

The Final Years

After departing Chiang Mai, Ācariya Mun stayed two rains retreats at Wat Non Niwet monastery in Udon Thani. Following the second retreat, a group of lay devotees from Sakon Nakhon, headed by a longtime disciple, Khun Mae Num Chuwanon, came and invited him to return with them for the spiritual benefit of people there. When he readily agreed, all concerned were delighted, and arrangements were made to escort him there. Upon arriving in Sakon Nakhon in late 1941, Ācariya Mun first resided at Wat Suddhawatt monastery. Soon monks and laity were arriving daily to pay their respects and seek his advice.

While at Wat Suddhawatt, somebody came with a camera and asked permission to take his photograph to keep as an object of worship. In all, Ācariya Mun allowed his picture to be taken three times: on this occasion in Sakon Nakhon; previously, when he was staying in Nakhon Ratchasima; and later, at Ban Fang Daeng in That Phanom district of Nakhon Phanom province on his return from Ācariya Sao's funeral.¹ The photographic prints that his devotees collect as objects of worship today are reproductions of pictures taken on these three occasions. But for these, there would be no photographic images to remind us what he looked like. It was not easy to get permission to take Ācariya Mun's picture. Those who tried were on pins and needles, fidgeting nervously as they waited drenched in sweat, looking for a good opportunity to broach the subject with him. Well aware that he rarely gave permission for such activities, they were afraid that if they did not handle the situation properly, then he might simply dismiss them with a curt retort.

Ācariya Mun stayed at Wat Suddhawatt monastery for awhile before moving to a small forest monastery near the village of Ban Na Mon which, being very quiet and secluded both day and night, suited him perfectly. The monks and novices living with him were an impressive sight they said very little, but packed quite a punch. That is to say, instead of chatting among themselves, they preferred to put effort into their practice, each monk sitting in his own hut or walking meditation out in the forest. At four o'clock in the afternoon they all emerged from their living quarters to sweep the grounds together. With the whole area

swept clean, they drew water from the well and carried it around to fill up the water barrels used for cleaning their feet and washing their alms bowls. These chores completed, everyone bathed together at the well in an admirably quiet, composed manner. They performed each daily chore with a remarkable self-control, always applying mindfulness and wisdom to analyze the nature of the tasks at hand no one absent-mindedly engaged in idle conversation. As soon as the day's duties were finished they separated, each monk returning to his hut to sit or walk in meditation as he saw fit.

When the monks returned to their huts, the monastery appeared deserted. A visitor happening to arrive then would not have seen a single monk simply standing around or sitting idly. Had the visitor ventured into the surrounding forest, he would have discovered some of the monks pacing back and forth on their meditation tracks, and others sitting peacefully in their small huts, all preferring to practice quietly, in solitude. They came together for almsround and the morning meal, or when there was an evening meeting, and only occasionally for other required duties. Even on almsround, each monk walked to and from the village with cautious restraint, mindfully intent on his meditation practice. They were not negligent, walking along casually gazing here and there, chatting with anyone who chanced to pass by. His monks truly were an inspirational sight to see as they walked for alms with such dignified composure.

Back in the monastery, the monks sat together investigating the food in their alms bowls as they prepared to eat. They reflected on the dangers inherent in attachment to food. Remaining mindful as they ate, they gave no indication that they were enjoying the food. With their attention focused on the contents of their alms bowls, they refrained from talking and did not allow their gaze to stray from the task of eating. They chewed their food carefully to avoid making loud, impolite noises that could disturb the others. The meal over, they helped each other put everything neatly away and swept the place clean. Each monk washed his alms bowl, dried it with a cloth, and carefully placed it in the sun for a few minutes. Only then did he put his alms bowl away in the appropriate place.

These duties completed, each monk returned to the seclusion of his own living quarters, turning his full attention to training his heart and mind

in the manner of practice best suited to him. Sometimes a monk exerted himself to the limit; at other times, less so. In either case, he concentrated solely on his practice, unconcerned about how many hours passed or how much energy he expended. Basically, his objective was to make sure his mind remained focused on the meditation subject he had chosen to control it until that focus of attention became a mental object he could rely on to direct his heart toward peace and calm. Such calm, in turn, helped him to concentrate his mental focus on the cause and effect relationships inherent within whichever phenomena his wisdom then chose to investigate, allowing him to gradually attain increasingly more subtle levels of Dhamma as he progressed toward the ultimate goal. While applying himself assiduously, he always tried to make sure that his mode of practice was correct for the level of Dhamma he was working on.

It is extremely important that a monk have mindfulness at every stage of his practice. It is also essential that a monk use wisdom when his practice reaches those levels of Dhamma where wisdom is indispensable. Mindfulness, however, is always indispensable at all times, in all activities. *Whenever mindfulness is missing, effort also is missing. Lacking mindfulness, walking and sitting meditation are just empty postures void of anything that could be called "right effort". For this very reason, Ācariya Mun stressed mindfulness more than any other aspect of a monk's practice. In fact, mindfulness is the principal foundation supporting every aspect on every level of meditation practice. Practiced continuously, it eventually develops into the kind of supreme-mindfulness that fosters the highest levels of wisdom. Mindfulness must be used intensively at the preliminary level of developing meditative calm and concentration. In all succeeding levels of practice, mindfulness and wisdom must be developed in tandem, working as a team.*

Ācariya Mun taught his monks to be very resolute and courageous in their practice. Anyone who was not earnestly committed to the practice was unlikely to remain with him for long. About once a week he called a meeting and gave a talk; on other nights he expected the monks to expedite their efforts on their own. Those with doubts or questions about their practice could consult him without having to wait for the next meeting. An aura of Dhamma pervaded the atmosphere around him, giving his students the feeling that *magga*, *phala*, and Nibbāna

were truly within their reach. His reassuring presence gave them the determination and courage necessary to pursue their practice to the limit, conducting themselves in a manner that suggested they had the highest attainments in their sights. When meditating, they made little distinction between day and night; each monk strived in earnest regardless of the hour. On moonless nights, candle lanterns illuminated meditation tracks around the whole area. On moonlit nights, monks walked meditation by the light of the moon, each practicing with a sense of urgency that allowed him very little time for sleep.

Ācariya Mun's proficiency in chanting the *suttas* was unrivaled. He chanted *suttas* alone for many hours every night without fail. He would chant long discourses, like the *Dhamma-cakka-pavattana Sutta* and the *Mahā Samāya Sutta*, nearly every night. Occasionally, he translated the meaning of the *suttas* for our benefit, translations based on his own personal experience. He spoke directly to their essential meaning, often bypassing the strict rules of Pāli grammar normally used to maintain uniformity in translations. The undeniable clarity of his translations allowed his audience to glimpse the fundamental message of the ancient texts he quoted. Amazingly, he translated Pāli better than the accomplished scholars, though he had never studied Pāli in any formal way. No sooner had he mentioned a Pāli phrase than, without even a pause, he had translated it as well in a quick, fluent style that defied belief. For instance, when citing passages from the *Dhamma-cakka-pavattana Sutta* or the *Mahā Samāya Sutta* during the course of his talks, he gave fast, simultaneous translations worthy of a tenth grade Pāli scholar.² I say the tenth grade because I have heard ninth grade Pāli scholars translate and they tend to be slow and plodding. They deliberate quite a long time over each passage and even then they are not very sure of their translations.

Not only was Ācariya Mun quick, he also was boldly confident of the truth of his words. Having clearly experienced the truth of their essential meaning himself, he was certain of his translations. Pāli verses arose spontaneously in his heart, which he then elaborated on in a way that differed somewhat from classical interpretations. For example, *vātā rukkhā na pabbato*, which he translated as: "gale force winds can uproot whole trees, yet they can't move a mountain of stone." This is an example of one Dhamma verse that arose spontaneously in his heart, along with the translation, while he was giving a talk to the monks.

What I just wrote about the ninth and tenth grades of Pāli scholarship shouldn't be taken too seriously. It is merely a figure of speech used by monks in the forest tradition no offense is intended. We forest monks tend to act a bit like monkeys that have grown accustomed to living in the wild: even if they are caught and raised as pets, they still retain their old habits. They can never really adapt to human behavior. Please excuse me for presuming to compare Ācariya Mun's translations with those of Pāli scholars. Some readers may feel that I have overstepped the mark here.

In due time Ācariya Mun left Ban Na Mon and moved to Ban Khok, just over a mile away, where he spent the rainy season retreat. Since it was difficult to find a better location, the monastery was located only half a mile from the village. Still, the place was very quiet. Not more than eleven or twelve monks stayed with him at any one time in either of those places due to the limited number of available huts. It was while he resided at Ban Khok that I arrived. He was kind enough to accept me as a student, although I was about as useful as an old log. I lived there like a ladle in a pot of stew. I feel ashamed just thinking about it now: this useless log of a monk staying with an absolutely brilliant sage of such universal renown.

All the same, I do feel easier about writing his story from this period onward. Up to this point in the story I have felt somewhat hampered, and not a little frustrated, by the fact that most of my information comes secondhand from senior disciples who lived with him in the early years. In preparation for writing this biography, I spent many years going around to meet those *ācariyas*, interviewing them and writing down their memories, or taping my conversations with them. All this material then need to be carefully arranged in chronological order before it could be presented in a meaningful, readable format _ a very demanding task. From now on I shall be writing about what I myself witnessed in the final years of Ācariya Mun's life. Although this part of the story may not impress the reader as much as what has gone before, as the author I feel relieved to be writing from personal experience.

Ācariya Mun spent the rains retreat at the Ban Khok forest monastery with a small group of monks, all of whom remained healthy and contented throughout the three months. Ācariya Mun called a meeting

about once a week, both during the retreat period and after it was over. Although his discourses usually lasted for two to four hours, his audience was so completely absorbed in meditation practice that thoughts of weariness and fatigue never crossed their minds. For his part, Ācariya Mun was completely absorbed in delivering the Dhamma, expounding the nature of cause and effect in a reasonable way that struck a chord with his listeners, all of whom were genuinely searching for Truth. The Dhamma he presented was delivered straight from a heart that had realized this Truth with absolute clarity leaving no room for doubt. Only one doubt remained: Could the monks actually do the practice the way he described it.

He delivered his discourses in a manner reminiscent of times past when the Lord Buddha delivered a discourse to a gathering of monks. We can be sure that the Lord Buddha's discourses were concerned solely with the great treasures of Dhamma; that is, he spoke only on subjects directly related to *magga*, *phala*, and Nibbāna. Thus, monks listening to him were able to attain *magga*, *phala*, and Nibbāna one after another, in steady succession, right up until the day of his final passing away. Because the Buddha's teaching emanated directly from an absolutely pure heart, the Dhamma he delivered was incomparably superb. This was *magga* and *phala*, pure and simple, and his listeners were able to emulate his teaching to perfection.

The Dhamma that Ācariya Mun delivered was spontaneous Dhamma of the present moment refined and purified in his heart. He did not theorize or speculate when he spoke. His audience already had their own doubts and uncertainties about the practice, and further speculation would only have served to increase those doubts. Instead, as they listened, his Dhamma gradually dispelled their doubts. Those who heard his wonderful expositions were able to use them as a way to significantly reduce their *kilesas*. Beyond that, they could be used to conclusively eliminate all doubts.

Ācariya Mun chanted *suttas* every night for several hours. On a night when no meeting was held, he left his meditation track at about eight o'clock and entered his hut to quietly chant *suttas* at length before resuming seated meditation until it was time to retire. On meeting nights, his chanting began later, after the meeting was over. This meant

that his normal schedule was delayed when there was a meeting so that he retired later than usual, at midnight or one a. m.

One evening, hearing him softly chanting in his hut, I had the mischievous urge to sneak up and listen. I wanted to find out what *suttas* he chanted at such length every night. As soon as I crept up close enough to hear him clearly, however, he stopped chanting and remained silent. This did not look good, so I quickly backed away and stood listening from a distance. No sooner had I backed away than the low cadence of his chanting started up again, now too faint to be heard clearly. So again I sneaked forward and again he went silent. In the end, I never did find out what *suttas* he was chanting. I was afraid that if I stubbornly insisted on standing there eavesdropping, a bolt of lightning might strike and a sharp rebuke thunder out. Meeting him the next morning I glanced away. I did not dare to look him in the face. But he looked directly at me with a sharp, menacing glare. I learned my lesson the hard way: never again did I dare to sneak up and try to listen in on his chanting. I was afraid I would receive something severe for my trouble. From what I had observed of him, if I persisted there was a real chance I'd get just what I was asking for.

It was only later, after long association with him, that I clearly understood just how well he perceived everything going on around him. Thinking about it now, how could he possibly have been unaware that I was standing there like an idiot and listening so intently. It's obvious he was fully aware. But before making any comment, he wanted first to wait and check out this stubborn, silly monk. Any further such behavior was bound to invoke a severe response. What amazed me was: each time I crept close to his hut he stopped chanting straight away. He obviously knew exactly what was going on.

Fellowship with Pigs

One day, shortly after my arrival during a time when I was extremely wary of Ācariya Mun I laid down in the middle of the day and dozed off. As I slept, Ācariya Mun appeared in my dream to scold me: "Why are you sleeping like a pig? This is no pig farm! I won't tolerate monks coming here to learn the art of being a pig. You'll turn this place into a pigsty!" His voice bellowed, fierce and menacing, frightening me and causing me to wake with a start. Dazed and trembling, I stuck my head

out the door expecting to see him. I was generally very frightened of him anyway; but, I had forced myself to stay with him despite that. The reason was simple: it was the right thing to do. Besides, he had an effective antidote for pigs like me. So, I was in a panic. I stuck my head out, looking around in all directions, but I didn't see him anywhere. Only then did I begin to breathe a bit easier. Later when I had a chance, I told Ācariya Mun what happened. He very cleverly explained my dream in a way that relieved my discomfort _ a tolerant approach that I don't always agree with, since soothing words can easily promote carelessness and complacency. He explained my dream like this:

"You've just recently come to live with a teacher and you are really determined to do well. Your dream simply mirrored your state of mind. That scolding you heard, reproaching you for acting like a pig, was the Dhamma warning you not to bring pig-like tendencies into the monkhood and the religion. Most people do only what they feel like doing, failing to take into account the value of their human birth and the consequences of their actions. This makes it difficult for them to fully realize their human potential. There's an old saying that someone is 'not all there'. It refers to a basic lack of human potential arising from callous insensitivity to the fact that human beings possess intrinsic qualities that are superior to those of animals. This attitude promotes such degrading behavior that some people end up damaged almost beyond repair an empty human shell lacking all intrinsic goodness. Even then, they are unaware of what has happened to them, or why.

"If we possess sufficient mindfulness and wisdom, Dhamma can guide us in investigating this matter for ourselves. Your dream was a good, timely warning learn from it. From now on, whenever you're feeling lazy you can use it as a means of stirring up the mindfulness necessary to overcome your indolence. This type of dream is exceptionally potent. Not everyone has a dream like this. I appreciate such dreams for they effectively stimulate mindfulness, keeping it constantly vigilant. This in turn accelerates progress in meditation, allowing the heart to attain calm with relative ease. If you take this lesson that Dhamma has provided and put it consistently into practice, you can expect to quickly achieve meditative calm. Who knows, you may even penetrate the true nature of Dhamma ahead of those who have been practicing meditation for many years. That dream of yours was very worthwhile. It wasn't a bad omen by any means.

"Don't be excessively frightened of your teacher it will only cause you to feel uncomfortable all the time. Nothing of benefit can be gained from unreasonable fear of the teacher. He has a moral obligation to educate his students, using every means available to him. It's not your teacher you should fear, but evil, for evil leads directly to suffering. I don't accept monks as my students just so I can castigate them for no good reason. The training a monk undertakes is a stringent one, following principles laid down by the Buddha. A teacher's guidance must follow the strict logic of these principles. If he deviates from this path, neither he nor the student benefits in any way.

"So put your mind at ease and work hard at your practice. Effort is key don't become discouraged and ease up. Dhamma belongs to everyone who truly desires it. The Buddha did not limit the possession of Dhamma to a particular individual. Everyone who practices in the right way enjoys the same right of ownership. Don't forget that auspicious dream. Reflect on it often, and all pig-like tendencies will fade into the background as *magga*, *phala*, and Nibbāna draw ever closer. Then it's only a matter of time before the domain beyond *dukkha* appears. It's inevitable. I'm truly pleased about your dream. I have trained myself with a similar fiery intensity and I've always had good results. I found it imperative to use such methods throughout my years of practice, and now occasionally I must use similar methods to train my students."

Ācariya Mun used this interpretation of my dream to console a youngster who was new to the training. He was concerned this kid might lose heart and give up trying to make an effort, thus rejoining the fraternity of pigs. That's why he resorted to this method of teaching. His teaching methods always displayed an unparalleled ingenuity.

I often went to speak with him during that early period when my mental state was fluctuating between periods of progress and periods of decline _ a time of particular stress and uneasiness for me and he advised me in the same comforting manner. As soon as I paid my respect to him, he asked me how my *citta* was doing. If it happened to be a time when my meditation was progressing nicely, I told him so. He then voiced his approval and encouraged me to keep up the good work so that I could quickly transcend *dukkha*. If my meditation was deteriorating, I replied that my mind was so bad it seemed all traces of happiness had gone. He then adopted a sympathetic attitude:

"That's too bad. Where's it gone? Well, don't be discouraged. Just put maximum effort into your practice and it will reappear for sure. It has simply wandered off somewhere. If you accelerate your efforts it will come back on its own. The *citta* is like a dog: it inevitably follows its owner wherever he goes. It won't just run away. Intensify your practice and the *citta* is bound to return on its own. Don't waste time thinking about where it's gone to. Wherever it's gone, it can't possibly run away. If you want it to return quickly, concentrate your efforts. Any discouragement will only boost the *citta's* ego. Thinking you really miss it so much, it will play hard-to-get. So stop thinking about the *citta* you've lost. Instead, think "*buddho*", repeating it continuously, over and over again. Once the word "*buddho*" has been mentally established by repeating it continuously in rapid succession, the *citta* will hurry back of its own accord. Even then, don't let go of *buddho*. *Buddho* is the *citta's* food _ as long as there is food, it will always come running back. So repeat "*buddho*" constantly until the *citta* has eaten its fill, then it will have to take a rest. You too will feel satisfied while the *citta* rests calmly. When it's calm, it ceases to run madly about looking to cause you trouble. Keep this practice up until you cannot chase it away, even if you want to. This is the perfect method to use with a mind whose ravenous appetite is never satiated. As long as it has enough food, it will not leave even if you try to drive it away. Follow my advice and the state of your *citta* will never again deteriorate. *Buddho* is the key. So long as its food is there, it won't stray. Do as I say and you'll never again experience the disappointment of seeing your *citta* get worse time and time again."

This was yet another technique employed by Ñācariya Mun to teach those of us who were really stupid. But at least I believed him in my own stupid way. Otherwise, I would probably still be chasing after a mind in perpetual decline without any chance of ever catching it. I've written about this matter for the sake of those readers who may glean some useful ideas from the way a clever person teaches a stupid one. It is not my intention to glorify my own stupidity or the lenient treatment that I received from Ñācariya Mun at that time.

Following the rains retreat, Ñācariya Mun returned briefly to Ban Na Mon and then moved on to Ban Huay Kaen, settling in the nearby forest for awhile. From there he moved to an abandoned monastery at the base of a mountain near the village of Ban Na Sinuan, remaining

there for several months. While he was there, he came down with a fever which lasted for days, curing himself as usual with the 'therapeutic power of Dhamma'.

In April 1942 he traveled to Ubon Ratchathani to attend the funeral of his teacher, Ācariya Sao. Once the cremation ceremony was completed, he returned to Ban Na Mon for the rains retreat. During that retreat Ācariya Mun employed a wide variety of methods to press his students to maximize their efforts, exhorting them to be diligent in their practice. He called a meeting once every four days throughout the entire rains period, helping many monks to develop in Dhamma and attain inner strength. Many experienced unusual insights which they reported to Ācariya Mun. I had the privilege of listening to those experiences, although I was not as accomplished in my practice as many of the others. Many memorable things occurred during that rains retreat things that I have never forgotten. I will remember those outstanding experiences for the rest of my life.

During that retreat period Ācariya Mun began to use tough, coercive measures with us, treating us more like old footrags. Until then, he had used relatively gentle methods, turning a blind eye to our shortcomings. He probably decided that the time was right to get tough with us. If he continued to tolerate our lapses indefinitely, he would feel burdened all the time and his students would never awake from their slumber long enough to open their eyes and see the earth, the sky, the moon and the stars. As a result, all the monks were eager to do meditation practice and excited about the insights they gained from their efforts. Monks routinely described their inner experiences to Ācariya Mun so that he could help them to further their understanding. At the same time, he would point out how they could perfect those aspects of their practice that still needed improvement. He did his best to answer every question that was put to him. Those question-and-answer sessions, when he gave advice to specific individuals, were engrossing expositions on the practical aspects of Dhamma. His responses to the monks who approached him about their meditative experiences were never predictable, being dictated by the specific nature of the experience or the question under discussion. He always answered in the manner best suited to the individual student, elucidating points of practice and recommending techniques appropriate for his specific level of practice. Those of us, who had the privilege of listening in, especially enjoyed

hearing about the meditation experiences and questions posed by monks whose practice had reached an advanced stage. We were truly captivated then, wishing for those discussions never to end. We were keen to hear such exchanges very often and so imbibe this Dhamma to our heart's content.

Ācariya Mun addressed many different topics during the course of a meeting. He told us about his past lives. He recounted the initial stages of his own practice, including insights into various phenomena arising in his meditation. He elaborated on the methods he used in his struggle to extricate himself from the quagmire of *saṃsāra* to the point where he verged on transcending the world of conventional reality, and how that final transcendence actually occurred. Talk of his supreme attainment made those of us, who yearned for this transcendent Dhamma, eager to attain it ourselves. This prompted some of us to feel a bit dejected, wondering if we really had enough inherent potential to successfully reach that sphere of Dhamma that he had realized to perfection. Perhaps we would remain stuck in this quagmire forever, unable to escape from the deep pit of *saṃsāra*. How is it he can attain freedom, yet we still cannot arouse ourselves from sleep? When will we be able to realize the same transcendent freedom he has? This sort of thinking had the advantage of awakening a persistent determination in us to tolerate the difficulties and press ahead with our efforts. This in turn facilitated every aspect of the practice. We were so inspired and energized by the Dhamma he so kindly elucidated for us that all sense of weariness and fatigue vanished. Our faith in him gave us the necessary strength to willingly shoulder the heaviest burdens.

The Lord Buddha taught us to associate with the wise. The truth of this is obvious to students living in the presence of a good teacher, listening day in and day out to his uplifting instructions. Their enthusiasm gains momentum as his teaching gradually permeates deep into the fabric of their being, and his virtuous qualities eventually infuse their characters. Although they cannot hope to match him in every respect, at least they exemplify their teacher's virtues. The opposite also holds true: the more we associate with fools, the worse off we are. These two teachings of the Buddha are equally valid: we can become good through association with good people, or we can suffer harm through association with bad people. If we observe someone who has spent a long time training under a good teacher, it is evident that he has gained some steadfast

principles from that relationship. Conversely, it's obvious that those who get mixed up with fools will eventually display the same foolish characteristics or perhaps worse ones.

Here I am referring to the external fools we meet in society. But you should understand that there are still other, internal fools buried deep within the personalities of each and every one of us even well-mannered people like monks and nuns who wear the sacred Buddhist robes, openly proclaiming themselves to be disciples of the Lord Buddha. By inner fool, I mean the craven stupidity and timidity that makes us shrink from facing up to the mind's baser instincts, which are just waiting to express themselves in ignoble, degrading ways. Many people are unaware of the repugnant forces buried within their minds. But even people who are aware of them tend to believe that as long as those things remain hidden inside and do not express themselves in speech or actions, then their repugnance is not really an issue. In truth, all bad things, regardless of where they exist, are intrinsically repugnant by nature. It's not necessary for bad instincts to express themselves externally to be considered repugnant. They are already frightfully repugnant in and of themselves and must be dealt with as such.

That wisest of sages, the Lord Buddha, taught us to renounce all bad things and root them out, completely eradicating them from our hearts. The Lord Buddha and his Arahant disciples were perfect examples of this: Both their hearts and their conduct were free from blemish. Wherever they lived they always remained unperturbed and sublimely contented. In my opinion, based on personal observation, Ñacariya Mun was another monk free from blemish. I say this with complete confidence, accepting full responsibility, for I am certain that it is true. Any skepticism should be directed at me, not Ñacariya Mun his escape from the snares of Māra is already well completed.

After the rains retreat, Ñacariya Mun continued living at Ban Na Mon for many months. Just prior to the next retreat he moved back to Ban Khok, but not to the same forest monastery where he previously lived. He stayed in a new monastery, built and offered to him by Ñacariya Kongma Chirapuñño. He found the location quite suitable, comfortably spending the rains retreat there in good health. As usual, he held regular meetings to instruct the monks.

In summary, Ācariya Mun stayed continuously in the area around Ban Huay Kaen, Ban Na Sinuan, Ban Khok, and Ban Na Mon in the Tong Khop district of Sakon Nakhon province for three successive years, including three rainy season retreats. As usual he taught the nonphysical beings who contacted him, though fewer *devas* came in Sakon Nakhon and their visits were far less frequent than those of *devas* in Chiang Mai. It was probably because the region was less remote, and thus less secluded. They tended to come only on religious festival days, such as Māgha Pýjã, Visãkha Pýjã and the observance days at the beginning, the middle, and the end of the rains retreat. Other than that, relatively few *devas* came to visit him.

Only a small group of monks actually spent these rains retreats with him due to a limited number of available huts. He could not accept new arrivals unless there were vacancies. The situation was different outside of the retreat period. Then monks from many different places came to train under him. Following the retreat, a steady flow of monks came and went at his monastery, and he always very kindly made a special effort to instruct them in their practice.

In the dry season, following the third rains retreat, a group of lay people from the village of Ban Nong Pheu Na Nai went to see Ācariya Mun, and invited him to return with them to live near their village. He accepted their offer, and was escorted to their village in the Na Nai sub-district of Phanna Nikhom in Sakon Nakhon province, where he spent the next rains retreat. He traveled the distance from Ban Khok to Ban Nong Pheu hiking through thick forest, camping out along the way each night. Making his way through rough, wooded terrain the entire way, he finally arrived several days later.

Soon after his arrival, he came down with a severe case of malaria. The symptoms of this strain of malaria alternate between bouts of very high fever and shivering cold chills. It's a punishing affliction that lasts for months. Anyone falling victim to such severe malaria lives to dread it because the fever never quite seems to go away. It may last for years, the symptoms returning again and again after apparently having been cured. The fever can disappear for fifteen days, or maybe a month; and then, just when one thinks it's finally cured, it resurfaces. Sometimes several months may elapse before it returns.

I previously described how malarial fever caused in-laws to lose patience with each other. If the son-in-law came down with it, his wife's parents soon became fed up with him. If one of his wife's parents had it, the son-in-law soon got fed up. The patient became a burden on the rest of the family because although he couldn't do any heavy work he still ate a lot, slept constantly, and then complained bitterly no end. Malaria is a most tiresome illness which tries everyone's patience. Its effect was compounded by the fact that in those days there were no effective medicines for curing malaria as there are today. A person contracting it just had to wait for it to disappear on its own. If it refused to go away, it could easily become a chronic condition, dragging on for years. Young children who became infected usually had swollen, distended bellies and pale, anemic complexions. Natives of the low-lying plains, who had moved to settle in forested areas, tended to be the worst victims of this strain of malaria. Indigenous forest inhabitants were not immune, though their symptoms were seldom so severe as those of people who came from open, lowland areas.

Malaria was also common among *dhutanga* monks, as they normally liked to wander extensively through forested mountain areas. Were this dreaded disease something valuable, something to boast about, then I myself could boast with the best of them, having suffered its devastating effects many times. It scares me just thinking about it now. I was hit with a case of malaria my very first year at Ban Nong Pheu, an ordeal that severely chastened me. Fever plagued me the entire rainy season, then lingered on intermittently into the dry season, refusing to completely go away. How could I fail to be chastened? Being fully sensitive to pleasure and pain like everybody else, monks naturally dread the thought of pain and discomfort.

Once Ācariya Mun became settled at Ban Nong Pheu, the number of monks coming to stay with him on a regular basis steadily increased. As many as twenty to thirty monks came each year to spend the rains retreat with him. In addition to the monks who lived in the monastery, many others stayed close by in the vicinity of other small villages. A few monks lived together in some locations, five or six in others, and occasionally nine or ten in some places. Each of these groups stayed in separate places, all within walking distance of Ācariya Mun's monastery. As many as thirty to forty monks from the surrounding area used to assemble at his monastery on *uposatha* observance days.

Combined with resident monks, the total assembly easily reached fifty or sixty. Outside the retreat period, it sometimes exceeded that number, as monks continuously arrived at Ban Nong Pheu seeking Ācariya Mun's guidance. During the day they dispersed into the thick forest, surrounding the monastery grounds, to do their practice in solitude. The forest in this region was many tens of miles wide, while its length was almost unlimited as it extended along a series of overlapping mountain ranges that seemed to stretch on forever.

In those days, virtually the whole region from the district of Phanna Nikhom south to the province of Kalasin was blanketed by forests. For this reason, Ācariya Mun's monastery at Ban Nong Pheu proved to be an excellent central location for *dhutanga* monks of the *kammaāhāna* tradition who were obliged to attend regular recitations of the *Pāāimokkha*³ and receive Dhamma instructions from their teacher. Those wanting to come with questions about their meditation practice could easily do so. During the dry season, his disciples wandered off into the surrounding mountains, living and practicing in the many caves and under the overhanging rocks scattered throughout the rugged terrain. Numerous small settlements of thatched huts dotted the mountain ridges where five or six families eked out a living, growing crops. Many *dhutanga* monks relied on those communities for their daily alms food. But they could live conveniently anywhere in the region's thick forests since small village communities of ten to thirty houses were scattered throughout.

The village of Ban Nong Pheu was situated in a rather broad valley completely surrounded by mountains. The villagers made a living by farming the land they could clear. Beyond that, forested mountain ranges stretched in every direction, making it an ideal place for *dhutanga* monks who easily found the kinds of secluded sites they preferred.

Consequently, large numbers of *dhutanga* monks lived throughout the region, in the rainy and the dry seasons alike. Many went to see Ācariya Mun regularly, and then wandered off again to practice in the mountains, walking down from there to hear his instructions, then returning to continue their practice. Some traveled from other provincial districts, or even other regions, to train with him at Ban

Nong Pheu, especially in the dry season when travel was more convenient.

Lay people also made the arduous journey to pay their respects to him and hear his advice. They traveled by foot from locations all around the region, some, quite far away. Everyone came by foot, except for the elderly and women who, unaccustomed to hiking, hired ox carts to take them to the monastery. The dirt track extending from the main district of Phanna Nikhom to Ban Nong Pheu was about twelve miles long, following a path that cut straight up through the mountains. Following a more circuitous route around the base of the mountains, the distance was about fifteen miles. Those unaccustomed to hiking would never make it if they took the direct route, since there were no villages along the way where they could find food and shelter. The more circuitous route had only a few villages, spread far apart; so it wasn't very convenient either. Monks traveling to see Ācariya Mun went on foot, there being no road to Ban Nong Pheu that was suitable for motorized traffic. What public transport there was in those days went along the main provincial highways, and then only infrequently. Latecomers usually missed their ride and wasted a whole day waiting for the next one.

Dhutanga monks preferred traveling by foot. They found riding in vehicles inconvenient, since they were usually crowded with people. A *dhutanga* monk considered hiking from place to place simply another aspect of his meditation practice. Once he determined which mountain range or forest he wanted to head for, he focused on his practice and started his journey as though he were walking in meditation and the forest trails were his track. He did not fret about where the next village might be or whether he would reach it before dark. He resolved to walk until dusk, then look for a place to rest for the night. The next morning he walked on until he reached the nearest village. There he collected alms food from the local inhabitants as he passed through. He was satisfied to eat whatever they offered. The quality of the food was usually poor, but that didn't worry him if it was sufficient to keep him going from one day to the next, he was contented. Having eaten his meal, he continued on his journey peacefully until he reached his destination. There he searched until he found a site in the forest that best suited his personal requirements. He paid special attention to the availability of water a vital requisite when living in the wilds.

Having set up camp in a suitable location, the *dhutanga* monk turned his attention to the task of intensifying his efforts internally, alternating walking and sitting meditation around the clock, day and night. Bolstered by mindfulness and aided by the contemplative faculties of wisdom, he concentrated on a Dhamma theme that suited his temperament, thus inducing his heart to drop into the peaceful calm of *samādhi*. Withdrawing from *samādhi*, he focused on developing wisdom by investigating whichever phenomena arose in his field of awareness. Subjects included impressions from the external environment that constantly impinged on his sense faculties, and aspects of his internal environment, such as the physical elements and the sense organs, which continually fluctuate as they remain constantly in motion. He meditated on *viparināmadhamma* : that all things perpetually come and go, subject to the instability of constant change. He could not afford to be apathetic toward anything that might entangle his heart. He used wisdom to thoroughly analyze his body and mind to clearly understand their true nature, gradually letting go of any attachment to them. Wisdom was the tool he used to excavate the entire root system of the *kilesas*, relentlessly destroying them trunk, roots, and all. His mind was fixed on a single purpose: investigating all arising phenomena. Everything that made contact with the mind was scrutinized in terms of the *ti-lakkhaṇā*⁴ to gain insight into its true nature, thus eliminating the *kilesas* associated with it. Any *dhutanga* monk who felt uncertain about his mode of practice returned to Ācariya Mun as quickly as possible to ask him for clarification. As soon as his doubts were cleared up, he left, returning to the seclusion of the mountains to press ahead with his spiritual development.

Many *dhutanga* monks relied on Ācariya Mun to give them guidance in meditation. There was not sufficient room in his monastery to accommodate them all. So, after receiving his instructions, they went to live in the surrounding hills and forests. Spreading out in different directions, either alone or in pairs, each monk looked for a secluded place to set up camp that was within walking distance of Ācariya Mun's monastery. In that way they could return to see him with minimum inconvenience. Depending on individual preferences, some monks lived three or four miles away, others between five to eight miles, while a few might have lived as far as twelve to fifteen miles from him. Monks traveling a distance of twelve miles or more to consult Ācariya Mun

remained overnight in his monastery before walking back to their respective locations.

The trails that connected forest and mountain hamlets then were very different from the provincial roads seen everywhere today. They were mere dirt tracks that those communities had used for ages to keep in touch with one another; and all the local people were familiar with the routes. Since the villagers seldom made long treks to visit one another, the trails were often overgrown and obscured by undergrowth. Anyone unfamiliar with this network of trails had to be very careful not to take a wrong fork and get lost in the densely forested terrain. One might well end up in an area where there were no settlements at all. The distance between some communities could be twelve to fifteen miles of uninterrupted jungle. Such lengthy trails required special caution, for any traveler who lost his way would almost surely end up spending the night in the wilderness without any food. Besides that, he might never safely find his way out unless he chanced upon a hunter who pointed him in the right direction or conducted him back to the main trail to his destination.

Harsh Training Methods

Dhutanga kammaāhāna monks were motivated by their great enthusiasm for Dhamma. They regularly endured many hardships: in their wandering lifestyle, in their living conditions, and in their mode of practice. It was difficult for them to find an excellent teacher like Ācariya Mun, a teacher capable of training them in the authentic way, thus bringing joy to their practice. Whenever they met him, they were as excited as small children greeting their parents. The devotion and affection they felt combined to give them a feeling of complete confidence in him. Their lives and well-being were placed solely in his hands. *Dhutanga* monks naturally tended to have immense faith in their teacher, revering him so much that they would willingly give up their lives for him without regrets. Even when living apart from him, they continued to feel an extraordinary sense of obligation to their teacher. No matter how much hardship they endured, or how difficult their training was, they were contented to persevere so long as their teacher was supportive. They could manage to put up with the deprivations they suffered daily _ going without, as often as not because they were convinced in their hearts that Dhamma was more important than

anything else. There were times when they had to sleep in the pouring rain through the night, shivering like little birds. Still, their determination to endure adversity for the sake of Dhamma never wavered.

It was always very interesting to hear *dhutanga* monks discuss their experiences of wandering through remote forest areas. The way they practiced, the way they endured it was pitiable how, due to extreme deprivations, they lived in the forest like wild animals, often sleeping on the ground without shelter. They used a variety of techniques to intensify their meditation, experimenting until they found the ones that best suited their character. They tried: going without sleep; reducing the amount of food they ate; fasting entirely for as many days as they could reasonably manage; walking in meditation all night, from dusk until dawn; sitting in *samādhi* for many hours at a stretch; sitting in *samādhi* all night, from dusk to dawn; sitting in *samādhi* on a trail used by tigers when entering their lair; sitting in *samādhi* at night on forest trails frequented by tigers; sitting in *samādhi* in a cemetery on the day a corpse was being cremated; sitting in *samādhi* at the edge of a precipice; venturing deep into the mountains at night looking for a particularly scary place to sit in *samādhi*; sitting in *samādhi* late at night at the foot of a tree in a tiger-infested area, relying on the threat of danger to help the *citta* attain calm. These methods were all practiced with the same aim in mind to torment the *citta*, and so forcibly tame its unruly nature.

When a monk discovered that any one or more of these techniques matched his individual temperament, he used it to good effect, focusing his mind and strengthening his resolve, thus achieving his objective and learning many valuable lessons in the process. For this reason, *dhutanga* monks actually preferred such harrowing practices. Ācariya Mun himself had used them and so liked to encourage his monks to do likewise, insisting that this was the way clever people trained themselves. These techniques have never been abandoned they are still being practiced by *dhutanga* monks today.

The training we undertake to develop our spiritual worth requires a fair amount of coercion to be successful. The hardships we experience are insignificant when compared with the good results we gain: virtue, contentment, discipline, and firm Dhamma principles to supervise and

maintain our lives all qualities that people highly value. Only useless junk and cadavers require no maintenance. The personal worth we hope to realize will only arise through conscientious self-improvement, so we should work to maintain this purpose in our lives. By this means, we will be good, happy, prosperous people now and in the future. *Dhutanga* monks therefore deserve a lot of respect for refusing to allow adversity and hardship to hinder their practice, thus clearing the way for Dhamma to develop in their hearts.

So long as people are interested in practicing Dhamma properly, the Buddha's *sāsana* will last indefinitely in the world. The *sāsana* rewards those truly desiring Dhamma who practice accordingly, giving excellent results at every step along the path. This principle was embodied in the Lord Buddha, who was earnest in his pursuit of Truth a Truth that he fully realized and then taught to the world. Those who truly believe in Buddhism are those who earnestly pursue Truth. They never practice in a halfhearted, inept manner, thus impeding the *sāsana's* progress and devaluing it to the extent that non-Buddhists find cause to be contemptuous. The genuine *sāsana* are the very Noble Truths that deserve to be proclaimed and accepted throughout the universe without concern about their validity, since they are true natural principles emanating directly from the Buddha's absolute purity unless, of course, one is uninterested in Truth or unable to understand it. In that case, the *sāsana* may simply be held hostage within the countless diverse opinions of people whose hearts are totally obscured by a mass of deep-rooted *kilesas* a veil of defilements that the *sāsana* has long since thoroughly penetrated.

Please excuse me for this lengthy digression it shows I lack the firm principles needed to restrain my wayward tendencies. I would like to continue discussing those harsh training methods that *dhutanga* monks tended to use until they became second nature. Diligently practiced, each of these methods produces clear-cut results. They help diminish the unruly, arrogant nature of the mind, a condition exacerbated by excessive physical vitality. Reducing the intake of food, fasting, going without sleep, or other harsh methods, such as walking or sitting in meditation continuously for long periods of time all of these practices provide the heart with the strength required to advance easily on the path of Dhamma. Other practices are designed for those who are scared of tigers or ghosts, which when practiced unflinchingly, force the heart

to turn inward where its true sanctuary lies, remaining there until calm and courage arise. Fears can be alleviated, or even banished, by such means. The *citta* then comes to realize its own strength and ability so that when it is driven into a corner at a truly critical juncture for example, when the body is racked by excruciating pain it has the means to emerge victorious, and survive. Normally, mindfulness and wisdom are fully aroused only when the *citta* is placed in a critical situation. Otherwise, they never have a chance to realize their full potential.

An excellent way to develop the capacity of mindfulness and wisdom to act boldly in full knowledge of their true potential is to use our basic ingenuity, experimenting with various forceful techniques until we find those that best suit us. Our hearts then remain unperturbed, regardless of what happens. Each of these methods brings its own distinct results. Those who have long suffered from fear of ghosts can rid themselves of this debilitating fear by forcing themselves to spend the night in a cemetery. Those who are terrified of wild animals, like tigers, can overcome this fear by forcing themselves to spend the night alone in terrifying wilderness. Those who have persistent craving for food can alleviate it, or even overcome it, by drastically reducing the amount they eat, or by going on fast.

We all appreciate good food. We tend to believe that eating a lot of good, tasty food will make us happy. The trouble is: greed never accepts that it's had enough. It always hankers for more. No matter how much discontent it causes us, we fail to consider that the dissatisfaction stems from our tendency to overindulge. So, those of us practicing Dhamma for the sake of understanding ourselves and our attachments must investigate such desires and exercise some forceful restraints on their excesses. In the case of *dhutanga* monks, this sometimes takes the form of self-imposed austerities. When a monk notices that a certain type of food kindles an unseemly craving in his heart, he punishes the craving by refusing to eat that food. Instead, he eats things that he feels no desire for. If he feels that he'd like to eat a lot, he eats only a little instead. Or he may eat only plain rice, even though there are plenty of other foods to choose from. Those foods which invigorate the body may hamper his *citta* by overwhelming its mental faculties, thus making meditation more difficult. His practice then fails to progress as it should, despite the fact that he is striving with the same intensity as ever. Once he realizes the cause of the problem, he strives to eliminate

it by adamantly refusing to follow the greed in his heart. This is the attitude of a monk truly committed to training himself under the guidance of a good teacher: he resists any temptation to follow his usual self-indulgent tendencies.

Just as a *dhutanga* monk trains himself to be moderate and restrained in what he eats, so too, when he goes to sleep, he determines to awaken at a predetermined time. He doesn't just let sleep take its course, waking him up randomly whenever it so desires. He trains himself to carefully consider the appropriateness of his actions. He resists doing anything that may violate the ethical principles of Dhamma and therefore be inappropriate, even though it may not strictly be in violation of the disciplinary rules. He strives to inculcate Dhamma within his heart so that it steadily flourishes, never deteriorating an extremely difficult task. So difficult, in fact, that no other endeavor can compare with it.

When, however, we inculcate the ways of the world in our hearts, defilements easily arise and flourish, then wait there ready to cause harm whenever we're off guard. We can never manage to bring them under control. In an instant, they furtively infiltrate our hearts and multiply until we cannot keep track of them all. We can be sure they will cause us nothing but trouble. They arise and flourish so quickly that, within the blink of an eye, they are everywhere, and we are helpless to catch them. Sexual craving⁵ is one such defilement very easy to arise but so difficult to purge. Sexual craving creates a destructive, offensive state of mind that tends to express itself with unrivaled audacity. Because everyone in the world is so fond of it, it becomes emboldened, causing destruction everywhere while ignoring the moral consequences. It does show some fear of people with Dhamma in their hearts. But, more than anything else, it is terrified of the Lord Buddha and the Arahants. Since these Noble Ones have completely demolished its normal playground, sexual craving does not dare enter their hearts to prowl around. But it still creates plenty of trouble for the rest of us who remain under its power.

Dhutanga monks are aware that these oppressive *kilesas* are obstructing their spiritual progress. That's the reason they torture themselves with such arduous training practices. For *kilesas* are not in the least disconcerted by the fact that monks have ordained into the holy life and wear the yellow robes: the distinctive 'badge of victory' for those who

defeat the forces of Māra. They invariably try to convince monks to give up the yellow robes and the spiritual quest they symbolize, refusing to admit defeat regardless of a monk's age or seniority. For this reason, *dhutanga* monks feel compelled to use coercive methods in their struggle to eradicate the *kilesas* from their hearts. They endure and press ahead in spite of the difficulties, battling pain and discomfort but never reversing course. Otherwise, the *kilesas* will make fun of them as they disgrace themselves and the yellow robes they wear. Even more damaging is the discredit they do to the monkhood an order of spiritual warriors who never accept defeat and the *sāsana* which is the principal basis for all mankind. Better they sacrifice their lives to redeem themselves and the yellow robes, than allow themselves to perish in disgrace. In that way, they redeem the monkhood and the religion as well.

Dhutanga monks use such exhortations to embolden themselves to strive for victory, thus honoring the Dhamma that some day will undoubtedly lead them to that sublime domain beyond *dukkha*. Only the Dhamma of the Lord Buddha is capable of showing the way to that sublime transcendence. It is without a doubt the one straight path leading to the land beyond suffering. There is not a more esoteric way that can be taken to avoid the difficulty of putting maximum effort into the practice. Alternative paths are all littered with stumbling blocks that constantly thwart the wayfarer's hopes of success. They inevitably cause pain and frustration, leading to despair and a lack of confidence that the chosen way will ever lead to a state of total freedom.

Before emerging as a revered teacher of such renown, Ācariya Mun practiced with the attitude that cemeteries were irrelevant to him. That is, he was prepared to discard his body wherever he happened to be when he breathed his last breath. He felt no qualms about dying for the sake of Dhamma. Later, when instructing his students, he taught them in a forceful, dynamic fashion that stressed the sharp, incisive tactics he had honed to perfection in his own practice. His teaching was mentally stimulating, helping his students constantly develop new skills to see through the cunning tricks of the *kilesas* and thus uproot and destroy them once and for all. Only then would they be safely out of danger, living contentedly without *dukkha*. They would no longer meander through the round of *saṃsāra*, where one birth changes into another continuously, but the *dukkha*, that is carried around in the heart,

remains unchanged regardless of how many times one is reborn. Since each new life is merely a new instrument for one's own destruction, no one should be satisfied with birth in any realm of existence. It is equivalent to a prisoner changing cells within the same prison: as long as he remains imprisoned, there is no fundamental improvement. The wise well understand the dangers of the cycle of repeated birth and death. It's as though with each new birth the heart has moved into yet another house that is on fire: no matter where it's reborn it can never escape the threat of danger. This is but a small taste of how Ācariya Mun routinely taught his *dhutanga* disciples. Perhaps some of my readers will discover an affinity for his style of teaching.

On *uposatha* observance days, when as many as forty to fifty additional monks attended from various locations, Ācariya Mun gave discourses on Dhamma that generally differed from those he gave exclusively to the monks who regularly lived with him. Although his *uposatha* discourses were often forceful and profound, they could not match the ones given regularly to the monks living in his monastery. Those talks were truly dynamic, and penetrating. Each time he spoke, the impact of his Dhamma was so powerful it seemed to dispel the *kilesas* from the hearts of his listeners, as if the whole world had momentarily vanished from their awareness. What remained was an awareness of the heart united in perfect harmony with Dhamma, an experience so amazing and gratifying it defies description. For days thereafter the dynamic power of his Dhamma seemed to subdue their *kilesas*, as though he had issued them all a defiant challenge. Inevitably, their *kilesas* gradually reemerged after several days, until they were finally back in full force. By then, another meeting had been scheduled where Ācariya Mun subdued them once more, giving the monks a few more days of relief.

All *dhutanga* monks earnestly striving to reach the Dhamma that transcends *dukkha* feel an exceptionally strong bond with their teacher. Eradicating the *kilesas* requires that individual effort be inextricably combined with the help and advice of a good teacher. When confronted with an intractable problem, a monk practicing on his own will hurry back to consult his teacher who clarifies the nature of the problem, allowing the student to understand its underlying causes and so overcome his doubts. Sometimes while a monk is struggling with a problem which is too complex for him to resolve on his own, his teacher unexpectedly explains the solution of that very problem to him,

immediately eliminating that obstacle so his student can proceed unhindered.

Practicing monks are able to determine the precise levels of Dhamma that their fellows, and even their teacher, have attained by listening to their discussions about meditation practice. This knowledge helps to foster an atmosphere of mutual trust within the circle of practice. When a monk explains the nature of his experiences and the stages he has passed through, it is possible to immediately determine the level of Dhamma he has realized from that description. When a student tells the teacher about his experiences in meditation, or when he asks advice about a specific problem, he can assess his teacher's level of attainment at that time by gauging his responses. If the teacher has passed beyond that point himself, he is already familiar with those experiences, and he is able to use them as a starting point to advise his student on how to proceed. Or, in the case of a specific problem, he is able to pinpoint the nature of the problem in such a precise way that the student accepts his advice without reservation. Perhaps a student deludes himself into thinking he has reached the highest level of Dhamma, having completely transcended the different stages. But, the teacher, through his own experience, knows this to be untrue. The teacher must then explain to his student why he is wrong, pointing out exactly where his thinking went astray. Once he is willing to accept the validity of his teacher's reasoning, he can safely avoid such dangers.

Once *dhutanga* monks have discussed the various aspects of meditation practice among themselves and reach the point where they know and accept the truth of their respective levels of attainment, there is then no need for further confirmation. The principles of truth that have been discussed constitute their own proof. Practicing monks use this knowledge to determine one another's level of Dhamma. From the teacher on down to the junior monks, they all rely on evidence gathered in this way. As for intuitive knowledge of these matters, it requires an inner faculty to which I can lay no claim. I shall leave this matter to those with the appropriate expertise. It is a special case requiring individual skill.

The regular conversations on meditation that Ñacariya Mun held with his disciples enabled them to develop close personal relationships with him. Due to the profound respect this tutelage inspired, they willingly

entrusted their lives to his care. This deep faith induced them to unreservedly accept as true whatever he told them, for he always spoke about principles of truth, never presenting mere opinions or guesswork based on information from other sources.

I myself have always been someone with strong views, being reluctant to submit to anyone's judgment. So I liked to argue with him. In this respect, I admit to being one of Ācariya Mun's more annoying and contentious disciples. Sometimes I was so caught up in disputing an issue with him that I forgot I was a student seeking his guidance not a teacher instructing him. I still pride myself on my audacity to speak up, having no sense of misgiving. Although he then slapped me down and chopped me to pieces, the important thing was: I was able to learn for myself whether the truth lay in my opinions, or in the wisdom of my teacher. When I argued with him, it sounded like a shouting match. The more I pressed my case, the more I realized that he had all the truth on his side. I had only my inane fallacies, piled up all around me. I always fought a losing battle. When the dust settled, I thought long and hard about what he said, respectfully accepting its truth with all my heart. At the same time, I made a mental note of my misconceptions. On occasions when I refused to yield to his reasoning because I still couldn't understand what he was getting at, I would wait for another opportunity to debate with him. But I always came away bruised and battered by the power of his reasoning, my opinions tied in knots. Still, I could not resist smiling to myself, delighted by the mighty power of his Dhamma.

Although Ācariya Mun realized full well that I was wildly opinionated, he did not scold me or try to force me to change my attitude. Instead, he could not help but smile when looking at me. He may have been thinking how insufferable I was; or he may have felt sorry for this idiot who liked fighting with such diehard assurance. I must admit: I was never a very fine person. Even today, I still shamelessly argue with senior *ācariyas*. But it's paid off for me in the sense that I've learned many unusual lessons this way which form a valuable part of my education to this day. These monks never seem to mind my intrusions; in fact, they are often amused by them. It's not so often that a stubborn old monk drops by to stir things up. Ordinarily, no one dares come and argue with one of these *ācariyas*. So when the monks in his monastery

hear what's going on, they become rather puzzled and more than a little alarmed.

After leaving Chiang Mai, where he passed beyond the thick jungle of repeated birth and death, he invariably had a profound reason in mind when he decided to live in any one place for a long time, although he kept these reasons to himself. Nakhon Ratchasima was a case in point. Many monks and lay people there had long developed a true devotion to Dhamma; so, many of them came to study with him as accomplished meditators. Later, some followed him to Udon Thani and Sakon Nakhon where they continued to study with him until he died. The monks and laity from Nakhon Ratchasima who kept in contact with him were all well established in meditation practice. Some of those monks have since become famous *ācariyas* who possess a firm basis of Dhamma in their hearts, and are still teaching monks and laity today. Many lay devotees have continued to see steady progress in meditation. Today, they show the way of generosity and spiritual development to other devotees in the area in a truly commendable fashion.

He next settled at Udon Thani, where he spent the rains retreat. Chao Khun Dhammachedi, the abbot of Wat Bodhisomphon monastery, was an influential monk with a large following of monks and lay supporters. He praised Ācariya Mun's preeminence, encouraging them all to make his acquaintance, offer donations and, above all, hear his teaching. Since his ordination, Chao Khun Dhammachedi had been a devoted disciple, and Ācariya Mun reciprocated by showing unusual kindness and affection toward him thus, his willingness to stay several years in Udon Thani.

Later after moving to Sakon Nakhon and living at Ban Na Mon, Ācariya Mun met an elderly, white-robed nun who ran a small convent in the village. She was a major reason why he remained there as long as he did: her meditation was exceptionally good. She had developed a firm basis in Dhamma, so Ācariya Mun gave her regular instructions on practice. He said it was rare to find someone so accomplished.

Ācariya Mun's lengthy residence at Ban Nong Pheu was prompted by both the significance of the location and the people living in the village. The place was centrally situated in a very broad valley, completely surrounded by mountains, making it an ideal environment for the

dhutanga life. Living in the village was an elderly white-robed lay woman who was approaching eighty. Much like the elderly nun at Ban Na Mon, she was an accomplished meditator who always received special attention from Ācariya Mun. She consulted him often, walking with difficulty from her home to the monastery. Shuffling slowly along, supported by a cane, she had to stop for rest three or four times before she finally arrived at the monastery, exhausted and out of breath. We all truly felt sorry for her. Seeing her struggle so painfully, Ācariya Mun would feign disapproval: "Why come all the way out here? Don't you realize how exhausted you are? Even children know when they're tired. Here you are eighty, ninety years old, yet you still don't know when you're worn out. Why do you take all the trouble to come here?"

Her reply was always characteristically straightforward and fearless. He then inquired about her meditation and explained various aspects of Dhamma relating to it. Not only had this woman developed a solid foundation for her meditation, she also possessed *paracittavijjā*, the psychic ability to know the fundamental moral bias of a person's heart. On top of that, she had a knack for perceiving unusual external phenomena. Addressing Ācariya Mun, she recounted these extraordinary perceptions with a daring self-assurance that amused him, causing him to laugh about her indomitable spirit.

"Your *citta* has long since gone beyond", she boldly declared. "I've been aware of your *citta* for a long time it's absolutely without parallel. Since your *citta* is already so supreme, why do you continue to meditate?"

Ācariya Mun laughed. "I will resolutely continue meditating until the day I die. A disciple of the Buddha never allows his resolve to weaken."

To this she said: "If you still had more to accomplish, I could understand that. But your heart is already filled by an exceedingly luminous radiance. How can you go further than that with meditation? I look at your *citta* and see its radiance encompassing the whole world. Your awareness extends everywhere nothing can possibly obstruct its scope. But my own *citta* sadly lacks such supreme qualities, which is why I must come to ask your help. Please tell me: how should I practice to attain the same preeminence you have?"

Hearing her discussions with Ācariya Mun, one sensed that her meditation was truly exceptional. Upon encountering a problem, she inevitably started dragging herself slowly down the path to the monastery, with her cane keeping her company. Ācariya Mun was especially kind to her: he made a point of advising her every time she came. On such occasions, the monks would sneak up to listen quietly at one side of the meeting hall where their discussions were held, eager to hear her questions and his answers. Because her questions arose directly from her own experiences in meditation, these exchanges fascinated the monks. Some of her doubts concerned internal matters, focusing on intrinsic Noble Truths; other questions related to external affairs and focused on the *deva* and *brahma* realms. If Ācariya Mun accepted her understanding of these matters as being correct, he encouraged her to continue her investigations. But if he did not agree with the course she was pursuing, he advised her to forgo that approach, explaining how she should adjust her practice to set it right.

Her claims to knowing their minds intrigued the monks who, though eager to hear her insights, were also rather apprehensive about what they might reveal. But she always described an impressive vision: radiant auras of increasing brilliance, from the young novices on up to Ācariya Mun, resembling the night sky's array of stars and planets: some were bright, some less so. It was a majestic sight, for not even the junior monks or young novices had somber, gloomy states of mind. Each being admirable, every monk was worthy of respect in his own way as he strove to improve and refine himself spiritually. Sometimes she recounted her visits to the *brahmaloka*, describing how she saw large numbers of monks, but no lay people. This puzzled her, so she asked Ācariya Mun to explain which he did.

"The *brahmaloka* is mostly inhabited by monks who have already attained the level of Anāgāmi, that's why. When a monk who has attained Anāgāmi dies, he is reborn in the *brahmaloka*. Very few lay people develop themselves to that level, so they rarely gain access to the *brahma* realms. Thus you saw only monks there, but no lay people. Another thing: if you're so curious, why didn't you ask one of the monks you saw? Neglecting to ask them while you were there, you now want to come and ask me."

She laughed. "I forgot to ask them. I didn't think about it until I'd come back down, so I decided to ask you. If I remember, next time I go up I'll ask those monks."

Ācariya Mun's explanations usually had a dual purpose: to expound the truth of the matter, and then to clear up her doubts. Later he discouraged her from sending out her awareness to perceive external phenomena, for it used up the valuable time she needed to spend investigating internal phenomena and the basic principles underlying them _ investigations leading directly to the realization of *magga* and *phala*. Obediently, she practiced as he advised. He often praised this woman's meditation practice, telling his monks of her high achievements in Dhamma _ a level of success that many of them could not emulate.

Her practice, no doubt, was a factor in his decision to live so long at Ban Nong Pheu _ the longest residence of his monastic life. Also, it was a convenient central location serving all the practicing monks living and wandering in the surrounding area. Well within walking distance of his monastery were many secluded places, suitable for practice. Monks had a choice of staying in wooded lowlands, high mountains, or caves _ all being environments conducive to the ascetic way of life.

Ācariya Mun lived at Ban Nong Pheu monastery for five years. Because of his advanced age he was seventy-five years old with failing health when he began staying there he remained within the confines of the monastery all year, unable to wander extensively as he had in the past. He was content to provide sanctuary to all his disciples earnestly seeking Dhamma. While he was living there, the *devas* seldom contacted him, tending to visit only on certain special occasions. So he concentrated his efforts on assisting the monks and laity more than he had at other places.

The Therapeutic Qualities of Dhamma

Ban Nong Pheu monastery was situated in a dense forest, rife with malaria. As the rainy season approached, Ācariya Mun advised monks, who came simply to visit him, to hurry and leave before wet weather arrived. In the dry season they could stay without risk. Monks who fell

victim to malaria just had to put up with the debilitating symptoms. They had no access to anti-malarial medicines such medicines being scarce everywhere back then. So, they had to rely on the 'therapeutic qualities of Dhamma' instead. This meant investigating painful feelings as they arose with an intense, incisive degree of mindfulness and wisdom. Otherwise, they had no effective means of alleviating the pain. If successful, they reduced the fever, thus effecting a cure much quicker than could normally be expected.

A courageous monk who succeeds through the power of mindfulness and wisdom to overcome the painful feelings caused by illness, creates thereby a solid base of support that will serve him well in times of good health as well as in times of sickness. Ultimately, at the time when death is imminent, he will not feel weak and disheartened, and thus not be overwhelmed. Having succeeded in establishing total mastery of the truth about *dukkha*, he boldly faces the natural process we call 'death'. Mindfulness and wisdom have taught him to recognize *dukkha's* intrinsic nature, so he never again worries about pain. He always maintains the firm basis of truth he achieved through his investigations. Later, when a critical situation does arise, the mindfulness and wisdom that he has trained to proficiency will come to his rescue. He can utilize their investigative skills to override the pain, allowing him to immediately reach safety. Thus trained, mindfulness and wisdom will not abandon their duty, leaving him simply to wallow in misery as he did before he came to realize the true nature of *dukkha*. On the contrary, they will immediately engage the enemy. His external manifestations of illness will resemble those of any other sick person: that is, he will appear just as weak and exhausted as anyone else. But internally, mindfulness and wisdom will manifest within his heart like soldiers preparing to do battle. Then no amount of pain will affect his state of mind. His only consideration will be the inner search for the true causal basis of the physical body, the painful feelings, the *citta*, and the mental phenomena arising in conjunction with it;⁶ for, this is precisely where the full intensity of *dukkha* will converge at that moment. Since his ability to confront the pain and endure its effects is no longer a concern, his confidence is unshakable. His primary concern is whether mindfulness and wisdom will successfully realize the entire truth of these phenomena in time.

Once a monk has investigated a Truth of Dhamma, like the Truth of *Dukkha*, until its true nature is fully understood, the next time he wishes to repeat that accomplishment, he does not allow the difficulties of the investigation to block his way and needlessly weaken his resolve. He simply considers what he previously did to enable him to see the truth so clearly, then reproduces that same effort in the present moment. In that way, a clear realization of the truth always lies within the powers of his mindfulness, his wisdom, his conviction, and his persistent effort. The truth is: pain, body, and *citta* all exist separately, each one being true within its own sphere. They in no way conflict or interfere with one another. By the power of this realization, *samudaya* the cause of *dukkha* _ is conquered, and all apprehension about the pain, the condition of the illness, or the prospect of dying is vanquished with it. Such fears are really emotional concerns that demoralize the spirit and lead to a debilitating sense of frustration. Once this decisive breakthrough is achieved, the illness is likely to subside as a result. But even if the symptoms don't entirely abate, they will not intensify to the point where the *citta* is overwhelmed by an onslaught of painful feelings, thus producing a twofold illness: one of an ailing body, the other of an ailing mind.

In times of severe illness, *dhutanga* monks are sure to examine the resultant pain. It's considered an essential means of sharpening up mindfulness and wisdom, thus honing their skills until they are quick enough to keep pace with all mental activity thoughts that are inevitably bound up with physical and mental pain. Any monk showing signs of anxiety or uneasiness when ill is considered a failure within the circle of practicing monks. Mentally, his *samādhī* and wisdom are insufficient to sustain him in a time of crisis. Lacking mindfulness, his practice is unbecoming and unreliable. This doesn't fit with a monk's obligation to stockpile mindfulness and wisdom as the weapons of choice for protecting himself in his battles with pain of all kinds. Those who have developed the qualities needed to remain mindfully self-controlled, never showing signs of agitation, are considered truly praiseworthy examples of the warrior spirit typical of practicing monks. In critical situations, they stand their ground and fight. The benefits of this to their meditation are self-evident. Those good results are also noticed by their fellow monks, all of whom greatly admire a fighting mentality. The others have faith that, no matter how overwhelming the pain is, a

dhutanga monk will never be defeated even in death. That is, his mindfulness and wisdom will never accept defeat, for they are the investigative tools he uses to search for a safe, trouble-free way to go beyond when it finally becomes impossible to keep body and soul together.

Anyone practicing Dhamma, who arrives at the Truth proclaimed by the Lord Buddha, is absolutely certain of its universal validity. Confronted with the enemy, he will never accept defeat and withdraw his forces. He is obligated to fight to the death. If it so happens that his body cannot withstand the pressure he will let it die. But he will never relinquish his *citta*, or the mindfulness and wisdom which maintain and protect it. He is committed to fighting on to victory. Failure is never an option. He displays the attributes of a warrior who expects to be victorious, and thus reach a sanctuary that is truly safe and secure. Practicing with unwavering faith in the principles of Truth, he is certain to personify the maxim: *dhmmo have rakkhati dammacāriy* Dhamma protects those who practice it faithfully. If, however, he practices in a hesitant, halfhearted fashion, the outcome will only contradict the Truth, never validate it. It cannot be otherwise, because Dhamma, the *svākkhāta*dhamma, requires that results be directly correlated with their causes.

Despite all the rewards the world seems to offer, a *dhutanga* monk prefers to concentrate on the immediate, inner rewards offered by the *sāsana*. For example, the peaceful calm of *samādhi* and the intuitive wisdom needed to extract the *kilesas* piercing his heart, both reward him with a steadily increasing sense of contentment that is clearly evident, moment by moment. These immediate, tangible results are the ones a *dhutanga* monk strives to realize. In doing so, he cuts through burdensome problems and unresolved doubts. If he truly has the capability to transcend the world in this lifetime be it today, tomorrow, next month, or next year this feat will be accomplished by means of his unflagging diligence at each and every moment.

Ācariya Mun employed inspirational teaching methods to reinforce this fighting spirit, regardless of whether his students were sick or not. He insisted his monks always be warriors fighting to rescue themselves from danger. But it was in times of illness that he placed special emphasis on being uncompromising. He worried they might become

dispirited in the face of this challenge. A sick monk showing signs of weakness or anxiety, lacking the mindful self-control expected of him, was bound to be severely rebuked. Ācariya Mun might actually forbid the monks in his monastery to care for a sick monk, believing that weakness, anxiety, and a whining mentality were not the right way to deal with illness. Sick people react in that way all the time and never see it as a problem. But a monk, whose status demands that he put up with difficult situations and investigate them carefully, should never react like that. It creates a bad example. For if a monk brings this kind of defeatist attitude into the circle of practice, it may spread like a contagious disease, easily infecting others.

Think of the mess that might cause: Monks moaning and groaning, tossing and turning like dying animals. You are practicing monks, so don't adopt animal-like behavior. If you begin thinking and acting like animals, the religion will soon develop animal characteristics, spreading confusion everywhere definitely not the way of the Buddha.

We have all been sick at one time or another, so we are well aware of what someone else feels like when sick. It isn't necessary for you to make a public display of your discomfort. If mental anguish and vociferous complaints were effective cures, then conventional medicines would not be needed. Whoever fell ill could just whine about his plight in a loud voice to make the illness go away as easy as that. There would be no need to spend a lot of time and trouble treating the patient. Can whining really cure your present illness? If it can't, why disgust everyone else with your useless whining? This is a sample of the lecture Ācariya Mun might give a monk whose inability to face hardship was an annoyance to the whole monastic community.

On the other hand, when he visited a sick monk, who maintained a strong, mindful calmness, showing no signs of agitation about his condition, Ācariya Mun invariably demonstrated his approval. He commended the monk for his fortitude and gave him some very inspiring words of encouragement. Even after his recovery, Ācariya Mun continued to praise that monk's mental toughness, holding him up as an excellent example for the others.

"That's how a true warrior in the battle with pain gets the job done. Don't complain about the enemy's overwhelming numbers. Just dig in

and fight them all to the limit of your strength and ability without flinching. Never withdraw your forces, never accept defeat. Never let the enemy stomp on you while you're down. We within the circle of practice must be warriors. It is no use complaining how extremely painful an illness is just focus on the pain as it arises and try to understand its true nature. Regardless of how much, or how little pain we experience, all pain is a manifestation of the Truth of *Dukkha*."

Any monk who was weak and submissive when faced with a painful affliction heard a different tune from Ācariya Mun.

"If you want the Truth, but refuse to investigate it because you are afraid of pain, how will you ever discover where the Truth lies? The Lord Buddha succeeded in realizing the Truth by thoroughly investigating everything, not by whining about everything like this useless monk now disgracing himself. Where did the Buddha ever state that reaching a true understanding requires moaning and groaning? I didn't study many books, so perhaps I missed it. Where in the *suttas* does it refer to moaning and groaning? If any of you who are well-versed in the scriptures comes across a passage where it states that the Buddha extolled the merits of moaning and groaning, please point it out to me. Then I won't have to teach monks to trouble themselves about investigating pain and putting up with difficulties. You can all just moan and groan until the Truth arises to fill the whole universe. We can then witness the appearance of wise, sagacious individuals who have succeeded in reaching *magga* and *phala* by the power of their loud moans and groans. They will be in a position to question the legitimacy, and the current relevance, of the Dhamma that Lord Buddha proclaimed over 2,500 years ago.

"The Dhamma of these latter-day sages will be a new, modern Dhamma whose attainment requires no troublesome investigations. All that's required to attain *magga* and *phala* is a chorus of moaning and groaning, a method suited to an age when people prefer to seek righteous results from unrighteous causes a pernicious attitude consuming the whole world today. Before long there won't be enough room on the planet to hold all these modern-day sages. I myself have an old-fashioned mentality. I trust what the Lord Buddha taught and dare not take any shortcuts. I am afraid that, as soon as I put a foot forward, I

would fall flat on my face and die there in disgrace. That would be immensely heartbreaking for me."

Any monk who showed weakness when in pain could expect such uncompromising treatment. The same kind of punishing rebuke was meted out to a monk who succumbed to weakness or discouragement while undertaking any harsh training practice, since they were obstacles preventing him from making use of the various investigative techniques at his disposal. Ācariya Mun constantly urged his monks to display the fighting spirit necessary to overcome these impediments, so they very often heard this dynamic teaching. For them, seekers of the true Dhamma, his words were a kind of therapy which roused their courage, invigorated their practice, and kept their spirits high. Thus buoyed, they were ready to advance triumphantly, step by step, up the path to that sphere of blissful contentment the Dhamma promises to reveal. Inspiring commitment, his stimulating instruction dispelled tendencies toward weakness and laziness that prepare the way for the misery of *saj̄sāra*.

While Ācariya Mun lived there, two monks died in the monastery at Ban Nong Pheu, and another one died close by, at Ban Na Nai. The first to die was a middle-aged monk who ordained specifically to practice meditation. Living in Chiang Mai as Ācariya Mun's disciple, he eventually followed his teacher to Udon Thani, and then Sakon Nakhon sometimes staying with him, sometimes practicing alone, until he finally passed away at Ban Nong Pheu. He was very skilled in *samādhi* meditation, and, prompted by Ācariya Mun's constant tutoring, his wisdom practice had already developed a sense of urgency. He was a very devout, resolute character who gave wonderfully lyrical talks on Dhamma, in spite of being wholly illiterate. His talks, quick-witted and clever, were invariably illustrated with skillful similes, allowing his listeners to easily grasp his meaning. Unfortunately, he had tuberculosis. Long a chronic illness, it eventually reached a critical stage while he was living in the monastery. There, early one morning at about seven o'clock, he passed away in a calm, peaceful manner, befitting one who had been a genuine practicing monk for so long. Witnessing his final moments, and then the moment when his breathing stopped, I developed a deep respect for this monk and his proficiency in meditation.

At death, it is we who control our destiny. So we must take sole responsibility for our future. For no one else, no matter how close or dear, can intervene to affect the outcome. Before that moment arrives, we must develop a means of focusing all our strength and skill on facing this critical juncture wisely, so as to extricate ourselves from danger and safely move on. Our final moments will present us with a significant challenge. All of us, whether we are well-prepared or not, will eventually be confronted with this situation. Those of us who have devised clever means for helping ourselves will fare well. But those of us, who remain ignorant and confused, will founder helplessly, unable to salvage our fate.

The Lord Buddha declared: "*Kho nu hāsa kim ānando...*".⁷ It can be translated essentially as: *When the world is engulfed in lust, anger, and delusion _ a blazing bonfire that rages day and night how can you keep smiling and laughing all the time? Why don't you immediately search for a refuge you can depend on? Stop this negligence now! Don't carry on with it until the day you die, or else you will experience the painful consequences into the future indefinitely.* The Buddha was cautioning people not to be unreasonably heedless in their lives. But when people hear the Buddha's words today, they feel so embarrassed, so ashamed of their wanton infatuation with sensual pleasures that they want to hide their faces. Despite their shame, they are still lured by their desires loving this, hating that for this kind of intransigence has always been an integral part of worldly attitudes. And they don't know how to stop themselves. So, sadly, their only response to the Buddha's warnings is shame.

The death of the monk at Ban Nong Pheu should prove a valuable lesson to all of you who are headed toward the same fate. Please consider the manner of his death carefully. Just as he was about to pass away, Ācariya Mun and the other monks, who were on their way for alms, stopped by to witness that sad event. Afterwards, Ācariya Mun stood in silent contemplation for a moment; then he spoke to everyone in a solemn tone of voice:

"There's no need to worry about him. He has already been reborn in *Abhassara*, the sixth *brahma* realm. He's all right for now. But it's a shame in one way, for had he lived longer and developed his insight with a little more intensity, he could well have been reborn in one of the

five *suddhāvāsa brahma* realms.⁸ There he would have progressed directly to the ultimate goal, destined never again to enter the cycle of rebirth. And what about the rest of you what kind of rebirth are you preparing for yourselves? Will it be one in the animal world, the ghost world, or in the realms of hell? Or will it be as a human, a *deva*, or a *brahma*? Or will it be Nibbāna? Which will it be? If you want to know for sure, look closely at the compass bearing of your heart to see the direction in which you are headed. Examine yourselves now to find out whether your present course is a good one, or a bad one. Once you are dead, it will be too late to make adjustments. Everyone knows that death is final nothing more can be done after that."

The second death was that of a monk from Ubon Ratchathani who came down with malaria and died a month later. Shortly before it happened, his death was foreseen in the meditation of another monk who was living there at the time. The monk went to speak with Ñcariya Mun the next evening. After discussing various aspects of meditation practice for awhile, their conversation turned to the sick monk, and the monk informed Ñcariya Mun about the vision that appeared in his mediation.

"Something odd occurred in my meditation last night. I was investigating in my normal way when I reached a state of calm and suddenly saw an image of you standing before a pile of firewood, saying, 'Cremate that monk right here. This is the best place to do it.' I don't fully understand the meaning of it. Will that sick monk die of malaria? His condition certainly doesn't appear to be that serious."

Ñcariya Mun responded immediately.

"I have been investigating this matter for a long time now. He is bound to die, it cannot be avoided. Still, he won't have died in vain. I have seen his mental state: it's exceptional. So, he's sure to fare very well. But I strictly forbid you to mention anything about this to him. If he finds out that he's certain to die, he will feel very disappointed. Then his health will deteriorate even further, and his mental state could waver to the extent that he misses the excellent rebirth he can expect now. Disappointment is a very harmful emotion in this respect."

Several days later, that monk's condition suddenly took a turn for the worse. He died calmly at about three a. m. This prompted me to consider how Ācariya Mun must have investigated the circumstances that lay behind every incident that appeared to him during meditation, pursuing them all until he clearly understood their significance. Then he simply let go, allowing them to follow their natural course.

One morning, a disciple of Ācariya Mun, who was running a very high fever due to malarial infection, decided to forgo almsround and fast for the day. He used his investigative skills to battle the intense pain from early morning until three in the afternoon, when the fever began to abate. Feeling completely exhausted in the middle of the day, he drew his attention to and concentrated solely on those points where the pain was most intense, but without making an effort to probe and analyze the pain with wisdom. At midday, Ācariya Mun momentarily sent out the flow of his *citta* to check how the monk was coping with the pain. Later in the afternoon, while visiting Ācariya Mun, he was surprised to hear Ācariya Mun immediately question his mode of practice.

"Why were you investigating like that? How can you expect to understand the truth about the body, the pain, and the *citta*, if you merely concentrate your mind on a single point? Instead, use your intuitive wisdom to analyze all three of them. In that way, you discover the true nature of each. Yours is the kind of concentration one expects from a yogi: it has all the single-minded intensity of a dogfight! It is not the right practice for a monk wanting to discover the truth about pain. Don't do it again. It's the wrong way to go about realizing the many truths to be found within the body, the pain, and the *citta*. During the middle of the day I examined your practice to see how you were coping with the pain caused by your fever. I noticed you were just focusing your attention exclusively on the pain. You were not using mindfulness and wisdom to ease the problem by looking at all three aspects of it: body, pain, and *citta*. This is the only effective way to quell pain, and neutralize the symptoms, so that the fever subsides as well."

Tigers Make the Best Teachers

When Ācariya Mun believed that a specific kind of advice would help one of his students, he spoke to him directly about it. He could be very blunt in his advice to certain monks.

"You'd be better off going to meditate in that cave than you are living here in the monastery. Characters like yours prefer tough, coercive measures. Better still, find a tiger to be your teacher fear of it will subdue your *citta*, forcing it to enter into calm. Realizing Dhamma in this way, you can gain some contentment. Living here in the monastery is not right for you. Stubborn people need hard things to soften them up and make them more pliable. Since tigers are such good tormentors, anyone fearing them should take one as a teacher. It's much better than having a teacher you don't fear. If you are afraid of ghosts, you should take ghosts as teachers to enforce mental discipline. Take as a teacher whatever your heart most fears. This is how a clever person forces himself to submit to the training."

Before ordaining, the monk he was addressing had been a real tough guy with a bold, no-nonsense sort of character. If he said he was going to do something, he did it. He was a rather stubborn person, but stubborn in the way of a monk. As soon as he heard Ācariya Mun's resolute advice, he immediately decided to follow it, reasoning something like this to himself: *Surely a monk of Ācariya Mun's caliber would never send me to be killed by a tiger. I must go and live in the cave he mentioned. If that means death, I'll just have to accept it. If I want to see for myself the truth of what he said, then I must have no qualms about dying. I've heard that he always has very sound reasons for what he says; and he's careful to thoroughly examine every situation before speaking. Anyone who can understand his teaching and put it into practice is bound to get good results. I must take what he just said very seriously it came from an insight into my character, and a genuine concern for my well-being. It is as though he plucked out my heart and examined it, and has found out all about me. How can I doubt his advice? If I fail to act on it now, how can I call myself a monk? I might as well be a lay person. I'm going to live in that cave whatever happens. If I die there so be it. If I don't, then all I ask is a chance to realize some amazing Dhamma while I'm there. It's obvious that he was talking about me when he referred to being stubborn and recalcitrant. It's a true measure of his genius: he knows me better than I know myself. I know I'm that type of person, one hundred percent. For my own good, I can't afford to disregard his advice about tigers. I must do what he said and subject myself to this agonizing practice.*

This monk truly was a stubborn character, reluctant to accept advice from anyone, just as Ācariya Mun indicated. After considering Ācariya Mun's remarks and reaching a definite decision, he went to take his leave. As he approached, Ācariya Mun immediately asked him where he was going.

"Where are you off to? You look all dressed up, and ready to march earnestly into battle."

"I'm going off to die in that cave you told me about."

"What! What did I say to you: go die in that cave, or go meditate there?"

"Well, you told me to meditate there, not die there. But I know from the other monks that there's a tiger living in the cave above the one I'll be staying in. They say that the tiger's cave is just close by it comes and goes there all the time. When it goes out to hunt for food, it will pass right in front of my cave, so I have my doubts about remaining alive there. I was simply voicing my apprehension."

"Many other monks have already stayed in that cave, on many different occasions, and none of them were devoured by tigers. So, why should a tiger suddenly decide to come gobble you up? What's the difference between your flesh and the flesh of those other monks that makes it so much more likely to whet a tiger's appetite? Where did you get this savory flesh tigers like so much that they are waiting to pounce on and devour only you and no one else?"

Ācariya Mun then explained about the deceptive nature of the mind that deludes people in ways that are far too numerous to easily keep up with.

"If you don't examine everything and test it out with a critical, discerning attitude, you will be tormented by the mind's myriad tricks and never learn to tame its unruly nature. You have yet to leave, but already you trust the whisperings of the *kilesas* more than the advice of your teacher. How will you ever manage? Although people the world over have yet to die, they are all terrified of death. But birth, the enticement luring them into death, is feared by no one _ everyone craves birth. I cannot figure out why people are so infatuated with birth.

Just one birth in a physical body means immense suffering and anxiety. Suppose human beings could send up shoots like a clump of bamboo: their eagerness for birth would increase rampantly. Each person desiring to branch out into hundreds, or thousands, of additional people, without giving thought to how the combined fear of so many people dying at once might affect them. The whole world would become tumultuous with the fear of death and there would be no safe place to live.

"You are a practicing monk, a trained spiritual warrior. Yet your fear of death surpasses that of the untrained laity. Why do you let the *kilesas* harass you in this way? You have the mindfulness and wisdom needed to defend yourself, so why don't you use them? Go on the offensive. Chase out the devious *kilesas* lurking there in your heart. Then you will realize how stupid you've been, blindly serving their interests, unaware of the power they have over you. A warrior's victory depends on his willingness to brave death on the battlefield. If you're not willing to die, then you shouldn't enter the battle zone. Only by braving death will you be able to defeat your enemies. If you are truly determined to transcend *dukkha*, by realizing its true nature, you must view your fear of death as one form of *dukkha* a product of the *kilesas* stored in your heart. You can only resolve this matter by making a stand on a battlefield conducive to victory, like the one I just indicated. Persevere, and you will come to realize fear's harmful effects: it stirs the emotions and demoralizes the spirit, always giving rise to suffering. It is better to take a defiant stand now. Don't simply keep clinging to that fear, hugging it tightly to your chest and burning your heart until you cry out in agony. Fail to act decisively now and your suffering will continue indefinitely.

"Will you believe in the supreme sanctity of your teacher and the Dhamma? Or are you going to trust that fear the *kilesas* have released into your heart which is depriving you of the very mindfulness and wisdom you need to defeat it? Looking around, you seem to see only tigers, all coming to tear out your flesh and make a meal of you.

Why is that? Please reflect deeply on the matter. I assure you that I have used the same combative training method to good effect in my own practice."

Such was his delight in the Dhamma he heard that the monk said he felt his *citta* glowing bright with courage as he listened to Ācariya Mun's strong rebuke. When Ācariya Mun finished speaking, the monk took his leave and immediately prepared to go to the cave.

He arrived at the cave still buoyed by a sense of courage and rapturous delight. He put down the belongings he carried with him and began to survey the surrounding area. Then, by some mischance, the thought arose in his mind that the cave was home to a tiger. With this thought in mind and his eyes scanning the ground in front of the cave, he spied a tiger's paw-print in the dirt. Never considering that it was probably made long before, the sight of it sent shock waves of fear through him, nearly scaring him out of his wits. In that instant, he completely forgot his teacher and the sense of courage that glowed so brightly while he sat listening to him in the monastery. Fear overwhelmed his heart and he was helpless to prevent it. He walked over and erased all traces of the paw-print with his foot, but the fear persisted. Still, he did feel a little better not having to look at it anymore.

From the moment he glanced down to discover the tiger's paw-print, he was terrified a paralyzing fear lasting all night. Even during the day, his fear remained; but it became especially intense once night fell, as he imagined the whole area around his cave to be teeming with huge tigers. To make matters even worse, he had a sudden recurrence of malaria, with fever and chills. He felt as though he had fallen into a living hell devoid of any physical or mental comfort whatsoever. To his great credit, he was tough enough mentally to resist the temptation to give up his painful attempts at finding a means to overcome his fear. The worsening fever, combined with his agonizing fear of tigers, did unsettle his composure, however, nearly driving him crazy.

Once in a long while he thought of Ācariya Mun's kindness and the advice he had given, which temporarily helped to douse the fires of misery burning in his heart. As symptoms of the malaria became more and more intense, he reflected back on his earlier intention to sacrifice his life in that cave: *Previously, I made a decision to sacrifice my life here. When Ācariya Mun asked me where I was going, I immediately announced that I was going off to die in this cave. And as I hiked up here, I felt as though I was walking on air, such was my determination to brave death. So, why is it that upon reaching the cave and actually*

entering the jaws of death, I have now changed my mind and decided I don't want to die? Now, I'm so afraid of dying I can hardly hold my own. I'm exactly the same person I was then. I didn't exchange my heart for the heart of some coward. So why do I seem to be a new person with a cowardly attitude? In the monastery, I was prepared to die. Now that I'm actually here, I've changed my mind. Which is it going to be? Make up your mind right now don't wait any longer. How about this? I'll go sit in meditation at the overhanging edge of a steep precipice. If my mindfulness falters, then let me fall to my death at the bottom of the ravine where the vultures and the flies can take care of my corpse. There would be no need to trouble the villagers about it. No one should have to dirty their hands handling the corpse of a useless monk my futility might prove contagious. Then again, I could sit in meditation right in the middle of the path leading to the tiger's cave. I'll make it easy for that tiger when it goes out hunting for food. It can just sink its teeth into my useless neck and have me for a snack tonight. Which will it be? Make up your mind quickly do it now!

His resolve bolstered, he walked to the front of the cave and stood for a moment, awaiting inspiration. Weighing his two options, he finally decided to go with the first one: to meditate, seated precariously on the brink of the steep precipice near his cave. Any slip in mindfulness, and vultures and flies would be there to take care of his remains. That decided, he walked over and sat down, facing a deep gorge with his back to the path the tiger took to and from its cave. He began repeating "*buddho*", intensely aware that, if careless, he could die in an instant. Seated there meditating on *buddho*, he kept a vigilant watch on his mind to see which fear predominated: that of falling down the precipice, or that of being attacked by a tiger. As soon as it became apparent that fear of the precipice was the greatest, he gathered his mindfulness and focused intensively on one of his two meditation themes: either the repetition of *buddho* or the recollection of death depending on which one arose in his mind at any one moment. Meditating thus, poised on the brink of death, his *citta* soon gathered itself into one point of focus, and then suddenly dropped down to the very base of *appanā samādhī*,⁹ rapidly converging into a state of total calm. In an instant, he was oblivious to all the fiery turmoil that had engulfed his mind for so long. All that remained was the essential

knowing nature of the *citta* existing alone, by itself, in all its amazing splendor. Fear of death had utterly vanished.

The hour was ten p. m. when the monk's *citta* `converged' dramatically into *appanā samādhi*, an experience so profound that he did not withdraw from that state until ten o'clock the next morning. Opening his eyes, he saw the sun halfway up the sky. Since it was already too late for morning almsround, he didn't bother to go to the village he simply went without food that day. Withdrawing from *samādhi*, he was aware of a complete absence of fear. In its place was an amazing sense of courage he had never before experienced. His fever was gone as well _ completely cured that night, and he never again suffered a recurrence of malaria. He was convinced that the `therapeutic powers of Dhamma' had cured both his malaria and his fear of tigers. From that day on, his body was never again plagued by malaria, his mind never again ravaged by fear. No longer terrified of tigers, he could go anywhere, live anywhere unperturbed

Occasionally, he wished a tiger would show up to test his mental fortitude. He imagined himself calmly walking right up to it without the least apprehension. Reflecting on the whole experience, he felt immensely gratefully to Ācariya Mun for so kindly teaching him about the corrupting power of fear. Now that he understood how his mind worked, he persistently used this coercive style of practice. Preparing to meditate, he preferred looking for the most frightening places he could find. For the remainder of his stay there he continued this training, making a special effort to seek out frightening locations for conducting his meditation. Noticing that tigers regularly used a certain path, he made a point of sitting right in the middle of it. While meditating in the cave, he resolved not to lower his mosquito net because sitting inside a lowered mosquito net gave more protection from the threat of tigers. Minus that element of fear his *citta* was reluctant to drop into the desired state of calm. Where he sat depended each time on where he felt his *citta* was most likely to rapidly `converge' to the very base of *samādhi*.

Late one night as he sat out in the open, his *citta* refused to drop into calm despite his best efforts. He sat there frustrated for a long time until he finally thought about the huge tiger that came and went frequently in the area: *I wonder where that tiger is today. It would be nice if it came*

by here to help my citta drop into calm. If it passed by, I wouldn't have to struggle with my meditation like this the citta would just instinctively drop into calm.

Not long after thinking of his friend perhaps after half an hour he heard the footsteps of that huge animal walking towards its cave, as though right on cue. The time was approaching two a. m. Hearing the tiger draw nearer, he roused himself with a timely warning: *Here it comes, right now! Are you really so casual? Aren't you afraid it will sink its teeth into your neck and make a meal of you? If you don't want to be tiger food, then you better hurry up and look for a safe place to hide.*

As he thought this, he conjured in his mind an image of the tiger pouncing on him, its gaping jaws closing in around his neck. The moment he fixed his attention on this mental image, his *citta* `converged', dropping rapidly until it reached the very base of *appanā samādhī*. Instantly all external phenomena completely vanished from his awareness himself, the tiger, everything. What remained was serenity and tranquility the union of *citta* and Dhamma as they melded into one essence of indescribable wonder. His *citta* rested in that sublime state for a total of eight hours from two o'clock that night until ten o'clock the next morning. Upon withdrawing, he saw the sun was already high, so he again canceled his almsround and went without food. He then walked over to inspect the place, where he heard the tiger approaching, to see if there were any signs that a tiger really had passed by. Or had his ears merely been playing tricks on him? Looking at the ground, he saw the tracks of a huge tiger, about twelve feet behind the spot where he had been sitting. The tiger's tracks continued in a straight line all the way up to its cave, never veering off to the direction where its friend was sitting in meditation. The whole incident was strange, and quite amazing.

The experience, in *appanā samādhī*, of the *citta* fully `converging' into its true base, is an experience that varies according to the natural inclination of each individual. Some people are inclined by temperament to experience a very rapid convergence, feeling as though they are falling down a well. The internal sense faculties cease to function at that time, meaning they are totally unaware of all external sense impressions. This monk's *citta* was one such case: when it fully `converged' in *samādhī*, all awareness of external phenomena ceased as

a consequence. As the monk explained it, the moment his *citta* fully 'converged,' everything that was involved with it in any way vanished instantly. Only when he withdrew from that state did his normal awareness of things return. But, he found it difficult to attain this state unless he was under duress by some external threat. A real threat of danger forced his *citta* to 'converge' very rapidly in a split second it reached its true base. He said this was the reason he liked to seek out frightening places.

"I find this the most convenient way to develop my meditation: practicing in places that arouse fear. I actually prefer wild mountains that have caves frequented by tigers, and tend to shy away from those that don't. As you can see: tiger-infested areas are perfectly suited to a rough character like me that's what makes me so fond of them.

"I had other strange experiences while living in that cave. Besides realizing my goal to attain deep meditative calm, I also developed several unusual kinds of psychic awareness. For example, terrestrial *devas* came some nights to visit and converse with me. Even stranger still, when someone in the local village died I always knew about it immediately, though I'm not sure where this knowledge came from. It simply arose spontaneously in my heart. And it was invariably correct never did I find reason to doubt it. My cave was located about five miles from the village, yet those people still insisted on coming to request my help in performing the funeral rites, which was very troublesome for me. As soon as someone died in the village I was aware of it, knowing straightaway that the next day I'd have to make another long trek to the village cemetery. And sure enough, the villagers came once again to bother me. Nothing I said could dissuade them. They told me that monks were scarce in that area, so they had no other choice but to disturb me. They believed that the deceased would benefit if a monk performed the funeral. I sympathized and felt sorry for them, so I had to go. During periods of fasting, which I found conducive to intensive meditation, I didn't want anything to interfere with my practice; but something usually did come up.

"While living in that cave I always relied on my friend the tiger to give my meditation practice a timely boost. Every other night it ventured down in search of food, as all hungry animals do. But it never showed

any interest in me, even though it walked right past me on its way out. There was only one way down so it had to go that way."

This monk had the rather unusual habit of leaving his cave late at night to go sit in meditation on stone outcrops high up in the mountains. He appeared wholly unfazed by the danger from wild animals. By temperament, he preferred to wander alone through the wilds. I have included his story here because it teaches some valuable lessons. He practiced with unwavering purpose until he managed to expose the truth of his unruly mind, thus disciplining it and bringing it under his control. Things once viewed as threats, like tigers, became friends instead, assisting his practice. He managed to make use of a wild tiger a most unpredictable creature to inspire him in his mediation practice, thus achieving remarkable results.

Once Ācariya Mun had settled in the monastery at Ban Nong Pheu, he was contented to encourage the community of *dhutanga* monks practicing under his tutelage. As many as twenty to thirty of them joined him there during retreat periods. Despite the increasing numbers, however, conflicts, that might have caused him concern, seldom arose. Each monk was determined to focus diligently on his own practice. An harmonious sense of fraternity existed among the monks who all lived together in unity of purpose. Peacefully walking together to the village for alms each morning they were an impressive sight. A long bench had been constructed in the village where the monks sat to chant a blessing after receiving offerings of food. Later, back in the monastery, they ate together in silence, seated in rows according to seniority. Once they finished eating, each monk washed his own bowl, dried it thoroughly, replaced its cloth covering, and put it neatly away. When their morning duties were completed, they separated, each monk walking into the extensive forest surrounding the monastery to find a secluded meditation track where he concentrated on his meditation walking or sitting, as he preferred. Remaining in the forest until the afternoon chores began at four p. m., they then returned from their meditation sites to help each other sweep the monastery grounds clean. Once they finished sweeping, they worked together to carry water from the well to fill the various water barrels water for drinking, water for washing feet, or water for washing their alms bowls. A quick bath at the well was followed by a resumption of meditation. On nights when no meeting had been called, they continued to practice as usual until it was time to

retire. Normally, Ācariya Mun called a general meeting once every seven days, though any monk, who wished personal advice, could see him on any day. Monks wanting to ask questions about their practice were advised to approach Ācariya Mun at a time during the day when he was free usually just after the morning meal, in the early afternoon, at five in the afternoon, or at eight o'clock at night.

Hearing Ācariya Mun discuss Dhamma and answer questions in the quiet hours of the evening was a very pleasant experience. Then, many unusual questions were asked by disciples who came from various locations in the surrounding area to seek his advice. Some of these questions dealt with internal matters that arose in the course of a monk's meditation. Others dealt with external phenomena, such as *devas*. The monks who arrived to discuss their practice with him had varying skills and abilities in meditation. Some had unusual meditative experiences to relate. We listened eagerly, so mesmerized by his replies that none of us wanted the sessions to end. Each time we learned valuable lessons that led to practical methods for improving our meditation and thus gave us great satisfaction.

On timely occasions, Ācariya Mun recounted edifying stories about his past. He told us about his early years in lay life: how he ordained, first as a novice, then as a monk. Some of these stories were so funny they made us laugh; some made us pity him for what he had gone through; and some, the ones about his attainments, were just incredibly amazing. Living continuously with a good teacher for a long time had many distinct advantages. Following his example, his disciples gradually altered their basic attitudes and ways of behavior, adjusting their outer conduct and augmenting their inner skills little by little to match his, until eventually their characters naturally harmonized with his as much as possible. The secure environment he offered to his disciples meant that their practice was unlikely to go astray. Constant exposure to his inspirational teaching gradually allowed the essence of Dhamma to penetrate deep into their hearts. His intimidating presence promoted the kind of vigilant self-control that reinforces mindfulness and wisdom. Fear prevented his disciples from becoming complacent by forcing them to be extremely circumspect in their behavior and their thoughts. Even then, despite their best intentions, he could still catch them napping, and then expose their shortcomings for everyone else to hear. It was extremely embarrassing to have one's personal failings exposed

like this; but a monk had to accept the consequences of failing to be properly circumspect

We all experienced an indescribable sense of joy, living and practicing with Ācariya Mun. But if we held unreasonable opinions, our delight could easily turn to frustration, for those wrong views became a constant hindrance. I cannot speak for others, but I've always had a rather rough disposition, so I relied on Ācariya Mun to pound me into shape. In that way, I managed to find some breathing room when the *kilesas* began to suffocate me. Hearing him recount the various stages of his own practice, my spirit was so energized I felt I could float up and walk on the clouds. While listening to him, my whole being felt light as a wisp of cotton. But later, when I tried to duplicate this buoyancy on my own in meditation, I felt as though I was laboring under the weight of a mountain. I met nothing but heavy resistance. I became so frustrated with myself I wanted to bury my head in the ground to hide my shame a fitting humiliation for such a vulgar character who was loath to accept advice.

I have mentioned my own coarse, callous nature here to let the reader know just how low the heart can sink when loaded down with destructive influences, and how hard it can be to pull it back up again and discipline it in the proper way. If we do not make a supreme effort now, eventually this tendency will plunge us into the depths of disaster, regardless of who we are or where we live. Effort must be used to discipline the heart. Any person who succeeds in subduing the unruly nature that has burdened his heart from time immemorial and who is thus living in total freedom that person deserves the highest respect. The Lord Buddha and his Arahant disciples are shining examples of this achievement.

Likewise, I am absolutely convinced that Ācariya Mun was one of the Lord Buddha's present-day Arahant disciples. He was courageous and masterful in the way he lived his life, and was never in danger of succumbing to the power of the *kilesas*. Even in old age, when he could be expected to rest and take it easy, no longer needing to exert himself in meditation practice, he still did as much walking meditation as he always had _ so much so that the younger monks could hardly keep up with him. Fulfilling his teaching obligations with great compassion, he never lost hope in his students. His exhortations reflected his resolute

character, and he invariably preferred the rhetoric of a warrior. He delivered his talks forcefully, aiming to arouse in his disciples the strength and courage needed to completely transcend *dukkha*. He rarely compromised or made allowances for their shortcomings. He did not want to lull to sleep those very monks who already had a deplorable tendency to show weakness in their practice.

Ācariya Mun had utmost respect for all aspects of the Buddhasāsana, from the theory and practice of Dhamma to its inner realization. And this in an age when genuine disciples of the Buddha are hard to find.

He placed special emphasis on the thirteen *dhutanga* observances, which Buddhists everywhere had long since lost interest in. No one thought to restore them to the prominent position they deserve. The fact that they have now become such a significant part of a *dhutanga* monk's practice is a direct consequence of the earnest efforts that Ācariya Sao and Ācariya Mun made to revive their use in Thailand's Northeast region. Both Ācariya Sao and Ācariya Mun observed all thirteen of these ascetic practices at one time or another in their lives, although only the ones I've mentioned earlier were practiced on a daily basis. Other *dhutanga* observances, like staying in a cemetery or living out in the open at the foot of a tree, were practiced so often that these two *ācariyas* became thoroughly familiar with them. *Dhutanga* monks in the Northeast today are descendants following directly in their footsteps.

Ācariya Sao and Ācariya Mun were keenly aware of the practical value the *dhutanga* observances had for practicing monks. They clearly understood that each of these thirteen practices was an extremely effective means of closing off the outlets through which *kilesas* of *dhutanga* monks tend to flow. Without the restraining influence of ascetic practices to stem the flow from those outlets, *dhutanga* monks are 'ascetic' in name only, their *kilesas* being free to roam at will, causing considerable annoyance to everyone. With the help of the *dhutangas*, monks can rest assured that their conduct will not be offensive to others. Each *dhutanga* practice promotes a virtuous quality, while its observance reminds a *dhutanga* monk not to be careless by thinking in ways that contradict the very virtue he is trying to develop. On guard, he immediately becomes conscious of any lapses in judgment, which in turn fosters mindfulness to catch such oversights in

the future. Considered in its entirety, *dhutanga* asceticism is broad in scope, each separate practice having a very distinct purpose. Provided a monk understands the true purpose of each *dhutanga* he undertakes and then observes them properly, they are easily capable of totally eliminating his *kilesas*. They are powerful enough to deal a decisive blow to every type of *kilesa* no *kilesa* is beyond their reach.

As long as we dread the hardships involved in observing ascetic practices, then the *kilesas* have little fear of us. The hardships that the *kilesas* cause us, when there are no ascetic practices to suppress them, are somehow forgotten, opening the way for us to accuse these practices of being too difficult or even obsolete. When our own thoughts become our enemies, the *kilesas* are secretly held in high regard; but in our rush to admire them we fail to realize this. The harmful effects of this supportive admiration are plain, and plainly infinite in scope.

The monk who truly practices any one or more of the *dhutangas* inevitably presents a pleasing, dignified appearance. His basic needs are easily taken care of. What he eats and where he sleeps are never a problem for him. He is always contented with the simple belongings he possesses. Unencumbered by emotional attachments and material possessions, he feels mentally and physically buoyant. Even lay people can benefit from undertaking some of the *dhutanga* practices, just as the monks do, since both monks and lay people are burdened with the same kinds of *kilesas*. The *dhutanga* practices are, after all, designed to counteract the *kilesas*, so people from all walks of life should try their best to make use of them for this purpose. The *dhutangas* comprise qualities of Dhamma so supremely profound that it is difficult to fully comprehend their true magnitude.

I myself do not have as comprehensive a knowledge and understanding of the *dhutanga* practices as I should, but in my own unsophisticated way I have tried my best to do justice to them. I hope you will forgive my shortcomings in this regard. In truth, the *dhutangas* are so profoundly subtle it would be virtually impossible to fully elaborate on all their outstanding qualities. They have the capacity to take someone, who is truly devoted to their practice, from the basic levels of Dhamma all the way to the highest *ariya* levels. In fact, no Dhamma attainment is beyond the scope of the *dhutangas*. As a teacher, Ācariya Mun always

led his disciples in observing these ascetic practices, right until the last days of his life. Only when his strength was completely exhausted did he let go of them, along with his physical body. Clearly the *dhutangas* are essential practices for those intending to purify their hearts of all vestiges of the *kilesas* this truth is undeniable.

I shall refrain from giving a detailed explanation here of each ascetic observance with its distinctive merits and importance. Anyone interested in looking into them can uncover these attributes for themselves. You may discover a degree of subtlety that proves to be more beneficial to you than simply reading someone else's explanation. I have been looking into these practices since my early days as a *dhutanga* monk and I continue to gain good results from them to this day. I have always considered them an essential part of my overall practice. Anyone intent on seeing an end to the *kilesas*, from the most vulgar ones to the most refined, should never overlook the *dhutanga* observances, thinking them incapable of doing the job.

His Final Illness

Ācariya Mun had already lived for five years at Ban Nong Pheu monastery when, in March of 1949 precisely on the fourteenth day of the fourth lunar month his body began exhibiting signs indicating the approaching end of his life. By then, he was 79 years old. On that day there appeared the first symptoms of an illness that was to worsen until it finally brought to a close his long life¹⁰ a day that sent tremors through Ācariya Mun's body elements and shock waves through the community of his close disciples. Initially there was a light fever, accompanied by a slight cough. But as the days passed, the symptoms steadily worsened, never showing the slightest improvement. Obviously abnormal, the constant decline in his health worried us all. But Ācariya Mun himself clearly knew that this was to be his final illness an illness no type of medical treatment could cure. He informed his disciples of this from the very beginning and from then on never showed any interest in medicines. On the contrary, he seemed annoyed when someone brought him medicines to take. This he expressed in no uncertain terms:

"This is the illness of an old man who has reached the end of the line. No matter what kind of medicine I take, it will never be cured. All that's

left is the breath in my body, biding its time, awaiting the day it finally ceases. I'm like a dead tree that's still standing: no matter how much you fertilize and water that tree, it is impossible to make it sprout and flower again. This old dead tree now stands anticipating the day it will topple over and go crashing to the ground, felled by this very same illness. I thoroughly investigated my condition long before the symptoms appeared. That is why I've been warning you all: Don't be complacent. Hurry up, intensify your efforts now while I am still alive. In that way, I can help you resolve any problems you may have in the meantime. Missing this opportunity now may cause you to waste a lot of time in the future. I will not be here much longer. Soon I shall depart this world, in keeping with the law of impermanence that follows constantly on the heels of all conditioned things without exception.

Three years ago I warned you that I would not last more than three years. What more can I say? What I've told you, I know to be inevitable. The work that the round of *saṃsāra* performs inside the minds and bodies of human beings and animals alike continues unerringly along its natural course. In just a few months time it will complete its final task within this body of mine. How can it possibly alter its appointed task?"

With each passing day his symptoms gradually worsened. Showing no interest in medicines of any kind, he was clearly annoyed when people came and urged him to try this remedy or that cure. But so many people arrived offering 'cures' that he had a hard time resisting them all. Each one touted the effectiveness of the medicine he was offering, insisting that if he took it he was sure to get better, for it had already cured many others. They all pleaded with him to try their medicines out of compassion for them. They wanted him to get better so he could continue to be of service to his many followers for a long time to come. He often warned them that medicines were useless for his illness; that only firewood for cremating the corpse was appropriate. But the more he protested, the more they beseeched him. So occasionally he yielded to their appeals and took a small dose of medicine. He was concerned that people would feel disappointed if they believed he had given up on his condition.

As news of his illness spread across the region, people began arriving from all directions to visit him at Ban Nong Pheu. Traveling from

locations far and near in all kinds of weather, a steady flow of monks and laity poured in like the waters from a monsoon rain. Ban Nong Pheu was situated in a valley surrounded by thick forest some twelve to fifteen miles from the main highway between Udon Thani and Sakon Nakhon. Though people had to travel by foot to see him, they appeared undaunted by the distance and the difficulties it posed. Only the elderly, unable to make the journey on foot, hired ox carts to take them there.

By nature, Ācariya Mun always preferred to live alone quietly. Even the monks living with him were discouraged from bothering him unless absolutely necessary. Consequently, receiving large numbers of well-wishers disagreed with his natural inclination to remain aloof from such tiresome affairs. When sick, he had always been reluctant to allow even his close disciples to take care of him, though he did make certain exceptions. When he did allow it, the monks attending to his personal needs had to be very circumspect in his presence. Only monks deemed trustworthy were selected for these duties. As his health deteriorated, a discerning senior monk was appointed to oversee all arrangements for his health care. Since by nature Ācariya Mun was very thorough and meticulous, this monk had to decide what action was appropriate in each instance and then see that the other monks carefully followed this regimen. For this reason, monks attending on him were carefully chosen to ensure their behavior did not conflict with his subtle temperament.

The lay people and the monks, arriving from various locations around the region with hopes of seeing him to pay their respects, were first asked to wait until an appropriate time could be arranged. When the monk handling these matters felt the time was right, he entered Ācariya Mun's hut to inform him about the visitors. Once permission was granted, the visitors were taken to see him. After Ācariya Mun had spoken to them for awhile, they respectfully took their leave and departed. The monks at Ban Nong Pheu monastery had always arranged visits in this manner for those who came to see him. Visitors were invariably asked to wait until permission was granted; and then, they were escorted to his hut in groups at the time which he had agreed to receive them. The exceptions to this rule were senior disciples, who enjoyed a special, close relationship with him, being *ācariyas* in their own right. Once Ācariya Mun was informed of their arrival and had

given his consent, the *ācariyas* went straight in to converse with him in private.

As the months passed, his condition continued to deteriorate. Although the symptoms never became very severe, he always felt unwell. His illness resembled an armed insurgency gradually escalating into a full scale war, consuming everything in its path, and leaving its victim decimated. His disciples were deeply affected. He occupied a special place at the center of their hearts, so his failing health left them all distraught. Feeling sad, even dejected, they were not so cheerful as before. Every conversation began with the topic of Ācariya Mun's illness and moved on to something else, only to return to his health again as the conversation ended.

Despite failing health, Ācariya Mun did not neglect his teaching obligations. His compassionate concern for his disciples never diminished, though he was no longer able to expound the Dhamma in such detail as before. Having finished his talk, he briefly answered questions and then promptly adjourned the meeting to return to his hut for a rest.

Incredibly though, while sitting there expounding Dhamma to the assembled monks, he showed no signs of his illness. He spoke with characteristic resoluteness in a sharp, lively fashion, his voice booming loudly as if he never had been sick. When he wanted to emphasize a point, the tempo of his voice quickened dramatically to drive the point home. He held nothing back as he spoke. His whole demeanor belied his true condition. Only after he finished speaking did we all realize how exhausted he was. So we quickly adjourned to allow him a chance to rest.

One evening shortly before his illness began, on the occasion of Māgha Pýjā, the full moon day of February 1949, Ācariya Mun began expounding Dhamma to the assembled monks at eight p. m. and did not finish until midnight, speaking for a total of four hours. The power of the Dhamma he delivered that night truly amazed the whole assembly of *dhutanga* monks who were gathered for that occasion. To those listening, the entire universe appeared to have vanished without a trace, replaced in their awareness by the flow of his all-encompassing Dhamma, radiating forth in every direction. He began by paying tribute

to the 1,250 Arahants who had come together spontaneously on this full moon day in the time of the Buddha.

"On this day 1,250 Arahants assembled spontaneously at the Lord Buddha's residence without prior arrangement. They were all individuals of the utmost purity, completely free of *kilesas*. The Lord Buddha himself delivered the *Pãåimokkha* exhortation¹¹ that day, making the occasion a *visuddhi uposatha*; that is, an *uposatha* observed among monks who are all absolutely pure. Compare that assembly with the one gathered here today. You listen to the *Pãåimokkha* being recited among monks who are all absolutely tainted not one of you is completely free of *kilesas*. It is dismaying to think that, having ordained as a monk, each of you is a son of the same Buddha as those Arahant disciples.¹² Yet, in your case it is just an empty claim lacking any real substance; like a person having the name 'Goodman' who, on the contrary, is so weighed down under his own evil doings he can hardly move. In the Buddha's day, monks practiced the Dhamma truly and so became true monks with a true understanding which concealed nothing false. Today, the fame and celebrity of some monks is so great that they rival the sun and the moon, yet their actions sink to the depths of *avici*. Where will they ever find virtue, truth, and purity? They merely accumulate a mass of *kilesas* and create the evil *kamma* that goes with them. Since monks today are not engaged in uprooting the *kilesas* from their hearts, how can *visuddhi uposatha* possibly arise? Once ordained, they are satisfied with their exalted status as Buddhist monks, taking for granted that this makes them models of virtue. But they have no idea what the true virtues of a Buddhist monk really are. If they understood the meaning of the *Pãåimokkha* exhortation that the Lord Buddha delivered, they would know the true nature of virtue. He condensed the essential meaning of virtue into this concise statement: Refrain from all evil, develop goodness and wisdom in abundance, and purify the mind until it is bright and clear. This is the essence of the Buddha's teaching.

"Refraining from evil, what does it mean? Some people refrain from acting in evil ways but still speak in evil ways. Others may not act or speak in evil ways but still like to think in evil ways. They continue to amass evil within themselves from dawn to dusk. Waking up the next morning, they resume _ amassing more evil. So it continues, day in and day out, and they are not interested in reflecting upon their actions. Convinced they are already virtuous people, they wait around expecting

a state of purity to arise from virtue that exists in name only. So they never find a state of purity; instead, they find only defilement and disquiet. This is bound to happen, for anyone intent on looking for trouble is sure to find it. What else would they find? There is no shortage of such things in the conventional world we live in."

This was Ācariya Mun's way of explaining the underlying, natural principles of virtue to practicing monks in the hope that they would gain a profound insight into the Truth. He then went on to explain the way of practice that begins with *samādhi* and wisdom and ends with the ultimate attainment _ absolute freedom. Discussing all areas of practice fully and openly, his exposition that day held nothing back. But, since much of what he said has already been covered in previous talks, I shall not elaborate any further here. The assembly of monks sat perfectly still the entire time he spoke, no one making the slightest sound to interrupt the cadence of his voice as he delivered this eloquent discourse.

As he finished speaking, he made a similar remark to the one he previously made at Wat Chedi Luang monastery in Chiang Mai. He said, in effect, that this talk would be the 'final encore' of his old age _ never would he give another such talk. His words that night were prophetic, because from that day on he never gave another profound and lengthy exposition of Dhamma. One month later his illness began, and his health steadily declined until he finally passed away.

Despite the physical difficulties he suffered as a result of that degenerative disease, he insisted on making the effort to walk to the village for almsround and continued eating only one meal a day from his alms bowl, as he always had. He did not simply abandon these practices. Eventually, when he felt that he could no longer walk the entire distance, he made an effort to walk at least halfway through the village before returning to the monastery. Seeing that so much walking caused him great difficulty, lay supporters and senior monks conferred and decided to invite him to walk only as far as the monastery gate, where offerings of food would be placed in his bowl. Had they requested him to abstain altogether from going on almsround, he would surely have demurred _ so long as he was still physically able, he felt obliged to continue. So everyone had to respect his wishes. They wanted to avoid doing anything that might conflict with his resolute temperament. He continued walking to the front gate for alms until he

became too weak to make it there and back. At that point, he began walking only as far as the refectory to collect alms. Only when he could no longer walk at all did he stop going for alms. Even then, he continued to eat just one meal a day, which he took in his alms bowl. The rest of us had to respect his wishes each time. We were all amazed at the endurance of this noble sage who, refusing to forsake his fighting spirit, conceded nothing to the *kilesas*.

As for the rest of us, we would probably be so dispirited at the very first sign of sickness that someone would have to carry us to the refectory to eat. It is truly disgraceful: the *kilesas* always laughing at us as we lie hopelessly on their chopping block, waiting for them to shred us to pieces like so much raw meat. What a pathetic sight! Here we are full-fledged human beings willingly putting ourselves at the mercy of the *kilesas*. All of us who carry this shame on our conscience should stop and reflect on Ācariya Mun's mode of practice. We can then adopt it to safeguard us in our struggle with these defilements. In that way, we will always remain faithful to our Buddhist principles instead of just being the *kilesas*' whipping boys.

Eventually, Ācariya Mun's condition became so serious that the rest of us felt obliged to undertake certain precautions. We quietly arranged for groups of three or four monks to keep a vigil every night sitting beneath his hut. We arranged this ourselves without informing him, though he may have been intuitively aware of it. We were concerned he might forbid us to do it, reasoning that it was a burden on the monks and thus an unnecessary nuisance. Every night small groups of monks took turns, sitting silently beneath his hut in continuous shifts that lasted until dawn. Each group stayed for several hours until it was replaced by the next. This routine was already well established by the beginning of the rainy season retreat that year. When it became obvious that his illness had become very debilitating, we conferred among ourselves and decided to request his permission for two monks to be allowed to sit in meditation on his verandah. With his consent, two monks were always seated on his verandah from then on, and two more were seated down below. Besides the regular shifts of monks who kept watch on him, others were quietly overseeing the whole arrangement throughout the night.

The end of the rains retreat saw an increasing number of senior disciples begin arriving from their own retreat locations to pay him their respects and help look after his needs. By that time his condition was critical, and becoming more and more unstable by the day. Eventually, he called all his disciples together one day to remind them of the proper way to handle his impending death.

"My illness has now reached its final stage. It is time to think about what will happen when I die preparations must be made in time. As I've told you many times, I am going to die this much is certain. My death is destined to be a major event affecting not only the general public, but animals as well. I want you to know that I do not wish to die here at Ban Nong Pheu. If I die here, it will be necessary to slaughter large numbers of farm animals in order to feed all the people coming to my funeral. I am only one dying person, but the death of this one person will in turn cause the deaths of a great many animals. Crowds of people will travel here to attend my funeral, but there's no market in this village where foodstuffs can be purchased. Since ordaining as a monk I have never for a moment considered doing harm to any animal, to say nothing of killing them. Compassion has always been the foundation of my conscious existence. I am continuously extending the spirit of loving kindness and dedicating the fruits of my merit to all living beings without exception. I do not want to see any animal lose the life it cherishes so dearly. I could never countenance having my own death become a source of enmity between myself and the world's animals.

"I want you to take me to Sakon Nakhon so I can die there. That town has a large marketplace, so my death should not affect the lives of so many animals. I have yet to die, but monks and lay people are already arriving here in a steady stream, their numbers increasing each day clear evidence of the scale of the problem. Now think of how many people will come when I finally do die. Many people will mourn my death, but that is not my concern. I am ready for death whenever and wherever it happens. I have no regrets about parting with my body. Having already investigated it thoroughly, I know that it is merely a combination of elements that have joined together temporarily, only to break apart again and revert back to their original elemental nature. What is there to be attached to? What I am concerned about is safeguarding the local farm animals so they won't have to perish as well. I don't want to see animal carcasses laid out for sale all up and

down the roadsides here. That would be extremely regrettable. Fortunately, it's not too late to remedy the situation. I am asking that you arrange for my departure as soon as possible for the sake of all those animals that would otherwise die as a result of my death. It is my express wish that their lives be protected. Does anyone have anything to say? If so, speak up now."

Not a single person in the group spoke up. A atmosphere of quiet despair pervaded the assembly. As the Buddha said: *yampiccaṃ na labhati tampi dukkhajā*: not getting what one wants is truly a form of *dukkha*. Everyone realized that whether he went to Sakon Nakhon or remained at Ban Nong Pheu, in either case the situation was hopeless he was going to die. So the meeting remained silent. There was just no way to resolve this dilemma. In the end, everyone willingly agreed to his request.

Prior to the meeting, the residents of Ban Nong Pheu village had made it known that they would feel honored to have him die there. "We will manage all the funeral arrangements ourselves. We may be quite poor here but our hearts are rich in faith and respect for Ñcariya Mun. We will do everything we possibly can to arrange the funeral here.

We won't let anyone look down on us saying that the villagers of Ban Nong Pheu couldn't cremate the body of even one *ñcariya* instead, it had to be done elsewhere. We don't want that kind of reputation. Whatever happens, all of us here are ready to offer ourselves to Ñcariya Mun, body and soul. He will remain our cherished refuge until the day he dies. We can't allow anyone to take him away. We will resist to the last breath any attempt to do so."

So when hearing Ñcariya Mun's explanation for being taken away, their disappointment was palpable, but they felt they couldn't object. Although they venerated him so much their sadness and disappointment at hearing his reasons nearly broke their hearts, they were forced to accept his decision. They truly deserve a lot of sympathy. Their willingness to sacrifice everything in their devotion to Ñcariya Mun is a gesture I will always treasure. I'm sure that all of my readers feel the same way.

Many of Ācariya Mun's most senior disciples attended the meeting, aware as he spoke that he must be moved as soon as possible. After he had announced his decision and stated his reasons, and there being no dissenting voices, the monks and laity who were present all agreed to construct a stretcher suitable to carry him on the long journey from Ban Nong Pheu to Sakon Nakhon. The next day, a large crowd of lay supporters and monks brought the stretcher to his hut, awaiting his departure. An immense sorrow overcame everyone that day. They realized they were about to lose somebody whom they so deeply cherished and revered. It was a sorrow so great that local people and monks alike could barely contain their emotions.

After the morning meal was over and everyone awaited in readiness for the journey to start, emotions began to run high in the crowd surrounding his hut as the local people, gathered to see him off, gave vent to their despair one last time. Many monks and novices swelled the crowd; they too felt the strain. The deep sadness depressing their hearts slowly welled up, and tears flowed quietly, dampening their cheeks. At that moment Ācariya Mun appeared, carried by a group of his senior disciples _ a moment of further heightened emotion. As the monks carried him down the steps and placed him on the stretcher, the mixture of affection, respect, and despair that everyone had kept bottled-up inside freely poured out: men, women, monks, and novices were no longer able to hold back their flood of tears. Onlookers wept openly, expressing an unrestrained and deep sense of sorrow. I myself could not avoid getting caught up in the despondent mood pervading that sad occasion, despite the fact that I was accompanying Ācariya Mun when he left. The air filled with sounds of weeping and crying. People called out, begging Ācariya Mun, "Please get better: Don't pass away from this world leaving us forever in unbearable sadness." They were almost inconsolable at that point. In his great compassion, he sympathized with how poor their community was. This they knew; yet they couldn't help but feel terribly miserable watching the cherished treasure over whom they had faithfully kept watch for so many years slip away from them forever. He was departing now, and there was nothing they could do to prevent it.

As Ācariya Mun was carried past, the sounds of their heartfelt laments surged along the path, a tidal wave of grief inundating the hearts of those who lined the route. As he passed by, everything appeared gray

and bleak, as though their lives had suddenly been snuffed out. Even the grasses and trees, though insensible to the unfolding scene before them, appeared to wither up and die in response. As Ācariya Mun left the peaceful shade of the forest sanctuary where he and his disciples had lived so contentedly a place where so many ordinary people had come to find shelter over the years the monastery suddenly felt deserted, even though many monks still remained. Suddenly it no longer had that enormous tree with the thick, broad foliage that had always given so much peace and comfort to all who came to shelter there. The heartrending, anguished cries of those wanting to offer their undying devotion to the *sāsana* was an immensely sad, forlorn sound indeed. They were witnessing the departure of the one man who embodied the high ideals of their unshakable religious faith.

Long after the procession had passed through the village and the sounds of inconsolable grief had faded into the distance, hundreds of monks and lay people continued to walk behind his stretcher, their long, drawn faces mirroring the somber, cheerless spirit of the occasion. Walking along in complete silence like mourners in a funeral procession of a close friend or relative, they did their best to come to terms with the heartbreak. No one spoke a word, but in their hearts they pondered long and deeply on their shattered hopes, the overwhelming feeling being that all was now lost. It seemed then as if we were taking his corpse away to dispose of it, even though he was still very much alive. The realization that all hope was now gone, that he would never return again, had fully sunk in. The more we thought about it, the sadder we became. Yet we couldn't stop thinking about it. We all walked along in a kind of melancholy daze, contemplating thoughts of despair.

I must confess to being shamefully inadequate in this regard the whole journey I thought only of how I was about to lose my one true refuge in life. No longer would there be someone to rely on when questions arose in my practice, as they so often did. The distance from Ban Nong Pheu to the district seat of Phanna Nikhom was approximately fifteen miles; but the long hours of walking passed almost unnoticed. Walking behind him, knowing he was dying, I thought only of how much I was going to miss my teacher. I desperately wanted him to continue living at the time. His final days corresponded to a crucial stage in my own meditation practice, a time when I had many unresolved problems to work out. No matter how much I pondered this predicament, I always

arrived at the same conclusion: my dependence on him would have to be terminated soon. This made the future look bleak.

His condition remained calm and stable throughout the long journey _ he did not display any obvious signs of ill health. In fact, he appeared to be lying fast asleep, though of course he wasn't sleeping at all. Around midday, the procession reached a cool, shady grove of trees. We asked Ācariya Mun's permission to take a short rest for the sake of the large group of people accompanying him. He immediately asked, "Where are we now?" The moment I heard his voice I was caught off guard by a surge of affection and emotional attachment. Why was I so deeply moved by this wonderful, welcome sound? It seemed, suddenly, as though Ācariya Mun was his old self again.

Is this beloved paragon of the three worlds truly going to abandon me, a poor orphan whose heart is about to break? Will his pure heart, whose kind assistance has always helped to breathe life into my spirit, really withdraw from my life and disappear forever? Such were my immediate feelings the moment Ācariya Mun spoke up. Some people may consider this a somewhat crazy reaction. But I have no misgivings _ I willingly admit this kind of craziness. For Ācariya Mun's sake, I was so crazy I would gladly have volunteered to die in his place without the least concern for my own life. Had it been his wish, I would have happily laid down my life no second thoughts. I was prepared at a moment's notice to sacrifice my life for his. But, alas, it was impossible for him to accept any sacrifice I might be willing to offer. The truth is that everyone in the world must inevitably travel the same route: whatever is born must die. There are no exceptions.

The journey to Sakon Nakhon was planned in two stages. The first day we walked as far as Ban Phu monastery in Phanna Nikhom district, where we were to rest for a few days, allowing Ācariya Mun a chance to recuperate before moving on to Sakon Nakhon.¹³ Leaving Ban Nong Pheu at nine o'clock that morning, the procession eventually reached Ban Phu monastery shortly before dark. The journey had taken all day because we followed the more circuitous route, skirting the edge of the mountains, to make it easier for him and the many elderly men and women determined to follow him all the way. Upon arriving, we invited him to rest in a low pavilion where his needs could easily be attended.

It was also a convenient place for monks and lay people to pay him their respects.

Ācariya Mun's sojourn at Ban Phu monastery dragged on for many days, his condition steadily worsening the entire time. Meanwhile, each new day brought visiting crowds of monks and lay people from the surrounding area. Some even came at night. All were eager for a chance to meet him and pay their respects. Though well aware of his illustrious reputation, most of them had never made his acquaintance. They had heard the news that he was certainly a modern-day Arahant who would soon pass away into Nibbāna. It was rumored that those who met him would be blessed with good fortune, while those that didn't would have lived their lives in vain. So they were all anxious to benefit by coming to pay him homage. They did not want to feel they had wasted their birth as human beings.

The very first morning after arriving at Ban Phu, Ācariya Mun demanded to know when he would be taken to Sakon Nakhon. He told his disciples that it was not his intention to die at Ban Phu they must take him on to Sakon Nakhon without further delay. His senior disciples replied that they planned to wait for a short while for him to recuperate, then they would proceed to Sakon Nakhon as he requested. So Ācariya Mun let the matter drop for awhile. The next day he again asked the same question. His senior disciples repeated their reasons and he remained silent, only to bring it up again later. Time and again he demanded to know when they would take him to Sakon Nakhon. He said that, by waiting too long, he would fail to make it in time.

In the end, they asked him to extend his stay at Ban Phu monastery for a full ten days. By the time four or five days had passed, he was pressing them constantly to take him to Sakon Nakhon. Each time, his senior disciples either kept silent or repeated their previous justifications for staying. Repeatedly he pressed them, scolding them for waiting so long.

"Are you going to have me die here?! I've told you from the very beginning _ I am going to die in Sakon Nakhon. My time is almost up. Get me there in a hurry! Don't wait so long!"

During the final three days, his demands to be taken to Sakon Nakhon became increasingly vociferous. During his last night there he flatly refused to lie down and sleep. Instead, he urgently called the monks to his bedside and told them unequivocally that he could not remain alive much longer. He insisted on being taken that very night to be sure of arriving in time. He then had us prop him up, sitting cross-legged in *samādhī* and facing in the direction of Sakon Nakhon. As soon as he withdrew from *samādhī*, he told us to prepare to leave he was waiting no longer. We rushed off to call his senior disciples. They informed him that he would definitely be taken to Sakon Nakhon the next morning. Following this assurance, his sense of urgency lessened somewhat, but he still refused to go to sleep, speaking openly about how he felt:

"My time is almost up, I cannot hang on much longer. It would be better to leave tonight. In that way, I will be sure to arrive in time for that critical moment which is now fast approaching. I have no wish to shoulder the burden of this flaming mass of body elements any longer. I want to discard the body once and for all so that I needn't be concerned with this great pile of pain and suffering ever again. I am literally on the verge of death right now. Don't you monks realize that I could die at any minute? My body is completely useless now. There is no justifiable reason to keep me in this state of physical torment. All of you understand my reasons for going to Sakon Nakhon that's why we came here in the first place. So why do you still insist on delaying my departure? Is this Sakon Nakhon? Why don't you take me there immediately? I want to go right now! What are you waiting for? What use is a corpse? It's not useful for anything, not even for making fish sauce!

"I have already told you: my body has reached its limit it simply cannot last any longer. Isn't anyone here interested in listening to me and doing what I say? I have explicitly stated what I want you to do, still no one seems to listen. If you insist on adopting such an attitude, how will you ever discover the Truth? If here in my presence, while I'm alive, you are so stubborn, refusing to believe what I say, how will you ever manage to be good, reasonable people once I'm dead? I know what I told you to be absolutely true. I have explained the whole situation to you in a carefully considered, reasonable manner. Yet, you stubbornly refuse to

comply. I am beginning to lose hope that any of you will develop the principles of sound judgment needed to uphold the *sāsana*."

Ācariya Mun was very adamant the last night at Ban Phu he absolutely refused to sleep that whole night. I suspect he was afraid that, in his condition, he might never wake up again. At the time none of us there with him could figure out his reason for staying awake all night. Only later did the real reason occur to me.

At seven o'clock the next morning, several trucks from the provincial highway department arrived to escort Ācariya Mun to Sakon Nakhon. Mrs. Num Chuwanon, as head of the escort, invited him to ride in one of the vehicles. He readily agreed and asked only whether there were enough vehicles to carry all of the many monks who were scheduled to accompany him. He was informed that three trucks had come. If these were not sufficient to transport all the monks who wanted to go, a return trip would be made to pick up the rest. Understanding the arrangement, Ācariya Mun remained silent. After the monks had eaten their meal, a doctor injected him with a sedative so that he would not be disturbed by the bumpy ride. In those days, the roads were quite rough _ full of potholes and in generally poor condition. Having received the injection, he was placed on a stretcher and carried out to one of the trucks parked at the edge of the field, there being no road into the monastery. Soon after, he began to fall asleep. The convoy of vehicles then began the trip to Sakon Nakhon, arriving there at exactly noon.

Upon arrival, he was carried down from the truck and placed, still sleeping, in a hut at Wat Suddhawatt monastery. He remained asleep the entire day, not waking until about midnight. Within an hour of his waking those critical symptoms of which he had repeatedly forewarned his seemingly deaf and blind disciples became more and more apparent, as if to say to us all: *Now do you see? This is why I kept insisting that you hurry to bring me to Sakon Nakhon. I want to quickly rid myself of this messy heap of suffering. The symptoms are fully obvious now. If you still don't understand, then take a look. If you still don't believe what I was telling you, then watch carefully and consider with all your heart what you see appearing before you at this moment. Was I telling you the truth or not? Stop being so deaf, blind, and thoughtless from now on. Otherwise, you will never find the wisdom needed to save*

yourselves. What you are witnessing right now should inspire you to think deeply so don't be complacent.

Bhārā have pañcakkhandā: the five *khandhas* are indeed a heavy burden. In the very early hours of the morning he began to take leave of this heavy burden this heap of intense suffering that no truly wise person wants to encounter again in the future. The monastery was absolutely quiet that night. No one milled about to disturb the stillness. Shortly, some important *ācariyas*, like Chao Khun Dhammachedi from Wat Bodhisomphon monastery in Udon Thani, arrived at his hut, having come in great haste as soon as they heard the news. As they entered, they hurriedly sat down in a calm, composed manner, though their hearts were actually troubled by the obvious deterioration in his condition. It was a poignant reminder that he could pass away at any moment. Monks arriving to monitor his condition sat silently in three rows facing him. Important senior disciples, led by Chao Khun Dhammachedi, sat in the front, the more junior monks and novices filling the remaining rows. All sat in complete silence, their eyes fixed on *Ācariya Mun*. Their lower eyelids were moistened by tears they couldn't hold back such was the intensity of their despair. They knew all hope was lost, for nothing at all could be done to change the inevitable. They felt as if their own lives were losing all meaning.

At the beginning, *Ācariya Mun* was lying on his right side in the 'lion's posture'. Fearing this might exhaust him, some monks gently removed the pillow supporting him so that he came to rest lying on his back. As soon as he became aware of this, he tried to shift back to his right side, but he no longer had the strength to move. As he struggled to turn on his side, some senior *ācariyas* attempted to reposition the pillow so that it again supported his back. But noticing how very weak he was, they decided to stop, fearing that it might just make matters worse. Consequently, when *Ācariya Mun* finally passed away he was lying neither on his back nor on his right side, but slightly propped up somewhere in between. It was simply impossible to adjust his posture further under the circumstances. His disciples, mostly monks and novices with a few lay people, sat in total despair as life slowly ebbed from his body. So apprehensive were they about his imminent death, they had almost forgotten to breathe.

As the minutes passed, his breathing gradually became softer and more refined. No one took their eyes off him for it was obvious the end was fast approaching. His breathing continued to grow weaker and weaker until it was barely discernible. A few seconds later it appeared to cease; but it ended so delicately that no one present could determine just when he passed away. His physical appearance revealed nothing abnormal so different from the death of the ordinary person. Despite the fact that all his disciples observed his final moments with unblinking attention, not one of them was able to say with any conviction: "That was precisely the moment when Ācariya Mun finally took leave of this dismal world."

Seeing no apparent signs of life, Chao Khun Dhammachedi rather tentatively said, "I think he's passed away." At the same time he glanced down at his watch it was exactly 2:23 a. m. So that was taken as the time of death. When death had been confirmed, the impact of his passing was reflected in the grief-stricken, tearful faces of all the monks who sat crowded around the lifeless body. There followed an anguished few moments of low coughs and soft, incoherent mutterings before the whole room sank into a mood of silent despair which is beyond the power of words to describe. Our hearts were plunged into unbearable feelings of emptiness; our bodies sitting there appeared to be mere empty shells. Several long moments of stilled silence ensued when the whole world appeared to cease momentarily while Ācariya Mun abandoned his conventional existence and entered into the domain of Ultimate Happiness where no vestige of conventional reality could disturb him ever again.

I myself very nearly died of a broken heart along with him as I sat by his side steeped in pensive sorrow. I could not manage to shake off the gloomy, somber mood that clouded my heart as he departed the world. I could do nothing to alleviate the extreme pain of the loss I felt. 'Living dead' fittingly describes my sense of hopelessness at that moment.

After a period of silence, his senior disciples had the monks neatly rearrange his bedding. They laid out his body there for the time being, with the understanding that next morning they would consult together about making further arrangements. This accomplished, the monks began filing out of his room. Though a few remained on the verandah outside the room, most of them went down below. Even though the

whole area surrounding the hut was illuminated by brightly-lit lanterns, his disciples stumbled around blindly in dejection, unsure where they were going. Appearing somnolent, almost drugged, they wandered aimlessly back and forth. Several monks actually fainted at the time, as though they too were about to expire because life no longer held any meaning for them. The entire monastic community found itself in a chaotic state of confusion late that night; all were inconsolable over the terrible sense of loss they suffered. Monks milled around absent-mindedly, having no clear idea where they were going or why. Such was the power of utter despondency arising from the departure of that shining beacon which so illuminated their lives and brightened their hearts. Suddenly, all sense of comfort and security had evaporated, exposing them to the uncertainty of living on without a reliable refuge. This cold, dark constriction in their hearts left them feeling that nothing substantial remained in the entire universe, nothing they could hold to for support. Failing to consider that beings throughout the universe have always managed to find a source of refuge, at that moment they appeared to face a bleak and uncertain future, as if dire misfortune were engulfing them all. Ācariya Mun had been the one, true refuge. To him they could always confidently entrust themselves, heart and soul, without reservation.

I mean no disregard to the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha, but at that moment they seemed somehow very distant, making it difficult to reestablish them as a viable refuge. They did not appear to project the same affirmative presence that Ācariya Mun did; he was always close at hand and ready to help resolve our doubts and provide us with inspiration. Approaching him with pressing problems that we were unable to solve on our own, these same burning issues invariably dissolved away the moment he offered a solution. This salient recollection, so deeply engraved on my heart, profoundly affected me when he passed away. I could think of no other person capable of helping me solve my problems. Who else could I find with such compassion for me? Who else's advice could I trust? I was afraid of being left alone, depressed, and hopelessly stuck with my own store of ignorance. Gone were the easy solutions I had found while living with him. The more I thought about this dilemma, the more discouraged I became about finding a safe, painless way out on my own. In my ignorance, I saw no way forward at that moment; only misery and

despair stared me in the face. Sitting there in front of his dead body, as though I myself were dead, I could think of no way to save myself and relieve my misery. I sat brooding, a living, breathing ghost, completely oblivious to time or bodily fatigue. This was the first time in my life as a monk that I felt so gloomy, frightened, and confused—and there was no one to help me, no means of extricating myself from this distress. Each time I glanced down at Ācariya Mun's still, lifeless body, tears welled up in my eyes and flowed down my cheeks. I was helpless to stop them. My chest heaved and sobbed as an uncontrollable emotion arose and lodged in my throat, nearly suffocating me.

Eventually I regained enough presence of mind to reflect inwardly, admonishing myself: *Do I really intend to die of a broken heart right now? He died free of concerns and attachments, which are matters of the kilesas. If I were to die now, I would die as a result of my concerns and attachments. That would be harmful to me. Neither my despondency nor my death is of any use to me, or to Ācariya Mun. When he was alive, he never taught us to miss him to the point of death. This kind of longing is the way of worldly people everywhere. Even though my reason for missing him is associated with Dhamma, it is still contaminated by worldly concerns, and thus hardly worthy of a Buddhist monk. Such thoughts are especially inappropriate for someone like me who has set his sights firmly on achieving the highest level of Dhamma. The Lord Buddha stated that whoever practices the Dhamma properly is, in fact, worshipping the Buddha, that whoever realizes the Dhamma, realizes the Buddha as well. It is clear that my longing is not in perfect accord with Dhamma. To be in perfect accord with Dhamma I must practice precisely what Ācariya Mun taught me. This is the correct way for me to show how much I miss him. Should I die while engaged in those harsh training methods that he recommended, I shall feel confident that my death is in harmony with the principles of Dhamma. This is the only sensible way to behave. I must not obstruct my own progress by longing for him in an unreasonable, worldly manner _ I'll only harm myself.*

In this way I regained mindfulness, allowing reason a chance to intervene and forestall the maelstrom raging in my heart at the time. And so I avoided being buried alive in my own futility.

The Funeral

By midmorning, reports of Ācariya Mun's death had spread throughout the adjacent communities; senior monks and government officials of all levels had heard the news. All hurried to the monastery, anxious to pay their last respects to his body. While gathered there, they conferred with Ācariya Mun's senior disciples to reach a consensus on the most suitable way to arrange the funeral. They were determined that it be conducted in a manner reflecting his exalted status as a distinguished *ācariya*, greatly revered nationwide. At the same time, they arranged to have news of his death broadcast over the radio and printed in the newspapers so that his faithful followers would have access to the news wherever they might be.

No sooner had reports of his death begun to circulate than groups of monks and lay devotees began pouring into the monastery from all directions to pay their last respects. From the time his death was announced until the day his body was cremated, a steady flow of visitors came daily to pay their respects. People living close by came and returned home the same day. But those living some distance away had to stay in the monastery overnight transportation being less convenient then, than it is today.

During Ācariya Mun's earlier stay at Ban Phu monastery, the people who came to see him had offered so many gifts of various kinds it was hard to keep track of them all. The amount of gift offerings he received from the faithful was extraordinary a trend which continued until the day of his death. Like rainwater in the monsoon season, donations flowed into the monastery in a continuous stream. In his lifetime he had always been the recipient of much largess, regardless of whether he was staying near a population center or deep in the mountains. Even when staying in the remotest locations, there were invariably generous people willing to make the effort to trek through thick forest so they could offer him something special. By nature, Ācariya Mun was always generous and self-sacrificing: he gave away everything he was offered to assist others. He never thought of keeping things for himself and he never regretted his beneficence. He gave away everything he received, irrespective of what it was or how much it may have cost. In terms of actual poverty, perhaps no monk was poorer than Ācariya Mun. The combined amount of all the donations he received during his life was

prodigious, but the amount he gave away in charity was equally as great, if not greater. Whatever he was given, he very soon passed on to someone in need. Even on occasions when he had nothing to give away, he thought of other ways to be of help, though he did this unobtrusively. His beneficence often provided nearby monasteries with much-needed assistance. As the result of a life of self-sacrifice, even after his death people from all over the region continuously arrived with offerings to place before his body as it lay in state at Wat Suddhawatt monastery.

Prominent senior monks, in consultation with local government officials, decided that it would be best to keep Ācariya Mun's body for several months before proceeding with the cremation. Agreement was reached that the cremation should take place during the period of the waxing moon in January of 1950. With this in mind, they arranged a special casket to hold the body.

At four o'clock that afternoon, a large crowd of laity, monks, and novices came to attend the funeral bathing rites for his body. When this ceremony was completed, his body, still draped in his monk's robes, was wrapped in many layers of white cloth and placed respectfully in the special casket. The casket's entire front panel was made of glass, allowing those coming from afar, who had never before seen him, to view his body. No one was to be disappointed. The community of monks, headed by Chao Khun Dhammachedi, decided to arrange nightly sessions of *sutta* chanting to honor him, accompanied by discourses on Dhamma, which were always well attended.

All the various functions connected with Ācariya Mun's funeral were organized with the generous cooperation of the local populace. From government officials and business leaders down to the general public, all contributions were made in a spirit of geniality. Sincere in their faith, they took these responsibilities very seriously, never losing heart. From the day Ācariya Mun passed away until the time of his cremation, the people of Sakon Nakhon put forth a concerted effort to make life as convenient as possible for the monks and novices gathered there for the occasion. They worked tirelessly, with enthusiasm, to insure that this huge funeral ceremony was an unqualified success, and spared no effort or expense in the process.

In the months leading up to the cremation, hundreds of monks arrived in Sakon Nakhon wishing to pay their final respects. Most then returned home, but over one hundred remained, residing in the monastery to help coordinate all the necessary arrangements. Despite the large influx of monks, local residents never felt discouraged; the faithful were prepared to support them each day with plenty of alms food. The lines of monks receiving food every morning seemed to stretch on forever, but people remained unstinting in their generosity from the first day to the last _ on not a single day was alms food in short supply. Even with the increasing demand, ample food offerings were always graciously provided to support the monks.

I witnessed the enormous sacrifices these people made during that period, so I feel obliged to record for posterity their charitable goodness and amicable cooperation. It made such a deep impression on me _ I shall never forget it. I never imagined I would see so much patience, endurance, and self-sacrifice shown by one group of people. Having experienced this incredible outpouring of generosity firsthand, I want to express my admiration to the people of Sakon Nakhon: they possessed a magnanimous faith that never waned. Their grand hospitality has left me with a warm feeling of gratitude _ an impression that will forever remain in my heart.

One had to sympathize with the monks and novices, staying at the monastery, who helped supervise suitable arrangements for all the people attending the funeral, and with the many lay supporters who toiled so hard, helping with the labor. Well in advance of the cremation date, monks and novices were already arriving in large numbers, while the cremation ceremony was expected to attract a crowd of well over ten thousand people. Several pavilions were constructed to house people, and as many kitchen areas as possible were set up around the grounds to accommodate the large crowd that was expected to attend this important occasion. Begun shortly after Ācariya Mun passed away, these preparations were completed just in time for his cremation.

As the day of the funeral ceremony drew near, monks and lay devotees flooded in from all directions, their numbers swelling until those charged with receiving them were hardly able to cope. The closer it came to cremation day, the greater the multitude of people pouring into the monastery. In the end, no more space could be found to

accommodate the hordes of people who kept arriving. By funeral day, all the huts were full, and the whole extensive tract of forest within the monastery grounds was crowded with monks and novices who had traveled from all over the region. Most of them camped out in the woods, their white umbrella-tents visible everywhere. A total of eight hundred monks and novices were camped out inside of Wat Suddhawatt alone; several hundred more found shelter in nearby monasteries. In all, well over a thousand monks and novices were present at Ācariya Mun's cremation. As for the lay devotees, it was simply impossible to count how many were camped inside the monastery grounds. Over and above that, many more people stayed outside the monastery, sleeping under trees or out in the open fields. Many more slept in town, filling up all the limited hotel space. With the entire multitude finally assembled at the funeral pyre on cremation day, it was impossible to give an accurate reckoning of their total strength. At best, one could estimate that tens of thousands were in attendance that day.

And yet, strangely, amazingly, there was very little of the kind of noise usually associated with such a crowded ceremony. Only the sound of the public address system was heard, broadcasting the religious functions being performed in connection with the cremation. Performed strictly in accordance with *kammaāhāna* tradition, there were no sideshows to entertain the crowd. The quantities of food, cloth, and other items, that were offered by devotees from all over the region to help the monastery with the funeral, amounted to a small mountain of goods. Hundreds of sacks of rice were offered, while the cars of faithful donors continuously brought food of all sorts to help feed everyone. The quantity of merit-making cloth, offered in honor of Ācariya Mun, would probably have filled a weaving factory. I've never seen a weaving factory and I have no idea how big they are, but I am confident that this mountain of cloth brought by faithful followers from all over the country would have exceeded the capacity of any such factory.

I wish to apologize to the reader if this seems an exaggeration. I was somewhat carried away by a sense of pride I felt concerning the offerings of so many generous people. I never imagined that we Thai people could be so generous. But witnessing this wonderful display of munificence personally, I have continued to be amazed by it ever since. Self-sacrifice and bounteous generosity are hallmarks of the Thai people. From a global perspective, Thailand is but a small country, yet

our compassionate tendency to engage in spontaneous acts of charitable giving is second to none. It is a tradition that is entirely appropriate for a country like ours with a Buddhist heritage that teaches us to have compassion for one another. On the whole, we Thais have always been a nation of warm, big-hearted people who tend to shun narrow-minded, stingy attitudes.

Nowhere was this more apparent than at Ācariya Mun's funeral, where faithful donors offered an abundance of items for general consumption. The bounty was truly extraordinary. The sizes of the enormous pots of rice and stew prepared each day were almost frightening. These pots were so big and heavy that several people were required to carry them to the pavilions where the monks gathered to eat. Due to the unusually large number of monks, many different eating places were set up to accommodate them. Most of them ate in large groups thirty to forty monks here, fifty to sixty monks there at locations set aside for that purpose within the grounds. Smaller groups of nine to ten monks ate together in the monks' living quarters. The vast majority of them were *kammaāhāna* monks who ate directly from their alms bowls, so large quantities of dishes and eating utensils were unnecessary, making it much easier to serve so many. Sets of dishes were provided only for the relatively few, prominent administrative monks and those accompanying them.

Once the pots of rice and stew had been offered, monks served themselves in order of seniority, placing rice, stew, and assorted sweets together in their alms bowls. This was normal practice they invariably mixed their food in that way. The religious faith of the general public and the protective power of Ācariya Mun's spiritual greatness combined to ensure that food was always plentiful.

For the duration of the funeral, there were no instances of drinking or drunken behavior, no quarreling or fighting, and no cases of theft were reported. When found, lost articles were handed over to someone in authority who announced them over the loudspeakers. If the item in question was something valuable, the announcer did not describe it. He said merely that a valuable item had been found and urged the owner to come and claim it. Having correctly identified it, the item was returned to him. If the lost article was something common, the announcer simply described what had been found so the owner could then reclaim it. If it

was money, he announced only that some money had been found, but the amount and its container such as a wallet were not mentioned. The owner was required to supply this information as proof of ownership.

The funeral ceremonies preceding the cremation of Ācariya Mun's body lasted a total of four days and three nights. The entire event was remarkable in many respects. To begin with, despite the enormous crowds, there was very little noise; no fights or wild, drunken behavior anywhere in the area, no pickpockets, and no thefts reported. Lost valuables were promptly handed over to the authorities; all monks and novices were calm, quiet, and very well-behaved. In any gathering of such size, it is unusual to meet with even one of these favorable conditions. Having them all combined in a single event was truly remarkable indeed.

Beginning at eight o'clock each night the monks assembled to chant *suttas* in honor of Ācariya Mun. The laity then offered gifts of cloth to the monks, one of whom gave a discourse on Dhamma. Again the next morning after the meal, members of the laity began presenting traditional offerings of merit-making cloth to the monks, offerings which continued with no fixed schedule throughout most of the day. During the four-day period, there were so many faithful devotees, traveling such great distances, hoping to dedicate offerings of cloth, that it would have been impractical to restrict those offerings to scheduled times. The issue was resolved by permitting lay people who wanted to dedicate offerings of cloth to a monk, or a group of monks, to make their dedications as quickly and easily as possible. Those arriving with cloth to offer were advised to contact the announcer and specifying to him how many monks they required. Using the public address system was by far the most convenient method, since it was almost impossible to find a specific monk in such a large crowd in any other way. So if certain devotees wanted to invite a specific monk to come and receive an offering, his name was announced on the public address system. The announcer had a complete list of the names of all the monks in attendance. All visiting monks and novices were required to register their names at the announcer's booth as soon as they arrived, and an announcement to this effect was broadcast on a regular basis. This policy allowed the organizers to make an accurate estimation of the number of monks and novices attending the funeral ceremonies. It

also enabled the announcer to call out their names correctly when required.

Monks walked to the nearby villages, or into town, for alms every morning. The only exception was the day of the cremation itself. On that day, the laity made a special request that the monks collect food in the immediate vicinity of the monastery. The faithful lined up in groups at various places inside and outside the monastery, placing offerings into their bowls as the monks filed past.

The ceremony began on the tenth lunar day of the third lunar month and ended at midnight on the thirteenth lunar day with the cremation of Ācariya Mun's body. The special casket containing Ācariya Mun's body was placed on an ornate funeral pyre, specially constructed for the cremation. Built on the site where the *uposatha* hall presently stands, it was a four-sided wooden structure decorated with intricately carved motifs that skilled craftsman had created for the auspicious occasion. It looked very impressive worthy of such a distinguished *ācariya*. His remains were later collected on the morning of the fourteenth lunar day. Unfortunately, I cannot recall the day of the month according to the international calendar.¹⁴

To the best of my recollection, his body was placed there on the eleventh lunar day. As they prepared to move his body from the pavilion where he lay in state, the monks and the laity held a short service to ask his forgiveness for any past transgressions they might have committed. The casket containing his body was then carried solemnly to the funeral pyre, prompting a dramatic outburst of emotion among his followers as they expressed their grief once more. Watching his body pass by for the last time, the crowd looked on with long, sad faces, tearful expressions occasionally erupting in cries of anguish. It was a chaotic scene, his casket moving slowly through throngs of impassioned supporters, all mourning the loss of an exceptionally noble person who possessed such a boundless ocean of loving kindness. Many in the crowd wept openly as his body passed by. It was all they had left of him _ the last vestige of conventional reality still associated with his presence in the world. He had entered the sublime, pure land of Nibbāna. Never again would he return to physical, bodily existence the domain of tearful lamentations.

His devotees wept one last time with affection and respect for a man whose Dhamma teaching had soothed their hearts and tempered their ignorance. Through his grace, they had gained the presence of mind needed to reflect on the merits of virtue and the failings of evil. Reminded of his great virtue, they longed to keep his body awhile longer as an object of veneration, though they knew this was now impossible. So they asked only that they be allowed this final chance to offer their tears and heartfelt emotions as tokens of their deep appreciation.

Although they may have been unfortunate in many ways, they did have the wonderful good fortune to witness for themselves the final farewell of a supreme sage, sublimely free of all *kilesas* an extremely auspicious event that is rarely ever witnessed. Having transcended *saṃsāra's* abundant misery, he had already reached the Ultimate Happiness of Nibbāna. Even so, they continued to hope that his compassion would be with them in this hour of sorrow a sorrow that made them weep with longing for that noble being of unbounded virtue who was so dear to their hearts. They wondered when they would ever find a way to escape Māra's net and reached the safety of Nibbāna as well. But their time was not yet ripe. All they could do was extol his extraordinary virtue and honor his magnificent achievement with their tears. Such was the overwhelming sentiment of the Buddhist faithful as they mourned the loss of the monk they so revered. Only when his body had finally been placed upon the funeral pyre did they begin to calm down and grow quiet.

At midnight the funeral pyre was lit. In anticipation, such a mass of people had crowded in around the cremation site that no one could move. Packed tightly together, they pushed and pressed against one another trying to get a better look. All had patiently waited late into the night to have one last glimpse of his body a memory to be long cherished by everyone.

Just as the funeral pyre was lit, something unimaginably strange and wonderful occurred. As the first flames began to shoot up, a small cloud appeared in the sky and began to rain ever so gently on the burning pyre. It was the night of the full moon. Bright moonlight was shining over the surrounding area, but the cremation site was suddenly bathed in a fine, misty rain. Softly sprinkling for about fifteen minutes,

the cloud then gradually faded into the clear night sky. You may wonder why I think it so strange. Normally, at that time of year, the sky is completely clear; only the stars and the moon are visible. And so it was that night, until the funeral pyre was lit, when a small cloud floated over, sprinkling a gentle shower on the whole proceeding. I clearly witnessed this amazing event such an extraordinary spectacle I've never forgotten it. Anyone who was there that night will be able to confirm it.

Instead of the usual pile of firewood or charcoal, Ācariya Mun's funeral pyre was made with fragrant sandalwood that ardent devotees had specially ordered from across the Mekong River in Laos. Having acquired a sufficient amount, they mixed it with incense, using this as a pyre to cremate the body. The results were just as satisfactory as those obtained by using plain firewood or charcoal. From the moment the pyre was lit until the cremation of his body had been completed and his remains had been safely collected, the whole affair was supervised by officials from the monastic and lay communities.

At nine o'clock the following morning the bone remains were carefully collected from the ash.¹⁵ Bone relics were distributed to monks representing the various provinces in attendance with the understanding that these relics would be placed in suitable public shrines in their respective locales. Fragments of bone were also handed out to members of the general public, but due to the size of the crowd, there were not nearly enough to go around. As far as I can recall, representatives from over twenty provinces took bone relics back with them that day.

When the collection and distribution of the bone relics were finally completed, something indescribably moving happened that made a profound impression on me. As soon as the officials in charge of collecting the bones had finished their work and left, a scene of total confusion ensued as men and women of all ages rushed in to collect bits and pieces of ash and charcoal to keep as objects of worship. Everybody scrambled to get a bit of this or a piece of that, combing the ground around the funeral pyre for any small memento they could find. In the end, the whole area was spotless as if it had been scrubbed clean. Walking away, each person seemed to be floating on air, smiling, overjoyed beyond words. All clasped some small keepsake in their fists, guarding their treasure jealously, as though afraid someone might try to snatch it away at any moment. Like so many other events

occurring during the course of Ācariya Mun's funeral, it was an extremely moving sight.

Later, as their last act of homage before going home, most people returned one more time to the site of the cremation the final resting place of Ācariya Mun's body. Prostrating themselves three times, they sat quietly on the ground for a few moments in an attitude of deep reflection, expressing their sense of loss with tears and quiet sobs in a way that was heartrending to witness. As I watched those people who felt such profound gratitude for a monk of surpassing virtue, I shared with them the same painful sense of loss. When their moment of quiet reflection was over, they rose and sadly walked away, their faces stained with tears. Other faithful devotees then took their places, solemnly paying their final respects, aware that they had lost the person they so dearly revered. And so it continued for many hours that day it was an incredibly touching scene to watch.

The key factor here is the heart: the heart is the most important thing in the world. People's hearts were the primary force behind all the events I have just described. Tens of thousands of monks and lay people attended the funeral their motivation for going came directly from the heart. Their hearts were instinctively drawn to Ācariya Mun, for his heart was pure Dhamma an attainment so sought-after that it induced good, moral people from all over the country to come to worship him. Although their hearts may not have amassed as much virtue as they would have liked, it was still enough to create in them a tendency toward future rebirth as human beings. This is unlike the hearts of shameless people who seem to be vying for rebirth in hell or the animal world _ types of birth that result in endless suffering. Rebirth in the lower realms of existence effectively debases the heart even further. Eventually, nothing of value is left to hold on to and all hope is lost.

All matters, without exception, converge at the heart: the heart is the driving force churning out the affairs of this world and determining the direction they take. If the heart is inclined toward goodness, everything a person does will bring contentment, both now and in the future. All paths branching off from the main avenue of goodness will invariably provide comfort and security to the virtuous wayfarer. Each rebirth will be a happy, prosperous one where hopes and desires are constantly being fulfilled. One day, that accumulated virtue is bound to lead to the

most cherished goal of all. Witness Ācariya Mun, whose heart was a wellspring of goodness from the beginning stages to the very highest one.

Ācariya Mun has been widely glorified for his attainment of *Parinibbāna*. The word *Parinibbāna* is used solely in connection with someone absolutely free of all *kilesas*. When the average person stops breathing, bringing his physical existence to an end, this condition is known as 'death'. But when the Lord Buddha or an Arahant dies, this is *Parinibbāna*. It is generally presumed that Ācariya Mun's death was also *Parinibbāna*, a conclusion I have no reason to dispute. I gladly yield to the verdict of all those fine people who have given him this prestigious epitaph. For many years I lived with him, listening closely to his every word, and I found nothing contradictory in his way of life or his Dhamma teaching. In truth, his teaching so profoundly impressed me that I am convinced it was *amatadhamma*,¹⁶ emanating from a heart of genuine purity. A heart of such pureness is by no means inherent within human beings. To experience it, one must take the heart of an ordinary human being, then cleanse it until it becomes the pure heart of an Arahant _ there is no other way. This purified heart then remains *ariyacitta ariyadhamma* forever.

Saying that the heart is the most important thing in the world means that the heart is the decisive factor controlling all manifestations of good and all manifestations of evil. The heart is the principal actor, and the one ultimately held accountable for all actions. If people's hearts motivate them to act in evil ways, the entire planet can easily be destroyed as a consequence. Thus, it is essential that our hearts should receive enough proper training and care so that we can safely look after ourselves and the world we live in. Then we will live in comfort, our lives free of undue disturbance; and the world will be a pleasant place to live, without the specter of strife constantly hanging over it.

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