

# Author's Preface

The life story that you are about to read of Ācariya Mun Bhýridatta Thera, his way of practice and his moral goodness, is the result of extensive research which I conducted in consultation with many *ācariyas* of his discipleship who lived with him throughout various periods of his monastic life.

I sought out these *ācariyas*, recorded their memories of him, and compiled their recollections to write this biography. This account is not as completely accurate as I wished, because it was virtually impossible for the monks to remember all the many experiences that Ācariya Mun conveyed to them about his life as a wandering forest monk. But, if I were to wait for every detail to be recalled before writing this biography, it would only be a matter of time before all information is forgotten and forever lost. All hope of recording his story for the edification of interested readers would then be surely lost as well. With great difficulty, I composed this biography; and, although it is incomplete, my hope is that it will prove to be of some benefit to the reader.

I shall attempt to depict the many aspects of Ācariya Mun's daily conduct, as well as the knowledge and insights he attained and elucidated to his disciples. I intend to illustrate his Noble life in the style of the Venerable Ācariyas of antiquity who transcribed the essence of the lives of the Buddha's Arahant disciples into ancient texts, ensuring that all future generations will have some understanding of the results that are possible when the Dhamma is practiced sincerely. May the reader forgive me if my presentation of Ācariya Mun's life appears inappropriate in any way. Yet the truth is that it is a factual account, representing the memories of Ācariya Mun Bhýridatta Thera's life as he himself conveyed them to us. Although I am not wholly comfortable with the book, I have decided to publish it anyway, because I feel that readers interested in Dhamma may gain some valuable insight.



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**T**he Venerable Ācariya Mun Bhýridatta Thera was a *vipassanā* meditation master of the highest caliber of this present age; one who is truly worthy of the eminent praise and admiration accorded to him by his close disciples. He taught the profound nature of Dhamma with such authority and persuasion that he left no doubts among his students about the exalted level of his spiritual attainment. His devoted followers consist of numerous monks and laity from virtually every region of Thailand. Besides these, he has many more devotees in Laos, where both monks and lay people feel a deep reverence for him.

His story is truly a magnificent one throughout: from his early years in lay life through his long endeavor as a Buddhist monk to the day he finally passed away. Nowadays, a life of such unblemished excellence is harder to come by than a lode of precious gemstones.

Ācariya Mun was born into a traditional Buddhist family on Thursday, January 20, 1870, the Year of the Goat. His birthplace was the village of Ban Khambong in the Khongjiam district of Ubon Ratchathani province.

His father's name was Khamduang; his mother's Jun; and his family surname Kaenkaew. He was the eldest child of eight siblings, though only two of them were still alive when he passed away. A child of small stature with a fair complexion, he was naturally quick, energetic, intelligent, and resourceful.

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At the age of fifteen he ordained as a novice<sup>1</sup> in his village monastery where he developed an enthusiasm for the study of Dhamma, memorizing the texts with exceptional speed. A young novice of affable character, he never caused his teachers or fellows any trouble.

Two years into his new way of life his father requested him to give up the robes, and he was required to return to lay life in order to help out at home. However, his fondness for the monk's life was so pronounced that he was certain he would ordain again some day. His good memories of life in a monk's robes never faded. Thus, he resolved to enter the monkhood again as soon as possible. This strong sense of purpose was due, no doubt, to the power of that indomitable faith, known as *saddhā*, which was such an integral part of his character.

When he reached age twenty-two, he felt an urge to ordain as a monk. So, for that purpose, he took leave of his parents. Not wanting to discourage his aspirations and having also kept the hope that their son would ordain again someday, they gave their permission. To this end, they provided him with a complete set of a monk's basic requisites for his ordination. On June 12, 1893,<sup>2</sup> he received his *Bhikkhu* ordination at Wat Liap monastery in the provincial town of Ubon Ratchathani.

His *upajjhāya* was the Venerable Ariyakawi; his *kammavācariya* was Phra Khru Sitha; and his *anusāsanācariya* was Phra Khru Prajuk Ubonkhun.<sup>3</sup> He was given the monastic name "Bhýridatta".<sup>4</sup> After his ordination, he took residence at Wat Liap in Ācariya Sao's *vipassanā* meditation center.

## *The Prophecy*

When Ācariya Mun first began practicing *vipassanā* at Ācariya Sao's center, he meditated constantly, internally repeating the word "*buddho*", the recollection of the Buddha, as he preferred this preparatory Dhamma theme above all others. In the beginning, he failed to experience the degree of calm and happiness that he expected, which caused him to doubt whether he was practicing correctly. Despite his doubt he didn't flag in his persistent use of the word "*buddho*", and eventually his heart developed a certain measure of calm.

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One night he had a dream:

He walked out of a village and entered a large, dense jungle overgrown with tangled undergrowth. He could hardly find a way to penetrate it. He struggled to find his way through this vast thicket until he finally emerged safe at the other end. When he came out, he found himself at the edge of an immense field that stretched as far as the eye could see. He set out resolutely, walking across this field until he happened to come across a huge fallen *jāti* tree.<sup>5</sup>

Felled long ago, its trunk was partially embedded in the ground, and most of its bark and sapwood had already rotted away. He climbed upon this giant *jāti* log and walked along its full length. As he walked, he reflected inwardly. He realized that this tree would never sprout and grow again. He compared this with his own life which would certainly not rise again in any future existence. He identified the dead *jāti* tree with his own life in *saṃsāra*. Seeing that the tree had rotted away, never to root and spring to life again, he reckoned that, by keeping up his diligent practice, he would surely find a way to reach a definite conclusion to his own life in this very existence. The vast expanse of open field symbolized the nature of the never-ending cycle of birth and death.

As he stood on the log contemplating this, a broad white stallion trotted up and stood next to the fallen *jāti* tree. As it stood there, Ācariya Mun felt an urge to ride it. So, he mounted the mysterious horse which immediately raced off at full gallop. He had no idea where he was being taken or why. The horse just continued galloping at full speed without showing any obvious sign of direction or purpose. The distance it traveled across the vast field seemed immeasurable. As they strode along, Ācariya Mun saw a beautiful *Tipiāika* cabinet<sup>6</sup> in the distance, adorned with exquisite silver trim. Without guidance, the horse led him directly to the enclosed bookcase, and came to a halt right in front of it. The moment Ācariya Mun dismounted with the aim of opening the cabinet, the white stallion vanished without a trace. As he stepped towards the bookcase, he noticed that it was standing at the very edge of the field with nothing in the background but more of the dense jungle, entangled and smothered with undergrowth. He saw no way of penetrating it. When he came to the *Tipiāika* cabinet, he reached out

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to open it; but, before he had a chance to discover the contents inside, he woke up.

This was a dream *nimitta*, an omen confirming his belief that if he persevered in his efforts, he would undoubtedly discover a path for attaining what he sought. From then on, with renewed determination Ācariya Mun meditated intensively, unrelenting in his efforts to constantly repeat "*buddho*" as he conducted all his daily affairs. At the same time, he very carefully observed the austere *dhutanga* practices which he undertook at the time of his ordination, and continued to practice for the rest of his life.<sup>7</sup> The *dhutangas* he voluntarily undertook were: wearing only robes made from discarded cloth – not accepting robes directly offered by lay supporters; going on almsround every day without fail – except those days when he decided to fast; accepting and eating only food received in his alms bowl – never receiving food offered after his almsround; eating only one meal a day – never eating food after the one meal; eating only out of the alms bowl – never eating food that is not inside the one vessel; living in the forest – which means wandering through forested terrain, living and sleeping in the wilds, in the mountains or in the valleys; some time spent living under a canopy of trees, in a cave, or under an overhanging cliff; and wearing only his three principal robes – the outer robe, the upper robe, and the lower robe,<sup>8</sup> with the addition of a bathing cloth which is necessary to have nowadays.

Ācariya Mun also observed the remainder of the thirteen *dhutanga* practices when circumstances were convenient; but, he upheld the above seven routinely until they became integrated into his character. They became so much a part of him that it would be difficult to find one who is his equal these days.

On his own accord, he showed earnestness in finding meaning in everything he did. He never approached his duties halfheartedly. His sincere aim, always, was to transcend the world. Everything he did was directed toward the noble effort of destroying the *kilesas*<sup>9</sup> within himself. Due to this sense of purpose, he allowed no hiding room in his heart for arrogance and conceit, despite being exposed to the same defiling influences as was everyone else. In one respect he differed markedly from the average person: instead of allowing his mind free reign for the *kilesas* to trample all over, he always put up a fight, attacking them at every opportunity.

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Later, when he felt confident that he had developed a sufficiently solid foundation in his meditation, he investigated the dream *nimitta*. Turning his attention to the dream, he analyzed it until he gradually comprehended its full meaning. He saw that ordaining as a monk and practicing the Dhamma properly was equivalent to raising the level of the *citta* beyond the poisons of the world. The dense, entangled jungle, where dangers of every kind await to ambush, was the analogy for the *citta*, a repository of pain and misery. The *citta* must be lifted until it reaches the vast, wide open expanse – a sphere of Ultimate Happiness, and freedom from all fear and concern.<sup>10</sup>

The majestic white stallion symbolized the path of practicing Dhamma. He rode the horse as the means of transport to the realm of complete contentment, where he encountered the beautiful *Tipiāka* cabinet with an exquisite design. Able only to look upon it, he lacked the spiritual perfection necessary to secure the cabinet's opening and admire its library to his heart's content – a feat accomplished only by one who has acquired *catu paāisambhidāñāōa*. A person endowed with this four-fold knowledge is renowned throughout the three worlds for his brilliant wisdom and his comprehensive knowledge of teaching methods, extensive as the sea and sky. Such a one is never at a loss when teaching *devas* and humans.

Because Ācariya Mun lacked a sufficiently high level of spiritual perfection, he was denied the opportunity to open the cabinet, and had to be content with simply admiring its beauty. Consequently, he would attain only the level of *paāisambhidānusāsana*, meaning that he had sufficient wisdom and expository skills to elucidate to others the basic path of Buddhist practice, but not its entire breadth and depth. Although he humbly stated that his teaching was merely sufficient to show the way, those who witnessed his practice and heard the profound Dhamma that he taught throughout his life were so deeply impressed that no words can describe it. It would certainly be difficult to witness or hear anything comparable in this day and age – an age much in need of such a noble person.

## The Sign

At one point during his meditation training at Wat Liap, Ācariya Mun's *citta* 'converged' into a state of calm<sup>11</sup> and a vision arose spontaneously. The mental image<sup>12</sup> was of a dead body laid out before him, bloated, oozing pus, and seeping with bodily fluids. Vultures and dogs were fighting over the corpse, tearing into the rotting flesh and flinging it around, until what remained was all scattered about. The whole scene was unimaginably disgusting, and he was appalled.

From then on, Ācariya Mun constantly used this image as a mental object to contemplate at all times – whether sitting in *samādhi*, walking in meditation, or engaging in other daily activities. He continued in this manner until, one day, the image of the corpse changed into a translucent disk that appeared suspended before him. The more he focused intensely on the disk, the more it changed its appearance without pause. The more he tried to follow, the more it altered its form so that he found it impossible to tell where the series of images would end. The more he investigated the visions, the more they continued to change in character – *ad infinitum*. For example, the disk became a tall mountain range where Ācariya Mun found himself walking, brandishing a sharp sword and wearing shoes. Then, a massive wall with a gate appeared. He opened the gate to look inside and saw a monastery where several monks were sitting in meditation. Near the wall he saw a steep cliff with a cave where a hermit was living. He noticed a conveyance, shaped like a cradle and hanging down the face of the cliff by a rope. Climbing into the cradle-like conveyance, he was drawn up to the mountain peak. At the summit, he found a large Chinese junk with a square table inside, and a hanging lantern that cast a luminescent glow upon the whole mountain terrain. He found himself eating a meal on the mountain peak ... and so on, and so forth, until it was impossible to see an end to it all. Ācariya Mun said that all the images he experienced in this manner were far too numerous to recall.

For a full three months, Ācariya Mun continued to meditate in this way. Each time when he dropped into *samādhi*, he withdrew from it to continue his investigation of the translucent disk which just kept giving him a seemingly endless series of images. However, he did not receive enough beneficial results from this to be convinced that this was the correct method. For after practicing in this manner, he was over-



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sensitive to the common sights and sounds around him. Pleased by this and disappointed by that, he liked some things and hated others. It seemed that he could never find a stable sense of balance.

Because of this sensitivity, he came to believe that the *samādhi* which he practiced was definitely the wrong path to follow. If it were really correct, why did he fail to experience peace and calm consistently in his practice? On the contrary, his mind felt distracted and unsettled, influenced by many sense objects that it encountered – much like a person who had never undergone any meditation training at all. Perhaps the practice of directing his attention outwards towards external phenomena violated the fundamental principles of meditation. Maybe this was the reason he failed to gain the promised benefits of inner peace and happiness.

Thus, Ācariya Mun came to a new understanding about himself. Instead of focusing his mind on external matters, he brought his *citta* back inside, within the confines of his own physical body. From then on, his investigations were centered only on his own body.

Keeping a sharp mindfulness, he examined the body from top to bottom, side to side, inside out and throughout; every body part and every aspect. In the beginning, he preferred to conduct his examinations while walking in meditation, pacing back and forth in deep thought. Sometimes he needed to rest his body from these exertions. So, he sat in *samādhi* for awhile, though he absolutely refused to let his *citta* 'converge' into its habitual state of calm. Rather, he forced it to stay put within the body's domain. The *citta* had no other choice but to travel around the many parts of the body and probe into them. When it was time for him to lie down, the investigation continued inside his mind until he fell asleep.

He meditated like this for several days until he felt ready to sit in *samādhi* and try to attain a state of calm with his newly discovered method. He challenged himself to find out what state of calm the *citta* could attain. Deprived of peace for many days now, and having begun the intense training associated with body contemplation, his *citta* 'converged' rapidly into a calm state with unprecedented ease. He knew with certainty that he had the correct method: for, when his *citta* 'converged' this time, his body appeared to be separated from himself. It seemed to split into two at that moment. Mindfulness was in force during the entire time, right to the moment that the *citta* dropped into *samādhi*. It didn't wander and waver about as it had previously. Thus,

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Ācariya Mun was convinced that his newfound method was the right one for the preliminary work of meditation practice.

From then on, he continued to religiously practice body contemplation until he could attain a state of calm whenever he wanted. With persistence, he gradually became more and more skilled in this method, until the *citta* was firmly anchored in *samādhī*. He had wasted three whole months chasing the disk and its illusions. But now, his mindfulness no longer abandoned him, and therefore, he was no longer adversely affected by the influences around him. This whole episode clearly shows the disadvantages of not having a wise teacher to guide one. Misjudgments occur without timely advice and direction in meditation. Ācariya Mun was a perfect example of this. Having no teacher can lead to costly mistakes that can easily harm the meditator, or, at the very least, delay his progress.

DURING ĀCARIYA MUN'S early years as a wandering monk, people showed little interest in the practice of *kammaāhāna* meditation. Many regarded it as something strange, even alien to Buddhism, having no legitimate place in the life of a monk. Back then, a *dhutanga* monk, walking in the distance on the far side of a field, was enough to send country folk into a panic. Being fearful, those still close to the village quickly ran home. Those walking near the forest ran into the thick foliage to hide, being too scared to stand their ground or greet the monks. Thus, *dhutanga* monks, wandering in unfamiliar regions during their travels, seldom had a chance to ask the locals for much needed directions.

Women from the countryside often took their small children on excursions into the surrounding hills to pick wild herbs and edible plants, or to fish in outlying ponds. Suddenly spotting a party of *dhutanga* monks walking toward them, they would yell to each other in alarm, "Dhamma monks! Dhamma monks are coming!" With that they threw their baskets and other gear to the ground with a thud, and frantically rushed to find a safe hiding-place. Their discarded belongings could have been damaged or broken when flung to the ground, but they took no notice; everyone simply fled into the nearby forest, or if close by, to their village homes.

Meanwhile the children, who had no idea what was happening, started crying and pleading for help when they saw their mothers scream and run away. Too slow to keep pace with the adults, the little ones

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raced around in confusion. Stranded, they ran back and forth in the open field while their mothers remained in the forest, too frightened to emerge and retrieve them. An amusing scene of needless panic, but at the same time pitiful: to see innocent children so frightened, running in circles, desperately crying in search of their mothers.

Obviously the situation didn't look good, so the *dhutanga* monks hurried past lest their prolonged presence provoke even more hysteria. Had they made any attempt to approach the children, the incident might have gotten out of control with terrified kids frantically scattering in all directions, their shrill screams ringing through the forest. In the meantime, their anxious mothers huddled, trembling, behind the trees, afraid of the 'Dhamma monks' and, at the same time, afraid that their children might flee in all directions. They watched nervously until the monks were out of sight.

When the monks finally disappeared, a big commotion erupted as mothers and children dashed excitedly about, trying to find one another. By the time the whole group was safely reunited, it seemed as though the entire village had disbanded for awhile. The reunion was accompanied by a hubbub of chatter, everybody laughing about the sudden appearance of the 'Dhamma monks' and the chaos that followed.

Such occurrences were common in those early years: women and children were terrified because they had never before seen *dhutanga kammaāhāna* monks. Ordinarily people knew nothing about them and showed little interest, except to flee at their sight. There are several possible reasons for this. Firstly, their appearance was rather austere and reserved. They were unlikely to show much familiarity with anyone they hadn't personally known for a long time; someone who knew their habits well. Also, their robes and other requisites were an ochre color from dye made from the heartwood of the jackfruit tree – a color that was striking but had a tendency to inspire more fear than devotion.

These jackfruit-colored robes were worn by *dhutanga* monks as they wandered from place to place practicing the ascetic way of life. They carried their umbrella-tents,<sup>13</sup> which were considerably larger than ordinary umbrellas, slung over one shoulder. Over the other shoulder they carried their alms bowls. Walking in single file and dressed in their yellowish-brown robes, they were an eye-catching sight to those as yet unfamiliar with their mode of practice. Finding a quiet spot, condu-

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cive to meditation, *dhutanga* monks settled for a while in the outlying forests of rural communities, allowing the locals a chance to get better acquainted with them. By listening to their teachings, questioning them, and receiving their advice, people's lives benefited in so many ways. Gradually over time, their hearts grew to accept the reasonable explanations they heard, and faith issued naturally on its own. With a belief in Dhamma thus instilled in their hearts, old suspicions died away to be replaced by a reverence for the monks whose teachings made such an impression. Then, to those well acquainted with their peaceful temperament and exemplary conduct, the mere sight of monks walking across the countryside inspired devotion. During that early period, such enlightening experiences were shared by country people all over Thailand.

Traveling far and wide, and determined to practice correctly for the sake of Dhamma, *dhutanga* monks always managed to impress people and do them great service. They didn't depend on publicity to get out their message. They relied instead on their exemplary behavior<sup>14</sup> as a natural means of gaining public interest.

A *dhutanga* monk who is concentrated on Dhamma considers wandering in search of seclusion to be an indispensable part of his personal practice. Secluded places offer his mind and body a calm, quiet environment. So it was with Ācariya Mun. Each year at the end of the rainy season retreat he started traveling, hiking through forests and mountains in locales where he found just enough small villages to support his daily almsround. More than any other part of the country, he enjoyed wandering in Thailand's Northeast region. Among his favorites were the vast forests and mountain ranges in the provinces of Nakhon Phanom, Sakon Nakhon, Udon Thani, Nong Khai, Loei, and Lom Sak; or on the Laotian side of the Mekong River in such places as Tha Khek, Vientiane, and Luang Prabang. Those locations with their huge tracts of forest and mountainous terrain were ideally suited to practicing the ascetic way of life.

Wherever he was, whatever the time of day, Ācariya Mun's primary focus remained the same: working tirelessly to improve his meditation practice. He knew that this was his most important task in life. By nature, he disliked involvement in monastic building projects. He preferred to concentrate exclusively on the inner work of meditative development. He avoided socializing with fellow monks and remained aloof from civil society, much preferring life alone – a style of living

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that allowed him the freedom to focus all his attention and energy on one main task: transcending *dukkha*.<sup>15</sup> Earnestness and sincerity characterized everything he did: never deceiving himself, he never misled others.

The incredible energy, endurance, and circumspection that he put into his practice was truly amazing. Qualities such as these helped to ensure that *samādhi* and wisdom steadily progressed, never showing any signs of decline. Since the day he first discovered body contemplation to be the right method for the preliminary work of meditation, he kept that contemplation always in mind. Assiduously maintaining that method, repeatedly investigating his body, over and over again, he became very skilled at mentally dissecting the various body parts, large and small, and then breaking them apart with wisdom. Eventually, he could dissect his entire body at will and then reduce the whole lot to its constituent elements.

Through perseverance, Ācariya Mun steadily and increasingly attained more peaceful and calmer states of mind. He wandered through forests and over mountains, stopping at suitable locations to intensify his practice; but, never did he relax the persistent effort he put into all his activities. Whether walking for alms, sweeping the grounds, washing a spittoon, sewing or dying his robes, eating a meal, or simply stretching his legs, he was aware of striving to perfect himself at every waking moment and in all activities, without exception. Only when the time came to sleep did he relent. Even then, he resolved to get up immediately, without hesitation, as soon as he awoke. He made sure that this habit became ingrained in his character. The moment he was conscious of being awake, he rose quickly, washed his face, and resumed his meditation practice. If he still felt sleepy, he refused to sit in meditation right away for fear of nodding off to sleep again. Instead, he practiced walking meditation, striding back and forth to dispel the drowsiness that threatened to overtake him at the slightest lapse in vigilance. If walking slowly proved ineffective, he sought to invigorate himself by quickening his pace. Only when all drowsiness disappeared and he began to feel tired did he leave his meditation track to sit down to continue meditating until dawn.

Shortly after dawn, he prepared to go on his almsround. Wearing his lower robe, placing his under and upper robes together and wrapped about him, his alms bowl hanging from his shoulder by a strap, he walked to the nearest village in a self-composed manner, careful to

maintain mindfulness the entire way. Considering his hike to and from the village a form of walking meditation, he focused his attention inward every step of the way, insuring that his mind did not venture out to become involved with any emotionally-charged sense object along the route. Returning to his campsite, or the monastery where he resided, he arranged the food he had received in his alms bowl. As a matter of principle, he ate only the food he was offered in the village, refusing to accept any food brought to him afterward. Only much later, in his very old age, did he relax this practice somewhat, agreeing to accept food that the faithful offered him in the monastery. During his early years, he ate only the food he had received in his alms bowl.

With everything to be eaten placed in the bowl, he sat contemplating the true purpose of the food<sup>16</sup> he was about to eat as a means of dousing the inner fires of hell; that is to say, any craving for food that might arise due to hunger. Otherwise, the mind might succumb to the power of craving and indulge in the fine taste of food, when in fact, it should be reflecting on food's essential qualities: how all food, being simply a composition of gross elements, is inherently disgusting by its very nature.<sup>17</sup> With this thought firmly fixed in his mind, he chewed his food mindfully to deny any opening to craving until he had finished the meal. Afterwards, he washed the bowl, wiped it dry, exposed it to direct sunlight for a few minutes, then replaced it in its cloth covering, and put it neatly away in its proper place. Then, it was time once again to resume the task of battling the *kilesas*, with the aim of destroying them gradually until they were thoroughly defeated and unable ever again to trouble his mind.

It must be understood, however, that the business of destroying *kilesas* is an inexpressibly difficult task to accomplish. For though we may be determined to burn the *kilesas* to ashes, what invariably tends to happen is that the *kilesas* turn around and burn us, causing us so much hardship that we quickly abandon those same virtuous qualities that we meant to develop. We clearly see this negative impact and want to get rid of the *kilesas*; but then, we undermine our noble purpose by failing to act decisively against them, fearing that the difficulties of such action will prove too painful. Unopposed, the *kilesas* become lord masters of our hearts, pushing their way in and claiming our hearts as their exclusive domain. Sadly, very few people in this world possess the knowledge and understanding to counteract these defilements. Hence, living beings throughout the three worlds of

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existence are forever surrendering to their dominance. Only the Lord Buddha discovered the way to completely cleanse his heart of them: never again did they defeat him.

After achieving that comprehensive victory, the Lord Buddha compassionately turned his attention to teaching the way, proclaiming the Dhamma to his disciples and inspiring them to resolutely follow the same Noble Path that he had taken. Practicing thus, they were able to emulate his supreme achievement, reaching the very end of the Noble Path, the highest attainment: Nibbāna. Dealing the all- powerful *kilesas* a fatal blow, these Noble individuals eradicated them from their hearts forever. Having extinguished their *kilesas*, they became those Arahant disciples that people the world over have worshipped with such devotion ever since.

Ācariya Mun was another Noble individual following in the footsteps of the Lord Buddha. He truly possessed unshakable faith and uncompromising resolve – he didn't merely talk about them. When the morning meal was over, he immediately entered the forest to begin walking meditation in those peaceful surroundings that were so conducive to calm and inner happiness. First walking, later sitting, he pursued his meditation until he felt the time was right to take a short rest. His strength renewed, he resumed his attack on the *kilesas*, creators of the endless cycle of existence. With such determination and steadfast application to the task, the *kilesas* were never given reason to scoff at Ācariya Mun's efforts. While practicing *samādhi* intensively, he also worked tirelessly to develop insight, his wisdom revolving relentlessly around whatever object he was investigating. In that way, *samādhi* and *vipassanā* were developed in tandem, neither one lagging behind the other; and his heart remained peaceful and contented in his practice.

Still, periods of slow progress were inevitable, for he had no one to advise him when he got stuck. Often he spent many days working his way through a specific problem, painstakingly figuring out the solution for himself. He was obliged to exhaustively investigate these stumbling blocks in his practice, examining every facet carefully, because they were a hindrance to his progress and also potentially dangerous. In such situations, the advice of a good teacher can be invaluable, helping the meditator to advance quickly and confidently without wasting time. For this reason, it's very important that meditators have a *kalyāṇamitta*. Ācariya Mun personally experienced the drawbacks of not having such

a wise friend to give him timely advice, insisting that it was a definite disadvantage.

### *Ācariya Sao Kantasālo*

In his early years of practice, Ācariya Mun often wandered *dhutanga* in the company of Ācariya Sao,<sup>18</sup> comforted in the knowledge that he had a good, experienced teacher to lend him support. But when he asked his teacher to advise him on specific problems arising in his meditation, Ācariya Sao invariably replied: "My experiences in meditation are quite different from yours. Your *citta* is so adventurous, tending always toward extremes. One moment it soars into the sky, only to plunge deep into the earth the next. Then, after diving to the ocean floor, it again soars up to walk meditation high in the sky. Who could possibly keep up with your *citta* long enough to find a solution? I advise you to investigate these matters for yourself and find your own solutions." Ācariya Sao never gave him enough concrete advice to really help him, so Ācariya Mun was forced to solve his own problems. Sometimes, he nearly died before discovering a way past some of the more intractable problems he faced.

Ācariya Mun described his teacher as someone with a smooth, serene temperament who inspired deep devotion. A rather strange feature of Ācariya Sao's practice was his tendency to levitate while in *samādhi*, his body hovering quite noticeably above the floor. At first, doubtful that his body was indeed floating, he opened his eyes to see for himself. As soon as his eyes opened, concern about the condition of his body caused his *citta* to withdraw from *samādhi*. He promptly fell back to the floor, landing hard on his buttocks which was sore and bruised for many days. In truth, his body did float about three feet above the floor. But by opening his eyes to check, he lost the mindfulness needed to maintain his *citta* in *samādhi*. Withdrawing suddenly from *samādhi* caused him to come crashing to the floor, like any other object dropped from a height. Practicing *samādhi* later and feeling his body levitate again, he kept mindfulness firmly focused within that state of *samādhi*, and then, carefully opened his eyes to look at himself. It was obvious to him then that he did levitate. This time, however, he didn't



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fall back to the floor, for mindfulness was present to maintain total concentration.

This experience taught Ācariya Sao a valuable lesson about himself. Yet being an exceptionally careful, meticulous person, he wasn't entirely convinced. So he took a small object, inserted it into the underside of the thatched roof in his hut, and continued to meditate. When he felt his body beginning to float again, he firmly focused his *citta* in *samādhi*, and he was able to float upward until he reached that small object in the thatch. Drawing level with it, he slowly reached out and very mindfully took it in his hand so that he could bring it back down by means of *samādhi*. This meant that once he had it in his grasp, he gradually withdrew from *samādhi* to the point where his body could slowly, and safely, descend to the floor – a point still short of complete withdrawal from *samādhi*. Experimenting like this, he became convinced of his ability to levitate, though this did not occur every time he entered *samādhi*.

From the beginning of his practice to the end of his life, Ācariya Sao's *citta* tended to have this smooth, imperturbable quality; in sharp contrast to the wholly adventurous nature that characterized Ācariya Mun's *citta*. Unlike him, Ācariya Sao was not so motivated to live dangerously, seeking adventure; nor did he tend to perceive the variety of unusual phenomena that Ācariya Mun invariably did.

Ācariya Mun told us that, once, in ages past, Ācariya Sao had resolved to become a Paccekabuddha.<sup>19</sup> Intensifying his efforts at meditation caused him to recollect his longtime resolution, and his lingering attachment to that goal made him reluctant to strive for Nibbāna in the present. It soon became apparent that this vow would block any attempt to realize Nibbāna in his lifetime; therefore, he immediately decided to renounce the old vow. In its place, he resolved to attain Nibbāna as soon as possible. He became determined to reach this goal within his present lifetime in order to avoid the misery of being reborn in the future.

Having forsaken his original vow, and thus, unhindered by previous commitments, his meditation practice progressed smoothly until one day he finally reached the Land of Ultimate Happiness that he had been aiming for. However, his teaching skill was very limited, probably due to a natural predisposition toward becoming a Paccekabuddha: someone who has no inclination to teach others although he is able to fully enlighten himself. Furthermore, the fact that he could so easily

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give up his original resolve and then achieve his new goal meant that his previous vow had not yet matured to the stage of being irreversible.

Ācariya Mun related that in ages past he had made a similar resolution – in his case, a solemn vow to become a Buddha. As with Ācariya Sao, intensifying his efforts at meditation caused Ācariya Mun to recollect this long-standing intention, and this underlying attachment made him reluctant to strive for the attainment of Nibbāna in his present life. Ācariya Mun renounced his vow to be a Buddha only after he began practicing *dhutanga kammaāhāna*, for he then realized that its fulfillment would take far too long. It required eons of traversing the round of *saṃsāra*: being born, growing old, becoming ill, and dying over and over again, enduring misery and pain indefinitely.

Renouncing the original vow relieved Ācariya Mun of this concern, opening the way for his meditation to progress smoothly. The fact that he could so easily abandon the original vow indicates that it was not yet so firmly fixed in his conscious being that he couldn't detach himself from it.

Ācariya Mun often accompanied Ācariya Sao on his excursions wandering *dhutanga* across the provinces of the Northeast region. Due to differences in personality, their meditation experiences varied in some respects; but each very much enjoyed the other's company. By nature, Ācariya Sao preferred to say very little. He was a reluctant teacher, especially of the laity. Occasionally obliged to give instruction to lay supporters, he was always very frugal with words. The little he did say could be summed up like this:

“You should renounce evil and cultivate goodness. Being fortunate enough to be born human, don't waste this good opportunity now. Our status as human beings is a very noble one; so, avoid all animal-like behavior. Otherwise, you'll sink below the animals, and be much more wretched as well. When you eventually fall into hell, your tortuous existence there will be far more grievous than that of any animal. So don't do evil!”

That said, he left his seat and returned to his hut, taking no further interest in anyone.

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He always spoke very sparingly. In an entire day he might say only a few sentences. On the other hand, he could endure many hours of sitting and walking in meditation. He had a remarkably dignified, noble appearance that inspired respect and devotion. Just a glimpse of his serene, peaceful countenance made a lasting impression. He was greatly revered by monks and laity alike and, like Ācariya Mun, he had many devoted disciples.

It was well known that these two *ācariyas* shared immense love and respect for each other. In the early years, they enjoyed traveling in each other's company. They spent most of the year living together, both during and after the annual rainy season retreat. In the middle years, they normally spent these retreats in separate locations but close enough to each other to make visiting easy. Very seldom, then, did they spend a retreat together, for each had an increasingly large following of disciples, making it difficult to find enough space to accommodate them all at one location. Living separately eliminated the burden of having to arrange living quarters for so many monks.

Even when living apart, they often thought of each other with genuine concern. On occasions when Ācariya Sao's disciples visited Ācariya Mun, the first question he asked concerned the health and well-being of Ācariya Sao, who in turn invariably reciprocated by inquiring about Ācariya Mun's well-being when one of his disciples paid a visit. Through such messengers, each then conveyed his respectful greeting to the other, maintaining contact in this way at every opportunity. Each of these great *ācariyas* had enormous respect for the other's spiritual achievements. Both used words full of praise and admiration when speaking to their disciples about each other. Their comments never contained a hint of criticism.

ĀCARIYA MUN WHOLEHEARTEDLY agreed with Ācariya Sao's comment about his *citta* being adventurous, and tending to go to extremes: soaring high in the sky one moment, then plunging into the earth before diving to the ocean floor. His *citta* truly did have such mercurial characteristics. Dropping into *samādhi* in the early stages of his practice, his *citta* tended to focus outward then, perceiving all manner of unusual phenomena – things he had never dreamed of seeing. For example, he saw a bloated corpse laid out before him. As I have mentioned

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before, when he concentrated his attention on this image, it soon changed into a translucent disc which in turn altered its form, creating an endless series of images.

Even after discovering the correct method of practice, when his *citta* 'converged' into calm it was still inclined to focus outward, perceiving countless types of phenomena. Sometimes, he felt his body soaring high into the sky where he traveled around for many hours, looking at celestial mansions before coming back down. At other times, he burrowed deep beneath the earth to visit various regions in hell. There he felt profound pity for its unfortunate inhabitants, all experiencing the grievous consequences of their previous actions. Watching these events unfold, he often lost all perspective of the passage of time. In those days, he was still uncertain whether these scenes were real or imaginary. He said that it was only later on, when his spiritual faculties were more mature, that he was able to investigate these matters and understand clearly the definite moral and psychological causes underlying them. Any lapse in concentration as his *citta* 'converged' into calm created an opening through which it could again focus outward to perceive such phenomena. His newfound proficiency notwithstanding, if his attention turned outward, his *citta* would be off in a flash.

Ācariya Mun told us that early on, due to inexperience with the mercurial nature of his own mind, when focusing his *citta* to examine the lower half of his body, instead of following the various parts down to the soles of his feet, it would shoot out through his lower torso and penetrate deep into the earth – just as Ācariya Sao had so astutely remarked. No sooner had he hurriedly withdrawn the *citta* back into his body than it would fly through the top of his head, soaring high into the sky where it paced back and forth contentedly, showing no interest in returning to his body. Concentrating with intense mindfulness, he had to force the *citta* to reenter the body and perform the work he wanted it to do.

In those early days his mind developed a tendency to drop so speedily into a state of calm – like falling from a cliff, or down a well – that his mindfulness couldn't keep up with it. Resting only briefly in complete stillness before withdrawing slightly to the level of *upacāra samādhi*,<sup>20</sup> his *citta* tended to venture out so often, and experienced such a variety of strange things, that he became very frustrated. He tried to force it

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to remain inside the confines of his body, but often to no avail. His *citta* was far too fleeting for mindfulness and wisdom to keep pace.

Still too inexperienced to work out an effective solution, he felt uneasy about the direction of his meditation. Yet, being a strictly internal matter, he couldn't mention his predicament to anyone else. So, with an intense degree of mindfulness and wisdom to guide his efforts, he experimented with many different techniques, suffering considerable mental strain before finding a viable means of controlling his adventuresome *citta*. Once he clearly understood the correct method of taming his dynamic mind, he found that it was versatile, energetic, and extremely quick in all circumstance. Eventually working in unison, mindfulness and wisdom blended so well with the *citta* that they merged to become one with it. Thus strengthened, the *citta* functioned like a magic crystal ball; and he was fully capable of keeping pace with all the myriad phenomena arising within it.

Ācariya Mun possessed a bold, fearless character. He was also extremely intelligent. Because his rigorous training methods differed significantly from ones practiced by other monks, his style of practice was unique – and incredibly difficult to imitate. From my own observations, I can unequivocally state: *He was a truly noble character with a quick, adventurous mind who trained himself with uncompromising resolve. His harsh training methods were often quite unique. He had an ingenious way of mixing coercive pressure and gentle persuasion to tame a dynamic mind that, at the least lapse of concentration, ventured out to find things that could easily cause him problems.*

Struggling desperately on his own to find ways to control his unruly mind, practicing without a dependable guide and enduring difficulties, Ācariya Mun sometimes felt that he was beating his head against a mountain. Unlike so many others, he had to manage without the aid of a wise teacher's proven meditation methods – a disadvantage he often warned others against later on. To his own students he always emphasized his readiness to clarify any problems they experienced in meditation, thus saving them the difficulty of having to waste time as he had in his early years.

SHORTLY AFTER HIS ORDINATION, Ācariya Mun began wandering *dhutanga* in Nakhon Phanom province, and eventually crossed the Mekong River to enter Laos, where he contentedly practiced the ascetic way of life

in the mountainous district of Tha Khek. This area of Laos abounded in large, ferocious tigers – huge beasts that were considered far more vicious than tigers on the Thai side of the river. Repeatedly they attacked and killed the local inhabitants and then feasted on their flesh. Despite such brutality, those people, mostly of Vietnamese descent, weren't nearly as afraid of tigers as were their Lao and Thai neighbors. Time and again they watched these terrible beasts attack and kill friends and relatives; yet, they seemed indifferent to the carnage. Having seen a friend killed right in front of them, the flesh torn from the body by a hungry tiger, the people would casually venture back into that same tiger-infested forest the next day, as though nothing had happened. The Lao and Thai communities would have been extremely upset, but the Vietnamese seemed strangely unmoved by such occurrences. Perhaps they were so accustomed to seeing such things that it no longer affected them.

The Vietnamese had another strange habit: When they saw a man-eating tiger suddenly leap out to attack one of their companions, no one in the group made any effort to save their friend's life. They simply abandoned their friend to his fate and ran for their lives. Suppose a group were sleeping in the forest overnight. If a huge tiger leaped into the campsite and dragged one of them away, the others, awakened by the noise, would jump up and run away, and then, calmly find another place close by to sleep. Like children, they acted without much rhyme or reason in these matters. They behaved as though those huge beasts, which had already shown themselves to be so adept at devouring human flesh, were somehow too stupid to do the same to them.

I am also familiar with people who have no proper fear of tigers. When coming to live in our country, they like to settle in dense, overgrown jungle areas abounding in tigers and other wild animal. Venturing deep into the forest in search of timber, they then spend the night there far from the village, showing no signs of fear at all. Even alone, these people can sleep deep in the forest at night without fear. If they wish to return to the village late at night, they have no qualms about walking alone through the dense undergrowth, and back if necessary. If asked why they aren't afraid of tigers, their response is that, while the huge tigers in their own country have a taste for human flesh, Thai tigers don't; and that they're even scared of people. Conditions can be so dangerous in their homeland that people staying overnight in the forest must build an enclosure to sleep in that resembles a pigsty;

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otherwise, they might never return home. Even within the precincts of some village communities, prowling tigers can be so fierce that no one dares leave home after dark, fearing an attack by a tiger leaping out of the shadows. The Vietnamese even chide the Thais for being such cowardly people, always entering the forest in groups, never daring to venture out alone. For these reasons, Ācariya Mun claimed that the Vietnamese lacked an instinctive fear of tigers.

When Ācariya Mun crossed into their country, however, the tigers there never bothered him. Camped in the forest, he often saw their tracks and heard their roars echoing through the trees at night. However, he never felt personally threatened by such things; they were simply natural aspects of forest life. In any case, Ācariya Mun wasn't worried about tigers so much as he was worried about the possibility that he might not transcend *dukkha* and realize the Supreme Happiness of Nibbāna in his lifetime.

When speaking of his excursions crossing the Mekong River, he never mentioned being afraid. He obviously considered such dangers to be a normal part of trekking through the wilds. If I had been faced with those same dangers instead of Ācariya Mun, surely the local villagers would have had to form a posse to rescue this cowardly *dhutanga* monk. When I'm walking in meditation in the forest at night, just the occasional roar of a tiger so unsettles me that I can barely manage to keep walking to the end of the track. I fear coming face to face with one of those beasts – and losing my wits. You see, since becoming old enough to understand such things, I always heard my parents and their neighbors vociferously proclaim that tigers are very fierce animals, and extremely dangerous. This notion has stuck with me ever since, making it impossible not to be terrified of tigers. I must confess that I've never found a way to counteract this tendency.

ĀCARIYA MUN SPENT most of the earlier years of his monastic career traveling at length through the various provinces of Thailand's North-east region. Later, as he developed enough inner stability to withstand both external distractions and those mercurial mental traits that were so much a part of his character, he walked down into the central provinces, wandering contentedly across the Central Plains region, living the *dhutanga* lifestyle until eventually he reached the capitol, Bangkok. Arriving shortly before the rainy season, he went to Wat

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Pathumwan monastery and entered the retreat there. During the rains retreat he made a point of regularly going to seek advice from Chao Khun Upāli Guōyāpamācariya<sup>21</sup> at Wat Boromaniwat monastery to gain more extensive techniques for developing wisdom.

Ācariya Mun left Bangkok following the rains retreat, hiking to Lopburi province to stay awhile at Phai Khwang Cave in the Phra Ngam mountain range before moving on to Singto Cave. Life in such favorable locations gave him an excellent, uninterrupted opportunity to fully intensify his spiritual practice. In doing so, he developed a fearless attitude toward his mind and the things with which it came in contact. By then, his *samādhi* was rock-solid. Using it as the firm basis for his practice, he examined everything from the perspective of Dhamma, continually uncovering new techniques for developing wisdom. After a suitable interval, he returned to Bangkok, once again visiting Chao Khun Upāli at Wat Boromaniwat. He informed his mentor of developments in his meditation practice, questioning him about doubts he still had concerning the practice of wisdom. Satisfied that the new investigative techniques he had learned were sufficient to further his progress, he finally took leave of Chao Khun Upāli and left to seek seclusion at Sarika Cave in the Khaw Yai mountains of Nakhon Nayok province.

### *Sarika Cave*

Ācariya Mun spent three years living and practicing in Sarika Cave. His entire stay there was filled with the most unusual experiences, making it a memorable episode in his life. To the best of my recollection, he first arrived at Ban Gluay village, the village nearest the cave and thus close enough to be convenient for almsround. Unfamiliar with the area, he asked the villagers to take him to Sarika Cave. Straightaway they warned him that it was a very special cave possessing numerous supernatural powers, insisting that no monk could possibly live there unless his virtue was pure. Other monks who had tried to live there quickly fell ill with a variety of painful symptoms – many had even died before they could be brought down for treatment. They told him that the cave was the domain of a spirit of immense size possessing many magical powers. It also had a very foul temper. This giant spirit guarded



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the cave from all intruders – monks being no exception. Unexpected occurrences awaited all intruders into the cave, many of whom ended up dead. The spirit delighted in testing any monk who came bragging about his mastery of magic spells for warding off spirits. Invariably, the monk would suddenly fall ill and die a premature death. Fearing that Ācariya Mun might die likewise, the villagers pleaded with him not to go.

Curious about the talk of a huge, malevolent spirit with supernatural powers, Ācariya Mun asked and was told that a trespasser usually saw some sign of those powers on the very first night. An ominous dream often accompanied fitful sleep: An enormous black spirit, towering overhead, threatened to drag the dreamer to his death, shouting that it had long been the cave's guardian exercising absolute authority over the whole area, and would allow no one to trespass. So any trespasser was immediately chased away, for it accepted no authority greater than its own, except that of a person of impeccable virtue and a loving, compassionate heart, who extended these noble qualities to all living beings. A person of such nobility was allowed to live in the cave. The spirit would even protect him and pay him homage, but it did not tolerate narrow-minded, selfish, ill-behaved intruders.

Finding life in the cave a very uncomfortable experience, most monks refused to remain for long; and fearing death, they made a hurried departure. Generally, no one managed a long stay – only one or two days at most, and they were quickly on their way. Trembling and almost out of their minds with fear as they climbed back down, they blurted out something about a fierce, demonic spirit. Scared and chastened, they fled, never to return. Worse still, some who went up to the cave never came down again. Thus, the villagers worried about the fate that awaited Ācariya Mun, not wanting him to become the next victim.

Ācariya Mun asked what they meant by saying that some monks went up there never to return: Why hadn't they come down again? He was told that, having died there, they couldn't possibly come back down. They recounted a story of four seemingly competent monks who had died in the cave not long before. Prior to entering the cave, one of them had assured the villagers that he was impervious to fear, for he knew a potent spell that protected him against ghosts and other spirits, plus many other potent spells as well. He was convinced no spirit could threaten him. Warning him repeatedly about the dangers, the villagers

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tried to discourage his intentions, but he reiterated that he had no fear and insisted on being taken to the cave. The villagers were left with no other choice, so they showed him the way. Once there, he came down with a variety of afflictions, including high fevers, pounding headaches, and terrible stomach pains. Sleeping fitfully, he dreamt that he was being taken away to his death.

Over the years, many different monks had tried to live there, but their experiences were strikingly similar. Some died, others quickly fled. The four most recent monks died within a relatively short period. The villagers couldn't guarantee that their deaths were caused by a malevolent spirit; perhaps there was another reason. But they had always noticed a powerful presence connected with the cave. Local people weren't so bold as to challenge its power, for they were wary of it and envisioned themselves being carried back down in critical condition – or as corpses.

Ācariya Mun questioned them further to satisfy himself that they were telling the truth. They assured him that such things happened so often it frightened them to think about it. For this reason, they warned any monk or lay person who came to search the cave for magical objects or sacred amulets. Whether the cave actually contained such things is another matter; but, the fact that some people liked to claim their existence meant that those with a penchant for sacred objects inevitably went there to search for them. The villagers themselves had never seen such objects in the cave; nor had they seen those seeking them encounter anything but death, or narrow escapes from death. Thus, fearing for Ācariya Mun's safety, they begged him not to go.

Ācariya Mun gave the villagers a sympathetic hearing, but in the end he was still curious to see the cave. Live or die, he wanted to put himself to the test, and so discover the truth of those stories. The scary tales he heard didn't frighten him in the least. In truth, he saw this adventure as a means to arouse mindfulness, an opportunity to acquire many new ideas for contemplation. He possessed the courage to face whatever was to happen, as befits someone genuinely interested in seeking the truth. So in his own unassuming way, he informed the villagers that, although the stories were very frightening, he still would like to spend some time in the cave. Assuring them that he would hurry back down at the first sign of trouble, he asked to be escorted to the cave, which they obligingly did.

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FOR SEVERAL DAYS, Ācariya Mun's physical condition remained normal, his heart calm and serene. The environment around the cave was secluded and very quiet, disturbed only by the natural sounds of wild animals foraging for food in the forest. He passed the first few nights contentedly; but on subsequent nights he began to suffer stomach pains. Although such pains were nothing new, this time, however, the condition grew steadily worse, eventually becoming so severe that he sometimes passed blood in his stool. Before long his stomach refused to digest food properly – it simply passed straight through. This made him reflect on what the villagers had said about four monks dying there recently. If his condition didn't improve, perhaps he would be the fifth.

When lay people came to see him at the cave one morning, he sent them to look in the forest for certain medicinal plants that he had previously found beneficial. They gathered various roots and wood essences which he boiled into a potion and drank, or else ground into powder, drinking it dissolved in water. He tried several different combinations of herbs, but none relieved his symptoms. They worsened with each passing day. His body was extremely weak; and though his mental resolve was not greatly affected, it was clearly weaker than normal.

As he sat drinking the medicine one day, a thought arose which, prompting a self-critical examination, reinforced his resolve:

*I've been taking this medicine now for many days. If it really is an effective stomach cure, then I should see some positive results by now. But every day my condition worsens. Why isn't this medicine having the desired effect? Perhaps it's not helping at all. Instead, it may be aggravating the symptoms and so causing the steady deterioration. If so, why continue taking it?*

Once he became fully aware of his predicament, he made an emphatic decision. From that day on he would treat his stomach disorder using only 'the therapeutic properties of Dhamma'. If he lived, so much the better; if he died, then so be it. Conventional types of treatment proving ineffective, he determined to stop taking all medicines until he was cured by Dhamma's therapeutic powers, or else died there in the cave. With this firm resolution in mind, he reminded himself:

*I'm a Buddhist monk. I've certainly practiced meditation long enough to recognize the correct path leading to magga, phala, and Nibbāna. By now my practice should be firmly anchored in this conviction. So why am I so weak and cowardly when faced with a small degree of pain? It's only a slight*

*pain, after all, yet I can't seem to come to grips with it. Becoming weak all of a sudden, I now feel defeated. Later, when life reaches a critical juncture – at the moment of death as the body begins to break up and disintegrate – the onslaught of pain will then crush down mercilessly on body and mind. Where shall I find the strength to fight it so I can transcend this world and avoid being outdone in death's struggle?*

With this solemn determination, he stopped taking all medicines and began earnestly focusing on meditation as the sole remedy for all spiritual and bodily ailments. Discarding concern for his life, he let his body follow its own natural course, turning his attention to probing the *citta* – that essential 'knowing nature' which never dies, yet has death as its constant companion. He set to work examining the *citta*, using the full powers of mindfulness, wisdom, faith and perseverance that he had been developing within himself for so long. The seriousness of his physical condition ceased to interest him; concerns about death no longer arose. He directed mindfulness and wisdom to investigate the painful feelings he experienced, making them separate the body into its constituent elements, and then thoroughly analyzing each one. He examined the physical components of the body and the feelings of pain within it. He analyzed the function of memory which presumes that one or another part of the body is in pain.<sup>22</sup> And he analyzed the thought processes which conceive the body as being in pain.<sup>23</sup> All such vital aspects were targeted in the investigation conducted by mindfulness and wisdom as they continued to probe into the body, the pain, and the *citta*, relentlessly exploring their connections from dusk until midnight. Through this process, he succeeded in fully disengaging the body from the severe pain caused by his stomach disorder until he understood, with absolute clarity, just how they are interrelated. At that moment of realization, his *citta* 'converged' into complete calm – a moment that saw his spiritual resolve immeasurably strengthened, and his bodily illness totally vanish. The illness, the pain, the mind's preoccupations – all disappeared simultaneously.

Remaining only briefly in complete stillness, his *citta* withdrew slightly, reaching the level of *upacāra samādhi*. This 'luminous' *citta* then left the confines of his body and immediately encountered an enormous, black man standing fully thirty feet tall. The towering figure carried a huge metal club – twelve feet long and thick as a man's leg. Walking up to Ācariya Mun, he announced in a menacing voice that he was about to pound him right into the ground. He warned Ācariya

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Mun to flee that very instant if he wished to remain alive. The metal club resting on his shoulder was so huge that a single blow from it would have been enough to pound a large bull elephant into the earth.

Ācariya Mun focused his *citta* on the giant spirit, asking why he wanted to club to death someone who had done nothing to warrant such brutal treatment. He reminded the giant that he had harmed no one while living there; that he had caused no trouble deserving of such deadly punishment. The giant replied by saying that he had long been the sole authority guarding that mountain and would never allow anyone to usurp that authority. He felt compelled to take decisive action against all intruders.

Ācariya Mun's response was reproachful: "I did not come here to usurp anyone's authority. I came to carry on the noble work of spiritual development, for I aim to usurp the authority that the *kilesas* exercise over my heart. Harming a virtuous monk in any way is an absolutely despicable act. I am a disciple of the Lord Buddha, that supremely pure individual whose all-powerful loving compassion encompasses the whole of the sentient universe. Does the great authority you boast give you power to override the authority of Dhamma, and of *kamma* – those immutable laws that govern the existence of all living beings?"

The creature replied: "No, sir."

Ācariya Mun then said: "The Lord Buddha possessed the skill and the courage to destroy those insidious mental defilements that like boasting of power and authority. Thus, he banished from his heart all thoughts of beating or killing other people. You think you're so smart, have you ever given any thought to taking decisive action against the *kilesas* in your heart?"

The creature admitted: "Not yet, sir."

"In that case, such overbearing authority will just make you a cruel, savage individual, resulting in very grave consequences for you. You don't possess the authority needed to rid yourself of evil, so you use the fires of magic against others, unaware that you're actually burning yourself. You are creating very grave *kamma* indeed. As though that weren't bad enough, you want to attack and kill someone who represents the virtues of Dhamma which are central to the world's well-being. How can you ever hope to lay claim to laudable virtues, when you insist on engaging in evil behavior of such unparalleled brutality?"

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“I am a man of virtue. I have come here with the purest intentions – to practice Dhamma for my own spiritual benefit, and the benefit of others. Despite that, you threaten to pound me into the ground, giving no thought to the consequences of such an evil deed. Don't you realize that it will drag you into hell where you will reap the terrible misery you have sown? Rather than feel concerned for myself, I feel very sorry for you – you've become so obsessed with your own authority that it's now burning you alive. Can your potent powers withstand the effect of the grave act you are about to commit? You say you exercise sovereign authority over this mountain, but can your magic powers override Dhamma and the laws of *kamma*? If your powers really are superior to Dhamma, then go ahead – pound me to death! I'm not afraid to die. Even if I don't die today, my death remains inevitable. For the world is a place where all who are born must die – even you, blinded as you are by your own self-importance. You are not above death, or the laws of *kamma* that govern all living beings.”

The mysterious being stood listening, rigid as a statue, the deadly metal club resting on his shoulder as Ācariya Mun admonished him by means of *samādhi* meditation. He stood so completely still that if he were a human being we would say that he was so frightened and ashamed he could scarcely breathe. But this was a special nonhuman being, so he didn't in fact breathe. Yet, even though he managed to do so admirably, his whole manner clearly showed him to be so ashamed and fearful of Ācariya Mun that he could barely restrain his emotions.

Ācariya Mun had finished speaking. Suddenly, the contrite spirit flung the metal club down from his shoulder and spontaneously transformed his appearance from a huge, black creature into a devout Buddhist gentleman with a mild, courteous demeanor. Approaching Ācariya Mun with heartfelt respect, the gentleman then asked his forgiveness, expressing deep remorse. Here is the gist of what he said:

“I was surprised, and felt somewhat frightened, the first moment I saw you. I immediately noticed a strange and amazing radiance extending out all around you, a brilliance unlike anything I had ever seen. It created such a profound impact that in your presence I felt weak and numb. I couldn't do anything – so captivated was I by that radiant glow. Still, I didn't know what it was, for I had never before experienced anything like it.

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“My threats to kill you a moment ago didn’t come from my heart’s true feelings. Rather, they stemmed from a long-held belief that I possess unrivaled authority over nonhuman beings, as well as humans with evil intent who lack moral principles. Such authority can be imposed on anyone, at any time; and that person will be powerless to resist. This arrogant sense of self-importance led me to confront you. Feeling vulnerable, I didn’t want to lose face. Even as I threatened you, I felt nervous and hesitant, unable to act on my threat. It was merely the stance of someone accustomed to wielding power over others. Please be compassionate enough to forgive my rude, distasteful behavior today. I don’t wish to suffer the consequences of evil anymore. As it is now, I suffer enough. Any more, and I won’t have the strength to bear it.”

Ācariya Mun was curious about this: “You are a prominent individual with enormous power and prestige. You have a nonphysical body, so you needn’t experience the human hardships of hunger and fatigue. You aren’t burdened having to make a living as people here on earth are, so why do you complain about suffering? If a celestial existence isn’t happiness, then which type of existence is?”

The spirit replied: “On a superficial level, perhaps, celestial beings with their ethereal bodies do actually experience more happiness than humans, whose bodies are much grosser. But speaking strictly in spiritual terms, a celestial being’s ethereal body still suffers a degree of discomfort proportionate to the refined nature of that state of existence.”

This discussion between spirit and monk was far too profound and complex for me to capture its every detail here, so I hope the reader will forgive me for this shortcoming.

As a result of the discussion, the mysterious celestial being, showing great respect for the Dhamma he heard, affirmed his devotion to the three refuges: Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha. He let it be known that he considered Ācariya Mun to be one of his refuges as well, asking Ācariya Mun to bear witness to his faith. At the same time, he offered Ācariya Mun his full protection, inviting him to remain in the cave indefinitely. Had his wish been granted, Ācariya Mun would have spent the rest of his life there. This being cherished the opportunity to take care of him – he wanted to ensure that nothing whatsoever disturbed Ācariya Mun’s meditation. In truth, he was not some mysterious being with a huge, black body – that was merely a guise. He was the chief leader of all the terrestrial *devas* living in that region.<sup>24</sup> His large

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entourage lived in an area that centered in the mountains of Nakhon Nayok and extended over many of the surrounding provinces as well.

Ācariya Mun's *citta* had 'converged' into calm at midnight, after which he met the terrestrial *deva*, communicating by means of *samādhi* meditation until four a. m., when his *citta* withdrew to normal consciousness. The stomach disorder that was troubling him so much when he sat down at dusk had completely disappeared by that time. The therapeutic power of Dhamma, administered by means of meditation, was the only remedy he needed to effect a decisive cure – an experience that Ācariya Mun found incredibly amazing. Forgoing sleep, he continued striving in his practice until dawn. Instead of feeling tired after a night of exertion, his body was more energetic than ever.

He had passed a night full of many amazing experiences: He witnessed Dhamma's powerful ability to tame an unruly spirit, transforming arrogance into faith; his *citta* remained in a serenely calm state for many hours, savoring that wonderful sense of happiness; a chronic illness was completely cured, his digestion returning to normal; he was satisfied that his mind had acquired a solid spiritual basis – one he could trust, thus dispelling many of his lingering doubts; he realized many unusual insights he had never before attained, both those that removed defilements and those that enhanced the special understanding which formed an intrinsic part of his character.

During the months that followed, his meditation practice progressed smoothly, accompanied always by indescribable peace and tranquillity. With his health back to normal, physical discomforts no longer troubled him. Sometimes, late at night, he met with gatherings of terrestrial *devas* who came from various places to visit him. *Devas* from the surrounding area had all heard of Ācariya Mun, for the mysterious *deva* who had engaged him in a war of words was now announcing his presence to others, and escorting groups of them to meet him. On nights when no visitors came, he enjoyed himself practicing meditation.

ONE AFTERNOON HE LEFT his meditation seat to sit in the open air not far from the cave, reflecting on the Dhamma that the Lord Buddha had so compassionately given to mankind. He felt this Dhamma to be so very profound that he understood how difficult it was going to be to practice it to perfection, and to fully realize its essential truths. He felt a sense of satisfaction, thinking how fortunate he was to be able



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to practice Dhamma and realize its many insights and truths – an amazing feeling. Even though he had yet to reach the ultimate realization, a dream he'd long desired to fulfill, still the spiritual contentment he experienced was very rewarding. He was sure now that, unless death intervened, his hopes would surely be realized one day. Savoring his contentment, he reflected on the path he took to practice Dhamma and the results he hoped to achieve, proceeding step by step, until he reached a complete cessation of *dukkha*, eliminating all traces of discontent still existing within his heart.

Just then, a large troop of monkeys came foraging for food in front of the cave. The leader of the troop arrived first, a good distance in front of the rest. Reaching the area in front of the cave, it spotted Ācariya Mun who sat very still with eyes open, glancing silently at the approaching monkey. The monkey immediately became suspicious of his presence. Nervous, worried about the safety of its troop, it ran back and forth along the branch of a tree, looking warily at him. Ācariya Mun understood its anxiety, and sympathized with it, sending out benevolent thoughts of loving kindness: *I've come here to practice Dhamma, not to mistreat or harm anyone; so there's no need to fear me. Keep searching for food as you please. You can come foraging around here every day if you like.*

In a flash, the lead monkey ran back to its troop, which Ācariya Mun could see approaching in the distance. He watched what happened next with a sense of great amusement, combined with sincere compassion. As soon as the leader reached the others, it quickly called out: *Goke, hey not so fast! There's something over there. It may be dangerous!* Hearing this, all the other monkeys began asking at once: *Goke, goke? Where, where?* And simultaneously, the leader turned his head toward Ācariya Mun's direction as if to say: *Sitting over there – can you see? Or something like that, but in the language of animals, which is an unfathomable mystery to most human beings.* Ācariya Mun, however, understood every word they spoke.

Once it had signaled Ācariya Mun's presence to the group, the lead monkey warned them to proceed slowly and cautiously until they could determine exactly what was up ahead. It then hurried off ahead of the group, warily approaching the front of the cave where Ācariya Mun was seated. Being concerned for the safety of those following behind, it was apprehensive, but also curious to find out what was there. It cautiously snuck up close to Ācariya Mun, jumping up and jumping

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down from branch to branch, as monkeys tend to do, for they are quite restless as everybody knows. The lead monkey watched Ācariya Mun constantly until it was sure that he posed no danger. Then, it ran back and informed its friends: *Goke*, we can go. *Goke*, there's no danger.

During this time, Ācariya Mun sat perfectly still, constantly gauging the lead monkey's inner feelings to judge its reaction to him. The way it ran back to speak to its friends was quite comic; yet, knowing exactly what they said, Ācariya Mun couldn't help feeling sorry for them. For those of us who don't understand their language, the calls they send back and forth to one another are merely sounds in the forest, much like the bird calls we hear every day. But when the lead monkey ran back, calling out to its troop, Ācariya Mun understood the meaning of what was said as clearly as if they had been conversing in human language.

In the beginning when the lead monkey first spotted him, it hurried back to its troop, warning its friends to take care and pay careful attention to what it had to say. Although it communicated this message in the *goke goke* sounds that monkeys make, the essential meaning was clear to the others: Hey, stop! Not so fast! There's danger up ahead. Hearing the warning, the others began wondering what danger there was. First, one asked: *Goke*, what is it? Then, another asked: *Goke*, what's the matter? The lead monkey answered: *Goke gake*, there's something up there – it may be dangerous. The others asked: *Goke*, where is it? The leader replied: *Goke*, right over there.

The sounds made by this large troop of monkeys, as they questioned and answered one another, reverberated through the whole forest. First, one called out in alarm; then another, until monkeys, large and small, ran frantically back and forth, seeking answers about their situation. Fearful of the possible danger they all faced, they yelled excitedly to one another in a state of general confusion – just as we people tend to do when confronted with an emergency. Their leader was obliged to speak up and to try to clarify the situation, cautioning them: *Goke gake*, everyone wait here first while I go back and check to make sure. With these parting instructions, it hurried back to look again. Approaching Ācariya Mun who was seated in front of the cave, it looked warily at him while scurrying to and fro through the branches of the trees. Its eyes examined him with intense interest until it was satisfied that Ācariya Mun wasn't an adversary. Then, it hurriedly returned to its troop and announced: *Goke gake*, we can go now, it's not dangerous.

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There's no need to be afraid. So the whole troop moved forward until it reached the spot where Ācariya Mun was seated, all of them cautiously peering at him in a way that signaled their continuing mistrust. As monkeys tend to do when their curiosity is aroused, the troop was jumping about through the trees.. The *goke goke* sounds of their queries echoed through the forest: What is it? What's it doing here? The sounds of their replies reverberated in the agitated tone of animals needing to find out what's going on.

This narration has a repetitive quality, for this is the narrative style that Ācariya Mun himself used when telling this story. He wanted to emphasize the points of interest for his audience, and thus clearly indicate their significance. He said that wild monkeys tend to panic when sensing danger because, for ages, human beings have used various brutal methods to kill these animals in countless numbers. So monkeys are instinctively very distrustful of people.

The flow of an animal's consciousness infuses the different sounds it makes with the appropriate meaning – just as human verbal expressions are determined by the flow of human consciousness. So, it is just as easy for monkeys to understand the meaning of their common sounds, as it is for people to understand the same language. Each sound that issues from an animal's flow of consciousness is attuned to a specific meaning and purpose. These sounds communicate a clear message, and those who are listening invariably comprehend their precise meaning. So, even though it has no discernible meaning for human beings, when monkeys emit a sound like *goke*, they all understand its intended meaning, since this is the language monkeys use to communicate. Much the same applies to people of different nationalities, each speaking their own national language. Just as most nations around the world have their own specific language, so too each species of animal has its own distinct means of communication. Whether animals and humans can comprehend each others' language ceases to be an issue when we accept that each group has the prerogative to decide on the parameters of its speech and the manner in which it is conducted.

Finally overcoming their fears, the monkeys roamed freely in the area around the cave, foraging for food as they pleased. No longer were they on guard, wary of the threat of danger. From that day on, they felt right at home there, showing no interest in Ācariya Mun; and he

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paid no special attention to them as he and they both went about their daily lives.

Ācariya Mun said that all the animals foraging for food in the area where he lived did so contentedly, without fear. Ordinarily, animals of all kinds feel comfortable living in places where monks have taken up residence, for animals are quite similar to human beings in emotion. They simply lack the same predominant authority and intelligence that humans possess. Their level of intelligence extends only to the tasks of searching for food and finding a place to hide in order to survive from day to day.

ONE EVENING ĀCARIYA MUN felt so moved by a profound sense of sadness that tears came to his eyes. Seated in meditation focusing on body contemplation, his *citta* 'converged' into a state of such total calm that it appeared completely empty. At that moment, he felt as though the whole universe had ceased to exist. Only emptiness remained – the emptiness of his *citta*. Emerging from this profound state, he contemplated the teaching of the Lord Buddha which prescribed the means for removing the defiling pollutants that exist in the hearts of all living beings – a knowledge arising from the incisive genius of the Lord Buddha's wisdom. The more he contemplated this matter, the more he understood the amazing sagacity of the Buddha – and the more profoundly saddened he was by his own ignorance. He realized the paramount importance of proper training and instruction. Even such common bodily functions as eating food and relieving ourselves must be taught to us. We learn to perform them properly by undergoing training and instruction. Washing and dressing ourselves, in fact all of our daily activities, must be learned through education – otherwise, they will never be done correctly. Worse than doing them incorrectly, we may end up doing something seriously wrong, which could have grievous moral consequences. Just as it's necessary to receive training in how to take care of our bodies, so it is essential to receive proper guidance in how to take care of our minds. If our minds don't undergo the appropriate training, then we're bound to make serious mistakes, regardless of our age, gender, or position in society.

The average person in this world resembles a young child who needs adult guidance and constant attention to safely grow to maturity. Most of us tend to grow up only in appearance. Our titles, our status, and

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our self-importance tend to increase ever more; but the knowledge and wisdom of the right way to achieve peace and happiness for ourselves and others, don't grow to maturity with them; nor do we show an interest in developing these. Consequently, we always experience difficulties wherever we go. These were the thoughts that moved Ācariya Mun to such a profound sense of sadness that evening.

AT THE FOOT OF THE MOUNTAIN, where the path to the Sarika Cave began, stood a *vipassanā* meditation center, the residence of an elderly monk who was ordained late in life, after having had a wife and family. Thinking of this monk one evening, Ācariya Mun wondered what he was doing, and so, he sent out his flow of consciousness to take a look. At that moment, the old monk's mind was completely distracted by thoughts of the past concerning the affairs of his home and family. Again, sending out his flow of consciousness to observe him later that same night, Ācariya Mun encountered the same situation. Just before dawn, he focused his *citta* once again, only to find the old monk still busy making plans for his children and grandchildren. Each time he sent out the flow of his *citta* to check, he found the monk thinking incessantly about matters concerned with building a worldly life now, and untold rounds of existence in the future.

On the way back from his almsround that morning, he stopped to visit the elderly monk and immediately put him on the spot: "How is it going, old fellow? Building a new house and getting married to your wife all over again? You couldn't sleep at all last night. I suppose everything is all arranged now so you can relax in the evenings, without having to get so worked up planning what you'll say to your children and grandchildren. I suspect you were so distracted by all that business last night you hardly slept a wink, am I right?"

Embarrassed, the elderly monk asked with a sheepish smile: "You knew about last night? You're incredible, Ācariya Mun."

Ācariya Mun smiled in reply, and added: "I'm sure you know yourself much better than I do, so why ask me? I'm convinced you were thinking about those things quite deliberately, so preoccupied with your thoughts you neglected to lie down and sleep all night. Even now you continue to shamelessly enjoy thinking about such matters and you don't have the mindfulness to stop yourself. You're still determined to act upon those thoughts, aren't you?"

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As he finished speaking, Ācariya Mun noticed the elderly monk looking very pale, as though about to faint from shock, or embarrassment. He mumbled something incoherent in a faltering, ghostly sounding voice bordering on madness. Seeing his condition, Ācariya Mun instinctively knew that any further discussion would have serious consequences. So he found an excuse to change the subject, talking about other matters for a while to calm him down, then he returned to the cave.

Three days later one of the old monk's lay supporters came to the cave, so Ācariya Mun asked him about the monk. The layman said that he had abruptly left the previous morning, with no intention of returning. The layman had asked him why he was in such a hurry to leave, and he replied: "How can I stay here any longer? The other morning Ācariya Mun stopped by and lectured me so poignantly that I almost fainted right there in front of him. Had he continued lecturing me like that much longer, I'd surely have passed out and died there on the spot. As it was, he stopped and changed the subject, so I managed to survive somehow. How can you expect me to remain here now, after that? I'm leaving today."

The layman asked him: "Did Ācariya Mun scold you harshly? Is that why you nearly died, and now feel you can no longer stay here?"

"He didn't scold me at all, but his astute questions were far worse than a tongue-lashing."

"He asked you some questions, is that it? Can you tell me what they were? Perhaps I can learn a lesson from them."

"Please don't ask me to tell you what he said, I'm embarrassed to death as it is. Should anyone ever know, I'd sink into the ground. Without getting specific, I can tell you this much: he knows everything we're thinking. No scolding could possibly be as bad as that. It's quite natural for people to think both good thoughts and bad thoughts. Who can control them? But when I discover that Ācariya Mun knows all about my private thoughts – that's too much. I know I can't stay on here. Better to go off and die somewhere else than to stay here and disturb him with my wayward thinking. I mustn't stay here, further disgracing myself. Last night I couldn't sleep at all – I just can't get this matter out of my mind."

But the layman begged to differ: "Why should Ācariya Mun be disturbed by what you think? He's not the one at fault. The person at

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fault is the one who should be disturbed by what he's done, and then make a sincere effort to rectify it. That, Ācariya Mun would certainly appreciate. So please stay on here for awhile – in that way, when those thoughts arise, you can benefit from Ācariya Mun's advice. Then you can develop the mindfulness needed to solve this problem, which is much better than running away from it. What do you say to that?"

"I can't stay. The prospect of my developing mindfulness to improve myself can't begin to rival my fear of Ācariya Mun: it's like pitting a cat against an elephant! Just thinking that he knows all about me is enough to make me shiver, so how could I possibly maintain any degree of mindfulness? I'm leaving today. If I remain here any longer, I'll die for sure. Please believe me."

The layman told Ācariya Mun that he felt very sorry for that old monk, but he didn't know what to say to prevent him leaving: "His face was so pale it was obvious he was frightened, so I had to let him go. Before he left, I asked him where he'd be going. He said he didn't know for sure, but that if he didn't die first, we'd probably meet again someday – then he left. I had a boy send him off. When the boy returned I asked him, but he didn't know, for the elderly monk hadn't told him where he was going. I feel really sorry for him. An old man like that, he shouldn't have taken it so personally."

Ācariya Mun was deeply dismayed to see his benevolent intentions producing such negative results, his compassion being the cause of such unfortunate consequences. In truth, seeing the elderly monk's stunned reaction that very first day, he had suspected then that this might happen. After that day he was disinclined to send out the flow of his *citta* to investigate, fearing he might again meet with the same situation. In the end, his suspicions were confirmed. He told the layman that he'd spoken with the old monk in the familiar way that friends normally do: playful one minute, serious the next. He never imagined it becoming such a big issue that the elderly monk would feel compelled to abandon his monastery and flee like that.

This incident became an important lesson determining how Ācariya Mun behaved toward all the many people he met throughout his life. He was concerned that such an incident might be repeated should he fail to make a point of carefully considering the circumstances before speaking. From that day on, he never cautioned people directly about the specific content of their thoughts. He merely alluded indirectly to

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certain types of thinking as a means of helping people become aware of the nature of their thoughts, but without upsetting their feelings. People's minds are like small children tottering uncertainly as they learn to walk. An adult's job is to merely watch them carefully so they come to no harm. There's no need to be overly protective all the time. The same applies to people's minds: they should be allowed to learn by their own experiences. Sometimes their thinking will be right, sometimes wrong, sometimes good, sometimes bad – this is only natural. It's unreasonable to expect them to be perfectly good and correct every time.

THE YEARS ĀCARIYA MUN spent living in Sarika Cave were fruitful. He gained many enlightening ideas to deepen his understanding of the exclusively internal aspects of his meditation practice and many unusual insights concerning the great variety of external phenomena he encountered in his meditation. He became so pleasantly absorbed in his practice that he forgot about time: he hardly noticed the days, the months, or the years as they passed. Intuitive insights arose in his mind continuously – like water gently flowing along in the rainy season. On afternoons when the weather was clear, he walked through the forest admiring the trees and the mountains, meditating as he went, absorbed in the natural scenery all around him. As evening fell, he gradually made his way back to the cave.

The cave's surrounding area abounded in countless species of wild animals, the abundant variety of wild plants and fruits being a rich, natural source of sustenance. Animals such as monkeys, langurs, flying squirrels, and gibbons, which depend on wild fruits, came and went contentedly. Preoccupied with their own affairs, they showed no fear in Ācariya Mun's presence. As he watched them foraging for food he became engrossed in their playful antics. He felt a genuine spirit of camaraderie with those creatures, considering them his companions in birth, ageing, sickness, and death. In this respect, animals are on an equal footing with people. For though animals and people differ in the extent of their accumulated merit and goodness, animals nonetheless possess these wholesome qualities in some measure as well. In fact, degrees of accumulated merit may vary significantly among individual members of both groups. Moreover, many animals may actually possess greater stores of merit than do certain people, but



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having been unfortunate enough to be reborn into an animal existence, they must endure the consequences for the time being. Human beings face the same dilemma: for although human existence is considered a higher birth than that of an animal, a person falling on hard times and into poverty must endure that misfortune until it passes – or until the results of that unfortunate *kamma* are exhausted. Only then can a better state arise in its place. In this way the effects of *kamma* continue to unfold, indefinitely. For precisely this reason, Ācariya Mun always insisted that we should never be contemptuous of another being's lowly status or state of birth. He always taught us that the good and the bad *kamma*, created by each living being, are that being's only true inheritance.

Each afternoon Ācariya Mun swept the area clean in front of the cave. Then for the rest of the evening he concentrated on his meditation practice, alternating between walking and sitting meditation. His *samādhi* practice steadily progressed, infusing his heart with tranquillity. At the same time, he intensified the development of wisdom by mentally dissecting the different parts of the body, while analyzing them in terms of the three universal characteristics of existence: that is to say, all are impermanent, bound up with suffering, and void of any self. In this manner, his confidence grew with each passing day.

### *The Sāvaka Arahants*

Living in Sarika Cave, Ācariya Mun was occasionally visited by *sāvaka* Arahants,<sup>25</sup> who appeared to him by means of *samādhi nimitta*.<sup>26</sup> Each *sāvaka* Arahant delivered for his benefit a discourse on Dhamma, elucidating the traditional practices of the Noble Ones. Here is the substance of what was expressed:



Walking meditation must be practiced in a calm, self-composed manner. Use mindfulness to focus your attention directly on the task you have set for yourself. If you're investigating the nature of the *khandhas* or the conditions of the body, or simply concentrating on a specific Dhamma theme, then make sure mindfulness is firmly fixed on that object. Don't allow your attention to drift elsewhere. Such

negligence is characteristic of one having no solid spiritual basis to anchor him, and thus lacking a reliable inner refuge. Mindful awareness should attend each and every movement in all your daily activities. Don't perform these actions as though you are so sound asleep that you have no mindful awareness of how your body tosses about, or how prolifically your sleeping mind dreams. Going on your morning almsround, eating your food, and relieving yourself: in all such basic duties you should adhere strictly to the traditional practices of the Lord Buddha's Noble disciples. Never behave as though you lack proper training in the Teaching and the Discipline. Always conduct yourself in the manner of a true *samaõa*<sup>27</sup> with the calm, peaceful demeanor expected of one who ordains as a disciple of the Lord Buddha. This means maintaining mindfulness and wisdom in every posture as a way of eliminating the poisons buried deep within your heart. Thoroughly investigate all the food you eat. Don't allow those foods that taste good to add poison to your mind. Even though the body may be strengthened by food that's eaten without proper investigation, the mind will be weakened by its damaging effects. By nourishing your body with food that is eaten unmindfully, you will, in effect, be destroying yourself with nourishment that depletes your mental vitality.

A *samaõa* must never endanger his own well-being or the well-being of others by shamefully accumulating *kilesas*; for, not only do they harm him, but they can easily mushroom and spread harm to others as well. In the view of the Buddha's Noble disciples, all mental defilements are to be greatly feared. Utmost care should be taken to ensure that the mind does not neglect to check any outflow of the *kilesas*, for each one acts like a sheet of fire destroying everything in its path. The Noble Dhamma, practiced by all of the Lord Buddha's Noble disciples, emphasizes scrupulous self-discipline at all times and under all conditions – whether walking, standing, sitting, lying down, eating or relieving oneself; and in all of one's conversations and social interactions. Inattentive, undisciplined behavior is a habit of the *kilesas*, leading to unwholesome thoughts, and thus, perpetuating the cycle of birth and death. Those wishing to escape from the cycle of rebirth should avoid such deplorable habits. They merely lead deeper into the abyss, eventually causing one to become that most undesirable of persons – a wretched *samaõa*. No one wishes to partake of wretched food; no one wishes to reside in a wretched house; and no one wishes

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to dress in wretched clothes, or even look at them. Generally, people detest and shun wretched things – how much more so a wretched person with a wretched mind. But the most abhorrent thing in the world is a wretched *samaōa* who is ordained as a Buddhist monk. His wretchedness pierces the hearts of good and bad people alike. It pierces the hearts of all *devas* and *brahmas* without exception. For this reason, one should strive to be a true *samaōa* exercising extreme care to remain mindful and self-disciplined at all times.

Of all the many things that people value and care for in the world, a person's mind is the most precious. In fact, the mind is the foremost treasure in the whole world, so be sure to look after it well. To realize the mind's true nature is to realize Dhamma. Understanding the mind is the same as understanding Dhamma. Once the mind is known, then Dhamma in its entirety is known. Arriving at the truth about one's mind is the attainment of Nibbāna. Clearly, the mind is a priceless possession that should never be overlooked. Those who neglect to nurture the special status that the mind has within their bodies will always be born flawed, no matter how many hundreds or thousands of times they are reborn. Once we realize the precious nature of our own minds, we should not be remiss, knowing full well that we are certain to regret it later. Such remorse being avoidable, we should never allow it to occur.

Human beings are the most intelligent form of life on earth. As such, they should not wallow in ignorance. Otherwise, they will live an insufferably wretched existence, never finding any measure of happiness. The manner in which a true *samaōa* conducts all his affairs, both temporal and spiritual, sets a trustworthy example to be followed by the rest of the world. He engages in work that is pure and blameless; his actions are both righteous and dispassionate. So, endeavor to cultivate within yourself the exemplary work of a *samaōa*, making it flourish steadily, so that wherever you go, your practice will always prosper accordingly. A *samaōa* who cherishes moral virtue, cherishes concentration, cherishes mindfulness, cherishes wisdom and cherishes diligent effort, is sure to achieve that exalted status of a full-fledged *samaōa* now, and to maintain it in the future.

The teaching that I give you is the dispensation of a man of diligence and perseverance, a spiritual warrior who emerged victorious, a pre-eminent individual who completely transcended *dukkha*, freeing

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himself of all fetters. He attained absolute freedom, becoming the Lord Buddha, the supreme guide and teacher of the three worlds of existence. If you can understand the special value this teaching holds for you, before long you too will have rid yourself of *kilesas*. I entrust this Dhamma teaching to you in the hope that you will give it the most careful consideration. In that way, you will experience incredible wonders arising within your mind, which by its very nature is a superb and wonderful thing.



A *sāvaka* Arahant having delivered such a discourse and departed, Ācariya Mun humbly received that Dhamma teaching. He carefully contemplated every aspect of it, isolating each individual point, and then thoroughly analyzed them all, one by one. As more and more *sāvaka* Arahants came to teach him in this way, he gained many new insights into the practice just by listening to their expositions. Hearing their wonderful discourses increased his enthusiasm for meditation, thus greatly enhancing his understanding of Dhamma.

Ācariya Mun said that listening to a discourse delivered by one of the Buddha's Arahant disciples made him feel as if he was in the presence of the Lord Buddha himself, though he had no prior recollection of meeting the Buddha. Listening intently, his heart completely full, he became so absorbed in Dhamma that the entire physical world, including his own body, ceased to exist for him then. The *citta* alone existed, its awareness shining brightly with the radiance of Dhamma. It was only later, when he withdrew from that state, that he realized the oppressive burden he still carried with him: For he became conscious again of his physical body – the focal point where the other four *khandhas* come together, each one a heavy mass of suffering on its own.

During his lengthy sojourn at Sarika Cave, Ācariya Mun entertained many *sāvaka* Arahants and heeded their words of advice, making this cave unique among all the places where he had ever stayed. While living there, the Dhamma of unimpeachable certainty arose in his heart; that is, he attained the fruition of *Anāgāmi*.<sup>28</sup> According to Buddhist scripture, the *Anāgāmi* has abandoned the five lower fetters that bind living beings to the round of repeated existence: *sakkāyadiāhi*, *vicikicchā*, *silabbataparāmāsa*, *kāmarāga*, and *paāigha*. Someone reaching this level of attainment is assured of never being reborn in the human

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realm, or in any other realm of existence where bodies are composed of the four gross physical elements: earth, water, fire, and air. Should that individual fail to ascend to the level of Arahant before dying, at the moment of death he will be reborn into one of the five Pure Abodes of the *brahma* world. An Anāgāmi is reborn in the abode of *aviha*, *atappa*, *sudassa*, *sudassi* or *akaniñña*, depending on the individual's level of advancement along the Arahant path.

Ācariya Mun revealed that he attained the stage of Anāgāmi in Sarika Cave exclusively to his close disciples; but, I have decided to declare it publicly here for the reader's consideration. Should this disclosure be considered in any way inappropriate, I deserve the blame for not being more circumspect.

ONE NIGHT, HAVING CONTINUED to practice peacefully for many months, Ācariya Mun experienced an unusually strong feeling of compassion for his fellow monks. By that time, amazing insights surfaced nightly in his meditation practice. He became keenly aware of many strange, wonderful things – things he had never dreamed of seeing in his life. On the night that he thought about his fellow monks, his meditation had an exceptionally unusual quality to it. His *citta* had attained an especially ethereal refinement in *samādhi*, resulting in many extraordinary insights. Fully realizing the harmful effects that his own past ignorance had caused him, he was moved to tears. At the same time, he understood the value of the effort he had struggled so diligently to maintain until he could reap the amazing fruits of that diligence. A deep appreciation for the Lord Buddha's supreme importance arose in his heart; for, it was he who compassionately proclaimed the Dhamma so that others could follow in his footsteps, thus allowing them to understand the complex nature of their own *kamma*, and that of all other living beings as well. Thus the vital significance of the Dhamma verse: *All beings are born of their kamma and kamma is their one true possession*, which succinctly sums up practically all the Buddha's teachings.

Those insights notwithstanding, Ācariya Mun continued to remind himself that despite their truly amazing character he had yet to reach the end of the path and the cessation of *dukkha*. To accomplish that he would need to pour all his energy into the practice – with unstinting resolve. In the meantime, he was pleased to see that the chronic stomach ailment which he had suffered so long was now completely cured.

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More than that, his mind was now firmly anchored to a solid spiritual basis. Although he had yet to totally eradicate his *kilesas*, he was sure of being on the right path. His meditation practice, now progressing smoothly, had none of the fluctuations he had experienced earlier. Unlike in the past, when he was groping in the dark, feeling his way along, he now felt certain of the path leading to the highest Dhamma. He was absolutely convinced that one day he would transcend *dukkha*.

His mindfulness and wisdom had reached a stage where they worked ceaselessly in perfect concert. He never needed to urge them into action. Day and night, knowledge and understanding arose continuously – both internal spiritual insights and awareness of countless external phenomena. The more his mind delighted in such amazing Dhamma, the more compassion he felt for his fellow monks: he was eager to share with them these wondrous insights. In the end, this profound feeling of compassion precipitated his departure from that auspicious cave. With some reluctance, he eventually left to search out the *dhutanga* monks he had known previously, when he was living in the Northeast.

Several days prior to his departure from Sarika Cave, a group of terrestrial *devas*, led by the mysterious being he first encountered there, came to hear a discourse on Dhamma. After finishing his discourse, Ācariya Mun informed them of his decision, saying he would soon take leave of them. Unwilling to see him depart, the large company of *devas* who were gathered there beseeched him to stay on for the sake of their long-term happiness and prosperity. Ācariya Mun explained that, just as he had come to that cave for a reason, so too he had a reason for moving on – he didn't come and go slavishly, following his desires. Asking for their understanding, he cautioned them against feeling disappointed. He promised that, if the opportunity presented itself in the future, he would return. The *devas* expressed their sincere regrets, showing the genuine affection and respect for him they'd always felt.

At about ten p. m. on the night before his departure, Ācariya Mun thought of Chao Khun Upāli at Wat Boromaniwat monastery, wondering what was on his mind. So he focused his *citta* and sent the flow of his consciousness out to observe him. He found that Chao Khun Upāli was at that moment contemplating *avijjā* in relation to *paāicca-samuppāda*.<sup>29</sup> Ācariya Mun took note of the time and the date. When eventually he arrived in Bangkok, he asked Chao Khun Upāli about

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what he'd observed. With a hearty laugh Chao Khun Upāli immediately acknowledged it to be true, saying this in praise of Ācariya Mun:

"You are truly masterful. I myself am a respected teacher, yet I'm inept compared to you – and I feel embarrassed. You truly are a master. This is exactly how a genuine disciple of the Lord Buddha follows in the footsteps of the Supreme Teacher. We can't all be incompetent in the practice of the Lord Buddha's teaching – somebody has to maintain this exalted Dhamma in the spirit that it was originally taught. By not allowing the modern age we live in to foster a lazy, defeatist attitude toward the highest attainments, you have demonstrated the timeless quality of the Buddha's teaching. Otherwise, the true Dhamma will no longer arise in the world, despite the fact that the Buddha proclaimed it for the benefit of all mankind. The special knowledge you have just displayed to me is most admirable. This is the way the Lord's teaching should be developed and put into practice."

Ācariya Mun stated that Chao Khun Upāli had the utmost admiration and respect for him. There were certain occasions when he sent for Ācariya Mun to help him solve certain problems he was unable to resolve to his own satisfaction. Eventually when the time was right, Ācariya Mun left Bangkok and returned directly to the Northeast.

IN THE YEARS PRIOR to his sojourn at Sarika Cave, Ācariya Mun traveled into the neighboring country of Burma, later returning by way of the northern Thai province of Chiang Mai. Continuing on into Laos, he practiced the ascetic way of life for some time in the area around Luang Prabang, eventually returning to Thailand to spend the rains retreat near the village of Ban Khok in Loei province, quite close to Pha Pu Cave. The following rains retreat was spent at Pha Bing Cave, also in Loei province. Back then, these places were all wilderness areas, teeming with wild animals where village communities were located far and few between: one could walk all day without coming across a single settlement. A person losing his way in that vast wilderness could find himself in the precarious situation of having to sleep overnight in an inhospitable environment at the mercy of tigers and other wild beasts.

### *Biography of Ācariya Mun*

On one occasion Ācariya Mun crossed the Mekong River and settled in a large tract of mountainous forest on the Laotian side. While he camped there, a huge Bengal tiger often wandered into his living area. Always coming at night, it stood some distance away watching him pace back and forth in meditation. It never displayed threatening behavior, but it did roar occasionally as it wandered freely around the area. Being well accustomed to living in close proximity to wild animals, Ācariya Mun paid little attention to the tiger.

During that excursion he was accompanied by another monk, Ācariya Sitha, who had been ordained slightly longer than he had. A contemporary of Ācariya Mun, Ācariya Sitha excelled in the practice of meditation. He liked the type of seclusion that the wilderness offered, preferring to live in the mountains stretching along the Laotian side of the Mekong River. Only occasionally did he cross the river into Thailand, and then never for very long.

On that occasion, Ācariya Mun and Ācariya Sitha were camped some distance apart, each depending on a separate village for his daily alms food. One night while walking in meditation, Ācariya Sitha was visited by a huge Bengal tiger. The tiger crept in and quietly crouched forward to about six feet from his meditation track, right in between the lighted candles at each end of the track that allowed him to see as he paced back and forth in the dark. Facing the meditation track while remaining motionless, it sat there calmly like a house pet watching Ācariya Sitha intently as he paced back and forth. Reaching that place on the track opposite which the tiger was crouched, Ācariya Sitha sensed something out of place. At once he became suspicious, for normally nothing was at the side of his track. Glancing over he saw the huge Bengal tiger crouched there, staring back at him – since when he couldn't tell. Still, he felt no fear. He merely watched the tiger as it sat motionless, looking back at him like an enormous stuffed animal. After a moment he continued pacing back and forth, passing each time in front of the tiger – but thoughts of fear never crossed his mind. He noticed, though, that it remained crouched there for an unusually long time. Feeling sorry for it, he directed this train of thought at the tiger: *Why not go off and find something to eat? Why just sit there watching me?* No sooner had this thought arisen, than the tiger let out a deafening roar that resounded through the whole forest. The sound of its roar left Ācariya Sitha in no doubt that it intended to stay, so he quickly



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changed tack, thinking: *I thought that only because I felt sorry for you – I was afraid you might get hungry sitting there so long. After all, you have a mouth and a stomach to fill, just like all other creatures. But if you don't feel hungry and want to sit there watching over me, that's fine, I don't mind.*

The tiger showed no reaction to Ācariya Sitha's change of heart – it just crouched by the path and continued to watch him. He then resumed his meditation, taking no further interest in it. Some time later he left the meditation track and walked to a small bamboo platform situated close by to take a rest. He chanted *suttas* there for awhile then sat peacefully in meditation until time to go to sleep, which he did lying on the bamboo platform. During that entire time the tiger remained crouched in its original position, not far away. But when he awoke at three a. m. to resume his walking meditation, he saw no sign of the tiger anywhere – he had no idea where it had gone. As it happened, he saw it only that once; from then on until he left that place, it never appeared again.

This incident intrigued Ācariya Sitha, so when he met with Ācariya Mun he described to him how the tiger had crouched there watching him. He told Ācariya Mun the tiger had roared at the precise moment the thought arose wishing it to go away. He recounted how, although he wasn't conscious of any fear, his hair stood on end and his scalp went numb, as if he were wearing a cap. But soon he again felt quite normal, resuming his walking meditation as though nothing had happened. Actually, there probably was a subtle measure of fear buried deep inside that he was incapable of perceiving at the time. Although the tiger never returned to his campsite, he often heard the sound of its roars echoing through the nearby forest. Still, Ācariya Sitha's mind remained resolute and he continued to practice contentedly, as he always had.



