



AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF
AJAAN JIA CUNDO

Gold
*wrapped
in*
Rags

Ajaan Dick Sīlaratano

*I reckon I got better results meditating for
the short time it took me to urinate than those
lazy bastards did meditating all night!*

—Ajaan Jia Cundo

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AUTOBIOGRAPHY
OF AJAAN JIA CUNDO

Translated by

Ajaan Dick Silaratano


ForestDhamma
Publications

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*I wish to express a deep sense of gratitude to
Ajaan Cherry Abhiceto for the steady support and
encouragement he has given me throughout my
long spiritual journey.*

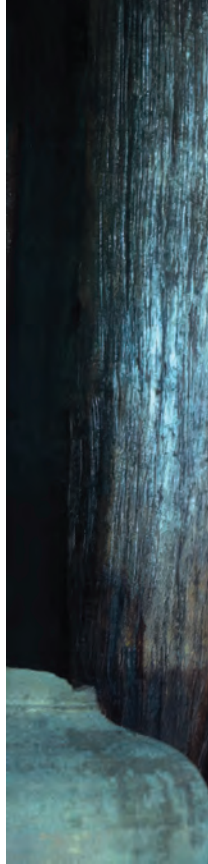
















Dawn

Imagine for a moment the desperation felt by ordinary peasant farmers in southeastern China during the first decade of the twentieth century, when living conditions had become untenable for poor farmers throughout the region. During extended periods of drought, the land lay parched; when the rains returned, the rivers flooded the lowlands. Either way, year after year, the conditions for harvesting crops were disastrous. Without rice to eat, life became desperate. To make matters worse, the general lawlessness of the region gave rise to raids by marauding gangs of armed men looting depleted grain supplies.

Sia Eung, the eldest son of an ethnic Hokkien family, grew up in a village in Fujian province alongside a river which flooded its banks so often that the rice crops frequently failed, leaving his family to survive on a meager harvest each year. As typhoons swept in over the moun-

tains and onto the low-lying countryside, storm winds blew without respite, and dense, lashing rain fell steadily for months, drenching everything. When water levels rose until they overflowed the river's banks, the rushing current started devouring the embankment, pulling the land into the surging torrent. The river swelled and flowed faster as its momentum grew, gobbling up everything in its path and spilling over so far that it inundated the rice fields.

The ensuing floods washed everything away, not just the family's fields but their home as well. Everything the family owned ended up floating in the middle of the river. All that remained of their house above water was the thatched roof stubbornly hanging on against the floodtide. Half-starved farm animals clung to the debris floating in the water, and human corpses, beginning to bloat and rot, bobbed in the swirling eddies. When the rain stopped, the sun beat down, and wafts of stench drifted off the river. The scenes of destruction were reminiscent of what the Buddha realized on the night of his enlightenment: that the cycle of birth and death resembles an ocean of suffering.

After the flood, the young man's family packed what few possessions they had left and trekked across the high mountains into the next valley to stay with relatives and try to start their lives anew. There, they built thatched huts in the open fields and eked a living out of the land. The following year drought descended, scorching the land and shriveling their crops.

When he could no longer endure the feelings of despair, Sia Eung reached a pivotal moment in his young life. One morning, as dawn broke across the barren fields, he bid a tearful goodbye to his parents and left home in search of a better future. He set out on foot over the parched floodplain south of his home, hiking through the flat, hard landscape scarred with the stubble of a drought-stricken rice crop. Full of youth, he was strong and capable of walking long distances without tiring. He took few possessions with him, only some extra clothes stuffed in his Chinese traveling case, a tall, rounded basket made of

woven bamboo that he carried suspended from a shoulder-pole. Sia Eung was twenty-two years old and on his own.

Like so many young men of that era, he joined a mass migration fleeing the severe hardships of southern China in search of greener, fresher pastures in the lands of Southeast Asia. He had heard from the tales of previous migrants that lands to the far south were peaceful and plentiful. His plan was simple: keep walking south until he reached the sea, then stow away in the hold of a merchant vessel sailing southwest and plying its trade at cities and towns along the eastern coast of the Southeast Asian mainland. When a favorable opportunity presented itself, he intended to disembark and seek employment on the mainland.

When the Chinese junk he eventually stowed away on reached the open sea, Sia Eung presented himself to the ship's captain and offered to work as a crewman to pay for his passage. Traveling in a southwesterly direction across the South China Sea, stopping to unload and load cargo at seaports along the route, the ship eventually entered the waters of the Gulf of Thailand where it dropped anchor at the port city of Laem Sing on Thailand's southeastern coast. Finding conditions there favorable for beginning a new life, Sia Eung—soon to be the father of Ajaan Jia Cundo—disembarked carrying only his woven bamboo traveling case and sought employment in the bustling city.

Although Ajaan Jia's father turned out to be a minor character in the following account of his son's life, he nonetheless exerted an important influence on his son's temperament, which formed the basis of his bold, direct, and assertive personality. Ajaan Jia's father was an ethnic Hokkien, and the young Jia inherited from him the inherent character traits typical of Hokkien people.

Even when speaking with close friends and family, Hokkien people tended to shout and remonstrate in loud and forceful voices as if they were quarreling among themselves. The Hokkien viewed loud and brassy speech simply as an effective and confident way to communicate. Although they sounded rude using profanity in ordinary

conversation, they did not intend their words to be offensive. In their minds, they were just bantering good-naturedly.

Ajaan Jia himself became well known for his “uncultured” character traits and his use of uncompromisingly forthright or even crude language in everyday conversation—behavior which at times led to public controversy. Ajaan Jia possessed a dynamic personality, resourceful and full of energy, strong-willed and adamantly self-assured. Like his father, he was a physically imposing man with a tireless work ethic, which could easily lead to confrontations when obstacles blocked his path.

When Ajaan Jia eventually agreed to recount the story of his life, his strict, no-nonsense character was on full display as he raised the curtain to look back on his life as a forest monk, with the hopes, goals, adventures, and lessons learned taking center stage. He guided his listeners through a biographic landscape of intersecting people, places, and events that focused attention on the fierce and resolute temperament that shaped the course of events on his spiritual journey. In his storytelling, Ajaan Jia did not avoid addressing his own shortcomings nor did he shy away from depicting the people with whom he interacted in the most candid and outspoken terms. In his rigorous pursuit of spiritual excellence, he was as demanding of himself as he was of his students. He was not all strictness and severity, however. Glimpses of his less daunting, more human side can be seen in the anecdotes he told about his eccentric habits and unorthodox behavior, which enable the reader to gain a fuller picture of his overall personality.

By the time of the first interview, Ajaan Jia’s enlightened mind, comfortably clothed in the discarded rags of his outward personality, engaged the world untouched by feelings of awkwardness or embarrassment. His account reads as though he was announcing to the world the confidence he felt in the depth and maturity of his understanding. Speaking honestly and openly about himself and his exploits, he concealed no hidden agendas or ulterior motives. He simply exhibited

the stubborn, combative traits from which he had earned the moniker “gold wrapped in rags.”

On the afternoon of January 30, 2000, a group of monks and lay devotees, who had practiced under Ajaan Jia’s guidance for decades, approached him at his monastic residence with a special request: Would he kindly agree to tell the story of his life in full so that it could be recorded and preserved for the benefit of future generations? They were seeking an in-depth account of his personal experiences and reflections and were prepared to allow all the time he needed to relate his story. Then eighty-four years old, Ajaan Jia was nearing the end of his life. He suffered from multiple physical ailments which had decimated his body and sapped his strength. Laying back in a rattan recliner with his feet elevated to ease his chronic pain, Ajaan Jia agreed to narrate the events of his life on the condition that his biography be used for the purpose of inspiring the present generation of monks and lay practitioners to put their faith in the traditional Buddhist practices that lead directly to liberation from suffering. Recordings taken from that and subsequent interviews became the oral history on which this book is based.

While members of the group set up their video recording equipment, Ajaan Jia warned them that his memory had deteriorated along with his physical health, a handicap which was likely to affect the accuracy of his recollections. Nevertheless, he would do his best under the circumstances. The outcome was, in fact, a detailed account of the events that characterized Ajaan Jia’s life and the extraordinary times in which he lived.

With the exception of this introduction and the epilogue that concludes the book, the contents of this book were taken from those recorded interviews, which were conducted on a regular schedule over a period of several weeks. The voice recordings were later transcribed

into the Thai language and published as an autobiography entitled: *Ajaan Jia Cundo: Gold Wrapped in Rags*.

This book presents the English translation of the Thai version, which I have reworked for clarity and smoothness. The resulting English version is a carefully composed work. The selection of its materials and their arrangement into chapters is guided by a desire to highlight specific themes of Ajaan Jia's life and his path of practice.

Ajaan Jia opened his narrative with the story of his father's emigration at a young age from South China to southeastern Thailand. He talked about the influence his parents had on his upbringing and temperament. He spoke about the time his mother and father met, recounted stories from his childhood and teenage years, and described his life as a monk, placing special emphasis on the many decades he lived the life of a forest monk alongside some of the most renowned meditation masters of the Thai Forest Tradition.

Ajaan Jia was born in an age of foot travel and boat canals, candlelight and wood stoves, dirt roads and gravel streets, and agrarian social customs. It was a simple, uncomplicated era when virgin forests, carpeted with thick subtropical undergrowth, dominated much of Thailand's landmass, creating large expanses of wilderness that extended through many regions of the country. Where today roads wind through the countryside, at that time only narrow trails passed through the dense jungle terrain where village settlements were often located a day's walk apart. The forests surrounding those communities teemed with dangerous wild animals, making them appear frightening to the local inhabitants. It was in such sparsely inhabited wilderness locations that Ajaan Jia would come to find the ideal environment for treading the Buddha's noble path to enlightenment.

As can be expected from an off-the-cuff oral account of one's life, his narration of events sometimes lacked structure and consistency. Initially, recollection of episodes from his youth did not always follow the order in which they occurred. Instead, remembrances came to

mind in a more random fashion, as the memory of an event or person from his childhood prompted him to describe a related incident that happened years later. For example, while relating his life as a young teenager, he interposed stories that happened after he became a monk, then promptly returned to the narrative of his teenage experiences. In such instances, I have rearranged the storyline by regrouping the sequence of events to reflect an accurate chronological order as much as possible. For instance, all stories relating to his monastic life are placed together—some occurring at the time of his ordination, others in the years following it. Other sections of the narrative have been moved around and inserted in places where they seem to better fit the biographical order of events, making this English narrative flow smoothly from one story to the next.

Due to their conversational tone, Ajaan Jia's recollections often seemed to ramble and meander from one episode to the next, with the chain of events punctuated at intervals by spontaneous Dhamma teachings. Had Ajaan Jia chosen to edit the text himself before publication, perhaps he would have pared down some of the digressions and organized the story in a clearer structure. But as he expressed no interest in doing so, the original editing team was left to their own devices. Reluctant to deviate from Ajaan Jia's spoken word, the Thai editors transcribed his oral account just as he spoke it and published it without significant changes.

Because Ajaan Jia used informal language that is more common in speech than in writing, his storytelling was naturally folksy and colloquial. Being unrehearsed, his speech was characterized less by complex grammatical structures and technical vocabulary, and more by the grammar, vocabulary, and idioms suitable for everyday language and conversation. Following along with the drift of his memories wherever they lead gives his account a down-to-earth, unpretentious quality. Consequently, his storytelling reads like one friend talking to another about his life. That informal style notwithstanding, when the

subject of Dhamma came up in the story, Ajaan Jia's tone immediately became serious, restrained, and circumspect in response to and in respect for the Dhamma he was voicing.

His account portrayed many episodes detailing the events that happened in his life, some of which culminated in vivid descriptions of the decisive experiences that occurred during crucial periods of his spiritual growth and development. He stuck to the practical details that defined each episode of his life and did not try to present a romanticized version of events. He was neither wistful nor nostalgic about the past. He accepted the inevitability of a changing world, remaining pragmatic and forward-looking throughout the narration.

Because Ajaan Jia spoke spontaneously about his life, some degree of exaggeration and embellishment, or occasional stretching of time and place, was liable to occur. Ajaan Jia was often the only source of the accounts he gave and sometimes related his stories in more than one version, which inevitably gave rise to certain discrepancies and disparities. I attempted to reconcile seeming inconsistencies by prioritizing the most likely version—or in some cases combining details from several versions into one—and inserting it in its proper place in the chronology of events. To provide additional context for those events, the Thai editors sometimes added their own comments, or else quoted stories describing events in his life that were adapted from the comments of his contemporaries. When those comments were constructive, consistent with Ajaan Jia's purpose, and helpful in clarifying the circumstances that formed the setting for a specific episode, I incorporated them into the narrative. I have also edited out digressions that do not seem relevant to the ongoing narrative and that might merely add confusion to the storyline. The result, I hope, is a coherent and readable biographical account that makes Ajaan Jia's deep Dhamma accessible to a modern audience.

Ajaan Jia's oral account of his life ends around 1984, a full twenty years before he passed away. In lieu of Ajaan Jia's direct input, the Thai

editors either commented on the last two decades of his life themselves or quoted accounts from other sources. These approaches, however, amounted to little more than a general overview, often lacking in detail and substance. To remedy that, I have taken what information the editors did provide, combined that with other descriptions I could find, and used that material to construct a narrative of the end of Ajaan Jia's life. The resulting conclusion to this biography, captured in an epilogue entitled *Dusk*, is centered around two major themes of his final years—the construction of his monastery, Bhūridatta Forest Monastery, and the gradual deterioration of his physical body.

In order to paint a coherent picture of the events that occurred during the construction of Bhūridatta Forest Monastery, I collected and compared comments made by his disciples with information gleaned from photographs taken at various stages during the first ten years of that period. I then wove these together into a description that captures the enormous effort, cooperation, and generosity required for such an endeavor, and one that functions as a cautionary tale of the dangers that comfort and excess can bring to a community striving for genuine release from suffering.

So as to accurately depict Ajaan Jia's physical decline and his unwavering resilience in the face of the cumulative health issues he experienced during the years prior to his death, I first consulted the relatively limited material provided by the original editors. This included a series of bullet points listing Ajaan Jia's medical conditions, the doctors who treated him, particular dates of note, and the hospitals where he received treatment. From there, I researched the various illnesses to the point where I could accurately describe their typical symptoms and used that knowledge in conjunction with photographs from the period to add more details to the sequence of events leading up to his death. As the decline in his health paralleled other incidents that took place in his old age, I employed that association to draw the story of Ajaan

Jia's life to a close, culminating in the final passing of the spiritual warrior on August 23, 2004.

Throughout the course of this translation, I have endeavored to follow a time-honored tradition of Buddhist biography which places as much emphasis on the lessons learned from the moral consequences of the events described as it does on the events themselves. In other words, a Dhamma lesson waiting to be told can be found embedded in every episode of Ajaan Jia's life. Ajaan Jia himself employed the method of using recollections about his life as a means of introducing his audience to important lessons regarding the practical aspects of the Buddha's teachings.

Ajaan Jia's narratives were told from the vantage point of an elderly and mature teacher. His principal motive for relating his life story was clearly instructional, his teaching activity being focused primarily on the forest monks under his care. He believed that talking about his experiences would encourage them in their training and clarify the true purpose of Buddhist meditation practices to help them avoid falling victim to doubt and confusion. During the interviews, he frequently broke the narrative to press home a point or lesson he believed to be of special benefit to monks in the audience. These digressions, which tend to give his narrative a somewhat episodic and disjointed quality, took several forms. Sometimes they relay short moral tales and direct exhortations of advice and caution to his listeners. At other times these digressions are profound teachings on moral virtue, meditative calm and concentration, and insight meditation techniques. Because Ajaan Jia spoke about Buddhist practice from his own personal experience, these Dhamma teaching interludes also lent the storyline the purpose and authority to allay doubt and instill confidence in the audience.

Ajaan Jia lived and practiced within a Buddhist monastic tradition where monks were usually tight-lipped about their personal stories, and autobiographies were almost nonexistent. Never one to comply

with conventions, Ajaan Jia boldly proclaimed the methods he used and results he gained at each stage of his spiritual training. In that sense, he left a record of his life and meditation experiences that in both extent and detail was unusual in Thai Buddhism. The inclination to talk about his own life increased with age and had become a prominent feature of his teaching style by the time the interview for this book took place, prompting Ajaan Jia to openly discuss the full range of his spiritual attainments.

The narrative's rambling style and rhythm seem just right as a reflection on the austere nomadic lifestyle Ajaan Jia led for much of his monastic life. Deeply impressed by stories he was told about Buddhist monks whose great virtue enabled them to undertake ascetic practices that would seem incredible to most, he embarked on a strict regimen of monastic training in an attempt to emulate them. Inspired by heroic tales of the hardships that illustrious Buddhist figures of the past had overcome in the struggle to reach enlightenment, he set out on the Buddhist path with high hopes, eager to start his formal practice. He believed that a monk who commits himself to attaining the end of all suffering must push forward with unwavering determination and maintain that momentum, whatever the difficulties encountered, until the ultimate goal is achieved.

Since the time of the Buddha, the lifestyle of a Buddhist monk has been modeled after the life of a homeless wanderer. Such a spiritual aspirant, having renounced the world and gone forth from his home and family, dressed in simple robes stitched together from discarded cloth, depended on alms food for his meals, and took the forest environment as his dwelling place. Buddhist renunciation practices based on that spartan lifestyle and exercised for the sake of spiritual progress on the Buddha's path to enlightenment became known as *dhutaṅgas*. The austere nature of those practices provided the supporting structure for meditation methods used by forest-dwelling monks throughout the

history of Buddhist monasticism, which helps to explain why ascetic practices have always been deeply woven into the fabric of Buddhism.

The early twentieth century witnessed an extraordinary revival of that traditional monastic lifestyle. The resurgence, which would come to be known as the Thai Forest Tradition, was an attempt to revitalize ancient standards of Buddhist practice—forest living, moral discipline, and meditation in search of the Buddha’s path to enlightenment—that had long been missing in the monastic culture of the day. During this revival, as in previous eras of Buddhist renaissance, the role of forest monks in Thailand came to be that of masters of ascetic practices and of meditation techniques that enabled them to directly access another order of reality and to transmit the knowledge resulting from that access to their disciples. The power perceived to have been generated by forest monks’ sexual abstinence, ascetic practices, and, above all, their dedication to meditation, motivated generations of followers to venerate them and to strive to emulate their austere way of life.

By the time Ajaan Jia entered the monkhood in 1937, the forest monks of Thailand had established a strong meditation tradition grounded in the thirteen *dhutaṅga* ascetic practices authorized and encouraged by the Buddha. They referred to their ascetic lifestyle as *tudong*, an abbreviated form of the word *dhutaṅga*. The *tudong* concept encompassed not only observing all or some of the *dhutaṅgas* and other renunciate practices, but also more broadly to the custom of a forest monk trekking alone on foot for months through sparsely populated wilderness areas—arduous journeys that often tested a monk’s spiritual strength and stamina to the limit. While traveling, *dhutaṅga* monks of Ajaan Jia’s generation carried only their basic requisites: the three principal robes, an alms bowl, a razor, a belt, needles and thread, a water strainer, and an umbrella-tent—a cloth curtain hung from the edge of a homemade umbrella that formed a tent-like shelter when suspended from the branch of a tree.

Their daily lives were full of forests and mountains, rivers and streams, caves, overhanging cliffs, and dangerous wild animals. They moved from place to place by hiking along narrow wilderness tracks in remote frontier regions where village communities were scarce. Since their lives depended on the alms food they collected from those small settlements, wandering *dhutaṅga* monks never knew precisely where they would find their next meal, and were prepared, when circumstances dictated, to receive no food at all. They simply relied on strict discipline and fierce determination to see them through the difficult challenges they set for themselves.

After his ordination, Ajaan Jia joined the ranks of those intrepid forest monks who undertook *dhutaṅga* ascetic practices to rid their minds of encumbering defilements. Accomplishing that goal required nothing short of a revolution in the mental habits by which a monk managed his daily life. Such a transformation, in turn, entailed commitment, courage, and a lifetime of persistence and discipline.

That meditative lifestyle combined periods of settled living—when monks gathered in forest monastic communities to train under a reputable *ajaan*, or teacher—with the nomadic *dhutaṅga* existence they pursued once their training was completed. Ajaan Jia’s introduction to the *dhutaṅga* practices began with life in a forest monastic community where he lived under the watchful tutelage of Ajaan Kongmaa, a senior monk respected for his wisdom. Inside the monastery, his life was regulated by an intensive regimen in which discipline restrained a monk at every turn: in the routines of meditation, in the procedures of the Dhamma hall, in the teacher and disciple protocols, in morning and evening chanting before the Buddha statue, and in the disciplinary precepts that Buddhist monks observed. Ajaan Jia was taught foundational Buddhist meditation themes like mindfulness focused on the meditation-word “*buddho*” and contemplation of the human body. By emphasizing respect for traditional monastic values in this way, forest monasteries were able to maintain the integrity of their monks’ com-

mitment to authentic Buddhist practices. Although many forest monks lived and studied with their teachers for years before daring to strike out on their own, Ajaan Jia, with his bold and adventuresome temperament, was a notable exception. Over time, Ajaan Jia became one of a group of forest monks who pioneered the use of new and innovative *dhutaṅga* strategies, helping to add new dimensions to the Buddha's time-honored ascetic practices.

In parallel with their solid training in discipline and meditation, forest monasteries also required their monks to regularly observe certain core *dhutaṅga* practices: living in the forest, walking on alms-round each day, eating only one meal a day, and eating all food directly from their alms bowls. Monks were also encouraged to experiment with other *dhutaṅga* practices they felt suited their temperament; for example, wearing only robes that were made from discarded cloth, living outdoors—camping at the foot of a tree, in a cave, or under an overhanging cliff—and the practice of never lying down. These practices were considered advanced forms of asceticism to be undertaken at the discretion of individual monks when they felt they were ready to intensify their meditation and test their inner strength to the limit.

Ajaan Jia's narrative reveals his deep appreciation of the natural world. His account indicates that many regions of Thailand were rich in pristine, old-growth forests, clearwater rivers and streams, wide caves where the air was cool and fresh, mountains watered by natural springs, and an abundance of wildlife. It was an environment of immense biodiversity that had remained virtually untouched in South and Southeast Asia stretching back for millennia to the time of the Buddha. Although the emphasis placed on forest meditation practices waxed and waned through the centuries, the virgin wilderness never ceased to be a source of ideal seclusion for the spiritual training of dedicated practitioners. That situation changed radically, however, in the mid-twentieth century.

In 1916, the year Ajaan Jia was born, nearly seventy percent of Thailand's landmass was blanketed by vast expanses of hardwood forests where a *dhutaṅga* monk could hike from one end of the country to the other through uninterrupted wilderness. Due to subsequent rampant deforestation, by the time Ajaan Jia passed away in 2004, only twenty percent of the country remained forested, and those dwindling wilderness areas were mostly confined to national forest reserves. Such wholesale destruction of old-growth wilderness areas meant that a forest monk's range of activity was eventually reduced to pockets of woodland separated by extensive areas of cultivated rice fields and urban sprawl. The Buddhist monk's natural abode of rivers, mountains, and caves, which had endured unscathed for millennia, was confronted with the seemingly irreversible modern-day trend to lay the natural world to waste.

Read from the perspective of that altered landscape, Ajaan Jia's autobiography can be understood as both an ode paying tribute to perhaps the last golden era of Buddhist ascetic practices, and as a swan song heralding the sunset of the ideal meditation environment that for so long made those unique modes of practice possible. Although a crucial element in forest practice had been lost during his lifetime, Ajaan Jia did not want his successors in Buddhist practice to become prisoners of time and place. Instead, he threw down the gauntlet to future generations of Buddhist practitioners, challenging them to remain true—under all circumstances—to traditional Buddhist practices that lead directly to liberation from suffering.

Gold Wrapped in Rags presents the real and true account of Ajaan Jia's life and practice—disclosing for us not only the character and personality of the man who lived his transient life on this earth, but also the noble goal that he transcended his earthly persona to attain, and the means by which he threw back the shabby shroud of that persona to reveal the pure gold veiled behind those tattered rags.

Rags

When my father was in his early twenties, he traveled by ship from China to Thailand seeking a better life. He didn't bring many possessions with him, only some extra clothes that he stuffed in a Chinese traveling case, a woven bamboo shoulder pack. When he finally made his way to Thailand, he settled in the province of Chanthaburi, where he lived in Klong Naam Khem district in the coastal town of Laem Sing on the Gulf of Thailand. That's where he met my mother, who was born in Chanthaburi province to a Chinese father and a Thai mother. After they married, they moved ten miles north along the main Chanthaburi Canal to live at Nong Bua village. My whole family, including my parents and grandparents, had a strong faith in Buddhism. After all, we were all born Buddhists.

My father adopted the Thai name Sunchae Pothikit. My mother's name was Fae Pothikit. My parents made their living as merchants, operating a general store from the ground floor of our home, selling local produce such as fruit, rice, and fish. In those days, there were no motorcars, so people traveled from one place to another on foot. My dad used to walk the length and breadth of Chanthaburi province collecting the rent from his rice fields. His trekking covered long distances: three miles from Nong Bua to Priw, six miles from Priw to Dong Ching, and another six miles to Srijomthian. He walked the whole route and then returned home straight after finishing his business. My dad was a strong and diligent man who worked very hard to build our family business.

As for me, I was born on June 6, 1916 in Tambon Khlong Naam Khem, Laem Sing district, Chanthaburi province. This date was equivalent to Tuesday, the sixth day of the seventh lunar month in the Year of the Horse. I was the fourth child of a loving family with two older sisters, one older brother, two younger sisters, and one younger brother. My parents adopted our eldest sister, Pim, who was adored by all of us.

Initially, my parents called me Ow Jia, which means "black stone," because I have a large black birthmark on my back. Later they shortened my name to Jia, which means "eat" in Chinese—maybe I used to eat too much! The black birthmark, which stretches from the center of my back across my shoulder blade and down toward my waist, was said to be a very auspicious sign. I wasn't aware of that when I was growing up, but after I became a monk, I met a man in the south of the country who told me that it was very rare for anyone to be born with a black birthmark of such size on his back.

It is claimed that people who have this type of birthmark tend to be as solid as a rock. They can endure anything. Whether it's extreme heat or extreme cold, ecstasy or misery, they can cope with every situation and overcome every obstacle. This makes for a good Dhamma

teaching, reminding us to be emotionally firm, strong, and stable as a rock. When somebody pours filth on it, the rock is unmoved; should someone pour perfume on it, it's equally unmoved. There is no reaction from the rock.

My childhood home was a two-story shophouse located at No. 82, Unit 7 in the Muang district in Nong Bua near where the main canal empties into the sea. The house stood on the canal side of the road with its back to the water. The front of the house faced a hard, earthen street crowded with many homes and small businesses. The rear of the house backed right up to the main canal which flowed down to the sea. A small area on the side between the house and the water, hugging the canal's edge and cordoned off by a fence made of driftwood slats, contained a dozen enormous, round earthenware jars used for storing fresh rainwater. On the other side, a narrow bamboo walkway along the back of the house provided access to the landing pier where our boats were docked. Where the pier jutted out into the slow current, the tall wooden post that anchored it stood out distinctly against the rows of neatly moored boats that lined the canal. Tidewater filled the canal at high tide each day, raising the boats to the level of the pier as water flooded the wide basin in all directions. The long island that formed the opposite shore of the canal was sparsely populated. Only a few dwellings were visible from my house. For the most part, mango and lychee orchards grew all the way to the water's edge.

Our house was built to last. Supported from below by solid wooden posts and cross beams and clad with hardwood planks, it was built to withstand the extreme tropical weather conditions. The double teakwood sliding doors on the ground level opened to a long, spacious room with a wooden floor where my parents ran the general store, buying and selling various local commodities. An old glass cabinet and two green antique jars in the corner held items of special value. A wide staircase led to the upper floor that served as our family's living and sleeping quarters. Teak paneling covered the walls of all the upstairs

bedrooms. Two doors opened onto a covered balcony overlooking the street. Wooden shingles covered the peaked roof, which was strong enough to withstand the punishing monsoon rains.

When I was a boy, I felt a real aversion to the fermented shrimp paste we call *kapi*, which has a pungent, rotten smell. When my big brother didn't want me to follow him around, he yelled at me over his shoulder, "Hey Jia, don't follow me. If you do, I'll throw shrimp paste on your head!" That's all it took for me to scream out and run back home.

When it came to food, I was always very hard to please. When the food contained a lot of pork fat, I'd throw a tantrum and stubbornly refuse to eat it. I was very fussy about what I ate and even kicked the food away angrily if it didn't please me. I was able to get away with that because my family was quite wealthy. Even today, I refuse to eat shrimp paste, in part because it's made from shrimp heads, which I'm allergic to. I felt a piercing rectal pain every time I ate them, so I stopped taking them altogether. I'm allergic to many other kinds of food as well, which made it extremely difficult for me later when I was a monk living in the jungle with my teacher, Ajaan Mun Bhūridatto.

After finishing fourth grade at the local elementary school, I began working in the family business. Waking up early every morning, I pushed open the big double doors downstairs, cleaned and swept out the store, and stacked the merchandise at the front, ready for my mother to sell. I then ate and ran off to play with my friends until the afternoon. Each evening, I lugged the unsold merchandise back inside, swept the floor again, and closed and locked the big doors.

As I grew older, I was the one that did most of the heavy work, whether selling to customers at home or hauling goods to sell at the river market. Mostly, we sold local fruit produce. Farmers delivered the fruits to our house where I packed them in woven bamboo baskets. My parents sold what they could at our home store, and I sold the excess at the local river market. In those days, the road system around our

village was not well developed, so it was much easier to travel by boat to sell our goods. I loaded the baskets in one of our boats, which were moored out back, and took the produce to the local market. When fishing season came around, I focused my efforts on fishing.

Because my house was located on the bank of a canal that connected to the sea, I became one of the best swimmers in the village. At high tide, water covered the entire landscape as far as the eye could see. I was out on the water in my boat fishing every day, so I became very familiar with the sea—how could I fail to be a good swimmer? One day, I noticed something bobbing on the surface of the canal about 600 feet from the bank. I thought it must be a rooster because I spied a patch of red on its head. I decided to fetch the rooster, so without delay I dove into the water and started swimming out into the current. As my steady strokes pulled me farther and farther from the shoreline, my friends became so worried I might drown that they began screaming, “Look, Jia’s going to drown! Jia’s going to die!” But how could I die? I was too good a swimmer for that. Water skills were second nature to me since I rowed a boat every day to fish or deliver rice to the mill. Besides, the tide was going out, so I simply glided along with the prevailing current.

Before long, I reached the “rooster” only to discover that it was actually a vulture eating the bloated remains of a dog carcass floating on the surface. Startled, the vulture suddenly rose from the water and flew away. So much for my beautiful rooster! I couldn’t stop laughing at my own foolishness as I looked back and saw myself impetuously leaping into the water and swimming as fast as I could to grab it. Just the antics of a crazy kid, that’s all.

As a young man, I worked as a trader, selling fruits like rambutans, durians, and mangosteens. I tended to act the tough guy—serious, gruff, and afraid of no one. Like my father, I took my work seriously. Our forefathers were straightforward, honest people—they brooked no sympathy for the lies and deceit of others. This character trait was

passed on from generation to generation until it reached me. I'm a very determined person. When I decide to achieve something, I won't stop striving until I succeed. For instance, at the landing where I took my boat to sell fruit, the riverbank rose steeply from the water's edge. None of the other merchants could manage to haul their boats up onto the bank, but I never failed to do so. I wouldn't stop pulling until I made it. I was really strong, and I didn't shy away from hard work. I just kept at it the whole time. I took the attitude that I would rather break than bend. That attitude led to a wild spirit that never allowed anyone to get the better of me.

By that time, I owned two sailboats, one big and one small, and I used the big one for trading. Once a year, I delivered large containers of preserved durian fruit to Bangkok and Malaysia. I bought durian preserves from local villagers at ten *baht* a pound and sold the stuff later for twenty-eight *baht* a pound. It was hard to store so much of it in the house because it easily became moldy. I had to pack the containers carefully, compressing the jellied fruit until it was free of air bubbles, then covering the top with wax paper to seal it. If mold appeared, I cut the moldy parts off and repacked the good parts tightly in another container.

Mine was one of the wealthiest families in the village. Because my father was a Chinese immigrant, we had only my mother's land to farm. So, after the durian season, we sold the rice that the local farmers produced. We bought raw unhusked rice grown in the surrounding countryside and took it to a large rice mill for husking, then sold it to customers for cooking. This was one of the ways that my family made a living each year.

After the fruit season ended, I had to help with husking at the rice mill. We loaned milled rice to poor people who had no money to buy rice, and after the harvest, they gave us unhusked paddy rice in return. Besides selling various goods on credit, my parents also loaned money. Many of the local farmers borrowed money from them. Most of those

transactions were in the form of a verbal agreement. My parents simply depended on people's honesty. Occasionally, debtors denied ever borrowing the money. In those cases, my mother took the offenders to court, and invariably they lost. They were usually forced to give us a water buffalo to pay off the debt. One spiteful person fed the buffalo broken glass mixed with alcohol and grass before handing it over. The broken glass cut the animal's stomach so badly that it died a few weeks after we received it. In the end, we were cheated—we got nothing of value in return for our loan. Still, my mother never complained much. She was a very kind and generous person.

My parents owned a lot of gold in the form of jewelry and ornaments, which had been fashioned into various shapes, such as turtles or birds. These gold ornaments were kept in bamboo baskets in our home, and my mother would return all the gold that people pawned with us as soon as they came to pay back their loan. My mother never cheated anyone. People in the surrounding area who were short of cash also borrowed money from my mother. Because they often paid off their debts at harvest time with sacks of rice, our store often had rice stacked to the ceiling.

In those days, people liked wearing necklaces, bracelets, and anklets. We had dozens of bamboo baskets full of such gold jewelry. When the price of gold increased, people came to ask for their jewelry back. My mother returned it all to them at the original price. She said that she would not take from others, as it was unwholesome behavior. My mother was very benevolent. She had two older brothers who ordained as monks, named Venerable Lung Heuy and Venerable Lung Hok, who taught her the value of virtuous behavior. When she went to the monastery, they told her, "Fae! Don't cheat people when trading. The stuff you earn from cheating you cannot take with you when you die. Instead, it will lead you to birth in a hell realm." My mother always kept this admonition in mind. She also enjoyed making merit by offering donations to the local monastery. As I was still young at that time,

I was not interested in merit-making. I would go to the monastery only when someone asked me to accompany them.

I sometimes accompanied my grandmother to the local monastery when she went to make offerings to the monks on Buddhist festival days, such as Visākha Pūjā or Māgha Pūjā, or the beginning of the monastic rainy season retreat. We also set up a stall providing free food to people who came to join the festivities. On those occasions, I stayed overnight at the monastery, helping to transport the rice we used to cook rice porridge.

By the time I turned fifteen years old, I'd become the main strength of the family. My only interest was working hard and making lots of money for my parents. My mom and dad ran the shop, and I'd help them open it in the morning and then spend the rest of the day on my sailboat buying and selling goods for them. I worked hard for our family's trading business, and I enjoyed the work, feeling a sense of pride and purpose every day as I set out on my own. I had a muscular body for a kid my age. Hoisting one on each shoulder, I regularly carried two forty-five-pound containers of durian preserves without any difficulty. I did not drink or take drugs. My only vice was smoking cigarettes.

When I had free time during the fishing season, I would accompany three or four of my friends to lay fishing nets in the open sea. My big sailboat was used to haul the nets and bring the fish back. When the wind picked up, we caught so many anchovies they almost filled the boat. Back on shore, we sold them for the going rate, and I usually gave all the money to my friends. We were very close and traveled together everywhere, working hard and looking for a good time. Those childhood friends are all dead now. I remember going out with my friends during the New Year holiday season, playing poker, competing in Chinese board games, and shooting pool. Sometimes we fought among ourselves, sometimes we played happily together. That's just

the way kids are. We never thought about the moral repercussions of our actions.

In my youthful exuberance, I paid no attention to skillful actions and unskillful actions. I didn't bother much about good and evil, right and wrong. My only concerns were enjoying myself and making a living. I couldn't even recite basic Buddhist chants like "*Namo tassa bhagavato...*" If I happened to visit a monastery and hear a monk talk about the six sense bases—eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind—I couldn't make any sense out of what he was saying. I remember thinking to myself, "What is this monk talking about?" I didn't have a clue. Only later in life, when I became a monk myself, did I realize how important the six senses are in the Buddha's teachings.

As I mentioned earlier, I refused to let anyone take advantage of me. On one occasion, when I went to the riverside market landing to sell a boatload of fruit baskets at the pier, I punched a big Chinaman so hard that he passed out cold. My fist was that lethal. There was no way he could get back up by the count of ten. He couldn't even move. It all started when I was emptying my boat, placing the baskets of fruit on the pier, and this guy pulls up beside me in his boat and starts stacking his fruit baskets on top of mine! His baskets were much bigger and heavier than mine, but he just kept crushing my baskets with his. I shouted out that if he didn't stop, I'd punch him. But the big ape just ignored me and kept flattening my fruit. As soon as he dropped the next basket, that was it—wham!—I leveled him with an uppercut to the chin. And that settled it.

I was ready to go at him again when the police suddenly arrived. The officer in charge was furious because this Chinese guy was a subordinate of his. At the time, I felt that I was in the right because he barged right in like a thug. He ignored the rules. The rule at the landing was first come, first served. The boat that arrived first was allowed to unload its cargo onto the pier first. Latecomers had to keep their goods in the hold until the first boat finished unloading and received pay-

ment, and the pier was cleared for the next one. On top of that, if the brute damaged my fruit, I'd get paid less and lose a lot of money. So, I had to fight.

As it turned out, the Chinaman's boss was one of my mother's friends. Later, my mother scolded me for being so heavy-handed. I immediately shouted back at her, "Why? Why do you believe those people? If it's going to be like that, I won't work anymore. I'm finished! Are you going to let them bully us? That guy damaged our fruit, what do you say about that? Each basket is worth a lot of money, Mom." In the end, my mom had to relent because my reasoning was good. That guy started the whole thing by trying to push me around. I wasn't all that unruly as a kid, but I was really stubborn. Everyone was wary of me. And I'd be damned if I was going to let anyone push me around.

Sometime later, I was rowing my boat into the same docking area when I ran into three or four other guys who were struggling to control their boats. So, I just pulled around them and got to the pier first. When they accused me of cheating, I grabbed a big oar and stared them down, daring them to come get me. I really meant business. They were clumsy handling their boats; why should I have to wait? I wasn't going to mess around. If they had made a move that day, I'd have broken some bones, for sure. I would probably have killed someone, which would have been disastrous; I would never have been able to ordain. Instead, I'd have been running from the cops. Fortunately, those guys didn't dare approach me.

Because I had finished the fourth grade of elementary school, my teacher tried to persuade me to become a teacher like him. He offered a salary of three *baht* per month. I didn't take up his offer. My mother also wanted me to be a teacher, so she tried to encourage me. I said, "No way! Right now, I can earn a lot more than that just by hauling durian fruit to the market—why should I be a teacher? No way." And besides, I was not that good at my studies, just average.

My mother kept pestering me to be a teacher because she felt it was an honorable profession. So, when I was fifteen years old, I went to help teach at the school for about ten days. The students were so damn stubborn that I soon became annoyed and fed up with them. They didn't listen or pay attention to my lessons. They were awfully difficult to please. I thought long and hard about how to keep them under control. In the end, I hit on the idea of using an extremely bitter medicinal vine called *borapet*. It was well known that when a mother wanted to stop breast-feeding her baby, she would rub *borapet* on her breasts. When sucking her nipples, the baby tasted only the bitterness of the vine. Over time, the baby was weaned from breast milk, until it showed no further interest in suckling.

Taking that as my inspiration, I carried a handful of *borapet* with me to school and placed slivers of it in the mouths of the naughty students. That was enough to cure their misbehavior. Following that, the kids were very well behaved. However, when they returned home, they still had the bitter taste of *borapet* in their mouths, so they complained to their parents. Then, all hell broke loose. Their mothers came to lodge a formal protest at the school, which became a big story all over the district. I couldn't figure out what all the fuss was about. How on earth could anyone be harmed by tasting *borapet*? Anyway, I couldn't help it! Those students were too much. I told their parents as much, but they were in no mood to listen. So, I resigned from my position.

When I was young, I liked trading and I was always restless—I couldn't stay still. Human beings can't remain idle; they must work for a living. Most of my jobs were related to the sea and, because I was strong and smart on the water, I hardly ever felt afraid when traveling that way. I used to sail my boat from Chanthaburi to buy coffin planks on Elephant Island, which was located in the Gulf of Thailand off the coast of the neighboring province. I regularly traveled there to buy the planks, then sold them later back on the mainland for a good profit. If planks weren't available, I purchased shrimp paste or pumpkins in-

stead. Some years, it was quite pleasant going to the island as I could work and have fun at the same time. The weather was good, the beach was beautiful, and good, cheap food was easy to find.

Elephant Island was a big landmass surrounded by about twenty-eight smaller islands of various sizes. The island was carpeted with the thick vegetation of tropical rainforests and boasted several high mountain ranges, which were the source of the numerous waterfalls and short canals that crisscrossed its interior. It rained there almost year-round. The heaviest rains blew in from the sea during the rainy season months between May and October. From November to January, the wind blew from the shore out to sea. The villagers called it the North Wind, which gusted strongly for three to seven days, then slowed down for a week or two before increasing again. From February to April, the wind blew toward the shore again, but its breezes were slow and soft. I preferred sailing to the island during that period as it was the safest time to be out at sea. Apart from those months, trading boats faced the danger of capsizing in the high winds and large waves of a seasonal typhoon.

Villagers on the island subsisted on gardening and fishing and by selling their goods to visiting tradesmen. Besides buying coffin planks, I also loaded my boat with shrimp paste, pumpkins, second-grade fish sauce, sun-dried fish and shrimp, as well as salted fish, each of which was very cheap. Big pumpkins cost only one or two cents. I really enjoyed trading because with only a small amount of money I could buy lots of produce to fill up my boat. Sometimes, my mother complained to me, “Jia... what did you buy this for?” and I would reply, “It’s so cheap, Mom. Why should I waste my time going there and then come back with an empty boat?”

On one occasion, my parents asked me to go buy coffin planks on Elephant Island. No sooner had I set sail, than a violent squall suddenly whipped my boat around and rammed it bow-first into the nearest

bank. The waves were so high and the wind so strong that the boat nearly broke apart.

Before I left on that trip, my grandmother taught me to meditate by continuously repeating the words “*Buddham, Dhammam, Saṅgham*” as a meditation focus. She said that the power of the Triple Gem would protect me. She told me, “We Buddhists must cultivate the virtues of the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha in our minds, and then we will avert all dangers.”

When the storm arose, with its huge waves crashing all around me, tossing my boat up and smashing it into the shore, and the howling, shrieking sound of the wind battering my ears, I thought I might die then and there. Suddenly, I recalled the meditation mantra that my grandmother taught me. So, I started to repeat, “*Buddham, Dhammam, Saṅgham.*” Once my mind became focused on the words, my fear of death subsided. Not long after that, amazingly, the gale-force winds also subsided, and I was able to maneuver the boat to calmer waters.

Shortly after I turned twenty, my outlook on life started to change. I had a steady relationship with a girl named Paeng, and we were planning to get married. Before taking that step, I wanted to ordain as a monk as a way of paying back all the kindhearted things that my parents had done for me. I knew they would be pleased with my decision, especially since I intended to remain a monk for only three months. Besides that, I was becoming increasingly frustrated with the way my eldest sister was handling the family finances. I wanted a break from work as I did most of the labor but received few of the profits. Nobody tried to persuade me to become a monk. It simply occurred to me that at age twenty the time was right to ordain as a way of repaying all the people in my life who had been so kind and supportive.

At that time, two senior disciples of Ajaan Mun—Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo and Ajaan Kongmaa Cirapuñño—were wandering *dhutaṅga* in Chanthaburi province, teaching people the benefits of giving up immoral behavior and cultivating moral virtue in their lives.

Prior to their arrival, forest monks had never visited the eastern part of Thailand. They were the first teachers to introduce the Thai forest meditation tradition to residents on the east coast. Ajaan Kongmaa settled for a while at a local monastery near Nong Bua, where my grandmother sometimes took me to offer alms food. I was impressed by his resolute demeanor.

Dhamma, the teachings of the Buddha, is the most precious treasure in the world. Nothing else in the world compares to it. Why do I say this? Just look at me! I was always stubborn and full of mischief. Even though my parents were wealthy and respected members of the community, I had no interest in Dhamma when I was growing up. I just wanted to enjoy myself, playing around like the other boys my age. Still, I must have accumulated a reservoir of merit in my previous lives. That store of merit, combined with my parents' unshakeable faith in the efficacy of *kamma*, eventually pulled me in the direction of the Buddha's teachings.

A human birth is a fortunate one. Each of us who is born a human being can trace our good fortune back to the merit we accumulated from good and skillful actions performed in our past lives. Some people are born with severe handicaps such as blindness, deafness, muteness, or mental illness—all possible results of doing unskillful acts of body, speech, and mind in previous lives. Those who experience the results of their former skillful actions are born with good physical and mental faculties and bright and clear minds. In addition to that, some are born into wealthy families where life is especially easy because they needn't work hard to earn a living. This level of well-being is known as *pubbe kata-puññatā*, which means "abundant merit accumulated from past actions." Those who enjoy the benefits of ample merit should use that resource wisely to strive for higher and higher forms of merit.

Unfortunately, most people don't have occasion to listen to Dhamma teachings from a meditation master. Instead, they gravitate toward worldly pursuits. Newborns' first teachers are their parents

who, because they themselves are more familiar with and more skilled in worldly affairs, tend to teach their children mundane knowledge instead of knowledge based on principles of Dhamma. Normally, parents prefer their children to marry, make a decent living, and raise families of their own to continue the family line, which from the viewpoint of the real aim of the Buddha's teachings—putting an end to the causes of suffering—is equivalent to saddling their children with a lifetime of pain and dissatisfaction. Unfortunately, most parents show little interest in reflecting deeply on the implications the Buddha's teachings have for their lives and the future happiness of their children. Instead, they encourage their children to cope with life in the same way they have, which often means enduring the same feelings of struggle, dissatisfaction, and anxiety they themselves experience.

The Buddha possessed the supreme vision to see and know all aspects of human experience, and all of them showed themselves to be on fire. That's why the Buddha declared emphatically that "Everything is on fire!" By "everything," he meant every facet of all six human sense faculties—the five external senses plus the mind; it includes their respective organs and objects, their operation, and all the feelings produced by their operation. The Buddha clearly stated that all the factors that make up human experience are ablaze with the fires of greed, aversion, and delusion.

The five aggregates are the five components of a living being, which means they are the five components of all experience. What we normally think of as a person or living being is, in fact, a set of five processes. The first of these, form, is comprised of the five physical senses. The remaining four processes are: feelings of pain or pleasure; memory or recognition; thought or imagination; and consciousness, which can take any of the other aggregates as its object. The Buddha saw these groups to be blazing masses of fuel. Consciousness and its objects are like fires consuming fuel in that they consist of an unceasing series of dynamic changes. The Buddha compared the five

aggregates that constitute life's experiences to heaps of burning firewood that add fuel to the flames of craving, aversion, and delusion and stoke the fires of suffering that they cause. Extinguishing those fires led the Lord Buddha to the supreme bliss of Nibbāna.

The Buddha was born the crown prince of a royal kingdom. Growing up, he exhibited exceptional intelligence, along with a compassionate heart and a bright mind that easily mastered any skill in any field of activity he attempted. Even his physical feats demonstrated supernatural powers. Legend has it that, without prior training, he strung the most powerful bow in the ancient world and drew the taut string back so hard that the arrow hit the center of a target 1,000 feet away, thus displaying his unrivaled ability to harness the forces of the natural world. He was in fact so gifted that he could accomplish any feat he set his mind to. But, having spent eons of his past lifetimes developing supreme virtues, he was destined from birth to attain *Sammā-sambodhi-ñāṇa*—the Spiritual Wisdom of the Awakened Ones—in order to help others achieve transcendent happiness through the knowledge and practice of Dhamma.

The young prince Siddhattha was taught by his father to accept the idea that living a life of luxury and comfort was the way to experience happiness. For decades, he enjoyed a life of pleasure and privilege residing at the royal court. When he eventually encountered a decrepit old man, a severely ill man, and a corpse being carried to the funeral pyre by mourners, he realized that all human beings without exception are destined to get sick, grow old, and die. This insight caused him great dismay. He became so disenchanted with the worldly pleasures he'd enjoyed that he resolved to leave his home and take up the life of a wandering ascetic. The Buddha-to-be then began a six-year quest for enlightenment by first practicing a regimen of extreme austerities in an attempt to burn off the mental impurities that bound him to the world of life and death. After much trial and error and a change of strategy, he finally awakened to *Sammā-sambodhi-ñāṇa*, attaining the supreme

wisdom of all Buddhas. Following enlightenment, the Buddha began a life of teaching others that lasted for forty-five years. He soon gathered around him other ascetics who had renounced worldly life, and he initiated them into the Bhikkhu Sangha. The conduct of this order of monks was governed by the Vinaya rules of monastic discipline that he laid down—rules that have guided the conduct of Buddhist monks right up to the present day. Its emphasis on learning, practice, and discipline makes the Bhikkhu Sangha an extraordinary brotherhood. It is in essence a royal lineage, for we monks are the sons of a Tathāgata.

With that in mind, I regard the common Thai practice of short-term ordination to be disrespectful to the Buddha's original intentions. It is now customary for Thai men to become monks with the intention of remaining in the Sangha for only a few months—sometimes only a few days—before abandoning that privilege to return to lay life. Their reason for ordaining has nothing to do with renouncing worldly pleasures and escaping from the prison of *samsāra*, which has always been the proper purpose for joining the Buddha's Bhikkhu Sangha.

Alas, my own path to monkhood followed a similar pattern. Out of respect for my parents, I had decided to ordain when I reached the age of twenty. But just after I turned twenty, my plans were delayed when I was unexpectedly conscripted into military service. After undergoing an initial period of basic training at the local center, I was released from my military obligations because the army intended to recruit only forty new soldiers that year. Since enough men had volunteered to cover that quota, I was not required to move forward with military training. I felt relieved that I didn't have to be a soldier.

But even after my stint in the army ended, I still found excuses to delay my ordination. Another season passed before I got around to it. When I finally made up my mind to proceed, it was with the intent that after being in robes for a reasonable amount of time, I would give up the monkhood and marry the girl I loved.

Initially, family and friends were surprised I was willing to join the monkhood, considering I had never in my life chanted the basic “*Namo tassa...*” verses and that my unruly temperament was at odds with the Buddhist ideal of self-restraint and strict discipline. I’d never looked down on the monks or their lifestyle, but my only concern as a young man was to have fun and enjoy my life like everyone else my age. Everybody called me a troublemaker, which was fair enough, but I wasn’t a hooligan. At the same time, I wasn’t afraid of anyone either—even the hooligans. I was prepared to lose any amount in an honest card game, but I could never tolerate cheating.

I convinced my friend Awt to ordain together with me. His parents and mine took us to meet with Ajaan Kongmaa at the local monastery and asked him to prepare us for ordination. When people heard the news, they said, “Jia?... He’ll never ordain! Even if he manages to put on the robes, he’ll never make it through. He will definitely disrobe within the first few months. Now his friend Awt, he’s so well-behaved. He’ll probably remain a lifetime in the monkhood.” In actual fact, Awt disrobed a few days after the ordination ceremony—and I’m still here! People are like that. They mostly focus on outward appearances. Then again, they did have a point: Who would have guessed that I could succeed as a monk? I was so stubborn, and as restless as a monkey. I was the village troublemaker!

I was obviously unprepared for monastic living. When I finally walked through the gates at Sai Ngaam Forest Monastery to request ordination, I lacked even a basic understanding of the Buddha, his life, and his teachings. I felt like a log of green wood with all its branches and leaves still intact being shoved into a firebox. That is how I entered the monkhood—unsuitable and awkward in every way.

In truth, my girlfriend was the center of my attention. Because of her, I planned to be a monk for only a few months and then disrobe. Before ordaining, I promised her that the situation would just be temporary, that I’d remain a monk for only four months as a gift of merit

to share with my parents, and that I'd marry her after leaving the robes. Many young men who take temporary ordination are simply biding their time in the Sangha until they are free to disrobe and pursue their interest in women—the main attraction when we're young.

This was also my mindset in those days. I was just a young kid out to have a good time. I didn't know anything about Dhamma. I didn't understand the difference between skillful and unskillful behavior. Back then, I couldn't have cared less about the consequences of my actions. During the weeks of training before I shaved my head and put on the garb of a white-robed postulant, I continued to misbehave. When I was alone and nobody was watching, I'd sneak out of the monastery and go home for a while. But once I'd shaved my head and put on the white robes, I made a resolve to never sneak back home again.

Only later, after I ordained and spent time learning from my teacher, Ajaan Kongmaa, did I realize how heedless I'd been. Ajaan Kongmaa constantly reprimanded me, "Always consider your actions carefully. Reflect on your purpose before you act. Don't act hastily when you should take your time; don't act slowly when you need to be quick. If you don't give sufficient thought to making the right choices, stumbling your way through life like a clumsy idiot, you'll tend to meet with only pain and suffering."

As Sai Ngaam Forest Monastery's resident teacher, Ajaan Kongmaa was appointed to tutor me in preparation for my ordination. Making myself ready for ordination entailed being dressed in white, training in moral discipline by strictly following the rules of good conduct and other monastic regulations, and being well-informed about all the duties I should do for the monastery and my master. These were strict requirements. Only when Ajaan Kongmaa saw that a postulant was competent in these tasks would he ordain him. If a postulant was unable to carry them out to his satisfaction, he held off the ordination until he saw improvement.

Ajaan Kongmaa took very seriously the traditional practices championed by *dhutaṅga* forest monks. He was never indulgent toward an ordination candidate's careless disregard for his strict training methods. He made sure each candidate was properly trained before becoming a monk. I, too, received the same treatment: For months, I lived with Ajaan Kongmaa as a white-robed postulant who was required to accompany him and attend to his daily needs. Throughout those months of initial training, I worked hard to learn each step of the ordination procedure and struggled to memorize the ordination chanting, focusing on how to properly pronounce the complex sounds of the Pāli language: the long and short vowels, the nasal sounds, the variance in the consonants, and the proper cadence. Besides that, I practiced the correct method of bowing to the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha, and to my teacher. Every morning and evening, I sat in on Ajaan Kongmaa's Dhamma talks, learning how to meditate by acquainting myself with the meditation objects prescribed by the Buddha.

On a night not too long after I began my training, during the period I was rehearsing the chants for my ordination, I listened attentively to Ajaan Kongmaa deliver his regular evening Dhamma talk. He had taught us to mentally recite "*buddho*" while listening to his talks, which I did. Although I couldn't understand every word he spoke, I continued reciting the meditation-word *buddho* until my mind became absorbed in it. While I meditated on *buddho*, my ears continued to acknowledge Ajaan Kongmaa's voice, but my mind remained focused on the meditation-word. That is to say, my mind was doing its duty, and my ears were doing theirs. Suddenly and unexpectedly, my mind dropped into a still, calm, quiet *samādhi* state. The *samādhi* experience then gave rise to a strange occurrence.

As my mind converged into one-pointedness, a mental image arose of me kneeling and then collapsing face-down on the white sand that covered the monastery compound. The vision was clear and precise: It was unmistakably the white sand in the monastery. This unusual per-

ception lasted until Ajaan Kongmaa finished speaking, at which time the mind returned to ordinary consciousness. When my normal awareness resumed, I humbly approached Ajaan Kongmaa on my knees and asked him, “Venerable sir, a moment ago while I sat listening to your Dhamma talk, I felt that my body had disappeared. Is that possible? Where did my body go?”

These were the words I used, for I didn’t know the right way to describe my experience. Before that vision occurred, I’d never felt brave enough to ask Ajaan Kongmaa a question. But the excitement I felt that night emboldened me to speak out.

Ajaan Kongmaa replied, “There’s nothing to worry about. Everything is okay. Your meditation is improving. Just keep working on it.” I took pride in the knowledge that I was on the right track. I felt how fortunate it was that I’d found a good teacher like Ajaan Kongmaa, someone who knew about meditation from his own practical experience rather than mere speculation or guesswork. Finding an excellent teacher is of critical importance in meditation. If your teacher has the wisdom of a sage, he can set you on the right path to discover the truth for yourself.

Never before had I found the degree of tranquility I did that night. When it happened, my mind instantly thought, “What could this be?” and its immediate conclusion was, “This is happiness.” That experience was my real initiation into monastic life. The fact that my mind reached that stage of calm at the beginning of my training helped me to quickly develop higher levels of virtue and more profound levels of insight. Meditating in that monastic environment naturally inspired my mind to strive for increasingly higher levels of spiritual attainment, which is the true aim of monastic life. To achieve that objective, a monk must harness his powers of discipline and determination to ward off thoughts and emotions that can trouble his mind.

For instance, before I ordained as a postulant I was really deluded about women and their attractiveness. Even after ordination, thoughts

of my girlfriend Paeng and our relationship still tormented me at first. But being an earnest and determined individual, I found it easy to put the Buddha's teachings into practice. After my amazing *samādhi* experience, I saw my girlfriend in a different light. Previously, seeing her face every day on almsround caused a pang of longing to pierce my heart. But when I met her the day after my mind first dropped into that tranquil state of *samādhi*, I stopped on the road and told her that I had decided to remain in robes; I would not be returning home as I had promised. I wanted to tell her candidly that I wasn't stupid anymore, that I was through with being a slave to my desires. But I was concerned that stating my feelings so bluntly would hurt her feelings.

Soon after that incident, I turned my attention to contemplating the human body as a topic of meditation. The Buddha highly recommended body contemplation practices that aimed at counteracting attachment to one's own body and at preventing one from perceiving the bodies of others as objects of desire. Because attraction to Paeng occasionally crept into my mind, I decided to begin practicing *asubha* meditation, which focuses attention on the unattractive and unpleasant aspects of the human body. Of all the body contemplation practices taught by the Buddha, *asubha* is the most powerful and effective meditation for countering sexual craving.

I began practicing *asubha* meditation by probing deeply into the various parts that make up the physical body. In my meditation, I peeled away the body's thin coating of skin to reveal the bloody and repulsive mess underneath. While doing so, I was constantly struck by the human body's inherently disgusting nature. What I encountered resembled a living, stinking corpse more than a human being. The whole thing repulsed me; I couldn't stand the sight of it. That woman's body that I couldn't resist grabbing a few months before completely lost its appeal. Once I turned my full attention to the body's true nature and away from temptations of the flesh, my mind let go of lust and dropped into a clear, calm, concentrated state of *samādhi*.

As for Paeng, she later married a man from Khao Saming. They eventually moved to Saam Khok district and died there. It's sad, really. She lived and died without doing anything meaningful with her life. And to think, that was the woman I fell in love with. It just goes to show how important associating with virtuous people is in life. I try to tell people that, but it's usually a waste of time because most people fail to understand. Perhaps they have too much dust in their eyes to focus on the truth. The Lord Buddha put it best when he said, "Those who can scrub the muck of defilements from their minds and pull out the thorn of sexual craving from their hearts, such people will rid themselves of delusion. They will remain unperturbed in the face of praise or blame, happiness or suffering."

After I put on the postulant's robes, listening to Ajaan Kongmaa's Dhamma talks encouraged me to reflect on the virtuous qualities of my parents and on the inevitable hardships of family life. I thought about how difficult it was for them to raise me, how much they sacrificed for my sake. I began to realize how much suffering is involved in raising a family, and in what ways it can at times resemble a living hell. The more I contemplated it, the more I realized that most parents are so busy bringing up their children that they rarely have time to rest and take it easy. That thought reminded me of an old Thai story about the virtuous man with a loving family who was having a difficult time making ends meet. As he walked through the forest one day, he came across a lush mango tree that had dropped some of its fruit. He gathered up the most beautiful mangoes on the ground and saved them for his children to eat; he saved the overly ripe mangoes for his wife; and the rotting ones he kept for himself. But he made sure to eat the spoiled fruit only when he was alone, as he didn't want his wife and kids to know about his sacrifices.

This story calls attention to a certain reality about worldly life that those untrained in the principles of Dhamma don't fully understand. For instance, although my parents sacrificed so much time and energy to ensure that I experienced success and happiness in the world, they, like most parents, failed to realize that true happiness is not found in material gains or pleasurable pursuits. On the contrary, true happiness is found in the heart of someone who is unattached to worldly concerns. This is an essential principle of Dhamma which exists within the heart of every individual. It is accessible to everyone who chooses to meditate on the Buddha's teachings.

I myself had been content to follow my parents' lead in life. I always respected them as my teachers without questioning their motives. It wasn't until I began reading the Buddha's life story soon after my ordination that my views on the purpose of family life began to change. I was struck by the fact that the Buddha was born into a wealthy family where he lived the luxurious life of a prince. Seeking to foster happiness for his son, his father so thoroughly shielded the young prince from all forms of unpleasantness that he was completely unaware of the pain, suffering, and hardship of life in the world outside the palace. But when the prince finally managed to venture outside the palace walls, he was confronted with the reality common to all human beings when he saw an old man, a sick man, and a corpse. The inevitability of old age, sickness, and death caused him to question the direction of his life. Inspired by seeing the peaceful demeanor of a wandering ascetic, the future Buddha resolved to renounce his exalted status and all his possessions and leave the palace in search of the true source of happiness.

The Buddha's story illustrates that, even with the best intentions, parents can steer their children in a direction designed to perpetuate the cycle of life and death—and the pain and suffering that comes with it—while instilling in them a false sense of security in their outlook on life. Most children grow up with parents who emphasize worldly

concerns, such as how to make money and earn a living. They want their children to continue the family lineage and have kids of their own.

Eventually, children learn to think in the same way their parents do. This outlook becomes an obstacle that discourages young people from taking a serious interest in Dhamma. Even though a human birth has given them the physical and mental capacity to grasp the basic teachings of the Buddha, they nonetheless end up spending most of their time thinking about worldly matters of little substance and fail to recognize and act on their hearts' inherent spiritual qualities. This aspect of worldly existence is the reason why I say family life is difficult and burdensome.

Everyone who is born on this planet wants to experience genuine happiness in their lives. At the same time, everyone who comes to birth is bound to have a mind controlled by the forces of greed, hatred, and delusion. Due to a lack of training in faithfully upholding the precepts and practicing meditation, these dark forces are bound to dominate in the never-ending pursuit of commonplace, mundane goals.

All of us have parents who nurtured and protected us. Our very survival has depended on our parents more than anything else. If they had not taken care of us every step of the way, then we might not be alive today. Then again, because our parents brought us up with care, provided us with an education, and helped us to establish ourselves in a career and build our own family, we are conditioned to follow the way of life they taught us without questioning it. The mission of most parents is the pursuit of wealth and worldly gains, and this mission becomes their descendants' inheritance when they die. They live full of hope that their children and grandchildren will follow their example and carry on the struggle to achieve or exceed the same goals they hold dear. In the end, people feel obliged to please those loved ones who have spent so much time and effort looking after them. Rarely does a

son or a daughter seize the chance to free themselves from the burdens of lay life.

In everyday life, people try to live in a way that produces the kinds of causes which bring them good and beneficial results. It is natural for people to want to better their situation and be successful in life. But regardless of how hard they work to achieve success, at the time of death all their mundane achievements will be lost. Most people spend their lives chasing after worldly prosperity with the aim of amassing wealth for themselves and their family. Their basic goals in life are to have good health, a happy family life, a prosperous livelihood, and general satisfaction. But they seldom think clearly about the limitations of those forms of happiness. In fact, the effort put forth to achieve prosperity and happiness fails to deliver lasting peace of mind because people ignore the basic principle that all things that arise also pass away, that every accomplishment, by its very nature, is impermanent and therefore untrustworthy. Because they never last, worldly successes have only limited value. In the end, their effects will all disappear.

To understand these limitations and overcome them, people must examine their minds in light of the Buddha's teachings on right view and right intention. And to achieve that, they have to seek seclusion from the dust and confusion of everyday life and take up the practice of meditation in earnest. Unless people search for the causes of their suffering and make efforts to eliminate those causes, the pleasures of good health and wealth will be only short-term remedies for their suffering and not a lasting solution. Without wisdom, people easily become concerned with the material rewards of their actions or with their desire for praise and a good reputation in society—all of which will soon be gone.

The Buddha established a spiritual training whereby a person who practices meditation with right view and right intention can attain sublime states of calm and concentration that transcend the bounds

of common worldly pleasures and their false promise of happiness. In truth, practicing meditation is a means of attaining the highest form of happiness. No measure of happiness exceeds the happiness made possible by engaging in the mental training that leads directly to Nibbāna. Even a small amount of progress along the path in the direction of Nibbāna is far more beneficial than the pleasures associated with good health and wealth, which only succeed in making life in *samsāra* a little more comfortable. On the other hand, when done with the right commitment and determination, meditation practice, without a doubt, leads toward the realization of Nibbāna, the ultimate happiness and the end of all suffering.

Buddhists have the advantage that the Buddha clearly laid out the correct way to practice at every step of the path. Unfortunately, most people waste the excellent chance to make progress in the practice of Dhamma that a human birth provides. If they would only take advantage of the opportunity to come to the monastery to practice meditation and listen to Dhamma talks, they could learn to free their minds from the burden of troublesome thoughts and emotions. Like the Buddha and his Arahant disciples, they should seek out quiet and secluded locations that are removed from the disturbances of lay life. Such retreat environments are naturally conducive to practicing meditation for the sake of peace and tranquility.

Robes

My ordination ceremony took place on July 11, 1937 at 4:19 p.m. The ceremony was held inside the ordination hall at Chanthanārāma Monastery, which was located on the banks of the Chanthaburi River, not far from Sai Ngaam Forest Monastery where I lived. Chanthanārāma Monastery was the administrative headquarters of the Dhammayut Monastic Order for the provinces of Chanthaburi, Ranong, and Trat, and was the designated ordination center for the whole area. In those days, a stand of large *canda* sandalwood trees, from which the monastery got its name, grew beside the well on the monastery grounds. Presiding over my ordination was my preceptor, Venerable Ajaan Sian Uttamo, the monastery's abbot. The Venerable Ajaan Cheui Thongkhamdee was my *kammavācācariya* chanting instructor and the Venerable Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo was

my *anusāvanācariya* teaching instructor. I was given the Pāli name “Cundo.” I was one month and five days into my twenty-second year, and I was the first person for whom Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo chanted a part in a monk’s ordination ceremony.

I still remember Ajaan Lee’s instructions to me on that occasion, “You are a meditation monk. The primary work of a meditation monk has been assigned to you today at your ordination. It is given simply as five meditation objects to be memorized and reflected on in forward and reverse order: *kesā*—hair of the head; *lomā*—hair of the body; *nakhā*—nails; *dantā*—teeth; and *taco*—the skin that enwraps the body. It is up to you to contemplate the significance of these physical features in your meditation to the best of your ability. This reflection underlies the true work of those monks who practice according to the principles of Dhamma that were taught by the Lord Buddha.

“These five body parts are to be contemplated at length until you become aware that the body’s true nature is neither inherently beautiful nor desirable; but instead, that it is fundamentally unappealing, changeable, unsatisfactory, and thus should not be seen as belonging to you. These five parts form the external, visible features of the human body, the appearance of which can arouse lust and attachment in the mind. Only when the body is properly dissected and analyzed does the mind gradually develop a strong sense of dispassion toward the human form, causing the desires associated with it to begin to weaken and dissolve away. The mind is then free to devote itself to subtler aspects of meditation in search of more lasting and worthwhile forms of happiness.”

Following the ceremony at Chanthanārāma Monastery, I returned with Ajaan Lee and Ajaan Kongmaa to Sai Ngaam Forest Monastery where, from 1937-1939, I spent my first three rains retreats as their student. Those two *ajans* had been Dhamma friends for many years. Before they first met, Ajaan Lee had already ordained as a monk at the temple in his home village. When he heard that a wandering *dhutaṅga*

monk was camping out in the local cemetery, he went to pay his respects and ask him some questions. Ajaan Lee was inspired by the *dhutaṅga* monk's demeanor, which was so different from the other monks he knew. Ajaan Lee asked the monk who his teacher was. He replied that his teacher was Ajaan Mun Bhūridatto, who at that time was staying not far away at Burapha Monastery in the city of Ubon Ratchathani.

Ajaan Lee then traveled several days on foot to reach Burapha Monastery, where he met Ajaan Mun for the first time. He formally paid respects to Ajaan Mun and asked for his guidance. The advice that he received showed him the way forward in his meditation practice. It was there at Burapha Monastery that Ajaan Lee made the acquaintance of Ajaan Kongmaa, who was already an accomplished student of Ajaan Mun.

Eventually, Ajaan Lee convinced Ajaan Kongmaa to take him wandering in the regional forests to search for secluded places to meditate. During their travels, Ajaan Kongmaa's teachings on the Dhamma at various levels impressed Ajaan Lee, especially when Ajaan Kongmaa spoke about the results he achieved during the years he practiced under Ajaan Mun's guidance. He explained the body contemplation methods that Ajaan Mun taught and the profound results he gained from their practice, which inspired Ajaan Lee to increase his diligence in meditation.

The two friends eventually returned to Ajaan Mun, where Ajaan Lee made the decision to take a second ordination with the Dhammayut Monastic Order, the order to which Ajaan Mun belonged. Ajaan Mun arranged for the ordination to take place at Burapha Monastery on May 27, 1927.

After following Ajaan Mun for many years, and later wandering *dhutaṅga* alone through numerous Thai provinces, Ajaan Lee departed the country's Northeast region. He walked around the eastern foothills of the Sankambeng mountain range that separates the Northeast from the Southeast region of Thailand and proceeded south

toward the town of Sra Kaeo. From Sra Kaeo, he walked through the forested slopes of Soi Dao Mountain and entered the Southeastern province of Chanthaburi for the first time in early 1935.

Ajaan Lee settled in Chanthaburi province, where he began to teach Dhamma to the lay community. Many of the local inhabitants were so enthusiastic about his Dhamma talks that they arranged a place nearby for him to spend that year's rains retreat. His residence soon became known as Khlong Kung Forest Monastery. As meditation gained popularity with increasing numbers of people in Chanthaburi, Ajaan Lee's teaching burden increased since he was the only meditation monk available in the area to guide them. This situation prompted Ajaan Lee to write Ajaan Kongmaa, asking if he could join him and assist him in teaching the laity. After receiving approval from his teacher, Ajaan Sing, Ajaan Kongmaa traveled to Chanthaburi and started giving the locals instructions in the virtues of kindness and generosity, proper moral behavior, and meditation.

When Ajaan Kongmaa first arrived, Ajaan Lee escorted him to Naa Yai Aam village at the request of the district head who wanted to set up a forest monastery there. Naa Yai Aam village was a very poor community with the reputation of being a rural hideout where bandits took shelter from the authorities.

Finding a quiet spot conducive to meditation, Ajaan Kongmaa camped in the forest outside the village for many months, allowing the locals a chance to get better acquainted with him. He taught them lessons in moral conduct to inspire them to feel remorseful about their past misdeeds and instill in them a healthy fear of the consequences of immoral behavior. To this end, he stressed the importance of strict adherence to the five precepts, which represent the foundation of all virtuous actions. By listening to his teachings and putting his advice into practice, the villagers' lives began to improve. As their hearts learned to accept Ajaan Kongmaa's practical instructions, their faith in him increased. With a belief in the benefits of moral virtue instilled

in the hearts of its residents, the village that was once a hotbed of lawlessness became a cool, pleasant place to live. Old animosities died away to be replaced by a reverence for the monk whose teachings had made such an impression. When Ajaan Kongmaa eventually left Naa Yai Aam village, the people there cried like small children mourning the loss of a parent.

Due to Ajaan Lee's influence in the province, forest monks were sought after in village communities around Chanthaburi. My hometown, Nong Bua, was one such village. Its residents, who harbored a strong faith in the Buddha and his teachings, had on multiple occasions invited Ajaan Lee to settle in their vicinity and guide them in matters of virtuous conduct and meditation. Ajaan Lee was unable to oblige their request, but they were nonetheless eager to support another monk from the forest tradition.

At that time, a group of the town's devout lay supporters heard that Ajaan Kongmaa, who had the reputation of being a strict practitioner, was staying with Ajaan Lee at Khlong Kung Forest Monastery. Six people from the group volunteered to travel to Ajaan Lee's monastery and invite Ajaan Kongmaa to return with them to Nong Bua. They did not propose to invite Ajaan Kongmaa simply to have him perform religious rituals. These people were truly interested in Dhamma and possessed a thorough knowledge of the Buddhist Scriptures. They also valued the wise counsel of practicing forest monks. After a two-hour boat ride, the petitioners landed at the dock in Chanthaburi and walked the rest of the way to the monastery.

So delighted was the group when they first met Ajaan Kongmaa that they immediately proffered him their invitation. Ajaan Kongmaa responded by saying, "You should go back home and make a solemn wish asking the Triple Gem to provide an auspicious omen. If an auspicious omen appears, you can return; otherwise, don't come back." Immediately, one of the villagers spoke up, "Venerable sir, I've received a good omen already. Last night I dreamt that two beautiful white ele-

phants, a mother and her baby, approached me. But when I reached out my hand to pet them, the pair of them turned into a white chicken!”

Ajaan Kongmaa listened quietly to the man’s story and contemplated the meaning of the dream for a while. He then said, “Well! In that case, I agree to move to Nong Bua village. Come back to pick me up on Wednesday, March 17.” The year was 1936.

When the awaited day arrived, four villagers returned to pick up Ajaan Kongmaa and bring him back to Nong Bua. They showed up at his residence at exactly one in the afternoon. From there, they escorted Ajaan Kongmaa and the novice monk who attended him back to their district.

On arriving at Nong Bua village, Ajaan Kongmaa and the novice were taken to stay in a section of forest that the villagers reserved as a burial ground for uncremated dead bodies. It was also the location where they intended to build a monastery for the monks. A large group of villagers had gathered at the burial ground to welcome their arrival. Showing great enthusiasm, they busied themselves building small huts to house their guests. When evening fell, they all sat respectfully to listen to Ajaan Kongmaa teach the Dhamma. Feeling deeply inspired, they left for home when he finished speaking.

Let’s reflect for a moment on the story of the villager’s dream, the one in which two white elephants turned into a white chicken as soon as he started petting them. Dreams like that tend to be dismissed as fanciful imaginings, but to the surprise of all the monks, novices, and villagers of Nong Bua, the white chicken dream turned out to have a real-life basis.

About a mile from the burial ground lived a farmer that everyone called Uncle Bey who raised chickens for a living. His prize chicken was a plump white one. The very same night that Ajaan Kongmaa arrived at the burial ground, Uncle Bey decided to catch and kill that white chicken. His intention was to make a spicy lemongrass curry with it, which he planned to offer to the monks the next morning. In

the dead of night, Uncle Bey chased the white chicken around the coop in a fruitless effort to capture it. The coop's high walls made the job impossible as the chicken easily flew up to evade his grasp. In the end, worn out and weary of the chase, Uncle Bey decided to go to bed and try again first thing the next morning. He reckoned that daylight gave him a better chance of killing the chicken.

Before dawn the next day, however, the white chicken had already awakened and eaten its food before the other chickens woke up. Then it started crowing loudly, in an agitated manner, as though it was giving vent to a feeling of anger and resentment. "No matter how well that man raised and fed me, in the end he aims to kill me for food like he slaughtered the pigs next door!"

Thinking like this, the white chicken began to panic. It frantically paced the coop before daybreak, on the lookout for danger. Just the night before, it had managed to escape certain death; today it might not be so fortunate. Having considered its options, the chicken began scratching the ground looking for food to bolster its strength for the coming struggle. At the same time, it reflected on how it could escape from the coop.

As the morning sun rose over the horizon and the dim light of dawn began to illuminate its surroundings, the white chicken knew there wasn't much time left. Once the sun's rays struck its feathers, the white chicken gave out a big crow and jumped high into the air, launching its body out of the coop and onto the branch of an overhanging tree. Flying from branch to branch and crowing as loud as it could, it proceeded across the fields toward the burial ground where Ajaan Kongmaa stayed.

Almost immediately, Uncle Bey ran after it in hot pursuit. Staying just ahead of him, the chicken made its way into the grounds of Ajaan Kongmaa's new monastery. Uncle Bey chased it around the grounds, making grabs at it while trying to drive it off monastery property. He managed to chase the white chicken back to his house three times,

but it still evaded his grasp. Each time the bird bolted back to the monastery. The third time, feeling its very life to be at stake, the white chicken headed straight for Ajaan Kongmaa's newly built hut, landed right on the roof, and refused to move. Fearful of Ajaan Kongmaa, Uncle Bey didn't dare approach any closer. Feeling safe at last, the white chicken made its home in the monastery, taking Ajaan Kongmaa as its guardian. As its story spread through the village community, the white chicken soon became a kind of local celebrity—all of which led to the village man's dream coming alive in the folklore of Sai Ngaam Forest Monastery.

The chicken remained a fixture at Ajaan Kongmaa's residence, leaving it only to follow him around. The white chicken searched for food at his hut and roosted in a tree nearby. On occasions when Ajaan Kongmaa moved to another hut for a night, the faithful chicken followed along with him. Whichever hut he moved to, on whichever day, it traveled behind him like a shadow. In the end, it followed Ajaan Kongmaa everywhere.

Ajaan Kongmaa could train the chicken to do almost anything. When he told it to roost in a certain tree, it obeyed his command. When he told it to go somewhere, it took off straightaway. When he ordered it to stop, it stood stock still. It was as though it understood Ajaan Kongmaa's spoken commands. He always treated it with fondness and a gentle kindness.

Whenever Ajaan Kongmaa was reading a book on monastic discipline, the white chicken would walk up close and stand right next to the book. It remained right beside the book, nearly obscuring Ajaan Kongmaa's view of the pages, almost as though it was jealous of the attention he paid to the book! It even glared and cast angry glances at whatever Vinaya text Ajaan Kongmaa was holding, which made for a strange sight.

The white chicken became a major attraction for visitors to the monastery. Soon they started playing with it and teasing it just for fun.

Over time, the chicken became frustrated and annoyed by all the unwanted attention. The playfulness of their intentions aside, people just wouldn't leave the poor creature alone. Eventually, it couldn't abide the constant intrusions any longer and began to strike out at its tormentors by kicking at anyone who teased it. Before long, everyone got the message: Whoever disturbs the white chicken gets kicked. But its kick could be dangerous, especially to toddlers and small children, because the chicken had long, menacing spurs on its feet capable of causing injury. No one dared to discipline the chicken, however, because it was viewed as being Ajaan Kongmaa's favorite.

When the situation reached a crisis, the lay men and women who frequented the monastery decided to take matters into their own hands. Together, they decided to cut off the spurs on the chicken's feet in order to keep everyone safe. Concluding that they could no longer allow it to injure people, they caught it one day and chopped off the menacing spurs with a machete.

The chicken was extremely upset and angered by this brutal attack. It felt that its source of strength and courage to resist its tormentors had been hacked off. Venting its anger, it ran constantly around the monastery screeching from morning till night. Distraught and inconsolable, the chicken fled at the sight of people, rebuffing all playful gestures. It no longer trusted people. Yet those same people continued to disturb its peace and quiet at every opportunity. In the end, it tried to avoid contact with people altogether. It wanted to live alone without fear of disturbance. Its body and mind could relax only when it was perched high up in the branches of a tall tree. But no matter where it went to hide, people searched until they found its hiding place. At last, heartbroken, it decided to return to Uncle Bey. One day it walked home, crestfallen, with its head hanging low to the ground, and never returned.

The incident with the white chicken caused a lot of Ajaan Kongmaa's lay supporters to change their attitude toward animals.

Some of them gave up killing animals for the rest of their lives. Some made steadfast resolutions to uphold the moral precepts till their dying day. Some felt guilty and came to regret the things they had done to the white chicken.

The whole episode was incredible! It was like a dream that comes true! A local man dreamed that he had two white elephants—a mother and her infant—which represented Ajaan Kongmaa and the novice monk. Upon petting them, the elephants turned into a white chicken. Shortly afterward, a white chicken shows up at Ajaan Kongmaa's new monastery. This occurrence made a lasting impression on the local people, which caused them to reflect on its deeper significance.

“Might it be possible that a person of great merit and accomplishment will come to Sai Ngaam Forest Monastery, someone who ordains as a monk and attains the highest level of Dhamma, becoming pure and unsullied, like the white chicken's feathers? Similar to the fearless white chicken, this person will be brave and determined in the practice of Dhamma. The white chicken must be an auspicious sign, one that portends the appearance of a powerful white elephant in the realm of the Buddha's teachings.”

As word of these events spread, the residents of Nong Bua village began to believe that the white chicken story was a good omen indicating that Ajaan Kongmaa would attract outstanding disciples to ordain with him at Sai Ngaam Forest Monastery. But oddly enough, even though I lived right there in Nong Bua during the period of this incident, I knew nothing about it—I was obviously too busy having fun in my youth to take any notice. On the other hand, of all the many monks who ordained with Ajaan Kongmaa at Sai Ngaam Forest Monastery, I was the very first. Therefore, the story of the white elephants becoming the white chicken was particularly relevant to me—although I'm probably not the chicken.

I was still quite young when I entered the monkhood. I started my first rains retreat lazy, loud, and difficult to teach. Mainly, I avoided others and slept whenever I had a chance. By the middle of the rains retreat, I began to realize that it was inappropriate to be so stubborn and lazy. Feeling ashamed, I took to scolding myself, “Where did this idleness come from? Every day, I eat the food that the villagers offer to monks out of faith in us, and yet how do I repay them? By being lazy? I don’t deserve their faith and respect. Before leaving lay life to become a monk, I worked very hard. I rowed my boat nonstop day and night. Now that I’m a monk, why am I suddenly a no-good, lazy bastard? I’m really no different from the good-for-nothing idiot who’s too lazy to work to earn a living. I don’t deserve people’s respect! And yet the faithful pay their respects to me and offer me food because they think that I am a virtuous monk.” In the end, I cursed myself, “You bastard! What kind of a monk are you? How dare you let people bow down to you when you can’t even meditate as well as some of the elderly folks in town! Why did you bother to become a monk anyway?”

After berating myself for being useless, I was fired up and ready to do battle and overcome my shortcomings. Searching for a means to fight against the ignoble side of my character that made me lazy, weak, and worthless, I sat down to meditate, repeating the meditation-word “*buddho*” with the same serious-minded purpose that I’d always done things before laziness took hold of me. I thought, “Before I ordained, I said that I would never back down from anyone. But now I back down from my own weaknesses so easily that I’ve become their obedient slave. Is this feebleness something to be proud of? Hell no!”

“OK! That does it!” I thought. “I won’t give in, even if it means death. From now on I will take the Buddha as my example and practice with an earnestness similar to his. I vow to adopt the same diligence in my meditation practice that the Buddha’s Arahant disciples did in theirs. From now on, I will refuse to back down when confronted by my internal enemies.”

From the moment I took up *buddho* meditation in earnest, my attitude toward the monastic way of living totally changed. Whether I was seated in meditation or pacing back and forth on my meditation path, the effort I exerted was forceful and unrelenting. Ajaan Kongmaa taught me to practice walking meditation by pacing back and forth along a straight line between two well-marked points located thirty to forty paces apart and laid out at a quiet and secluded location in the forest. His instructions were to stand erect and alert, with hands joined just below the waist, the palm of the right hand overlapping and clasping the back of the left. While walking, the eyes should be kept focused on the ground a few paces ahead. I was told to walk diligently back and forth along the path, pivoting at each end and then returning. Because the repetition of *buddho* gave good results, I harmonized that mental repetition with the pace of walking, each footfall being coordinated with *bud* and then *dho*. In this way, I practiced walking meditation every day and every night without fail until my worldly infatuations and ambitions started to fade away. As the burden on my heart grew lighter, my mind felt calmer. Sometimes, I became so absorbed in meditation that I walked three or four hours at a stretch without a break, oblivious to the time of day or changes in the weather. By the end of my first rains retreat, I had spent so many hours doing walking meditation that the earthen path I walked on started breaking apart from continuous use.

Whoever claims that the development of virtuous mental qualities does not demand the sacrifice of every ounce of energy for the sake of the highest good, that person doesn't know what he's talking about. How can sacrificing your life for the sake of moral excellence not entail expending valued time and energy? Far from what people might think, development in Dhamma requires giving the endeavor everything you've got—until nothing's held back, and no more energy remains to throw into the effort.

As the momentum of my meditation gathered pace, I sought fresh contemplations to stimulate my mindfulness. For instance, I began reflecting on death. Can people who are wealthy and have many material possessions take any of that stuff with them when they die? No. Regardless of what efforts a person has made to be successful in life, all their possessions and their worldly achievements are lost at the time of death. All things appear and disappear; they never last.

When monks are invited to officiate at a funeral ceremony, they perform the ritual of taking robe-making cloth from the coffin of the deceased. This funeral rite is performed not because the cloth itself has special value, but rather as an opportunity for the monks and relatives of the deceased to solemnly reflect on the nature of death, on the truth that one day all of them will certainly die as well. As the monks take the cloth, they chant “*aniccā vata saṅkhārā*”: All compounded things, including our bodies and minds, are impermanent and subject to change. Nothing carries on in the same way forever.

Unfortunately, most people never stop to reflect on their own bodies and minds. They are too lost in trivial thoughts to see their life frittering away—slipping away from them, moment by moment, as they settle into habitual ruts of thought and behavior. To get out of those ruts, they must learn to focus on the present moment. For this very purpose, I encourage people to focus their minds on *buddho* for as long as they can—for days at a time, for months, or even years, until it becomes a habit that remains with them all the time. By then, their meditation should be unshakeable.

If the mind resists their efforts to calm down while walking and repeating *buddho*, I advise them to remain steadfast and persistent. Continue walking in step with *buddho* until the restless mind relents and becomes peaceful, even if that means pacing back and forth for hours. As the mind becomes absorbed in *buddho*, concentration deepens, and the rhythm and pace of walking adapt to the steady stream

of awareness that has developed. Then, the whole body may appear to float effortlessly along the path as though riding on a cushion of air.

I often experienced that feeling of floating while I walked meditation. It felt as though body and mind were suspended above the ground—at one moment, soaring up and away; at another, gliding back down, then up again. I could walk like that for hours, oblivious to the time and the fact that I was sweating profusely throughout. Walking meditation was such an enjoyable experience that I became hooked on the pleasant feeling and didn't want to stop. Which just goes to show how rewarding walking meditation can be when you put your all into the practice.

In the early days of my monastic life, however, my meditation practice lacked proper direction and consistency. On some occasions, the results were encouraging; on others, I felt drowsy and couldn't stay awake on the meditation seat. My halfhearted effort was discouraging. Deep down, I felt ashamed of myself for being so lazy in meditation. I compared my attitude to that of the monastery's lay supporters, who found time to practice meditation even though they worked long hours and had busy family lives. And there I was—a fully ordained monk, a son of the Buddha—sitting around idly from dawn to dusk gazing at the Buddha statue with droopy eyes, attending to my teacher with a lazy indifference, and sleepwalking through my duties at the meditation hall. Instead of trying harder to be more diligent than ordinary village folk, I was no match for them. I also thought to myself that I am a human being, just like the Buddha and his Arahant disciples. I live the same way they did and eat the same kinds of food. How come they were able to attain such exalted spiritual heights while I'm stuck in a rut? Obviously, I have only myself to blame.

Is laziness a virtue? Of course not. The wise people of this world always praise hardworking individuals. Why do I feel so sluggish and drowsy? Don't I feel embarrassed seeing the monastery's main hall full of lay people sitting attentively in meditation? I have worked hard all

my life. I was able to accomplish things that no one else could. How come, now that I'm a monk, I can't learn to meditate wakefully? Why can't I figure this out?

Considering my predicament in that way made me feel deeply dismayed. Making up my mind then and there to dramatically change course, I rose from my seat, approached the Buddha statue on my knees, and bowed to the Lord Buddha three times. With my hands joined together and my mind intensely focused, I made a solemn resolve, "From this moment on, if I do not meditate with unbending resolve, may I be destroyed by lightning bolts, earthquakes, floods, and raging fires!"

After putting my life on the line by making that uncompromising vow, my heart felt a burst of energy as my mind steeled for the challenge. Courage welled up inside as I prepared to face a life-or-death moment. I fervently appealed to the power inherent in the good *kamma* I'd accumulated from past virtuous actions to help me succeed in freeing my mind from all encumbering hindrances. To realize my vow, I began meditating day and night, sitting for long stretches during the day and walking for hours on end after dark.

From the moment I made that resolve, I forced my mind to stay firmly on the repetition of *buddho*. I had come to the conclusion that, for me, focusing on *buddho* was preferable to focusing on the breath as an object of meditation because my mind drifted too easily between the in and out breaths. Thus, from the time I awoke in the morning until I fell asleep at night, I made my mind think only *buddho*. *Buddho* became my sole preoccupation; all other concerns were irrelevant.

Maintaining such a single-minded focus was a struggle. I had to force my mind to be with *buddho* each and every moment without interruption. When my attention began to slip, I quickened the pace of the repetition...*buddho, buddho, buddho*...faster and faster, leaving no opening for other thoughts to gain a foothold. At times, I hammered away like that for many hours without moving, but my mind still refused to reach a calm and concentrated state. I then cursed myself,

“You bastard! When there’s fish, you eat fish! When there’s shrimp, you eat shrimp! When there’s duck, you eat duck, too! Chili sauces and curries and syrups and sugars, you get to eat them all! So why the hell won’t you work for me?”

Whether I was seated in meditation, doing walking meditation, or performing daily chores, the word *buddho* resonated deeply within my mind at all times. As I’ve mentioned, by temperament I was always bold and uncompromising, and this tenacity worked to my advantage. In the end, I became so earnestly committed to the meditation that nothing could shake my resolve; no errant thought could separate the mind from *buddho*.

As it happened, that was the only way I could quiet my mind and attain *samādhi*. Having staked my life on the solemn pledge I took, I could not let up or give in. Even when I sat in meditation continuously for five hours but still couldn’t bring the mind to stillness, I did not dare to get up and take a break for fear of suffering the consequences of breaking my vow. I just had to force myself to submit to those harsh training methods. “Ow! My legs hurt! Ow! I can’t fight anymore! Ow! I’m getting up in another half an hour! I’m done! This is awful!” I needed to battle that internal discord. A warrior must fight! There is no other way to achieve victory.

Practicing meditation earnestly to attain deep calm and concentration means being totally committed to the work at each stage of the practice. Nothing less than total commitment will succeed. To experience deep levels of *samādhi*, meditators cannot afford to be halfhearted and listless, forever wavering because they lack a firm resolve to guide their practice. Meditators without a solid commitment to the principles of practice can meditate their entire lives without gaining satisfactory results.

When, with supreme effort, my mind was able to let go of everything and drop into *samādhi*, the experience was an indescribably amazing, silent, and smooth stillness of mind. That stillness was accompanied

by an incredible feeling of lightness and buoyancy that made my body feel as though it was hovering in midair. I was conscious of a similar sense of floating when walking on the meditation path, as though I was flying above the path. My meditation soon reached a point where I could walk all night without sleeping. Eventually, the meditation path became so worn down and broken apart that the monks would look at it in disbelief. They couldn't understand how two feet could exact so much punishment on the sandy soil beneath them. But how could it be otherwise when I continued to walk night after night without stopping to rest?

Resolutely safeguarding my vow involved exerting myself to the limit of my endurance and then pushing beyond it. My determination was so strong that nothing would deter me. If eating became an obstacle to fulfilling my vow, then I just wouldn't eat. If keeping the vow meant death, I was prepared to die. I would not back down. When, with all my determined effort, the mind still refused to converge into *samādhi*, I'd counter with an even more potent vow and increase my exertions. This boldness became so much a part of my practice that Ajaan Lee began warning people, "Don't dare challenge Tan Jia. He won't give in to anyone, not even the *devas*. He'll accept anyone's challenge."

During the hot season months of my first year in robes, I joined three fellow monks hiking through the mountainous region in the northern part of Chanthaburi province, seeking out quiet and secluded forested locations where we could practice meditation undisturbed. That region had tracts of forest and hilly terrain that were well suited to our need for solitude.

In the style of *dhutaṅga* monks, we wandered from place to place, hiking through forests and mountains in locales where there were just enough small village settlements to support our daily almsround. We each carried an umbrella-tent slung over one shoulder and an alms bowl slung over the other. When we found a quiet spot that was conducive to meditation, we camped for a while in the outlying forests

near those small settlements. We saw this lifestyle as a way to be serious in our determination to practice correctly for the sake of Dhamma. We became convinced that working tirelessly to improve our meditation practice was the most important task in monastic life.

The four of us returned safely to Sai Ngaam Forest Monastery shortly before the start of the 1938 rains retreat. In our enthusiasm for the ascetic way of life, we decided to use that rains retreat to strictly observe some of the *dhutaṅga* practices that the Buddha recommended. We wanted to emulate genuine practicing monks who were striving earnestly for liberation from suffering. Together, we pledged to walk to the village for almsround every morning, except when fasting; to sweep the monastery grounds and clean the main hall every morning and evening without fail; to eat food only from our alms bowls; and as a group, to pay our respects by bowing to the Buddha and to our teachers every morning.

Other practices that were mandatory for the rainy season retreat included gathering at 8:00 p.m. for evening chanting, followed by a Vinaya reading and a group meditation session that lasted until 11:00 p.m. We were required to wake up at 3:00 a.m. and meditate on our own until 5:00 a.m., and then gather at the main hall for the morning almsround.

By far, the most challenging practice that a few of us undertook was going without sleep the whole night until dawn. Of all of us, I was the most committed to this practice as I made a solemn vow from the very beginning not to sleep at night throughout the entire three months of the retreat period. Following the potency of my previous vow, I bowed deeply to the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha, steadied my mind and focused it inward, repeating silently to myself, “I vow through the power of the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha to not sleep during the hours from dusk to dawn every day for the entire three months of this rains retreat. Should I break this vow for any reason, may I be destroyed by lightning bolts, earthquakes, floods, and raging fires!”

Upholding the integrity of my vow was the most important aspect of its success because that indicated how well the potency of my past *kamma* had prepared me for the intense challenge ahead. Karmic strengths and weaknesses are crucial factors in meditation because the moral quality of our past actions largely determines the strength and depth of our meditation and reinforces our readiness to persevere through hardships and difficulties without giving in. In that way, our capacity to carry out a vow relies on an accumulation of inner worth, which is based on the good merit we have made. The cultivation of inner worth is an important aspect of how effectively we can overcome the obstacles we face in intensive practice. Being able to stick with a demanding challenge indicates a high level of virtuous *kamma*—a degree of excellence which those who fail the challenge tend to lack. In truth, it's not easy to succeed; most people fail. It's easy to make a solemn vow, but extremely difficult to put your life on the line to realize it.

I admit I wasn't mentally prepared for how difficult it would be to forego sleep every night. My whole life I had routinely laid down to sleep at night. When suddenly I had to stop and stay awake instead, my body struggled to adapt. Some nights I wanted to collapse on the floor and pass out. But by repeating *buddho* with unrelenting determination, I managed to enter *samādhi* and go long periods without sleep. As I pushed myself past the bounds of physical endurance with a complete lack of regard for my health, the thin flesh on my buttocks became bruised and sore, making it extremely painful to sit long hours. But I had the strength of a bull in those days, and a temperament to match. Consequently, I devoted the entire rains retreat to meditation, without spending a single moment lying down to recuperate. Despite the pain and difficulty I endured, never once, day or night, did I lie down to rest. I hardly slept at all either. I took short naps in the daytime sitting up and leaning my back against a post, but only to give me enough rest to stay awake all night. I always felt drowsy in the morning when

walking on almsround. But I doggedly resisted the fatigue and pushed on, fearing the consequences should I fail to escape from the world of *samsāra* and fall again into human existence with its suffering, constant change, and certainty of death and rebirth.

During my three-month-long quest to abstain from sleep, I experienced nights when the conditions in my meditation were just right, moments when my mind was centered and so totally focused on *buddho* that I became oblivious to the time of day and the external environment. No images or visions appeared in the mind at all. When the mind was free of distraction and fully concentrated, a refined awareness was all that remained, standing out prominently on its own. Occasionally, feelings of body and mind ceased altogether, leaving an incomparable stillness in their place.

Aside from occasionally experiencing such sublime states, maintaining my vow day in and day out was usually a struggle. There were times when I just wanted to escape. But each time, I doubled down on my primary purpose. Any thought of surrender was out of the question because surrender meant reneging on my solemn pledge, the dishonor of which might shame me into abandoning my life as a monk. To inspire courage, I reflected on the fate of worldly folk who are drowning in the vast and deep ocean of *samsāra*. Life has no purpose in its depths, other than to be food for turtles and fish to prey upon. Dying such a death is worse than useless. And yet, living beings continue to sink through those dark waters with no prospect of salvation. Unless a liberating vessel comes to their rescue, they will die a meaningless death at the bottom of the sea. I was determined not to follow suit.

Contrary to popular sentiment, living the life of a householder—having a spouse and supporting children, struggling for financial prosperity and trying desperately to hold on to it—entails many causes for disappointment and dissatisfaction. Because of the pressure they feel to earn a living and raise a family, people run frantically around day and night with little time to rest their minds and experience peace.

The Buddha was right when he declared, “The fetter that shackles people to a life of pain and suffering is the fetter of attachment to sons and daughters, husbands and wives, property and possessions. These personal bonds are the most difficult to disengage from and go beyond. Grasping at and clinging to them drags people down to the deepest point in the sea of perpetual life and death, where they languish in the darkness, unable to find their way up to the light at the surface.”

People everywhere value worldly knowledge more than the Dhamma that the Buddha taught. The Buddha was very clear when he declared, “I cannot see any fetter more dangerous than craving for binding living beings to an existence of endless wandering in *saṃsāra*, the realm of pain and suffering.” But most people are reluctant to take the words of the Buddha to heart and act upon them. They’d rather waste their time gossiping, taking it easy, and having fun. When they come to visit the monastery, they bring radios and other devices that they listen to furtively while the monks are teaching Dhamma—even though the real purpose of visiting a monastery should be to leave all worldly pleasures and amusements at home and focus wholeheartedly on learning the way to find true and lasting happiness in their lives.

Sincerity is an essential quality in training the mind. No matter how ignorant someone is, if that person is truly sincere and dedicated to Dhamma practice in all postures—whether standing, walking, sitting, or lying down—that person will surely attain supreme happiness someday. The Buddha himself stressed that diligent effort practiced relentlessly leads to complete disenchantment and dispassion, and through dispassion, liberation of the mind is attained. This is the only way; there is no other way.

When the rains retreat of 1938 ended, I had fulfilled my vow—I did not lie down for the entire three months. My sincerity and dedication to Dhamma practice in only three postures gave me the confidence to push my strengths and abilities to their limits in the challenges that still lay before me.

Bones

In early July, 1939, Ajaan Kongmaa called a meeting of five local Chanthaburi monasteries. The purpose of the gathering was to cultivate unity and harmony among the monks, novices, and lay people to ensure that Buddhism would continue to prosper in the area. Primarily, he wanted to make the practice of the monastic rules consistent so that monks residing in all five monasteries would be observing the monastic code and practicing proper etiquette to the same standard. After the meeting adjourned, Ajaan Kongmaa delivered an inspiring Dhamma talk to raise the spirits of the monks and novices and stimulate the development of their meditation practice.

At the outset of the rains retreat that year, Ajaan Kongmaa established the daily routine to be followed by all monks residing at Sai Ngaam Forest Monastery. He mandated that silence should prevail

after dusk and throughout the night—no one should disturb the quietude. Monks must strive to maintain a calm body and a quiet mind. At 7:30 p.m. every evening, a bell announced the time for evening chanting. Ajaan Kongmaa's nightly Dhamma talk followed the chanting, after which the monks remained seated in meditation until 11:00 p.m. Ajaan Kongmaa stressed that anyone who fell asleep in the hall before that time had to make up for his lapse of concentration by meditating throughout the night until dawn.

At precisely 3:00 a.m., the first bell of the day woke the monks and novices, calling them to rise from their sleeping mats and begin walking meditation. The bell sounded again at 4:00 a.m., summoning the monks to the main hall to practice seated meditation, and at 5:00 a.m. sharp the morning chanting began. Upon the conclusion of chanting, the monks stood up in unison and quickly focused their attention on their assigned chore of preparing the main hall for the morning meal. Each monk spread a sitting cloth at his appointed seat on the dais, readied water for drinking and washing, and helped sweep the hall clean of dust. Once all the tasks were completed, the monks knelt at their seats and bowed three times to the Buddha statue and then did the same to Ajaan Kongmaa. Only then were they ready to walk to the village to receive alms.

After returning to the monastery with food offerings, the monks ate their meal in silence. The bowls from which they ate were then washed, thoroughly dried, and returned to each monk's hut where they were put neatly away for the day. By 9:00 a.m. the monks were seated, meditating in the solitude of the forest. Both sitting and walking meditation continued until 3:00 p.m. at which point the paths around the monastery were swept of leaves and twigs and the main hall's floor was again dusted and polished in keeping with a long-standing tradition of Thai forest monks.

Ajaan Kongmaa trained his students to uphold the high standards expected of forest monastics. In addition to studying the ancient Pāli

texts, meditation—aimed at both meditative calm and wisdom—was practiced daily. Ajaan Kongmaa stressed that *samādhi* and wisdom were like the two wheels on a cart: Only when both wheels worked in unison could the cart move forward. The calm and concentration of *samādhi* enabled wisdom to reach deeply to remove mental defilements; the intuitive insights that uprooted defilements, in turn, deepened meditative calm. In this manner, the two worked together to lead a practitioner along the path to enlightenment. Besides study and meditation, attendance at the fortnightly recital of the Pāṭimokkha rules was mandatory for the whole community, as was attendance at Sangha meetings and Ajaan Kongmaa's frequent Dhamma talks. Monastics were obliged to perform *pūjās* and chant devotional verses on all important Buddhist holy days.

By the time my third rains retreat began, the monks at Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo's monastery—Khlung Kung Forest Monastery—and those living at Sai Ngaam Forest Monastery were engaged in a brotherly competition to see which group could strive more diligently in meditation. The monks at Khlung Kung Forest Monastery emphasized abstinence from food as an aid to practice, while the monks at Sai Ngaam Forest Monastery preferred to refrain from lying down at night to aid theirs. The *ajans* at both monasteries encouraged their students to put forth increased effort in their chosen meditation methods.

At that time, I also observed the sitter's practice—I never slept at night. As a result, my heart was peaceful, and its wisdom was quick to understand basic principles clearly. Although I believed my heart had developed a strong foundation to anchor it, I did not recount the results of my meditation to anybody, not even Ajaan Kongmaa. Since almost everyone in Nong Bua village remembered me as being stubborn and disobedient, they too were totally unsuspecting. They wouldn't have believed me anyway, even if I had told them. I myself was surprised that I could ordain and stay as a monk for as long as I had.

The news that the monks of two nearby monasteries were fasting and depriving themselves of sleep began to spread through the district. Even though the monks were practicing diligently and putting their lives on the line for the sake of the Buddha's teachings, not everyone was sympathetic. Monks from other monasteries who did not meditate started criticizing the practice monks, saying, "These practices are *atta-kilamathānuyogo!* Fasting and sleep deprivation are forms of self-mortification, which the Buddha strictly forbade! Those monks are causing themselves to suffer for no good reason. Their overly zealous austerities are in breach of the monastic rules. They have deviated from the Middle Way that the Buddha laid down."

To draw attention to this perceived breach of the rules, a delegation of local Chanthaburi monks took their complaints to Bangkok and addressed them directly to Supreme Patriarch Chuen, the administrative head of the Thai Sangha, who then traveled to Sai Ngaam Forest Monastery to evaluate the truth of the matter for himself. Was Ajaan Kongmaa misleading his students? Supreme Patriarch Chuen wanted to see with his own eyes how the forest monks practiced and whether their meditation methods were appropriate according to Dhamma and Vinaya and the Buddha's Middle Way. I was fortunate enough to act as Supreme Patriarch Chuen's attendant during his visit, setting up his seat in the main hall and looking after his robes and bowl. As a result, I became well acquainted with him. My mother and father also spoke with him quite often.

Because Ajaan Kongmaa was very strict in matters involving meditation practice and monastic discipline, his reputation as a good meditation monk spread far and wide. He was highly respected by people in Chanthaburi province, who often crowded into the monastery to hear him discourse on Buddhist principles. His fame soon stirred up resentment among those who were envious of his popularity, some of whom went so far as to try to damage his reputation. However, Ajaan Kongmaa did not perceive their unfriendly actions as a hindrance to

his practice. He simply viewed all such “problems” as opportunities for growth and development in the practice. He taught his students to see their problems in the same light—not as obstacles on the path, nor as setbacks to their progress, but as motivations to find ways to overcome the faults in their own character and go beyond them.

Supreme Patriarch Chuen was circumspect in the way he investigated the accusations leveled against Ajaan Kongmaa. From the beginning of his stay, he followed the routines, rules, and etiquette of the monastery as if he were just another one of the resident monks. He insisted on eating only once a day. Even though Ajaan Kongmaa arranged for lay people to offer him his usual midday meal, he expressed a wish to practice exactly like the monks with whom he was living.

One complaint lodged with Supreme Patriarch Chuen accused Ajaan Kongmaa of slinging his alms bowl from one shoulder like the monks of other sects. Curious about this practice, the Supreme Patriarch came out of his residence one morning and walked toward the monks when they were about to go on almsround. He wanted to see with his own eyes how the monks carried their alms bowls. Once he saw firsthand the way meditation monks walk for alms—with their bowls slung in front of them from a shoulder-strap and held tightly to their side—he thought that method looked quite practical. He ended up saying, “Kongmaa, your way of carrying the alms bowl slung from one shoulder resembles carrying it the conventional way. It’s okay. It’s not wrong.” For his part, Ajaan Kongmaa was unaware that complaints had been made about his behavior.

Ajaan Kongmaa was later accused of misrepresenting the Buddha’s teachings in his Dhamma talks. Some claimed that his discourses presented a mistaken and false interpretation of the Pāli texts. Without prior knowledge of these accusations, Ajaan Kongmaa sent out an announcement one day summoning the townsfolk to the monastery to hear Supreme Patriarch Chuen expound on the Dhamma. In response, a large crowd showed up eager to hear the Supreme Patriarch give a

Dhamma talk. Never had so many faithful lay supporters gathered in the monastery at the same time.

When Ajaan Kongmaa, himself keen to hear the talk, approached the Supreme Patriarch's residence to respectfully invite him to speak, the Supreme Patriarch surprised him by saying that he felt unwell, so Ajaan Kongmaa would have to give the talk on his behalf. Ajaan Kongmaa bowed, returned to the main hall, and began speaking to the gathering. A little over ten minutes into the talk, a young novice stepped outside the hall to relieve himself and spied the Supreme Patriarch seated on the ground beside the hall listening to Ajaan Kongmaa speak. Amazed, the novice quickly reentered the hall to inform Ajaan Kongmaa, but was unable to catch his attention.

On that occasion, Ajaan Kongmaa gave a profound and comprehensive discourse on the Dhamma that covered both academic and practical aspects in detail. The Supreme Patriarch was full of praise the next morning, saying, "Kongmaa, you're more articulate than scholar monks with the highest degree in Buddhist theory."

Another accusation falsely leveled at Ajaan Kongmaa was that he practiced black magic when he wandered through the countryside, handing out amulets and talismans to local people like a shaman.

So, one day Supreme Patriarch Chuen asked Ajaan Kongmaa to take him on a short *dhutaṅga* trek through the forest. He didn't want anyone else to join them, just the two of them were to go. Despite his monastic seniority, the Supreme Patriarch insisted on carrying his own alms bowl and umbrella-tent as they hiked along the forest trails. Although Ajaan Kongmaa offered to carry his gear for him, the Supreme Patriarch wouldn't allow it. Carrying his own requisites, he walked behind Ajaan Kongmaa out of the monastery and into the dense surrounding forests. The sight was most impressive—as though a brave monarch was striding onto the battlefield to strive for victory.

He asked to be taken to the places where Ajaan Kongmaa had previously traveled. So, Ajaan Kongmaa led him out into the forested

regions of Chanthaburi province, walking from place to place, stopping in locations where he had meditated in the past. Wherever they stopped, many people interested in Dhamma came to pay their respects to the wandering monks, listen to Ajaan Kongmaa give Dhamma talks, and practice meditation under his guidance. The Supreme Patriarch remained quietly in the background. From the beginning, he had stipulated that Ajaan Kongmaa should not disclose to others that he was the Supreme Patriarch of Thailand. He wanted Ajaan Kongmaa to address him as he would any other monk.

One day they camped on the lower slopes of Sabaap Mountain. No sooner had they settled in than a severe rainstorm blew in packing high, swirling winds. Their umbrella-tents were no match for the strong gusts and heavy downpours. As was common among practicing monks, they had set up their umbrella-tents some distance apart. Huddled under his umbrella-tent for protection, the Supreme Patriarch was drenched by the deluge, his robes soaked through and through. Seated under his umbrella-tent, Ajaan Kongmaa was also drenched by the rainstorm, but his robes remained dry, for he knew how to safeguard them.

After the rain stopped, Ajaan Kongmaa wrapped himself in a dry robe and went to check on his partner. Seeing him wrapped in a dry robe, the Supreme Patriarch asked, “How come you’re not sopping wet? I’m soaked right through!”

“I know a magic formula that protects me,” said Ajaan Kongmaa.

“Can you please tell me the formula?”

Ajaan Kongmaa just smiled and changed the subject.

When they arrived back at Sai Ngaam Forest Monastery, one of the novices went to pay his respects to the Supreme Patriarch and sweep out his residence. Remembering Ajaan Kongmaa’s protection formula, he questioned the novice, “Novice! I want to ask you something. Do you know anything about the rain-protection formula—what are the words for it? Tell me what you know.”

“I kinda know them, sir.”

“Good! Let me hear them so I can commit them to memory.”

“*When it rains, store all robes inside the alms bowl.* This is what all practicing *dhutaṅga* monks do. Their upper and outer robes are neatly folded and placed inside their bowls, after which they put the bowl lid on good and tight.”

The Supreme Patriarch burst out laughing, “So that’s how he did it! Ajaan Kongmaa wouldn’t say! I really thought he used a Pāli protection-verse.”

After that incident, Supreme Patriarch Chuen was fond of telling everyone, “The *dhutaṅga* practices that Ajaan Kongmaa and other practicing monks follow are very beneficial. These are the sort of practices that will help Buddhism flourish.”

Such were the good leadership qualities exhibited by the Supreme Patriarch, who undertook the investigation in such a way that he could personally experience the situation for himself and judge its merits with fairness. After the close of his inspection, he steadfastly protected Ajaan Kongmaa from criticism and praised him for the noble purpose of his way of practice.

By the time my third rains retreat began, I had fully embraced my uncompromising commitment to meditation. That steadfastness was the result of the solemn vow I had taken earlier while bowing to the Buddha statue at Sai Ngaam Forest Monastery. I’d made that vow as a pledge to resolutely carry out the mission of taming my unruly mind. I had called on the Buddha to be my witness because I feared the devastating consequences that I’d suffer should I break an oath to the Buddha.

My meditation during the rains retreat was dominated by that tough-minded attitude toward practice. Confident I was on the right track, I doubled down on my *buddho* repetitions by increasing the tempo, each *buddho* following the last in quick succession to close off any

gaps where thoughts might gain a foothold. If repeating *bud—dho...* *bud—dho* at a quickened pace wasn't enough to narrow the gaps, I sped up to *bud-dho..bud-dho*, then *bud.dho.bud.dho*, until finally *dho.dho.dho.dho.dho...* in extra quick succession in order to keep up with the fleeting nature of my mind. If I simply breathed in thinking *bud* and breathed out thinking *dho*, my mind would still find openings where sense impressions could easily squeeze through to incite unwanted thoughts. The secret was to repeat the mantra very fast with focused attention, so fast that the mind quieted down, became still, and entered naturally into a calm, concentrated state of *samādhi*. Resting serenely there, the mind no longer required the anchor of the meditation-word.

My mind would withdraw from deep *samādhi* focused and alert, so I'd quickly stand up and go straight to the walking path to continue meditating without interruption. The meditation path was about thirty paces long, a comfortable distance for long hours of pacing. Standing stock still at one end of the path, I reinforced my resolve to walk through the night until daybreak without sleeping as a prelude to taking the first step. Normally, nonstop pacing should be exhausting, but instead of feeling heavy and tired as the night wore on, I was more invigorated the longer I walked. My body felt light and airy, as though floating like a feather, while my mind was uplifted by an indescribable joy. Every evening, I looked forward to another all-night meditation session.

In this respect, I followed an old adage in the circle of practicing forest monks which instructs practitioners to continue using a meditation method that suits their temperament for as long as it gives them good results. It's counterproductive to continually try different methods when the one they are practicing is just right for them.

As I progressed with my preferred meditation method, a familiar pattern began to develop. When the mind became calm and fully aware, applied thought and discernment arose spontaneously, prompting wisdom to perceive the way forward. Increased concentration led

to a rapturous feeling of peace and contentment, which was accompanied by a sense of expansiveness and buoyancy permeating the whole body. When the feelings of rapture subsided, the mind settled into a quiet, blissful happiness. From there, the mind converged into *appanā samādhi* or full absorption—a totally tranquil state free from defilements.

The rapturous feeling, called *pīti* in Pāli, has a unique revitalizing and recuperative effect. It is experienced in a variety of ways during meditation. Initially, it appears as a slight sense of excitement, as though the hairs on the back of the neck are standing up. As the meditation progresses, *pīti* can arise in the body like flashes of lightning flaring brightly inside. Then, there's sporadic *pīti*, which comes and goes like waves breaking on the shore, passing first through the body and then vanishing. In some cases, *pīti* can arise with such an intense and powerful burst of energy that it makes the body rise quickly into the air and levitate there. In fact, Ajaan Sao Kantasilo was known to have levitated effortlessly while experiencing this form of *pīti*.

The ultimate form of *pīti* permeates throughout the entire body like a mountain torrent filling up a deep gorge. It's a sensation of such potency that it has the power to cure both physical and mental ailments. Often referred to as "Joy in Dhamma," it's the kind of *pīti* that I experienced most often.

On one specific occasion, late at night when my mind was well composed, the experience of Joy in Dhamma that pervaded my heart was so intense that tears began to roll down my face. While wandering endlessly through *samsāra*, how seldom it is that one has the opportunity to come in contact with the Buddha's teachings or those of his fully liberated Arahant disciples! With the incredible opportunity for liberation afforded by a human birth, I was struck by a poignant sadness as I reflected on the human condition with its insecurity, its impermanence, its proximity to death, and the possibility of rebirth in the lower realms for those people who squander this chance.

I, too, had wandered aimlessly through countless births and deaths over eons of time. But once the attachments inside my mind began to loosen their grip, revealing the causes of my suffering, I began to understand the extent to which pain and confusion exist in the hearts of other people as well. Having examined my own heart and seen the pain and delusion there, I realized that everybody is caught in a similar predicament. But because I had caught a glimpse of the way to go beyond suffering and its causes, I had the advantage of viewing that predicament from a higher level of wisdom and understanding. A deep, personal intuition then arose that everyone has the potential to transcend suffering if they could only open their eyes and see the way for themselves. The sadness and dismay I felt at recognizing the root causes of pain and suffering in other people arose simultaneously with the wonderful sense of joy and freedom I felt inside, causing tears of compassion to roll down my cheeks.

In truth, the consciousness that pervades living beings is by nature an aimless wanderer, roaming the length and breadth of saṁsāric existence without purpose or direction—just ceaselessly moving on without the prospect of ever finding a final resting place. When human beings are born, that transient consciousness animates their bodies and minds. But those people don't know where they came from or where they're headed. They know only that they were born, and that they will die someday. Beyond that, life's path is a mystery. They were born into this world alone, and they will die and pass on alone. They have parents and relatives, brothers and sisters, friends and colleagues, but none of them will be traveling with them when they die. They will move on into the uncertainty of the future all on their own. The worst danger of life in the human realm is that such people may misunderstand the true value of moral principles and consequently deny the efficacy of meritorious action and moral virtue—instead, placing a higher value on immoral ideas and harmful behavior.

During long walking meditation sessions, I contemplated the unstable nature of saṃsāric existence and recognized the same instability in my own mind—how in the endless cycle of wandering from one birth to the next, it had never found a place where it could stop to rest for good. But I saw too that in this lifetime I'd found a meditation method that calmed the mind and brought its wayward whirling to a halt. I felt like a long-lost and confused person who suddenly discovers a path that can lead him to complete safety and perfect happiness.

Inspired by that insight into the nature of living and dying, I continued walking nonstop throughout the night. Even though I continued pacing on the meditation path until dawn, my body felt fully rested and ready to keep going, as if it had enjoyed a normal night's sleep. All the while, my mind was immersed in a profound sense of compassion for the plight of living beings who repeatedly come to birth, grow old, become sick, and die—over and over again without end.

Following that intense experience, I decided to seek Ajaan Kongmaa's advice. I approached my teacher respectfully, bowed three times, and related my experience of the previous night. His reply altered the course of my meditation. He instructed me that my experiences in meditation the previous night were a consequence of an intense form of *pīti* known as Joy in Dhamma, which, though powerful, would not be able to sustain my practice in the long run. He insisted that I continue the repetition of *buddho* with increased vigor, and that once I did so, the intense experiences of rapture would gradually subside. After that, I should turn my attention to body contemplation, focusing on the body's constituent parts, as a means of gaining insight into the attachments that cause pain and suffering.

After I followed Ajaan Kongmaa's advice to focus exclusively on *buddho*, the rapturous joy disappeared as he said it would. I then turned my attention to body contemplation. The more I contemplated the physical body, the more I perceived bodily experience in a way I

had never expected or imagined. In traditional Buddhist meditation, thirty-two specific parts of the body are recommended as objects for body contemplation. These include hair on the head, hair on the body, nails, teeth, skin, flesh, sinews, bones, kidneys, heart, spleen, lungs, intestines, stomach, feces, pus, blood, and so on. They are intended to be broadly representative of the human body as a whole.

I began examining the thirty-two body parts by visualizing each part individually to determine which piece appeared attractive, which piece aroused lust in the mind. Mentally, I cut off body parts one at a time and placed them together in front of me. I placed the hair in one pile, and nails and teeth in another. I removed the skin, the flesh, the sinews, and the bones and heaped them up as well. Next, the internal organs were laid out before me. Contemplating them in my mind's eye, I wondered which pile warranted feelings of desire. With the skin removed, what was there to admire in the human body? Whether they belong to a man or a woman, human body parts in and of themselves have no attractive qualities. How then is a bag of flesh, blood, and bones able to fool the whole of humanity into lusting for it?

Contemplating like this in all postures throughout the days and nights I spent at Sai Ngaam Forest Monastery, my mind became concentrated in a special way unique to wisdom practice. When the mind dropped into *samādhi* by means of wisdom, that *samādhi* was sharper and more powerful than the *samādhi* achieved by more conventional means.

As my practice gathered momentum during that retreat period, I instinctively switched my meditation-word from *buddho* to *maraṇaṃ*, a Pāli word meaning “death.” The dismaying sadness of the human condition, caught up as it is in the repetitive cycle of death and rebirth, had become a recurring theme in my meditation. The body that is clung to so dearly in life breaks up and disintegrates after death, leaving a confused mind adrift and blindly grasping for another physical form to anchor it. The ensuing rebirth sets in motion another torturous

round of pain and suffering, and so on—ad infinitum. The transition to death meditation was a consequence of those sobering reflections.

The more effort I put into repeating *maraṇaṃ* as a mantra, the more benefit I gained from the contemplation of death and dying. When my mind accepted the truth that death is a reality shared among all people, a strong empathy arose for humanity's common experience of enduring this kind of suffering. Facing the reality of death also enabled me to appreciate the importance of the opportunities that life gave me, which inspired me to make the best use of that valuable time to strive for freedom from suffering. In this way, death meditation generated in me a strong desire to practice for the attainment of the Buddha's "deathless" Dhamma.

When the Buddha embarked on his quest for liberation, one of his most influential experiences was the sight of a fresh corpse, which inspired the realization that he too would surely die. Spurred on by a sense of urgency, he resolved to search for that which doesn't age, doesn't become sick, and doesn't die—the end of all suffering—Nibbāna. Because death contemplation was practiced as a path to enlightenment, the Buddha encouraged people to meditate on, deeply investigate, and directly understand the nature of death for themselves.

To realize the full benefits of the Buddha's teachings, meditators must train their minds to stay fully focused on every breath, every repetition of a mantra, and every contemplation—without wavering. As dedicated practitioners struggle to develop such a wide-ranging mental discipline, they learn to recognize which meditation methods work best for them at any given time and are prepared to apply the most appropriate method whenever concentration begins to falter. Lacking these effective means, meditators may strive tirelessly all night but still fail to experience the peace and calm they are seeking.

Repeating a mantra is one such effective method. It can serve as a lifeline when all else fails. Constantly repeating a single word may seem like an inferior practice, but don't be fooled by its apparent

simplicity. Its uncomplicated nature actually works to a meditator's advantage when the mind is confronted by a continuous assault of thoughts and sense impressions, and a sharp, effective method to cut through the cognitive overload is needed. Done quickly and energetically, repeating a mantra can yield incredible results. Like a strong post embedded in the ground that remains unshaken, intensive mantra repetition prevents the mind from being attracted to distractions that enter through the sense doors. With firmness established, mindfulness can fully immerse itself in the mantra, creating an immovable presence of mind that guards against carelessness when dealing with ongoing thoughts and emotions.

Because the power of a mind focused on one object is what brings the mind to the peace and calm of *samādhi*, meditators should remain intent on keeping mindfulness firmly focused on their mantra. Ultimately, the mind becomes so internally focused, so completely absorbed in the mantra, that the act of repeating it becomes unnecessary, causing it to simply drop away on its own. The result is a still, quiet, clear mind free of thought and delusion that is indescribably amazing.

Regrettably, due to a lack of consistency in maintaining their focus, many meditators experience highs and lows in their practice. To avoid this tendency, every effort must be made to keep one's undivided attention fixed on the repetition of the mantra. Without this single-minded attention, results soon become erratic. Meditation can progress smoothly at times only to stall suddenly and become unexpectedly difficult. Concentration can falter to the point where all apparent progress vanishes. But when a mantra like *buddho* is used continuously as an anchor to ground mindfulness in the present moment, the mind is sure to attain a consistent state of meditative calm and concentration.

Practicing meditation earnestly to attain the end of all suffering requires total commitment to the project at each stage of the path. Nothing less than full dedication will succeed. To experience the deepest levels of *samādhi* and achieve the most profound levels of wisdom,

meditators cannot afford to be halfhearted and lazy, yielding to the lure of old mental habits. They must put their life—their whole being—on the line. Otherwise, practitioners can meditate their entire lives without breaking through to freedom.

I speak here from personal experience. When I first began to meditate on *buddho*, my foundation was still too shaky to be reliable. Due to the intense effort I exerted in the beginning, my mind succeeded in attaining *samādhi* on a regular basis. With my mind feeling as stable as a mountain, I pushed myself relentlessly every night to attain *samādhi* sooner and stay there longer. The results I achieved seemed spectacular.

But over time I became complacent and relaxed my intensity, which permitted my meditation to decline. As mental hindrances took advantage of my slackness, what had once been a robust meditation practice slowly deteriorated. The more I worried about the decline, the more my meditation suffered. I was at a loss and didn't know where to turn for help. I finally realized that I had let go of my anchor—*buddho*—which allowed my mind to drift in a sea of thoughts and frustrations.

So, I started anew. I picked up *buddho* and drove it like a stake into the ground, refusing to release my grip even for a moment. I was determined not to indulge my old thought patterns. All my concerns about progress or decline were put aside. I would let happen whatever was going to happen. Worrying about progress and decline was a source of agitation that distracted me from the primary mission. Only the unrelenting repetition of *buddho* could prevent fluctuations in my meditation. It was time for all-out war on worrisome thoughts. If I let myself think, I'd be thinking all day; if I let myself talk, I'd be talking all day. It was time to use *buddho* like a buzz saw to cut through all the mental crap.

My mind had repeatedly failed to drop into *samādhi* because its unruly nature kept bossing my thoughts around. Forceful measures

were needed to crush that unruliness once and for all. I was prepared to torture the mind if necessary—bring it to its knees and teach it a lesson it would never forget. The time had come to do or die. I predetermined a time limit for my seated meditation sessions—whether it was two or three hours or more—and adamantly refused to uncross my legs to stand up before I had exceeded that limit. Surrendering to weakness was not an option. I would only submit to what the Buddha taught: be strong and tolerant of pain and hardship; be persistent and diligent in meditation; and be honest and truthful to oneself. This is the attitude of a true Dhamma warrior.

It was during this crucial stage that I gained a solid foundation in my practice. After succeeding in that trial by fire, I never again experienced a decline in my meditation. The fluctuations that had long plagued me ceased to be a factor. Instead, my mind achieved increasing levels of calm and concentration, which soon gave me the confidence to place a renewed emphasis on wisdom and insight meditation.

No matter how deep or continuous my *samādhi* experiences had been, on their own they were incapable of bringing about an end to all suffering. But a firm *samādhi* practice did provide me with an effective springboard from which to launch my investigations into the true nature of the human body. So from that time on, I reestablished body contemplation as the focal point of my meditation practice.

Focusing with mindfulness and scrutinizing with wisdom is what the Buddha and his Arahant disciples called insight meditation, and it is the key to accessing body contemplation. So, when I felt attracted to a human form because it looked appealing to the eye, I activated mindfulness and wisdom to dissect that pleasant image, bit by bit, until the perception changed from pleasing to unpleasant, from attractive to unattractive.

While observing the bodily forms and features of people around me, I noticed that I felt sexually attracted to certain body parts more than others. Paying special attention to those alluring forms—whether the shape of a leg, the curve of a chest, or a distinctive facial feature—I made that specific part an object of investigation. Scrutinizing its distinctive characteristics, I questioned why the sight of that part delighted the senses and aroused feelings of attraction. Did it appear especially beautiful? If so, what distinguished its beauty? The body is composed of numerous parts, why was that part so enticing? Recognizing that this kind of infatuation was a hindrance to my meditation, I focused my attention on that part with a vengeance, mentally dissecting the pleasing aspects and delving into them to discover exactly where the attraction lay. Close inspection showed that I'd been yearning for something which was, at best, unexceptional or, at worst, repugnant. By investigating deeply with wisdom into just one body part until its true nature was clearly understood, I could apply that insight to every other body part, for they were all by nature foul and unappealing.

Sexual attraction is based in perceptions of the human body, and those perceptions are generated in the mind of the beholder. It is the mind, defiled by sexual desire, that lusts after sensual perceptions. For that reason, mindfulness and wisdom are the tools of choice for rooting out the defiling influence of sexual craving. Mindfulness is the ability to maintain one's focus on the inherent features of sensual perceptions as they occur, while simultaneously recognizing their significance relative to the ongoing investigation; in other words, identifying which features are central to the experience of sexual attraction, and which are merely peripheral to it. This twofold ability explains why mindfulness is so tightly bound up with insight and wisdom. It obviously plays an important preparatory role in laying the groundwork for clear comprehension to arise.

When wisdom arises coupled with mindfulness, the intuitive qualities of wisdom are more potent; lacking the focused support of

mindfulness, wisdom tends to be more analytical and less potent. In fact, the more alert mindfulness becomes, the weaker unwholesome states of mind tend to be, making it harder for those defiled states to dominate thoughts, speech, and actions. The more clearly the mind understands the underlying repugnance of sexually attractive mental images, the less likely it is to be ensnared by them.

I probed and examined my mind's attraction to bodily images over and over until I became skilled at recognizing the defilements that caused me to eagerly grasp at and cling to false perceptions of beauty. Using wisdom's acuity to penetrate directly to the source of sexual desire enabled me to counteract those mental images associated with lust's corrupting effects. Deployed in this way, wisdom was able to understand the truth of the body with greater clarity. When perceptions of the body's attractiveness lost their appeal and faded away, what was left to be attached to? What was there to lust after? What part of the body was worth clinging to? The defilement of sexual desire had long deceived me with its perceptions of human beauty. When finally seen clearly with wisdom, however, the human body by its very nature repelled desire.

To truly grasp the truth of this matter for myself, in a clear and precise way that left no room for doubt, I had to approach the practice with utmost urgency—as though nothing else in the world mattered more than the project I was working on at that moment. Time and place were not relevant factors; nor were ease and comfort relevant concerns. Regardless of how long it took or how difficult the work proved to be, I would persist with body contemplation until doubt and uncertainty were overcome.

Nearing a decisive breakthrough in my investigation, I accelerated my effort to discover the truth. Repeatedly contemplating and deepening my understanding unshackled the mind from its false assumptions about the body and weakened the defiling influence of sexual desires.

As the defilements lessened, the mind's knowing nature began to shine forth with greater clarity. With increased clarity came sharper wisdom.

By that time, my mind was continuously alert and wide awake. The need for sleep and the pangs of hunger no longer intervened. I didn't feel tired or hungry, even when seated in meditation late into the night. Such wakefulness has been referred to as "entering the path of the Noble Ones." The Buddha called it *ekāyano maggo*—the one sure path to Nibbāna. He also described it as *paccattam veditabbo viññūhi*, meaning that it must be individually experienced by the wise for themselves. Not even the Buddha, his Arahant disciples, or our revered teachers can walk the path and experience the journey's liberating results for us. We must take up the challenge to practice diligently until we put an end to suffering within our own minds, which is where Nibbāna, the end of all suffering, will appear. I cannot stress this point enough: Practitioners must dig deep to fulfill their quest for enlightenment. We already know the strategies that the Buddha taught for accomplishing this goal—we just need to apply them effectively in our own mental training.

Due to the uncompromising earnestness with which I undertook the mental training at Sai Ngaam Forest Monastery, my meditation continued to increase in strength and intensity. Even so, I regularly reminded myself to avoid feeling complacent and content with my accomplishments, but instead to keep pushing the meditation to higher and higher levels. I knew that contemplating the body in all its aspects was the way to relieve my mind of concerns about sliding back into old mental habits, so I redoubled my efforts to break down the barriers that attachment to physical appearance had erected. After thoroughly investigating the body and clearly seeing all its implications for craving and clinging, I not only became disillusioned with the lure of physical attraction but also disgusted with my tendency to still take the bait. The more I investigated every unpleasant aspect of the human body, the more weary and dismayed I felt about my deluded attachment to

it. It was disheartening that I should identify with, and find desirable, something so unreliable and repulsive.

Later, during my third rains retreat at Sai Ngaam Forest Monastery, I sat down one day to meditate under the shade of a large almond tree. By then, my mindfulness and wisdom were fully engaged in continuous, around-the-clock body contemplation. The pace of the investigation at that point was truly extraordinary. Wisdom moved rapidly through the body, looking in and out from every angle while examining each aspect in meticulous detail.

The mind became so engrossed in its investigation that I ceased to feel the physical body I was investigating. When the feeling of my body's presence disappeared from awareness, the mind felt light and buoyant. Mindfulness and wisdom, however, remained unperturbed by the loss of physical sensation. They continued their nonstop efforts by using a mental image of the body as the focal point of their search for the truth. The investigation progressed without any reduction in intensity until my mental acuity became very subtle and refined. Mindfulness and wisdom were able to manipulate the mental image of the body to the extent that I could chop up the body parts appearing in the image into smaller and smaller shreds, effectively mincing the whole body with my mind. My attention was focused solely on the mental image I was investigating. I saw the entire process unfold distinctly because my concentration fixed itself firmly to each consecutive stage of the visualization.

At that juncture, the mind felt no inclination to turn its attention elsewhere; it was completely engrossed in the insightful work at hand. Its understanding grew clearer and clearer until only a conceptual image of scattered body parts remained, with wisdom figuratively pounding the flesh to a pulp and the bones to dust. The sense of having a physical body had long since vanished from my awareness. What re-

mained was a spellbinding perception of body parts crumbling to bits and slowly disintegrating as their basic constituent elements merged with the earth and disappeared. At the precise moment that perception vanished into the earth, the mind and its mental faculties simultaneously converged into a wondrous state of pure and pristine awareness that radiated out in all directions. When the real basis of that perception was understood, the external world of appearances collapsed, and my attachment to it ceased of its own accord. Once my mind had withdrawn completely from all sensual involvement, a feeling of profound serenity enveloped my entire being. With that climactic occurrence, the mind had been purged of mental impurities rooted in sexual desire.

When the mind suddenly disengaged from bodily perceptions and the world of external appearances disappeared, it felt like the earth and the sky had just collapsed, like the entire universe had imploded. With the cessation of all images created by the mind, came the cessation of attachment to form. Only brilliantly pure awareness remained. My mind experienced that utterly amazing Dhamma for many hours before it withdrew to normal consciousness. Coming out of meditation that night, my heart exclaimed, "I've found the precious treasure I was looking for!" I will remember that night for the rest of my life.

The impact of that realization brought tears of wonder to my eyes. The Dhamma of the Lord Buddha is amazing beyond all belief! It possesses a marvelous flavor that far surpasses every other taste. Whoever has earned the merit to savor its exceptional taste will certainly treasure it forever. It's infinitely more valuable than all the material wealth in the world. Reflecting thus on the ultimate worth of my monastic life, I felt that I had discovered a priceless treasure.

What is the meaning of the "priceless treasure" that I discovered in my meditation that night? Pay careful attention as I explain. What we experience as mind has two distinctly different aspects which we might call the "knowing mind" and the "thinking mind." In our ordinary experience, these two are lumped together as "the mind,"

but as we progress deeper and deeper in both *samādhi* and wisdom meditation, their distinction becomes more obvious. It is important to understand the relationship between these two aspects of mind. Otherwise, we will be unaware of the crucial difference between the thinking mind, which constantly deliberates and inclines toward the influence of defilements, and the knowing mind, which does not form any ideas at all but simply knows and remains neutral. The thinking mind is fabricated; the knowing mind is genuine. The thinking mind is intellect, defiled and complicated, whereas the knowing mind is awareness itself—pure and simple. Try to see this difference for yourself when you practice *samādhi* meditation. Notice how the mind that attains a still, calm state of *samādhi* and then withdraws, differs from the mind that thinks incessantly about worldly attachments and never remains still.

The thinking mind and the knowing mind are actually two facets of the same mental sphere. Only mindfulness and wisdom can effectively bridge the gap between these two aspects of mind. When the mind is focused in *samādhi* and firmly grounded in mindfulness and wisdom, its thinking capacity becomes a useful tool which can rationally contemplate the relationship between external activity taking place in the six objective sense-spheres and the subjective awareness of the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touches, and ideas that arise as a result, and which are known internally. The space where the reasoning mind and the knowing mind overlap is wisdom's field of action.

The Buddha and the Arahants designated wisdom as a factor on the path to the realization of Nibbāna, not the final outcome. The ultimate outcome, the attainment of Nibbāna, they called *vimutti* or total release—the pure mind freed from all delusion. Release occurs when the mind, in all its aspects, has been investigated and clearly understood and its true nature has been realized. With its task completed, wisdom, the investigative tool, is naturally set aside, leaving the knowing mind secluded from defiling influences and sensual interference.

When path factors like diligence, mindfulness, *samādhi*, and wisdom become fully integrated, they converge on the calm solitude of pure awareness, detached from everything. At that point, the meditator understands intuitively that craving and clinging to objects of the senses are the greatest dangers to peace of mind. This knowledge and understanding arises inside the mind that is dispassionate about the world and supremely contented within. Experience is then *akālika*—time no longer exists. Concepts of space have no meaning. The mind and the Dhamma have become one as the meditator stands squarely in the middle of the noble path to Nibbāna.

The nature of the mind is inconceivably mysterious. The gulf between the state of my mind before it converged so spectacularly, and what appeared after I emerged from that experience, was like the difference between night and day—as though those experiences represented two completely different people. I say this in the context of Dhamma. It's not an exaggeration. After the mind withdrew from deep absorption that night, it appeared conspicuously bold and fearless. By fearless, I mean the mind held no fear of facing the truth in any situation. Wherever my further investigations into the truth of Dhamma were to lead me, I now had the courage to face the realities of living and dying head-on without flinching.

Following that life-changing experience, all desire for wealth or worldly treasures vanished. Even if a heap of gold, silver, and precious gemstones were piled before me as high as a mountain, I would view it as a worthless pile of shit compared to the radiant Dhamma in my heart. So brightly did the Dhamma of the Lord Buddha illuminate my heart that night that I no longer felt attraction to sensual objects.

Trails

Because the Dhamma is sandiṭṭhiko—experienced and understood within oneself alone—I did not talk to anyone about this incident in my meditation, not even Ajaan Kongmaa. I simply kept it to myself. I didn't tell Ajaan Kongmaa about the profound experiences that happened in my meditation because I suspected he wouldn't take them seriously. After all, I was still a very junior monk at that time. I was reluctant to speak openly about my meditation in Sai Ngaam Forest Monastery for I feared that talking about it would only lead to differences of opinion among the senior monks and give rise to unnecessary misunderstanding.

Instead, my thoughts were drawn toward the Venerable Ajaan Mun, whose great renown as a meditation teacher I had long been aware of. I'd heard about the extraordinary courage and determination

he displayed in practicing the forest monk's way of life and the uncompromising strictness he used in teaching his disciples. I considered Ajaan Mun to be the highest authority on meditation. Although the *ajans* at Sai Ngaam Forest Monastery were disciples of Ajaan Mun, I was convinced it would be better to question the great master himself. Indeed, I felt sure that Ajaan Mun was the only person I could trust to interpret the significance of my recent meditation experience. I resolved to seek him out, prostrate myself at his feet, and request his guidance. I intended to tell him everything, beginning with the day I started meditating and continuing step by step up to the dramatic events I'd recently experienced in my body contemplation practice. I hoped to have him confirm my belief that my meditation was firmly on the right track.

In December of 1939, I made the decision to take leave of Ajaan Kongmaa and make the long trek to the northern province of Chiang Mai, hoping to meet up with Ajaan Mun there. When Ajaan Kongmaa learned that I intended to take his leave to search for Ajaan Mun, he asked me in a very serious tone, "Tan Jia, how can a monk like you possibly stay with Ajaan Mun?"

Did he really think I was that inept? Even if there was some truth in what Ajaan Kongmaa implied, I had no intention to abandon my resolve. I answered him as diplomatically as I could. "Why is it wrong for me to go see a monk of such high virtue? A rough person like me needs to find a tough teacher to straighten him out. The venerable teachers here are certainly competent. I don't underestimate their ability. But continuing to stay at Sai Ngaam Forest Monastery means I'm living too close to home, too near family and friends. I need more seclusion from the distractions caused by their frequent visits. Living nearby, they can easily drop in and chat about whatever's on their minds. Friends and neighbors try to drag me into their worldly affairs, which makes it more difficult to focus on meditation practice. As soon as my mother heard that I planned to leave for Chiang Mai, she showed up and broke

down in tears. Emotional outbursts like that disrupt my calm and concentration, which becomes very tiresome. I left the home life with all its worries and concerns in a deliberate attempt to pursue a life of renunciation. I now feel that facing the challenge of living far away from home will keep my mind sheltered from mundane concerns and greatly benefit my practice. That's why I humbly seek your approval."

Ajaan Kongmaa's curt reply was, "Well, Tan Jia, if you learn something good up there in Chiang Mai, don't forget to come back down to enlighten us old folks, okay?"

Hearing the mocking tone in his voice, I thought, "What the... What the hell does that mean?" and I became more determined than ever to leave.

Somewhat annoyed, I stated my intentions very clearly, "Permission or no permission, I'm going to Chiang Mai. Let Ajaan Mun be the one to judge whether or not I can stay with him." I felt that sure of myself at the time.

After informing Ajaan Kongmaa of my intention to leave, I went to say goodbye to my parents and other relatives. I arrived home to find both my mother and my father crying. My mother pleaded with me tearfully, "You've always been picky about food and so hard to feed! How can you even think about going on such a long and arduous journey, son?"

Of all her children, I was the one my mother had always loved the most, and her concern showed in the tears on her face. "Eggs! Yeah, they're hard for me to eat! And that's why I have to go to Chiang Mai—I'll become so well trained that eating eggs will be easy! There's no need to worry! I'm not going to die of starvation, Mom!" I tried to calm my parents down and make them feel comfortable with my decision because I did not want them to worry about me too much.

As I headed out on the trek to Chiang Mai, I stopped at Ajaan Lee's monastery to pay my respects. When I told him where I intended to go, his eyes lit up and his voice roared out, "That's the way to do

it! Go for it, Jia! Like a disciple of the Tathāgata!” He continued with some timely advice, “Ajaan Mun is a truly great monk, so be careful to behave faultlessly in his presence. Stay vigilant and be sincere in your practice, otherwise you won’t be able to stay with him for long. You can’t fake it with Ajaan Mun, he will see through you straightaway. Pay close attention to how he thinks, how he speaks, and how he behaves and try to incorporate these factors into your Dhamma practice. In that way, you will stay on the Dhamma path that Ajaan Mun has blazed.”

Listening to Ajaan Lee’s instructions, my heart felt a surge of courage as I resolved to push forward in the quest to train under such a renowned Arahant. My spirits were high as I prepared to take leave of Ajaan Lee. As I rose to go, he pointed to the young monk seated beside him and said, “Tan Jia, take my disciple Tan Fuang with you as a traveling companion. Should you encounter difficulties, you can help each other out.”

Ajaan Lee then set our departure date to coincide with his, for he was soon to depart on a trip to India. A few days later, the three of us journeyed to Bangkok on a passenger steamer. As we were preparing to board the boat, my parents and relatives showed up to plead one last time for me to stay. With tearful faces, they crowded around me, trying to prevent me from going aboard. My older sister cried out, “Monks can’t carry money, they can’t work for wages, so how will you survive? How will you manage to travel to Chiang Mai?”

I shot back, “How do monks all over Thailand travel? How do they live? How do they eat? Well, that’s exactly how I’m going to travel. That’s exactly how I plan to live. The Buddha never had this much damn trouble when leaving the palace to become a monk! What a nuisance!”

Reacting to this outburst, my sister snatched the umbrella-tent that I used to ward off mosquitoes when meditating and hid it from view. It was exasperating. By the time we were called to board the boat, she still hadn’t returned it to me. Finally, I looked right at her and said,

“Okay, I guess I’ll have to just damn well sleep without it and let the mosquitoes devour me. When my own family can’t stop me from going, what makes you think that an umbrella-tent or a hoard of mosquitoes can?”

Once my sister realized how dogged my determination was, she relented and handed back the umbrella-tent. Ajaan Lee, Tan Fuang, and I then boarded the steamer to Bangkok without further incident.

From Bangkok, Ajaan Lee set out on his journey to India, the birthplace of the Buddha. He didn’t fly to India or go by train; instead, he hiked through wilderness areas until he reached the Burmese border and trekked all the way across Burma to arrive in India.

Meanwhile, Tan Fuang and I resided in Bangkok for about three weeks before boarding an overnight train heading north to Chiang Mai. Upon our arrival, we went to stay at Chedi Luang Monastery in the city center. Somdet Mahā Wirawong was the abbot, although at that time he had yet to be promoted to the title of Somdet. Hence, he was known to us simply as Ajaan Pim. He was young, and we had just met for the first time. Straightaway, Ajaan Pim told me to spend the night in an underground passage beneath the ancient royal stupa at the center of the monastery. A tight corridor descending from a narrow aperture at the *chedi’s* base provided just enough space to lie down at the bottom. It turned out that this *chedi* was considered to be the home of a very fierce demon. Right after I lay down to sleep, a huge black apparition appeared standing menacingly over me, one giant leg on each side. I quickly began repeating a protection-verse that I knew by heart and then radiated thoughts of friendliness in all directions until my mind converged into deep meditation. By the time I withdrew from meditation, the demon had vanished.

The next morning, the monks told me that everyone who had ventured to spend the night underneath that *chedi* became so terrified that they abandoned their attempts in the middle of the night. I was the only person they knew of who had spent an entire night there.

Later, I found out that the demon had departed the *chedi* that night and never returned to frighten the monks again. That demon and I must have shared some karmic relationship in our past-life history for my presence to have had such an effect on it.

Tan Fuang and I resided at Chedi Luang Monastery for only a short time before moving on in search of Ajaan Mun. In hopes of picking up clues about his whereabouts, we set out on foot heading in the direction of Chiang Dao. Finding no word of him there, we proceeded west through mountains and valleys, hiking and camping along winding forest trails until we reached Phrao district. While camping there, we asked the village folk living in the surrounding area if they knew where we could find Ajaan Mun. Not surprisingly, the hill tribe people of northern Thailand spoke their own dialects that neither Tan Fuang nor I understood. It was quite frustrating, really. The villagers kept repeating something that sounded like “*Tu, aew yung gaa*” but we had no idea what that meant. They obviously couldn’t understand the questions we asked them either. Finally, I threw up my hands and shouted, “Tu, your mother’s one too!” and walked off. Fortunately, they didn’t catch my meaning.

The journey to find Ajaan Mun in the northern wilderness was the most arduous and exhausting endeavor I’d ever undertaken. It was the first time that I’d walked long distances barefoot on rugged dirt trails that never seemed to reach a satisfactory destination. My feet were blistered and raw. My body became so weak that I had only my inner strength to carry me through.

As I struggled with hardships day after day, my thoughts were constantly drawn toward Ajaan Mun and the refuge that he embodied. Dragging my body through long hours of pain and fatigue, I beseeched Ajaan Mun to rescue me from my plight. “Ajaan Mun, where are you? Help me, please. I’m nearly dead from exhaustion. I’ve heard you can know the hearts and minds of others. Are you aware that Tan Jia is coming to see you? His body is worn out and ready to collapse. He no

longer knows how he got here or where he should be going. Where are you, Ajaan Mun? If you are aware of this appeal to your kind heart, please send someone to come and fetch me before I die along the way.”

This plea ran through my mind many times a day while I pushed ahead in my search for Ajaan Mun. Sometimes, I whispered it under my breath; sometimes, I spoke it out loud. But I never gave up my resolve. I never let thoughts of defeat creep in. Whatever the toll on my body, I was determined to continue the search until my last breath. I believed I must meet him to tell him about my meditation experiences. I wanted to hear his verdict. If I failed to find him in Phrao district, so be it—I’d continue trekking from one northern district to another until I tracked him down. As long as I kept body and mind together, I was sure to find him in the end. My commitment to overcoming all obstacles in my path was just incredible.

And to think that before I became a monk, I had no interest in religious matters at all. I would turn my back and walk away every time a monk gave a Dhamma talk. I couldn’t be bothered to listen. But now look at me. I’d walk to the end of the earth to hear Ajaan Mun speak. I was that eager to find a trusted authority who could confirm that I was not crazy, that the Dhamma I had realized was the kind of Dhamma that people trapped in a web of craving and delusion could never comprehend. Only a fully awakened Arahant could verify the attainment of that Dhamma, the value of which transcends all heavenly and earthly treasures. Thinking like this put a bounce in my step as I forged ahead with my pilgrimage.

Shortly thereafter, Tan Fuang and I happened upon a small village settlement called Mae Koy. There we met a man who told us that Ajaan Mun was residing in an old, abandoned monastery nearby. This welcome news lifted my spirits and whetted my appetite to hear his teachings to such an extent that concerns about hunger, thirst, and exhaustion vanished. Tan Fuang and I hurried on our way and were soon standing at the monastery gate. Finding the gate open, we strode

in to look around. Inside the monastery grounds we saw several small, grass-roofed huts with split-bamboo floors and walls made of bamboo latticework packed with leaves. The grounds were swept so neatly that I thought the monastery was bound to house a sizable community of monks.

As I walked up to the first hut, I spied an old monk sitting on a small bamboo platform wearing his upper robe with the right shoulder bare, as though he were patiently waiting for someone to show up. A man of small stature with dark, tanned skin, he looked up inquisitively but said nothing when I approached. It was the bold, majestic appearance that gave him away. It must certainly be Ajaan Mun—who else could it be? He must have known already that I was coming to see him! That’s why he’s sitting here waiting. I showed up without any advance notice, but he already knew! Certain I faced Ajaan Mun, I dropped to my knees on the bare ground and bowed deeply three times at his feet, thinking how rare it was to meet a man who knows the events of past and future, who knows in advance who’s coming in and who’s going out.

After my prostrations, he asked me, “Where are you from?”

“I’m from Chanthaburi. I’ve lived with Ajaan Kongmaa and Ajaan Lee.”

“Aha! Tan Lee and Tan Kongmaa, right? They’re my disciples.” He said this in such a way that I felt he knew my background, where I’d come from, and why I was there.

Later, when an opportunity arose, I briefly described my meditation experience to him, “I practiced body contemplation until body and mind separated and everything disappeared. I probed deeply to investigate every aspect of the body in meticulous detail. I searched carefully and methodically, part by part, layer by layer—until, in a moment of wonder, the whole physical universe tore apart and dropped away from the mind, leaving in place only the mind’s natural state of knowing the truth in harmony with Dhamma. Alone, on its own, totally devoid of

worldly impact, the awareness itself shone bright and clear. Absolutely nothing made contact with it. A feeling of being centered in this clear brightness expanded until eventually all sense of bodily awareness disappeared. Only clear, pure awareness remained. The mind stayed absorbed in this serene state of deep *samādhi* for many hours.

“Even though the awareness felt intensely single-minded, it seemed almost as if the mindful focus I had cultivated for so long suddenly lacked its usual concentration. But it was just a case where the entire physical world had vanished from awareness. Only an indescribable purity of mind remained—just the true knowing mind, without a trace of blemish.”

Sitting quietly as he listened, Ajaan Mun did not object to my account. I then asked how I should proceed, what I should do next. He replied, “Continue with the same practice. That’s good already. Just keep striving until you finish the job.” His answer was very brief, but I felt gratified knowing I was on the right path.

Those who have never seriously practiced body contemplation fail to realize how much the physical body is a source of various afflictions and attachments, which in turn cause constant frustration and anxiety in life. So long as the mind remains focused on external bodily appearances, it won’t be able to free itself from pain and suffering. However, when attention is directed inside the body, the cause of the problem starts to become apparent because mindful attention guards against the intrusion of external distractions.

Whether doing walking or sitting meditation, always hold the mind’s attention within the body’s physical frame. Don’t let it stray from the constraints of mindfulness. Mindfulness is essential because it keeps awareness grounded in the present moment. Mindfulness provides the information needed for wisdom to investigate the body. Because it is constantly aware of what occurs moment to moment, mindfulness is the mental faculty that gathers the necessary investigative data. It outlines the boundaries of the mind’s perceptions. Through

detached observation, a clear mental picture emerges to serve as a basis for in-depth examination. In this way, mindfulness is the foundation of every meditative investigation.

Repeatedly contemplating with mindfulness and wisdom helps to weaken mental hindrances and free the mind from sensual attachment to the body. As the mind's preoccupation with the physical body decreases, it begins to shine forth with greater concentration and clarity. With increased clarity comes heightened understanding. Strong concentration allows wisdom to reach deeply and remove mental defilements through profound insights. To accomplish this, each part of the body must be examined until it appears clearly to the mind as repugnant, unsatisfactory, ever-changing, and not-self. In truth, the Buddha encouraged his disciples to clearly comprehend how everything in the body is subject to change, that no inherent self can be found there, and that no bodily experience will ever lead to full and lasting happiness. When the investigation reaches this level, wisdom separates the mind from the body until the mind eventually becomes detached forever from the belief that the body is oneself. Upon reaching this level, the mind passes beyond bodily desires with no lingering attachments.

After receiving assurances from Ajaan Mun that my practice was on the right track, I bowed gratefully at his feet three times, retired to the hut assigned to me, put my bowl and robes away, and bathed at the well. I rejoined Ajaan Mun that evening to ask dependence from him as my teacher, an observance strictly followed by forest monks. He agreed to my request, which meant that he accepted me as a disciple like a father would a son. I was now his burden, for it was his responsibility to train and instruct me in the Buddha's way of practice. But the burden was shared, for it was now my responsibility to trust in Ajaan

Mun's instructions and to serve faithfully as his personal attendant. Thus began a four-year relationship of devotion and practice.

In his wisdom, the Buddha established this practice of mutual dependence to ensure that junior monks receive proper discipline and guidance when they join the Sangha. A junior monk of five rains retreats or fewer is required to live in dependence under the supervision of an experienced senior monk. If the dependency lapses because the student is separated from his teacher overnight, the junior monk must request dependency anew upon his return. Even if a newly ordained monk is exceptionally learned and skilled in both the ways of the world and of Dhamma, he is not exempt from this obligation.

The Buddha did allow exceptions to this rule for the following cases: a junior monk who has yet to find a monastery to start his training; a monk in the middle of a long-distance journey; a monk laid up with a serious illness or serving as another monk's nurse; and a monk camped temporarily in the wilderness to accelerate his meditation. However, such monks were advised to bear in mind that whenever they encountered a worthy teacher, they must continue the five-year dependency with him and fulfill their responsibility to the end. This was the correct attitude to have.

A monk who has fulfilled his five-year obligation but has yet to reach ten years as a trainee is considered an intermediate monk. He is expected to have sufficient knowledge and experience to hold his own in the Dhamma and Vinaya practices, thus making him capable of living and practicing on his own. For this reason, the Buddha gave intermediate monks who were deemed competent permission to excuse themselves from their apprenticeships to go live by themselves. In other words, they have faith in the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha, possess energy and mindfulness, and feel fear and dread of bad behavior. They must have right view concerning moral virtue and be well-versed in Dhamma teachings and the ways of wisdom. In addition to that, they should know what is and what is not an offense of the Vinaya monastic

rules, as well as which are considered minor offenses, and which are grave offenses. They should also have correctly committed the entire Pāṭimokkha to memory. Intermediate monks who possess the above qualities are permitted to stay and meditate alone. However, they are not supposed to mentor other monks by setting themselves up as teachers. On the other hand, intermediate monks who lack sufficient knowledge and understanding to depend on themselves must continue taking dependence from the teacher, even after they've completed a five-year training period.

Ajaan Mun instructed me at length about the monastic duties and responsibilities that make up the code of behavior expected from members of a forest monastic community. Learning these duties is especially important for junior monks because it allows them to integrate quickly into the established routine of the monastery. In the Pāli language, these duties are called *vatta*. These specifics of monastic behavior, which are detailed in the Vinaya texts, form an integral part of the customs and traditions practiced by forest monks in Thailand. As such, they play a central and practical role in the daily life of a forest monastery.

The main objective of practicing this code of behavior is the cultivation of mindfulness and wisdom in a monk's everyday chores. With increased focus on routine tasks comes a heightened attention to detail. Because the number of details regulating nearly every aspect of monastic life is extensive, a monk undergoing the training—especially a junior one—must pay close attention to everything he does from morning to evening. This degree of attention requires mindfulness to always be aware of what's happening, to recall what action is appropriate for that situation, and to act on it in a timely manner. Such attentiveness demands diligence and energy. Diligence counteracts the tendency to do things halfheartedly or in a sloppy way. Monks who perform their daily chores to perfection are called *Ācāra-sampanno*, meaning they exhibit flawless conduct.

Mostly, Ajaan Mun directed his remarks specifically to my situation as a junior monk, explaining how I was expected to fulfill my obligation to serve as his personal attendant. Every morning just after dawn, I was to take his bowl, sitting cloth, and shoulder bag from his hut, carry them to the main meeting hall, and set up his seat there by arranging his sitting cloth, lap cloth, face cloth, cup, tooth sticks, and other requisites. I had to check to make sure the water kettle was full of fresh, clean water and that a clean spittoon was placed beside it. It was also my responsibility to sweep and clean his hut every morning before almsround.

Ajaan Mun taught that junior monks should show respect to senior teachers by bowing to them at the appropriate times, by rising to greet them when they arrive, by holding their hands in *añjali* when speaking to them, and by performing other duties of respect.

His advice for the monks in training with him was practical. A junior monk still under dependence must ask permission from the abbot before going to the village or traveling to another location. To go without asking permission or to go after being denied permission is an offense against the disciplinary code. A junior monk is expected to leave decisions about travel up to his teacher's discretion. Likewise, a junior monk should avoid associating with people outside the monastery in such a way as to cause mistrust and suspicion. He should avoid engaging in unseemly behavior which might reflect badly on his teacher; he should try to behave as though he were always in his teacher's presence. When alone, he can imagine that his teacher is present and ask himself, "How would I behave if he were here watching me?"

A junior monk should always walk a few paces behind his teacher, and never interrupt him when he is speaking. Should his teacher misspeak, he shouldn't correct him publicly but instead wait for an opportunity to mention it privately. Also, a junior monk is responsible

for taking care of his teacher when he is sick and should not leave his side until he either recovers from illness or passes away.

Ajaan Mun directed me to take special care of my requisites—be they personal possessions, like the bowl and the robes, or something which belongs to the Sangha, like buildings, books, or tools—in such a way as to make them last as long as possible.

Taking a good look at monastic discipline, I saw that the entire code of conduct was about training the heart to be self-sacrificing, humble, and free from blemish. Ajaan Mun pressed me to carry this diligent attitude into my meditation practice. His message was loud and clear: Whether walking for alms, sweeping the grounds, sewing or dyeing robes, eating a meal, washing a bowl, or simply stretching my legs, mindfulness must be maintained at every waking moment and in all activities. His advice for me concerning rest was meant for serious practitioners: Take a break only when it's time to sleep, then resolve to get up immediately as soon as you awaken. The moment you wake up, rise quickly, wash your face with cold water, and resume your meditation. If you still feel sleepy, practice walking meditation, striding briskly back and forth to dispel the drowsiness. Sit down to meditate only when all drowsiness has disappeared.

Invigorated by the power of Ajaan Mun's teaching, I spent the next several months making an all-out effort in every aspect of monastic practice. But when the more temperate climate of the rainy season abruptly ended and the cold, windy nights set in, I struggled to stay warm, and my concentration suffered. I had only thin cotton robes to wrap around me which left me shivering at the mercy of the elements. The walls and roof of the bamboo platform where I slept were made of dried banana leaves, which afforded just enough protection to keep out the morning dew but not enough to protect from the cold. One night, as I lay on that platform shaking uncontrollably and unable to fall asleep, I wondered how my companion Tan Fuang was coping with the northern climate. I walked quietly to his platform and whispered ever

so softly to him, “Fuang, it’s so damn cold. Let’s just go back home.” I said this not because I intended to give up and leave, but because I wanted to gauge his mood—see how he’d respond, what he was thinking. He remained silent and still, and in the silence, I knew that he was as determined as I was to stick it out, no matter the hardship.

At dawn the next morning, when it was light enough to make out the lines on the palm of my hand, I left the small platform where I stayed and walked quickly to a small bamboo hut that served as the dining hall. The moment I entered and looked up, Ajaan Mun’s eyes struck me like a thunderbolt. “You people from the southern seashore don’t have any tolerance for pain! Get out! Go! No one invited you to come here!” His voice roared as fiercely as a tiger ready to pounce. Small kitten that I was, I crouched down in fear. My legs suddenly went numb; I couldn’t move.

Ajaan Mun could read my mind. He knew everything. That was a scary thought. From then on, I knew I had to be extremely careful with my thoughts and my speech in his presence. Because Ajaan Mun was an Arahant, the consequences of my negligence could be severe. After composing myself, I took a tentative step and very humbly began doing my morning duties.

Those few words from Ajaan Mun really caught my attention. I felt as though I’d come under his spell because I followed his example in everything I did. I cautioned myself to be careful—Ajaan Mun was the real thing. After that incident, he treated me kindly. He asked me to help him in various ways, and I kept close to him and took good care of him. I gradually became more familiar with his methods and felt more comfortable in his presence.

Back then I was still young and strong, but I worried about Ajaan Mun’s health. He was almost seventy years old and so thin that his skin had shrunk around the bones, making him appear frail and sickly. But then again, when we walked together, his quick movements surprised me. When I walked with him through the forest, his pace was so

fast that I could hardly keep up with him on the trails. He easily walked all day. And when dusk turned to night, he just kept right on going.

Despite his age, Ajaan Mun went entirely without food on some days. He subsisted solely on tea and water. As a result, he grew even thinner. His gaunt appearance worried me so much that I occasionally pleaded with him to eat some food. He'd usually grunt and say, "It's none of your business." I'd press him further, "Come on, please eat something." To which he'd shoot back, "Leave me alone. Don't bother me." Exasperated, I'd blurt out, "Good grief! How can someone be born a human being and not want to eat food?" Then, he would respond more forcefully, "Go away! Leave me alone! It's my business, not yours." Ajaan Mun scolded me like that every time I brought up his fasting.

After Tan Fuang happened to overhear one of these heated discussions, he caught up with me as I walked away and asked why I was so intent on provoking Ajaan Mun. Wasn't I afraid of his scolding? Tan Fuang was obviously terrified, but I told him that if I didn't provoke Ajaan Mun, we wouldn't hear such good teachings.

Later, Ajaan Mun scolded Tan Fuang because he disagreed with the way Ajaan Mun took palm sugar as a medicinal in the afternoon. Every morning on almsround in the village, someone placed a small piece of palm sugar in Ajaan Mun's bowl. Since it was wrapped up tightly, the piece of sugar did not make direct contact with the food items in the bowl. Upon returning to the monastery, Ajaan Mun had a monk put the sugar aside for use with his afternoon tea. According to monastic rules, if the lump of sugar contained traces of food, its consumption in the afternoon would not be allowed. Ajaan Mun was always scrupulous in making this distinction. But Tan Fuang mistakenly thought that Ajaan Mun had violated a rule of conduct and made comments to that effect behind Ajaan Mun's back.

In the afternoon, after having a monk break the sugar lump into small pieces, Ajaan Mun would place a piece in his mouth and then

follow it with three sips of tea. He would repeat this several more times and then stop, leaving half the sugar uneaten.

Ajaan Mun confronted the monks at a group meeting that night. His eyes flared and his tone of voice was menacing as he spoke, “Which one of you wants to challenge me? Huh? Somebody here tried to hit me on the head with the rule book. He thinks I’m a fool. Who is it?” In fact, Ajaan Mun had already seen into the mind of the guilty party and knew who he was.

There were not many of us present, so we also knew the culprit. After the meeting, we discussed the Vinaya issue among ourselves in some depth. In the end, Tan Fuang admitted the fault was his and went straightaway to apologize and ask Ajaan Mun’s forgiveness. Following that, Ajaan Mun never mentioned this matter again. But our respect for his mental skills increased, and we were much more cautious and circumspect about what we thought and how we behaved from then on.

I often recalled what Ajaan Lee told me before I left Chanthaburi, “So, you think you can live with Ajaan Mun, eh? Then be careful, because he will know everything that’s going on in your mind. If you do stay with him, don’t act in any way to spoil my good reputation!”

Despite the hardships I endured, I felt extremely fortunate to have the opportunity to live and practice in the presence of a monk like Ajaan Mun, who was faultless both in realization of the Dhamma and adherence to the Vinaya. From an ordinary person’s perspective, living on a windblown platform in a remote wilderness location and eating one meal a day is bound to be torture. But the setting was just right for a monk intent on liberation.

Daeng Forest Monastery, where Ajaan Mun resided, was situated in a small clearing surrounded by a landscape of forests and mountains stretching to the horizon in all directions. Its resident monks relied on the inhabitants of a nearby six-house village settlement for their daily alms food and other simple requisites. Owing to their faith in Ajaan Mun, the villagers had fashioned the hut in which he lived out of local

materials. With a frame constructed of bamboo posts and a floor of flattened bamboo strips, the hut had walls and a roof covered with large overlapping banana leaves for protection against the weather.

The monastery provided a place of ideal seclusion for forest monks to practice. At the same time, the power of Ajaan Mun's virtuous attainments and accumulated merit was so strong that his presence acted like a magnet drawing people of faith to him. The longer Ajaan Mun resided at Daeng Forest Monastery, the more his exalted reputation spread to people living far and wide in that area. Consequently, people were willing to travel long distances just to meet him and pay their respects. Although well-intentioned on their part, intrusions of this kind were unwelcome disruptions to his daily practice. This inevitably meant that Ajaan Mun would not remain very long in one location. Having a character shaped by the practice of Dhamma and Vinaya, he was not willing to compromise the strictness of his principles simply to satisfy the wishes of his devotees.

The same strict attitude applied to the way in which Ajaan Mun managed affairs inside the monastery. For instance, one day the monastery's female lay attendant, who walked from the village every morning to offer food to Ajaan Mun, arrived carrying several small mango seedlings, which she proceeded to plant near Ajaan Mun's hut. He immediately asked what she was doing. She replied that she was planting mango trees for the monks so that when they eventually bore fruit, the monks would have mangoes to eat. She considered this idea very practical.

Seeing the matter differently, Ajaan Mun raised his voice and scolded her, "Who do you think I am? You misunderstand my purpose here. I came to this monastery to find seclusion from the outside world. My sole purpose is to practice the Dhamma that transcends mundane concerns. I didn't come here with the intention to settle down and cultivate fruit trees and vegetables to supplement my diet. Don't you

realize that you're bringing me a load of trouble? Do you expect me to sit here and grow old looking after these mango trees?"

This incident pointed to another reason why Ajaan Mun never stayed in one location for very long. Always acting with discretion, he was very circumspect in the way he practiced the monk's life. He refrained altogether from involvement in worldly matters. Even small matters that most people would consider insignificant received his full attention. He didn't get carried away with popular trends in society. He saw them for what they were—distractions from the true purpose of monastic living. He believed that monks, whose livelihood depends on the generosity of others, have an obligation to earnestly focus on Dhamma rather than directing their attention to common lay practices. He believed in a strict division of labor between the monks and laity, which he felt accorded with the spirit of the monastic discipline set out by the Buddha.

Ajaan Mun was especially dismissive of planting fruit trees and flowering plants inside the monastery compound and was particularly critical of monks who engaged in these activities. He accused them of flirting with nature or of being aristocratic monks who indulged in a frivolous pursuit of beauty and comfort but lacked any substance of Dhamma in their hearts. The more flowering trees and shrubs they had to look after, the more disinclined they were to meditate seriously.

In fact, the Buddha's rules for monastic conduct clearly state that a monk violates the disciplinary code if he plants fruit trees and flowering plants himself, has someone do it for him, or if he places flowers in pots for decoration. The Buddha criticized all such activities as inappropriate behavior that leads to a decline in monastic standards. During his lifetime, if a monk committed even a minor transgression of the rules, the Buddha asked his great disciples, Venerable Sāriputta and Venerable Moggallāna, to discipline the offender on his behalf. If that monk refused to obey their instructions, they had the Buddha's permission to penalize him according to the severity of the offence.

The Buddha stipulated that the Sangha was responsible for reprimanding and punishing those monks whose harmful behavior adversely affected the community, especially in the case where recalcitrant monks refused to change their ways. The Buddha realized that if he did not establish a means to address such disobedience, it would soon become a chronic problem leading to disharmony within the Sangha.

The history of Daeng Forest Monastery stretches back centuries. Early ethnic Mon inhabitants of the area built the monastery in the middle of a dense rosewood forest. The site was later abandoned and fell into ruin, as evidenced by the broken bricks and clay tiles scattered around the compound—the only remains of a fabled past. In his wanderings through the North, Ajaan Mun discovered this ancient site and decided to settle there for a while. The forest setting provided a naturally quiet and secluded retreat environment conducive to a life of meditation.

Despite his reclusive nature, Ajaan Mun attracted a large following of disciples willing to endure the hardships of life in the wilderness to study with him. During Ajaan Mun's sojourn at Daeng Forest Monastery, many disciples traveled on foot from as far away as Central and Northeast Thailand to listen to his teaching and receive his training. Ajaan Tate Desaraṃsī, Ajaan Phrom Cirapuñño, Ajaan Waen Suciṇṇo, and Ajaan Fan Ācāro are a few examples. To reach him, they had to hike for days along narrow trails in the remote wilderness regions that separated Thailand's North from the rest of the country—regions where the population was sparse and village settlements were so far apart that it often took a whole day to walk from one to the next. These indomitable monks endured rain and cold, hunger and thirst, and the ever-present danger of tigers and elephants to learn at the feet of the great master. Many of the monks who trained directly under his guidance have distinguished themselves by their attainments in Dhamma. Eventually becoming well-known teachers, they've passed

on his distinctive teaching methods to their disciples in a forest monastic lineage that extends to the present day.

Ajaan Mun’s teaching style was very practical and down-to-earth. It was conveyed to us less through lofty discourses, though these were very inspiring, than through his exemplary actions and the force of his personality—as Ajaan Mahā Boowa has clearly described in two classic books: *Venerable Ācariya Mun Bhūridatta Thera: A Spiritual Biography* and *Paṭipadā: Venerable Ācariya Mun’s Path of Practice*. As for me, I gained practical knowledge mostly by observing how he behaved and trying to emulate it, rather than by simply listening to him speak and trying to process that information intellectually. By temperament, I have always placed more emphasis on doing than on speaking. I prefer to put all my effort into getting things done, as I’m not very skilled at talking, writing, or memorizing long Dhamma passages. Ajaan Mun’s ability to be a living, practicing example of what he taught was one of the traits that most impressed me about the training I received with him. Instead of just teaching verbal knowledge, he wanted to place me in situations that would force me to develop the qualities of mind and character which I needed to survive my battle with the defilements.

For instance, Ajaan Mun always stressed the importance of good moral conduct for monks—how we speak and how we behave. He explained that moral discipline is the gateway to the path that leads to an enlightened mind and the cornerstone on which all genuine progress in meditation rests. Unless monks are principled in their conduct, taking their precepts seriously and practicing them strictly, they will not be able to live this life of renunciation for long. A monk lacking moral virtue is like a human body with a defective organ that can’t function properly or perform its obligations for the welfare of the whole body. The more moral handicaps a monk has, the more apathetic he is toward Dhamma practice. On the other hand, those monks whose moral standards are high and whose conduct is unblemished should not become complacent. Their moral standard can be raised even higher, and

their virtue can become even purer by concentrating on being satisfied with little, being easy to care for, being calm and serene, being free of defilements, being inquisitive and energetic, and being refined in manner and character. All these factors will contribute to the perfection of monastic discipline, which makes a monk inclined to join the noble lineage of the Arahants.

These refinements of a monk's conduct are covered extensively in the thirteen traditional *dhutaṅgas*, or ascetic practices, initiated by the Buddha—practices like living off alms food, wearing robes made of discarded rags, living in the forest, and eating only one meal a day. These and other *dhutaṅgas* are austere trainings designed to aid in the elimination of defilements from the mind, and thus serve as powerful means to advance meditation practice. Their primary aim is to pressure the practitioner to see the inherent danger of attachment to insubstantial things, such as the physical body and perceptions of the eight worldly concerns—pleasure and pain, gain and loss, praise and blame, fame and disrepute. Practiced with diligence, the *dhutaṅgas* reduce troubling weaknesses like excessive eating, preoccupation with clothing, laziness, attachment to comfort, and restlessness.

A monk who practices the *dhutaṅgas* must be willing to put his life on the line and, if necessary, sacrifice his life to attain the fruits of the practice. When he makes a solemn resolve to observe a certain practice, he should never back down, never give up. It is therefore advisable for him to choose the *dhutaṅgas* that are suitable to his own character and temperament. It's not necessary to practice them all. He can simply select the ones that are best suited to his needs from the following *dhutaṅga* practices.

Wearing only robes made from discarded cloth is a *dhutaṅga* observance that Ajaan Mun practiced routinely. This ascetic practice counters the desire to wear fine, attractive-looking robes and other personal items. It is practiced by searching for large and small pieces of cloth which have been thrown away because they are no longer use-

ful, then washing and stitching the pieces together to make a usable garment—such as an upper robe, a lower robe, an outer robe, a bathing cloth, or any other cloth requisite. Such cloth may be found discarded on the ground at cremation sites, along roadways, in alleyways, or at public dumps—any cloth that is obviously ownerless. It may be torn, burned, frayed, or gnawed by animals then cast aside as rubbish; it might even be soiled with human waste or other dirty stains. In other words, worthless old rags are collected here and there, one piece at a time, and put away until a full robe can be sewn from them. The difference between this ascetic practice and a monk’s normal practice is that monks’ robes are usually cut and sewn from bolts of new, store-bought cloth offered for that purpose by lay supporters.

The main benefit of this ascetic practice is that it counters thoughts of pride and self-importance. A practicing monk must never allow pride to usurp the virtues he cultivates within his heart. Instead, he should train himself to assume the self-effacing attitude of living as a worthless old rag by never allowing conceit about his worthiness to come up. Ajaan Mun believed that the practice of wearing robes made from discarded old rags was an excellent way to reduce feelings of self-importance.

Wearing only the three principal robes is a *dhutaṅga* practice that Ajaan Mun observed faithfully from the day he ordained until he reached old age. In those days, *dhutaṅga* monks wandered through forests and mountains, traveling by foot the whole way. Because each monk carried his own belongings, he took with him only what was truly essential. A monk’s three principal robes—the lower robe, the upper robe, and the outer robe—were all that he needed to protect himself from sun, wind, and rain and thus to live in relative comfort. Extra robes were often an unnecessary indulgence. Choosing the *dhutaṅga* practice of using only three robes fostered contentment with little and allowed a monk to travel in a light and carefree manner like a bird on

the wing. Should he be given something extra, he would simply pass it on to another monk to avoid accumulating unnecessary possessions.

Walking on almsround every day is a *dhutaṅga* observance that, as an ascetic practice, directs a monk to walk from the monastery to a village community to collect alms food every day without fail. A *dhutaṅga* monk chooses to make the effort to meet faithful donors in their own communal setting for their spiritual benefit, rather than sitting back lazily waiting for the villagers to come to serve him in the monastery for his benefit. A lazy monk easily becomes spoiled when his needs are kindly attended to. A *dhutaṅga* monk, however, harbors no such expectations. He is intent on receiving food in his bowl at the homes of his donors as a way of benefiting them by giving each of them the opportunity to make merit for their long-term well-being.

Ajaan Mun believed this practice should be treated as a sacred duty that calls for serious reflection each time a monk prepares to go on his morning almsround. He viewed almsround as an aspect of meditation practice during which each monk should endeavor to be mindful and remain properly restrained in body, speech, and mind. He stressed that mindfulness should be present in every movement and every thought, at every step on the route.

Omitting no house on almsround while walking in the village each morning to collect food for the day is another *dhutaṅga* ascetic practice. A *dhutaṅga* monk does not choose to frequent only wealthy households that offer better food or favor the homes of his relatives or special supporters. He stops in front of every house on his route, even in front of those where he is unlikely to receive any food at all. He doesn't choose the houses where he'd prefer to go and avoid those he'd prefer not to. He accepts whatever is offered at each stop with a clear mind unsullied by sensual desire. He trains himself to be contented with whatever food is placed in his bowl, whether it is tasty or tasteless, crude or refined, day-old or freshly cooked, separately wrapped or

ladled in, or offered with clean hands or dirty ones. In each case, his demeanor remains calm and composed.

Eating only one meal a day is an ascetic practice that is ideal for the meditative lifestyle of a *dhutaṅga* monk. This practice helps support the work of meditation, as eating too much food can make the mind sluggish and dull. This *dhutaṅga* observance is an especially useful means of curtailing the greedy mentality of a practicing monk who tends to be infatuated with food. Unrestrained by a single meal, he could easily become more concerned about the food he puts in his stomach than he is about the fruits of his meditation.

The rules for this ascetic practice stipulate that a monk's daily ration of food must all be eaten in one sitting. As soon as he rises from his seat, his meal for the day is over, even if food remains in his bowl. Eventually, even more stringent variations to the main rule were added. In the first variation a monk consumes only the amount of food that is in his bowl when he begins to eat—regardless of how little that may be—and refuses to accept more food before he gets up from his seat. In the second variation a monk is allowed to receive more food so long as some food still remains in his bowl. In the third, most lenient variation, a monk can continue to receive and consume more food provided he remains seated.

Eating food only from the alms bowl is an ascetic practice whereby a *dhutaṅga* monk eats all food directly from his alms bowl, using his fingers to pick up each morsel and put it in his mouth. He abstains entirely from using utensils such as dishes, cups, or spoons while eating the meal. Every type of food—whether savory, salty, sour, or sweet—is placed together in the one vessel, where the flavors are bound to mix together. At a minimum level of strictness, different classes of food can be separated and kept apart. In a stricter practice, different types of food contact one another at the bottom of the bowl. With the strictest version of this practice, a *dhutaṅga* monk deliberately mixes together all varieties of food, using his hand to combine them into a hodge-

podge of contrasting flavors and textures. Consequently, eating directly from the alms bowl is an excellent practice for freeing the mind from infatuation with the taste of food.

Combining the taste and feel of food together in one bowl is an effective means to undercut desire for the taste of food and remove greed from a monk's mind as he eats his meal. A *dhutaṅga* monk cultivates the awareness that food's real purpose is to nourish the body, allowing it to remain healthy enough to continue his meditative lifestyle from one day to the next. In this way, neither the pleasant flavor of preferred foods, nor the unpleasant flavor of disagreeable ones, will cause mental disturbance that might prompt a monk's mind to waver.

At the same time, eating all food directly from the alms bowl without using any other utensils is a practice suited to the ascetic lifestyle of a *dhutaṅga* monk who aims to be content with little. Using just his alms bowl is a valuable practice for a monk wishing to unburden himself of concerns about having to carry extra utensils and look after them.

Eating only the food collected on almsround is the *dhutaṅga* monk's practice of eating only that food which is received in the alms bowl on a monk's daily almsround, while declining food that is offered later back at the monastery. A *dhutaṅga* monk eats whatever food is offered into his bowl, never feeling anxious or upset should it fail to meet expectations. He regards the food he receives in his bowl each day to be enough for his needs, regardless of how much or how little he is offered. Anxiety about food is a characteristic of hungry ghosts, who are tormented by the harrowing results of their own bad *kamma*. Instead, the *dhutaṅga* monk cultivates contentment with little, and thus he is easily satisfied. The ascetic practice of refusing to accept any food offered after returning from almsround is a good method for countering the tendency to be greedy for food. It is also effective in reducing a monk's expectations concerning food and in eliminating the anxiety these expectations create.

Living in the forest is an ascetic practice that stands at the heart of all the *dhutaṅga* observances. The Buddha bestowed high praise on monks who undertook this practice. In the Pāli discourses, the Buddha often instructed his disciples to seek out the seclusion of forest dwellings as they were the most favorable places for purifying the mind of all defilements. Many of his greatest disciples, including Venerable Aññā-Koṇḍañña and Venerable Mahā Kassapa, were strict forest dwellers who maintained an austere, renunciant lifestyle their entire lives. The practices of those early forest monks epitomized the Buddha's teachings and exemplified his path to liberation.

Buddhist monks who have chosen to undertake this *dhutaṅga* practice have gained many advantages from living in the forest. Meditating in a forest environment, a monk is more likely to attain those concentrated *samādhi* states he has yet to attain and maintain those he has already attained. Dwelling in the wilderness, with its austere and dangerous conditions, provides an excellent place for training the mind to overcome fear and dread. Because a *dhutaṅga* monk lives entirely out of doors at the mercy of changes in the weather, he develops a deep appreciation of the changing nature of all conditions. His daily life unfolds within an environment of forests and mountains, rivers and streams, caves, overhanging cliffs, and the presence of wild animals, which he sees as his equals in birth, aging, sickness, and death. Meditating in the natural surroundings of a forest environment awakens his senses and encourages mindfulness to remain vigilant in all his daily activities. Living in the seclusion of forests and mountains offers the *dhutaṅga* monk a calm, quiet environment for meditation, far removed from the distracting sights and sounds of crowded places. The seclusion experienced living in wilderness areas allows him to go beyond an intellectual understanding of the teaching and experience the true nature of what the Buddha taught. And living in the forest is the one ascetic practice that sets the stage for the other twelve *dhutaṅga*

practices by providing them fertile ground in which to take root and flourish.

Dwelling at the foot of a tree as a *dhutaṅga* observance closely resembles the ascetic practice of living in the forest. It differs in that a monk refrains from lodging in the relative safety of a bamboo platform or a crude hut and instead reaps the benefits of choosing the foot of a tree—usually a large, majestic one with a broad base and abundant shade—as a temporary lodging. He resolves to sit and sleep on the ground, using leaves and moss for cushioning. The tree's canopy becomes his roof. While providing some protection against the onslaughts of inclement weather, the tree also acts as an ideal location to firmly center his mind on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness and the Four Noble Truths, meditations which constitute his most effective defense against the inner onslaughts of mental defilements. Being constantly vulnerable to the threat posed by wild animals forces a monk to rely on the power of his meditation to protect him from imminent danger by establishing a firm inner refuge in the mind.

Monks and forests have coexisted in harmony since the time of the Buddha, when his disciples regularly retreated into the depths of the forests and mountains in search of physical isolation to aid them in the development of meditation and realization of the truth of the Buddha's teachings. The Buddha himself was born in a forest grove, he attained enlightenment at the foot of the Bodhi Tree, and he passed into Parinibbāna between a pair of *sal* trees. The Buddha frequently dwelt in forests, both during his spiritual quest and after his enlightenment.

Not all forest locations were deemed suitable for ascetic practice, however. The Buddha discouraged monks from living under trees that bordered a property line, trees located at a pilgrimage site, fruit-bearing trees, flowering trees, resinous, sappy trees, trees occupied by bats, or trees growing in the middle of a monastery compound. Being inconvenient for calm and seclusion, these places should be avoided.

Living under the open sky is the ascetic practice whereby a *dhutaṅga* monk resides in an area out in the open—like a meadow or a woodland clearing—away from the canopy and shelter of trees found in forests and mountains. A makeshift cover fashioned from a monk’s robes and a patchwork of large leaves can be put up in the middle of a clearing. Other less strict forms of this *dhutaṅga* observance include: living under the shade of boulders, under the covering of bushes and shrubs, under the protection of overhanging cliffs, or in a deserted shack in a rice field. Living in wide and open spaces that integrate simplicity, quietude, and natural beauty offers monks an abode conducive to pleasant, peaceful abiding and deep meditative concentration.

The monk who adopts this *dhutaṅga* practice lives free of the responsibility to keep his lodging neat and tidy. Instead, he simply defers to the natural world’s prevailing order. When on the move, he feels lighthearted and confident, knowing that he can stop and rest anywhere along his journey and expect to have the stars as his ceiling and the moon as his lamplight. This prospect energizes a *dhutaṅga* monk, helping him dispel drowsiness, laziness, and boredom on a long trek. Invigorated by this freedom, he finds it convenient to undertake the ascetic practices that strengthen virtuous qualities like fewness of wishes, contentment with solitude, self-effacement, and wholehearted effort. The *dhutaṅga* monk who lives and practices under the open sky is the perfect example of the “homeless one” whose mind is constantly alert and earnestly focused on its primary objective—the transcendence of all suffering.

Staying in a cremation ground is an ascetic practice that reminds a monk to be attentive to the fact that his body, too, will die and be cast aside one day. The Buddha encouraged monks to stay in cemeteries and cremation sites to promote the awareness that they themselves live each moment in the shadow of aging, sickness, and death. Camping at places where corpses are discarded to rot on the ground or to be cremated on a pyre of burning logs forces a *dhutaṅga* monk to be mindful

that death can strike at any moment in any place—an awareness that arouses a sense of urgency in his practice.

At the Buddha's time, corpses were customarily dumped in a charnel ground and left to slowly decompose while the rotting flesh was gnawed at by vultures, crows, dogs, and jackals. The pervasive stench of decay was overpowering. Eventually, the moldering remains were reduced to a skeleton smeared with remnants of flesh and blood and held together by withered tendons, until, at last, even the bones broke apart and turned to dust.

Viewing this macabre spectacle and contemplating the grave and mortal reality of human existence, a forest monk enlists mindfulness and wisdom to probe, explore, and discover for himself the basic principles underlying the truth of life and death. Consequently, cemeteries have always offered monks an opportunity to develop a comprehensive knowledge and understanding of what it means to die.

Arousing a feeling of urgency is a critical step forward on the Buddha's path to liberation. Practicing mindfulness of death with that urgency is a powerful means of paying the reality of death the attention it deserves, and the respect it merits, without hesitation or delay. Practiced thoughtfully, it produces an acute awareness of the fragile nature of human life, which is expressed as a deep feeling of shock and dismay accompanied by a comprehension that life does not last forever, and that efforts to overcome the fear of dying must be accelerated accordingly.

Contentment with any lodging assigned is a *dhutāṅga* practice that fosters a monk's contentment with whatever lodging is available, regardless of its condition or location. In a forest monastery, a member of the community is usually chosen to assign dwellings to permanent residents and visiting monks, often using the status of seniority as a determining factor. A monk who observes the ascetic practice of being content with any lodging will not make any requests or state any preferences; he will simply accept the accommodation arranged for

him. Neither will he hint nor suggest that another monk be moved to accommodate him, even if that monk is his junior. He will gratefully accept without reservation the dwelling assigned to him, and in the process, close the door to greed and envy—actions befitting a disciple of the Buddha.

The sitter's practice of not lying down is the last of the thirteen ascetic observances and one that exemplifies the intense nature of the *dhutaṅgas*. The monk who chooses to adopt this challenging practice agrees to spend the entire day and night using only three postures—sitting, standing, and walking—without ever lying down. Even when a monk is overcome by drowsiness, any naps he takes must be confined to these three postures. A *dhutaṅga* monk undertaking this practice strictly should sit free of all back support or other aids that would help keep his body upright. Practicing a less strict version, a monk is allowed to lean against a post or a wall to ease the strain on his back, but he should never rest in a reclining position. A vow may be taken to continue this practice for a single day or for many days in a row, even up to spending the entire three-month rains retreat in only three postures without lying down to sleep, as I myself have frequently done.

The sitter's practice is excellent for getting rid of sloth and torpor and laziness of all kinds, including the pleasure derived from lounging about idly or lying comfortably to sleep. Foregoing lying down gives a monk a lot more time to practice meditation. Its main purpose is to arouse increased energy to fight through the hindrances experienced in night-long meditation efforts.

Ajaan Mun strongly believed that the observance of *dhutaṅga* practices exemplified the true spirit of the forest monk's way of life. He strictly adhered to many of these ascetic practices throughout his life and always urged his disciples to adopt them in their own practice. While I lived and practiced with Ajaan Mun, he constantly stressed the value of using these austere methods in training. He sang the praises of living in remote wilderness areas, places that were isolated and

frightening; for example, at the foot of a tree, high in the mountains, in caves, under overhanging rocks, and in cemeteries. We were taught to consider our daily almsround a solemn duty and advised to refuse food offered after we returned. He insisted that we eat all food mixed together in our bowls and avoid eating from other containers. And he exhibited a peerless standard of austerity by eating only one meal each day until the very last day of his life.

As for me, I have practiced four *dhutaṅgas* my whole monastic life without fail: wearing only the three principal robes, walking on almsround every day, eating food only from the alms bowl, and eating only one meal a day.

Apart from these four, I also undertook other *dhutaṅga* practices from time to time. As I mentioned earlier, I spent an entire rains retreat observing the sitter's practice. The other *dhutaṅga* observance that I've practiced most often is living in wilderness areas remote from places of human habitation. True to the character of a forest ascetic, I retreated from social interaction and kept to myself in the peace and quiet of forested recesses which the village and townsfolk viewed with such a sense of fear and dread that they dared not come to disturb me.

During my younger years, when I had more strength and energy, I'd trek alone into Thailand's vast wilderness areas searching for secluded places to hang my umbrella-tent and meditate uninterrupted by the sights and sounds of public life. I sought out remote sites in impenetrable jungle terrain and camped under overhanging cliffs on craggy rock faces in the mountains, places where even local hill tribe people found it hard to follow me. I lived in solitude, without concern for my life or fear for prolonged hardship, practicing the *dhutaṅga* way of life to the best of my ability.

Wilds

Ajaan Mun established a monastic routine at Daeng Forest Monastery that laid out a monk's daily duties and responsibilities beginning from the moment he rose in the early morning until he retired late at night, and his disciples conscientiously followed that schedule. Rising in the early hours before dawn, the monks got up quickly, washed their faces in cold water to liven up, then stepped onto their meditation paths to pace back and forth until all drowsiness had been dispelled. As dawn broke, each monk descended from his hut carrying his bowl and robes and hastened to the dining hall. The gathered monks began their chores by scrubbing and sweeping the hardwood floor and railings, after which they placed their sitting cloths on the clean floor, rinsed out their alms bowls with cold water, and set the bowls at their seats in preparation for the day's almsround. In the time remaining before the

walk to the village, they swept the grounds around the dining hall in all directions.

When the early morning light was bright enough to leave for almsround, each monk reentered the hall, put on his upper and outer robes, slung his alms bowl over one shoulder, and started walking with the others toward the village to collect alms. Upon returning to the monastery, he hung his outer robe in the sun, put on his upper robe, and attended to the food he'd received in his bowl. Once all the monks were seated, Ajaan Mun led them in chanting the blessing—rejoicing in the generosity of the givers and wishing peace and happiness to all living beings. Before beginning the meal, each monk focused on the food he was preparing to eat, reflecting on its nature and its purpose as follows: “The food I am about to consume is eaten simply for the purpose of maintaining the body’s health and longevity and relieving its various afflictions. Eating this meal as a support for living the holy life, I will conduct myself blamelessly and live a simple life.”

After finishing his meal, each monk carried his empty bowl to the washing area outside, scrubbed it clean, dried it in the sun, put it in a carrying case, and returned it to his hut where he placed it neatly in one corner. The bowl’s lid was left slightly open to allow any residual food odors to escape. The monk took time to pick and brush his teeth and attend to his toilet needs. After that, he might take a short rest, but would not fall asleep. When he felt refreshed, he rose to pay respects to the small Buddha statue in his hut and sat down to begin meditating on his preferred meditation theme. If he continued to feel drowsy, he would step outside his hut and onto his walking meditation path to focus his attention on the body in motion. Invigorated by walking, he later returned to a seated posture—the right foot placed on the left thigh, the left foot placed on the ground and tucked under the right thigh. Firmly grounded in body and mind, a monk could pass many hours absorbed in mindful awareness.

Every day at 4:00 p.m., the resident monks put aside their formal meditation practice to participate in the afternoon chores required of all members of the community. They began by sweeping the grounds of the entire monastery compound. Having closed their bowls' lids tightly to keep out the dust, they swept leaves and twigs from the area around their huts and continued sweeping the path that led from their huts to the main hall. They finished by sweeping the wide, cleared area encircling the open-air hall. Several monks began cleaning dust from the hall's floor while others proceeded to the well to fetch water to fill the earthenware pots that held water used for drinking and washing. When their chores were completed, the monks donned their bathing cloths and took a bath at the well. Feeling clean and refreshed from a cold-water bath, each monk returned to his hut and stepped onto his meditation path. Standing erect and alert with hands joined just below the waist, the palm of the right hand gently overlapping and clasping the back of the left, he paced the path from one end to the other and back again until sunset.

As night fell, the monks often congregated at Ajaan Mun's hut to give him a massage and listen while he gave an inspiring Dhamma teaching on the merits of training the mind with the powers of mindfulness and wisdom. Afterward, he asked the monks to return to their huts to chant and meditate on their own. Typically, monks at Daeng Forest Monastery went to sleep at around 10:00 p.m. and woke up at 3:00 a.m., getting up quickly, washing their faces with cold water, and stepping onto their meditation paths, just as they had the morning before. This was the basic daily routine that Ajaan Mun employed to keep his disciples fully focused on their monastic purpose throughout their waking hours.

Ajaan Mun always followed well-established monastic practices that had been passed down and used effectively through successive generations from the time of the Buddha to the present day. He believed that following those procedures diligently, with attention to

detail, guarded against complacency and misbehavior in the monastic community. He stressed that proper conduct, especially regarding the monastic rules, was the foundation on which a good meditation practice rested. The development of meditative concentration and wisdom required adherence to certain uniform principles of thought, speech, and action. To be successful, this discipline needed to encompass all facets of a monk's character and all aspects of his daily life. Ajaan Mun used to say that when the foundation is solid from the beginning, the results will be good in the end. He compared monks who had built such a foundation to rice farmers who, having prepared their fields well, can expect to harvest a good crop. He constantly reminded his disciples to pay heed to the fine details of their everyday conduct, both those aspects that focused on the monastic code of conduct and those that concerned proper monastic etiquette. Forest monks could not choose to be concerned with some aspects of their behavior and neglect others; otherwise, their efforts in meditation would ultimately prove disappointing. Ajaan Mun insisted that forest monks pay close attention to these basic elements of the practice.

I seemed to be standing in Ajaan Mun's line of fire the whole time I lived with him. He took aim at me even when his intended target was someone else. There were many instances when I was minding my own business and remaining aloof from events happening around me, yet Ajaan Mun singled me out for public criticism. I was caught off guard because I couldn't understand what I'd done wrong. He could be so vocal and so severe with his reprimands that I was occasionally reduced to tears. Assuming that Ajaan Mun had his own good reasons, I silently endured the tongue lashings, remained patient, and carried on.

One such episode involved a group of visiting monks who showed up at the monastery to seek Ajaan Mun's advice. Though he was obviously displeased with their comportment, he decided not to confront

them directly. Instead, he confronted me! Turning to me sitting quietly nearby, he reprimanded me harshly for some apparent fault. I was devastated. I felt like I was his spittoon! But I sat there calmly, not daring to react.

Another incident occurred after I'd finished sweeping leaves from the path going to the communal outhouse. I'd done a thorough job and was pleased with myself. I had painstakingly swept the whole area clean, except for a deep depression around the drainage ditch. Try as I might, I couldn't manage to remove all the leaves from that depression.

As I stood there admiring my handiwork, Ajaan Mun walked into the area, inspecting the paths as he went along. He scanned the whole place looking for stray leaves, but I was confident he wouldn't find anything to criticize. Suddenly, he looked up, walked over to where I stood, and started giving me hell. I thought, "Oh no, I'm about to bear the blame again!" I could see it coming because at that time a group of new monks had come to stay with us, and they liked to talk together throughout the night.

Ajaan Mun walked up and, looking right at me, asked in a booming voice, "Jia! What are you doing? Who took all the candles from the outhouse? And which one of you swept the ditch over there! Which one? Who just swept there?"

Ajaan Mun already knew that the new monks were to blame for taking all the outhouse's candles to illuminate their huts while they sat and talked till almost daybreak. They didn't meditate; they were only interested in idle chatter.

It so happened that those careless monks were sweeping within earshot of Ajaan Mun. Realizing that scolding them to their faces would be counterproductive, he turned on me instead and bellowed out his disapproval for their benefit. Nonetheless, I still managed to shoot myself in the foot. In answer to his question about who had swept the leaves, I proudly informed him that I had swept the whole area.

His voice descended like a hammer blow, which startled me because I was unprepared. “You’ve gone over the heads of Ajaan Kongmaa and Ajaan Lee to reach me, now you must make good use of this opportunity! If you insist on misbehaving, I’m telling you—don’t stay here! Get out! Go right now and don’t come back if this is the way you want to behave! Get out! Leave! Now!” The intensity of his rebuke shook me to the core, and inwardly I bowed to his authority.

Meanwhile, the new monks had heard what Ajaan Mun said loud and clear, and they were rattled. They looked at each other in panic and quickly hurried off in separate directions. But they failed to take his words to heart and see the reprimand as a warning directed at them. Instead, they were amused that Tan Jia had received a scolding and soon began criticizing me for my perceived shortcomings. In the end, none of those monks were the wiser for Ajaan Mun’s teaching. Stubborn and heedless, they neglected to see their own faults but instead saw faults only in others.

Ajaan Mun’s indirect approach was characteristic of his teaching style. If he couldn’t get through to the recalcitrant monks among us, he made sure that the rest of us got the message loud and clear. He refused to allow us any leeway when it came to inappropriate or undignified behavior. It was unfortunate that certain monks came with the intention to learn Dhamma from Ajaan Mun only to turn a deaf ear to his teachings. Given their attitude, I was baffled as to what kind of lessons they expected to learn from him. In the end, although they were the ones acting like a bunch of swine, it was usually my head that ended up on the chopping block.

The fact that Ajaan Mun often treated me like a punching bag was unsettling and disheartening to the point where I sometimes began to question his motives. But in my heart, I accepted that he had valid reasons for his teaching methods, and I deferred to his wisdom. Ultimately, I loved Ajaan Mun like a father.

I had lived with Ajaan Mun at Daeng Forest Monastery for several months when he received a letter inviting him to join a group of distinguished senior monks at Chedi Luang Monastery in Chiang Mai for a special ceremony honoring the occasion of Māgha Pūjā. This annual ceremony celebrates a gathering held between the Buddha and 1,250 of his Arahant disciples at which the Buddha summarized the basic principles of his teachings as: doing good actions, refraining from bad actions, and purifying the mind.

By coincidence, the letter arrived when Ajaan Mun was suffering from a bout of malaria. The high fever, chills, nausea, vomiting, and fatigue that he experienced meant that he was not well enough to travel such a long distance. Consequently, and to my surprise, Ajaan Mun asked me to attend the ceremony on his behalf. He wrote a letter to the abbot introducing me as his representative and told me to deliver it to the abbot in person. I did what he asked and felt honored to do so.

I left Daeng Forest Monastery with tears in my eyes. I worried about Ajaan Mun's worsening condition the whole time I was away. I felt that my fellow monks at the monastery lacked the necessary experience to take care of him in a manner that suited his temperament and took account of his needs. Up to that point, I had served as Ajaan Mun's personal attendant, performing the daily chores at his residence: preparing and washing his bowl and robes; arranging the tooth sticks; washing the spittoon and replenishing the drinking water; sweeping and cleaning his residence; giving him a nightly massage; and ministering to him in times of illness. I prepared the water for Ajaan Mun's evening bath, making sure it was the right temperature. I massaged his arms and legs to relieve the stress of aches and pains. I boiled water for his afternoon tea and cleaned the cup when he finished drinking. I washed his robes in a timely manner and laundered his other cloth requisites until they were clean. All those chores were accomplished with mindfulness and wisdom to the best of my ability.

Giving all my energy to those tasks as if my life depended on his well-being, I never tired of serving my teacher. Everything had to be ready on time and done just the way he preferred it. Out of deep devotion, I gladly took the responsibility of caring for his every need. Not even my own parents had been treated so well.

My attitude was strange, really, because it was out of character for me to devote so much time and energy to the needs of another person. By nature, I instinctively preferred to focus my time and energy on my own practice. How could I suddenly be so neat and tidy with someone else's requisites when my own hut always looked messy and unkempt? Although I felt indifferent to my own living conditions, I would not tolerate the slightest neglect of the high standards that Ajaan Mun demanded of me. No matter how much stress and strain that attention to detail entailed, I always rushed back to be close by his side.

I felt that a special kinship existed between the two of us. Perhaps I had a past-life connection with Ajaan Mun; perhaps our karmic paths had crossed long-ago in lives of Buddhist endeavor. Even though I tended to appear disheveled and socially awkward, he never gave up on me. In fact, he was always kind to me—no matter how it may have appeared to others. I'm not ashamed to admit that whenever I recall the kindness he showed me when I lived with him, I'm left so speechless with emotion that sometimes I shed tears of gratitude.

The more I reflect deeply on Ajaan Mun's exemplary conduct and the tireless energy he put into instructing his students, the more certain I am that no one else in the world had such a storehouse of merit and virtue. He never sought mundane happiness for himself; on the contrary, he endured the hardships of forest life just so he could help relieve the suffering of his disciples. The time I spent as Ajaan Mun's student was the most auspicious period of my life. To me, he was the embodiment of the Buddha's teachings on Dhamma and Vinaya. As a fully awakened Arahant, he was revered by humans and celestial beings from all realms of existence.

As soon as the Māgha Pūjā ceremony at Chedi Luang Monastery concluded, I hurried back from Chiang Mai to help look after my teacher, whose malarial symptoms had worsened in the interim. He continued to suffer bouts of high fever, followed by cold sweats and chills. He hadn't eaten any food the whole time I was gone.

Ajaan Mun had been struggling with malarial symptoms off and on for years. He further aggravated those symptoms while on a visit to a hill tribe village where he had been invited to preside over a local merit-making function. Feeling unwell even before he left, he made the long trip through the mountains on foot as a favor to a longtime supporter who was hosting the event. The strain of the journey worsened his condition, causing a sharp spike in his fever. Malarial parasites had begun to infect his brain, which made him feel nauseous and disoriented. Despite this severe disability, Ajaan Mun made the trek back to Daeng Forest Monastery on foot as soon as the merit-making function ended.

That long march was a trip to remember for the young hill tribesman who accompanied him. He was amazed by the speed with which Ajaan Mun covered the distance over mountains and through valleys despite his ailing health. He exclaimed to us when they arrived that, even though he'd hiked in those mountains all his life, he couldn't keep up with the old and sickly monk he was escorting. The way Ajaan Mun glided effortlessly along the forest paths without tiring left the young man gasping for air as he tried to keep up with him. The whole experience made him wonder what the trip would have been like had Ajaan Mun been in good health. In any event, Ajaan Mun arrived back long before his young escort.

Back at the monastery, Ajaan Mun's condition continued to deteriorate. Fearing the worst, Naan Daeng, a devout supporter from Chiang Mai, entreated Ajaan Mun to travel to McCormick Hospital in Chiang Mai for treatment, and he agreed. In those days, there were no roads linking the monastery to the city, so we were obliged to travel

there on foot. We soon set off together. Ajaan Mun walked ahead at his usual rapid pace, his walking stick tapping out the rhythm of his steps. I followed behind carrying two alms bowls slung across my shoulders, trying desperately to keep up. His capacity for tolerating acute pain and discomfort was second to none. Although dreadfully sick, he hiked steadily to Phrao district without showing signs of fatigue or complaining about ill health.

Finally arriving at Chiang Mai city, we stopped briefly to rest at Chedi Luang Monastery before proceeding to the hospital. Naan Daeng and other local supporters took care of all the arrangements for Ajaan Mun's admission to McCormick Hospital, which had been founded by a group of Christian missionaries. Catering mostly to wealthy patients, it offered the most advanced care in the city at that time.

The abbot of Chedi Luang Monastery arranged for a specialist to supervise Ajaan Mun's medical care. After administering several standard remedies for cerebral malaria, which showed only negligible results, the doctor was unwilling to give an assurance about Ajaan Mun's recovery. He whispered to the abbot that he'd reached the limit of what he could do to help. The condition was life threatening. He was concerned that as the hours passed, Ajaan Mun might slip into a coma.

As soon as the doctor left the room, Ajaan Mun called the abbot to his bedside and asked what the doctor had said. When told, Ajaan Mun assured the abbot that he would not die from this illness, so everyone should remain calm and not panic. Calling all of us together, Ajaan Mun explained what he intended to do next. He had investigated his condition thoroughly and concluded that only the therapeutic powers of Dhamma could effect a cure for the illness. He then specified a secluded location not far from Chiang Mai, known as Pehr Forest, where he asked to be taken. The abbot immediately arranged to send him to Pehr Forest.

Before Ajaan Mun left the hospital to head for Pehr Forest, I took his leave, hiked back to Daeng Forest Monastery, and reported his decision to the interim abbot, Ajaan Phrom Cirapuñño. That same night, Ajaan Phrom called a meeting of the monastic community and inquired as to who among the monks present would volunteer to look after Ajaan Mun's needs at Pehr Forest. Without hesitation, I raised my hand. Ajaan Phrom kept looking around the room, but no one else made a gesture. They all sat quietly with heads bowed. The other monks didn't dare to speak up; they were too afraid of Ajaan Mun, who had a reputation for fierceness and harsh admonishments. I looked at the monk sitting beside me, Tan Taa Piak, whom I had known from the time we lived together at Sai Ngaam Forest Monastery in Chanthaburi. I leaned over and spoke softly, encouraging him to join me. Would he go with me to take care of Ajaan Mun? Tan Taa Piak nodded and, having received Ajaan Phrom's consent, we agreed to leave the next morning.

We started the trek back to Chiang Mai after the morning meal and didn't arrive until 9:00 at night—almost twelve hours on our feet! By contrast, when Ajaan Mun and I walked to Chiang Mai, we left at the same time after the meal but arrived in Chiang Mai at 5:00 in the afternoon. That's four hours faster! And Ajaan Mun was sick with malaria! The problem was that Tan Taa Piak, though young, walked the forest trails very slowly, resting often. We spent that night at Chedi Luang Monastery in Chiang Mai.

The following morning Naan Daeng arrived with a car, picked us up, and drove us to Pehr Forest, where we respectfully greeted Ajaan Mun and bowed at his feet. His thin, gaunt appearance worried us. Clearly, the malaria still raged inside his body. He'd lost more weight, and his strength appeared to be waning—as though life energy was draining from his haggard form. Simply walking required one person on either side to prop him up and prevent him from falling over. But remarkably, his radiant inner presence showed no signs of sickness or infirmity. He uttered not a single complaint about his worsening con-

dition. He didn't groan or bemoan his fate. His indomitable character made Ajaan Mun an easy patient to nurse. Even the doctors were impressed by his unflappable equanimity in the face of intense suffering. He projected such a feeling of warmth and tranquility that everyone around him felt soothed and reassured.

In times of illness, Ajaan Mun preferred to employ the therapeutic powers of Dhamma to manage the pain and bring about an effective cure. This method entailed investigating painful bodily feelings with an intense, incisive degree of mindfulness and wisdom. He viewed all pain as a manifestation of the Noble Truth of Suffering. The weakness and exhaustion he displayed externally resembled that of any other sick person; but internally, mindfulness and wisdom rose in his heart like warriors preparing to do battle, ensuring that no amount of pain affected his presence of mind. If the Dhamma troops succeeded, the symptoms would abate and health would be restored. If, however, Ajaan Mun were to die on the battlefield, he would die undefeated.

Ajaan Mun praised monks who remained self-controlled during onslaughts of painful feelings, calling them worthy representatives of the warrior spirit that's expected of *dhutaṅga* monks. In critical situations, they stood their ground and put up a strong fight. No matter how overwhelming the pain, a *dhutaṅga* monk's mindfulness and wisdom never retreated or conceded defeat—even in death he was triumphant.

Ajaan Mun used inspirational teaching methods to boost his disciples' fighting spirit, regardless of whether they were sick or healthy. He insisted that his monks act like warriors fighting to rescue themselves from mortal danger. He placed special emphasis on remaining steadfast in times of illness, with the intention of preventing meditators from becoming dispirited when pain threatened to overwhelm their defenses. Ajaan Mun tended to rebuke sick monks who showed signs of weakness or despair, believing that putting up with difficult situations while investigating them carefully was the least a practicing monk could do to live up to his status as a son of the Buddha.

Ajaan Mun had adopted this uncompromising attitude toward ill health when he first ordained. His initial reaction to sickness of any kind was to focus the powers of Dhamma he'd developed in *samādhi* and insight meditation on bodily symptoms as they occurred. He would focus those therapeutic powers on the feelings of pain and weakness that arose in order to neutralize their debilitating effects and gradually bring about a long-term cure. He rarely turned to doctors and medical remedies for relief. On the occasions when he experienced a dangerous health crisis, an internal investigation of the disease in his body and symptoms such as fever or fatigue was critical to his survival and recovery. With some illnesses, especially those he experienced alone deep in the wilderness, Dhamma medicine was his only recourse to treat the problem. At such times, mindfulness and wisdom worked day and night to bring his physical condition back from the brink.

Ajaan Mun had struggled with chronic stomach pains since childhood. Every time this condition flared up, the abdominal pains became so severe that he couldn't move without causing more pain. His only source of relief was meditation, using wisdom techniques to keep his mind in the present and work with the effects of the searing pain.

His stomach problem became so acute and persistent at times that the condition appeared to be life threatening. Under those circumstances, an ordinary, untrained person who relied only on doctors and medicines would surely have succumbed to the illness. Likewise, if Ajaan Mun had depended solely on external support—as though he lacked a nose of his own to breathe—he would surely have died in agony at some remote forest location. Instead, he relied on calling forth the therapeutic power of Dhamma to escape from the clutches of death. He said that as soon as the symptoms of illness started to appear, the therapeutic properties of his meditation responded immediately and began to bring relief. As a result, he showed little interest in conventional medicines. Even as his vitality steadily declined in old

age, he continued to apply Dhamma medicine to maintain harmony in his bodily elements.

When Ajaan Mun addressed a sick monk, he brought up his own experiences as examples to follow. He would say, “When the body is sick with a high fever and relentless pain, immediately summon the therapeutic power of Dhamma and use it to deal with those debilitating conditions. When this method is practiced with persistence, the sickness will abate, and its symptoms will subside on their own.

“When you have courage to fortify yourself and mindfulness and wisdom as your guides, the painful feelings caused by illness can be overcome. This approach fosters a solid basis of Dhamma in the heart that will serve you well not only in times of sickness but also in times of good health. Mindfulness and wisdom teach you to understand the connection between body, pain, and mind. When their relationship is clearly understood, painful feelings will never again be a cause for concern. The firm basis in Dhamma achieved through meditation on pain can become so stable that, should a critical situation arise in the future, your well-trained mindfulness and wisdom will come to the rescue, overriding the anxiety caused by pain and allowing you to reach a state of equanimity. When death becomes imminent, you will not feel weak or disheartened, and thus will not be overwhelmed. Having succeeded in mastering the Noble Truth of Suffering, you can boldly face this moment of ultimate truth about life and death.”

I was blessed with the chance to nurse Ajaan Mun back to health during his convalescence at Pehr Forest. There I saw further evidence that Ajaan Mun was an exemplary teacher in every aspect of the practice—both in his impeccable behavior and in his outstanding mental qualities. His energy, endurance, courage, frugality, and sublime detachment were exceptional attributes that put him in a class of his own. None of his disciples could rival Ajaan Mun’s excellence

in those virtues. He was the ultimate Dhamma warrior—intrepid and fearless to such a degree that mortal enemies like craving and ignorance could never perturb his equanimity.

Living with Ajaan Mun motivated me to have great enthusiasm for the principles of Dhamma. Although I endured many hardships practicing under austere conditions, Ajaan Mun's authentic training methods brought joy to the practice. The affection and devotion I felt for my teacher gave me a feeling of complete confidence in his guidance. I placed my life and well-being solely in his hands. I managed to put up with the daily deprivations because Ajaan Mun convinced me that Dhamma was more important than all other matters. I was content to persevere through days of rigorous training because of his steadfast support and guidance. There were times when I felt that I would willingly give up my life for him without regret.

Ajaan Mun contended that, because the human body is naturally subject to old age, sickness, and death, human beings can expect to experience many kinds of painful afflictions during their lives. He challenged his disciples to realize that pain and suffering need not be the same thing. Even while experiencing a severe sickness, it's possible to convert the resulting pain into a Dhamma lesson by deeply investigating pain's true nature with mindfulness and wisdom. How much we suffer from painful feelings depends more on the degree to which we cling to our bodies than it does on the severity of the affliction the body endures. Suffering is caused not by the severity of the physical condition but by how attached we are to our physical well-being. If we were not attached to the body, then painful feelings on their own would not cause us to suffer. When we reach a clear understanding that the mind's grasping at and clinging to the body is actually the main problem, then when the body is in pain, the mind need not suffer as a consequence. Painful feelings are seen merely as natural phenomena, arising and ceasing, which need not result in experiences of personal suffering.

Ajaan Mun did not deny the effectiveness of medical remedies for healing disease, nor did he forbid his monks to seek such remedies. He explicitly stated that diseases caused by imbalances in the bodily elements—such as infections, allergies, and malnutrition—can be treated and cured by taking medications prescribed for those ailments. What he objected to was meditation monks making a habit of depending on doctors and medical cures to relieve every ailment they suffered. Such an attitude tended to strengthen the defilements and weaken the warrior spirit that would embolden these monks to hold their ground and put up a fight. He wanted his monks to make a habit of fending for themselves, rather than habitually looking outside for help. The warrior training that he emphasized aimed to instill in them a faith in the power of their own inner strength. He worried that without that attitude his monks would become so afraid of dying that they'd neglect to search for the healing power of Dhamma within themselves.

Ajaan Mun constantly reminded his disciples that death is the natural consequence of birth—that all creatures born on this earth will eventually die, their bodies decaying until they are reduced to their natural elements. Indeed, everything in the universe is impermanent and ever-changing. Everything will disintegrate and disappear. Because death is unavoidable, fear of this inevitability is misguided. Better they fear rebirth and its consequences and use that apprehension as motivation to go beyond birth and death entirely. If fear of death prevents a monk from diligently practicing meditation, he is bound to come back and suffer pain and distress time and time again in future births. Likewise, if he doesn't experience for himself what it's like to overcome the fear of intense pain, he'll likely never experience the wonders of Dhamma. Dying and being born again means continuing to carry the burden of misery with no end in sight. Monks who overcome the fear of death can gradually reduce their number of rebirths until they eventually transcend birth and death altogether. At that point they will never again return to bear the burden of suffering.

While I was nursing Ajaan Mun back to health, Lady Khiaw, a long-standing supporter, paid him a visit one day and offered to provide him a donation of one Thai *baht*. That same evening, as I massaged Ajaan Mun's feet, I asked him to please consider whether it would be appropriate to use Lady Khiaw's donation to purchase a can of condensed milk so that he could drink a cup every morning to regain his strength. Back then, the only milk available was a brand of sweetened condensed milk called Mali, and one can of it cost only five Thai pennies.

I sat still listening for his answer, but Ajaan Mun remained silent. He was probably thinking over his options, as every action he took—even in such a small matter as this—demanded conformity with the Dhamma in his heart. He never gave more priority to food or health than to the principles of Dhamma. He used to say, “I’m a son of the Buddha practicing the Dhamma, and every aspect of my behavior must conform to a higher standard. Although that standard may displease the sensibilities of worldly people, I cannot violate my oath to faithfully observe the major and minor principles of monastic conduct which the Lord Buddha so compassionately established for the Sangha. The true Dhamma is not influenced by popular trends or majority opinion but is rather the exclusive right of the pure mind that has fully realized the truth of that Dhamma. Ordinary people whose minds are tainted by the defiling influence of their own self-interest tend to set up standards that benefit them personally. Being a Dhamma practitioner, I must take the Buddha’s teachings as the highest authority governing my actions. Taking this attitude is far safer than following the dictates of self-interest or majority opinion.”

Following a long period of silence, I spoke up again, “Drinking a little milk every day can be beneficial for the elderly. It helps rejuvenate the body so it can recover more quickly from illness. Please try drinking a cup of milk in the morning.”

Ajaan Mun continued to sit quietly as before. I took his silence to mean that he had accepted my proposal. At sunrise the following morning, I had a layman take the money which Lady Khiaw had offered Ajaan Mun to the market and buy a can of condensed milk. When he returned, I heated up the milk and offered it to Ajaan Mun. Appearing annoyed, he refused to drink it, telling me that milk usually gave him diarrhea. Undeterred, I implored him to try it anyway, assuring him that he needn't worry as I would take care of any mess myself. Hearing that, Ajaan Mun relented.

The milk helped him to gradually regain the strength he needed to fight off the malaria. When Lady Khiaw's money ran out, Naan Daeng continued to provide condensed milk until Ajaan Mun made a full recovery. After that, Ajaan Mun stopped taking milk entirely. He had been drinking the milk merely as a medicine, not because he enjoyed the taste or craved the extra vitality.

I served Ajaan Mun with a sense of deep faith and awe in the steadfastness with which he comported himself through times of severe hardship. Being in his presence while illness ravaged his body became an important lesson for me in the unsurpassed power of spiritual well-being. Through the dignity and composure Ajaan Mun displayed when encountering bodily sickness, he educated a physically healthy person like me about the superiority of inner strength over physical strength. It was a potent reminder that diseases of the spirit are potentially far more damaging than those of the body.

Ajaan Mun himself liked to say that it's possible for a human being to remain healthy and free from physical sickness for a year or two, or for decades, or even for their entire life. Finding people with good healthy bodies is not so unusual. But finding people with good healthy spiritual qualities *is* very unusual. The diseases of greed, aversion, and delusion, and their legion of contagious mental defilements, are like a plague that infects the hearts and minds of people everywhere. No one is spared the harmful effects of this widespread contagion. The

Buddha and the Arahants are the sole exception. Only the Buddha and the Arahants have cured these chronic ailments for good; only they have totally eradicated diseases of the mind.

For three months, I attended to Ajaan Mun's every need, nursing him back to good health as best I could with the limited resources at hand. Of course, my clumsy efforts paled in comparison to my teacher's curative powers. Still, I put my body on the line for him, and his condition steadily improved. Just after dawn every morning, I scrubbed and swept Ajaan Mun's hut, prepared his robes, and set out his alms bowl for the morning meal. Due to ailing health, he was unable to make the long walk to the village and back, so the rest of us shared with him the best of the food we received in our bowls, and I added a cup of warm condensed milk each day. After the meal, I washed Ajaan Mun's bowl, dried it thoroughly in the sun, and returned it to its place in his hut. I then cleaned the outhouse toilet and swept the ground around the hut.

In the afternoon, I brought Ajaan Mun a cup of hot tea and again swept the leaves from his path. I boiled a kettle of water and mixed the hot water with his cold bath water. Then I used my palms and fingers to rub the warm water over his frail body in a circular motion. One therapy I administered every night without fail was a full-body massage. At dusk, I would walk to his hut, prostrate to his recumbent figure reclining on a thin straw mat, and start to massage his limbs. Ajaan Mun taught me how to gently squeeze with my hands along the full length of his arms and legs, moving up and down each limb before shifting my attention to his torso and kneading his back. I was careful not to press too firmly for fear of accidentally injuring him. By then, his body was little more than skin and bones, and it ached constantly.

Ajaan Mun found this type of massage helpful for reviving the strength and relieving the discomfort in his weakening body. So, I kneaded and squeezed Ajaan Mun's legs and arms several hours every night for the entire three months he was recuperating from that bout

of malaria. In the end, Ajaan Mun's health returned to normal, and I felt greatly relieved.

Although nursing Ajaan Mun through illness put a strain on me physically, my mind was peaceful and happy. The physical difficulty was part of the training, and I accepted it gladly. The exhaustion and hunger I endured never bothered me. I looked on the whole experience as an extremely valuable Dhamma teaching, one in which I became so absorbed that I lost all track of time. I felt no desire to be anywhere else but by his side day and night. His presence was the treasure I'd been seeking all my life. His pure goodness and impeccable demeanor drew me to him like a magnet.

The highest truth of the Buddha's teachings is not a right or privilege that can be bought by the rich and famous. That truth can be realized only by one whose heart has been purified in Dhamma. The inner wealth of such an individual surpasses any riches that might be amassed in the human world. Ajaan Mun lived in extreme poverty by worldly standards—he had no possessions of any worth. What he possessed in abundance was a wealth of Dhamma. In spiritual wealth, he was unsurpassed in our day and age. He was a famous monk with lots of disciples, but he rarely had enough food to eat from one day to the next. Living with him was hard because basic requisites were always in short supply. For as long as I stayed with Ajaan Mun, I never saw him eat high-quality food. His penchant for living in the wilderness—in caves and under overhanging cliffs, at cremation grounds and other remote places—precluded the luxury of a nutritious diet. He preferred to avoid busy commercial centers like towns and cities because their social activities and prosperous lifestyles were unsuitable for the tasks of calming the mind and transcending the cycle of birth and death.

Ajaan Mun chose a life of deprivation by staying at places where even the simple requisites he used daily were scarce and hard to come by. People living comfortably in their homes would find such conditions unbearable, but Ajaan Mun embraced this lifestyle voluntarily

for the purpose of achieving enlightenment. He lived for Dhamma and accepted the inconvenience and hardship associated with its practice. These harsh conditions also served as a challenging spiritual training ground for the monks who practiced under his guidance. Monks had to force themselves to live in this way because such living conditions naturally went against the grain.

Ajaan Mun spent most of his life in wilderness areas where villages were located a day's walk apart, places where he could easily put the teaching into practice. When I stayed with him, we often ate only plain rice—with no other food items added. I never once tasted a piece of grilled fish. But Ajaan Mun always gave the impression that wherever we were was just the right place to be because we were prospering in Dhamma. His attitude indicated that the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha were always present—living with him, at one with his supreme awareness. For this reason, he felt contentment whenever and wherever he traveled.

Ajaan Mun taught his monks to put body and mind on the line when striving to establish a firm basis in the practice. They must be willing to sacrifice their lives for Dhamma. Everyone who is born must die—such is the nature of the world. It's fruitless trying to resist that truth. The fruits of Dhamma cannot be experienced by denying the natural order of things. Ajaan Mun expected a practicing monk to be resolute and brave in the face of death. He insisted that his monks live in isolated wilderness areas teeming with wild animals so that they could discover for themselves the liberating power of meditation.

Training with Ajaan Mun forced us to be prepared for anything—including the prospect of dying—for danger lay in wait at the various places where we practiced. But the lesson was clear: When a monk was constrained by living in a frightening place where the food was limited and the basic requisites were scarce, his mind tended to be constantly under the control of mindfulness. As a result of strong mindful awareness, he was often able to attain *samādhi* faster than would otherwise

be expected. Ajaan Mun was confident that monks who practiced while hemmed in on all sides by adversity and hardship could experience advancements in their meditation that would exceed all their expectations.

One day while I was doing walking meditation on a path under the trees at the edge of Daeng Forest Monastery, I heard a woman singing as she walked through the fields behind me. With what was obviously a northeastern accent, she sang a soulful song in such a beautiful voice and with such fervent emotion that the sound pierced my heart. The lyrics she sang in a high-pitched, mournful voice sounded like a lament of her life of pain and suffering. Those words communicated a flavor of the Buddha's teaching, which prompted me to reflect deeply on the sad reality of human existence. Although she sang from her raw emotions without much mindfulness, I turned my listening inward to connect with the Dhamma in my heart. The sound of her voice resonated with my inner awareness until suddenly, while standing still on the meditation path, I experienced a profound insight that caused my awareness to converge rapidly into a central point of focus, drop to the very base of *samādhi*, and experience an indescribable feeling of pure knowing.

The lyrics that lady sang said it all:

*Suffering of body and mind
Consumes my thoughts and feelings.
Suffering binds me so tightly
Leaving no room for escape.
Tolerating the suffering of human life
I live and die with pain and sorrow.
Suffering of body and mind
Consumes my thoughts and feelings.
Pain and suffering overwhelm my lonely heart.*

On merely hearing those words, my mind came together and dropped into a state of pure awareness. That extraordinary experience goes to show that Dhamma resides inside the minds of us all. We need only to concentrate our focus in the right way with the right intention to discover the true meaning of suffering and its causes. By acknowledging this potential and acting on it, we can use the sights and sounds of the world as teaching aids—like transforming a poignant song about life’s sorrows into a symphony of Dhamma in the heart.

“*Suffering of body and mind*,” what does it mean? Once a woman marries, she’s always busy. Her body is in constant motion. Her husband demands attention and expects to be served, so she shoulders that burden. She soon bears children, who add weight to the burden, each in their own way. There’s always work to do and mouths to feed. She plows the fields and sows the rice, later harvesting and threshing it, all done in the hot sunshine. She feeds her family the best she can, cooking meager meals of rice and wild vegetables mixed with bits of meat and fermented fish paste. She makes brooms and baskets by hand. She sews pillows and mattresses, stuffing them with cotton wool. She knits woolen clothing for the winters and mends threadbare clothes all year long. She provides care and support for her aging parents and for her in-laws, as well. Her interest in spiritual matters loses out to the daily toil. Then, when she has a few hours alone, she releases the pent-up emotion by singing her plaintive song.

Hearing the haunting refrain of *suffering of body and mind* had become an inspiration for wisdom to arise. Letting the sound and its lyrics resonate in my heart, I contemplated their significance for people bound up in perpetual hardship and I experienced a deep dismay for the plight of all living beings. Because I had achieved a degree of freedom from suffering, I could reflect on those who were still trapped in a world of pain and delusion and experience a sense of heartfelt compassion.

By that point I had practiced the Buddha's teachings up to a stage where I began to understand the mind's deluded nature and its wrongful ways of thinking. As a result, my mind's attachments had begun to loosen their grip. This led to a wonderful sense of happiness and freedom. Only when I clearly understood the causes of my own suffering could I begin to realize how much pain and confusion existed in the hearts of other people. Having shone the light of wisdom on my own ignorance, I could view the suffering of others from a higher level of understanding. I saw clearly the way to go beyond suffering and its causes, while other people failed to see it or were uninterested in its existence. Considering this sad situation, a strong feeling of compassion arose within my heart.

At the time of the Buddha, some Arahants sang their own poetic verses. As I understand, they tended to intone the Dhamma in the melodic *sarabhañña* chanting style. When the Venerable Soṇa Kuṭīkaṇṇa, a disciple of the Buddha, attained enlightenment, he offered the Buddha an account of his attainment chanted in verse, reciting the stanzas in a *sarabhañña* cadence. After listening, the Buddha praised the pleasantly melodic tone of his chanting.

Even today, we Thais like to recite Dhamma verses the *sarabhañña* way. I myself enjoy hearing the Sahassanaya Verses intoned this way. *Sarabhañña* chanting is really a form of singing in which the lyrics follow a rhythmic pattern. Setting Dhamma to music originated with a *devaputta* named Pañcasikha, who was foremost among heavenly musicians. While seated in front of a cave where the Buddha resided waiting for the Buddha to acknowledge his presence, Pañcasikha pulled out his lute and started to strum. He sang a joyous song about the affection he felt for his beloved. The lyrics compared his love for her to the love the Bodhisatta felt for Bodhiñāṇa, the Wisdom of Enlightenment. When Pañcasikha finished, the Buddha praised him for his ability to harmonize his voice with the strings on his instrument.

At the time of the Buddha, a group of monks attained enlightenment while contemplating the words of a cheerful song being sung by a gang of female slaves as they drew water from a well. The sound and rhythm of their voices possessed a mesmerizing quality that drew the listeners' attention straight to the internal attributes of the sound itself, without reference to the singers or the external circumstances.

Many of the Pāli verses chanted today have been popular since the time of the Buddha. They were recited regularly throughout the ages by both lay practitioners and enlightened monks. Chanting the same verses that the ancients did connects us with the timeless quality of the Buddha's teachings. Chanting Pāli verses as a daily practice fosters success in meditation by allowing chanters to focus on the rhythmic patterns of the chants while also voicing spiritually uplifting sounds that resonate with the heart in a special way. Chanting cultivates mindfulness, builds concentration, strengthens wisdom, and helps keep the mind grounded in the present.

Throughout the period of my attendance on Ajaan Mun, my meditation continued to progress smoothly under his practical guidance. As my mastery of *samādhi* meditation increased, I experienced the frequent occurrence of *nimittas* arising in the mind. *Nimittas* are internal images arising in meditation that can appear in the form of lights, colors, or shapes, and which look as real as external images seen with the naked eye. Unsure as to whether I should actively engage these visions and try to understand them or simply ignore them, I sought Ajaan Mun's advice. Ajaan Mun warned me straightaway that if their appearance was merely a distraction, they should be intentionally ignored. But if my purpose was to understand the implication of those experiences, I must question the visions directly and then wait for the *nimitta* to reveal its significance. I asked him if the images represented something real, something to be trusted. He replied that, in and of

themselves, *nimittas* should not be considered real or trustworthy, but with caution they can be used by skilled meditators as tools for investigating with wisdom.

The visions that appeared when my mind attained a state of calm and concentration were usually related to some form of bodily experience. For instance, on one occasion I sat facing a bottomless abyss opening below me. Suddenly my body tilted and started falling head-first into the dark, yawning chasm. As I hurtled downward toward certain death, I steeled myself for the final impact and prepared to part from my physical body. Then, following a few moments in free fall, the vision vanished as suddenly as it had appeared. On another occasion, the trunk of my body expanded to such an enormous size—as wide as a gigantic water tank—that it felt like my body would burst, scattering body parts in all directions.

After experiencing many similar *nimittas*, I again expressed my concerns to Ajaan Mun and asked for advice on how to investigate them. He said that although such visions appeared to be in front of my field of vision—which caused me to look *at* them—they were, in fact, created inside my mind, and their visual manifestation was merely an illusion. He instructed me to redirect the focus of my awareness inside—to engage images of the body at their source—then use that sharp inner focus to investigate the images of the body created by the mind.

With that said, Ajaan Mun urged me not to chase after *nimittas* arising in my meditation. Images perceived in meditation were merely mental phenomena that had no inherent power of their own. They were no more special than images seen with open eyes. Although they weren't solid like tangible material objects, they were still seen as separate from the awareness that knew them. He insisted that I determine to reverse the direction of my focus, halting the outward flow of awareness and turning it inward to connect with the source of awareness itself. He cautioned that all *nimitta* visions are unreal and unreliable.

Trusting them can destabilize the meditator's mind, threaten its equilibrium, and endanger its sanity. At the very least, they distract from the primary purpose of the Buddha's teachings. The only safe way to deal with them is to bring the images inside and investigate them there.

Equipped with Ajaan Mun's sage instructions, I mentally established right mindfulness on the body and combined that with wisdom techniques to redouble my efforts on body contemplation. After withdrawing from *samādhi*, feeling calm and concentrated, I first focused attention on an imaginary image of my right thumbnail, then on images of my index fingernail, my middle fingernail, my ring fingernail, and finally, my pinkie fingernail. Returning to the thumb, I examined its structure, identified its joints, and then imagined cutting off the joints one by one up to the palm of the hand. The joints of the index and middle fingers were then chopped off as well, followed by the final two fingers. Once the joints of all five had been amputated on each hand, only the imaginary bloodied stumps of the hands remained. Methodically, I focused my attention across the palm to the wrist, where I lopped off my hands at their junction. I proceeded to the middle of my forearm, chopping through muscle and bone to leave only a stump behind. My elbows came next, each severed at the joint. By the time I dismembered the shoulders, the images of both my arms were separated from the torso.

My awareness scanned the entire physical frame, slicing up the lower body from the toes to the hips and the torso from the hips to the shoulders, until only the head and neck remained intact. In my mind's eye, I pulled the right eyeball from its socket, then the left one. I ripped off the right side of my nose, then the left side; the upper lip, then the lower lip; the right ear, then the left. The removal of both cheeks was followed by the extraction of the upper and lower teeth, leaving only a sunken, skeletal face flecked with bits of flesh and skin. The neck was severed at the jaw, exposing a ragged skull that had cracked open at the brow to reveal the soft tissue of the brain. These parts then joined the

other severed body parts in an imagined blood-soaked heap of flesh and bone.

I further investigated this mass of physical matter by applying to it the perception of the three fundamental characteristics of all things: *anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anattā*. The Buddha recommended that we clearly comprehend how everything in the body is subject to change; how no experience of the body will ever lead to complete and lasting happiness; and how no inherent, independent self can be found therein. Reflecting thus with mindfulness and clear comprehension can reduce the body's power over the mind and allow the mind's subtle awareness to shine forth with greater concentration and clarity. Increased clarity is accompanied by heightened understanding, while strong concentration empowers wisdom to dig deeply to uproot tenacious mental defilements. The removal of those defilements deepens concentration.

Body contemplation at this level presents a difficult challenge for the meditator. Its practice requires a degree of heightened concentration that can remain fully focused on the investigative process without succumbing to distractions. Once this strong concentration is established, the mind follows a series of changing images that methodically track each successive stage of the human body's dismemberment. This contemplation, when practiced consistently, enhances one's concentration which, in turn, leads naturally to the amazing full-absorption experience of *appanā samādhi*.

Ajaan Mun compared concentration and wisdom to the two wings of a bird in flight. Both wings must be properly balanced to lift the mind above craving and ignorance and toward liberation from suffering. The concentrated awareness of *samādhi* supports the insight practices of observing, examining, and investigating, while the insights gained from these practices foster heightened concentration. Like a bird's wings, each is essential for traversing the path to enlightenment. Meditative calm, concentration, and clarity of mind must be present before wisdom practices can penetrate to the root causes of suffer-

ing. Only when insight gains clear understanding at this deep level can defilements and delusions of the mind be exposed and removed. Concentrated awareness excavates the roots of the tree of ignorance; wisdom uproots and eradicates them.

Ajaan Mun taught well-established meditation practices that had been passed down from generation to generation since the time of the Buddha. He was an acknowledged master of all facets of the Buddha's teachings, and remarkably single-minded in his determination to pursue their practice to attain spiritual perfection. He was also keenly aware that people's temperaments and abilities differed widely and understood that it was unwise to teach only one meditation method when it came to the relationship between concentration and wisdom practices. Due to the varying strengths of people's spiritual faculties, not everyone could benefit from a single teaching method. Because Ajaan Mun knew intuitively what each student needed to hear, he tailored the emphasis of his teachings to fit specific individual needs, giving special prominence to the meditation subjects most appropriate to each meditator.

While Ajaan Mun lived in the mountains of Chiang Mai, the hill tribe people felt great joy listening to his Dhamma discourses in the late afternoons. Later at night, he taught Dhamma to *devas* from various realms of sentient existence, kindly responding to their many inquiries. *Devas* from the surrounding area had all heard of Ajaan Mun. On some nights, thousands of them gathered on the mountain to hear his teaching. From afar, the locals saw a strange radiance illuminating the mountaintop, which steadily grew in intensity until the entire mountain appeared to shine brightly. The villagers were bewildered: Was Ajaan Mun's meditation causing the radiance, or had he perhaps lit an especially bright lantern that night?

On the mornings following such episodes, the villagers would ask Ajaan Mun for an explanation as he walked through the village collecting alms food. Did he have a special lantern that could light up the whole mountain? Ajaan Mun would just smile but never revealed the true cause of the luminescence.

Ajaan Mun's fine-tuned powers of extrasensory perception contacted a diverse range of celestial beings whose existence was as much a part of his daily experience as that of the wild animals in the forest and the monks he trained in the monastery. He fully understood the causes of birth in these realms of existence. He explained that the reason a being is reborn into a particular realm is that in a previous life that being had made the kind of *kamma* that predisposed it to rebirth in that realm. As a general rule, the quality of future births depends on the moral quality of one's actions and the levels of concentration and wisdom achieved in one's meditation practice. Thus, someone who makes sufficiently good merit in this lifetime may be worthy of rebirth in a heavenly realm. Additionally, the enduring strength of those meritorious deeds will make it more likely that, in a subsequent human birth, such a person will have the good fortune to meet an accomplished meditation monk.

But those who spend their lives striving only for fame and fortune will be in danger of slipping into the lower realms because, regardless of what efforts they made to be successful in life, at the time of death all their worldly achievements will be lost. The only accomplishments that are not lost at death are actions and their future consequences. The karmic consequences of actions taken in this life will follow on to the next life and beyond. Sowing good seeds reaps pleasing fruit both now and in the future, whereas sowing bad seeds reaps unpleasant fruit now and in the future. With this understanding in mind, many faithful Buddhists spend their lives doing as many good deeds as possible with the aim of amassing a large amount of merit as an investment toward a favorable future rebirth. For instance, devout supporters who

share their money, time, and effort to construct meeting halls and monks' cabins for a Buddhist monastery are, in effect, building themselves a heavenly "palace," an abode that awaits them in a celestial realm of existence at the time of death.

I was fascinated by Ajaan Mun's uncanny ability to communicate with nonhuman beings from many different realms of existence. Since childhood, I'd heard about *devas*, *nāgas*, and *yakkhas*, and how truly accomplished monks could, in some mysterious way, see and converse with these otherworldly beings. As a young monk I learned from my teachers about the thirty-one levels of sentient existence. In the Buddhist worldview, the saṃsāric universe is inhabited not only by physical beings like humans and animals but also by various classes of nonphysical, heavenly beings called *devas*, which exist above the human realm in a hierarchy of increasing refinement, and by classes of lower beings living in the subhuman realms of existence. But I had no idea how to see or communicate with any of these realms.

Everyone knew that Ajaan Mun was an expert in matters regarding ghosts, *devas*, *brahmas*, *yakkhas*, and *nāgas*. Although he rarely talked about the extent of his knowledge, he excelled in the ability to interact directly with all the classes of living beings that populate nonphysical realms existing beyond the range of ordinary human perception. He maintained daily contact with beings in the higher and lower celestial realms, spirits of the terrestrial realms, and even inhabitants of the hell realms—all of which are invisible to the human eye and inaudible to the human ear but can be clearly known by means of extrasensory perceptions like divine sight and divine hearing.

Being rather audacious by nature, I couldn't resist asking Ajaan Mun about his experiences with the *deva* worlds. I knew full well he'd give me a tongue lashing, but I decided I had to ask him regardless of the consequences. One night while I massaged his limbs, I summoned enough courage to pose my question, though I remained apprehensive about his response. But before I spoke up, as I considered how to

phrase my question, Ajaan Mun called out my name: “Jia! If you’ve got a question to ask, ask it! You’re so confused you can’t think straight!”

Despite the intense fear I felt at that moment, I blurted out, “What do celestial beings look like? What do they sound like? How can I see them too?”

Duly provoked, Ajaan Mun replied, “That’s none of your business! You’re always asking such trivial questions. Forget about the *devas* and their appearance. Your problems exist right there inside your own heart and mind, and the *devas* have nothing to do with that. Look at your own appearance! Use some wisdom to examine the hair, nails, teeth, and skin that form the outer shell of your body. See them clearly for what they really are. The Buddha examined and investigated himself until he attained supreme enlightenment before he turned his attention to teaching humans and celestial beings. But you’ve become infatuated with the visible trappings of the world around you even though you’re still too blind to know what you’re seeing. Be careful you don’t damage your eyes before you even open them!”

Right then and there, I bowed to Ajaan Mun’s superior wisdom.

He continued by exhorting me to focus all my attention on my meditation practice. Only then would the whole panorama of the Dhamma’s possibilities open up before me. After that, anything would be possible. As if to illustrate those possibilities, he related the story of a monk he befriended while living deep within the northern wilderness, a monk whose extrasensory powers were so acute that he could make himself small enough to pass through the eye of a keyhole. When he wished, he could vanish into thin air; he could travel through space like a bird; he could dive into the earth as if it were water and walk on water as if it were land; he could pass through walls and mountains as if they weren’t there. The virtues of his character and the power of his concentration were so great that he had mastered the ability to manipulate the four elements. However, he lived and died alone in the wilderness without ever exhibiting those supernatural powers publicly.

Noticing my eyes light up with amazement as he spoke, Ajaan Mun quickly reminded me not to join the legions of blind people who waste their lives seeking delight in things they don't know and can't see. Instead, he urged me to focus full attention on my potential as a human being. Ajaan Mun stressed that, of all forms of existence, a human birth is especially opportune because it offers the best chance to overcome suffering and its causes.

Shortly after I asked the question about celestial beings, Ajaan Mun assembled the whole community for a Dhamma talk in which he urged the monks under his care to be more diligent in their training. "Why is it that other meditators can develop calm and concentration, but you can't? Your bodies and minds are basically no different from theirs—only the attitude and the effort are different. You must understand that no matter how immense the goal may appear, it is possible to achieve it provided you are willing to make the necessary effort. Reflect for a moment on the importance of a human birth. Of all possible births, a human birth is the one in which success on the Buddha's path is truly possible—precisely because we have the capacity to gain insights into the pain and difficulty of human existence and use those insights to overcome the fundamental causes of suffering. So, learn to endure hardship and use that experience as a motivation to realize the truth. Don't let this opportunity slip through your grasp. The *devas* that come to see me enjoy lives of ease and comfort, never having reason to long for freedom from suffering. They tend to indulge in their own complacency. We human beings don't have that luxury. Human life is not a time for complacency. Where is your sense of urgency, your enthusiasm for the challenge? Wasting the incredible opportunity for liberation this human life gives you will bring you face to face with the Lord of Death and the gates of hell. Don't say I didn't warn you!

"In the training, fear and dread of the consequences of weakness and backsliding in meditation practice are attitudes that can arouse enthusiasm and resolve. Once these attitudes are awakened, they must

be diligently upheld. Even when guided by the best of intentions, the life of a human being is full of pain and uncertainty. If old mental habits are allowed to remain stubbornly entrenched, they can produce unintended consequences when your initial enthusiasm and resolve eventually lose momentum. For the same reason, it is possible to undertake the practice of Dhamma with intense energy and commitment only to later turn away with little to show for your intention to attain freedom from suffering.

“Under those circumstances, death carries the possibility of future suffering in infernal torment. If you squander this incredible opportunity for liberation, how will you feel when the Lord of Death makes his ghastly appearance? How will you feel when hell’s minions throw you scraps like they would a scrawny, stray dog? See the danger clearly and gather your courage to stand firm in the struggle. Whatever ground you have gained in your battle with the defiling forces inside the mind must be held without yielding an inch. Your commitment and enthusiasm for the Dhamma must be safeguarded and never be allowed to retreat.”

A shiver raced through my heart as I sat listening to Ajaan Mun’s powerful Dhamma.

Ajaan Mun used his very acute powers of extrasensory perception to ensure against his students thinking or acting carelessly and without restraint. He chastised many heedless monks who were unaware he was privy to their thoughts and actions. Tan Paan was one such case. Tan Paan had previously been a well-known boxer in the Suan Gulap boxing camp. Giving up his profession to ordain as a monk, he followed Ajaan Kongmaa from his home in Ubon Ratchathani province to Chanthaburi, where he began his monastic training at Sai Ngaam Forest Monastery. Under Ajaan Kongmaa’s guidance, he developed a strong faith in forest meditation practices. Aware of Ajaan Mun’s excel-

lent reputation as a revered meditation master, he eventually traveled to the North in search of the place where Ajaan Mun resided.

Inadvertently, he'd left some photographs of boxers posing in various stances in his shoulder bag. Carrying these photos, he traveled from Bangkok to Chiang Mai, searching for Ajaan Mun in the mountainous region where he lived. Finally arriving at Daeng Forest Monastery, he paid his respects to Ajaan Mun and explained his reasons for coming. Ajaan Mun accepted him as a disciple and gave him dependence.

Ajaan Mun must have investigated the new monk that night. The next morning, when all the monks gathered in preparation for alms-round, he straightaway addressed the new arrival: "You claimed you came here for the purpose of learning about Dhamma. Why then did you exhibit such dreadful behavior last night? As I sat in meditation, you appeared right in front of me and started shadow boxing, punching and kicking the air around me like a prizefighter. Luckily, you didn't hurt me. Such behavior is not normal for someone with good intentions. What's the matter with you? Speak up!"

Tan Paan stood frozen to the spot, his heart racing and his body shaking with fear. His mouth opened, but he couldn't utter a word. He offered no response to Ajaan Mun's inquiries. A monk who had befriended him then spoke up in his defense, telling Ajaan Mun that Tan Paan had been a professional boxer. Having become disillusioned with life in the ring, he decided to ordain and devote his energy to a more noble pursuit.

Ajaan Mun noticed that Tan Paan looked unwell, so he changed the subject, saying it was time to go on almsround. Later, he told the other monk to question him privately, since Tan Paan's fear of Ajaan Mun prevented him from speaking coherently. After the meal, the monk found an opportunity to question him in private. During their discussion, the two monks searched for a solution to this dilemma. Looking inside Tan Paan's shoulder bag, they discovered the pho-

tographs of boxers facing the camera with fists raised as if ready to strike. They immediately realized the implications: Ajaan Mun's fine-tuned extrasensory perception had picked up on these images. After looking at them, they were convinced that the pictures were the cause of Ajaan Mun's interrogation. Regretting his carelessness, Tan Paan decided to burn the offending images. After that, life with Ajaan Mun returned to normal, and the boxing issue never resurfaced.

During the time Ajaan Mun spent recuperating from malaria at Pehr Forest, one of his more senior disciples, Ajaan Oon Kalyāṇadhammo, accompanied by a group of high-ranking lay people, came to talk to him about the virtues of eating vegetarian food. In their attempt to educate Ajaan Mun on the subject, they extolled the benefits of eating vegetarian meals, implying by their praise of a meatless diet that wise and discerning people prefer to be vegetarian. Their claim that vegetarians are clean and pure, whereas meat-eaters are like demons and ghosts performing evil deeds, struck a raw nerve with Ajaan Mun.

As I sat there listening, I surmised that it wouldn't be long before Ajaan Mun rebuked them. When they paused their harangue for a moment, Ajaan Mun issued a scathing retort.

"Well, Oon! Is this what you want to talk about? Listen here! People don't become virtuous because of the type of food they eat, but rather because of how well they reflect on the real purpose of eating food, whether it be vegetables or meat. Unlike the mind, neither meat nor vegetables can differentiate between what is good and what is bad, between wholesome and unwholesome qualities. Only the Buddha's teachings in all their aspects are capable of cleansing and purifying the mind. Only the Dhamma can teach us how to root out the bad and cultivate the good, to abandon the unwholesome and promote the wholesome. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

“Have any of you tried to realize the supreme Dhamma? Do you think merely chewing on vegetables will enlighten your mind? What power does food have anyway? It goes in fresh at one end and comes out a pile of excrement at the other. And from that you derive purity of mind? Since when has filth become virtuous? Meanwhile, the mind is full of its own form of excrement: the excretions of greed, ill will, and delusion. Everyone’s mind is polluted by these defiling excretions. Why don’t you put concerns for your stomachs aside and look at what really matters? The Buddha, teacher of humans and *devas*, was preeminent in wisdom. And the Vinaya rules state clearly that monks are allowed to eat meat. Yet you seem to think your wisdom surpasses that of the Buddha, that you can do him one better.

“As monks, we eat whatever food has been offered to us by lay supporters. Whether the food is fine or coarse, appetizing or unappealing, we accept it with gratitude and eat it for the health and well-being of the body. The Buddha laid down several rules forbidding monks from asking for the food they preferred to eat. They were expected to eat just the kind of meals that ordinary people ate, which often contained meat.

“In your rush to judgment, you seem to have forgotten that Devadatta tried to claim the same exception you have. When trying to create a schism in the Sangha, he challenged the Buddha to declare that all his monks must be vegetarians. As you surely know, the Buddha refused and cited the Vinaya rule that monks may eat fish or meat if it is not from an animal whose meat is specifically forbidden, and as long as they had no reason to believe that the animal was slaughtered specifically for them.

“If it’s true that eating vegetation leads to enlightenment, then cows and water buffaloes are bound to attain enlightenment before any of us, because they’ve eaten nothing but grass since the day they were born. Their mouths and stomachs are full of greens from morning

till evening, and yet they can't stop chasing each other around, fornicating all over the grasslands. Where's the virtue in that?

"I'm not criticizing you for not eating meat—that's your choice to make. I don't take issue with that. But I do take issue with you for disparaging others who eat meat, suggesting they are demons and ghosts while praising yourselves as being superior to them because of your vegetarian diet. That thinking is arrogant and inappropriate. Search within your own minds first to find out if anything truly virtuous resides there. Realize that you have yet to attain a superior level of virtue and get to work ridding your minds of the sensual desire, aversion, and delusion that are blocking your path to freedom. Don't waste time and energy traveling around trying to convince people that they should become vegetarians.

"We human beings achieve goodness and virtue through the purity of our intentions and the quality of our behavior, not through our stomachs and what we put in them. The kind of food we eat is a minor issue. Stop exaggerating its importance. Whatever keeps us alive from one day to the next is fit for our needs. If you prefer to eat only vegetarian food, feel free to do so. But don't seek to drag others along with you. I, for one, am firmly established in Dhamma principles."

After Ajaan Mun finished speaking, Ajaan Oon and his lay supporters remained totally silent. They shot each other sideways glances, but no one dared contradict Ajaan Mun. They probably felt as though a bolt of lightning had struck them from a clear blue sky. Some, no doubt, understood the reasoning behind Ajaan Mun's retort. Others, to their misfortune, refused to accept the truth of what they heard.

Roots

I had attended on Ajaan Mun for six months at Pehr Forest when he received a letter from Venerable Chao Khun Dhammachedi, the abbot of Bodhisomphon Monastery and the chief administrative monk of the entire Northeast province of Udon Thani. In his letter, Chao Khun Dhammachedi, who had been a disciple of Ajaan Mun since his youth, invited him to return to Udon Thani and settle in that region for the benefit of his many disciples there. Ajaan Mun had been born in the Lao-speaking Northeast region of Thailand, of which Udon Thani is a part, and had spent many years wandering through its vast wilderness areas that border the Mekong River. Known colloquially as *Issan*, Thailand's Northeast region was the homeland of many forest monks of that era and the birthplace of the Thai Forest Tradition.

By the time he received Chao Khun Dhammachedi's letter, Ajaan Mun had been living and practicing in the northern province of Chiang Mai for over twelve years. Interestingly enough, a short time before the letter arrived, he had expressed a desire to return "home," citing a wish to make his teachings available to a larger group of forest monks. Due to the remoteness of the northern region, only the most intrepid monks had managed to find him there, and their numbers were fairly small compared to the many devoted disciples he had left behind when he moved to the North. Ajaan Mun felt the time was right to reconnect with them in order to consolidate the Thai Forest Sangha and ensure its longevity as a beacon of hope for future generations.

In the past, Ajaan Mun had received many such invitations from Chao Khun Dhammachedi, but he had never answered those letters or accepted the requests. He was still considering this new request when Chao Khun Dhammachedi suddenly showed up at Pehr Forest to invite him in person. He had traveled from Udon Thani to the isolated region where Ajaan Mun lived to speak with him personally and thus give Ajaan Mun a chance to answer all his previous letters.

Ajaan Mun smiled and said, "I've received all the letters you sent, but I didn't answer them because they were small and insignificant compared to your arrival here today. Now I am prepared to honor your request."

Chao Khun Dhammachedi then formally invited Ajaan Mun to return to Udon Thani, a province where he had once lived many years before. He informed Ajaan Mun that he was offering this invitation on behalf of his disciples there, who missed his inspirational presence. Having received Ajaan Mun's consent, Chao Khun Dhammachedi suggested they set a timetable for his trip to Udon Thani. Due to Ajaan Mun's age and declining health, they deemed it wise that he travel the long distance by train. After a brief discussion, they decided on a departure date at the beginning of May that year—1940.

Ajaan Mun laughed like a lovable and distinguished elder statesman after the agreement was reached. Despite his obvious physical frailty, in that moment his appearance had an ageless quality. A master of the unconditioned Dhamma, he radiated warmth and vitality, while his demeanor displayed sublime elegance and grace. By his very presence, Ajaan Mun lent a clear sense of spiritual purpose to every occasion. People from all walks of life were naturally attracted to his aura of compassion and wisdom, which beckoned them to approach him and engage in conversation. These distinctive qualities are what I call “aging gracefully.”

People who never attempt to practice meditation usually feel distraught when they recognize the telltale signs of aging and decline in their bodies and minds. They are unsettled when facing a loss of physical strength that leaves them unable to manage their own affairs. Those who pride themselves on their intellect are shocked when their sight and hearing decline and their mental faculties become dull and confused. Watching their physical and mental powers waste away frightens those who have spent their lives actively engaged in affairs of the world. For most people, aging is a cruel reminder of life’s natural limitations. No matter how well they take care of their physical and mental well-being, both body and mind are bound to let them down in the end and cause them great discomfort. Without spiritual well-being to uplift their hearts and minds, they face the inevitability of death with fear and trepidation.

Good health, a happy family life, wealth, and prosperity are the primary goals that most people pursue. Such mundane achievements are regarded by most as reliable sources of happiness. In their rush to find happiness in these ways, many people neglect to make a habit of giving generously, of adhering strictly to basic moral precepts, or of developing firm spiritual principles by practicing meditation. They fail to understand that these fundamental virtues are the true sources of happiness. Once old age sets in, the short-lived and hollow nature

of these commonplace forms of happiness can take the elderly by surprise. As they cling futilely to the ebb and flow of the memories and experiences that make up their disappearing past, they are left to regret many unfulfilled aims and ambitions. This predicament is what I call “mundane aging.”

In contrast, elderly practitioners who throughout their lives practice warmhearted generosity, maintain a high level of moral virtue, and develop their minds with meditation will amass a storehouse of inner worth sufficient to guide them along the noble path to the end of all suffering. The highest levels of Dhamma are within their reach. The noble virtues of such elderly practitioners are lauded and respected by *devas* and humans alike. They are no longer attached to their physical appearance or their intellectual capabilities; nor do they feel lonely and isolated from the world around them. Some elderly practitioners even succeed in completely extinguishing the fires of greed, aversion, and delusion during their lifetime and pass away in a state of perfect purity; like Ajaan Mun, for example. Their spiritual purity shines like a beacon of Dhamma, illuminating the hearts and minds of Buddhist practitioners the world over, while their loving kindness radiates in every direction, bringing peace and contentment to living beings of all realms of existence. This serenity is what I call “supramundane aging.”

Witnessing these supreme virtues in Ajaan Mun’s animated presence while he conversed with Chao Khun Dhammachedi in the manner of a loving father reconnecting with his long-lost son was a heartwarming sight. How rare it is in today’s world to witness such a close and harmonious companionship. Rejoicing at the wonderful scene unfolding before me, I suddenly realized that monks who are truly sons of the Buddha possess the power to pass on the true spirit of the Dhamma to their disciples.

The night we arrived at Chedi Luang Monastery, a large group of terrestrial *devas* paid a nocturnal visit to Ajaan Mun as he sat in meditation and pleaded with him to remain in the North for the benefit of the *deva* population there. Reluctant to see him leave, they insisted that *devas* from all realms experienced peace and contentment from the power of the loving kindness emanating from his presence. They were loath to see him leave, for they feared their sense of contentment would soon fade in his absence. Even their social harmony might be affected.

Ajaan Mun told them that, having accepted an invitation and given his word, he was obliged to leave as planned. As a monk, he was duty-bound to honor his promise and remain true to his word. If he went back on a promise, his virtue would soon evaporate and his worth as a monk would diminish. He made it clear to them that a monk must preserve his moral integrity at all costs.

Ajaan Mun remained at Chedi Luang Monastery for about one week. During that time, a large group of his local devotees came to try to persuade him to extend his stay in Chiang Mai for the benefit of the people living there. Repeating the response he had given to the terrestrial *devas*, he insisted that, having accepted the invitation to go to Udon Thani, he could not further delay his departure.

After remaining several more days at Chedi Luang Monastery, Ajaan Mun and I departed on our journey to the Northeast. As there was no direct railway line from Chiang Mai to Udon Thani in those days, our first stop would be Bangkok. Somdet Mahā Wirawong, one of the highest-ranking monks in the country, accompanied by other senior monks and a large group of lay supporters, escorted Ajaan Mun from the monastery to the train station. Also present on that occasion was a multitude of celestial *devas*. Ajaan Mun told me that the *devas* who came to escort him to the train station filled the sky around us in every direction. They hovered patiently in midair after he reached the station, waiting to send him off before returning to their respective

celestial realms. On the ground, a hectic scene unfolded as Ajaan Mun greeted the scores of monks and lay people who were gathered to see him off, while at the same time intentionally bestowing his blessing on all the *devas* who hovered above. In the end, he was not able to focus his undivided attention on the *devas* and give them his final blessing until after he'd finished speaking to all the people gathered there and the train had begun pulling away from the station.

Ajaan Mun felt compassion for the *devas* who held him in such high esteem. They showed the same signs of sadness and distress that human beings do when parting with a close relative. Some continued to hover behind the train as it sped down the tracks, until eventually Ajaan Mun felt it necessary to tell them to return to their celestial realms. They obeyed reluctantly, wondering if he would ever bless them with his presence again.

Upon our arrival in Bangkok, we took up residence at Boromniwat Monastery at the personal request of Somdet Mahā Wirawong. As usual, I served Ajaan Mun by arranging the lodgings to suit his needs: fetching water from the well for bathing, preparing his drinking water, sweeping his room, and taking care of his bowl and robes. During our stay in Bangkok, many people came to discuss the Dhamma with Ajaan Mun. Those discussions often centered on issues of moral virtue, which he addressed as follows:

“Practicing moral virtue requires keeping your actions and speech in good order. But before you can put your actions and speech in proper moral order, you must ascertain where the intentions behind these activities originate. They begin with the master of body and speech—the mind—which determines the moral quality of your behavior. Once you have established that the mind is the causal factor, you must learn the ways in which your intentions regulate action and speech so that these activities remain blameless in all circumstances and are thus a

source of well-being for yourself and others. In this manner, the mind supervises the performance of every activity you engage in to ensure that your actions produce virtuous results every time.

“Safeguarding morality requires the mind to be skilled at controlling its intentions. Lack of such control will result in a stained moral fabric that is patchy and full of holes. The key to moral integrity is mindful awareness of your thoughts, coupled with the recognition of which urges are appropriate to act on and which are not. Pay attention to how you express yourself by way of body, speech, and mind. By monitoring these three behaviors so that actions stay within the confines of what is morally acceptable, you can be confident that your behavior will always be exemplary and never damaging or offensive. Apart from such exemplary supervision of body, speech, and mind, it’s difficult to define what genuine moral virtue is, since it’s impossible to separate its practice from the mind of the person who maintains it. Morality and the mind are not distinct entities like a house and its owner, so it’s impossible to distinguish between moral virtue and the mental attitude that produces it. Further, the peace of mind resulting from the practice of moral precepts cannot be separated from the virtuous actions that created it. They are all bound up together. Those who understand these principles and practice accordingly remain content in all circumstances, for they never worry about lapses in their virtuous intentions.”

When he felt the time was appropriate, Ajaan Mun and I boarded the passenger train that traveled from Bangkok to Udon Thani. We stopped first at Korat, the capital of Nakhon Ratchasima, which was considered the gateway to the Lao-speaking northeastern region. Lay devotees who wanted to make his acquaintance had asked Ajaan Mun to briefly stop over there. We stayed for several days at Salawan Forest Monastery, where Ajaan Mun received numerous visitors who came to ask him questions about meditation practice. On one occasion, he answered questions from late morning until nightfall. A question I still

remember concerned Ajaan Mun's reason for journeying to Nakhon Ratchasima. Was his purpose to seek seclusion and strive for Nibbāna? His response was striking:

“Being neither hungry nor deluded, I'm not searching for anything to create suffering or cause myself trouble. Restless and hungry people are never content with what they have. They run around creating difficulties here and there, doing whatever they please without considering if their behavior is morally correct or not. In the end, that restless hunger consumes their hearts like a blazing fire. Deluded people are always searching for wealth, status, praise, and pleasure. The wise, however, have ceased searching. Everything is already perfect within their hearts, so why should they waste their time looking for more? Why should they eagerly grasp at shadows when they know perfectly well that shadows are illusory? The Four Noble Truths are real, and they display themselves constantly within the minds and bodies of all living beings. Having fully understood those truths, I myself am no longer deluded and thus have nothing further to seek. As long as I am still alive and people need my help, I will do my best to assist them—it's as simple as that.

“The Buddha taught that we are always subject to the law of cause and effect, which is to say the law of *kamma*. A cornerstone of his teachings says that where there is birth, there is also death; that actions bring consequences. In everyday life, even people who do not think carefully about actions and their consequences still try to produce the causes that bring them good and beneficial results. It is natural for people to want to better their situation and be successful in life.

“But regardless of what efforts they have made to be successful, at the time of death all their material gains are left behind. All things are like bubbles: They appear and disappear, impermanent and ever-changing. This truth applies not only to human beings but also to all material things in the world: Everything must go through a time of arising, a time of staying, and a time of passing away. In the case of

human beings, we perceive this truth in the process of birth, aging, sickness, and death.

“Ultimately, the varying results that you experience in life depend on the deeds you have done and the karmic consequences you have created by the quality of your actions. You have no recourse but to accept the outcomes dictated by your *kamma*. It’s for this very reason that living beings differ so widely in everything from the quality of their next life—with its potential for different bodily forms and emotional temperaments—to the degrees of pleasure and pain they experience in that subsequent lifetime. All such consequences form part of their own personal makeup, a personal destiny for which each of them must take full responsibility. They must learn to live with the good and the bad, the pleasant and the painful experiences that come their way, for no one has the power to disown the consequences of their actions.

“For this reason, you must pay careful attention to your conduct in everyday life. Be wary lest the intentions behind your behavior become the cause of misfortune and suffering now or in the future. Rather than simply acting on impulse, use discretion to safeguard your prospects of experiencing good fortune. Pay attention to what you are involving yourself in, what you are involving other people in, and how that involvement will affect you in the future. In the end, every action you take results in karmic consequences. Good and bad acts of body, speech, and mind bring their corresponding outcomes, and their cumulative effect will shape your spiritual welfare going forward. So be careful not to unwittingly create a store of unwanted results and a future of unwelcome suffering.”

Before long, Ajaan Mun and I left Nakhon Ratchasima and resumed our journey to Udon Thani. When our train pulled into the bustling station at Khon Kaen, some of Ajaan Mun’s relatives who lived in the city were waiting there to greet him. They wished to invite him to disembark and break his journey there. They pleaded with him to stay in Khon Kaen for a while out of compassion for his devotees.

Since he was determined to push on to his final destination, he was forced to disappoint his relatives on that occasion.

When Ajaan Mun and I finally arrived in Udon Thani, we stayed with Chao Khun Dhammachedi at Bodhisomphon Monastery in the provincial capital. People from the provinces of Nong Khai and Sakon Nakhon, in addition to those from Udon Thani, were waiting there to pay respects to him and listen to him expound on the Dhamma. Ajaan Mun soon felt hemmed in on all sides by the crowds of devotees that visited the city monastery, so after several days he asked Chao Khun Dhammachedi to take him to a charnel ground somewhere in the jungle surrounding Udon Thani. In his *dhutaṅga* travels, Ajaan Mun was always on the lookout for secluded sites where he could set up his umbrella-tent and camp out in solitude. He found that charnel grounds were places that naturally encouraged alertness and introspection.

After considering the options, Chao Khun Dhammachedi suggested a site near Non Niwet, which was located in a quiet and undisturbed forested area. It remained secluded because the locals, fearing the wrath of fierce ghosts, did not dare to approach the area. Non Niwet's charnel ground was a place where local villagers discarded the corpses of thieves and murderers, throwing their bodies on the barren earth to decay and attract scavenging animals. As a result, the site provoked fear and dread in the hearts of the villagers.

Ajaan Mun and I moved to Non Niwet, set up our umbrella-tents under the shade of the trees bordering the open, corpse-strewn clearing, and settled there to begin the rainy season retreat. Once each week during the retreat that year, Chao Khun Dhammachedi escorted a group of public officials and other lay supporters from the city to visit Ajaan Mun, listen to his evening Dhamma talks, and ask him questions. I recall one questioner who asked if the attraction felt between a married couple occurs as a result of previous relationships in past lives.

Ajaan Mun's reply set the record straight:

“It is very difficult to know with any certainty whether or not our love for this person or our relationship with that person has its roots in a mutual affinity developed over many lifetimes. For the most part, people fall in love and get married rather blindly. Feeling hungry, a person’s normal tendency is to reach out and grab some food to satisfy that hunger. They will eat whatever is available if it is sufficient for their day-to-day needs. The same can be said for past-life associations as well. Although such relationships are a common feature of worldly life, it’s not at all easy to find genuine cases of people who fall in love and get married simply due to a long-standing past-life association. That’s because the emotional defilements which cause people to fall in love don’t spare anyone’s blushes, and they certainly don’t wait patiently to give past-life affinities a chance to have a say in the matter first. All those defilements ask is that there is someone of the opposite sex who suits their fancy—that’s enough for passion to arise and impulsively grab a hold. Those defiling forces that cause people to fall in love can turn ordinary people into aggressive competitors who will battle to the bitter end without respect for modesty or moderation, no matter what the consequences might be. Even if they realize they’ve made a mistake, they still refuse to budge. Even the prospect of death cannot make them abandon their unrestrained passions. This self-indulgence is the root of the emotional defilements that cause people to fall in love. Displaying itself conspicuously in people’s hearts, such self-indulgence is extremely difficult to control.”

Chao Khun Dhammachedi had gone out of his way to invite Ajaan Mun to Udon Thani, trekking for days through the mountains and forests of Chiang Mai to personally present his request. He had always shown a keen interest in the way of practice and never tired of talking about Buddhist principles, no matter how long the conversation lasted. He was especially appreciative when the discussion concerned meditation practice. Because he felt great respect and affection for Ajaan Mun, he took a special interest in his welfare, constantly asking people

who had seen Ajaan Mun about the state of his health. In addition, he encouraged people to meet with Ajaan Mun and get to know him, even going so far as to accompany those who did not dare go alone.

The Dhamma talks that Ajaan Mun gave when monks visited him at Non Niwet were always inspiring and insightful. A typical talk went like this:

“Only a monk who is firm in his discipline and respectful of all the training rules can be considered a fully fledged monk. He does not transgress the minor training rules merely because he considers them to be insignificant. Such negligence by a monk indicates that he feels no shame about improper behavior—a fault which may eventually lead him to commit more serious transgressions. A virtuous monk strictly adheres to the monastic code of discipline to ensure that his behavior is not stained by unsightly blemishes. By doing so, he feels comfortable and confident living among his peers, without concern that his teacher or his fellow monks will have reason to be critical or reproachful.

“For the ‘inner monk’ in your heart to reach perfection, you must be steady and relentless in your efforts to attain each successive level of both *samādhi* and wisdom. The present moment is where your mind must be focused. With your mind anchored in the present, worries and concerns about the past and future drop away, and you cease to send your awareness out to chase after restive thoughts that are disconnected from the present moment. Grounding your mind in the present means being mindful of what is front and center in your awareness at each moment. Well-trained mindfulness has the ability to move effortlessly from moment to moment with the natural spontaneity and fluid momentum gained from cultivating heightened awareness through consistent practice. When you persevere in this practice, skillful mental states will arise naturally and continue to gain strength until they are powerful enough to scrub clean the stains and blemishes that the defilements have produced to pollute your mind.

“When a monk’s conduct is wholly above reproach, his mind will be gladdened by the Dhamma qualities that he cultivates. A monk should never appear dreary or sad. Nor should he appear undignified, shunning his fellow monks because a guilty conscience is troubling his heart. Such negligent behavior runs contrary to the discipline espoused by the Lord Buddha, whose internal conduct and external behavior were both impeccable. To follow in his footsteps, a monk has to muster the courage needed to forsake all forms of evil and instead engage only in good deeds. He must be a man of integrity who is honest with himself and his peers while being faithful to the Dhamma teachings and the Vinaya rules. His meditation practice will thus be supported by his exemplary behavior wherever he goes. The brightness of his mindfulness and wisdom will light the way to a mind suffused with the essence of Dhamma. He will never again find himself trapped in a dark web of delusion with no means of escape. These are the inner qualities cultivated by a true disciple of the Lord Buddha. Study them carefully and continually bear them in mind.”

During the dry season months following the rains retreat, Ajaan Mun preferred to hike along footpaths in the surrounding wilderness, seeking secluded locations where he could practice the way of Dhamma in the manner most suited to his temperament. When the time came for us to leave Non Niwet’s charnel ground and head to the wilderness, Ajaan Mun told me to prepare his belongings for the journey and await his instructions. His modest belongings were limited to the eight basic requisites of a monk: a lower robe, an upper robe, an outer robe, an alms bowl, a razor to shave his head, a needle for mending robes, a cloth water strainer, and a waist belt. I quickly packed all his gear with mine. We were now ready to go the moment he gave the command. Once he had, I slung his bowl over one shoulder and mine over the other and walked behind Ajaan Mun as he headed out. I never asked

him about our destination. I simply followed him with a mind fully focused on the path in front of me.

Although Ajaan Mun leaned on a wooden staff when he walked, his pace was remarkably fast. After all this time, I can still remember the sound of the quick rhythm of his footfalls on the earthen path. I felt as though I had to run to keep up with him nearly every time we were on the trail—he walked that quickly! That year we set up camp in the vicinity of Nong Naam Khem village, where we spent several months living and practicing in the village’s charnel ground. Ajaan Mun liked the location because it was surrounded by a cool, shady forest and situated close to an abundant supply of fresh water.

From the years 1939 to 1941, I was the monk who most often accompanied Ajaan Mun on his *dhutaṅga* wanderings, which enabled my meditation practice to steadily progress as a result of the teachings he gave me during each outing. I was fortunate to have learned many new things during these excursions. But the training was intense, which forced me to remain sharp-eyed and on the ball at every moment. I had to think on my feet and make quick, sensible decisions in his presence; otherwise, he wouldn’t allow me to stay with him. I observed Ajaan Mun attentively when we were together and listened carefully to his explanations, straining to make out his remarks when he spoke softly, careful not to miss any words of wisdom. Through his guidance, I was able to resolve many doubts I had about the Buddha’s teachings and their application, for which I’ve been forever grateful.

One evening, as I gently massaged Ajaan Mun’s tired limbs at Nong Naam Khem village, he told me a captivating story about an extraordinary vision that arose in his meditation while he was living deep in a mountainous region of Chiang Mai. The hour was 3:00 a.m., a time when his body elements were especially subtle. He had just awoken from sleep and was sitting calmly in meditation when he noticed that

his mind wanted to rest in complete tranquility. He quickly entered a state of deep *samādhi* and remained there for about two hours. As his mind withdrew from that state and began returning to normal waking consciousness, it paused at the level of access concentration. There he became aware of certain events unfolding in his mind's eye.

In his vision, a huge elephant walked up to Ajaan Mun and knelt before him, indicating it wanted him to mount. Ajaan Mun promptly climbed onto its back and sat straddling its neck. Once he was settled on the elephant, he noticed two other elephants following behind him, both carrying young monks on their backs. The elephants were also very large, though slightly smaller than the one Ajaan Mun was riding. The three elephants appeared very handsome and majestic, like royal elephants that possess human-like intelligence and intimately know their master's wishes. When the other two elephants reached him, he led them toward a mountain range that was visible in the distance.

Ajaan Mun felt the whole scene to be exceptionally majestic, as though he were escorting the two young monks away from the perpetual cycle of birth and death. Upon reaching the mountain range, his elephant led them all to the entrance of a cave that was recessed into a hillside a short distance up the mountain. As soon as they arrived, his elephant turned around, placing its rear toward the entrance. With Ajaan Mun still straddling its neck, it backed into the cave until its rear end touched the back wall. The other two elephants with the two young monks astride walked forward into the cave. Each then stood in place on opposite sides of Ajaan Mun's elephant, facing inward as his faced outward. Ajaan Mun then spoke to the two monks as if he were giving them his final, parting instructions:

"I have reached my final hour of birth in a human body. Perpetual existence in the conventional world will soon cease altogether for me. Never again shall I return to the world of living and dying. I want you both to continue your monastic lives and develop your minds to the fullest extent possible. Before long, you will follow in my footsteps and

depart this world in the same manner as I am preparing to do now. Escaping from the world of sentient existence, with its clinging attachments and its agonizing pain and suffering, is an extremely difficult task that demands unwavering commitment. You must pour every ounce of energy into the struggle to prevail in this noble endeavor—including facing the threshold of death—before you can expect to attain complete freedom from craving and delusion. Once freed, you will never again fear death, nor will you grasp again at future birth and experience further death as a result.

“Having completely transcended even the slightest attachments, I shall depart this world unfettered, much like a captive released from bondage. Unlike people whose desperate clinging to life causes them immense suffering at the time of death, I have no regrets whatsoever about letting go of sentient existence for good. Therefore, you should not mourn my passing, for nothing good will come of it. Such grief merely promotes an increase of defilements in the mind, which the wise have never encouraged.”

When he finished speaking, Ajaan Mun told the two young monks to back their elephants out of the cave. Both elephants had been standing perfectly still, one on either side, as though they too were listening to Ajaan Mun’s parting words and mourning his imminent departure. In that moment, all three elephants resembled real, living animals, rather than visual images. At his command, the elephants carrying the young monks slowly backed out of the cave, all the while facing Ajaan Mun with their regally dignified demeanors. Then, as Ajaan Mun sat astride its neck, his elephant began to bore its hindquarters into the cave wall to its rear. When half of the elephant’s body had penetrated the wall of the cave, Ajaan Mun’s mind began to withdraw from *samādhi*, bringing an end to the vision.

Having never experienced such an unusual vision before, Ajaan Mun analyzed it and understood its meaning to be twofold. Firstly, when he died, two young monks would attain full enlightenment

after his demise, though he didn't specify who they were. Secondly, the vision demonstrated the abiding importance of both *samatha* and *vipassanā* meditation. The *samatha* approach to meditation encompasses practices, like the stages of *samādhi*, that aim to achieve mental calm and concentration. *Vipassanā* focuses on practices, such as body contemplation, that foster insight into the true nature of suffering and its causes. Ajaan Mun clearly understood the benefits that an Arahant gains from practicing both of these modes of meditation from the time he attains enlightenment until the time of his death. During that period of his life, he must rely on *samatha* and *vipassanā* to be his "Dhamma abodes." These abodes are experienced as spheres of blissful abiding here and now that help to ease the tension that occurs between the liberated mind and the five mundane aggregates—both of which remain interdependent until the moment when the mundane aggregates and the transcendent mind go their separate ways at the time of death. After an Arahant passes away, *samatha* and *vipassanā* cease to function and disappear like all other conditioned phenomena.

Ajaan Mun was heartened to know that two young monks would realize the highest Dhamma around the time of his death, either just before or soon after. He said it was very strange that, in his parting instructions to them, he spoke about his own impending death as though his time had already come.

When Ajaan Mun finished speaking, he remained silent. I continued waiting expectantly, eager to hear him reveal the names of those two young monks. But he didn't say another word.

Of all the great meditation monks I've lived and practiced with, I admired and respected Ajaan Mun the most. He was, without question, the most outstanding teacher I had ever met. Living and studying under his guidance for many years, I never saw him act contrary to the Dhamma or the Vinaya. His behavior was in complete harmony with

the Buddha's teachings and it never caused his students to doubt him. From my observations, he faithfully kept to the straight and narrow path of those noble disciples who practice rightly and truly. He never strayed from that path in the slightest.

When Ajaan Mun described the beginning stages of his practice, he spoke about his effort to develop mindfulness and his preference for living alone. When he lived with other monks, their social conduct could hinder his meditation progress. When living on his own, he found that all his activities were infused with mindfulness and wisdom, which enabled his mind to fully engage in meditation practice all the time.

Early in his monastic career, Ajaan Mun resolved never to return to this world of continued death and rebirth. No matter how much time and effort were required, he was determined to gain release from suffering in this lifetime and never be born again. He regarded his birth in the world of human affairs as a cause for dismay. When he saw the effects of birth, aging, sickness, and death experienced by all classes of living beings, it only increased his dismay and strengthened his motivation to seek complete freedom from suffering before he died. Wherever he lived, he resolved to diligently practice the Buddha's teachings. He desired nothing that might delay his release from suffering.

Ajaan Mun spent years trekking alone through forests and mountains in search of secluded places that offered body and mind a calm, quiet environment in which to practice meditation. For the most part, he lived entirely outdoors at the mercy of the elements and the vagaries of the weather. His daily life was full of forests and mountains, rivers and streams, caves, overhanging cliffs, and dangerous wild animals. Normally, he didn't remain in the same place for more than a single rains retreat. When the rainy season ended, he wandered peacefully through wilderness areas like a bird burdened only by its wings, free to fly wherever it wished. Ajaan Mun preferred living in the wilderness because the environment was not only spiritually challenging but also

free from worldly distractions. Camped in the wilds, he could push his practice to the limit without being sidetracked by less important issues. Wherever he cast his glance, whatever he contemplated, his ultimate purpose was at the forefront, fostering a clear sense of direction in his meditation.

Through his own heroic efforts, Ajaan Mun became keenly aware of the practical value that *dhutaṅga* observances had for practicing monks. He clearly understood that each of these practices is a very effective means of closing off the outlets through which a monk's mental defilements tend to flow. Ajaan Mun could see that each ascetic practice promoted specific virtuous qualities, while its observance reminded a monk not to carelessly think in ways that contradicted the very virtue he was trying to develop. Always on guard, a dedicated *dhutaṅga* monk immediately became aware of any lapses in judgment and resolved to remedy those failures in the future.

In addition to teaching the *dhutaṅgas* to his students, Ajaan Mun taught a variety of meditation methods, all of which were completely in line with the practical teachings of the Buddha. For example, he taught the recollection of the Buddha and mindfulness of breathing as a means of producing peace and tranquility in the heart. He taught the Four Foundations of Mindfulness and body contemplation for developing wisdom. He instructed his disciples to probe deeply to discover the truth about birth, aging, sickness, and death, showing them how to uproot the real causes of suffering from their minds. And he guided them every step of the way with precise instructions and timely advice. Because of his compassionate efforts, many monks of his lineage were able to attain an extraordinary level of success in their meditation.

Ajaan Mun taught his disciples that if they aimed to become firmly established in the practice they must be willing to put everything on the line to achieve that goal—both their bodies and their minds. Everything except their mindful focus must be sacrificed for the sake of attaining the ultimate Dhamma. Even their lives should not be exempt-

ed. Whatever happened, nature should be allowed to take its course. Everyone who is born must die—nothing is gained from trying to resist that inevitability. Truth cannot be found by denying the natural order of things. Instead, a monk must be resolute and brave in the face of death. Ajaan Mun was particularly vocal when encouraging his disciples to live in isolated wilderness areas teeming with wild animals, places where they came face to face with challenges that would motivate them to discover the virtues of meditation for themselves. The demanding nature of such environments encouraged serious practitioners to reflect inwardly and find within themselves a safe refuge—an inner space where external perils could not threaten their mental equilibrium.

Discovering this inner refuge required great courage, skill, and strength of mind. For Ajaan Mun, regularly maintaining that attitude meant pursuing the life of a homeless wanderer intent on renunciation and solitude. Having renounced the world and gone forth from home, he wore robes made from discarded cloth, depended on alms for food, and took the forest as his dwelling place. From the day he first ordained until the last day of his life, his entire lifestyle and the example he set for his disciples were modeled on the principles of fewness of wishes and contentment with little.

Ajaan Mun's lifestyle personified contentment with the absolute minimum. When Ajaan Mun walked to a village to collect food offerings, he didn't harbor expectations about what kind of food he would receive, nor did he verbally solicit alms from the inhabitants. If he received generous offerings of food, he felt fortunate. If he received little food, or occasionally no food, that was fine too. His hunger never conflicted with the Dhamma in his heart. For most of Ajaan Mun's adult life, his diet consisted of rice and water, with small pieces of fish and some forest greens thrown in to add flavor. Afternoon refreshments like coffee and sugar were largely unavailable. In his old age, Ajaan Mun became a highly respected and famous senior monk, one

who deserved the best food and the most comfortable lodgings. But a lifestyle of ease did not suit his temperament. Instead, he insisted on camping in remote wilderness areas where the local farmers, who were themselves very poor, shared with him what little they could grow on small plots of sloping mountain land.

Ajaan Mun found cloth to make and mend his robes in places where people threw away bits of old clothing: along the roadside, in refuse heaps, or at cremation sites. He picked up pieces of cloth that were soiled, wrinkled, and faded. Although they might appear tattered, when sewn together they produced a robe that was just enough to cover his body and protect it from the elements. He often slept on the ground, making his bedding of gathered leaves and his pillow of a folded robe. Using his outer robe for a blanket and the shade of a tree for a roof, he relied on this simple shelter wherever he traveled.

Ajaan Mun used Dhamma's curative powers as his medical remedy of choice. Occasionally, he used the medicinal fruits, leaves, or tubers which grew wild in the forest, when they were made available to him. He took these traditional medicines either pickled in fermented cow's urine or boiled in plain water as a concoction. By caring for himself in these ways, he remained healthy in body and mind.

Ajaan Mun's mind was powerful and all-encompassing, while his behavior was humble and unassuming. He believed in sacrificing his own interests to help others in need. When he received gifts of monks' requisites from lay supporters, he invariably left those articles behind when he departed so that other monks and novices could make use of them. He never hoped to gain more, nor did he fear going without. He neither sought pleasant experiences nor shied away from painful ones. Neither praise nor criticism aroused strong feelings. The beliefs and opinions that people expressed about him did not affect his serene state of mind. His mind was aware of everything but attached to nothing. The sum of his wanting was next to nothing. The objects of his dispassion were nearly everything.

Ajaan Mun possessed a mastery of psychic skills concerning all aspects of sentient phenomena. Over the years, his proficiency grew to such an extent that it seemed to have no limits. Because the monks living with him were aware of his extraordinary abilities, they took extra precautions to make sure they always remained mindfully self-controlled. They couldn't afford to let their minds wander carelessly lest their errant thoughts become the subject of a Dhamma talk at the evening meeting.

Giving helpful advice to nonphysical beings from many diverse realms of existence was a responsibility that Ajaan Mun continued to take very seriously right up to the time of his death. He was in constant communication with such beings wherever he lived, though those interactions occurred most often in the mountainous regions of the North. During the years that he lived in those remote wilderness areas, far from human habitation, one group or another visited him almost every night. Aware that living beings throughout the sentient universe share a common heritage of birth, aging, sickness, and death, and a universal desire to avoid suffering and gain happiness, Ajaan Mun understood the benefit they received from hearing teachings on Dhamma as a means of fulfilling their spiritual potential and attaining enduring happiness. Because he possessed the eye of wisdom, he made no fundamental distinction between the hearts of people and the hearts of *devas*. He did, however, tailor his teaching to fit their individual circumstances and levels of understanding.

Ajaan Mun could know things both apparent and hidden, including knowledge of the past and future. Although he displayed this ability on numerous occasions, his actions never concealed ulterior or worldly motives. His spoken words were derived from his own knowledge and insights and expressed to make people reflect on their essential meaning. Ajaan Mun's eloquent discourses clarified the principles of Dhamma in a way that left no room for doubt, which made listening to his talks an inspiring learning experience. His teach-

ings were fresh and invigorating, never stale or boring. He spoke of common, everyday things—things we saw and heard all the time but never paid close attention to until he mentioned them. His teachings employed a full range of expression: sometimes casual, sometimes serious, and sometimes forceful when stressing specific points. He could analyze the disparate aspects of the Buddha's teachings and articulate them in a way that deeply affected his audience.

I myself asked him questions about meditation problems that I couldn't solve on my own, and I always benefited from the wisdom of his answers. I was impressed by the fact that Ajaan Mun's advice never deviated from the path of practice taught by the Lord Buddha. For this reason, I became absolutely convinced that Ajaan Mun was one of the Lord Buddha's present-day Arahant disciples. Courageous and masterful in the way he lived his life, he was never in danger of succumbing to the power of greed, hatred, or delusion. Even in old age, when he could have been expected to rest and take it easy because he no longer needed to exert himself in meditation practice, he still did as much walking meditation as he always had; so much, in fact, that the younger monks struggled to match his exertions. Never losing hope in his students' potential for enlightenment, Ajaan Mun fulfilled his teaching obligations with great compassion. His powerful words reflected his resolute character, and he invariably used the rhetoric of a warrior to inspire courage in his disciples. He delivered his talks with the force of his convictions, aiming to arouse in his monks the strength and tenacity needed to completely transcend craving in all its guises. He never compromised his principles or made allowances for his students' shortcomings. Instead, he relentlessly pushed his disciples toward the threshold of the deathless Dhamma.

Seeds

Ajaan Mun and I spent two consecutive rains retreats at Non Niwet Monastery in Udon Thani. Following the second retreat, a delegation of lay devotees from neighboring Sakon Nakhon province came to visit Ajaan Mun. After exchanging heartfelt greetings, they expressed a fervent wish that Ajaan Mun consider moving to Sakon Nakhon to take up residence in the province for the spiritual benefit of the Buddhist faithful there. When he agreed, the delighted visitors quickly set about making travel arrangements. As usual, I accompanied him on the journey. By that time, I'd been Ajaan Mun's personal attendant for two full years. Upon our arrival at Sakon Nakhon in late 1941, Ajaan Mun and I were escorted to Suddhawat Monastery in the provincial capital. Soon, crowds of monks and laity were packing the Dhamma hall, eager to pay their respects and seek his advice.

Several days after we arrived at Suddhawat Monastery, Ajaan Mun received a correspondence from his friend and mentor, Ajaan Sao Kantasilo, who wrote asking Ajaan Mun to visit him in Ubon Ratchathani province because he had fallen gravely ill. Reluctant to make the long trek to Ubon himself, Ajaan Mun entrusted me to go on his behalf to attend to Ajaan Sao's needs and nurse him back to good health. I was to inform Ajaan Sao that, with all due respect, Ajaan Mun had sent me to be his attendant. When Ajaan Mun instructed me to take special care of Ajaan Sao, he stressed that even if his symptoms abated, I was not to trust that he was cured. He reminded me that Ajaan Sao would be eighty-two years old soon, and his health had been on the decline for some time.

I immediately took off on foot for Ubon. With my umbrella-tent slung over one shoulder and my bowl hanging from the other, I trekked south along forest tracks that passed through mountain ranges thick with dense foliage, where small settlements were often a day's walk apart. After two weeks of hiking, I finally arrived at Ubon and found Ajaan Sao recuperating at Dawn Taat Monastery in the Piboon Mangsahaan district. The cause of Ajaan Sao's symptoms was a severe allergic reaction. While Ajaan Sao sat meditating under a large rubber tree one afternoon, a hawk happened to swoop down through the overhead branches to snatch its prey. By some twist of fate, the hawk's wing collided with a beehive suspended from a branch high up in the tree. Suddenly dislodged, the hive crashed to the ground and split open a few feet from where Ajaan Sao sat. The agitated bees swarmed his body and stung him repeatedly. While under attack from all directions, Ajaan Sao managed to crawl under a nearby mosquito net, after which the bees gradually dispersed. It was a reaction to the bee stings that had caused Ajaan Sao's acute condition.

When I arrived, Ajaan Sao's skin appeared flushed, his throat and tongue were swollen, and he had difficulty breathing. Additionally, he suffered bouts of dizziness and felt unsteady on his feet. I immediately

went to work trying to relieve the most severe symptoms, but despite my efforts his condition only seemed to worsen. Using my fingernails, I scraped out a few stingers that remained embedded in his skin. To relieve the persistent redness, pain, and swelling, I crushed handfuls of soothing forest herbs and applied them to his body as a poultice to reduce the inflammation. After several days, the swelling and the skin discoloration subsided, and I eventually managed to nurse Ajaan Sao back to health.

Dawn Taat Monastery was a fifty-acre plot of land situated in the middle of the Moon River. The island monastery was the first monastery built by Ajaan Sao. Local farmers had previously planted rice on the island's low-lying land near the water's edge but had left the hilly, forested interior alone. Impressed by the island's seclusion, Ajaan Sao crossed over and began meditating on the island's forested hills. Before long, the villagers who supported him with alms food had developed such strong faith in Ajaan Sao that they offered him their low-lying fields as a site to build a monastery, thus turning the whole island into a residence for monks.

Originally, the local villagers had called the island Dawn Taak, or Leech Island, because the damp forest floor was teeming with leeches. The villagers were bitten by hordes of leeches whenever they entered the forest to look for wild vegetables and medicinal plants. After Ajaan Sao took up residence on the island, however, the locals changed its name slightly to Dawn Taat—*taat* meaning “holy relic.”

Ajaan Sao told me that before arriving at Dawn Taat, he had wandered continuously from place to place, spending nights camping in rural rice fields and pastures, sometimes taking shelter inside rice barns or under large, shady trees. Before the sun set below the horizon each day, he would have already found a place to hang his umbrella-tent and spend the night. When he first reached the area around Dawn Taat, he camped under a large *chor* tree near Dawn Phanchaat village.

The monks accompanying him set up their umbrella-tents in a woodland area nearby.

Ajaan Sao told me a strange story about the large flock of crows that lived in the branches of that *chor* tree. The whole flock exhibited abnormal behavior. They flew over and around the big tree where he camped all day, making raucous cawing sounds from dawn to dusk. The local villagers didn't dare take any action against them because they believed that the crows belonged to the guardian spirit that lived in the tree. They were terrified that, if they harmed the crows, the powerful spirit might curse them and cause them misfortune. For his part, Ajaan Sao saw the crows as companions in birth, aging, sickness, and death. Out of compassion, he began feeding them the leftover food from his alms bowl every morning. Soon, the crows became especially attached to him.

Each morning as Ajaan Sao left his campsite under the tree and began his walk to the village for alms, he called out to them, "Dear lovesick crows! Let's go on almsround together! Let's go help others who are suffering. Life on earth is difficult for humans and animals alike." Upon hearing this call to action, the flock of crows flew out from the *chor* tree and soared above Ajaan Sao while he walked to the village. The airborne procession of crows was a remarkable sight. Flying and cawing loudly in advance of Ajaan Sao, they heralded his approach to the village every morning. At first, people were astounded. They couldn't believe their eyes. They had vested the guardian spirit of the *chor* tree with so much power, only to realize that their belief in it had been misguided. At the same time, their faith in Ajaan Sao increased until it became unshakeable. Before Ajaan Sao showed up, the villagers had taken refuge in the guardian spirit in the *chor* tree for generations. From then on, however, they instead took the power of the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha as their refuge.

The villagers' faith was so sincere that they brought their small children outside and lined them up with everyone else to bow down

before Ajaan Sao as he walked past their homes on his morning alms-round. Ajaan Sao was always kind. Loving kindness radiated from him wherever he went. He never scolded the villagers or criticized them for their beliefs. Instead, he possessed many clever techniques for teaching Dhamma lessons to the local inhabitants. Through the power of his inexhaustible loving kindness, Ajaan Sao remained a steadfast refuge for living beings—animals, humans, and *devas* alike.

As soon as Ajaan Sao had fully recovered from the effects of the bee stings and regained his strength, he crossed the Mekong River and traveled on foot to the Laotian village of Li Phi to preside over a ceremony dedicating merit to his deceased preceptor, Tan Dae Dang. Ajaan Sao had wandered *dhutaṅga* in the southern provinces of Laos every year for decades. He usually lived and practiced in the Laotian province of Jumpasak near the village of Li Phi on the banks of the Mekong River during the cold and hot seasons, then returned to Dawn Taat Monastery for the rainy season retreat each year.

Ajaan Sao decided to travel to Laos by himself on that occasion. I was to join him there a little while later. Initially, I felt reluctant to accompany him to Jumpasak because I already had my mind set on returning to Sakon Nakhon to rejoin Ajaan Mun. But I couldn't stop thinking about the instructions Ajaan Mun gave me before I left: "Jia!... Take special care of Ajaan Sao for me, alright? Even if his symptoms improve and he feels better, be cautious. Don't trust the improvement in his health."

When Ajaan Sao was well on his way to Jumpasak in Laos, I gathered together three monks, a novice, and a white-robed postulant from Dawn Taat Monastery, and together we set off in pursuit of Ajaan Sao. We hiked first along the Mekong River toward the Suwan Kiri mountains, which are situated at the mouth of the Moon River where it flows into the Mekong.

We spent the first night camped in the Suwan Kiri mountains. The next day a lay supporter invited our group to stay at one of his properties near the Mekong River. His land contained a huge forest where wild animals like elephants, tigers, and bears roamed freely. Its waters teemed with what the locals called freshwater dolphins, which made low-pitched crying sounds, similar to a cow's mooing. The villagers constructed tiger traps from the branches and trunks of the large rubber trees which grew tall throughout the forest. The traps were designed so that a tiger passing through them would dislodge a low-lying branch, causing a heavy tree trunk to crash down on its back and kill it. Not knowing what a tiger trap looked like, I pushed a branch to the side as our group passed through the dense foliage, causing a log to fall and stab me in the leg. The pain was excruciating. I rubbed the wound with medicinal oil for hours before I could walk again.

After camping only briefly in that forest, we resumed our journey to meet Ajaan Sao at Jumpasak. As our group trekked along the west bank of the Mekong River, a local tradesman who was also headed to Jumpasak invited us to join him for a ride on his paddleboat. The rains had been heavier than usual that year, and the Mekong had swollen and overflowed its banks. The river's flow was so strong and its surface so choppy that it threatened to capsize our boat. Because the boat was propelled by the swiftness of that rough current, it was difficult to control. As it bounced up and down on the rough waves, the boat suddenly plunged into the gaping mouth of a large whirlpool, startling the boatman, who completely lost control of the oars.

The boat was immediately drawn into the rotating mass of water where it spun wildly around the opening at least twenty times, while we desperately held on to the gunnels for our very lives. Had it been a larger boat, like a barge, it probably would have gone around once and then moved on. But ours was a small paddleboat, which was nearly impossible to control in a strong, swirling current. Nevertheless, from my childhood experience with boats I instinctively knew what to do. I

yelled at the boatman to paddle hard against the flow of the whirling water and aim for the outer edge of the opening. I added my powerful stroke to help. With everyone's assistance, we prevented the boat from filling with water and just managed to escape without harm. We might have died if the boat had been drawn into the whirlpool's center.

We rode the Mekong's raging current without further incident until we reached our destination. After we disembarked, I led the monks to Ummaat Monastery in Jumpasak, hoping to catch up with Ajaan Sao there. But we arrived too late. He was already out on the forest trails, hiking to Li Phi Falls in the very south of Laos.

Our group remained at Ummaat Monastery for a short while, then hiked into the forest again. We found a secluded location to meditate near Sa-hua Creek, about six miles from the center of Jumpasak town, and remained there for the following six weeks. The small village settlement near Sa-hua Creek had only eighteen houses. During our sojourn there, we ate nothing but local village food. Because I stayed there for the purpose of Dhamma, the villagers' rough diet wasn't a problem for me. They offered us mostly sticky rice and small, boiled rice-field crabs, which I had difficulty eating because they were so dry and acidic.

We were meditating peacefully at our Sa-hua Creek campsite one morning when a messenger arrived to deliver a letter from Ajaan Mao of Ummaat Monastery stating that Ajaan Sao was seriously ill. We were informed that Ajaan Sao was traveling back from southern Laos on a boat that was expected to dock at Jumpasak around 5:00 p.m. that day. Ajaan Mao requested that Ajaan Sao's nephew Tan Peng and I be present at the riverside landing to receive Ajaan Sao and help attend to his needs. We set off without delay and arrived at the pier just in time.

When Ajaan Sao's boat arrived at the dock, Tan Peng and I saw immediately that he was in critical condition. We arranged for a stretcher to carry him to Ummaat Monastery, where we laid him down to rest inside the wood-framed ordination hall. As Ajaan Sao lay there breathing

softly, he signaled to us with his hands, indicating that he wanted us to help him up so he could bow down to the Buddha statue. We gently maneuvered his weak, frail body into a bowing posture, with knees on the floor and back erect. He bowed to the Buddha and rose slowly but gracefully two times.

After completing his third bow, I noticed that he remained prostrate with his forehead touching the floor for an unusually long time. Approaching him cautiously, I gently checked his wrist and could not detect even the faintest pulse. Seeing this, the other monks present in the hall began exclaiming, “Ajaan Sao is dead! Ajaan Sao died!” I quickly reprimanded them. “Ajaan Sao has not yet died! He is in a deep state of *samādhi*. Stay quiet and don’t interfere!”

Since Ajaan Sao continued to stay prostrate on the floor facing the Buddha statue, I decided to slowly move his body to a reclining posture. Because he was on the brink of death, moving his limp, lifeless body required skill and concentration. As I respectfully tried to reposition Ajaan Sao’s body, I noticed the monks and novices seated behind us sobbing and weeping. I told them sharply to leave the hall and wait quietly outside. Once I’d managed to maneuver Ajaan Sao’s body into a supine position, he took three prolonged breaths and passed away peacefully. The time was 5:30 p.m. on the third day of February, 1942. Ajaan Sao was eighty-two years old.

Immediately after Ajaan Sao’s passing, I began putting all my energy into the preparations for his cremation. First, I did everything I could think of that required immediate attention. I telegraphed Mr. Wichit, a student of Ajaan Sao in Ubon Ratchathani, to give him the sad news. I then found the large wooden mortar that I would use to break up charcoal. That done, I searched for a sizable log to use as a pestle. With the pestle in hand, I broke large chunks of charcoal into small pieces and placed the charcoal lumps at the bottom of Ajaan Sao’s coffin where they would soak up the corpse’s decomposition fluids, thus preventing foul odors. This method was the standard practice

before modern embalming techniques took its place. When pounding the large chunks, it's important to use high-quality charcoal to make sure that the smaller pieces don't crumble into dust while being broken up. I spread two large sacks of crushed charcoal inside the coffin to a depth of about ten inches. By the time I'd finished, I was completely covered in black soot, so I jumped in the river to wash up.

After lining the coffin with charcoal, I draped a clean white cloth over Ajaan Sao's body. Once the charcoal was suitably spread and the white cloth properly arranged, I gingerly placed Ajaan Sao's body inside the coffin. As a final act of service, with a heart full of devotion, I got down on my knees and bowed to his coffin three times. I then silently asked his forgiveness for any offence I might have committed against him in thought, word, or deed—by way of greed, aversion, or delusion—either intentionally or unintentionally.

To give his devotees in Jumpasak the opportunity to pay their final respects, I left Ajaan Sao's body on display in the ordination hall at Ummaat Monastery for several days. At the earliest suitable occasion, I arranged to have his coffin placed on a boat and ferried across the Mekong to the Thai side of the river. When the boat reached Thailand, a large gathering of senior monks and lay devotees from Ubon Ratchathani were waiting at the dock with a motorized vehicle to carry Ajaan Sao's body back to the monastery in Ubon where it would be cremated.

Shortly after I placed Ajaan Sao's body on the ferryboat, I left Jumpasak on foot. I trekked along the Laotian side of the Mekong before crossing over into Thailand at Amnat Charoen province. In Amnat Charoen, I stayed for a while with Ajaan Sao's most senior disciple, Ajaan Tong, then started my return trip to Sakon Nakhon province, hoping to rejoin Ajaan Mun in time for the beginning of the next rains retreat.

During the time I was away from him, Ajaan Mun had led his monks and novices from Suddhawat Monastery into the forests on the eastern slopes of the Phuphaan mountain range. They first set up camp near Naa Srinuan village. Later the whole group hiked further into the wilderness, staying for a while near Namon village, before they finally settled in a small forest monastery near the village of Baan Khok. The location suited Ajaan Mun's temperament perfectly as it was very quiet and secluded both day and night. He lived there free of illness, experiencing no recurrence of malaria and its painful symptoms.

As soon as I learned of Ajaan Mun's whereabouts, I set off immediately for Baan Khok village in Sakon Nakhon province, which was located about 180 miles north of Ubon following regional foot trails. I hiked at a steady pace along earthen paths that passed through rough, hilly terrain, stopping in the evening to camp in remote cremation grounds, wide-open fields, haystacks, forest dens, or under overhanging cliffs and outcrops. Wherever I ended up at nightfall, that's where I spent the night. My two years of living in the wilderness with Ajaan Mun had prepared me to cope with the hardships of trekking through this vast expanse of jungle. Even the crudeness of the village food offerings no longer bothered me. I felt I was ready to die on the trail if need be.

As I trekked over mountains and across valleys following in the footsteps of the old *dhutaṅga* masters, my heart took courage from reflecting on Ajaan Sao and the inspiration his life provided to an aspirant on the Buddha's noble path. The meditative lifestyle of trekking through wilderness areas and observing the ascetic *dhutaṅga* practices had been revived in the modern era largely by the efforts of Ajaan Sao Kantasīlo. He set the example that Ajaan Mun would follow and pass on to his disciples. Ajaan Sao's *dhutaṅga* wanderings had taken him through all the wilderness areas on both sides of the Mekong River—Lao and Thai.

When he was younger, Ajaan Sao hiked continuously as a way of life. With no particular destination in mind, he simply accepted whatever life's changing circumstances provided. Even when his journey did have a destination, he never knew what would be waiting for him when he arrived. In either case, he found very little in the way of comfort wherever he traveled. At the close of each day, he settled for any shelter that was available: the base of a tree, an overhanging cliff, or a farmer's dilapidated rice barn. When no proper shelter presented itself, he simply lay down out in the open air. Early every morning, he slung his alms bowl over one shoulder and walked through the vacant landscape to the nearest village settlement in search of food for the day. The rations he received were usually meager, though enough to sustain his wandering lifestyle. Occasionally, however, he received nothing at all and had to continue his journey on an empty stomach. As a rule, he practiced meditation in conditions of perpetual hunger and hardship. With only his three principal robes to clothe him, he struggled to keep warm in the cold season and dry in the rainy season. Taxing his body severely, Ajaan Sao stoically carried on with his meditation because he wanted to reach the end of the Buddha's path to freedom from suffering. Over time, his years of painful practice transformed his very being into a noble presence of perfect happiness.

Hiking and practicing the *dhutaṅga* way alone for once, I resolved to take Ajaan Sao's conduct as my standard. Since I experienced no external disturbances to distract me from my purpose, I saw this journey as an ideal opportunity to put all my strength and energy into meditation. The Buddha often described the virtues of monks wandering into the depths of forests and mountains, seeking secluded locations to support them in the development of meditation for the realization of the truth of his teachings. After all, the Buddha himself was born in a forest and attained enlightenment in a forest. He taught the Dhamma in forest environments and passed away under two magnificent *sal* trees. The Buddha frequently dwelt in the wilderness areas

of northern India, both during his spiritual quest and after his supreme enlightenment. Before he passed away, he left explicit instructions that preceptors who ordain new monks must advise them on the advantages of residing in the forest and meditating at the base of a tree. In accordance with those instructions, forest Dhamma practices continue to be faithfully observed to this day.

The Buddha once proclaimed, “Bhikkhus! Cut back the jungle, but don’t cut down the trees. The dangers you face come from the jungle. Once you’ve cut back the jungle, you will have tamed the wilderness.”

Some of the monks in attendance were perplexed by the Buddha’s statement. “Cut back the jungle, but don’t cut down the trees? What does the Buddha mean by that?” In fact, the Buddha was using the jungle as an analogy for the mind with its prolific undergrowth of defilements that spreads out in all directions. He was telling the monks to cut back the riotous undergrowth of greed, aversion, and delusion by uprooting the dense and tangled offshoots of mental defilements. The cravings that cause suffering and the attachments they spawn create a seemingly impenetrable jungle-like disorder and confusion in the mind. Clearing away this jungle once and for all opens an avenue to the supreme happiness of Nibbāna. The word Nibbāna indicates the absence of all defilements; in other words, laying waste to the mind’s jungle.

This, at least, is the scholarly interpretation of what the Buddha had to say. However, if Ajaan Mun were asked to translate this teaching, his interpretation would be much more blunt and direct: “Those jungles teeming with delusion, craving, and clinging must be totally eradicated by supreme wisdom. It is not enough to merely chop the trees down at the trunk; you must pull the whole tree out by the roots. Don’t cut down the trees—uproot them instead!”

Ajaan Mun translated quotes from the ancient Pāli texts based on his own personal experience. He spoke directly to their essential meaning, often bypassing the strict rules of Pāli grammar preferred

by scholars. The uniqueness of his translations gave us a glimpse of the true purpose of the Buddha's teachings. From the point of view of forest Dhamma, Ajaan Mun's interpretation of those teachings was always insightful and inspiring.

As March approached, the weather turned hot and dry. While hiking, I was on the lookout for places with tall, shady trees that allowed cooling breezes to move freely under their foliage. Walking beneath them helped bring relief from the stifling heat. Having been away from Ajaan Mun and his guidance for many months, I began to feel a bit lonely and adrift. Still, because I had fulfilled the responsibilities he entrusted to me when I departed, I felt confident that the power of his all-embracing virtue would protect me as I made my way back. Whether hiking, thinking, or conversing with the locals, I constantly heard Ajaan Mun's distinct voice in the back of my mind, coaxing me to remain focused and resolute in my practice. The subtle sound of Ajaan Mun's encouragement created a sense of buoyancy and contentment in my heart. I felt as though I was walking through a shady grove, where cool water to quench my thirst was never far away.

During long, hot days on the trail, when my mind started longing for some measure of ease and comfort, I imagined Ajaan Mun's powerful voice admonishing me not to clutter my mind with frivolous desires. With each sign of weakness, I could hear Ajaan Mun's warnings in my head. "Don't burden your mind with excessive thinking. It has enough to consider without adding dead weight to the load. Keep your wants simple. Don't wish for more than the minimum allowance of a monk's basic requisites. Be contented with little so that your life does not become a messy collection of material possessions. Carrying around stuff in excess of what's necessary just for the sake of comfort and convenience can be fatal for a *dhutaṅga* monk intent on following in the Buddha's footsteps. Greed can easily lay a trap that ensnares

the unwitting monk and often leads to his ignoble downfall. So, you must always remain one step ahead of greedy intentions in order to avoid the traps that will prevent you from achieving the highest goal.”

I had heard Ajaan Mun speak this admonition to his disciples many times. He often warned that a monk who hungers for possessions is as vulnerable to ruin as a hungry animal that cannot resist the bait in a deadly trap. He compared this cruel deception to a trap used by hunters in northeastern Thailand. To construct the device, trappers erected a pile of heavy stones placed loosely on one another and propped up in a precarious fashion with a few sticks. Bait was then placed underneath the stones. Upon spying the food, hungry animals like squirrels, chipmunks, monkeys, or gibbons abandoned their natural caution and unwittingly dashed into the trap. They were bound to strike one of the support sticks on the way in and bring the whole load of stones crashing down on top of them, ensuring an agonizing death. The message for *dhutaṅga* monks was: Don't let your guard down or act heedlessly.

Some forest monks ignored this warning. They trekked through the wilderness with the sincere intention of practicing meditation for the sake of Nibbāna. Eventually, one of them became well-known for his diligence in the practice and his exploits in wild places. People sought him out to prostrate themselves at his feet and honor him as a spiritual hero. They praised him glowingly and lavished him with costly gifts. Ambushed by the siren call of greed, this monk soon forgot his original purpose. He forgot the Dhamma of the Lord Buddha and the teachings of the great *ajāans*. Delighted by material possessions, he became the victim of his own defilements, which crashed down on his head like a load of heavy stones. In the end, even his moral virtue was compromised. Lacking moral shame, his behavior could lead to stressful situations and nagging feelings of regret, which made meditation difficult, if not impossible, to develop properly.

With Ajaan Mun's cautionary tale echoing in my heart, I was motivated to keep my distance from social interactions. This trek was my first experience walking *dhutaṅga* alone, and I was determined to maintain my inward focus until I reached the oasis of Ajaan Mun's monastery.

After hiking and camping in the wilderness areas between Amnat Charoen, Nakhon Phanom, and Mukdahaan, I decided to take a quicker, more direct route to Sakon Nakhon to hasten my return to Ajaan Mun. The shortcut led me through a region of dense jungle where the tree trunks grew so large that several people could not have encircled them with their arms. Tigers and other wild beasts prowled the undergrowth, occasionally roaring close by the trail. I climbed up and down mountains thick with impenetrable foliage located in sparsely populated areas. Most of the villages were small farming settlements where enterprising country folk eked out a living by clear-cutting small patches of jungle so they could plow the earth and plant subsistence crops.

I trekked on through this harsh landscape to the point of exhaustion. By noon of my first day on the trail, I'd gone through all my drinking water. Since I didn't know where to find more water and didn't dare leave the path to look for it, I just pushed on. Eventually, I encountered a jungle dweller who, knowing instinctively what I needed, quickly fetched water and humbly offered me some to quench my thirst. I soon realized that the villagers in those parts felt a common bond with *dhutaṅga* monks.

Using a commonsense sort of wisdom, I often reflected on the living conditions and the mindset of these hardy village folk. It was obvious to me that their lives were just as rough and austere as mine. But whereas they suffered countless hardships for the sake of building a home and feeding their families, I endured hardships on the trail for the sake of the Dhamma that would free my mind from suffering. They were destitute and overworked, struggling against the natural elements

just to survive; whereas I willingly put my life on the line without fear of hardship, content to struggle against mental defilements until I vanquished them forever.

At nightfall, after a long, strenuous day of hiking, I would sit in meditation beneath a roof of leaves or a canopy of stars. Later, if I found a path adequate for walking, I would continue my meditation by pacing back and forth until late into the night. I was motivated to push myself by the fear that Ajaan Mun might question me about my progress in meditation and criticize me if it didn't meet his expectations.

I finally emerged from that dense jungle when the trail crossed into the province of Sakon Nakhon. From there, I headed straight to Baan Khok village in Khok Srisupan district, where Ajaan Mun had established a small monastic community in the outlying forest. I passed quickly through the cluster of houses in the village and strode eagerly into the forest monastery, prepared now to respectfully inform Ajaan Mun about everything pertaining to Ajaan Sao's passing away.

The monks and novices living with Ajaan Mun at Baan Khok Monastery were an impressive sight. I noticed straightaway that they spoke very little. Instead of chatting among themselves, they preferred to practice meditation in solitude, each monk sitting in his own hut or walking in meditation at a separate location out in the forest. They came together after dawn each day for almsround and the morning meal. Each monk walked the distance to and from the village with cautious restraint, mindfully intent on his meditation theme. He never strolled along casually, gazing here and there and chatting with anyone who chanced to pass by. The daily routine inside the monastery was just as disciplined. At 4:00 p.m. the monks emerged from their huts in unison to sweep the monastery's grounds. When the whole area had been swept, they drew water from the well and carried buckets of

it around the monastery to fill up the water barrels used for cleaning their feet and washing their alms bowls. After completing these chores, all the monks bathed at the well in a quiet and composed manner. They performed each daily chore with admirable self-control, attentively focusing mindfulness and discernment on the execution of their assigned tasks. As soon as the day's duties were finished, each monk returned to his hut to sit or walk in mindful meditation.

Wherever Ajaan Mun happened to set up camp on his travels, his devoted disciples soon began to congregate. They were drawn by the magnetic pull of his exceptional spiritual power. During his stay at Baan Khok Monastery, the number of monks coming to live with him steadily increased. Besides the monks who lived in the monastery, many others stayed in forest locations within walking distance of the monastery grounds. During the day, they dispersed into the thick forest to do their practice in solitude.

Before the 1942 rains retreat began, the village community pooled its resources and labored in teams to build small huts for the monks camped in the outlying forests so that they too could join Ajaan Mun for the retreat period. Ajaan Mun ordered me to oversee that construction work, which I continued to do until the buildings were completed, just days before the retreat period started.

During that retreat, Ajaan Mun employed a wide variety of methods to persuade the monks under his guidance to maximize their efforts in the practice. He called an evening meeting and gave a Dhamma talk to all the monks at least once a week during the three months of that retreat. The monks sat on the floor facing Ajaan Mun in orderly rows as he elaborated on key points of the Buddha's teachings. His long and detailed talks would usually last about two hours, but would sometimes stretch to three or four. I found his lengthy discourses inspiring and invigorating. I became so absorbed in meditation as I listened that thoughts of weariness and fatigue never crossed my mind. For his part, Ajaan Mun was totally focused on expounding the

nature of discipline, concentration, and insight in a profound way that always struck a chord with his audience.

Ajaan Mun delivered Dhamma talks in a manner that was reminiscent of times past when the Lord Buddha delivered discourses to large gatherings of monks. We can be sure that the Lord Buddha's discourses were concerned solely with the great treasures of Dhamma, that he spoke only on subjects related to the direct path to Nibbāna. As a result, many monks in the Buddha's audience were able to attain the paths, the fruits, and Nibbāna right up until the day he passed away. Because his teachings emanated directly from an absolutely pure heart, the Dhamma that the Buddha expounded was so incomparably superb that hearing it inspired many of his listeners to emulate his liberating achievements.

The Dhamma talks that Ajaan Mun presented occurred to him spontaneously at the moment he spoke. What he said was never rehearsed. There was no formal introduction or specific conclusion; his talks were not mapped in advance like journeys with beginnings, rest stops, and final destinations. They were instead organic discourses that served to discuss and teach important Dhamma principles in an uplifting fashion. Ajaan Mun did not theorize or speculate when he spoke. His listeners already had their own doubts about meditation; speculation on his part would only have increased their uncertainty. Instead, his explanations tended to dispel the monks' doubts while they listened. Monks who heard Ajaan Mun's detailed descriptions of the obstacles they could expect to encounter in meditation were able to apply those lessons to their own practice and by doing so, significantly reduce troublesome mental hindrances.

Ajaan Mun addressed many different topics during those weekly meetings. He would tell us stories about his past-life encounters and recount stories about the initial stages of his own meditation practice, including insights into various experiences that arose in his meditation. He would explain the training methods he used in his struggle

to extricate himself from the quagmire of saṃsāric existence and how those methods led the way to his transcendence of the world of conventional reality.

Talk of Ajaan Mun's supreme attainment made those monks who yearned for this transcendent Dhamma eager to experience it for themselves, which prompted some of them to question whether they had enough inherent potential to successfully reach the level of liberation that Ajaan Mun had attained. Perhaps they would remain stuck in the quagmire forever, unable to climb free from *saṃsāra's* deep pit. "How is it that he can attain freedom, yet we still can't rouse ourselves from sleep? When will we be able to achieve the supreme state of freedom that he has?" This sort of thinking had the advantage of awakening in the monks a persistent determination to tolerate the hardships they faced while they pressed ahead with their meditation. This firmness of purpose, in turn, permeated every aspect of their practice. Ajaan Mun's disciples were so inspired and energized by the Dhamma he so kindly elucidated for them that all fear and hesitation vanished. Their faith in him provided them with the strength needed to willingly shoulder the heaviest burdens.

The Lord Buddha taught us to associate with the wise. The truth of this teaching is obvious to monks who live in the presence of a good teacher and listen to his uplifting instructions daily. Their enthusiasm gains strength as they gradually assimilate his teachings into their own practical experience, while also making an effort to match his virtuous qualities. Although they cannot hope to equal him in every respect, they can at least attempt to embody some of their teacher's virtues.

The opposite also holds true as well: The more we associate with fools, the worse off we become. These two teachings of the Buddha are equally valid; we can become good through association with good people, or we can suffer harm through association with bad people. If we observe those who have spent a long time training under a skilled teacher, it is evident that they have gained some steadfast principles

from that relationship. Conversely, it's obvious that those who get mixed up with fools eventually display the same foolish characteristics.

Ajaan Khao Anālayo was one example of a monk whom Ajaan Mun praised for the sterling example he set for his disciples, both in terms of his resolute practice and his steadfast principles. Though I'd yet to meet Ajaan Khao, Ajaan Mun's descriptions of his life and practice truly amazed me. The fact that Ajaan Khao had the kind of bold character that guaranteed he would put his whole strength into whatever he did strongly resonated with me. Like Ajaan Mun, he preferred to practice in remote, secluded locations with a single-minded resolve that put him in a class of his own among Ajaan Mun's disciples. He had no difficulty sitting in meditation from dusk until dawn without moving. He could sit the whole night through whenever he chose to do so.

In one of his evening Dhamma talks during that retreat, Ajaan Mun made it clear that Ajaan Khao had already followed the Buddha's noble path to the end and attained total freedom from craving and delusion. He stressed that both Ajaan Khao's mode of practice and his level of spiritual attainment were worthy of the utmost respect. He deemed Ajaan Khao fully capable of being an inspiration to his disciples, enabling them to reach the higher stages of concentration and wisdom by following faithfully in his footsteps.

After Ajaan Mun had spoken in praise of Ajaan Khao, he went on to declare that one of the monks seated there in the assembly that night had previously sought him out in the wilds of Chiang Mai to reveal certain results he'd experienced in his meditation practice. From that monk's description, Ajaan Mun could confirm that he had successfully eradicated sensual desire and ill will from his mind and thus attained the stage on the path to enlightenment known as Non-Returner. Ajaan Mun also disclosed that the very same attainment that he himself had struggled for twenty-two years to accomplish, the monk in question had achieved in just three. The disparity in the length of time required to reach that attainment, he stated, came down to the difference be-

tween the levels of their spiritual perfections and the varying strengths of the karmic legacies they had accrued in the past.

The monk in question, you see, was me. But I simply sat there listening respectfully with my head bowed, and Ajaan Mun never mentioned my name. In bringing up his praise of me here, I'm not trying to elevate myself to his level. I simply want to make the point that the spiritual qualities developed in past lives combined with the effort made in meditation during the present life have an effect on how prepared a person is to attain results in Dhamma practice—with some attaining quickly, others more slowly. To a significant degree, the ability to make progress toward enlightenment depends on the cultivation and general excellence of specific spiritual qualities known as the ten *pāramis* or perfections. These perfections are: generosity, moral virtue, renunciation, wisdom, energy, resolve, patience, truthfulness, loving kindness, and equanimity. They are referred to as perfections because the Bodhisatta “perfected” these ideal virtues to a transcendent standard of excellence over the course of many eons as he strove to become a Buddha.

Similar to a Bodhisatta, aspirants on the path must strive to cultivate and refine these ten virtuous perfections in their pursuit of enlightenment. The skillful means needed to make progress along that path hinge on the general excellence of those ten virtuous qualities. How skilled we are at developing them to a high standard will largely determine the strength and depth of our meditation, as well as our readiness to understand the higher truths reached at the advanced levels of Dhamma practice. We can only understand what we are ready to understand, and our readiness is largely a matter of the quality of our character, which is determined by the excellence of our perfections.

Similarly, only by enriching the quality of our inner being can we become worthy of encountering the right circumstances, the right guidance, and the right insights that will lead us to the realization of Dhamma's highest truths. Our capacity to clearly comprehend all

aspects of the Buddha's teachings relies on an accumulation of inner wealth, the value of which is based on the level of the perfections we have developed. As such, cultivating inner worth is a critically important part of the overall practice.

Inner worth is not measured by good actions alone, but also by the state of mind and the quality of the intentions with which those actions are performed. A desire to accumulate inner wealth without the intention to abandon harmful acts of body, speech, and mind shows a lack of understanding of the true nature of merit. Merit encompasses all the good and noble intentions in the mind. That's where inner worth resides. When the mind is meritorious, all thoughts, speech, and bodily acts are a source of merit as well. Wisdom is needed to guide intentions in a meritorious direction. Without wise guidance, people become more concerned with the future rewards of their good actions, praise, or good reputation among their peers than with accumulating a long-lasting store of inner wealth.

In order to understand the mind's intentions well enough to steer them in the right direction, mental activity must be examined in light of the Buddha's teachings on right intention and right understanding. In order to do so, meditation must be practiced in earnest. Ultimately, merit is a state of mind that we must cultivate within ourselves. When we meditate and investigate within the mind until we reach the heart of wisdom, we will see that evil refers to our own bad and ignoble intentions and merit refers to our good and noble intentions. Practicing meditation with the right commitment and determination is the highest form of merit we can make. No other merit exceeds the merit of engaging in the mental training that leads directly toward Nibbāna and its final release from suffering.

Seeing in my personal background a tough, unruly, and irreverent kid who cursed regularly and never backed down from a fight, some peo-

ple might reckon that I don't deserve to be in the same league as the *ajans* who are renowned for their outstanding virtue. Even as a monk, I rarely pulled punches, though those on the receiving end were usually unruly defilements and mental hindrances blocking my path. But that rough outward appearance is just my personality, not my true nature. External appearances and personality traits are natural expressions of the five aggregates, which display the unique physical and mental characteristics of each person. Those personality traits should not be mistaken for spiritual virtues and their levels of perfection, which exist outside the domain of the five aggregates. This distinction between observable personality traits and inner spiritual worth is clearly illustrated in the life of the notorious bandit *Āṅgulimāla*.

Āṅgulimāla was a young brahmin and scholar at the time of the Buddha who, prior to meeting the Buddha and attaining Arahantship, embarked on a murderous rampage, terrorizing the local population to accomplish a macabre mission. When he spotted the Buddha walking one day, he grabbed his weapons and dashed out to murder him. *Āṅgulimāla* expected to easily overtake him but even though the Buddha was only walking, serene and unhurried, *Āṅgulimāla* found that he couldn't catch up to him. Exhausted and frustrated, *Āṅgulimāla* yelled at the Buddha to stop. The Buddha told *Āṅgulimāla* that he had already stopped. He had stopped killing and harming and now it was time for *Āṅgulimāla* to do likewise. *Āṅgulimāla* was so struck by these words that he immediately cast away his weapons and followed the Buddha back to the monastery where he was ordained as a monk and later became an Arahant.

How on earth could a villainous murderer, known to have killed nearly one thousand people in cold blood, subsequently attain the exalted status of Arahant? The answer is that, having examined the accumulation of spiritual wealth in *Āṅgulimāla*'s heart, the Buddha saw that during his eons-long journey through *saṃsāric* existence, he had been responsible for an incalculable number of virtuous acts

of generosity, moral integrity, and spiritual awareness. He had thus amassed an enormous quantity of worthy *kamma*, the cumulative effect of which was immeasurably greater than the consequences of the evil actions he committed in his present life. Reconnecting with his rich karmic legacy, Aṅgulimāla responded to the Buddha's command that he stop his wrongdoing by throwing away his weapons, renouncing his acts of terror, and wholeheartedly embracing the Buddha's teachings for the sake of attaining the highest of spiritual goals. In the end, the personality embedded in the five aggregates had not changed; it was the undefiled awareness detached from the personality that had undergone a transformation.

The Buddha stated that among human beings, only a Buddha could totally transform his innate personality and leave his inborn character traits behind. All other human beings are unable to escape from the character and temperament with which they were born. For this reason, it can be misleading to judge someone's spiritual worth merely by their behavior or appearance. In fact, the part that holds the true essence of a person is invisible to human sensory perception. For instance, Ajaan Mun was by nature articulate and charismatic. His mind was energetic and tended to experience dynamic occurrences in meditation. These character traits remained with him throughout his life. His basic temperament never changed; even after he attained enlightenment, these innate character traits were still part of his personality, part of the person called Ajaan Mun that we all knew. Ajaan Sao, on the other hand, was by nature brief and impassive in speech and reclusive in habits. His mind was placid, smooth, and buoyant. These personality traits remained unchanged even after enlightenment. It was obvious to those who knew them that both men had vastly different personalities. Far less obvious was the fact that in terms of inner wealth and purity of heart, both men were in essence the same, with not a hair's breadth between them.

To indicate how external appearances can deceive, the Buddha told the story of a monk who was so decorous and refined in his conduct that his fellow monks assumed he must be enlightened. But when someone asked the Buddha if this monk was indeed an Arahant since his behavior was so inspiring, the Buddha replied, “No, not yet.” The Buddha elaborated, explaining that these were personality traits that the monk had inherited from previous lifetimes when he’d been born as a lion whose natural manner was always regal and majestic. Having now been born a human being and ordained a Buddhist monk, he’d brought those elegant mannerisms with him. Internally, however, he was still subject to the ill-mannered boorishness of the defilements.

Mine may have been the opposite case. It was during this rains retreat that Ajaan Mun began referring to me as “gold wrapped in rags.” It was his way of paying tribute to the brightness of the heart shining through a boorish personality. I took the compliment humbly and with caution because, even then, Ajaan Mun could turn quickly and scold me at any moment.

While spending the rains retreat at Baan Khok Monastery that year, a debilitating inflammation developed in the tendons of my right leg. The pain started at the hip and extended down to the foot, which made standing and walking very difficult. The pain I experienced felt like a boa constrictor had wrapped itself tightly around my leg. Ajaan Mun started calling me “the cripple” when he watched me limping around the grounds of the monastery.

Eventually, the excruciating pain moved up from my legs and spread into my upper body as well. Then I couldn’t move around at all! Tan Tongpaan—the monk whom I had befriended at Ajaan Mun’s monastery in Chiang Mai—concocted a curative treatment by soaking wholegrain rice overnight in warm water and then pounding it into a white mush. He also took handfuls of the extremely bitter medicinal

vine called *borapet*, pounded it to pulp, kneaded lots of water into the pulp, and strained the *borapet*-infused water out of it. After that, he combined the rice mush with the *borapet* water, poured the mixture into empty liquor bottles, and buried them underground for three days and nights. When the bottles were buried, the tops of the bottles had to protrude out of the earth about one inch.

When the concoction was fully matured and ready for consumption, Tan Tongpaan offered me the medicine. According to Buddhist monastic rules, all food items like rice must be consumed before noon. So, I had to take Tan Tongpaan's medicine between the hours of dawn and noon each day. I drank one full bottle every day until all the medicine was gone. By the end of this treatment, my tendinitis had been cured.

While living with Ajaan Mun, I remained my typically stubborn self—but stubborn in the way of a practicing monk. For instance, I had a tendency to argue with Ajaan Mun when I thought my reasoning was strong. But each time my views conflicted with his, I was put in my place by my teacher's superior wisdom. I must have been one of Ajaan Mun's most bothersome disciples. I accept full blame for that character flaw. Nonetheless, to this day I have no misgivings about speaking out so boldly. Although my arguments with him may have sounded like shouting matches, my intention was to test my doggedly held views against the unshakeable truth of Ajaan Mun's knowledge and understanding. The more I defended my opinions, the more I realized that he had all the truth on his side. Courageous though I was, I always fought a losing battle.

After each exchange, I reflected carefully on what he had said and respectfully accepted its truth with all my heart. On the few occasions when I stubbornly refused to yield to his teaching because I couldn't understand its meaning, I'd look for another opportunity to debate him. But I always came away battered and bruised by the power of his reasoning, with my opinions tied in knots. Although Ajaan Mun was

fully aware of my opinionated ways, he tolerated my outbursts because they were spoken in search of a clearer understanding. He never tried to change my attitude. Even today, my stubborn character trait often prevails. I can be single-minded and argumentative with monks and lay supporters alike when I have reason to be, which leads some people to think that I'm not a very nice person. Alas, the curse of the "old rag"!

Shortly after the 1942 rains retreat ended, Ajaan Mun announced to the monks that he intended to move his residence from Baan Khok to the forested hillsides surrounding the village of Namon. He planned to set up camp in an enormous wilderness area that was sixty miles wide and almost unlimited in length as it extended along a series of overlapping mountain ranges that seemed to stretch on forever. Many monks had gathered around Ajaan Mun at Baan Khok Monastery by that time, and most of them intended to accompany him on the journey. Among those monks, Ajaan Mahā Boowa stood out the most to me. He was a few years older than I was, but perhaps not yet wiser. His tough, uncompromising strictness set him apart from the others. His bold, outspoken character reminded me of something Ajaan Mun told me several years before when he saw a vision of himself seated majestically astride a white elephant, while two young monks straddled smaller elephants just behind him. Ajaan Mun understood that these two young monks would attain full enlightenment soon after he passed away and that they would bring enormous benefit to Buddhists everywhere. Although Ajaan Mun did not name the monks that appeared in his vision, he described to me their predominant character traits, which sounded very much like my own. I recognized many of these traits in Ajaan Mahā Boowa as well. I instinctively surmised that he must be one of the monks that Ajaan Mun was referring to in Chiang Mai.

By this time, I'd been living with Ajaan Mun and attending to his needs for almost three years. Looking toward the future, I felt the time was right for me to begin striking out on my own. I sought the opportunity to devote all my attention and effort to overcoming a persistent form of delusion that still plagued my meditation. Ajaan Mahā Boowa's presence made that decision much easier for me because I sincerely believed I could entrust him with the duties and responsibilities that I undertook on Ajaan Mun's behalf. I saw that Ajaan Mahā Boowa was diligent, thorough, and attentive to detail. He appeared to be trustworthy, especially when it came to matters pertaining to Ajaan Mun or Sangha activities. He was obviously capable of handling the pressure of serving Ajaan Mun without becoming flustered or upset by the demands of the assignment.

Attending to Ajaan Mun's needs on a regular basis provided many opportunities for good character development and success in meditation. But the duties were also demanding and sometimes stressful. A monk undertaking these responsibilities was obliged to remain very observant and vigilant whenever he was in Ajaan Mun's presence. He couldn't just go through the motions, performing his duties in a routine, mechanical fashion. He was expected to show a reason and a purpose for everything he did, whether it concerned how he cleaned Ajaan Mun's residence, how he looked after his requisites, or how he carried out errands. Every day, Ajaan Mun's residence had to be cleaned and straightened up; his bowl and robes freshened in the sunshine and put away neatly; his bedding aired out and put back in its place; and his teakettle and spittoon washed, wiped dry, and placed in its proper location. Everything needed to be in order and be done quickly and efficiently. Ajaan Mun did not put up with monks who hurriedly finished their duties by cutting corners. Nor would he tolerate monks who only reluctantly did what they were told to do because they were unwilling to put their hearts into the task.

By nature, Ajaan Mun always preferred to live quietly by himself. The monks living with him were discouraged from bothering him unless the circumstances truly required it. Those monks attending to his personal needs had to be very circumspect in his presence. They had to step so quietly that they made no sound when walking on the floor. They wiped their feet thoroughly after washing them so as not to leave wet footprints on the floorboards. They took extra care to work soundlessly when shaking out robes or opening windows and doors. As a result, only monks deemed to be trustworthy were selected to oversee Ajaan Mun's personal needs. Since by nature Ajaan Mun was very thorough and meticulous, his attendant monk had to decide what action was appropriate in each instance and then see that the other monks carefully followed this regimen. For this reason, monks attending to him were carefully chosen to ensure that their behavior did not conflict with his refined temperament. Keeping all of these factors in mind, I felt confident handing off this responsibility to Ajaan Mahā Boowa.

I myself had spent the previous several years attending to Ajaan Mun's personal needs and overseeing arrangements for his health care. I learned early on that practicing with him wasn't simply a matter of listening to teachings about Dhamma. I needed to attune my mind to how he reasoned things out, how he expressed his ideas, and how he deported himself, until they were firmly assimilated into the way I myself thought, spoke, and acted. Living with him for such a long time allowed me to regularly observe his habits, his conduct, his virtues, and his wisdom, day in and day out, under all circumstances. In a similar vein, living with Ajaan Mun forced me to remain so constantly restrained and watchful that mental vigilance eventually became an ingrained habit. Because of that, I felt that if I left Ajaan Mun at this time to wander *dhutaṅga* on my own, I'd be able to take care of myself using the various spiritual qualities I'd gained from his practical training.

After appropriate arrangements were made for his care, I paid my heartfelt respects to Ajaan Mun and humbly requested his permission to leave. With permission granted, I bowed again and begged his forgiveness for anything offensive I might have done, said, or thought in his presence, whether intentionally or unintentionally. I then departed Baan Khok Monastery and hiked to Naa Srinuan village, where I set up camp in a nearby forest cemetery.

Finding the location suitable for accelerating my meditation practice, I remained in the vicinity of Naa Srinuan through the end of the next rains retreat. My encampment was just half a day's walk from Baan Khok Monastery, which made it convenient to walk there when I had a question about my meditation. Twice a month, on lunar observance days, I made a day journey to Baan Khok to join the Sangha for Pāṭimokkha chanting and to listen to the Dhamma talks Ajaan Mun gave on those occasions. Afterward, I would hike back to Naa Srinuan, reaching my encampment just as night fell.

After the rains retreat, I wandered *dhutaṅga* in the surrounding mountains. I considered hiking from place to place to be another aspect of my meditation practice. Once I had determined the mountain range or forest I wanted to head for, I focused my mind on the practice and proceeded as though I was doing walking meditation with the forest trail as my path. I didn't worry about where I might find the next village, or whether I'd reach it before nightfall. I simply resolved to walk until dusk, then look for a place to rest for the night. The next morning, I'd continue until I reached the nearest village, where I collected alms food from the local inhabitants as I passed through. I was content to eat whatever food they offered. The quality of the food was usually poor, but that no longer bothered me. It was enough to keep me going from one day to the next, which was all that really mattered.

I continued trekking through those wilderness areas until I found a place that suited my purpose of setting up camp to practice intensive meditation for an extended period of time. Such a location preferably provided sufficient protection from the weather, a reliable source of fresh water, and a small village within walking distance. As soon as I had settled in, I turned my attention to redoubling my efforts, alternating walking and sitting meditation around the clock, day and night. My meditation at that time was primarily focused on insight practices, mainly those that investigated the body and the sense faculties.

Ajaan Mun always stressed that monks cannot afford to be lazy and must constantly remain diligent. This attitude required a lot more willpower now that I no longer had Ajaan Mun to urge me to put forth greater effort. I had felt so comfortable and secure living in his presence that—now alone—I occasionally cried because I missed him. I valued my connection with Ajaan Mun so much that no matter how far I wandered on my *dhutaṅga* travels I always returned to a place within walking distance of his monastery to set up camp for the rains retreat each year. Every dry season, I trekked off to meditate in the Phuphaan mountains, following my free-roaming spirit. But regardless of how far I ranged, I invariably hiked back to pay respects to Ajaan Mun, as I always considered him as the inspiration for my life, the one who continually shed light on the Dhamma path for me.

What passes for *dhutaṅga* training in the present day and age is radically different from the way we practiced it in the past. The current practice is so easygoing and comfortable that the monks behave more like privileged royalty than hardened practitioners. Some of them are so afraid of sunburn they don't dare stand out in the sun. When wandering *dhutaṅga*, instead of going on foot like practicing monks of old, they travel in the comfort of a car or a bus. Because their initial approach to the practice contradicts the true purpose of Dhamma, they inevitably start out on the wrong foot and continue to veer off the path from there.

Staying with Ajaan Mun, the training was always extremely difficult. The food was never as sumptuous and expensive as we find so often nowadays. Previously, we ate only chilies and salt with our plain rice, which made us hungry to imbibe our fill of the Dhamma instead. Now, so many varieties of food are available to *dhutaṅga* monks that they've become thoroughly spoiled! Ajaan Mun taught us to put our lives on the line for Dhamma, so we never concerned ourselves with the quality or the quantity of what we put in our mouths. Today, on the other hand, attachment to food takes precedence over Dhamma. Consequently, modern-day *dhutaṅga* monks prefer to walk around the town's crowded streets and markets, not daring to venture too far from their ever-dependable support network. What a shame!

Gold

By the beginning of 1947, I'd been away from my hometown for over seven years. I reflected often on the role my parents played in my upbringing and the opportunity they'd given me to pursue the path of Buddhist practice. I felt a strong desire to demonstrate my deep gratitude. There is, of course, nothing so profound as the care and affection of parents for their children. Without the care and love of my parents, who would have fed me when I was young and tended to me when I was sick? My parents looked after me when I didn't know what was going on around me and couldn't fend for myself. They raised me and taught me how to speak and think for myself. And, of course, they introduced me to Buddhism. Now that I'd had a chance to put the Buddha's teachings into practice, my heart had come to realize an amazing happiness. All of this was made possible by the power of

deep parental love. Honoring my parents for all they did for me was the least I could do to repay their constant care and affection. Due to my chosen vocation, I had never succeeded in giving them wealth and security like a good, faithful son normally would. Instead, I had what I considered to be the best repayment of all to offer them: I wanted to teach them about the wonders of Buddhist practice and help instill the Dhamma securely in their hearts.

By coincidence, at that time, I happened to meet a monk from my hometown who informed me that my mother was sick. And so it seemed appropriate that I return home and visit my parents. I also felt the absence of Ajaan Lee in my life. He taught me many inspiring Dhamma lessons and pointedly steered me in the direction of Ajaan Mun. I sincerely hoped to meet up with him when I returned. With these aims in mind, I began the long trek from the Northeast region back to my hometown in Chanthaburi on the southeast coast, a walking distance of over 400 miles. I covered the whole trek on foot by the quickest route possible, camping out in *dhutaṅga* fashion along the way. Traveling in those days was arduous because the dirt roads were in a constant state of disrepair. Few motor vehicles even attempted to traverse those poor conditions, leaving the muddy, pot-holed tracks to foot traffic and bullock carts.

When I finally arrived in Chanthaburi, I took up residence at Sai Ngaam Forest Monastery, the place where my life as a monk had begun ten years before. When my parents heard of my return, they rushed to the monastery to greet me, crying while asking me how I was and why I hadn't kept in touch with them. They said they had no idea whether I was alive or dead. "You should have at least let your mother know that you were still alive," my mother said with tears streaming down her cheeks. She wiped her eyes as she looked at me reproachfully.

I reminded my mother that she had cried when I left home seven years before, so now that I was safely back, why was she still crying? I chided her that if I had continued to stay home that whole time, she

would probably have cried even then. I advised her to let go of the past. I was back now, and that was all that mattered.

My mother sat still, listening and blinking her eyes as they welled up with tears. She spoke to me about her failing health and how worry and concern had made her miss me even more. “Had I died before setting eyes on you again, I would have been distraught. When I’m feeling sick, I cannot help thinking about my children. Should any of them be unaccounted for, I’d be beside myself with grief.” Then with a timid smile she asked, “By the way, what did you learn from Ajaan Mun when you stayed with him?”

The two monks who had been left in charge of Sai Ngaam Forest Monastery’s upkeep when a previous abbot departed helped me to settle in comfortably. I had lived with them for only a few weeks when they expressed a fervent desire to visit Ajaan Mun in the Northeast to pay their respects and listen to his Dhamma talks. They had questions about their meditation practice that they felt only he could answer. They were delighted that I’d returned to the monastery because it gave them a chance to pass their responsibilities on to me while they traveled north. Since I’d already spent many years with Ajaan Mun, it made sense that I offer them this opportunity. So, I agreed to be the temporary abbot at Sai Ngaam Forest Monastery in their absence.

I dedicated the next two years of my life to maintaining the monastery in good order and attending to the religious needs of my parents and the lay devotees who regularly attended the monastery to offer food in the morning. I resolved from the start to take these everyday responsibilities seriously. I curtailed the wilder side of my nature and remained courteous in my speech and sympathetic in my interactions with members of the local community, patiently performing the ritual roles expected of a village abbot. At the same time, in order to create the most peaceful and secluded environment possible for monastic training, I reduced contact with the lay community to a minimum. Lay people were welcome to come to the monastery in the morning

to offer food and request teachings or advice from me after I finished the meal. Otherwise, I asked that they did not visit as I found constant daytime interruptions from the lay community to be incompatible with the quiet and seclusion required for a monk's meditation practice. My strict policy resulted in a lack of distractions for the resident monks and maintained the sanctity of their meditation environment.

Following a lifelong tendency to seek seclusion and solitude, I left behind my monastic responsibilities during the cold season months and ventured alone into the nearby mountains to fully immerse myself in *dhutaṅga* meditation practices. I refocused my attention solely on the development of deep levels of concentration and on the intensive application of wisdom techniques. I journeyed on foot through local wilderness areas for several months, living simply and in harmony with nature, relying on the kindness of small forest communities to provide sustenance for my wandering lifestyle. When the next rainy season retreat period approached, I made my way back to Sai Ngaam Forest Monastery and resumed my monastic duties as before.

Following the 1948 rains retreat, I again took the opportunity to put aside my administrative responsibilities and spend time alone in the wilderness areas to the north. By then, the heat and humidity of the monsoon season had begun to ease off, signaling the onset of the cold season. The cooler, drier weather was a welcome relief, but more relieving still was the sense of solitude experienced in the seclusion of forested mountain ranges. After months of living a sedentary life and managing the monastery's diverse affairs, I was ready to seek sanctuary in a wandering, meditative lifestyle and the peace and quiet of solitude.

By the early months of 1949, I had penetrated deep into the jungle terrain of Chanthaburi's northernmost district. I'd been hiking on remote trails for months and my meditation was back to full strength. One

evening, while I was seated on the ledge beneath an overhanging rock, my mind experienced an occurrence that left a lasting impression on me. I was meditating nonstop at that time, trying to uproot the remaining defilements that obstructed my path. Suddenly and unexpectedly, my mind dropped into a state of profound stillness where not a single thought disturbed its sublime tranquility. Except for a very refined awareness that seemed to suffuse everything throughout the entire universe, absolutely nothing else appeared. The whole world appeared to be filled with this subtle quality of knowing, the effect of which was truly amazing. Whether I actively investigated the body or rested quietly in *samādhi*, stray thoughts did not intervene. The mind remained effortlessly bright and clear for hours.

From that day forward, the mind continued to contemplate all aspects of the body for many hours at a stretch. My concentration was intense and impactful, turning into a relentless driving force as the investigations gathered momentum. Through knowledge and skill gained over time, I knew where in my mind to dig and probe; it was just a matter of precisely locating defilements and extracting them. I felt like an experienced folk doctor who knows where to look for wild roots and herbs growing deep in the jungle; all he has to do is penetrate the tangled vegetation, find them, and pull them up. In this more advanced stage of my practice, my mind remained completely disengaged from peripheral thoughts and emotions and could thus focus exclusively on whatever appeared in its field of awareness.

My body contemplations soon reached the stage where wisdom sprang into action automatically, without conscious intention. The effect was a complete absorption in those investigations both day and night. Wisdom moved through mental images of the body with speed and agility, uncovering lingering attachments, grabbing those mental fetters by the scruff of the neck, and forcefully yanking them out. The mind spun relentlessly through every part and every aspect of the body, searching for the root causes of craving and delusion. This is surely

what Ajaan Mun had meant when he told me to “use the Noble Truths to smash the body to pieces.”

I reached the stage where I experienced the mind as though it were totally independent and soaring freely. As amazing as the sense of unhindered freedom appeared, I was reluctant to entirely trust this perception. I felt that nothing should be taken for granted at this stage in the practice. I continued to probe deeper into the mind, giving wisdom full rein to uncover the truth. When I say the mind appeared to soar freely, I mean the mind felt as buoyant as a wisp of cotton wool floating on a cushion of air. Probing deeper into that perception, I realized that although the cotton wisp appeared to be floating independently, it actually relied on air currents to keep it aloft. Without that uplifting support, it would fall back to earth. I also realized that the current state of my practice presented a similar predicament. In the same way that the sense of floating free and independent was an illusion—because its sense of freedom was, in fact, dependent on other factors—so too were the amazing experiences in my meditation just faulty perceptions, rooted in the mind’s fundamental delusion about itself. In other words, I still had crucial work left to do.

Shortly after that profound realization, I moved into a shallow cave-like opening hollowed out of the base of a cliff deep in a dense tropical forest on the south side of Baisri Mountain, an area known locally for its deadly malaria outbreaks. The jungle was also home to many dangerous wild animals such as elephants, tigers, leopards, bears, venomous snakes, and wild boars. I had been warned of all these dangers, but I chose to go anyway to challenge my mind’s ability to respond decisively to extreme conditions. Sheltering in the cave, I pushed myself mercilessly, fasting and going without sleep for days at a time, determined not to relax my efforts until I had achieved a further breakthrough.

Within days, I had come down with a severe case of malaria, which resulted in alternating bouts of high fevers and shaking chills.

Throughout the duration of these punishing symptoms, the sharpness and keenness of my mind became more and more acute and perceptive. On certain occasions, my awareness seemed to disconnect from external sense contact altogether. But normally, I could detect a very subtle sensation that's difficult to describe emanating from the physical sphere. My mind thus became fully focused on what appeared to be an exceedingly refined breath sensation. When I was able to hold the sensation steady at that refined level, it became increasingly fainter and more elusive as it faded in and out of awareness. Focusing intently on the faintest of those sensations, I watched them steadily become so indistinct that only a tiny trace of movement was detectable. I continued to delicately probe and question this almost imperceptible sensation until it finally faded into complete and utter stillness. All mental motion ceased. Nothing remained in the sphere of awareness. Nothing lingered to search for, nothing was left to focus on. All attachment between that totally still awareness and the activities of body and mind had been severed. Awareness was then free, vast, and supremely empty, without limits—boundless and all-encompassing. Nothing at all enclosed or obstructed it. When everything that had permeated awareness vanished, there was only a genuine, all-pervading emptiness that contained nothing. Emptiness of this kind is a total and permanent disengagement that requires no further effort to maintain.

At that unparalleled moment, awareness expressed the highest form of freedom, having absolutely let go of every vestige of primal ignorance, thus overturning the perpetual cycle of birth and death once and for all. After disabling delusion's all-encompassing network of ignorance with one powerful and decisive stroke, wisdom's insight delivered a fatal right hook to the chin of the champion of saṃsāric existence—knocking it out cold—never again to rise from the mat.

In the singularity of that moment, I finally came face to face with the Lord Buddha. I don't mean to boast, but that's the only way I can describe it. I realized unequivocally that attachment to the cycle of

birth and death, repeated endlessly over countless lifetimes, was rooted in a universal ignorance of the truth. Free from that attachment now, the world of ignorance no longer found a foothold in an awareness that was absolutely pure and at one with Nibbāna. Beyond that, I can find no words to convey the truth because that singular purity lies outside the realm of conventional language. Ordinary people who try to wrap their heads around it are bound to be left bewildered.

I finally rid myself of delusion and confusion by battling toe-to-toe with the demon of ignorance until the power of supreme wisdom broke through its last line of defense. Supported by the combined forces of faith, effort, mindfulness, *samādhi*, and wisdom—all of which had been well trained during countless lives of Buddhist practice—the ramparts of ignorance were stormed, and the great demon was slain in its previously impregnable saṃsāric fortress.

Supreme mindfulness and supreme wisdom closed all the pathways through which awareness could escape into sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, and thoughts. This allowed wisdom's forces to battle their way into delusion's inner sanctum and take out the central tyrant—the primary cause of all suffering. When awareness finally let go of body and mind, only the amazingly pure Dhamma remained, an occurrence inexpressively more astounding than anything I had ever experienced before in my years of meditation.

The plaintive song that I had overheard a lady in the North sing many years before rang true. “Suffering of body and mind consumes my thoughts and feelings. Suffering binds me so tightly...” That suffering, the suffering of body and mind, had now flipped over to become ease of body and mind. The verse “Suffering binds me so tightly” had been transformed into “Happiness embraces me so tightly.” My spontaneous reaction was: “How incredible! I’ve seen the truth I’ve sought for so long!”

Nibbāna is inherent within the realm of human existence, but it is not something specifically human. Nibbāna cannot be found in the elements of earth, water, fire, or wind, nor in anything of the physical universe. Figuratively, we may say that Nibbāna is a realm of absolute freedom. But, in truth, Nibbāna is a natural principle innate within all of us. It has no physical characteristics whatsoever. The five senses cannot know it; philosophy cannot reveal it; science cannot verify it. Even extensive study of the Buddha's teachings cannot reach Nibbāna unless the teachings are diligently put into practice. Only by practicing Buddhist meditation can the mind make the adjustments needed to realize Nibbāna. All of the many past Buddhas and their countless Arahant disciples did just that, allowing the truth to arise unequivocally within their minds.

If you want to dispel doubts about the ultimate consequences of your actions, you must resolve these uncertainties internally by practicing meditation until you clearly realize the truth of these things for yourself. Even doubts that have plagued you for your whole life will dissipate in a flash at the moment that realization occurs—just as perpetual darkness turns to brightness the moment a light is turned on.

The truth of the Buddha's teachings will be revealed to those who practice the teachings with diligence and an unwavering determination to discover the truth. To fully realize the truth about their own potential for release from suffering, seekers of the way must strive to become spiritual warriors on the path to liberation. Their hearts need to have a firm resolve that can boldly stand up to their internal enemies, finding the strength of purpose to fight with all their might without becoming weakened or disheartened and without retreating when the struggle appears too difficult. When this kind of fighting spirit is exhibited in the pursuit of Dhamma, then time and place are not relevant to the quest for truth. Regardless of whether it is the Buddha's age or our present age, Nibbāna can always be attained by those who earnestly follow the way to freedom. The true Dhamma

always exists in the present moment—the timeless present, here and now.

At the moment awareness passed beyond the tangled jungles of saṃsāric existence, wonder and amazement arose in me as I sat alone amidst the mountainous wilderness of northern Chanthaburi. It was clear that ignorance had ceased creating future births in the various realms of sentient existence. What remained was a completely pure awareness. As the sun rose above the mountain peaks, I bowed deeply in my heart to the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha, those three absolutely pure jewels which had been fused into the one unconditioned element of Nibbāna. A heart filled with Dhamma reflected with immense gratitude on everyone who had so graciously assisted me in reaching the land of freedom. I felt a deep sense of gratitude for the many sacrifices my parents had made on my behalf. It was impossible to assess the value of all their love and care for me. A moment of rapturous joy arose at the thought that I could now truly repay my great debt of gratitude to them.

My gratitude for Ajaan Mun's love and compassion knew no bounds. He had taken this worthless-looking old rag, tamed and refined its coarse and clumsy exterior, and polished the gold concealed inside until it had shone forth unhindered in all directions. I felt as though he had given me renewed courage every time I began to falter. He acted as both a mother and father in my times of need to such an extent that I knew I would never be able to repay even a small part of the debt I owed him. He was living proof of "that which knows." Sailing on the raft of his compassionate guidance, my heart had reached the other shore. With the turbulent waves and karmic consequences of greed, ill will, and delusion now left behind, I was free to leave the precious raft behind at the shoreline. How incredible.

I continued to reside in that small cave under a cliff in the wilderness, resting serenely in the undefiled bliss of final release from suffering. My heart rejoiced in the peace and quiet of that sparsely populated mountain region where human contact was limited to the folks giving food on my daily almsround. That wild, uncivilized jungle area was inhabited by good, honest, moral people. Even jungles with dense forests, tangled vegetation, and wild animals aren't as dangerous as the civilized jungles of human society—places overrun with entangling defilements where greed, hatred, and delusion are constantly on the prowl. These ferocious mental tigers inflict deep internal wounds, gradually eroding a person's physical and mental health until the damage becomes acute. Such injuries are extremely difficult to treat. Though the wounds tend to fester menacingly, those who are afflicted usually neglect their injuries, hoping they will somehow heal by themselves.

As the 1949 hot season neared and the sweltering heat and humidity began intensifying in the high jungles of northern Chanthaburi, I made my way back down to the marshy seashore communities of my youth. Relieved by then from all encumbering burdens, both mental and physical, I somewhat reluctantly returned to Sai Ngaam Forest Monastery to resume my responsibilities as “temporary” abbot of the small monastic community there—which of course meant living again amid the thorns and brambles of mundane society. Initially, I had contemplated taking the excellent Dhamma in my heart and teaching it to the people in my hometown. But eventually I concluded that it was beyond the spiritual power and ability of those people to grasp the radically profound nature of that supreme Dhamma. When I reflected on it, I felt disheartened by the prospect of trying to explain the amazing nature of that attainment to others and so decided to remain silent when I returned.

After taking up my former position as abbot, I began to contemplate my next move. By that time, I had served as the temporary abbot

of Sai Ngaam Forest Monastery off and on for two full years. The two monks who were supposed to return from Ajaan Mun's monastery to replace me had still not returned. Feeling that I'd already done all I possibly could to repay the debt of gratitude I owed my parents, I decided the time had come for me to wander freely again. As I had no intention to become a permanent abbot in my hometown monastery, I decided that I'd stayed there long enough. My spirit yearned to return to the wilds: to live in caves, under overhanging cliffs, or beneath shady trees.

It occurred to me that I'd never traveled to the South of Thailand. Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo, who mentored me in my early years as a monk, had spent many years wandering *dhutanga* in Thailand's southern provinces, so I decided to follow in his footsteps. I hoped to find a quiet, secluded cave in an area where nobody knew me. I felt as free as a bird, released to fly with no attachments to hold me down. My heart felt satiated in every way. Indeed, the Buddha and his Arahant disciples chose to live at ease in the depths of the forest, abiding pleasantly in the here and now.

For me, Ajaan Mun had always led the way. Even after he had thoroughly cleansed his mind of all defilements, a time when he could afford to relax in the company of like-minded followers, he chose instead to abide in secluded and tranquil wilderness areas, even though that arduous lifestyle took a toll on his physical health. He simply relied on the power of Dhamma, using its potency as all the Noble Ones had, to maintain the well-being of body and mind.

I traveled south by train and disembarked at Sawee district in Chumporn province, located about 300 miles down the southern peninsula. I soon set off hiking into the mountains, camping at suitable sites beside the trail. I occasionally hung my umbrella-tent near a villager's garden or in an orchard. I lived off the fruits of my daily almsround like a honeybee sampling the pollen from one blossom to another without worry or concern.

After months of *dhutaṅga* wandering in the mountains of Sawee district, I met a group of villagers who led me to a cave deep in a tropical jungle abounding with wild animals. The large cavern there had once been part of an ancient monastery complex but had long since been abandoned. The villagers invited me to reside there for the upcoming rains retreat and offered to renovate a section of the monastery if I agreed. I accepted the invitation mainly because I liked the cave and its location. Staying in a cave surrounded by dangerous animals would force me to remain alert and mindfully aware—important elements of abiding pleasantly here and now. Although I'd reached a stage where I could rest in peace and tranquility under all conditions, I still utilized external aspects of Dhamma to keep body and mind healthy and vigorous.

I spent the 1949 rainy season retreat at that cave in peace and solitude. No sooner did the retreat end than the same village group invited me to reside there permanently. They promised that if I agreed to stay on, they would raise funds to expand the monastery's living space to accommodate more monks. Seeing the danger of a long-term commitment as more frightening than the danger of wild animals, I slipped away quietly one day and resumed my *dhutaṅga* wanderings.

I trekked 180 miles further south to Nakhon Si Thammarat province and stayed at Maheyong Monastery for a short while before hiking another 150 miles to Songkhla province in the deep South, reaching there in November of 1949. I settled for a while at Huay Yaang near Baan Phru village in the Haat Yai district.

Not long after setting up camp at Huay Yaang in the second week of November, I had a startling vision of Ajaan Mun. A vivid mental image of his pale, dead body lying motionless within an open casket appeared suddenly in my meditation. I witnessed him departing the realm of saṃsāric existence forever to enter the liberation realm of Anupādisesa Nibbāna, the absolute cessation of all suffering. The image was clear and unmistakable.

On almsround the next morning, I asked one of the villagers if he'd heard any news about Ajaan Mun. Although he had not, I wasn't entirely reassured. I had a strong feeling my vision was an omen. I seemed to recall him saying that he would die in his eightieth year.

Upon returning from almsround, as I sat eating the food I'd received, a messenger came to inform me that news bulletins on the local radio were announcing that the Venerable Ajaan Mun Bhūridatto had passed away the night before at Suddhawat Monastery in Sakon Nakhon. Hearing that, I immediately finished eating and walked straight to the back of the building. There, in private, my chest heaved and I sobbed as an uncontrollable emotion arose and lodged in my throat, nearly choking me. I felt a terrible sense of loss. A feeling of eternal gratitude and reverence washed over me when I reflected on the departure of the man who had so illuminated my life and brightened my heart. He had always been close at hand and ready to help resolve my doubts and provide me with inspiration.

I knew I had to return to Sakon Nakhon immediately. Fortunately, Ajaan Mun's senior disciples had arranged to have news of his death broadcast over the radio and printed in the newspapers so that his faithful followers would have access to the news wherever they might be. Even though I was deep in the south of the country at that time, I still had the opportunity to pay my final respects in a timely manner. I boarded a train heading north that day. I stopped over in Chanthaburi to meet with Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo and asked him what course of action he wanted me to take.

Night had fallen by the time I arrived. Ajaan Lee was about to preside over a Pāṭimokkha recitation of the monks' disciplinary rules. Evidently, he was waiting for me to arrive to join them, even though I had not notified him in advance about my plans. The next morning, he told Tan Fuang, who had returned to train with Ajaan Lee some years before, and me to proceed quickly to Sakon Nakhon and help with the funeral arrangements. He planned to join us later.

When we arrived at Suddhawat Monastery, we were told that prominent senior monks, in consultation with local government officials, had decided that it would be best to keep Ajaan Mun's body for several months before proceeding with the cremation. An agreement had been reached that the cremation should take place during the time of the waxing moon in January of 1950. In the meantime, a special casket had been arranged to hold the body.

I headed straight for the pavilion where Ajaan Mun's body lay in state. As I glanced down into the open casket at Ajaan Mun's still, lifeless body, tears welled up in my eyes and flowed down my cheeks. I was helpless to stop them. I knelt beside the casket and performed three long bows to pay my final respects to the venerable monk who had such a profound impact on my life. All other thoughts evaporated, leaving only an overpowering sense of love and gratitude in that moment of supreme stillness.

Outside the pavilion, large kerosene lamps floodlit the monastery grounds, where people milled around uncertainly, seemingly lost. I could hear chaotic sounds of grief and lamentation from the crowd of visitors who waited patiently for their chance to go inside and pay their respects to Ajaan Mun's body.

In the months leading up to the cremation ceremony, hundreds of monks who also wished to pay him their final respects arrived in Sakon Nakhon. Although most then returned home, over a hundred remained, residing in the monastery to help coordinate all the funeral arrangements. The people of Sakon Nakhon put forth a concerted effort to make life as convenient as possible for the monks and novices gathered there for the occasion. Despite the large influx of monks, local residents were prepared to support them each day with an abundance of alms food. The line of monks receiving food every morning stretched into the distance, but people remained unstinting in their generosity from the first day to the last. They worked tirelessly and

with enthusiasm to ensure that this huge funeral ceremony would be an unqualified success.

Well in advance of the cremation date, monks and novices who wished to attend were arriving in large numbers. The cremation ceremony itself was expected to attract a crowd of thousands. Soon after I arrived, a critical shortage of clean water became apparent. Unless sufficient water could be found quickly, the monastery compound would soon become unlivable. Seeing that I was still young and robust, a senior monk ordered me to take charge of the search for a reliable source of water.

Lay supporters had been digging the ground in random locations with crude picks and long-handled hoes for so long that their hands were raw and blistered, but they still hadn't found groundwater. To avoid wasting time and energy, I decided to focus a combined effort on one promising spot at the edge of the woods, where the group quickly began to dig a wide vertical shaft in search of an underground water source. I also joined in the work, stripping off my shoulder cloth and working bare-chested under the winter sun to fill large wicker baskets with soil from the pit and haul them to the surface by hand. I must have looked like just another layman on the job—but monastic decorum be damned! We had a critical objective to achieve, and I needed freedom of movement to do my part. Once we finally reached an adequate source of groundwater, we were able to provide enough fresh water to last for the three months leading up to the funeral ceremony.

I was also tasked with completing construction of the funeral pyre and the main ceremonial pavilion, as well as many small dwellings to house the monks and novices. Several smaller pavilions were constructed to provide shelter for lay participants, and many places to prepare and cook meals were set up around the grounds to provide an adequate supply of food for the large crowd that was expected to attend the important occasion. I was kept so busy for those three months that

I hardly found time to rest. But in my heart, I never complained. I saw it as a means of honoring Ajaan Mun's virtuous perfections.

As the day of the funeral ceremony drew near, monks and lay devotees flooded in from all directions, their numbers swelling until those charged with receiving them were barely able to cope. The closer it came to cremation day, the greater the multitude pouring into the monastery. In the end, no more space could be found to accommodate the hordes of people who kept arriving. By funeral day, all the huts were full, and the whole extensive tract of forest within the monastery grounds was crowded with monks and novices who had traveled from all over the region. Most of them simply camped out in the woods. In all, well over a thousand monks and novices were present at Ajaan Mun's cremation. As for the lay devotees, it was simply impossible to count how many were camped inside and outside the monastery grounds.

And yet, amazingly, very little of the noise usually associated with such a crowded ceremony was heard. For the duration of the funeral, no instances of drinking or drunken behavior occurred, no quarreling or fighting flared up, and no cases of theft were reported. The entire event proceeded with such good taste and propriety that I couldn't help but imagine the hands of the celestial *devas* at work.

The cremation ceremony preliminaries began on the tenth lunar day of the third lunar month and culminated four days later with the cremation of Ajaan Mun's body at midnight on January 31, 1950. While the special casket containing his body passed through the crowd on its way to its final resting place on the funeral pyre, many in the crowd wept openly, all mourning the loss of an exceptionally noble person. The bodily remains being carried to the pyre were all they had left of him—the last vestige of conventional reality still associated with his presence in the world. He had entered the sublime, pure realm of Nibbāna. Never again would he return to physical, bodily existence—the land of pain and suffering.

The following day, when the fires of the funeral pyre had died down and Ajaan Mun's bone relics had been collected for safekeeping, the gathering of monks and lay devotees began to gradually disperse. I stayed on for several more days, determined to help clean up the monastery compound and leave the place as immaculate as possible, as it would always be the final resting place of the one person who had meant more to me than anyone else in the world.

In the days after Ajaan Mun's cremation, the *dhutaṅga* monks of his lineage wandered off in different directions feeling like orphans who'd lost both parents. Most of the younger monks began searching for a reliable teacher to act as a refuge in Ajaan Mun's stead. Many of them congregated around his senior disciples, whom they had learned to admire and respect. Although these monks ended up scattered across the Northeast, their purpose remained the same—striving for the realization of Nibbāna.

I myself headed south by foot, wandering *dhutaṅga* as I always had, until I eventually reached my hometown in Chanthaburi province. As my mother's health had continued to deteriorate, I spent a few busy weeks at Sai Ngaam Forest Monastery coordinating my mother's health care schedule with my brothers and sisters, who spared no expense of time or money to provide her with the best treatments available. As soon as I was convinced that my services were no longer needed, I approached Ajaan Lee and asked him to help me find a quiet, peaceful monastic setting somewhere in the forested regions of Chanthaburi, a place where I could live in seclusion and still wholeheartedly serve the interests of the religion. He advised me to move to a place called Khao Kaew and take up residence on the hilltop. Ajaan Lee had lived there several years previously. His austere lifestyle had so impressed the locals that they banded together to build a small pavilion and a bamboo hut for his stay. He named the monastery Khao Kaew, mean-

ing Crystal Mountain, because the peaked hilltop appeared to draw the surrounding landscape up to a point of symmetry and concord. I found the monastery deserted, so I moved in straightaway. I ended up residing there off and on for the next ten years.

By nature, I did not like to remain idle. I soon went to work making improvements to the original buildings and constructing new ones. Mostly, I labored on my own, using whatever local materials were available. The original buildings had begun to crumble and decay, succumbing to the hot, humid climate of the jungle. Since the buildings needed stronger foundations, I borrowed an old sledgehammer and spent my afternoons breaking up the large stones scattered around the hilltop. I didn't bother to ask for anyone's help, and no one would have been able to keep up with me even if I had.

When I needed lumber for posts and beams or for floorboards, I led a party of village men deep into the forest on the other side of the hill, where they felled trees and sawed the trunks into planks. We usually camped in the jungle overnight, slaving from dawn to dusk every day until the work was completed. We used long, two-man handsaws with wooden handles at each end to cut the big logs into flat boards. As one man pushed and the other pulled, the saw's teeth cut on both strokes to make a clean surface along the entire length of the log. When we had enough planks, we shouldered them through the thick jungle and up the hill to the monastery. The work was backbreaking but worthwhile, because hardwood made excellent building material.

Because I set very high standards for myself, I could be equally demanding with the work ethic of others. I expected a job to be done quickly and skillfully with no excuses or delays. Even though my helpers were local volunteers, I tended to be a hard taskmaster. I pushed myself to the limit, and everyone else was expected to follow suit. It was not in my character to talk sweetly and offer sympathies. On the contrary, on the occasions when I should perhaps have spoken softly, I yelled loudly instead. We had work to do; I just couldn't be

bothered to speak politely. Due to my hard-nosed, tough attitude, the village men were often reluctant to join me when I called on them to help with a work project. If I could've managed it by myself, I would have. But I needed help for the jobs monks weren't allowed to do. I felt the village men should have been grateful for the opportunity to earn spiritual rewards for their hard work. They should have honored the Buddha's teaching on the fruits of meritorious actions.

I did my best to repay the hard physical labor that the local people contributed to the monastery. On one occasion, I was invited to bless a newlywed couple at their family home. I felt reluctant to attend, but the parents were supporters of the monastery, and they were offering a meal. Their house was a typical village structure built on stilts with the main floor raised five feet above the ground. Because I arrived late, the other eight monks who'd been invited had already taken their seats on the floor above, and the rest of the house was full of family members milling around. The staircase going up to the main floor was bustling with women and children. Piles of cast-off shoes littered its base. Because the building was elevated on wooden posts, the upstairs floor stuck out at the level of my chest and was enclosed at the top by a guardrail about three feet tall. Since I had no intention of waiting for the crowd on the staircase to make way, and I didn't want to elbow my way through that crowd to find my seat upstairs, I simply reached out, grabbed the base of the guardrail with my hand, and pulled my whole body up until my right knee rested on the edge of the floor upstairs. With my alms bowl slung around my neck and resting behind one shoulder, I raised my body to a standing position, swung one leg over the top rail, and straddled it under my crotch. With my legs swinging freely on either side of the railing, I pivoted and hopped down on the floor—to the speechless astonishment of all the monks and guests present. I quickly took my seat at the head of the row of monks, surveyed the disorder of family and friends moving about laughing and greeting one another, and cut the whole scene short by bellowing out,

“Do you want the monks here to chant or not? If not, just bring in the food so we can eat!”

Since the owner obviously wanted us to bless his kids with auspicious chants, he was shocked by the sudden interruption. He blurted out, “Yes, please, sir.” I felt indifferent to his embarrassment. If all he really wanted was an auspicious future for the married couple, then there was sufficient merit in offering a meal to the monks, even without the chanted blessing. What was the purpose of the chants supposed to be anyway? To bless the sexual exploits of a couple so they could make a family, grow old, get sick, and die like everyone else in this world of pain and suffering?

In the end, we intoned the ritual chants and ate the meal without further comment. When the time came to leave, the upper floor was still congested, and the stairs leading down still crowded. What to do? My only option was to leave the house the same way I’d entered. With my bowl hanging from my neck, I straddled the railing again, arched one leg over the top, and gripped the railing to swing down to the ground. I could tell the young monks were embarrassed to watch a senior monk behave that way, but I felt unperturbed. Under the circumstances, it was the only sensible action to take. I probably reached the monastery before the other monks had even left their seats!

It felt awkward and out of character for me to always address people in a polite and deferential manner, as though I had to pretend to be someone I wasn’t. I never spoke with harmful intentions or hidden agendas. Just straight talk—no bullshit. For instance, an elderly matron from the Royal Palace in Bangkok showed up one day at Khao Kaew Monastery while I was working on a construction project. The occasion was her birthday, for which she wanted to make merit by offering a donation. Having come directly from work, I was underdressed for the occasion. I wore an old and soiled waist cloth with the shoulder cloth hitched up high around my neck. I probably looked more like the gardener than the abbot. The lady, on the other hand,

was painted up like one of the china dolls my mother kept on display in her glass cabinet at home. Never one for formality, I began hawking and spitting tobacco juice into an old, rusty tin can as we spoke. The poor lady looked alarmed. I could tell she was being very critical in her assessment of my conduct. Perhaps she was offended as well. I was happy that she had the chance to make merit for her birthday, but I could see that was the extent of her interest in coming to the monastery. Had she asked about Dhamma practice, that would have been another matter. I could be articulate when it came to the higher purpose of teaching Dhamma, but small talk was a waste of my time.

When I needed a ride to take care of business somewhere in the district, I usually flagged down a passing truck on the road outside the monastery's gate. I found the easiest way to get the driver's attention was to stand in the middle of the road and wait for him to stop. As soon as he did, I quickly hopped on board—no permission asked. The driver had no choice, really. He couldn't run over a monk! Besides, I treated everyone I met as though they were a friend or a relative. I saw us all as equals, as companions in birth, aging, sickness, and death. All living beings were the same in that respect. Hell, I'd hitch a ride with an elephant if I could!

Straddling the middle of the road with my legs spread apart while I adjusted my upper robe over both shoulders, I stopped whichever vehicle passed first: a farm truck headed to market, a local bus going to town, or a car of any kind. Once my business was finished, I returned to the monastery by the same means.

One day, I received an urgent telegram from the royal Dhammayut monastery in Bangkok, requesting that I go there immediately. As Khao Kaew Monastery was a full day's drive from Bangkok, I quickly walked to the road and stopped a ten-wheel truck hauling fruit the long distance to the capital. When I found the cab crowded with passengers, many of them women, I hoisted myself up onto the truck bed and took a seat cross-legged on the roof of the cab. There I remained

the whole day, the hot sun beating down on my head and the wind blowing in my face. By the time we reached Bangkok, I was worn out. To get from the fruit market to the royal monastery, I hailed the first taxi that passed by and jumped in. I didn't carry any money, of course, so the cabbie was in for a surprise. Heck, he was also a companion on the journey from birth to death, so I had no doubt that we'd work it out like brothers.

I had been summoned to Bangkok to join a delegation of senior monks that was scheduled to attend a meal offering at the Royal Palace. When the royal representative arrived to escort us to the palace, I asked him if I would be required to take a monk's ceremonial fan for the occasion, as I assumed it was the proper etiquette. But he said no, just go as you are. I was fine with that. But during the royal ceremony, when the monks sat down to chant the blessing just before the meal began, one of the palace officials overseeing the ceremony pointed to me and asked loudly, "Why doesn't that monk have a fan!" Just as loudly, I shot back for all to hear, "Stop! Everybody stop! We can't proceed until I retrieve my fan from the monastery!" My outburst spoiled the formal dignity of the occasion, stunning monks and royal householders alike. Softly and sternly, the palace official asked me why I had spoken up. I barked back, "I damn well asked before coming whether I needed a fan or not, and was told, no! So, I didn't bring one." Heads hung and faces turned red, as the royal family solemnly carried on offering the meal.

What is a fan, anyway? It's a badge of esteem used in formal monastic rituals. I had put up with those fans for ceremonial events, as they were promoted by the hierarchy of the administrative Sangha to denote rank and scholastic achievement. Such achievements were hollow in the view of practicing forest monks, however. Did Ajaan Mun esteem the ranks that were "bestowed" on monks? Hardly. He respected levels of meditative achievement: *samādhi* ranks and wisdom status. Real achievement comes from an internal struggle that involves effort, discipline, and great enthusiasm. This path leads to the

inner strength needed in the fight to increase wisdom and lessen ignorance. The only true badge of honor then is the attainment of absolute freedom.

Living at Khao Kaew Monastery, I was free to leave my ritual fan tucked away in a storage cabinet. The *dhutanga* monks who visited me never lugged one along when they came. We greeted and recognized each other by the Dhamma virtues in our hearts.

Life at Khao Kaew Monastery turned into an ongoing construction project. The only structurally sound building standing on the property when I arrived was the small pavilion where the monks gathered for meals and chanting. Even that was in poor condition. The few monks' huts that remained were falling apart. Roofs leaked and walls were missing. I resolved to renovate the old structures, build new ones, and develop the property into a fully functioning monastic hermitage.

I was prepared to shoulder most of the physical burden. The local village headman agreed to provide the monastery with financial resources. I believed it was my duty to achieve success through hard work without wasting money or other resources. We started by upgrading the materials we used to build new residences for the monks. I experimented with mixing and pouring concrete to replace the rickety bamboo huts. Bags of cement were available in the local market, sand was hauled in from the beaches and, with my trusty sledgehammer, I crushed rocks to provide stone aggregate to complete the mix. It was physically demanding manual labor. Cement, sand, and stone were combined with water in a shallow pit in the ground adjacent to the building site and mixed by hand. I pushed and pulled the blade of a long-handled hoe back and forth through the heavy mixture until it became a thick slurry ready to pour. Fresh concrete was scooped into buckets, hauled to the site, and poured into wooden frames to make first the floor and later the walls. Mostly I toiled alone. The village

headman was appreciative of my dedicated enthusiasm for the project, but he kept advising me to slow down and take it easy. It was all right to take time off to meditate, he cautioned. To that, I responded that I'd spent my entire monk's life meditating and there was nothing left to attain. He insisted that I'd gone too far with my insistence on working so hard. Working at that pace, he couldn't find workers willing to help me. I lambasted him and his workers for being lazy bastards who preferred lolling around to working hard. By the time I left Khao Kaew Monastery many years later, I'd built four concrete monks' residences, a new hardwood pavilion, and a towering concrete ordination hall. In other words, a fully functioning practice monastery. In addition, we planted a small forest of native trees covering the whole hilltop.

One of my earliest complaints was the poor quality of the tools that were donated for my use. I was particularly frustrated by the low-grade metal used in making sharp-edged tools like hatchets, axes, and machetes. Within a week of chopping with a new axe blade, the cutting edge began to nick and fracture because the metal was weak and brittle. Shoddy materials and sloppy workmanship were to blame. Fed up with poor-quality tools, I decided to take matters into my own hands and become my own blacksmith. Forging steel was a simple trade, but it required enormous strength, which suited my temperament very well. I built a small, charcoal-burning furnace behind my hut. I used leaf springs salvaged from the suspensions of old trucks because of their high strength, and heated the thick steel plates in the furnace's glowing charcoal until the metal became soft enough to shape using hand tools. When the metal was hot enough, I pulled it out, placed it flat side down on an anvil and pounded it into shape with a large hammer. Once the metal reached its desired shape, I filed the sharp edge down to remove any imperfections and smooth the surface. I then heat-treated it in the forge one more time to achieve optimal hardness. The tools I made were far more durable than those sold at the market.

Some idiots accused me of violating monastic discipline. They claimed the Buddhist Monastic Code forbade monks from forging their own tools. Nothing could be further from the truth. Nowhere in the Vinaya rules are monks prohibited from making an axe or a knife. These are common monks' requisites. I made them for a useful purpose. How could there be a fault? I did not use them to commit a crime. I did not use them to kill living beings. I did not sell them to make a profit. Having done nothing unskillful in their making or in their use, how could my conduct be wrong? Besides, pounding red-hot metal bars into tools can be a Dhamma teaching. Think about it as pounding your defilements and laziness into submission. In the end, I gave most of my axes and hatchets away to other monks. Where was the harm? Even today, at a ripe old age, I still enjoy working at the forge behind my residence.

My arrival at Khao Kaew Monastery had initially been greeted with enthusiasm in the surrounding communities, and many of the locals had volunteered to work on my construction crews. But the villagers also had their own work to do and their own lives to live. After the major building projects were completed, the majority of them returned to their mundane affairs and lost interest in the forest monastery on the hill. Villagers were grateful to have an opportunity to put food in the forest monks' bowls in the morning, but most of them didn't expect much more from the religion than that chance to make merit. Nevertheless, a small group of villagers who were deeply inspired by forest monks and their lifestyle did become regular supporters of Khao Kaew Monastery.

In the meantime, a number of monks and novices began to gather around me on Khao Kaew Hill, and I led them in undertaking an austere and vigorous meditation regimen. I pressed them to eat less, sleep less, talk less, and instead put their effort into sitting and walking meditation. Often, we sat in meditation or practiced walking meditation from dusk till dawn.

This group of monks included some of my earliest disciples. I gave them special attention because I knew the kind of momentum and intensity of effort needed to break through the walls of craving and delusion. I was in no mood for compromise, so I pushed my disciples to their limits. I always told them that if they genuinely aimed for liberation, they would have to courageously stare death in the face. Those who could put up with the pressure stayed on and prospered; those who couldn't soon left. The early disciples who persevered in putting my teachings into practice later became well-respected teachers in their own right and built monasteries and forest hermitages in wilderness areas of the country's northwestern region.

I tried to inspire in my disciples an enthusiasm for the training, stressing the patient endurance that was needed for them to succeed in reaching their goal. My aim was to instill in their minds the attitude that every detail has significance, and every action has consequences. Nothing was to be done in a lazy, slipshod frame of mind. Attention and careful consideration had to be given to every endeavor. I repeatedly hammered home the message that mindfulness must be sustained in every activity and tirelessly admonished the monks when I caught them being heedless.

Ten years after my return to Chanthaburi, I felt happy with the results of my efforts at Khao Kaew Monastery. The growing number of forest monks under my guidance was a good indication that Ajaan Mun's forest monastic lineage was firmly taking root in the Southeast. Shortly after the end of the 1960 rainy season retreat, I left the monks I'd trained in charge of Khao Kaew Monastery, bid farewell to my family, and stepped onto the forest trail leading to the Northeast. I intended to visit and pay homage to the disciples of Ajaan Mun that I respected the most. By the start of the rainy season, I had reached Baan Taad

Forest Monastery, where I bowed at the feet of Ajaan Mahā Boowa and requested permission to spend the 1961 retreat period there.

It was immediately apparent that Ajaan Mahā Boowa had established a thriving community of forest monks, all of whom were striving to maintain the virtues of renunciation, strict discipline, and intensive meditation. Much like Ajaan Mun, Ajaan Mahā Boowa had a reputation for being fierce and uncompromising with his students. He drilled into them the importance of practicing the bold meditation techniques that Ajaan Mun had championed.

He was also uncompromising in his opposition to attempts to introduce worldly values into the monastic community. Refusing to practice in line with people's wishes and opinions, he held true to the principles of Dhamma and monastic discipline and successfully maintained the monastery's atmosphere of concentrated focus. This strict attitude made me feel right at home.

Ajaan Mun used to caution monks against being influenced by worldly wishes and opinions that aren't based on Buddhist principles or ethical standards. Monks must remind themselves that lay life is a confining and dusty path, one that presents significant challenges to those seeking to tread the monastic path. The stability and strength of our religion have always depended on a community of monks who are completely dedicated to the practice of Buddhism and to teaching that path of practice to others. The stability and strength of the ordained Sangha, in turn, are dependent on its code of discipline, which is defined and governed by adherence to a set of precepts designed specifically for monastic living. Those rules outline a disciplined lifestyle that is ideally suited for practical application of the Buddha's teachings. Rather than expediently accepting the lower standards of worldly life, monks choose to adopt the higher principles enshrined in the monastic code of conduct. Otherwise, communities of practicing monks will lack harmony and discipline, and the religion will suffer as a result.

A central tenet guiding forest Dhamma meditation practices states that true achievement on the Buddha's path emerges from an internal struggle that involves enormous effort, strict discipline, and unwavering determination. Regardless of one's preferred method of practice, any effort put into meditation that ignores these principles easily becomes aimless and hesitant, which can lead to more mental discord, not less. It is imperative to develop enough inner strength to fight against the powerful pushback that comes from the combined forces of greed, aversion, and delusion. When the battle lines are drawn in the heart, only the strongest practitioners will emerge victorious.

When I arrived at his monastery, Ajaan Mahā Boowa resided in a small bamboo hut with a thatched grass roof, tucked away at one side of the monastery in a shady grove of tall bamboo trees. Local villagers had just begun to construct a new hardwood residence for him, which they considered to be a more appropriate dwelling given his status as the abbot. I soon jumped right in, uninvited, to lend a hand. The locals were clearing the brush and digging the ground in preparation for laying a foundation. I joined them after the morning meal, raking and leveling the earth, and generally doing groundwork where the wooden posts would be placed. When the workers broke for lunch, I kept raking. When they quit in the afternoon to go home for the night, I had my sights set on working until midnight. I continued to pound the loose soil with a tree stump attached to poles to compact and level the site. After the sun set and dusk enveloped the work area, I pounded the ground by moonlight with such a single-minded focus on the task that I was oblivious to any disruption I might have been causing.

Fed up with the constant racket at that quiet hour, Ajaan Mahā Boowa soon appeared in the half-light. He showed surprise at finding me to be the culprit. In a reproachful tone, he said that if it were anyone else, he would kick them out of the monastery straightaway. But since I'd lived and practiced with Ajaan Mun, he'd tolerate my behavior

just this once. “Is this how Ajaan Mun taught you? Was that what the Buddha taught his disciples? No. Quite the opposite.”

Ajaan Mahā Boowa continued his admonition citing a story from the scriptures about a time when, one evening after dark, the Buddha heard a crowd of people making a loud commotion inside his monastery. The loud, unpleasant clamor sounded like traders noisily hawking their wares. The Buddha told the monk next to him to send the offenders home immediately with the admonishment that their rowdy behavior at that late hour was detrimental to the monastery’s peaceful, quiet environment. Conscientious people are thoughtful of the needs of others and choose to act accordingly. They do not suppose they have a right to disturb the quietude of dedicated practitioners. Practicing monks have the right to expect the monastery to be still and quiet during the evening hours. That is a time when they thrive in a calm and quiet meditation environment. Disturbing that silence wastes their time and causes them difficulties for no good purpose. Noisy activity, when necessary, can wait for daytime. In that instance from the Buddha’s time, the disturbance was caused by lay people. How much worse is the offence when the culprit is a monk! Having said that, Ajaan Mahā Boowa quietly walked back to his hut.

Early the next morning, I waited for Ajaan Mahā Boowa to arrive at the main pavilion. After bowing respectfully to the Buddha statue, he sat down on the seat prepared for him. I quickly crawled over to where he sat and pulled one of his legs out from under him. Surprised, he demanded to know what I was up to. With tears running down my cheeks, I told him that I wished to bow down at his feet and pay my sincere respects to him. Looking Ajaan Mahā Boowa straight in the eyes, I told him with a sense of wonder that when he reproached me the previous night, he sounded exactly like Ajaan Mun, both in his manner and his expression. I voiced heartfelt regrets about my behavior the night before and confessed to being totally in the wrong.

I submitted wholly to Ajaan Mahā Boowa's authority because he so resembled Ajaan Mun, for whom I had undying reverence. In my entire life as a monk, I had felt afraid in the presence of only two monks: Ajaan Mun and Ajaan Mahā Boowa. That's it. I would not dare to contradict their superior judgment.

Much to my delight, I found out from Ajaan Mahā Boowa that Ajaan Khao's forest monastery was situated on the western edge of Udon Thani province, just a few days hike to the west. Ajaan Khao had been on my mind ever since I heard Ajaan Mun praise his virtuous character and high Dhamma attainment.

The day I arrived at Klong Pane Cave Monastery, I encountered the assembly of monks seated neatly in a row on the floor of a large open-air cave. I crept to one end of the line and asked which monk was Ajaan Khao. One of the monks nodded down the line, indicating the head monk at the end. Other than appearing older than the rest, Ajaan Khao did not stand out by his appearance. He seemed to be treated with no special deference, as though he was just another elderly monk at the gathering. This casualness surprised me, and years of living with Ajaan Mun had ingrained in my heart what I considered to be the proper monastic etiquette for this occasion. Oblivious to the glances of everyone present, I humbly crawled on my knees down the line of monks until I reached Ajaan Khao and bowed three times at his feet. Facing Ajaan Khao on my knees with palms raised and a feeling of sincere awe and respect, I begged him to sternly discipline me should I do anything wrong or unseemly. I promised to humbly admit my faults. I asked only that he accept me as a disciple.

Later, when I found the right opportunity, I approached Ajaan Khao with questions about his training methods. Since he was an elderly and experienced monk and I was still relatively young at that time, I relished every chance I had to learn from such a true master. At

our first meeting, he inquired about the state of my meditation practice. After I described my meditation from the earliest stages to the last stage, he praised my effort and confirmed that my understanding was correct. Even though I had supreme confidence in my Dhamma attainments, I believed it was important for a junior monk to show deference to his elders with a humble attitude.

I have often recounted this episode with Ajaan Khao to teach my disciples a lesson: Even though you may believe you are very proficient in meditation, be cautious about trusting your own assessments. Don't fall prey to complacency. Instead, test your understanding against that of an enlightened master. The same applies to body contemplation: Don't simply trust your own judgment. The body must be investigated from every possible angle until one is totally dismayed by the unpleasant reality of physical existence and no longer deludedly grasping the body as me or mine.

Several years before my arrival, Ajaan Khao led a small group of *dhutaṅga* monks on a trek across the forested mountains in Udon Thani province. When they reached Klong Pane Cave on the lower slopes of the western range, Ajaan Khao found the environment so conducive to meditative seclusion that he decided to settle in the area around the cave. Covered in thick jungle, the whole region was known for its massive boulders and overhanging cliffs. It was a place where caves dotted the landscape and tall, shady trees covered the hillsides. The location was so well suited to Ajaan Khao's temperament that he lived there comfortably for the remainder of his life.

During the rainy season retreat that year, I volunteered to build a water reservoir for the monastery, one big enough to catch and hold a large quantity of rainwater for use in the dry season. As I've mentioned, I have a doggedly determined character. When I decide to do something, I put all my energy into completing the task with skill and efficiency, allowing nothing to stand in my way. When the project was nearing completion, I heard news of a big typhoon moving

in, so I rushed to finish the work before the storm hit. As nightfall approached, all the monks retired to meditate, but my firmness of purpose was undaunted. I continued to pound rocks with a sledgehammer, breaking them up to line the bottom of the reservoir to prevent leakage during the heavy rainfall. Although the hammering made a loud noise, I pushed ahead undeterred. Such was the nature of my stubbornness.

Eventually, Ajaan Khao heard the banging noises and came to investigate. He was not pleased. Why was I working at the wrong hour of the day? Didn't I learn anything from Ajaan Mun? If it wasn't for his respect for Ajaan Mun, he said he would have asked me to leave the monastery and never come back. I felt ashamed at being chastised for a breach of etiquette yet again.

Softening his tone, Ajaan Khao proceeded to recount to me a vision that had made a profound impact on his approach to being a responsible leader in the monastic community:

In the years before *dhutaṅga* monks began to congregate around him to seek his guidance, Ajaan Khao had lived alone in a small forest hermitage where he preferred to remain aloof and practice in solitude. Seated in meditation there one night, an image of Ajaan Mun appeared in his mind. In the vision, Ajaan Mun spoke to Ajaan Khao and informed him that he would soon become a respected teacher in the forest tradition and have numerous disciples. He proceeded to advise Ajaan Khao that he should prepare to be a role model for a new generation of practicing monks.

In the vision, Ajaan Mun indicated that he had no doubts about Ajaan Khao's Dhamma attainment, but he wanted Ajaan Khao to focus on setting an inspiring example for his disciples to follow. He should not assume that the purity of his intentions entitled him to behave in ways that might lead to misunderstanding or disharmony within the monastic community. To maintain his good standing as a leader, he must lead wisely by example and not rely merely on common

knowledge about the monastic precepts to set the tone. Soon monks would be looking up to him for leadership and proper training, so he himself had to actively set the right standard. Then his disciples would feel confident that the practices he had taught them were correct and above reproach.

Ajaan Khao understood that Ajaan Mun was referring not only to the codified rules of monastic discipline that a monk must observe but also to the unwritten rules of good deportment that promote faith in skeptics and inspire further confidence in the faithful. He warned him that a teacher should not judge a disciple's conduct solely on the letter of the law and neglect appearances of impropriety that violate the spirit of the Buddha's teachings. In this regard, any discordant personal character traits that a monk exhibits, especially those that run counter to the welfare of the majority, must be firmly admonished by the teacher and brought under control. Ajaan Khao was told to guard his impeccable reputation so that others would say: His Dhamma virtue is exceptionally high—he is entirely beyond reproach.

As Ajaan Khao spoke, I reflected on my own recent behavior and how it had caused a disturbance within the monastic community at Klong Pane Cave Monastery. Humbled and chagrined by my conduct, I apologized to Ajaan Khao for my failure to live up to the high standards maintained by all the great teachers of our tradition. I determined at that moment, with the purest of intentions, to reform my wayward tendencies. But, alas, stubborn determination was still an attitude that would often trip me up in the years to come.

Caves

In early 1964, after two inspiring years serving Ajaan Khao, I resumed my wanderings in the wilds of the Northeast. I had my heart set on paying my respects to other highly acclaimed disciples of Ajaan Mun who resided in the area, *ajans* such as Ajaan Tate Desaraṃsī, Ajaan Fan Ācāro, Ajaan Khamdee Pabhāso, and Ajaan Awn Ñāṇasiri. Thus, I embarked on a lengthy pilgrimage to pay homage to these great meditation masters in the forest monasteries where they lived. For two years I wandered by stages across the wind-swept and sparsely populated northeastern landscape, camping beneath shady trees and receiving food from the poor rice farmers who lived along my route.

When bone-numbingly cold winds began blowing down from the north in December of 1965, I started hiking south toward the warmer weather that lingered on the central plains. I planned to eventually

make my way back home to Chanthaburi. News had reached me that my mother's chronic intestinal problems had gotten progressively worse while I was away, and I wanted to contribute to her recovery.

Upon my return, I resumed my old position as abbot of Khao Kaew Monastery. This time I was determined to bring my mother to the monastery so that she could spend the rainy season retreat period with me. When I noticed that her condition seemed somewhat improved, I took the opportunity to broach the subject with her. I went to her house to offer the invitation. When she voiced skepticism, I pleaded with her to join me at the monastery for three months of merit-making and meditation. She insisted she was too sick to spend three months away from home. I tried to bargain with her, suggesting first a two-month stay, then a one-month stay. But in the end, she agreed to stay at the monastery for only ten days.

From the very first day, I sensed my mother was annoyed with me. She resisted my overtures to help integrate her into the monastic routine. It appeared that she intended to stake out her independence from my chosen way of life. And she thought she had good reason. She quickly started to criticize what she felt to be my uncouth speech and behavior.

After living alone and carefree in wilderness habitats for the past several years, I felt awkward playing the role of abbot once again and acting with the customary decorum expected of a monk of my seniority. This wild monkey that had swung from branch to branch through the jungle, beholden to no one and unconcerned with praise or censure, was now confronted by the norms of "civilized" society. Free from the dictates of socially acceptable rules and conventions, I had lived in the wilderness exactly as I chose, obedient to no necessities except for those imposed by wind and rain, and certainly not to those of the world of commonplace manners and customs. My robes were torn and frayed, lacking in color and freshness. My sunburned features, with chapped hands, and thickly calloused feet, were an eyesore. Coarse,

uncouth, and too direct, my speech was graceless and offensive. The monkey appeared rude; he had no table manners.

In everyday conversations, I sometimes punctuated my speech with colorful expressions that some people considered to be vulgar. I tended to use crude and coarse language and inject swear words into discussions at the monastery. I might call someone a “jackass” or a “damn fool” in response to the circumstances at that moment. If I saw someone misbehaving, I might yell out, “You crazy idiot!” or “Stop that shit!” just to wake them up and get their full attention. Other expletives I uttered were perhaps too vulgar to mention here. Those robust responses were effective because all talking would stop after I spoke, and people would pay attention. They knew that the issue was important to me and that I meant business, and their reactions reflected that. I believe in being polite and encouraging when the circumstances warrant it. But sometimes, vulgar speech provides a little extra grease on the wheels—not that my mother could have understood that reasoning.

My mother soon began pleading with me to be more cultured and polite in my speech. Otherwise, people would criticize me for tarnishing my status as a celebrated senior monk. Being a gentle person, she was offended by vulgar language. Besides that, she felt embarrassed for me. She told me she knew I had a heart of gold on the inside, so why couldn’t that good nature show on the outside too? Why on earth did I insist on talking like that? I was a monk. How come I didn’t know the difference between what was appropriate and what was not? Frustrated, she occasionally wrung her hands and lamented that I tended to speak without any restraint.

I tried to explain that I couldn’t help it. It was instinctive, just part of the provincial dialect that I grew up speaking. True to my character, I became fluent in the salty language of the southeastern seashore fishermen. I’d always included a lot of common vulgarisms in my speech. Cursing playfully was common among the rowdy bunch I used to hang out with. We called each other every name in the book. But we

just laughed about it; no one took offense. Among friends, they were words expressing a kind of affection. No harm was intended.

It was also common for village folk to keep up a foul-mouthed banter, especially when the older men addressed the younger ones. Respect for age and experience made it acceptable, and even endearing. In terms of my age and my status as a monk, I felt a similar right and privilege. Most people were amused by my unsavory choice of words, although sometimes the monks and the women did profess embarrassment.

My mother had long been an honored and well-respected member of Chanthaburi society. With that status came a sense of pride and a feeling of dignity which she was determined to uphold despite her son's foul-mouthed behavior. She grudgingly tolerated me as mothers are wont to do with willful children. Although she disavowed my mannerisms, she never turned her back on me. I loved my mother dearly and didn't intend to cause her grief, but my natural instincts usually carried the day. I nevertheless made every effort to show gratitude to my mother as a way to pay back the lifetime of kindness she bestowed on me.

On lunar observance days, a group of lay people, mostly women from the towns and cities across the region, congregated at the monastery's pavilion in the evening to hear me give a Dhamma talk. My Dhamma teaching theme never changed for those sessions. I would always stress the importance of body contemplation, though I'd usually start off with the virtues of the repetition of *buddho*.

"*Buddho* is an exercise in ridding the mind of discursive thinking so that it becomes clear, sharp, and attentive. There's no need to vocally intone the word or be concerned with trying to visualize anything. The objective is to eliminate mental distractions. It's not necessary to evoke a special attitude of devotion to the Buddha. Just focus on *bud...dho*,

bud...dho in quick succession. The faster the repetition, the less likely it is that thoughts will find the space to sneak in edgeways. Rapid-fire repetition of *buddho* can generate enough mindfulness to rein in the mental restlessness that drives wandering thoughts, allowing them to gradually calm down and go quiet.

“Once the mind is sufficiently calm and quiet, conjure up a mental image of the physical body and start to meticulously dissect that image piece by piece, layer by layer. Taking the body to pieces is the most effective way to investigate it. I know this from personal experience. I always teach this type of body contemplation because I’ve seen how well it works.”

I told people to begin by dismembering the human body from head to toe. I first drew their attention to the head and went through its various parts. I instructed them to visualize the right eye and pull it out from its socket, then do the same with the left eye and then place both on the pavilion floor:

“Imagine tearing away the right and left nostrils and throwing those on the floor. Rip off the ears, the cheeks, and the lips, then pull out all the teeth. Chuck that lot on the floor with the rest. Move on to the hands and feet and use the mental image of a sharp knife to chop off the fingers and toes, one digit at a time, and add that to the bloody heap in front of you. Using the same imaginary knife on the abdomen, peel back the skin and cut through the bands of muscle to expose the internal organs—the heart, liver, kidneys, and intestines, for example. Yank them out one at a time in the mind’s eye, then examine them for insight as you dice them into small pieces with the sharp blade. Now scatter the pieces across the floor and wonder: Where in this disgusting mess am I? Where in it do I feel at home? Why do I carry this bloody burden around with me all the time?”

This is the gist of the Dhamma talk that I always gave on lunar observance days. I rarely deviated from that basic theme. The frequent use of this topic prompted my old friend Ajaan Fuang to confront me

one day during a visit to the monastery. He accused me of teaching only one kind of meditation, regardless of who was in the audience. It was always chopping up body parts and scattering them front and center on the floor. No wonder no one wanted to listen to my Dhamma talks! There was only one style, one kind of talk year after year. Why couldn't I tone it down a bit? Most people only wanted to hear something that made them relax and feel happy before going back to their family life. Women were particularly disgusted hearing about filthy body parts. It turned their stomachs. Why did I always insist on teaching women body contemplation? Ajaan Fuang recommended that I reserve this kind of intensive Dhamma investigation for my own practice instead. He felt it was inappropriate to introduce such practices to the general public.

On this subject, Ajaan Fuang and I disagreed. But don't be misled. A disagreement between practicing monks on points of Dhamma is not an argument in the ordinary sense of the word. It is a difference of opinion from which both can learn and benefit.

In fact, I heard complaints from many different people that my teachings were too harsh. Women were different, I was told. They came to listen to a smooth, eloquent discourse that would soothe their troubled minds. They weren't interested in attaining enlightenment. Why did I always insist on teaching women body contemplation?

My answer to those people was: How could women be any different from men with respect to meditation practice? Men are human beings. Women are as well. We needn't doubt that for a moment. Men and women are not the same in appearance. We all know that. But there is not a whisker of difference between the sexes when it comes to their essential minds. So don't be deluded by superficial impressions.

When we say, "this is a man" or "this is a woman," those designations result from the arising of thought. In deep *samādhi*, where thought does not arise, attributes like "man" or "woman" do not exist. That should make it clear that no distinction exists between the

conscious awareness of women and that of men. There is no reason, then, to doubt that women are fully capable of succeeding at all types of meditation. No grounds exist whatsoever for saying women can't become enlightened. If they really couldn't, what would I gain by going around lying to everyone? Women also have dirty parts, so it's only right that they should investigate those parts until they become disgusted and dismayed with physical existence and thus motivated to relieve the mind of that heavy burden. I simply teach them the unvarnished truth. It's up to them to find the inner strength needed to face up to it.

When I sat on the high seat in the pavilion teaching the people who came to meditate, some of them criticized me for scratching my crotch in public. They thought it very unbecoming of a monk to dig his fingernails into his private parts in full view of the assembly. They turned their heads away and cried foul. What was I supposed to do? The body itches when and where it chooses, and I scratch it to get some relief. It's as simple as that. If my ass itched, I'd scratch that too. Or my armpit. Why should I feel awkward or embarrassed? So what if they're considered "dirty" places? The whole damn body is a dirty place that itches here and there following the causes and conditions of birth as a human being. I might as well be embarrassed about having arms and legs, or hands and feet. When I fart or belch in public, it causes a stir. "He's a monk—how dare he!" It is as though these are somehow unorthodox behaviors. Farting is just a natural reflexive action of the bowels. Regardless of how it comes out, stomach gas makes a noise.

This embarrassment occurs because people are so obsessed with bodies that they don't want to face the truth about them. In their minds, they divide out the shameful dirty parts from the admirable clean ones and pretend everything is fine provided that everyone blindly follows the rules of social etiquette. Social customs certainly have their merits, but they mask a deeper reality about perceptions of the human body, which are characterized by a preference for beauty and attractiveness over ugliness and repugnance. These perceptions are

deeply personal and conveniently go unquestioned in order to protect the preferred image. It is strange that people identify with and desire something as gross and repulsive as the human body. They can do so only by completely ignoring the realities of flesh and blood.

I trained monks to practice the same method that I taught the lay people, though usually in more graphic detail. I always began by stressing the importance of disciplined behavior and focused attention. Without a strong foundation in discipline and powerful concentration, a monk's meditation was bound to falter when the practice intensified. Contemplating the body could resemble grabbing a tiger by the tail. Only those fully dedicated to the training had any real hope of taming the beast. On this topic, my talks often became animated. "To hell with being content to create a comfortable cell in the oppressive prison of *samsāra*! Break out of the confinement of attachment to the body and savor the freedom of never returning to the fetters of physical existence again. Free the spirit from the web of bodily attraction. Refuse to settle for a life of bondage and incarceration!"

The monks needed to learn the monastic rules of conduct as well as bold meditation techniques. In terms of monastic discipline, I was strict and meticulous. I schooled every monk who came to me for guidance and reprimanded monks severely when they violated the rules—whether they respected me for it or not. At the very least, I intended to maintain a high standard within the monastery. Monks were expected to follow even the lesser, unwritten rules of conduct. For instance, if I noticed two monks walking together and chatting, I immediately scolded them for wasting time and sent them straight back to their huts to meditate. Idle chatter was typical behavior of lay people, and it had no place in a practice monastery. Some monks were exemplary in carrying out their daily duties and responsibilities, only to later spend hours together fooling around. I chastised such monks

when I caught them. I reckon I got better results meditating for the short time it took me to urinate than they did meditating all night!

I taught the monks to be frugal with their requisites, and I led by example. Lay supporters worked hard, sacrificing their time and energy to provide monks with basic necessities. Forest monks were expected to keep those items in good condition and, when necessary, repair them to prolong their usefulness. They were expected to patch old robes that were torn or worn thin, and not just sit around idly waiting for lay folks to offer new robes to replace them. They mended holes in timeworn bowl bags, shoulder bags, and belts to keep them functional. Monks who acted responsibly with their requisites were content to make do with little. They knew how to live in humble circumstances and were happy to make use of secondhand items or maintain the usefulness of well-worn ones. *Dhutaṅga* monks take pride in mending their robes time and time again until the cloth looks like a patchwork of fabrics and stitches.

I insisted that my monks learn how to skillfully sew their robes by hand, using the needles and thread included in their basic requisites. Hand-sewing was a very useful skill for *dhutaṅga* monks because it allowed them to easily mend cloth items when they were wandering and camping in the wilderness. I didn't want monks to be dependent solely on the monastery's sewing machines to make or repair their garments.

I had learned from Ajaan Mun lessons in salvaging old cloth and other useful items that people threw away when they lost interest in them. For example, while walking on the country roads, I occasionally found an old, worn-out pair of pants or some other garment cast away on the side of the road. I thankfully picked up the obviously ownerless item from the ground and carried it back to the monastery where it could be washed and fashioned into small cloth requisites, patches for robes, or just foot rags. If I spied bent nails on the ground, I'd retrieve them, hammer them straight, and put them away for future use. A

broken plastic bucket could be cut into pieces and, with a little innovation, shaped into a sheath to cover the blade of a machete or a hatchet. If I saw a damaged pillow or cushion cast in the drain in front of a house in the village when on almsround, I ordered a junior monk walking behind me to pick it up and carry it back with him. The poor monk would feel embarrassed clutching a damaged and soiled pillow along with his clean alms bowl. People must have thought he was crazy! When we returned to the monastery, I would have the monk take the stuffing from the cushion and spread it out in the sun to dry. He would then wash the cloth casing, patch it if necessary, and put the stuffing back inside. In the process, he would learn a valuable lesson: Don't be wasteful! Treasure the lowliest acquisitions. This is the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether one has plenty or just barely enough.

Fine requisites themselves are not a true source of contentment and can easily become a source of discontent for a heart lacking Dhamma principles to sustain it. Unsupported by Dhamma and left to its own desires, the heart will be unable to experience genuine happiness, even with a mountain of valuable possessions at its disposal. Regardless of whether a monk wears robes patched with rags or brand-new robes, he must be satisfied with what he has and trust the power of the virtues he has developed to provide for the future. When craving leads the way, sought-after belongings end up being accumulated waste—which is useless for spiritual development. Ultimately, the monks who hoard these belongings turn their monasteries into wastelands of greed and desire. I wasn't going to allow that to happen at Khao Kaew Monastery.

When I moved back to Khao Kaew Monastery in early 1966, I resolved to live there and assist my mother to the best of my ability for the remainder of her life. My mother was a very noble, kind, and respectable

person. I loved her very much. I knew that she always had me on her mind. She had wanted me to be an active part of the family and trusted me to dedicate merit for her well-being after she passed away. Her death occurred on March 17, 1974, when she was ninety-three years old. I miss her to this day.

Her cremation took place several days after her death. An open-air cremation pyre was built on a flat area in front of the main pavilion inside Khao Kaew Monastery. I invited several highly respected disciples of Ajaan Mun to assist with the funeral arrangements and give Dhamma talks to the gathering of well-wishers attending the ceremony. After my mother's ashes had been gathered from the cremation site and dutifully distributed among members of the family, my filial responsibilities had been fulfilled. I was then released from further obligations and could roam freely again.

After leaving Khao Kaew Monastery, I trekked north through the country's central plains until I reached the Khao Yai mountain range that separates the Central and Northeastern regions of Thailand. I wandered *dhutaṅga* alone in the Dong Phraya Yen Forest for a few months before making my way south to Bangkok. There I stayed at Asokārāma Monastery, a monastery built by my mentor, Ajaan Lee, in the marshy Chao Phraya River estuary district on the outskirts of the city. It was a quiet and isolated location close to where the Chao Phraya River empties into the Gulf of Thailand. The main section of the monastery was built on high ground, but as more monks' residences were added over the years, construction began to stretch out into the swampy coastal tidewater area alongside the river. The huts there were built on stilts to protect them against rising water levels and were connected by elevated walkways which nearly flooded at high tide.

The monks living at Asokārāma Monastery were more urbane and studious than those I had been accustomed to teaching. Many of the senior monks were learned Pāli scholars who showed little interest in meditation practice, and their students tended to follow their example.

Undeterred by their apparent indifference, I gathered a group of young monks around me and instructed them in the basics of meditation. They were still required to spend their days pursuing academic studies, but in the evening, I brought them together for Dhamma discussions and meditation sessions.

Eventually, the abbot of the main royally sponsored Dhammayut monastery in Bangkok, Somdet Ñāṇasaṃvara, whom I had visited from time to time in the past, came to me with a proposal. He had long been an enthusiastic advocate for the forest monastic tradition. He appreciated its emphasis on putting the Buddha's teachings into practice in secluded environments. He felt that monks who ordained in Bangkok monasteries would be best served if they had the option to choose a lifestyle focused on meditation as an alternative to one focused primarily on academic studies. In conjunction with the senior monks at Asokārāma Monastery, we discussed the possibility of establishing a monastic retreat center in the coastal region southeast of Bangkok where monks from the urban monasteries who wished to practice meditation in earnest could take up residence and train under the guidance of an experienced teacher. Knowing my background from our previous conversations, Somdet Ñāṇasaṃvara proposed that I supervise the project and take responsibility for the training program.

When I agreed to participate, the group appointed a committee to search for an appropriate piece of land. As a result, two of Somdet Ñāṇasaṃvara's wealthy patrons purchased and generously donated 150 acres of land situated adjacent to another 1,000 acres of vacant farmland owned by the Thai king. The nascent monastery was given the name Ñāṇasaṃvara. In December 1976, I moved to Ñāṇasaṃvara Monastery and took up residence there together with my monastic students from Asokārāma Monastery. Only a few small huts were available to us at first, but with the help of local villagers we set to work building enough simple residences to house us all. Once we had completed the building of an open-air pavilion and all the monks' huts,

I discontinued the construction work and concentrated on instituting a daily monastic routine conducive to full-time meditation similar to the one that Ajaan Mun had established. If I had failed to institute a rigorous routine early on, it would have been hard to reverse the tendency to simply take it easy.

All monks were required to wake up promptly at 3:00 a.m., climb down from their huts, and begin doing walking meditation. I walked around the monastery at that hour every morning to make sure that all the monks were awake and meditating. When I found a darkened hut and a vacant meditation path, I cleared my throat, softly at first. If I didn't hear a response, I'd cough loudly and spit on the ground. If the silence continued, I'd take off one of my sandals and bang it on the wall of the hut, shouting a few choice words to accompany the noise and rouse the sleeping monk.

Before dawn, we all congregated at the pavilion to scrub and sweep the floor in preparation for walking to town for alms. Because the nearest town was far away, we started walking early in order to reach it shortly after the first light of dawn. Our destination was a small market town of noodle shops and seafood stores where the daily food offerings that we received were more than sufficient for our needs. After a long walk back to the monastery, we arranged the food in our bowls and sat down to eat.

I stressed moderation in eating: For practicing monks, less is always better than more. After the meal, bowls were washed and dried in the sun, the pavilion was cleaned again, and everything was put neatly away in its proper place. The monks then carried their personal items back to their huts and promptly began doing walking meditation. When we first moved to the new monastery, very few shady trees grew on the property, so the monks were obliged to pace back and forth under the hot sun. The land had originally been the site of a prosperous cassava plantation, but the flat fields were now bare of vegetation and furrowed from years of plowing. This presented significant challenges

to our efforts to develop a “forest” monastery. With the help of local labor, we started a forest reclamation project by planting hundreds of native trees, first at regular intervals around the monastic buildings, and later across the full breadth of the property. To combat a chronic scarcity of water, I instituted a water conservation policy: All wastewater, whether from washing bowls and robes or from bathing, was collected in such a way that the excess ended up watering the vegetation. No water was to be wasted. Even urine was collected and poured at the base of the young saplings. As a result of this effort, the “forest” reentered the monastery, one seedling at a time.

As dusk fell each evening, we all gathered again at the central pavilion. A Dhamma talk preceded seated meditation that lasted until I brought it to a close, after which I sent everyone back to their huts to rest for the night. The early morning meditation routine started again at 3:00 a.m. The monks from Asokārāma Monastery were not accustomed to such an intense lifestyle. They often stumbled out of their huts at that early hour, staggered over to the meditation path, and experienced difficulty walking mindfully until mind and body became fully awake.

I drilled them in the training methods that I had practiced under Ajaan Mun’s skillful guidance—methods that go against the grain by forcing meditators to confront their mental hindrances head-on to prevent them from falling prey to a complacent sense of self-satisfaction. Through repeated and regular repetition of the same practice, a monk’s meditation can remain consistent and predictable. But the effects of that mode of practice can result in a lack of sharpness and clarity, especially when one’s meditation habitually settles for a succession of calm and gentle states of mind, followed by timid insight investigations day after day. The familiarity of these practices makes practitioners feel deceptively at ease and comfortable with their meditation. They feel at ease because their minds are not being tested. They remain stuck in the same old rut, and they can’t rouse the courage to change course be-

cause change means uncertainty and discomfort. When life feels safe and familiar, finding the motivation to step into a challenging situation can seem daunting. It requires focused willpower and a radically different mindset. The demanding meditation practices that Ajaan Mun and his disciples pioneered were designed to strike a blow against such complacency by awakening the mental strength and focused energy needed to seek out the most challenging environments, while engaging in those practices that require the most skill and effort.

Ñāṇasaṃvara Monastery's physical landscape was open and free of danger. No wild animals roamed the countryside. No mental vigilance was required to feel secure. Thus, it was my job to establish a mental landscape within each monk that forced him to face the unpleasant realities of the human condition as a way of awakening him to his potential for experiencing states of clear, heightened awareness that could illuminate the mental dangers he must contend with. There were no wild animals to threaten the monks' safety, but wild defilements still roamed freely in their minds, harrowing in their potential for mauling the unsuspecting victim. Freedom from fear and anxiety meant trapping and eliminating the beasts of greed, aversion, delusion, and sexual craving.

To drive this point home to my students, my teachings often stressed the dangers of sexual craving. Because no other emotion defiles the mind so thoroughly, sexual craving is a root cause in the perpetuation of the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. The only way to make sure one will never take birth on this earth again is to uproot and destroy all traces of sexual craving. No other defilement weighs more heavily on the mind or exerts greater power over it than this form of craving. This defilement is one of the most significant obstacles to a monk's progress in meditation. The more deeply the body is probed and investigated, the more evident this truth becomes. Since hunger for sexual gratification is rooted in perceptions of the human body, exposing the body's repulsive reality will gradually diminish the mind's

infatuation with bodily attraction. How does the body, which is just a stinking bag of flesh, blood, and bones, manage to deceive everyone in the world into lusting after it? Only body contemplation can expose the nature of that deception.

I told the monks that skin is the chief deceiver. Because it encases the body from head to toe, it's the visible part that is always on display. But what does it conceal? It conceals the animal flesh, the muscles, the fluids, and the fat. It hides from view the skeleton with the tendons and the sinews. It covers the liver, the kidneys, the stomach, the intestines, and all the other internal organs. The human body's innards are not things of beauty worthy of passion and lust. Instead of being fooled by a thin layer of scaly tissue, peel it off to see what lies hidden underneath.

Seeing the body clearly and precisely in a way that leaves no room for doubt demands boldness and persistence. Investigating the body from time to time—only when in the mood—isn't enough. This practice must be approached as if it is a monk's life work, as though nothing else in the world matters except the analysis one is conducting at that moment. Time cannot be a factor; place cannot be a factor; ease and comfort cannot be factors. Body contemplation should occupy every breath, every thought, and every movement until the mind becomes thoroughly immersed in it. Nothing short of total commitment will bring genuine and direct insight into the truth. When body contemplation is practiced with single-minded intensity, each successive body part becomes a kind of fuel feeding the fires of insight meditation. The investigation then becomes a conflagration consuming the human body section by section, part by part, as each is examined and investigated with a burning intensity. Regardless of how long it takes or how difficult the work proves to be, body contemplation must be practiced relentlessly until all doubt and uncertainty have been eliminated.

As I'd come to expect, not everybody was happy with my way of teaching. The monks from Asokārāma Monastery had joined me with

good intentions, but their energy and enthusiasm soon faded under the pressure of food reduction, sleep deprivation, and intensive meditation sessions. Some of them became hooked on pleasant experiences in *samādhi* meditation that allowed them to forget about the stress and hardship of monastic life. Between meditation sessions, they felt free to let their minds drift off into pleasant reveries. They failed to grasp that *samādhi* is not the end result, that *samādhi* on its own does not have the power to eliminate suffering. I gave those monks an earful of warnings about the pitfalls of *samādhi*. Although the calm and concentration experienced in *samādhi* do form a firm foundation from which to launch an all-out assault on the defilements that cause suffering, the *samādhi* experience itself can be so peaceful and satisfying that a monk inadvertently becomes addicted to it. Soon his meditation loses its edge. Because his mindfulness isn't honed to sharpness and his effort isn't wholehearted, he remains trapped at a shallow level of "snooze" *samādhi*. When mental acuity and precision slacken, meditation often reaches an impasse.

I tried every trick I knew to wake those lazy monks up from their *samādhi* slumber. I taught them to use the repetition of the meditation-word *buddho* as though it were a file used for forming and smoothing the coarse surfaces of the mind until they form a sharp, concentrated edge capable of slicing through the fog of their daydreams. That single-minded focus would then be emboldened to test its strength when its mindful attention was centered on penetrative insight practices like body investigation. Combining strong-minded concentration with a variety of wisdom practices would prevent *samādhi* from losing its edge and exhausting its strength. In fact, the strength of *samādhi's* concentration was enhanced by the mental precision needed to scrutinize the human body down to the last detail. In the end, the powers of concentration and wisdom combined seamlessly to blaze a monk's path to release from the bondage of sexual craving.

My efforts to establish Ñāṇasaṃvara Monastery as a training center for practicing monks met with mixed reactions. Some monks put all their energy into following my instructions, and the results were encouraging. Other monks tried just as hard but failed to make significant progress because the headwinds of their old habits were too strong. The monks who refused to accept the strict discipline complained vociferously and threatened to run away. Some became so upset that their faces flushed crimson trying to hide their frustration with long hours of seated meditation. Other monks simply nodded off during meditation sessions, remaining dreamily unaware. All those monks were my charges, and I took my responsibility to teach them seriously, whether they showed enthusiasm or not. I considered all of us to be fellow descendants in Ajaan Mun's forest lineage. If I was harsh on them, it was only because I wanted them to experience the fruits of the Buddha's path to freedom.

For two years, I managed to maintain the strict monastic routine typical of forest monasteries. I policed the grounds every day, making sure all the monks were awake on time, keeping watch over their comings and goings during daylight hours, and leading them through long meditation sessions at night. On those occasions when we gathered to carry out maintenance work or other manual labor projects, I set the tone by personally grabbing a tool and setting right to work. As an example for the laggards and an inspiration for the diligent, I often worked so hard that very few of the young monks could keep up with me.

The situation wherein some monks constantly struggled with this monastic lifestyle while others persisted admirably in their efforts was not unusual in a practice monastery. A group of young men hailing from differing backgrounds, with diverse characters and temperaments, varying mental capacities and latent virtuous tendencies accumulated from their past *kamma*, were bound to adjust differently to a fixed, unvarying program of strict discipline and intensive medita-

tion. I felt I had to create a favorable practice environment and enforce a meditation program worthy of the most conscientious and committed of my students. I saw no reason to compromise these principles, no need to sacrifice intensity just to placate the stragglers.

But a rigorous practice routine required ample opportunities for seclusion and solitude. Any disturbances to the monastery's peace and quiet were unwanted distractions. When I first moved to Nāṇasaṃvara Monastery, the location was isolated and relatively unknown. A quiet calmness pervaded the whole area. That peaceful atmosphere began to change during my third year in charge. By then, the monastery had begun to attract attention—both locally, due to respect for the practicing monks, and more ominously, in the Bangkok metropolitan area, where Somdet Nāṇasaṃvara had taken pride in my success and started encouraging his disciples to pay me visits to learn more about meditation. On top of that, due to the Somdet's close connections with members of the royal family, plans were underway to merge the 1,000 acres of vacant land that the Thai king possessed with the 150 acres inside Nāṇasaṃvara Monastery, expanding the property—and resulting responsibilities—immensely.

These issues came to a head when a senior monk from the administrative hierarchy traveled down from Bangkok to pay a visit with an entourage of lay supporters trailing in his wake. Most of his followers were high-ranking ladies boasting royal titles or lofty social positions. Many of the rest were professors, doctors, or other intellectual types. It happened that the senior monk in question had a reputation for performing seances for the wealthy. That foolishness was the preoccupation of the gaggle that followed him. Instead of coming to the monastery to make merit by practicing meditation, these idiots came for the avowed purpose of taking advantage of the monk's psychic abilities to communicate with spirits of the dead. They intended to spend their time engaged in this bullshit, even though the monastery was well known as a haven for meditators.

I've never allowed anybody, regardless of their reputation or rank, to ride roughshod over the ethical principles that I hold dear. No one is granted that privilege. My reaction to the seances was swift and decisive. As soon as I saw the rogue monk holding a meeting with his fan club in the main pavilion, I walked in and lambasted the monk to his face in front of everyone. "You damn scoundrel, you've barged into my monastery uninvited just to trample on the virtues you vowed to uphold as a monk. You should be ashamed of your ignoble behavior." Shocked by this intrusion on their get-together, genteel ladies and cultured intellectuals alike scattered in different directions as the surprised monk's face turned pale. "This old monk will not tolerate conduct that violates the disciplinary rules laid down by the Lord Buddha and followed religiously by conscientious monks ever since. This monastery is not a rubbish bin for cast-off rules and discarded virtues. It is a garden for cultivating goodness and merit. You've worn out your welcome here. I expect you and your group to be gone before the end of the day." I heard later that the socialites in Bangkok were angry at my uncouth reaction to the visit of a highly celebrated monk and his retinue of distinguished guests. Such is the price we pay to uphold Dhamma principles in the face of worldly misconduct.

Incidents like the one I've just described eventually convinced me that I needed to find a place of my own where I was beholden to no authority other than the principles of Dhamma and Vinaya. Motivated by that resolve, I returned to Asokārāma Monastery during my third year of service to request that I be relieved of my duties as abbot and supervisor of Ñāṇasaṃvara Monastery. After detailed discussions with the relevant Sangha authorities, they agreed to find another experienced monk willing to replace me and carry on with the development of what was becoming a royally sponsored monastic center with grand expectations—a project in which I wanted no part.

Instinctively, I had always been drawn to wilderness locations that provided seclusion and refuge from the world's messy compromises. So, after a short stay helping with teaching duties at Asokārāma Monastery, I started to travel again. Due to my age—I was sixty-two years old by that time—and chronic physical conditions that limited my mobility, I was willing to accept rides on my travels around the country. Trekking along forest trails was reserved for wilderness areas where motorized traffic was impractical or impossible.

Out of undying respect for Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo, whose memory I always kept close to my heart, I headed for Chin Lae Mountain in Lopburi province just northeast of Bangkok, a locale where Ajaan Lee had wandered *dhutaṅga* and established a monastery almost twenty-five years earlier. I intended to retrace his steps through the mountains and visit that monastery to honor the senior monk who had urged and emboldened me as a young monk to seek out Ajaan Mun in the wilds of Chiang Mai. I've never forgotten the kindness and encouragement he showed to a raw recruit in the forest tradition.

In many ways, Ajaan Lee was everything that I was not. As a teacher, he was always conscious of his audience and ready, on the spur of the moment, to adapt his language to the level of the people to whom he was speaking. With farmers and traders, he bantered fluently in the Laotian dialects of his Northeastern homeland. With shopkeepers and government officials, on the other hand, he conversed in Thai, the national language, like a native speaker. When addressing members of the Bangkok elite, he knew all the refined and polished idioms and always spoke appropriately for the occasion. He had encouraged me to follow his example but soon realized I was a hopeless case. The communication skills that he'd mastered just didn't come naturally to me. Comparing my own "rustic" style to Ajaan Lee's elegance and erudition was like comparing a smelly pile of shit with a well-manicured flower garden.

In everyday conversation, I tended to address people with blunt and folksy language. When principles of Dhamma came up, however, my discourse became more deliberate and restrained, and my manner more circumspect due to a profound respect for the value of the Buddha's teachings. At the same time, my tone was usually serious and direct. I didn't like to sugarcoat my message. Experience taught me that the best way to get the listeners' attention was to punch them where it hurt most. Then they would wake up and start to really focus on what I was saying. On the other hand, if I was in the audience when another teacher spoke on Dhamma themes, I listened quietly and didn't interrupt. I still felt like a student of practice and wanted to learn more whenever I had the chance.

From Chin Lae Mountain I journeyed further northwest to Tak province, a mountainous wilderness district on the Burmese border. Several of the monks who had trained under my guidance when I was the abbot of Khao Kaew Monastery in Chanthaburi had already put down roots in the area's vast jungle. I struggled to walk through the boulder-strewn terrain to reach the sites where they had built monasteries and forest hermitages. The dense, almost impenetrable forest reminded me of my years practicing with Ajaan Mun in the uninhabited, inhospitable wilderness areas of the North. The austere environment in Tak province recalled years of internal struggle when only enormous effort, strict discipline, and unwavering determination allowed me to survive the ordeals and become a standard-bearer for wilderness monks everywhere. It pleased me immensely to see disciples I'd trained from an early age become rightful heirs to the legacies of monks like Ajaan Mun, Ajaan Khao, and Ajaan Lee. These disciples had taken the untamed wilderness as their home and refuge while training a new generation of practicing monks in the tried-and-true meditative lifestyle pioneered by Ajaan Sao and Ajaan Mun, the grand-

fathers of the Thai forest movement. Even in the modern world, which had increasingly lost its reverence for nature's sanctuaries, resilient pockets of dedicated forest monks continued to buck contemporary trends while living and practicing quietly on the borderland of modern society. I envied their independence. My body could no longer endure the physical punishment that this mode of living entailed. My days of indefatigable vitality were slowly coming to an end.

Aware of my penchant for living in caves, my disciples arranged a trip north up the Ping River, which flowed down from northern Chiang Mai through mountainous regions where age-old cave sites abounded. The steep cliffs that jutted out over the river basin, and the mountains and valleys stretching back beyond them, acted as a natural barrier separating the primordial landscape from modern-day development. Along the length of the mighty Ping, hundreds of ancient monasteries and stupas had fallen into ruin, their material remains scattered throughout the river valley. Human settlements were sparse in this interior jungle. We relied for our alms food on the families of fishermen that eked out their subsistence while living on raft houses moored in small, sheltered inlets recessed into the riverbank.

Trudging slowly along the bank of the wide river, we heard the trumpeting sounds of wild elephants that had come down to drink and bathe at the river's edge. Schools of colorful fish were visible swimming just beneath the surface of the glass-clear water. The forest came alive each morning with the hooting and screeching cries of monkeys and gibbons that reverberated through the canyons in the early daylight hours. The midday air pulsated with the buzzing, shrieking, and hissing noises of countless varieties of insects. The menacing growls of clouded leopards heralding the onset of darkness alternated with the loud, abrupt noises of their prey, the barking deer. From one sunrise to the next, the forest resounded with activity.

When we reached the Li district of Lamphun province, our party of *dhutanga* monks turned away from the river trail and hiked over

the steep hills to the east and down into an adjacent valley. We were searching for the entrance to Chaang Rawng Cave, once the spiritual center of a long-forgotten Buddhist civilization that flourished at the peak of human activity in the Ping River valley. On the floor of the large cavern inside that cave, an ancient ruler had built a small pavilion supported by huge golden teakwood timbers. The pavilion's floor was made of golden teakwood planks polished smooth by centuries of bowing to the cave's many Buddha statues situated in niches along the walls. Its roof, covered with teakwood shingles, fit snugly under the cave's arched ceiling. Sturdy wooden dowels pounded into the timber joints held the structure together. On the ground beside the pavilion lay an ornate wooden palanquin used in olden times to transport distinguished patrons.

Every nook and cranny in the cave's walls housed a Buddha statue—some large, some small. Many statues had cracked or broken over the centuries and their missing limbs and heads lay scattered on the ground below. The overall effect of this scene had inspired awe and wonder in generations of intrepid pilgrims who had trekked through the wilderness to pay reverence. The evidence of human intrusion in the area was minimal. Chaang Rawng Cave's seclusion was almost complete. Since no roads in or out existed at the time, the only way for ordinary people to reach the cave was by riverboat; even then, they were forced to hike in through the jungle and contend with the perils of wild animals and biting insects. Powerful forces of the natural world, both earthly and celestial, guarded the cave's privacy. Sanctuaries of Buddhist heritage like this ancient monument lost in the overgrown jungle, still unspoiled and unaltered, have unfortunately become a rare sight even in a country like ours, which boasts such a time-honored Buddhist culture.

Living in the depths of the jungle at Chaang Rawng Cave coaxed my mind to reflect on the rapid changes that had taken place in the world since Ajaan Mun passed away. Large swaths of wilderness

habitat had succumbed to the restless hunger of people of all classes seeking to take advantage of the country's natural resources for their own financial gain. From small farmers expanding their fields, to greedy businessmen seeking profit from the logging of timber, everyone encroached on the wilderness without feeling shame or hesitation about the propriety of their actions. The nation's wilderness areas were disappearing at a rate matched only by the proliferation of greed, aversion, and delusion in the confused jungles of its citizens' hearts. The wholesale destruction of our forests coincided with an uncontrolled expansion of the tangled undergrowth of mental defilements.

All too often people believe the conditions of the earth can be changed to ensure human happiness, to provide jobs, and to create material wealth and a comfortable life. Everyone is trying to accumulate as much wealth as possible, but the search for material wealth and the quest for spiritual wealth are in many ways incompatible. Material wealth views the earth and its resources as commodities for human consumption, and the harvesting of those resources as a human right. Spiritual wealth views the same abundant resources as a treasure to be safeguarded and a natural setting for profound spiritual experiences.

Because monks initially come from the lay society, this materialist worldview has infiltrated monastic communities. The ensuing change in attitudes has been dramatic. My earliest disciples, who came to the monkhood from rural farming families, had only elementary or middle school educations, but they were accustomed to working long, hard hours in the rice fields during the planting and harvesting seasons. Never ones to shy away from the demands of physical labor, those boys gave tireless effort to their tasks. Their thoughts were unruly, but their hearts had the strength to buckle down and rein in the restlessness in their minds. Though not highly educated, they were smart in practical, commonsense ways. Quick to learn, they exhibited a natural cleverness in devising and applying new ideas. Being serious and well intentioned, that first group of disciples was easy to teach using strict

training methods that pushed them to the limits of their abilities. They were realistic and tough-minded. They didn't argue or talk back.

Later, steel oxen replaced those of flesh-and-bone in plowing the fields and preparing the soil for sowing. Consequently, the sons of today's farmers engage in less physical labor and have more idle time to entertain social distractions. They study longer in school but engage less in religious activities. Their minds become so crammed with stressful thoughts on how to secure a wife and where to make a living that hardly a crack is left open to allow access for Dhamma themes to enter their consciousness. Even fundamental precepts of decent behavior are discarded by the wayside on the anticipated road to prosperity. If these young village men become monks at all, it's merely for a short-term stay to please their parents and fulfill some social expectation.

With the advancement of higher education in subsequent generations, a new breed of young men shows up to apply for monastic training. These recruits represent a more educated and skeptical generation of young people who have been raised mostly in an atmosphere of indifference to the supreme virtues that previous generations had taken for granted. The comfortable, sheltered lifestyle youngsters enjoy nowadays makes them less fit—and less inclined—to tackle the primitive conditions of *dhutaṅga* life: hiking on narrow, uneven forest trails, sleeping in mosquito-infested jungles, and subsisting on rough village fare.

Reflecting on the future, I realized that the remainder of my life would be dedicated to introducing Thai forest practices to monks whose minds were trained in intellectual skills, but who were sorely lacking in basic survival skills. A forest monk must have the wiliness of a fox, the strength of an elephant, and the heart of a tiger to follow the Buddha's path to the end. Today's educational system doesn't teach those virtues. University graduates are often too smart for their own good. Their first challenge? They need to realize how stupid they truly

are before they can bow down in earnest and accept their teacher's training.

The preceding first-person oral account of Ajaan Jia's life ends with the 1984 trip to Chaang Rawng Cave. Most of the description that follows, chronicling the final twenty years of his life, was provided by the editors of the original Thai edition of Gold Wrapped in Rags. These compilers either told their version of the events that happened during those years or quoted accounts gleaned from the comments made by Ajaan Jia's contemporaries. In the following epilogue, I have combined the sequence of events that the editors described in detail and elaborated on those stories with descriptions collected from other sources to bring the chronicle of Ajaan Jia's life and practice to an inspirational conclusion.

Dusk

Ajaan Jia returned from Chaang Rawng Cave having made a decision about his future role in the forest Sangha, but without a plan for how to realize it. However, his old friend, Ajaan Mahā Boowa, was already one step ahead of him. A longtime lay disciple of his had recently purchased a tract of land in Pathumthani province and offered the property to him in the hope that he would build a forest monastery at the site. By the time the two *ajans* met again in 1984, Ajaan Mahā Boowa had already determined that Ajaan Jia was the only monk he trusted to head up the project and make it a success. Not only did he feel it was time for Ajaan Jia to have a monastery of his own, but he also believed that his character had the rigor and resolve needed to transform a piece of land on Thailand's central lowlands into a forest monastery in the style of Ajaan Mun. To honor their venerated teacher, Ajaan Jia

decided to name the new monastery Bhūridatta Paṭipadārāma Forest Monastery, Bhūridatto being Ajaan Mun's formal monastic ordination name.

Both Ajaan Mahā Boowa and Ajaan Jia had put their lives on the line in the service of Ajaan Mun and his teachings. They shared in that inspiring experience and understood its transformative qualities. Among that generation of Ajaan Mun's disciples, Ajaan Mahā Boowa had been one of the most successful at replicating the intensity and strictness of wilderness training inside the confines of an established monastic center. Ajaan Jia agreed to put down roots in Pathumthani under the condition that Ajaan Mahā Boowa lend his strength and advice to get the project off the ground.

In 1984, Ajaan Jia moved his old and aching body to Pathumthani, where he planned to drag a new generation of forest monks—kicking and screaming—back to the old ways of *dhutaṅga* training. But first, he had to build the basic infrastructure for a functioning monastic community. The land that he had been offered measured about fifty acres in total. Much of the property was covered with pine forest that had an abundance of thick foliage and limited undergrowth. A smaller section of the property was open pasture. Another section consisted of fallow rice fields where the mud walls that retained the rainwater needed to grow rice followed the contours of the land in large rectangular patterns. Those low, earthen walls also served as raised walkways between the fields. The open land was bordered on two sides by a shallow canal.

The environment certainly had potential, but much work would be needed to shape many different environments into a viable monastic living space. With the help of local devotees, Ajaan Jia set to work, first building a simple abbot's residence—a small bamboo hut placed at the edge of the pine forest. He constructed the hut using four wooden posts to support a raised floor and a thatched roof made of woven coconut fronds. The walls consisted of old and frayed monks' robes hung like curtains to shield the four sides. From this cool, breezy platform Ajaan

Jia surveyed the farmland in front of him and contemplated how to incorporate the open spaces into the overall monastic ground plan so that the pine forest behind him would not feel like an island of forest encircled by a sea of tamed fields.

Fortunately, a group of dedicated engineers volunteered to offer their services. Together with Ajaan Jia, they drew up plans to fill the sunken portions of the rice fields between the mud walls with compacted earth, thus leveling the land area so that any water that did not sink into the soil would run off into the canals instead of collecting in the fields. It also opened the possibility of reforesting the undeveloped pasture and field areas. Since tree saplings often take decades to grow to a mature height, the earth-moving work became their first priority.

The rice fields were positioned in a wide area that spread out on both sides of the entrance road. Ajaan Jia's crew brought in excavating equipment to dig out earth from the adjacent pasture. The fresh soil was used to fill each rectangular section of the rice field to the top of the low wall. When one section had been fully compacted, a dump truck drove over it to begin depositing soil into the next section. By the time the job had been completed, the ground level of the entire area had been raised above the water level in the canals, which helped to prevent future flooding. The large holes left in the ground after the earth was removed became rainwater ponds.

When work on the infrastructure began in earnest, a group of Ajaan Jia's energetic monastic disciples joined the effort, prompting the team to build more bamboo huts in the shelter of the pine forest. They also erected a small pavilion where the monks would gather in the morning for the meal and in the evening for instruction and meditation. Despite the unusual workload, Ajaan Jia made a point of maintaining the basic framework of a monastic routine as much as possible.

At first, the group had no building materials and very few tools. When Ajaan Jia found old, rusting corrugated tin roofing or used lum-

ber that had been thrown away to rot, he conjured up ways to reuse these items. Because he abhorred wastefulness, Ajaan Jia mended broken tools himself and put them back into service. Rocks that had been sledgehammered to the consistency of gravel were used to pave the entrance road. Under a shaded lean-to built in the open pasture in front of Ajaan Jia's hut, bricks and mortar were utilized to construct a blacksmith's forge where he started making his own tools. Firing the forge with deadwood from the forest floor, he would heat up pieces of scrap metal until they were red-hot and hammer them into axes, hatchets, machetes, and hoes, which he would fit with sturdy, hardwood handles.

As the years passed, more and larger permanent structures were constructed to complete the institutional requirements of an official monastic compound. The dedicated monks who had helped Ajaan Jia build the monastery eventually moved away seeking more secluded locations to further advance their meditation practice. They were replaced by younger, less experienced monks lacking the same wisdom and judgment, monks who needed to be thoroughly schooled in the basic principles of the *dhutaṅga* lifestyle—austerity, strict discipline, and strong concentration.

The longer a monk stays in the same place, the more he puts down roots. Because the monastic community relies on donations, a monk can easily become beholden to the lay devotees who make daily offerings of food and refreshments. Wealthy devotees often make large donations to the building fund, giving them a vested interest in the success of the monastery. They usually want the buildings to be grand, impressive, and pleasing to the eye. When the donors visit the monastery, they notice features that displease them, so they lobby the abbot to build structures that are more attractively designed to replace the old and still functional but less attractive ones. Beautiful monastic buildings require daily cleaning and maintenance, tasks which consume hours of a monk's daily routine that could be more suitably spent

in meditation. Ultimately, it is the abbot's responsibility to oversee construction and maintenance issues while also supervising the monks in their daily schedule from the wake-up call at 3:00 a.m. until late into the night. That extra workload can be exhausting for an elderly monk.

Because Ajaan Jia's monastery was located within driving distance of Bangkok and its sprawling suburbs, food offerings were delivered directly to the monastery to supplement the food that the monks collected on almsround. As time passed and the monastery's reputation spread, more donors showed up each day bringing larger quantities of good-quality food. Fine rice and delicious curries soon became the norm. Consequently, the monks had to cope with a sumptuous meal and a full stomach each morning—a recipe for a mind full of sloth and torpor.

Ajaan Jia did not begrudge the monks the fine food, but its wide variety was a far cry from the food of his days living with Ajaan Mun. He had remained with Ajaan Mun for three rainy seasons and four dry seasons subsisting for the most part on just rice and bananas. Unfortunately, he was allergic to most of the food that villagers offered in the North and the Northeast. When no bananas were offered, he resorted to eating just plain rice, a diet that tended to cause indigestion and painful constipation. Because stomach medicines were unavailable in the wilderness, he was sometimes forced to stick two fingers down his own throat to induce vomiting, just to clear out his churning stomach. He said that his index and middle fingers were the medicine he never failed to carry with him in those days.

Ajaan Jia sometimes felt he was raising young, domesticated *dhutaṅga* monks who, after enjoying a sumptuous meal, “wandered” from the main pavilion back to their huts to take a nap. Laziness had crept into their minds with its mallet raised, ready to sound the death knell for the Buddha's austere ascetic practices. Fit and healthy bodies strolled around the monastery grounds with weak and flabby minds in charge. Even the birds and squirrels looked plump and overfed.

In the past, the great teachers in Ajaan Jia's tradition, from Ajaan Sao and Ajaan Mun on down, played the role of forest tigers to spur their disciples' innate virtues into action, inspiring in them the motivation and the courage to confront the jungle of unruly thoughts and emotions in their minds. One roar from the tiger's mouth sent chills up the spine and demanded unerring vigilance. How many of those fierce tigers were left? Not many. Most of those who remained had lost the spring in their step and the loud, deep growl in their throat. But they still had the roar in their hearts, if only their disciples could become aware of it. Instead, that later generation of *dhutaṅga* monks seemed to have forsaken a life of greater hardship to follow the path of least resistance—an attitude completely at odds with those great monks of the past.

At that point in his life, Ajaan Jia's teaching had also lost its hard edge. But then again, blunt force did not seem to have the same effect that it had with previous generations. Nonetheless, he had to acknowledge that some of his students might be capable of achieving significant breakthroughs in their meditation if he played the role of the tiger and made them endure austerities severe enough to open their eyes to the advantages of wilderness practice. If he left them to their own devices, simply allowing them to continue on as they had, it was clear that their eyes would remain closed for the rest of their lives. If they were to die without seeing the light, they would certainly have squandered a golden opportunity to break free of birth and death and experience the bliss of supreme happiness. For that reason, Ajaan Jia was vociferous in urging his students to take the meditation skills they had developed while practicing with him and trek into the country's remaining wilderness areas, where they could hone those skills to perfection and test their ability to cope with difficulties until they found a way through the unruly jungle of their worldly attitudes and opinions.

After working for many years to create Bhūridatta Forest Monastery in the spirit of Ajaan Mun and the *dhutaṅga* forest tradition that he championed, Ajaan Jia felt the need to refresh himself with a period of solitude and silence. Aware of this intention, a group of senior disciples volunteered to accompany their aging teacher on a return tour of the wilderness caves in Tak province. After visiting various caves in the region, the group finished its tour deep in the jungle at a cave known as Inthanin.

The trail leading up to Inthanin Cave was so narrow that they almost expected it to peter out among the rocks before it reached the entrance. Several times the trail crossed swiftly running streams on makeshift bridges made of rotting tree trunks. Both sides of the trail were dense with tangled vegetation and alive with the cries and chirping of birds and insects. As the trail became steeper, it sometimes assumed the shape of stairs worn into the rock. The cave's entrance came into view unexpectedly, as it was hidden from afar behind a veil of broadleaf jungle foliage.

Inthanin Cave was situated on a south-facing mountain slope, overlooking an unbroken view of valleys and mountains, some of which had summits that masked even loftier peaks beyond. A broad, arched opening, recessed into the rockface, allowed sunlight to reach the cave's back wall, creating a spacious, domed chamber some sixty feet deep, a hundred feet wide, and thirty feet high. Because air entered the chamber and circulated freely, the atmosphere inside the cave was cool and dry at that time of year, in sharp contrast to the constant heat and humidity experienced at Bhūridatta Forest Monastery.

Sheltering in caves had always given Ajaan Jia temporary respite from the dangers of camping out in the open. Wild animals, snakes, mosquitoes, and other insects mostly avoided the interior spaces of caves. Additionally, the stable temperatures of caves provided a cool habitat in the summer and a warm, dry shelter in the winter, making for an exceptional meditation environment. The silence Ajaan Jia ex-

perienced living in caves was so absolute that not only could he hear his own heart beating, but at times he felt he could sense the blood coursing through his arteries and veins. The entire atmosphere seemed to pulse with energy. Ajaan Jia told his disciples that the environment in and around Inthanin Cave was so agreeable and therapeutic to his physical ailments that, had he come across it before committing himself to Bhūridatta Forest Monastery, he might well have chosen to spend the remainder of his life there instead.

Mind you, cave life is very spartan. Seated in the seclusion of a cave, a solitary recluse has no company save that afforded by the trickling of water on the nearby rocks and the stirring of wild creatures in the woods. Hunger awaits him in the morning as he makes his way down the narrow trail in the half-light of dawn, at times in the pouring rain, to reach the nearest village settlement often located a long walk away. The meager food offerings placed in his bowl might consist only of lumps of plain rice with chili paste and some edible wild plants. Before long, he becomes as thin and haggard as a walking skeleton with pallid skin drawn taut over his bony cheeks. His threadbare robes are patched by hand with scavenged pieces of cloth.

Why would a monk take up forest dwelling as a way of life unless he was totally dedicated to the practice, begrudging neither his health nor his life? Such a monk does not simply grit his teeth and endure hardship and deprivation as some form of penance; instead, he embraces the opportunity to test his resolve by confronting difficulties and using the powers of his mind to firmly resist any tendency to give up and accept defeat. The more demanding the challenge, the more spirited his response. That fighting spirit keeps a *dhutaṅga* monk steadfast on the path to liberation.

Since many kinds of living beings exist at various levels of understanding, the path to liberation takes different forms—some long and plodding, others short but arduous. The shortest and most direct path requires deliberately confronting difficult circumstances that provoke

conflict and resistance in the mind of the meditator and using the challenge of overcoming them as motivation to intensify the practice. Living and practicing in wild places has unrivaled advantages as a way of life focused on throwing off the yoke of ignorance and attaining enlightenment as fast as possible. Such living requires a mindset that seeks the path of greatest resistance to counter the mind's usual inclination to settle for a path of least resistance to the strong pull of greed, aversion, and delusion.

The wilderness is the perfect arena in which to experience a collision between the forces of oppressive defilements and the liberating power of Dhamma, which is the very purpose for which the *dhutaṅga* practices were initially created. Rather than avoiding defilements, seeking relief from them, or compensating for them, liberation from suffering entails confronting the causes that give rise to suffering head-on and boldly eliminating them.

Deliberately choosing the hardships of living alone in the wilderness is a practice that compels meditators to develop the inner strength needed to overcome their fear of ever-present dangers while rejecting the sensual appeal of physical ease and comfort. Ease and comfort are the enemies of genuine spiritual practice. When the mind is backed into a corner from which no escape is apparent, it is forced to take refuge in resources of courage and inner strength that were not known to have existed until the frightening circumstances arose to call them forth. "Courage" here does not refer to a lack of fear; but rather, to using the heightened sense of alertness and the energizing qualities that fear evokes as a means of quickly centering the mind in present-moment awareness where it can realize its highest potential.

To live in the wildness of nature is to gain unique insights into the significance of the Buddha's teachings. Residing alone in wilderness environments had taught Ajaan Jia many profound lessons: lessons in life's fleeting, transitory nature; lessons in the pervasiveness of suffer-

ing in all forms of life; and lessons in how little control human beings have over the cycle of living and dying.

When observed closely with a clear mind, nature reveals a core principle that governs all forms of life: Everything comes and goes. For instance, the forest contains dead and dying trees in different stages of decay: some slowly dying with dry brown leaves still clinging to life; some already dead with thin sheets of bark hanging from the trunk; some pale, smooth dead trees with hardly any limbs left; and some long-dead ones, rotten while yet standing, with the soft outer layer of sapwood eaten away by insects. Newly fallen dead trees lie side by side with rotten trunks that fell long ago. By the time their crumbling carcasses have disintegrated into the ground beneath them, faint traces of organic matter are all that remain on the ground's surface. From these moldering remains sprout fungi and new plant growth, carrying on the universal cycle of death, decay, and regeneration.

Observing the life and death cycle of a forest tree serves as a reminder that the disintegration of a human corpse follows a similar process. When a corpse is left on the ground and exposed to the elements, it slowly rots in the warm sunshine. As time passes and decay accelerates, the skin darkens and the corpse begins to bloat. Eventually the skin ruptures and peels away, revealing the decaying flesh beneath. By the time maggots have eaten their fill of rotting tissue and vultures have scavenged the rest, most of the flesh and internal organs are gone. With the passage of time and exposure to the elements, the remaining scraps of tissue wash away, leaving only disjointed bones bleached white by the sun. In due course, the bones begin to break up and disintegrate. These too will eventually wear away and turn to dust, finally reclaimed by the earth element from which they came.

Although Ajaan Jia preferred to shelter in the relative security of forest caves, the untamed wilderness environment outside the cave reminded him of just how harrowingly painful the lives of the wild animals could be. Living alone in the wilderness, he witnessed the dra-

ma of animal existence unfold up close. The peril and uncertainty of animal life in the jungle never seemed to end. Every day was a fight for survival—for everything from the largest tiger to the smallest rodent—either to find enough food to live on each day, or to avoid the agony of being killed and eaten. Driven by hunger, many wild animals foraged and scavenged constantly. Continually on the lookout for threats to themselves and their young, forest animals could never fully let down their guard. Between struggling to stay alive and fighting to protect themselves and their offspring, animals in their natural habitat embodied real-life instances of suffering and its consequences. Whether roaming widely or living a whole lifetime confined to a single tree, their existence was trapped in a vicious cycle of persistent craving and chronic deficiency.

The lifespans of wild animals were generally short; their deaths, often painful. Across the wilderness landscape, the ruthless scenes of a predator attacking and killing its prey were commonplace. Witnessing these deadly attacks firsthand, Ajaan Jia could perceive the intensity of the fear experienced by vulnerable prey as predators stalked and ultimately slaughtered them. In one instance, he saw a tiger catch a deer and sink its sharp claws into the deer's rump, ripping through the hide and anchoring its grip deep in the muscle. The startled animal let out a disturbing, agonizing cry as its body hit the ground. An instant later the tiger sank its teeth into the deer's throat, choking off the sound of terror. Its vice-like jaws closed tightly to break the neck, leaving the deer to die a slow and excruciating death. Its young likely died soon after from starvation.

He had seen hawks swoop down from the treetops, talons extended, to catch and kill squirrels running across the branches below, and then use their hooked beaks to tear bite-sized pieces of flesh from the still-living animal to temporarily abate their hunger pangs. Leopards were fond of stalking and catching unsuspecting monkeys, which they ripped apart and ate on the spot. Bears had tremendous strength and

a dispassionate approach to killing any animal that crossed their path. They often began to feed immediately, without waiting for the prey to die.

Starvation was a common cause of death for animals who were injured or aging. Eventually, their bodies simply wore out, and they were no longer able to forage or stalk their prey. As death approached, their backbones stuck out grotesquely and their intestines and stomachs were sunken through to the bone before they finally collapsed to the ground.

The *dhutaṅga* monks with whom wild animals share their forest abode feel a deep kinship with all creatures in the natural world, which arouses in them a feeling that we are all one and the same—one in the sense that all living beings without exception are subjected to suffering in the course of being born, growing old, falling sick, and dying. Darkness and light, illness and health, and life and death are simply part of the back-and-forth of the impermanence of nature. The highs and lows of life center around personal feelings, but the natural world is completely apathetic to the feelings of living beings. It is not involved in nor influenced by personal sentiments. Dispassionate and impartial, it remains wholly indifferent to their happiness or suffering.

Ajaan Jia found that living alone in the wilderness for an extended period was one of the best ways to learn Dhamma lessons from the natural world because what he witnessed there put the Buddha's teachings into clearer perspective. It made him realize how vast the world of sentient experience was and how profoundly insignificant the person called Jia was by contrast. The wilderness never gave a damn about him. The birth of his body added nothing to it; its death would take nothing away from it. Body and mind were just a part of the same impersonal process of birth, decay, and death. There was no "me" or "mine" involved in that experience. Ajaan Jia's personal preferences had no control over the outcome of that process. In his contemplations of the natural world, he found only the absence of an intrinsic essence,

and thus found nothing worthy of clinging or attachment. He felt he was merely a part of a moment in time in the wild, and he felt no need to identify with it.

Trees—the sage observers of the natural world—like sentient living creatures, have life stages that include birth, growth, injury, disease, old age, and death. As trees go from birth to death, their physical forms change, as do their roles in the different communities of forest plants and wild animals. The oldest trees are living monuments of long-term survival that help keep forests alive by passing on their experience and hardiness to the other trees and plants in their environment.

Woodland areas can be viewed as large communities of trees, each containing many different families that include infants, adolescents, mature adults, and venerated elders. Tree families in a forest community need their elders as they are the source of the forest's resilience and renewal when it is faced with the ravages of wind and weather. Their cool shade encourages the growth and development of younger members. Their dead leaves enrich the forest floor, making it a fertile habitat for the birth and growth of future generations. Without this clearly noticeable effect of ancient trees, a community of trees cannot fully realize its natural potential.

Like ancient trees in the forest of human history, towering figures like Ajaan Sao and Ajaan Mun, who lived and practiced the ageless ways of wisdom, had remarkable knowledge and skills to pass on to their disciples. Few trees in the spiritual forest stood taller or offered more shade than these great teachers. Their Bodhi leaves of wisdom, which fertilized the ground of practice for future generations of practitioners, became indispensable for the long-term survival of the forest meditation tradition. The essence of that tradition, the single motivation that inspired it from the beginning and continues to influence the lives of those who practice it today, is the solemn resolve to attain the

end of all suffering by the most direct and effective means possible. The monks that represent the tradition thrive in environments of adversity, hardship, and struggle. Able to withstand and recover quickly from difficult conditions, these monks open a path to spiritual transcendence for future generations.

As the group of monks was about to depart from Inthanin Cave for their return trip to Bhūridatta Forest Monastery, Ajaan Jia gathered his trusted disciples around him in the cave's large chamber and assigned them a sacred duty. He solemnly relayed to them instructions for his final passing: When the time came, he was to be brought there to die in solitude and silence. He charged them with the responsibility of carrying his body back to the cave and leaving him there alone to finally shed that old, worn-out skin bag forever—leaving flesh, guts, blood, and bones there in the company of maggots and vultures where they belonged.

When fate finally passed judgment, however, Ajaan Jia was denied the opportunity to return to his preferred final resting place in the heart of Thailand's northern wilderness. He was held back by the infirmities that beset his body and sapped his energy as dusk began to settle over the life of a monk whose indefatigable spirit knew few definable limits.

Ajaan Jia could not recall any single moment when he noticed that his body was starting to let him down, when he could no longer assume that the strength and energy in his shoulders and arms would be there when he needed them. His legs, once a source of almost superhuman stamina, had succumbed to weakness; the agility needed to jump clear of a potential danger on the trail had gradually disappeared. Lacking the balance to keep his footing on uneven terrain forced him to place each step he took in the woods more deliberately. Accepting that the debilities of old age hampered his mobility, he resigned himself to planning his movements more thoroughly and pacing his exertions

more thoughtfully. When he was no longer as able-bodied as before, he simply settled comfortably with what abilities still remained.

Despite his failing physical strength, his heart continued to be strong, his mind sharp. The fierce resolve he had displayed since he was a child showed no signs of waning. The unbowed spirit that drove his body simply figured out how to get more out of less, how to adapt to physical limitations instead of resigning himself to them. He welcomed the challenges of old age with the same unwavering determination that he had exhibited when facing adversity wandering through Thailand's uncharted wilderness areas.

Ajaan Jia's declining health forced him to adapt by having young monks help him work the forge and by working shorter hours. He no longer had the quick reflexes and clear eyesight to hammer red-hot steel rods as precisely as he once had, so he adjusted the height and angle of his arm to make more solid contact. As aging overtook him, he exerted himself with a degree of caution, a sense that over time his limits had changed. Backing down from a rigorous challenge was not a cause for discouragement or regret. Nonetheless, he never shied away from the physical tasks he could still perform.

For the rest of Ajaan Jia's life, the forge remained behind his residence, ready for use. He would sit hunched over the anvil, struggling to pull the hammer down hard onto the steel while making sure that his strike was accurate. The natural wear and tear of old age had caused his spinal discs to become less flexible and more prone to tears and ruptures. One afternoon, a relatively minor twisting motion of his back as the hammer met the anvil caused one of his discs to rupture. The protruding disc pressed against the sciatic nerve, triggering severe pains stretching down his right leg that worsened when he was active. He adapted to this handicap by taking frequent breaks and adjusting his posture from time to time to ease the strain. Because he had difficulty bending or straightening his back, he avoided lifting the heavy burlap

sacks of charcoal that fueled the fire in the forge, instead relying on his disciples for assistance.

Once Ajaan Jia had settled permanently at Bhūridatta Forest Monastery, more lay supporters took advantage of his continuous presence to pay respects to him in person and offer donations. Always frugal with monetary offerings, he would only spend what was necessary to provide for the monastery's upkeep. The rest he would have his steward deposit in the monastery's account, hoping to one day repay the debt of gratitude he owed Ajaan Mun by building a memorial stupa, or *chedi*, to commemorate his supreme virtues. Within a reliquary to be placed inside its uppermost spire, Ajaan Jia planned to enshrine a tooth relic that Ajaan Mun had given him almost sixty years before.

Ajaan Jia was given the tooth several days after he began his apprenticeship with Ajaan Mun in Chiang Mai province. Early one morning, Ajaan Jia carried a basin of warm face-washing water to Ajaan Mun at his hut. When he arrived, Ajaan Mun was cleaning his teeth. Suddenly, the tooth next to the one he was brushing popped out and fell on the floor. Ajaan Mun calmly retrieved the tooth and, stretching out his palm, handed it to Ajaan Jia with the words: "Here, you take it." Since then, Ajaan Jia had treated the tooth as a sacred relic and kept it with him wherever he traveled. Ajaan Jia suspected that Ajaan Mun could see into the future and knew intuitively that one day his young disciple was destined to build a *chedi* in his honor wherein the tooth relic would be enshrined.

Ajaan Jia was in no hurry to begin construction. He was content to wait for an appropriate opportunity when the funds being saved were sufficient to cover the full cost of construction. Only then would he proceed. Finally, in February of 1996, the *chedi's* cornerstone was laid, and work began on what turned out to be a six-year project, an engineering feat of love and respect in which Ajaan Jia was personally involved from beginning to end.

Although hampered by the effects of the herniated disk, Ajaan Jia threw himself into every phase of the construction project, which gradually progressed to completion during the same period that his physical health was slowly deteriorating. The project's first year was devoted to laying the foundation. A solid concrete and steel foundation was anchored deep in the ground to support the structure, which would stretch seventy-two feet in width and rise to a height of one hundred twenty feet at its peak.

By then, the Ajaan Mun Memorial Chedi had become the main activity around which the monastery centered. His excruciating back pain notwithstanding, Ajaan Jia inspected the foundation site every day, supporting his back with a long staff as he walked to and from the building area. During that period, he experienced bouts of blurred vision due to glaucoma in both eyes and the painful symptoms of an enlarged prostate. He also underwent two surgical procedures to relieve pressure on the sciatic nerve and reduce his spinal discomfort. In defiance of the changes to his health, Ajaan Jia remained steadfast: *Chedi* construction forged ahead on schedule.

Each day the architectural drawings were unfolded and laid flat on a table so that he could inspect construction details as work on the ground progressed. Ajaan Jia requested that the *chedi* be designed in the architectural style of the ancient Sukhothai Kingdom, a style characterized by a tall, narrow central tower ending at its apex with a long, thin spire emerging from a spherical lotus bud. The structure was designed to maintain the traditional form of Thai *chedis* while taking advantage of contemporary building materials, such as reinforced concrete and marble cladding.

The eight-sided wall of the *chedi's* first story bore four wide, double-door entrances, one facing each cardinal direction, below which broad marble staircases rose to meet the polished, golden teak doors. The doors led into the base's inner sanctuary, which housed a memorial shrine with a life-size statue of Ajaan Mun seated in medi-

tation on the altar. Each surface of the four-sided, marble-clad dome that extended up from the center of the base contained a large window opening sealed by a massive pair of hinged teakwood panels. Soaring gracefully above each window was a marble archway bearing identical lotus-leaf motifs, their lower edges flaring like wings.

From the middle of the dome, a fluted marble tower ascended to the *chedi's* peak—a gold-plated spire containing Ajaan Mun's tooth and many other sacred relics. The entire *chedi* sat on a spacious concrete platform that could be ascended from any direction by four broad stairways leading upward and connecting to a second set of stairs near the doors. The elegance of its design was found not only in its seamless layer of white marble covering, its swinging teak doors, and its precisely detailed stonework motifs—but also in the well-grounded strength of its overall conception.

In 1998, as construction of the *chedi's* base level was concluding, Ajaan Jia stumbled while walking around the building site and wrenched his left foot, breaking the big and second toes. After doctors put a cast on his foot, he insisted on hobbling through the monastery compound every day. Determined to get the most out of what was left of his ailing body, he conversed loudly with bystanders and shouted instructions to the construction crew.

The adjustments Ajaan Jia made to prolong his ability to move freely offset the negative impact of his physical restrictions while he oversaw the completion of the *chedi's* marble dome and the fluted marble tower that rose from its center. His daily exercise routine included an early morning session laying on his back and vigorously punching, then kicking into the air above him. While he performed this exercise one morning in early 2001, he suddenly felt burning and tingling sensations running down the left side of his body, which led to a loss of control of the coordination and muscle functions on that whole side. Soon afterward, numbness and paralysis set in.

Ajaan Jia was rushed to the hospital where doctors discovered that he had suffered a hemorrhagic stroke caused by a ruptured blood vessel bleeding in the brain. The pooling blood had produced swelling and severe damage to some of the brain tissue. The hemorrhaging was so serious that the doctors were forced to operate immediately to save Ajaan Jia's life. Surgery was performed through the skull to remove the accumulated blood and relieve pressure on the brain, which stabilized his condition. Although a section of the brain had been injured beyond repair, draining the fluid helped prevent further degeneration. A week later, however, the hemorrhaging resumed, coalescing to form a life-threatening blood clot that required a second operation to remove.

Ajaan Jia was forced once again to adapt his lifestyle to new limitations. Although being bedridden isolated him even further from the ongoing *chedi* construction, he insisted that his attendants push him around the monastery compound in a reclining wheelchair. With the left side of his body paralyzed and the right side in constant pain from the herniated disk, he managed to carry on with an undaunted spirit. However, the level of disability brought on by illness and old age became increasingly evident to the monks living at the monastery who could see that their teacher's former vitality and alertness were rapidly waning. Speaking left him exhausted, as though the immense energy he had once poured into his teaching activity had been used up. Eventually, Ajaan Jia's students had to accept that he was slowly dying. His passion for the rigors of the *dhutaṅga* way of life had finally caught up with him. Despite everything he endured, Ajaan Jia did not feel helpless in the face of misfortune any more than he felt himself to be a victim of the ongoing effects of old age.

At long last, only the *chedi's* gold-plated top spire remained unfinished. Every day, Ajaan Jia was taken to inspect the preparations being made to transfer the many sacred relics he had collected into a hollow cavity inside the spire, where they would be enshrined for posterity.

In February 2002, in a grand ceremony held at Bhūridatta Forest Monastery, Ajaan Jia formally consecrated the sacred contents of the spire before it was lifted to the *chedi's* pinnacle. Leaning back in the wheelchair with his legs raised and using his still-functioning right hand, Ajaan Jia performed the symbolic gesture of pulling on a ceremonial cord attached to the spire as a crane lifted the sixteen-foot-tall cone to its final resting place atop the uppermost marble lotus bud, thus concluding construction of the Ajaan Mun Bhūridatta Memorial Chedi.

In December of 2002, Ajaan Jia began to experience chest pains and shortness of breath accompanied by long bouts of fatigue and weakness. An echocardiogram test revealed that he suffered the symptoms of chronic heart failure, indicating that his heart was failing to pump as much blood as the body needed to function normally. He remained in the hospital to receive treatment in the hope that therapy would slow his worsening heart condition. Eventually he returned to the monastery, where the treatment continued. Nonetheless, Ajaan Jia's health continued its downward spiral as his physical decline gathered pace.

In 2003, a chest X-ray revealed the white-gray mass of a lung tumor. A subsequent CT scan confirmed that the cancer had already reached a critical stage. Although there was no known cure for advanced lung cancer, with help from his medical team and conscientious attention from his monastic attendants, his symptoms were manageable in the short term. The symptoms he experienced included a persistent dry cough that worsened with deep breathing, followed by intermittent bouts of labored breathing and wheezing. Skin sores that refused to heal broke out all over his body. He was often plagued by stretches of bowel and bladder dysfunction, as well as periods of relentlessly coughing up bloody mucus.

A combination of the malignant tumor and the symptoms of congestive heart disease caused inflammation in the air sacs lining both lung cavities, which led to a dangerous buildup of fluid in his lungs. The weight of the fluid prevented the lungs from expanding, causing gasping and breathlessness to increase. To relieve the pressure, doctors inserted a wide needle attached to a drainage tube into Ajaan Jia's chest, which allowed the fluid to slowly drain into a container. So much fluid had collected in Ajaan Jia's lungs that it took hours to drain them completely. Although this procedure was repeated several times, making it easier for him to take deeper breaths, it did nothing to treat the cancer. Consequently, his prognosis continued to worsen.

Despite the uncertainty surrounding Ajaan Jia's prolonged infirmity, he exuded unflappable equanimity even while his body wasted away. He appeared serenely isolated from the decrepitude of a body that was rapidly breaking down, its energy receding as though the life force that sustained its existence was preparing to depart. Ajaan Jia's fearless personality shone steadily through those twilight hours of rampant aging.

By the time dusk fell on August 23, 2004, the transition phase from living to dying was rapidly progressing. Ajaan Jia's lungs had become so compromised that the oxygen level in his blood had gradually tapered off to the point where life itself appeared to be draining from his body. Over the next few hours, his blood's oxygen saturation dipped below eighty percent and continued to drop. As the spaces between breaths increased, his pulse and blood pressure became fainter. Eventually, insufficient oxygen remained to sustain the vital organs. The lungs and brain failed in quick succession, completing the physical process of dying. At 10:55 p.m. the doctors determined that the life of Ajaan Jia Cundo had finally come to an end. Although his death occurred far from his chosen cave in the wilderness, it also took place free from the entanglement of an ordinary mind trapped in the untamed wilderness of *samsāra*.

When the average person's physical and cognitive functions deteriorate to the point where they can no longer sustain life, the knowing awareness that instilled life into both body and mind at conception and maintained its living presence throughout periods of growth, sickness, and aging, finally vacates—leaving a lifeless corpse behind. The knowing awareness associated with that person carries with it the effects of all the intentional good and bad thoughts, speech, and actions committed during that lifetime as an ongoing legacy for the future. At the culmination of one life, this karmic legacy is duly transferred to the conscious presence of a living being in the next life.

Stated in another way, delusion creates the conditions for *kamma* and its consequences, which themselves determine the circumstances and conditions of the next birth. This delusion imparts a karmic blueprint that outlines all the qualities and character traits contained in that individual's karmic legacy, which is integrated into the knowing awareness that sustains life in the body and mind of a developing fetus. At birth, the karmic cycle continues with more actions and their karmic results, ad infinitum. This recurring pattern represents the never-ending cycle of saṃsāric existence.

The knowing awareness has no personal characteristics, however. It is not born, nor does it die. It is timeless, boundless, and radiant, but its true nature is obscured by mental defilements and clouded by delusion. This delusion creates within that awareness a center or focal point of the knower. The existence of that false center produces an individual perspective which is the nucleus of self-identity. This "self" forms perceptions of duality—the knower and the known—and from there, awareness flows out to produce physical and mental perceptions and all sensory experiences. The feedback from this outflow then reinforces the knower's sense of individuality by creating the false impression that there exists a world of experience separate from one who knows it.

The personal perspective begins with currents of mental activity that flow outward to create the entire sensory world, the world of conditioned phenomena. Therefore, all physical and mental phenomena exist relative to the knower, the awareness that perceives them. As such, they are merely conditional manifestations that the knower has brought into being and imbued with meaning. Gradually, these manifestations become incorporated into the knower's sense of its own identity. Thus, the known becomes enmeshed with the knower, trapping the knower in a web of self-delusion. The knower is reduced to depending on its own manifestations to provide a sense of continuity to its perceived existence.

Therefore, although awareness knows, it knows falsely; and it knows falsely because of the fundamental delusion of self-belief lying at the center of the knower that influences all of its experience. That central belief projects a concrete sense of self into the activities of body and mind and into perceptions of the six sense fields. That self-awareness created the person known as Ajaan Jia Cundo. Thus we can say that Ajaan Jia the person was, at the most fundamental level, a delusion. He had no existence outside of conditional appearances. He also had no existence independent of self-awareness. Ultimately, his personality was a creation of deluded knowing.

When that delusion was ultimately destroyed through insight into the nature of the processes described above, the focal point of the knower disintegrated, which caused the "self" perspective to disappear from awareness altogether. With the disappearance of self-identity, all conditional appearances manifested by the knower disappeared as well. Once awareness had been purified of all delusion, Ajaan Jia the person could no longer be found. The conditional appearances of his body and mind continued to function according to those karmic causes and influences put into effect prior to his awakening—when delusion was still in control. As a result, both the karmically created conditional appearances and the unconditioned awareness coexisted from the mo-

ment that he saw through this delusion and became an Arahant, until his body and mind eventually succumbed to death.

The death of an Arahant is unique because when the Arahant's body and mind disintegrate, no traces of the karmic consequences of past actions are left behind as a future legacy for rebirth. Once the center of self around which personal perspective coalesced has been destroyed, *kamma* and its effects have nowhere to manifest. The "self" perspective is revealed to be void and empty. Throughout Ajaan Jia's long life, the personality embedded in his body and mind retained its original coarse and dogged nature. The awareness however, separate from the person, had let go of the personal perspective and undergone a liberating transformation. When the old and torn rags of his personal identity fell away at death, awareness radiated like pure gold of the highest quality. No alloys or other contaminants remained to tarnish its brilliance. Consequently, it is impossible to compare the pure awareness of an Arahant with the heap of soiled rags known as body and mind.

It was in this context that Ajaan Mun had dubbed Ajaan Jia "gold wrapped in rags." With penetrative wisdom, Ajaan Mun saw directly through the ragged nature of his disciple's personality, perceiving the heart of gold that others were unable to recognize.

The Ajaan Jia who was born in 1916 and passed away in 2004 was a person endowed with body, feeling, memory, thought, and sense consciousness—a human being with a personal history stretching from birth to death. His physical and mental functions formed the outward appearance with which he engaged the world around him. His physical features, actions, speech, and thoughts presented a rough and daunting figure of a man, whose dominating personality combined provocative behavior with fierce determination—a stubborn bull with the penetrating stare of a wild tiger. These character traits, inherited from his karmic legacy, formed the window dressing that cloaked his

inner virtue. It took an exceptional teacher like Ajaan Mun to pull back that curtain and uncover his vast spiritual potential.

The beneficial effects of Ajaan Jia's past *kamma* enabled him to encounter Ajaan Mun at an auspicious time in his development. *Kamma* refers to the law of cause and effect. When we say that such and such is happening as a result of past *kamma*, it can mean that what we experience now is an effect produced by causes rooted in our past actions. But the *kamma* referred to above can be understood more fully by distinguishing between its two aspects. First, there is the *kamma* involved in relation to another person; in Ajaan Jia's case, between himself and Ajaan Mun. The second, more individual aspect of *kamma* involved Ajaan Jia's diligent engagement in Dhamma practice in many previous lives under many different circumstances, the overall effect of which created an interest in, and a natural attraction to, Buddhist practice in his present life. So, the fact that Ajaan Jia had the good fortune to meet Ajaan Mun in his life was probably due to the ripening of a Dhamma relationship formed in past lives, combined with a longstanding resolve to realize the truth of the Buddha's teachings, a resolve which had been developed during many lifetimes of dedicated practice.

Although it was truly a blessing to have the good fortune to find an outstanding teacher, Ajaan Jia still had to create the right kind of *kamma* to follow Ajaan Mun and put his teachings into practice. It is one thing to set out on a spiritual journey with good intentions, and quite another to find the resolve, endurance, and wisdom to follow that path to the end. Even after encountering Ajaan Mun and earnestly following his instructions, Ajaan Jia inevitably met difficulties and frustrations along the path. But he never let those obstacles overshadow the liberating value of the path he had chosen. By investigating the hindrances he experienced along the way and using the resulting understanding wisely, Ajaan Jia turned obstructions into unforeseen sources of strength and insight.

After living for many years under Ajaan Mun's tutelage, Ajaan Jia understood why the Thai Forest Tradition places such a strong emphasis on the relationship between teacher and disciple, and just how essential that relationship is to progress on the Buddhist path. Without his teacher's compassionate guidance, Ajaan Jia would have had little prospect of realizing the full depth of the Buddha's liberating teachings.

Ajaan Jia was born in an exceptionally auspicious time for authentic Buddhist practice. By virtue of his karmic background, it was almost inevitable that he would meet with the right conditions to further his spiritual progress. The early to mid-twentieth century was arguably one of the most remarkable periods of Buddhist practice in the entire modern era. Led by Ajaan Sao and Ajaan Mun with their revival of traditional Buddhist training methods, generations of Thai forest monks benefited from a renewed emphasis on strict discipline and time-honored ascetic practices to attain the highest Dhamma in an age when such an accomplishment was no longer thought possible.

Prior to this period of revival, a popular opinion held that it was no longer possible to attain Nibbāna. The best that could be expected of Buddhists in the modern era was that they faithfully observe moral precepts and steadfastly preserve Buddhist rituals. As a result of that conviction, the quality of monastic discipline had seriously deteriorated, and authentic Buddhist meditation practices had been all but abandoned.

Seeing the danger to the monastic traditions posed by this regression in monastic discipline, influential Thai monks spearheaded a reform movement in the nineteenth century that resulted in the formation of a new Thai monastic order called the Dhammayut Nikāya. One guiding principle of this new order was strict adherence to the Buddha's monastic code of conduct, or Vinaya. The insistence on strict compliance with the disciplinary rules at Dhammayut monasteries

attracted the likes of Ajaan Sao and Ajaan Mun to ordain and prosper in this monastic lineage.

In addition to strict discipline, the other principle that would set these two great teachers apart from their contemporaries was a renewed emphasis on the value of *dhutaṅga* ascetic practices recommended by the Buddha. This radical shift from a sedentary monk's respectable but unadventurous lifestyle to the rigorous austerities practiced daily by a wandering *dhutaṅga* monk became a turning point for reestablishing faith in the possibility of attaining the ultimate goal of the Buddha's teachings. Under Ajaan Mun's guidance, forest Sangha communities were able to maintain the integrity of their communal spirit by emphasizing respect for traditional Buddhist values, while at the same time granting a measure of autonomy to individual monks by encouraging each to experiment with the *dhutaṅga* practices that best suited their temperament.

The ascetic practices encouraged by the Buddha exert an intensified pressure on the attachments that create suffering. The criteria for deciding whether a practice should be adopted or not is how defiantly its use counteracts the power that the defilements exert on one's mind. The *dhutaṅga* monks of the Thai Forest Tradition who practiced these ascetic methods proved that, practiced correctly, with their original intent, the Buddha's teachings were still capable of leading a person who applied the right intention, the right attitude, the right mindfulness, and the right effort to attain the right results. Indeed, it was often the ascetic practices undertaken as aids to meditation that were instrumental in instilling the "rightness" in those path factors. Such concerted opposition to the excesses of craving, aversion, and delusion is what the Buddha meant by the Middle Way.

The Buddha stated that the Middle Way refers to the path of practice that is neither too lax nor too extreme. In other words, just right. But just right for what? Just right to counter the mental defilements in whichever way they manifest. If the defilements are strong, the

forces of Dhamma required to overcome them must be equal to the task. These forces must first put up a fierce resistance that brings the enemy to a stalemate, rendering it powerless to advance. Then the forces of Dhamma must adjust their tactics and take courageous action to intensify their attack and drive the defilements back to the brink of total submission. This is the Middle Way in action—the forces of goodness battle the forces of evil by employing the most appropriate meditation practices for the occasion, the ones optimally suited to counter the strength of the opposition at each juncture in the battle until Dhamma finally emerges victorious.

Among *dhutaṅga* monks intent on confronting the most resistant defilements, the *dhutaṅga* spirit they espoused spawned a variety of closely aligned ascetic practices. For fearless and intrepid monks like Ajaan Jia and his companions, these alternative observances became an indispensable part of intensifying their meditation for the purpose of tackling the most deeply entrenched defilements head-on with a winner-takes-all mentality.

Ajaan Jia praised the exploits of *dhutaṅga* monks who, rather than settling for slow and steady progress, challenged themselves by choosing to confront hardship and fear directly as a means of intensifying their efforts in meditation. He admired many of Ajaan Mun's disciples for the innovative ways in which they broadened the scope of traditional *dhutaṅga* asceticism. Whenever their minds were gripped by fear, or whenever they felt drowsy, complacent, or discouraged, they devised and put into practice uniquely appropriate strategies that forced them to confront these problems in a way that demanded a quick and decisive resolution. It was their dedication to ascetic practices that hardened them into Dhamma warriors who possessed the unwavering courage to face dangerous and painful situations for the sake of ridding their minds of suffering.

As a result, disciples of Ajaan Mun who practiced in wilderness areas tended to make a special effort to seek out frightening locations

to stimulate their meditation practice. Noticing that tigers regularly used a certain forest trail at night, such monks made a point of sitting on the ground right in the middle of that path. Some monks frequented village charnel grounds where corpses were cast away and wild animals were known to scavenge at night. Those monks who had an ingrained fear of ghosts deliberately spent nights meditating at cremation grounds deep in the forest in order to conquer that debilitating fear. Others, feeling lethargic, meditated while seated precariously on narrow ledges that extended over steep, rocky precipices, intending to take advantage of their fear of death to awaken concentration and arouse vigilance.

The concentrated awareness that was achieved by all these innovative practices induced a state of increased alertness. That heightened awareness soon gathered into a single point of focus, which caused the mind to rapidly converge to a point of sublime stillness. In an instant, the mind was oblivious to all the fear and trepidation that had previously engulfed it. In place of these hindrances a serene knowing essence arose—an awareness of pure, harmonious being so profound as to be indescribable. When the mind withdrew from that state, fear of death was often a thing of the past. It had been superseded by an incredible sense of courage the likes of which had never before been experienced. In the absence of that element of fear, the restless mind was reluctant to drop into the desired state of calm. Consequently, where Dhamma warriors sat in meditation on each occasion depended on the location where they felt the mind was most likely to quickly reach deep levels of *samādhi*.

The Buddha compared the difficulties experienced on the path of practice to the arduous spiritual journey of a monk which eventually leads him to the banks of a mighty river that separates him from the land of freedom at the far shore. To attempt the crossing, he must construct a sturdy raft and pilot it skillfully with ingenuity, fortitude, and stamina. The raft is fashioned from the Dhamma practices taught by

the Buddha, which the monk must diligently put to the test in his effort to complete the journey. He adapts the materials he uses to build the raft to the purpose of countering the hazards he expects to face on the river. From the many meditation methods that the Buddha taught, the monk chooses a set of practices that are uniquely suited to the mission. Supported by the raft while paddling deftly with his hands and feet, he feels confident he can eventually reach freedom's shore.

A meditative life practiced for the purpose of attaining freedom from suffering resembles paddling a raft against the prevailing current of birth and death. If a practitioner does not tenaciously resist the current's momentum, he will soon find himself drifting sideways down the stream following the flow of continued existence, and thus never reach the ultimate safety of Nibbāna's shore. Fierce, unwavering determination must be maintained with every kick and stroke to prevent his mind from veering off course.

Relying on the raft's stability to anchor concentration, a practitioner negotiates the needs and demands of crossing the mighty river, adjusting the mind to whatever obstructions it encounters. The mind moves through the perceptions of its awareness like the river water coursing beneath the raft, flowing over fears and under cravings, around attachments and through delusions. It adapts its attention to the forms and moods of the hindrances it encounters on the journey, becoming sometimes deep, sometimes shallow, sometimes infused with light, and other times lost in shadow. Constantly gathering insights to resolve conflicts between the defiance of defilements and the principles of Dhamma, the practitioner pushes on, neutralizing strong headwinds and powerful undercurrents at every juncture of his passage. Once the *dhutaṅgas* and other practices that constitute the raft have accomplished their mission, he abandons them at the shoreline because they are no longer needed. Only then is he fully prepared to step off the raft and onto solid ground.

We can imagine Ajaan Jia emerging from the wilderness, rooting his feet firmly on the river's bank, and staring with fierce and uncompromising determination at his destination on the opposite shore. Having carefully assessed what is required to make the crossing, he improvises a raft from materials that are available on the jungle floor. Cobbling together logs, branches, roots, and vines and rigging them with a sail stitched together from threadbare monks' robes, he boldly pushes off from the bank and into the current of the mighty river. Strong headwinds soon push the raft off course, tearing the sail to shreds in the process. In response, Ajaan Jia strips off his shoulder cloth and sets to work paddling vigorously until he finds a way to steady the raft and regain the advantage. With diligent attention to detail, he learns to read the river and tame its shifting currents. During the crossing, he endures stretches of torrential rain, blazing heat, and freezing temperatures. But he becomes so absorbed in the challenge that he forgets the conditions, forgets to sleep, and forgets to eat. Piloting his craft with only his arms and legs, Ajaan Jia advances undeterred until he arrives triumphantly at the far shore. Totally unfettered at last, he abandons the raft at the water's edge and steps to the ground, planting his bare and blistered feet firmly on *terra firma* in the land of absolute freedom.

Nibbanam paramam sukham.

Stars

This biography is the product of enormous effort and dedication from a globally dispersed team of individuals united by a shared purpose. Although the type of contribution each has made is varied, every person who contributed to this effort has, in some form, played a starring role in the process.

Chalermpon Charnwiset deserves special recognition for his role in keeping Ajaan Jia's memory alive by conducting a series of in-person interviews, the contents of which he transcribed and used to compose the autobiographical account from which my translation was taken.

The initial request for an English translation of Ajaan Jia's autobiography came from Lim Tay Poh and Chee How Liang, longtime followers of Ajaan Jia who manage the W.A.V.E. Publishing House in Malaysia. Aaron Rychlo, a student of mine at Forest Dhamma

Monastery who is conversant in the Thai language, volunteered to take up the project. Aaron did some preliminary work off and on for several years but, due to the degree of difficulty of the work, never completed his translation. Consequently, in June 2022 I decided to start the translation of the book from the beginning. However, had Aaron not forged ahead when the difficulties he faced gave him every reason to set the project aside, my own translation of Ajaan Jia's autobiography might never have come about.

The transformation from manuscript to book is an immense undertaking that calls for special acknowledgment. Mae Chee Melita Halim formulated and executed all elements of the book's design. She was a one-woman production team that guided the overall design process from conception to printing. Her design concept was intended to showcase the book's main theme: *gold wrapped in rags*. The cover design and the font chosen for the chapter titles are intended to represent the roughness of the *rags*, while the format of the text is designed to represent the Dhamma teachings that shine from within like *gold*.

Ajaan Kovilo and Joseph DeLeo agreed to copy-edit the manuscript at an early stage in its writing and continued making revisions through successive drafts. Their constructive comments led to significant improvements in the grammar, spelling, punctuation, and consistency of the final manuscript. They checked for factual discrepancies and misleading statements and insisted these issues be rectified to ensure the best possible experience for the reader. For their professionalism, I owe them heartfelt gratitude.

Careful re-reading of the manuscript by two of my monastic students, Sumedhaso and Adhicitto, helped to enhance the quality of my work. They suggested a number of revisions to smooth awkward passages, which made the prose clearer and more engaging. Without their skillful editing this book would be far less polished than it is.

Our team of proofreaders, led by Addie Onsanit, combed through the text looking for any lingering mistakes that may have slipped

through the cracks. The fact that they found so many is a testament to their persistence and attention to detail. After all their checks and corrections, should any of my notorious misplaced modifiers, dangling participles, or errant commas remain in this book, they surely deserve the blame...

Author

Ajaan Dick Silaratano was born Richard E. Byrd, Jr. in Winchester, Virginia in 1948. After graduating from the University of Texas in 1970, he became disillusioned with academia. Abandoning plans for graduate school, he began traveling the world in search of spiritual fulfillment. After several detours, his wanderings eventually took him to India and Sri Lanka in 1975. Along the way he had chanced upon a copy of *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation* by Ven. Nyanaponika Thera, which so inspired his nascent interest in Buddhist practice that he went to stay with Ven. Nyanaponika at the Forest Hermitage outside of Kandy, Sri Lanka. Eventually returning to India, he asked Ven. Buddharakkhita Thera for permission to stay at the Mahā Bodhi Society in Bangalore. Following several months of intensive meditation, he requested the “going forth” under the tutelage of

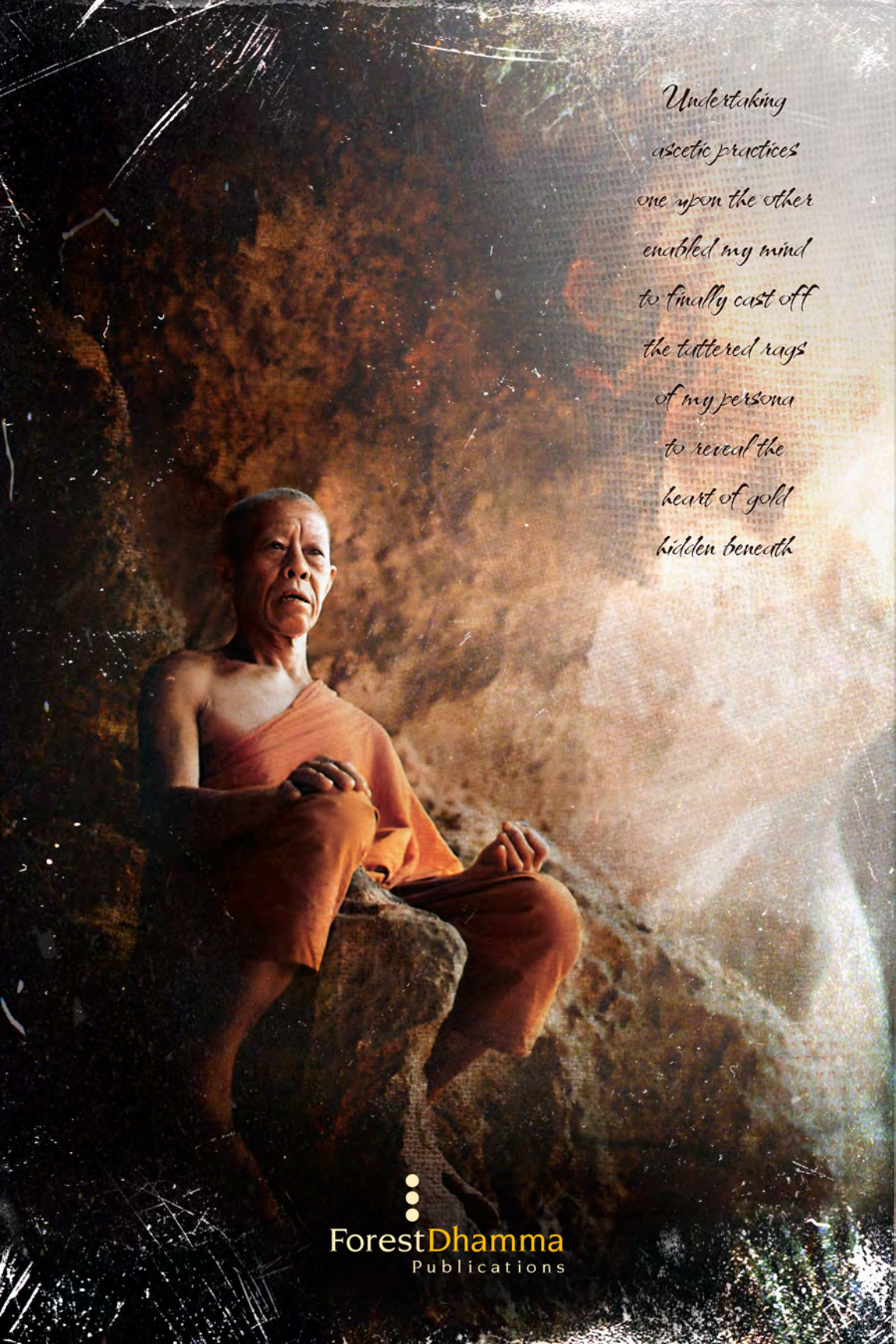
Ven. Buddharakkhita Thera on Visākha Pūja Day, 1975 and thus became Sāmaṇera Sangharatana.

While still ordained as a novice, he relocated to Sri Lanka in late 1975. He first stayed with Ven. Nārada Thera at Vajirarāma on the outskirts of Colombo. There he met Ven. Nyanavimala Thera, a German monk known for his ascetic practices and wandering lifestyle, who insisted that the young sāmaṇera first ground his practice in a study of the discourses recorded in the Pāli Canon and the rules of monastic discipline. Following Ven. Nyanavimala's recommendation, Sangharatana moved to Sri Vajirañāṇa Dharmāyatanaya Monastery at Maharagama. While there, he received full bhikkhu ordination in the Amarapura Nikāya on June 26, 1976, with Madihe Paññāsiha Mahā Nāyaka as his preceptor. After completing his first rains, Bhikkhu Sangharatana paid a second visit to Ven. Nyanaponika Thera in Kandy. While there he met Bhikkhu Bodhi, who gave him a copy of the book *Forest Dhamma*, a compilation of Dhamma talks given by Ven. Ajaan Mahā Boowa Ñāṇasampanno and translated from Thai into English by Ven. Ajaan Paññāvaḍḍho.

Inspired by his first encounter with the “forest” Dhamma of the Thai Forest Tradition, Bhikkhu Sangharatana took leave of his upajjhāya and traveled to Thailand in early 1977. He took up residence at Wat Bovornives Vihāra in Bangkok, where he was re-ordained as Bhikkhu Silaratano in the Dhammayut Nikāya on April 21, 1977, with Somdet Phra Ñāṇasaṁvara as his upajjhāya. He soon moved to Baan Taad Forest Monastery in the northeastern province of Udon Thani and was accepted as a student by Ajaan Mahā Boowa. He remained there for seventeen years, serving as Ajaan Mahā Boowa's attendant monk. He then spent a decade practicing *dhutaṅga* in mountainous forest reserves, staying in remote caves and secluded monasteries, and seeking out renowned meditation monks for spiritual advice. During that period, he lived a simple, ascetic lifestyle devoted to experiencing the extraordinary power of wilderness practice firsthand.

Shortly after Ajaan Mahā Boowa passed away in January 2011, Ajaan Dick decided the time was right to set up a branch monastery in the lineage of Ajaan Mahā Boowa in America. With the help of supporters in the United States and around the world, Ajaan Dick and a dedicated group of monks and lay volunteers began building Forest Dhamma Monastery in the mountains of southwestern Virginia. Today the monastery is at the heart of a thriving community of lay and monastic practitioners upholding the core principles of the Thai Forest Tradition under the guidance of Ajaan Dick.

Ajaan Dick Silaratano has been writing English translations of biographies of Thai Forest meditation masters and books on Buddhist meditation as taught in the Thai Forest Tradition for many years. His books include: *Uncommon Wisdom: The Life and Teachings of Ajaan Paññāvaḍḍho*, *Samaṇa: Luangta Maha Boowa*, *Mae Chee Kaew: Her Journey to Spiritual Awakening and Enlightenment*, *Arahattamagga*, *Arahattaphala: The Path to Arahantship*, and *Ācariya Mun Bhūridatta Thera: A Spiritual Biography*. All Ajaan Dick's works are available for free download on the monastery's website www.forestdhamma.org.



*Undertaking
ascetic practices
one upon the other
enabled my mind
to finally cast off
the tattered rags
of my persona
to reveal the
heart of gold
hidden beneath*

