Chapter 1

Early days

The Lao-Thais of Isan[1]Isan

THE NORTHEASTERN REGION OF THAILAND, known as *Isan* by the Thais, is bounded on the north and east by the Mekong river, and on the southis bounded by the thickly-jungled mountains of Northern Cambodia. It forms a square semi-arid plateau rippling here and there with muscle-like bands of low mountains. InUntil the early part of this century Isan wasstill separated from Central Siam by ahuge forest named DongPaya Yen; a forbidding barrier of dense forest, thick with wild beasts and malarial mosquitos. It is not surprising, then, thatmosquitoes. The Thais dwelling in the more benign central plains have tended to look on Isan and its people with fear and some condescension, attitudes that have still not completely disappeared today. To the Thais Isan has often seemed like a kind of semi-tropical Siberia.

Even before the major part of theits original forest was cleared,cover was hacked and burnt away, Isan was never an ideal place.idyllic land. Its soils are for the most part impoverished, if not by sand or stone, then by a choking salinity that often renders ground water too salty to drink and thedrink. The few rivers are navigable for only a few months of each year, hampering communications and isolating villages. The rivers flow in deep gullies which make it toomaking it difficult for farmers to channel water for irrigation, and thus restricting all but a few fortunate areas of Isan to one crop of sticky rice a year. The people have been subsistence farmers by necessity, scraping for a living with patient endurance and humility.Subsistence farming, therefore, has been the people's main occupation, but with very few areas managing to produce more than one crop of ....[3] a year.

Life in Isan has always hinged on the coming of the monsoon, but the torrential rains that follow the drought often wash everything away; floods are disastrously common. The cold season,The three seasons of Isan are as uncongenial as the landscape: the cold season from November through February, is the most comfortable, but there are harsh winds at night;February is the most comfortable but is racked at night by harsh winds; the hot season, from March through June, is numbingly hot, while in the rainy season the humidity can be so thick that you feel yourself almost wading through the air. In some years there is almost no rain at all and in The Isan, then,others there are disastrous floods. Isan is not an easy landin which to live in, but its people are tenacious. They survive – and miraculously, theysomehow flourish.

So who are the people ofthe Isan and where do they come from? The vast majority belong to a branch of the Thai people (scholars prefer the term "Tai") known as Lao. The great migrations of the Thai from Southern China began around the twelfth century, apparently in response to pressure from the invading Mongols. One migration trail, that of the "Siamese", passed down through the Chow Phraya River basin. Another followed the Mekong southwards and established settlements along its banks; these were the Laos. They were not, however, the first inhabitants of Isan: in Ban Cheeang there is archaeological evidence of a sophisticated culture going back thousands of years.

In the first centuries of the Christian era, Isan was settled by both Hindu Khmers from the Chenla empire to the east and the devoutly Theravadan Buddhist Mons of the Dvaravati civilization from the west. Subsequently, Isan formed part of the vast Angkor empire (Hindu during its growth and glory, Mahayana Buddhist during its decline) that dominated Southeast Asia from the eighth until the thirteenth century. The Laos slowly expanded through the region, absorbing features from the cultures that they encountered. Gradually there emerged the Isan culture that survives to this day, permeated with the gentleness and dignity of Theravada Buddhism, spiced with ancient animist traditions and brahmin rituals. It is a culture distinguished by its earthiness and courtesy, piety and love of fun.[1]

The Lao and Siamese Thais are close cousins. Their languages are almost one. They are both gentle, easy-going peoples. They abhor confrontation; the inability to control the expression of one's feelings they find coarse and immature. They admire "a cool heart" – the ability to remain calm and patient under stress. They are polite and diplomatic. The idea of forcing others to adopt the same views or beliefs as oneself is so alien to them that they have neither words for intolerance or its antidote, tolerance. The Thais show little enthusiasm for abstract theories and speculative thought. Their skills are grounded in everyday experience. They are pragmatists with a talent for creative compromise.

Contradictions are not difficult to find: co-existing with an almost obsessive concern with rank and prestige is the Thais' love of independence; together with their deep need for order a penchant for recklesssness; hand-in-hand with a marvellous generosity a sometimes mercenary greed. But of all the paradoxes, perhaps the most intriguing is their abiding attraction to such an apparently austere religion as Theravada Buddhism, for they are an unapologetically sensual people. The Thais and the Laos know how to enjoy the sensual world and (a point that peeved the nineteenth century European missionaries to no small degree) don't feel compelled to pay a penance of guilt for their indulgences. They reserve their greatest respect however for monastics, – those who willingly renounce sensual pleasures for something higher. Immorality may be rife in Thailand, but even today, amorality is rare.

If the people of Isan have differed from the Siamese it is in a more pronounced resilience.

[1] Making general statements about a group of many millions of people is

They are often patronised for their simplicity and stubbornness (one Western observer has caricatured them as a mixture of the hobbit and the hillbilly), but it is this constancy of heart that is their greatest strength. By any of the contemporary secular standards – GNP, political power, technological imperial, communal, capital, material -innovation, vibrant art and so on – Isan is an insignificant backwater, its people unremarkable. But from a Buddhist viewpoint, it would not be too fanciful to consider Isan a superpower. Throughout the twentieth century in particular, Isan has been an abiding stronghold of Buddhism at a time when all through Asia, other darker "isms" – imperial, communal, capital, material – have been wreaking havoc. The vast majority of Thailand's 350,000 monastics are from Isan. Most significantly, almost every one of the Thai monks of the modern age believed to have realizedrealized enlightenment, was born in the peasant farming villages of the Northeast,northeast, many of them in the "province of sages", Ubon.
... [1], Ubon.

Ubon
Ubon

Ubon was established in 1778 after an extended and difficult period ofThe history of Ubon began in 1778 with the conclusion of a traumatic migration. Some years previously, the noble Vientiane family of Jow Phra Dta and Jow Phra Lor families, together with theirits large retinue, had fled from the spite of the King of Vientiane, only to be attacked by his forces wherever they settled. DuringFinally, in desperation, during a siege of their latest encampment, a small group of horsemen had broken through the encircling forces late one night and rode westto Siam for assistance. The King of Siam was sympathetic towards them. Following the recovery of the capital, Ayudhya, which was devasted by the Burmese, the King of SiamHis renascent state was rapidly recovering from the devastation of its capital Ayudhya by the Burmese, and he was keen to extend hisits power. The Siamese expeditionary army sent to help the supplicants easily defeatedrouted the Vientiane forces and the Laowith ease and went on to sack their city. Now the migrants, survivors of a long flight, pledged allegiance to the King ofSiammigrants, survivors of a long flight and years of protracted strife, established a permanent settlement on the northern bank of the River Moon. They named the placeMoon, some fifty miles west of its confluence with the great Mekong. They called their new home Ubon, after the white *uppala* lotus that rises from the mud of the river bed and, unblemished from the mud, and pledged allegiance to the King of Siam, their saviour and patron. But before all else, as migrating Thai peoples had done for hundreds of years before them, they built a monastery for the Buddhist monks whothat had accompanied them during their years of protracted strife.

By the beginningearly years of the twentieth century, Ubon had becomecentury Ubon was the centre of a province including hundreds of villages and extending over

thousands of square miles. During the preceding century Siam had become surrounded by voracious colonial powers: Britain to the south and west and France, ominously, to the east. The old Siamese system of government, whereby outlying vassal states enjoyed miles wide, comprising hundreds of villages. Colonial powers surrounded Siam; Britain (to the south and west) and France (to the east) andvirtual autonomy, was now untenable. Consequent to these changes, Ubon was integrated into the modern nation-state being forged by King Chulalongkorn. It is unlikely, however, thatChulalongkorn to meet the foreign threat, and came to be ruled from Bangkok. It is, however, unlikely that more than a very few of the inhabitants of Ubon would have considered themselves to bepart of anything as abstract aspart of a nation. For most people, the village was their reality and their local monastery wasits independence and prosperity the source of their self-respect. These peoples' overriding concern was the daily struggle to feed their families, and the only institution theytrusted.

It was in one such small village, Ban Gor -identified with or trusted was the local monastery. It was in Ban Gor, a small village a few hours walk to the South of Ubon town -south of Ubon town, that one of the greatest monks of the modern era was born, and born. It was close to his village of Ban Gor that he later establishedclose to which he would go on to establish a forest monastery which was to become known world-wide. The Thai King bestowed upon himthat was to attain a world-wide reputation. In 1975 he received from the king, the honorary title of Tan Jow KininKhun Pra Bodhinyana Thera,in 1975, but he is known in the Western world as Ajan Cha, familiarly in Thailand as Luang Por Cha [Reverend Father Cha]Ajan Cha[Reverend Father] Cha, and to his disciples simply as, Luang Por.as simply "Ajan Cha".

Cha Chooangchote

Luang PorAjan Cha was born on the seventh waning day of the seventhwaning moon of the Year of the Horse, 1918. He was the fifth of eleven children born to Mah and PunPim Chooangchote, who, like the vast majority of their generation, were subsistence rice farmers. The name Cha means clever, capable, resourceful.

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

roasted". In his first months after weaning, Luang Por'sAjan Cha's mother would have fed him by chewing and masticating sticky rice in her own mouth first and then gently

spooning it into his.

HeAjan Cha was born into an affectionate and respected household, one of the wealthier families in a closely-knit community. The Isan villages of those days, isolated by forests and vulnerable to the vagaries of the weather and the caprice of spirits, put great valuestore onthe concept of sharing,of generosity andof harmony. The model wasthat of an extended family, and this is it was, more or less, as a result ofover the years marriages between inhabitants of a the village over the years.village tended to make it one in fact. Houses were made of wood, roofed with grass thatch,thatch and raised on stilts as protection from floods and wild animals andanimals. They were placed close together with no fixed boundaries between them. Daily lifeLife was conducted on thea large open space upstairs, with roomsinside the house used only for sleeping. People not only heard their neighbours'neighbours' family dramas, they could see them as well. This is how things were in a place whereBut there was no concept of privacy, much less a desire for it. The villagers subscribed to respect for monks, elders and spirits, consideration for the feelings of others and a sense of shame; they relished laughter and conversation. Luang PorAjan Cha grew up with a strong sense of community and place, and 'the"the gift of the gab'.gab".

The adjective that was often used to describe Luang PorAjan Cha in his old age – ebullient – is the one that comes most readily to mind when picturing him as a child. He was a chunky exuberentexuberant young lad and yet, at the same time, keen and perceptive – nobody'snobody's fool. He was full of fun and vigour, with the sunny, buoyant disposition so common to the Laos, but even then he showed a glint of steel in his ways. He was both a talker and a doer, the natural leader of his group of friends, the one whom everyone wanted to be close to and without whom all games and adventures seemed dull. Luang PorAjan Cha bore the round face and flat 'lions nose'"lion's nose" common to his race. More distinctively, his mouth was unusually wide and compelling – as if destined one day to have memorable things to say – while in charming contrast to the powerful symmetry of his face, thehis right ear was larger than the left. His childhood friends remember Luang Por'sAjan Cha's mildness. They say he never enforced his dominance with bullying or coercion; no-one can recall him in a fight. He was a mediator in his companions'companions' disputes and, from an early age, was drawn by the yellow robe.

He relates a childhood memory of playing the role of a monk. He would sit sternly on an old bamboo bed with *a pakaoumah*[1]*pakaoumah* draped over his left shoulder like a robe, and his friends would play the parts of the laity. The meal time is probably the only event m the monks'in the monks' daily life that is interesting enough to lend itself to drama and it was that which the children would enact. Luang PorAjan Cha would ring a bell and his friends would bring a tray of fruit and cool water. After bowing three times they would

offer it to him meekly. He in return would give them the five precepts of the Buddhist layperson and a blessing.

Interesting to note that theThe word *ngahn* means festival, ceremony or fair; and it also means work. Traditionally, the Thais have made no hard and fast distinction between work and play. They seem to be able to find enjoyment in almost anywhatever task they are faced with and this wonderful gift mainfestsmanifests early on. Village children have to take responsibility at an early age: in the fields, in the house and in raising younger siblings. For the most part, they have fun. The search for food is a necessity that becomes a game. Non-violence to animals is one of the Buddhist teachings that has never taken deep roots amongst the people of the Isan. Life is a struggle and they have usually been willing to eat anything that did not eat them, or in the words of more cynical observers, anything that moves.

Picture the scene: It is the Hot Season and Luang Por,Ajan Cha the young boy, is riding a water buffalo out to pasture in the mornings, scrambling for grasshoppers between the low bushes of the grazing fields and then, tired, laying on his back in the shade of a mango tree to escape the tremendousstifling heat, singing snatches of popular songs, munching lazily on a mango, dozing. The Rainy Season: naked, wading, shouting, he is in a wildboisterous group of young lads, lithe and sun-brown, catchinggrabbing at the crickets as they flee their inundated holes; or, he is chasing after the frogs and toads in the flooded fields, soaked by the rain so fresh and strong and joyful he just wants to sing or roar at the top of his voice. It is the Cold Season and he is climbing up trees grasping a long stick, ends smeared with stickyviscous jack-fruit sap to catchsap, and touching on their backs the cicadas congregating on the cool windblown branches, putting them in a lidded basket to take home for dinner, keeping just one or two for blasting the eardrum of a friend.

Monastery child

School was not as yet a major intrusion on childrens' right to fun. By the 1920's,1920's, some thirty years after its inception, a State education system had still made few inroads into rural Isan.School was not a major intrusion on children's right to fun. During Luang Por'sAjan Cha's childhood three years of primary education were available, but they were not compulsory and few parents saw their worth.Luang Por,Ajan Cha, by the age of nine, had completed a single year. year.

Education of the young had traditionally been one of the major functions of the village monastery. Apart from the fact that fifty percent of children – the girls – were excluded, results were impressive. Foreign observers had often expressed surprise at the high standard of literacy amongst Thai men (at the same time, interestingly enough, as praising what they saw as the superior shrewdness and industry of the women). The

boys would help out with the monastery chores and through daily personal contact with the monks and participating in the life of the *wat*, received an education with a strong moral and spiritual foundation. It was a system that forged strong links between the monastery and the village and it has been argued that the loss of this educational role to the State was a body blow to the rural Sangha'sSangha's sense of purpose from which it has never fully recovered.

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

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

On another occasion, in a more humorous vein, Luang PorAjan Cha told some lay disciples that he had become a *dekwat* (monastery child) because he was tired of watering the family tobacco fields and because the humdrum daily round of chores was so tedious and repetitive:

> "I was just a small, little child, *I'd*I'd never smoked tobacco in my life. But even so, first thing in the morning, as soon as *1*I got up, I was driven off to the fields to water tobacco plants, hundreds of them! It was infuriating."

As one of Luang Por'sAjan Cha's sisters remembers it, a small accident brought things to a head.

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

Not the most auspicious way of announcing a vocation one might think, but Lung Por was in good company.think. But Ajan Cha was in good company. The story is told of Ven. Anuruddha, a relation of the Buddha and one of the great *arahant* disciples, that as a child in the palace he had been greatly spoiled, (it is said that he had led such a sheltered life that he thought rice grew on a plate). When Mahanāma his brother first urged plate. When Mahanama, his brother, first urged AnnruddhaAnuruddha to go with him and request admission into the monkhood from the Buddha, Anuruddha refused, fearful of the hardships involved. It was only after MahanamaMahanāma had told him that if he stayed, he would have to take over the family affairs and explained all the work it entailed that Anuruddha reconsidered.

A few days after the mallet blow, Luang Por'sAjan Cha's parents took him to the village monastery. Wat Ban Gor was situated in a large sandy enclosure, shaded by coconut palms, mango trees and tamarinds, and consisted of a *sālā* or main meeting and sermon hall, a *viharavihāra* or monks residence and a *simanam* or water-ringed ceremonial hall. Por Mah and Maa Pim entrusted their son to the abbot with a predictable mixture of sadness and pride - and Luang Por was now a *dekwat* [monastery child].– and Ajan Cha was now a dekwat. But this was not the beginning of a long and painful separation from his parents: Luang PorAjan Cha had by no means withdrawn into a pinched and cloistered realm. The boundaries between the monastery and. the surrounding world were marked not by imposing walls, butby a rather half-hearted bamboo fence. Indeed the monastery was the central focus of the communal life of the village, rather than a symbol of its rejection. In a sense he had entered the world, rather than left it.

Monasteries in a nutshell

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

As Buddhism spread throughout India, the number of monks choosing to follow a more academic vocation was swelled by elderly monks and those too poor in health to live in the deep forest. At the same time, lay Buddhists had a desirewere desiring to feel the presence of the Sangha more tangibly in their midst. The forest monks were revered for their piety but they seemed too remote. The village and town-dwellers wanted monks nearby as an example and guide in their daily life, and also they wanted them to play a more prominent role in traditional ceremonies and in the community social life. Over the course of time the urban monks assumed an active and increasingly secular role that drifted from the original ideal of the *bhikkhu* but was indispensable in the creation of a society that conceived itself as Buddhist.

In the mid-thirteenth century, the town of Sukhothai, formerly one of the northern outposts of the Angkor empire, became the site of the first independent Thai kingdom. To the dynamic and conquering Thais, the ancient Mon Theravadan Buddhist tradition in Sukhothai must have appeared to be something very noble that had lost its sense of direction; compromised rather than enriched by its encounter with other traditions. Thus, King Ramkhamhaeng turned to the lineage of forest monks introduced into Southern Thailand from Sri Lanka[1] to re-vitalize the spiritual life of his kingdom. These monks were proficient in both the Pāli scriptures and the traditional meditation practices. They possessed the purity, integrity and freshness on which the religious life of a new self-confident Buddhist nation could be surely founded. The king built a monastery for them on one of the hills overlooking the city from the west and every Lunar Observance day he would ride out on his white elephant, head of a large and magnificent procession, to take the Precepts and listen to a sermon. Through the support of the King and his court the ideal of the forest monk was exalted.

However, over the centuries, with the decline of Sukhothai and the growth and expansion of Siamese power further south in Ayudhya, it was the monasteries of the towns and villages that came to dominate the country. As the Sangha's role in society broadened and became more entrenched, so at the same time did it become increasingly institutionalized. Given the immense prestige of the Sangha, it was inevitable that the king should seek to control it. A system of administration was established in which those exerting power were chosen by the king. A monastic life became a viable career as well as a vocation. Power, wealth, rank and fame were now available to the career monk and periods of corruption in the Sangha alternated with bursts of reform. During this period temporary spells in the monkhood came to be expected of every young man and it was understandable that the majority of these short-term monks would prefer to stay in a more comfortable monastery close to home than in a distant and austere forest, prey to spirits, wild animals and fevers. All such developments tended to marginalize the peripatetic forest monks. From their former pre-eminence the forest Sangha became an insignificant force, mistrusted by the authorities, feared and mythologized by the villagers, known for their purported psychic powers rather than their devotion to the Buddha's system of mind training. At the same time, the village monasteries became an intrinsic part of people's lives. The local monastery gave the village its identity, an affiliation with the unseen powers of the universe, a sense of continuity through change.

Few of the images that the word "monastery" is likely to evoke in a secular Western mind would agree with the reality of a village wat in rural Thailand. Wat Ban Gor, where Ajan Cha had gone to live, might be the abode of monks but it was considered the property of all. The path in front of the main hall was a public thoroughfare and the monastery well was used by all the nearby houses. Important public meetings took place in the monastery hall, which also acted as a hostel for travelers and was thus the centre

for the reception and dissemination of news about other areas. The monastery played a central role in the social life of the village. It was the site for the important festivals that punctuated the hard struggles of the year. With daily entertainments almost non-existent everyone looked to the lively *ngahn wat* or monastery fairs for excitement and fun. Some of the fairs were of specifically Buddhist significance (e.g. those marking the advent and end of the Rains retreat, the anniversary of the Buddha's birth, enlightenment and death); others like the Rocket Festival were of a more earthy animist character presided over by the monks and sandwiched by offerings of alms to them. But whatever the occasion, no ngahn would be complete without the entertainments staged in the monastery grounds: performance by *morlam* minstrels, stalls of special sweetmeats and noodles, shadow plays, boxing matches and fireworks. It was a time when the usually strict constraints of Isan village society were temporarily slackened, alcohol was recklessly consumed and the young men and women, dressed in their best, could preen themselves and flirt. Fun was the order of the day and the monastery its context and frame.

As for the monks, they were not an hereditary elite. In Thai Buddhism temporary ordination has long been the norm and constitutes a rite of passage for young men. It has thus always been easy to enter the monastic life and there is no stigma involved in leaving. On disrobing one is referred to as *Thit*, a respectful title derived from the Sanskrit "pandit" or sage. Indeed a man who has never been a monk would have difficulty finding a wife. Young women would shy away from him as a "*kon dip*" literally an unripe i.e. immature person. Customarily the young men in a village would become monks after finishing their military service, mostly for the three month rains retreat, but sometimes for as long as two or three years. The result was a fluid monastic community in which serious and dedicated students rubbed shoulders with restless time-servers. One of the great merits of the system was that with every family having members who were or had been monks, the close bond between village and monastery was constantly renewed.

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

But of course, ideally at least, it was the monastery'smonastery's religious role that was paramount. Primarily the monks were expected to be, as far as possible, the embodiment of the Buddha'sBuddha's teachings and to inspire, by word and deed, moral and spiritual values. They were also called upon to perform traditional rituals and ceremonies. They

would be invited to local houses to chant blessings and sprinkle lustral water during marriages, house-warming parties, times of sickness or ill luck. At the death of a villager they would chant the rather abstract and philosophical *Matika* verses, traditionally believed to be the teachings the Buddha gave to his mother in Tusita heaven, following her death.
death.

Perhaps most significantly, the monastery was the centre for the making of merit. The concept of merit will be treated in detail later in this textbook but for the present it may suffice to say that it refers to goodness as a force for present and future happiness. A wise person makes merit through acts of charity, a moral life and the cultivation of peace and wisdom. As a result he or she leads a succeessful and contented life and after death is reborn in a happy realm. Offerings of food and material support for the monastery have always been the most basic and popular form of merit-making. Although, individual monks might not always be especially inspiring to the laity, they have been considered ennobled and empowered by the yellow robe they wear and thus able to act as "fields of 'fields of merit'.merit". With accumulation of merit rather than material wealth seen to be the most important factor affecting peoples'peoples' present and future well-being, it is easy to see why monasteries have continued to command such a central role in village life.

The abbot was usually the most powerful and respected figure in the village, combining the prestige of age, position and wisdom. Very little went on in the village without his knowledge and nothing significant without his approval. People would go to consult him on every subject, from family conflicts to the buying of land. There is an account of the abbot of an Isan village monastery in Kampoon Boontavee's wonderfully evocative novel "Child of the Northeast". The young boy Koon goes to the monastery for the first time with his father to see the old abbot, Luang Por Ken, of whom he is mortally afraid. They arrive as the emaciated, black-toothed monk is speaking to a group of women – his robes "tattered and dark with age, the folded cloth that lay across one shoulder looking like the strip of cloth tied about the trunk of the ancient bo tree in the monastery yard." The women have brought their sick children to be blessed.

> "He bent forward again and blew once more on the head of the baby with the swollen face. Then he dipped his forefinger into a small pot of something black. Five or six women held their children up, and he gently touched their tongues with his blackened finger. He cleaned his finger, leaned back against his cushion, and spoke again in his deep rumbling voice.
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> "You people come to me for everything. For mumps!" He shook his head slowly. "Everybody who wants to become a monk comes to me, that I can understand. But also, everybody whose baby is sick, everybody who is building a

> new house, everybody who wants to get married. Everyone who wants to name a child, or who has the red eye disease, they all come to me. You people should think: *if I* die, then who is going to look after all these things? This year, *I* will be eighty-five years *old*." He was silent again for a moment, looking at the babies, then laughed quietly to himself, "Oh well, oh well."

Luang PorAjan Cha spent four years as a dekwat. During that time, he learned to read and write, helped with the sweeping and cleaning of the monastery, served the monks and gradually absorbed, if not their intellectual nutrition, then at least the ambience and flavour of the basic Buddhist teachings. His duties were not onerous and there was plenty of time for play with his fellow dekwat, of whom there was a constant supply. It was the custom, for rough lads to be sent to the monastery by their weary parents for urgent moral reform; orphans, if no relation could take them, could always find a refuge with the monks. Apart from accepting boys for religious reasons the monastery was also the local social welfare centre.

In the Monks' Discipline it is laid down that an aspirant must be twenty years of age before he can become a monk, but that a boy old enough "to"to scare crows"crows" can become a novice. Luang Por became a novice and took the 'going forth'Ajan Cha took the novice "going forth" vows in March 1931. He was thirteen and could have driven off a raiding hawk. As a*nen,* Luang Por's*nen* Ajan Cha's sturdy frame and bulging belly together with his resonant voice earned him the nickname of "Eung""Eung" or Bullfrog. Life carried on in almost the same relaxed fashion although wearing the robe conferred a higher status and increased expectations; at least in front of the laity a restrained demeanour was felt to be proper. Ajan Cha would spend time every day walking up and down in the shade, memorizing the various Pali[1]Pāli[2] chants: the daily service, meal blessings, auspicious verses chanted at house warming parties and marriages, and the more sombre funeral chants:

Adhuvam jivitam, dhuvam maranam, avassam me maritabbam
Life is uncertain; death is certain; I too will die

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

Back to the world

During his novice years Ajan Cha's teacher and mentor was a monk called Ajan Lung. In accordance with the reciprocal relationship laid down in the ancient texts, Ajan Lung oversaw Ajan Cha's studies and Ajan Cha in return acted as his personal attendant. Every

[2] The ancient Indian language in which the Theravadan Buddhist teachings were recorded.

now and then in the evenings, Ajan Lung would kindly accompany Luang PorAjan Cha on visits to his family -family – it would have been forbidden for a novice to go alone -– and indeedAjan Lung seemed to enjoy these excursions even more than Luang Por,Ajan Cha, exuding a confidence and charm amongst Luang Por'sAjan Cha's family that the young novice found a little eccentric. At Ajan Lung'sLung's instigation the visits became steadily more frequent and protracted, and sometimes it would be late at night before the two of them walked back to the monastery, accompanied by the barkingbarks of the village dogs, their footsteps disturbed. One day Ajan Lung confided in Luang PorAjan Cha that he had decided to disrobe and suggested that his protege might do likewise. A confused Lung PorAjan Cha agreed. He had been living in the wat for seven years and at the dangerous and wobbly age of sixteen, a small push was enough. The reason for Ajan Lung's discontent with the monastic life soon became clear. Some days after the joint disrobing, Luang Por'sAjan Cha's parents were visited by elder relatives of ex-Ajan Lung to discuss a marriage proposal. The ardent admirer of Luang Por's sister Bait,Ajan Cha's sister Sah, assured of her affections, was free at last to declare his love.

Lung PorAjan Cha went to work in the family fields. Inevitably, the novelty soon wore off and though he applied himself to his work with a gusto that drew much praise from his elders, he bore quietly within himself a sense of something lost and unfulfilled. It was not an overpowering emotion – he was a buoyant, vigorous young man – more like an unobtrusive shadow which he could only try to ignore. For the moment Lung PorAjan Cha was content to divert himself in the usual ways. Together with his best friend Put he would walk to neighbouring villages to flirt with young ladies at monastery fairs. fairs.

By that time Luang Por'sAjan Cha's remarkable endurance was already beginning to manifest itself – if only in rather mundane matters. He and his friends might walk as much as fifteen kilometres to a ngahn and then late at night walk back. Some of the young men in their group, a little the worse for drink, might want to stop and sleep under a tree somewhere on the way, but Luang Por,Ajan Cha, his old companions still remember well (it must have rankled), would always insist on walking the whole way home. He was however not without his weak points. Confident and self-assured as he seemed, Luang PorAjan Cha had a deep fear of ghosts. Sometimes, finding himself alone in a desolate place,, spirits frightened him so much that in the characteristically earthy Thai idiom, *kee hot dtot hay* – his faeces compacted and farts failed. He could work all day and then walk all night if he chose to, but not through a spirit-thick forest alone. Luang Por'sAjan Cha's home was separated from Put'sPut's by such a stretch of haunted forest. If they got home late at night, Luang PorAjan Cha would sleep at his friend'sfriend's house rather than go on alone.

When Luang PorAjan Cha finally fell in love it was with a girl from his own village. Her name was Jai, the step-sister of his companion Put. The girl'sgirl's parents were

pleased with the prospective match: Luang PorAjan Cha was a friend of the family, good-natured, hard-working and honest, and perhaps more importantly, his family was wealthy enough to offer a good 'bride price.'"bride price". In those days it was taboo for young lovers to be alone together. Theytogether; the custom dictated that they would meet at the girl'sgirl's house, upstairs on the porch in the evening, where she would be sitting demurely, spinning wool. Luang PorAjan Cha began to spend more and more of his evenings at Put'sPut's house. Relations between young men and women were strictly overseen by elders. Lovers, forbidden to touch, were quick to learn the nuances of the verbal caress. In Isan village life, banter between young men and women was inventive and the ability to extemporize much admired. The men would swagger and flatter and ardently woo in the I-'I can'tcan't-live-without-you' style,you style while the girls would play shy and hard to get, or else wittily insult their suitor'ssuitor's manhood; 'the"the loudmouthed swain is holding a limp kite in a windless sky'sky" was just one of the well-known jibes gleefully repeated. But witty repartee soon loses its charm when genuine feelings are engaged and late at night Luang PorAjan Cha and Jai would like to sit out in the starry coolness talking quietly, with Jai'sJai's parents asleep – or were they? – in their mosquito net a few feet away.

away.

The plan hatched on one such night was that they would marry as soon as Cha had completed his National Service and spent a rains retreat as a monk to make merit for his parents in the time-honoured way. At that time Cha was nineteen years old and Jai seventeen. It would be another four years before they could even expect to hold hands.

One day that year as the rainy season approached and every household was busy preparing ploughs, rakes, hoes, yokes, fish traps and machetes for the upcoming work in the paddy fields, Luang PorAjan Cha had just taken out a load of tools to the family'sfamily's small hut raised on stilts in the middle of their fields. We may imagine a muggy, overcast, oppressively humid day and a stocky young man with an unusually wide mouth, bare-chested, his pakaoumah around his loins, sitting on the uncomfortable wooden seat of an ox-cart as it jolts along a rutted lane. He is about to receive devastating news. Luang PorAjan Cha related the story himself many years later:

> "*When 1*When I was eighteen I liked a girl. She liked me too and, as these things go, after some time of liking her I fell deeply in love. I wanted to marry her. *1*I daydreamed about having her by my side helping me out in the fields, making a living together. Then one day on my way home from work I met my best friend, Put, on the road. He *sad 'Cha, I'm*said "Cha, I'm taking the *lady'*.lady." When I heard those words I went completely numb. I was in a state of shock for hours afterwards. I remembered the prediction of an astrologer that I would have no wife but many children. At that time *1*I wondered how it could be possible."

Simply, and with the unquestioned prerogative that parents of his age and culture

possessed Put'spossessed, Put's father and his wife had decided that their two stepchildren should marry; there was no more to be said. The reasons were pragmatic, economic. If Put married Jai, the family would be saved a bride price they could ill afford. They had just acquired land some distance from the village that should not be left fallow. The young couple could move out there and farm it together.

Luang PorAjan Cha, despite the coming of the rains, must have felt his life suddenly come to a standstill.beached in a dry and desolate land. But other than trying to reconcile himself to the situation, what could he do? It made no sense to be angry with Put. His friend had not plotted behind his back and was painfully embarrassed by the whole affair. But this disappointment was a profound one, a sharp and hurtful lesson in the uncertainties that bedevil human affairs. Where should you, where could you, place your trust?

Luang PorAjan Cha maintained a life-longhis friendship with Put butand indeed it was to last for the rest of Ajan Cha's life. But with Jai he had to be more circumspect;circumspect: his feelings could not be denied by an act of will. If heEven after becoming a monk, if Ajan Cha saw her in the monastery, he would have to do his upmost to avoid a meeting. Luang Pormeeting that might stir up painful emotions. Ajan Cha admitted that for the first seven years of his monkhood it was impossible tolet go of these recurring thoughts; the samecompletely let go of his thoughts of Jai. Perhaps after all, by some miracle, she became free – the same tantalizing scenarios periodically recurred in his mind, the same facile happy endings. In such a case, could heCould he then in such a case remain in the robes? He didn't know. The fantasies faded only after he had left thosedidn't know. It was only when he finally left his familiar surroundings and, through meditation practice, gained a method of stilling his thoughts and seeing them in perspective. Asperspective, that the fantasies faded. In later years as abbot of Wat Nong Pa Pong, describing to the monks the drawbacks of sensual desire, he would often talk of the debt of gratitude he owed to Put: "If he hadn't"If he hadn't married Maa Jai then I probably wouldn't be here today,"wouldn't be here today," he would say. Perhaps. At the same time one can'tcan't help but assume that if there had not been this particular obstacle to a conventional married life another would surely have emerged. He says:

> "I was fed up. I *didn't*didn't want to live with my parents. The more I thought about it, the more fed up I became. I just wanted to go off by myself the whole time – but to where I *didn't*didn't know. I felt like that for a number of years. I was fed up, but not with anything in particular. I just wanted to go somewhere and be alone. These were the feelings I had before I became a monk. I *wasn't*wasn't fully conscious of them but they were there all the same, all of the time."

Luang PorAjan Cha only ever mentioned two othermore incidents occurring in his relations with the opposite sex. In the first, an ex-monk with whom Luang PorAjan Cha

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

What is to be made of Luang Por'sAjan Cha's behaviour on this occasion? In later years he was to admit that sexual desire was the one defilement which he had great difficulty in overcoming. Here, in a situation that forms the stuff of adolescent fantasy, unbound by vows of celibacy, he is restrained. Perhaps it was fear, or lack of physical attraction. More likely, in view of his later struggles, Luang Por'sAjan Cha's sense of propriety and his respect for a dead friend overcame desire.

ForFor many generations of young Thai men, a visit to the local brothel constituted a normal part of an evening on the town. It was quite natural then that Ajan Cha's second and final close encounter with a woman should occur in such a place. Shortly before becoming a monk his fellow postulants invited him to join them on a clandestine expedition. Prior to renouncing the pleasures of the flesh, they said, he should first at least know what they were. As the group of friends approached their destination in the backstreets of Warin, guided by the characteristictell-tale green light outside it, Ajan Cha's heart was beating loudly. But once alone in a small room with his chosen partner he was ambushed by an unforeseen emotion. Through the thick powder on the lady's face, evidencethe woman's face he became aware of the ravages of acne. An uncontrollable disgust arose within him. and he got up abruptly. TheAjan Cha got up abruptly and, the next thing he knew, hewas standing at a street-side foodstall with a bowl of noodles in his hand. If it was a debacle then it was one which most aptly, and rather comically, foreshadowed the struggles of the next few years. As a young village monk the only desire that could match Luang Por'sAjan Cha's sexual lust was a craving for Chinese noodles.

Admission

Luang Por'sAjan Cha's name was missing from the list of young men from Ubon called up for National Service. He was now free to ask for admission into the monkhood. But by this time his ideas about becoming a monk had changed. He no longer considered it simply in terms of making merit for his parents, an expression of the gratitude he felt towards them. These were certainly noble aims but he desired something more, something that could resolve the dis-ease in his heart. Lay-life seemed hollow and

tedious; perhaps the monastic life could lead him to meaning and peace. He decided to become a monk for an indefinite period. His mother and father were pleased. They had enough children to help with the farm work and it wasfelt to be auspicious to have a son in robes. The Admission ceremony took place on the 26th April 1939, at Wat Gor Ny, the local monastery. Pra Kroo Intarasarakun was Luang Por'sAjan Cha's preceptor and conferred on him the monk'smonk's name of Subhaddo (well-developed).

[well-developed].

Luang PorAjan Cha spent the first two years of his monastic life at Wat Gor studying the teachings and he re-took the first level of monastic studies, *Nak Tam Dtree*.

> "When I first became a monk I *didn't*didn't train myself, but I had faith; maybe *1*I was born with it, *1 don't*I don't know. At the end of the rains retreat, the monks and novices who joined the Sangha at the same time as me all disrobed. I thought *'what's wrong with them?' but I didn't*"What's wrong with them?", but I didn't dare to say anything because I still *didn't*didn't trust my own feelings. My friends were excited at leaving, but to me they seemed foolish. I considered how difficult it was to enter the Sangha and how easy to disrobe. *1*I thought how lacking in merit they must be to look on the worldly path as more beneficial than that of Dhamma. *That's*That's how I looked at it; but *1*I said nothing, I kept my thoughts to myself. *I'd*I'd watch my fellow monks and novices come and go. Sometimes before disrobing *they'd*they'd try on their layclothes and parade up and down. I thought they were completely *stupid.*insane. But they thought they looked good, that their clothes were smart, and they talked about the things they were going to do after they disrobed. I *didn't*didn't dare to tell them that they *they'd*they'd got it all wrong, because I *didn't know how durable my own faith was then.*didn't know how long my own faith would last. After my friends disrobed I became resigned. *You're*You're on your own now, I said to myself, pulled out my copy of the *Patimokkha*[1]*Pātimokkha*[3] and started to memorize it. It was easier than before with nobody teasing me or fooling around. I was able to concentrate on it fully. I *didn't*didn't say anything but I made a resolution that from that day onwards until the end of my life, whether it be at the age of seventy or eighty or whatever, I would try to practice with a constant appreciation, not allow my efforts to slacken or my faith to weaken. To be consistent. *An*That is an extremely difficult *task. I didn't*task and I didn't dare to tell anyone else. People came and went and I said nothing, I merely watched impassively. But in my mind I was *thinking that they couldn't see clearly."*thinking, "They don't see clearly."

However, Luang PorAjan Cha had his own problems: food was a major craving in those early days.

[3] The 227 training rules of the Buddhist monk chanted in their original Pàli form on the twice-monthly formal assemblies of the community.

> *"It's*Its not a smooth ride while *you're*you're practising. You suffer. The first and second years are especially hard; the young monks and the small novices really go through it. I suffered myself, a lot. If *you've*you've got a problem with food its rough. I became a monk when I was twenty. *That's*That's the age when -– who can deny it? -– you really enjoy food and sleep. Sometimes *I'd*I'd just sit there quietly dreaming about things *I'd*I'd like to eat: pounded *dtahnee* bananas, green papaya salad, all kinds of things! The saliva would be flowing like a river in my mouth."

After completing his Nak Tam Dtree examination, Lung Porexamination Ajan Cha decided to leave in search of a more academic atmosphere. In 1941 he stayed at Wat Suansawan,in Wat Suansawan, about 50km to the east of Ban Gor and continued his studies at nearby Wat Po Dtahk. These were the war years. Thailand, officially at least, was an ally of Japan, and Ubon would later be bombed by the French. Food and everyday necessities were in short supply and the requisites at his monastery, where the Sangha was large, were spartan. Luang PorAjan Cha found the standard of teaching at Wat Po Dtahk disappointing, and after a single rains retreat he set off northwards with a companion in order to continue his studies at Wat Ban Nong Lak. He had heard much praise of the teaching abilities of the abbot of this monastery and found it to be deserved. However when his friend found the summer heat and scanty food at the monastery too taxing, Luang PorAjan Cha agreed to move with him to another monastery in a nearby town. There behe studied for the second grade and embarked on the tediousgruelling study of Pāli grammar. After passing the exam, in 1943, Luang Por1943, Ajan Cha returned to Wat Ban Nong Lak. It was a year in which Luang PorAjan Cha concentrated all his considerable energies on studying for the third and final grade and continuing with his Pāli grammar. For the first time he had found a gifted teacher who inspired him with confidence and respect, and his studies progressed smoothly.

Towards the end of that year, some time after the annual *Kathina* robe-offering ceremony, Lung PorAjan Cha received news that filled him with dismay and hesitation. His father had fallen seriously ill, although just how seriously was unclear. Luang Por'sAjan Cha's exams were to take place shortly and if he went home now, a whole year'syear's work would be wasted. Should he take the chance and take his exams first before going home? It was really no choice: he only had one father and exams could wait another year. He rushed home, as soon as he could, to find his father's condition steadily declining.

Ajan Cha's father, Por Mah, was proud to have a son in the robes and whenever Ajan Cha visited home would always encourage him in his efforts and make the request, "Please don't disrobe, venerable sir. I invite you to stay as a monk indefinitely."

This is a deliberately literal translation. It is hard to convey in English the tenor of a conversation between a Thai monk and his parents. Filial piety is greatly stressed in Thai society and the relationship between parents and children is generally warm and close.

Yet when the son becomes a monk, their way of relating to each other instantly and radically changes. The parents are now laypeople. They sit on a lower seat, at a respectful distance. They use honorifics when referring to their son and humble personal pronouns when referring to themselves. There is a formality and ritual air to their conversations that one from another culture might find odd and somewhat unnatural and yet for a canny observer there is no question that behind the form the deep affection remains intact. It is perhaps precisely because of the closeness of family relations that such a stilted form is deemed necessary.

Now as he lay weak and shrunken on his deathbed, Por Mah made the request once more. It was difficult for him to speak. He said,said,
"You've"You've made the right choice. *Don't*Don't change it. Laylife is full of all kinds of pain and difficulties. *There's*There's no real peace or contentment in it. Stay as a *monk."*monk."

On previous occasions, Luang PorAjan Cha had always kept silent, his head slightly bowed, showing respect, but withrespect, but an unwillingness to announce such a commitment. This time however, in a quiet voice, he replied, however, in a quiet voice he replied, *"No, I won't*"No, I won't disrobe. Why should I do *that?"*that?"

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

When Por Mah discovered that Luang Por'sAjan Cha's exams would take place shortly he urged him to return to thehis wat, but this request was refused. Instead, Luang PorAjan Cha helped to nurse his father for the thirteen more days and nights that the old man lingered on. It was December, when the days have a drained, subdued tone and a cold wind blows down across the Isan from China, when first thing in the morning everyone lights fires outside their houses to warm themselves by and jew-harp kites anchored high in the air utter their melancholy cry, "*dtuydtuy dtuydtuy*""*dtuydtuy dtuydtuy*" throughout the night. Finally one day Por Mah'sMa's laboured breath stopped, making the wind outside the house sound even louder.

It seems clear that the death of Por Ma precipitated a crisis in Luang Por'sAjan Cha's life. While nursing his father, truths that Lung PorAjan Cha had been studying academically found a grounding in his experience. The human body as a mere conglomeration of the elements of solidity, fluidity, heat and vibration; the inevitability of old age, sickness and death – prominent features of passages learned by rote in the wat – he now saw as concise, undeniable articulations of the nature of his own father'sfather's life, and such teachings found a deep resonance in his heart. On return to Wat Ban Nong Lak after the funeral, Luang Por'sAjan Cha's concentration on his studies was frequently interrupted

by vivid images of those days. The sufferings of his father'sfather's emaciated body in its final days, life'slife's abrupt cessation, the stiff and doll-like corpse his father had become and its growing smell, the shards of bone amongst the cremation ashes: such memories must have welled up within him constantly. He felt imbued by a profound and sober sense of sadness, determined to dedicate his life to the Dhamma and to be free of the cycle of conditioned existence. He made a solemn resolve:

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

As a result, Luang Por started practising meditation more seriously, but not without difficulties:

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

But there were omens in the air, auspicious omens that suggested that this struggle would eventually have a memorable resolution. One night in that year of 1944, Luang Por'sAjan Cha's mother, Maa Pim, had a vivid dream. In it she felt two of her teeth fall out. Her sadness and regret at this loss was cut short by a voice saying, "Never mind. Don't"Never mind. Do not worry about your teeth; I will bring you gold ones in their stead."stead." She woke up putting a hand instinctively to her mouth. Some days later, at the foot of the steps leading up to her house, Maa Pim discovered a sprouting bodhi tree, growing at a speed that was uncanny. Swallowing her amazement, she went to the monastery for advice. The abbot told her that it was an auspicious omen, but being the very same kind of tree under which the Buddha had been enlightened, she should re-plant it in a monastery – and that is what she did. So it was, for Luang Por's mother,was for Ajan Cha's mother a year of auguries, of golden teeth and magical trees, and a sense of some imminent good fortune. For himself it heralded a crucial change of direction in his life. He was beginning to feel the pull and tug of truth.

As he carried onwith his study of PaliPāli in the traditional way – translating stories in

the Dhammapada commentaries[1] into Thai - Luang PorDhammapāda commentaries[4] into Thai – Ajan Cha could not help but notice the disparity between his own life and those of the monks in the Buddha'sBuddha's time: they wandered in the jungles "solitary,"solitary, ardent and resolute",resolute", he was glued to a book in a monastery school room. Was he losing the spirit of his resolution? Just how important was academic knowledge? HeSomething inside of him was being choked by datives, genitives and the roots of verbs; this was surely not the way to liberation. He decided that the answer was to make a fresh start, to abandon his studies and wholeheartedly devote himself to the path of practice; in other words to become a forest monk. So far so good. But where could he look for guidance?

At that time Isan was still both thickly forested, and thinly populated. There were few roads and little travelling was done. The only way that one was likely to knowhear of a good teacher was by word of mouth, perhaps from a passing *tudong*[1]*tudong*[5] monk. The forest Ajans were few and far between and cherished their anonymity. Despite having been a member of the Sangha for seven years, Luang Por'syears Ajan Cha's decision to take up meditation, to become what was called a '*practicing* monk',"practice monk", was not as straightforward as might be imagined. He opted to return to Wat Gor Nork while he decided on his next move.

A visit to a forest monastery in Det Udom district in the hot season had ended in disappointment and Luang Por's new plans were now beingdisappointment and Ajan Cha's new plans were overtaken by the rains. He spent the retreat at Ban Gor helping to teach the first Nak Tam course to the young monks and novices, who showed little enthusiasm for their studies. They attended the classes in a merely perfunctory way, lazy and disrespectful. It was the final confirmation of the unsatisfactoriness of a life he had led for seven years. In December Luang PorAjan Cha took the third and final grade of the Nak Tam, course and prepared for a new "going forth"."going forth".

1946-1954 The Tudong Years

At the beginning of 1946, accompanied by a friend, Pra Tawan, Luang Por set off on the trek westwards towards central Thailand. The two monks walked barefooted in the traditional manner of the wandering mendicant or tudong monk, carrying their iron bowls in a cloth bag on one shoulder and their *glots* on the other. Villages were rare and the rutted tracks they walked along were often overgrown. It must have been a harsh

[4] The Dhammapāda is a collection of teachings given by the Buddha in verse form. A story has been prefixed to each verse purporting to give the circumstances that inspired the teaching and it is the collection of these stories that is referred to here.
[5] See glossary.

baptism into the tudong life for Luang Por and his companion – hot days on the road, chilling nights on the forest floor, one spartan meal a day.

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

The inhabitants of the small hamlets of Sisaket and Surin Ajan Cha and Phra Tawan passed through were poor and caught unprepared, they had little close at hand to offer to the lean dark monks that suddenly appeared out of the forest, walking slowly past their houses, heads bowed, silent as ghosts. Nevertheless, many people would rush out excitedly with whatever they had, often apologizing for the meagerness of their offerings, complaining half-seriously about the lack of warning. For the most part it was plain sticky rice that the monks would receive; on a good day perhaps supplemented by some fermented fish, a few chillies or a banana to eat with it. The rice would feel like a lead weight in their bellies but it was pure food, offered out of faith, and it staved off the hunger pangs during the long hours of walking. They would cover some fifteen miles a day, usually in single file, trying to still the stubbornly rebellious thoughts that would surge into their minds whenever they lowered their guard. In the evening they would look for a stream to bathe in, rinse out their sweat-soaked under robes and having put up their glots under a tree, spend the nights practising meditation.

Their first major test was the notorious Dong Paya Yen, a huge dense forest that had until recent years virtually isolated the Isan plateau from the rest of the country. By this time although its wild elephants, tigers and boars were rarely seen on the cart tracks that the two monks walked along, malaria was a constant danger: the cutting of the railway line to Isan a few years before had cost many lives. Poisonous snakes abounded, particularly cobras and the placid but highly venomous banded krait. In the evenings, after putting up their glots, the two monks would chant verses of protection. Sitting under a tree in the darkness every sound was significant and threatening. Even if the larger beasts left them alone, they were aware that a bite from one of the centipedes and scorpions in the dead leaves around them, would mean an agonizing and sleepless night. But eventually the effects of their long walk would take its toll on the two young monks and torpor would carry them away to a dreamless sleep.

Ajan Cha and Phra Tawan emerged safely from the jungle into the dry rice fields of Saraburi. Their plan was to make their way northwards to the monastery of Luang Por Pow, a forest Ajan whose reputation had reached them on the trail. A disappointment awaited them however: Luang PorPow had died a few months before. Even so, the

journey to Wat Kow Wongkot was by no means a wasted one. Their destination proved to be a steep-sided and rock-strewn hill honeycombed with caves in which the resident monks dwelt on simple wooden platforms. A modest wooden sālā and a kitchen nestling among the trees above them were the only visible sign of habitation as they climbed a well-swept path up the hill; the raucous sound of the cicadas that greeted them, rather than detracting from the silence, seemed somehow to be its voice.

Wat Kow Wongkot was a "forest monastery", the textbook definition of which being any monastery (even theoretically one completely devoid of trees) situated at least five hundred bowlengths (about 1 kilometre) from the nearest village. Although distance from the village does not in itself fully express those features that distinguish a forest monastery from an urban one, it does point to some of the most important divergences. The forest monastery's geographical separation from the village makes clear its aim of maintaining the monastic regimen so often praised in the Buddha's discourses, with its emphasis on seclusion, the training of body, speech and mind, and the limitation of duties to the local community to those directly concerned with the teaching of Dhamma.

The rationale of the forest monastery is that it is only through individuals realizing the various stages of enlightenment that the essence of Buddhism can be safeguarded and authentically transmitted from one generation to the next. In this view, the primary duty of monastics, the religious "professionals", is to seek out the most suitable environment for spiritual development, and then to apply themselves to the direct experience of the truth of the teachings; and then, subsequently, through example and instruction, to inspire others to emulate them, primarily the next generation of monastics, but also where appropriate, the lay Buddhists. The impact of the forest monks on the society is dependent on their aloofness from its daily traumas. They are seen to be practising what they preach, to proving the validity of moral and spiritual ideas by the way they conduct their lives. Their teachings often carry a weight that those of even the most articulate urban monks lack.

An air of peaceful seclusion surrounds the forest monasteries. Free of the central social role of the village wat, they provide a telling counterpoint to the busyness of the world. It was precisely in search of such a monastery that Ajan Cha had come so far and he felt inspired by the sincerity and gentle reserve of the monks of Wat Kow Wongkot. He was keen to learn about the way of practice that Luang Por Pow had established, to study the teachings that the master had written on the cave walls and to continue his study of the Monks' Discipline. It was with these considerations in mind that Ajan Cha and Pra Tawan asked for permission to spend their first Rains Retreat as tudong monks at Wat Kow Wongkot.

A prominent characteristic of Ajan Cha's practice and teachings, was the emphasis that he laid on the Vinaya Discipline. It was partly his frustration with the ignorance and disinterest that his fellow monks showed towards the Vinaya that had led him to leave the village monastic system. But although an intellectual interest in the Discipline had

been kindled early in Ajan Cha's monastic life, it was only after setting off on tudong that he felt able to approach it in a practical way, as a code to live by. Characteristically, he gave himself to an intense scrutiny of the two most detailed texts available – the classic fifth century manual Visuddhi Magga and the nineteenth century Thai commentary, Pubbasikkhāvannanā. These two works, especially the latter, deal with subtle (some might say nit-picking) details of the rules, in an antique, dusty prose that taxes the enthusiasm of all but the most ardent student. Ajan Cha studied them as avidly as one of more worldly tastes might devour best-sellers.

During that retreat of 1946, Wat Kow Wongkot also played host to a reclusive Cambodian monk distinguished by his proficiency in both the academic study of Buddhist doctrine and the practice of meditation. This was an unusual accomplishment in Thailand where in the previous century an unfortunate split had developed between the scholar-monks and the meditators. The scholars, as a rule did not meditate and the meditators did not study; consequently neither group held the other in very high esteem. This monk however, (whose name is unknown; he will be referred to here as Ajan Khmen), was blessed with a remarkable memory for the intricacies of the Discipline and profundities of the Discourses while at the same time adhering to the life of a tudong monk, his deepest predilection the natural silence of forests, mountains and caves.

During the retreat there occurred an incident that impressed Ajan Cha deeply and which in later days he would often relate to his disciples. Ajan Khmen had kindly offered to help Ajan Cha with his study of Vinaya. One day in the late afternoon, following a long and fruitful session, and having taken his daily bath at the well, Ajan Cha climbed up the hill to practise meditation on its cool, breezy ridge. That night, sometime after ten o'clock, Ajan Cha was practising walking meditation when he heard the sound of cracking twigs and someone or something moving towards him in the darkness. At first he assumed it was a creature out hunting for its dinner but as the sound got closer he made out the form of Ajan Khmen, emerging from the forest.
"Tahn Ajan, what brings you up here so late at night?"
"I explained a point of Vinaya incorrectly today."
"You shouldn't have gone to all this trouble just for that, sir. You don't have a light to show the way. It could have waited until tomorrow.
"No, it couldn't. Suppose for some reason or other I was to die tonight and in future you were to teach other people what I explained to you. It would be bad kamma for me and for many others."

Ajan Khmen carefully explained the point again and certain that it was clear, he returned into the night. Ajan Cha had often remarked on the classic phrase in the texts describing the sincere monk as one who "sees the danger in the smallest fault". Here at last was someone who paid more than lip service to that ideal, who genuinely felt the closeness of death and whose kindness had led him up a treacherous mountain path in the middle of the night. It was a powerful and memorable lesson.

During this first retreat dedicated to meditation, Ajan Cha was still unsure of the path of practice most suited to him and experimented with a number of different meditation techniques, including the use of a rosary. Initially, the biggest problem facing him in taking up this particular practice was a simple and practical one: he didn't have a rosary. Fortunately, some monkeys in their play broke off a branch from one of the many *dtabaak* trees on the mountainside and Ajan Cha was able to gather the 108 seeds necessary for his purposes. Having no thread however, for the next three days he was forced to improvise, dropping the seeds one by one into a tin. Unsurprisingly, it was not a success and he turned back to mindfulness of breathing.

> With my questions about *samādhi*, the more I reflected, the more I meditated, the more agitated and restless my mind became. In fact my mind was more peaceful when I wasn't meditating. It was so difficult! But even so I didn't stop; I kept at it. If I took things easy I felt fine, but as soon as I determined to make my mind peaceful it was all over the place. "What's this all about?" I asked myself, "Why is this happening?" Then I realized that walking around, giving no thought to the breath, I breathed in a pleasant comfortable way. But when I sat down and determined to make my mind peaceful, attachment took over, the breath became uneven and I was unable to concentrate on it. Why did the mind suffer more than before I started meditating? Because determination had turned into attachment. And so I got no results. Things got burdensome because of the craving that I carried with me into practice.

Ajan Cha's fear of ghosts had not been completely displaced by his growing courage but alternated with it, albeit at longer intervals. Usually he kept it smothered, out of sight and mind, through a nightly recitation of protective spells and incantations before he slept. One night, however, after a long period of meditation high up on the ridge of Kow Wongkot, Ajan Cha felt such a surge of confidence in the power of his virtue that he omitted the recitations.

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

The moment Ajan Cha lay down to sleep, however, he became aware of a chilling and thickening of the air around his glot. A malign presence began to bear down upon him. It was as if it had been lurking, waiting for the young monk to forget his spells. Through his

hubris he had made himself its prey. Suddenly Ajan Cha was pinned down on his back, paralyzed. Something was sitting on his chest, as if enjoying its efforts to crush him. It exuded an odour of crude and elemental evil that was vile to him. As the pressure intensified on his chest, he struggled desperately for breath. He fought with all his might to maintain his presence of mind and quell the feelings of panic. Mentally he recited the word "Buddho"over and over again with great determination. No other thoughts could enter his mind. He found a refuge in the recitation. The strength of the evil force was immense, however. It was checked, but not defeated and the struggle continued. Eventually, however, the pressure weakened. He gradually began to recover movement in his body. It was over. After the shock wore off there came a wave of exultation. He had survived the ordeal, as bad as his worst dreams, purely through the power of his virtue and meditation on the Buddha. He could ditch his spells.

Often it requires a strong personal experience to make the wise words of other people one's own. The incident above confirmed for Ajan Cha the important role of precepts in the training of the mind. They were, he was now both emotionally as well as intellectually convinced, the indispensable foundation for every desirable kind of happiness, culminating in the bliss of Nibbāna. Ajan Cha increased his care and attention to the precepts in the Monks' Discipline, restraining himself from even the most minor infringements. It was at this time that he completely forswore the use of money, a precept that few monks have ever dared or desired to keep strictly. There was to be no transgression of his precepts under any circumstances.

His problems with sexual desire were more intractable. While still newly ordained it had nearly led him out of the monkhood.

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

At Wat Kow Wongkot Ajan Cha was searching for ways of overcoming his lust:

> I didn't look at a woman's face for the whole of the Rains Retreat. I allowed myself to speak to women but not to look at their faces. Mind you, my eyes would strain upwards – they wanted to look so much I almost died! At the end of the retreat I went on almsround in Lopburi. Three months had passed since I last looked at a woman's face; I wanted to know what it would be like. "The defilements must be withering away by now," I thought. As soon as I'd made the

decision I looked at the woman approaching. Ohhh! She was dressed in bright red. Just a single glance and my legs turned to jelly. I was totally discouraged. When was I ever going to be free from defilements?

That's not how its done, you see. In the beginning you have to keep your distance from women. But really abandoning lust comes only through developing the wisdom that sees the true nature of things.

Luang Boo Mun

Muhuttamapi ce viññū
panditaṃ payirupāsati
khippaṃ dhammaṃ vijānāti
jivhaṃ sūparasaṃ yathā

An intelligent man, even though he is associated with a wise man only for a moment, quickly understands the Dhamma, just as the tongue knows the taste of soup.

(Dhammapada v.65)

During his stay at Wat Kow Wongkot, Ajan Cha first heard the name of the monk who was to become a legendary figure in Thailand, the most revered monk of his generation. Today, on the shrines of houses, shops and offices throughout the country a photograph of Luang Boo Mun can commonly be seen in a place of honour just below the Buddha himself. In it you see a slight figure dressed in the sombre robes of the forest monk, standing almost ghost-like amongst unearthly trees, his hands clasped in front of him, radiating an austere composure and ethereal stillness. He seems to be looking right through the camera and into the deepest recesses of your heart. It is an inspiring but discomfiting picture. It challenges all that you take for granted.

The impression of Luang Boo Mun conveyed by the stories and anecdotes related by those who knew him, is startlingly reminiscent of the accounts of great monks found in the Buddhist scriptures. Even after making allowances for the bias of loyal disciples, such comparisons are not fanciful. Luang Boo Mun was, for all sixty or so years of his monastic career, an exemplar of the ascetic peripatetic existence that we associate with the monks of the Buddha's time. He was in his mid-seventies before he spent two consecutive Rains Retreats in the same monastery. Only at the very end of his life, when he could no longer walk, did he give up his daily almsround. His psychic powers were apparently stupendous. His wisdom (to use the traditional simile), was as sharp and penetrating as a diamond sword. He is credited with the highest realization of Dhamma. For most Thais, Luang Boo Mun represents the incontrovertible proof that enlightenment exists and is attainable in this day and age.

The forest tradition has never disappeared from Thailand, but before Luang Boo Mun forest monks were always scattered in small isolated communities that possessed little sense of a wider tradition. These sanghas tended to be centred around a charismatic

teacher and after his death rarely survived for more than two or three generations. There are no records to tell us how many such groups have assembled and dispersed in the last seven hundred years. We will never know how many enlightened beings have come and gone. In the words of the Buddha himself, like birds crossing the sky, they left no tracks.

Luang Boo Mun, however, lived at the beginning of a more connected, informed and time-ridden age. Accounts of his practice and teachings have been recorded in many books. A number of fine training monasteries have been established by his disciples throughout the Isan which attract visitors and pilgrims from all over the country. He may be an unfathomable figure to many but he is not obscure. The high standards maintained by the monks of his lineage and the integrity and prowess of his greatest disciples has ensured that today there is a respect for forest monks that has not existed in the country since the Sukhothai period. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the Thai Forest lineage as we know it was established almost single-handedly by Luang Boo Mun. But in the late 1940's he was still relatively unknown. Throughout his monastic life Luang Boo Mun shunned fame and status like a pestilent disease. Fifteen years earlier, while staying at Wat Chedi Luang, one of the oldest and most prestigious monasteries in Chieng Mai, he had received a letter from the powers-that-be in Bangkok, informing him of his appointment as abbot. The next day he disappeared into the mountains and was not seen in the city again for a number of years.

Luang Boo Mun was often a fierce and exacting teacher. His scoldings were famous – in his disciple Luang Boo Maha Bua's memorable phrase, they "shrivelled your liver", And yet he inspired a quiet but intense devotion from all who knew him. Now, Ajan Cha learned from an old layman at Wat Kow Wongkot, Luang Boo Mun had returned to the Isan after ten years of solitary wandering in the north and a large group of monks had gathered around him in the PooPan mountains of Sakon Nakon. Ajan Cha's plans for the cold season crystallised.

At the end of the retreat, Ajan Cha, together with three other monks and novices and two laymen set off on the long walk back to Isan. They broke the journey at Ban Gor, and after a few days rest, began a 250 kilometre hike northwards. By the tenth day they had reached the elegant white stupa of Taht Panom, an ancient pilgrimage spot on the banks of the Mekong, and paid homage to the Buddha's relics enshrined there. They continued their walk in stages, by now finding forest monasteries along the way in which to spend the night. Even so it was an arduous trek and the novice and a layman asked to turn back. The group consisted of just three monks and a layman when they finally arrived at Wat Peu Nong Nahny, the home of Luang Boo Mun.

As they walked into the monastery, Ajan Cha was immediately struck by its tranquil and secluded atmosphere. The central area, in which stood a small meeting hall, was immaculately swept and the few monks they caught sight of were attending to their daily chores silently, with a measured and composed gracefulness. There was something about the monastery that was like no other that he had been in before – the silence was

strangely charged and vibrant. Ajan Cha and his companions were received politely and after being advised where to put up their glots took a welcome bath to wash off the grime of the road.

In the evening the three young monks, their double-layered outer robes folded neatly over their left shoulders, minds fluctuating between keen anticipation and cold fear, made their way to the wooden sālā to pay respects to Luang Boo Mun. Crawling on his knees towards the great master, flanked on both sides by the resident monks, Ajan Cha approached a slight and aged figure with an indomitable diamond-like presence. It is easy to imagine Luang Boo Mun's bottomless eyes and his deeply penetrating gaze boring into Ajan Cha as he bowed three times and sat down at a suitable distance. Most of the monks were sitting with eyes closed in meditation, one sat slightly behind Luang Boo Mun slowly fanning away the evening's mosquitoes. As Ajan Cha glanced up he would have noticed how prominently Luang Boo Mun's collarbone jutted through the pale skin above his robe and how his thin mouth stained red with betel juice formed such an arresting contrast to the strange luminosity of his presence. As is the time-honoured custom amongst Buddhist monks, Luang Boo Mun first asked the visitors how long they had been in the robes, the monasteries they had practised in and the details of their journey. Did they have any doubts about the practice? Ajan Cha swallowed. Yes, he did. He had been studying Vinaya texts with great enthusiasm but had become discouraged. The Discipline seemed too detailed to be practical; it didn't seem possible to keep every single rule; what should one's standard be? Luang Boo Mun advised Ajan Cha to take the "Two Guardians of the World" : *hiri* (conscience) and *ottappa* (intelligent fear of consequences), as his basic principle. In the presence of those two virtues, he said, everything else would follow. He then began to discourse on the threefold training of *sīla*, samādhi and *paññā*, the four Roads to Success and the five Spiritual Powers. Eyes half closed, his voice becoming stronger and faster as he proceeded, as if he was moving into a higher and higher gear. With an absolute authority he described the "way things truly are" and the path to liberation. Ajan Cha and his companions sat completely enwrapt. Ajan Cha later said that although he had spent a exhausting day on the road, hearing Luang Boo Mun's Dhamma talk made all of his weariness disappear, his mind became peaceful and clear and he felt as if he was floating in the air above his seat. It was late at night before Luang Boo Mun called the meeting to an end and Ajan Cha returned to his glot, aglow.

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

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

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

Orders of the day

Fragmentation of the Sangha into a number of different orders has been a dominant feature of Sri Lankan and Burmese Buddhism. In Thailand, however, the creation of new orders has been extremely rare. This anomaly is explained to a large extent by the fact that the Thai Sangha alone has enjoyed strong and uninterrupted royal support throughout its existence, and has been spared the stresses of living under an unsympathetic colonial administration. What is perhaps also pertinent is that the Thais abhor contention and find it hard to get excited over points of view.

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

The destruction of the Kingdom of Ayudhya in 1767 and the period of anarchy that followed it had dealt a crushing blow to the organization of an already corrupt monastic system. Despite the efforts at reform since the beginning of the Bangkok period, standards of Discipline were still very lax, and educational standards at a nadir. King Mongkut had become a monk during the final illness of his father, King Phuttaloetla. When, despite his own superior claim to the throne, he was overlooked by the Privy Council in favour of his half brother, he decided to pursue a monastic career until the day, if ever, when he might be called to secular power. He soon became deeply disillusioned by what he found around him in the monasteries of Bangkok and became

determined to re-establish what he saw as the ancient standards. His aim was a familiarly protestant one: to bring contemporary practices back in line with the teachings in the Buddhist scriptures. He supported a more rational, "scientific" approach to the Dhamma and an eradication of superstitions, an increased study of the Pāli texts, a new more "correct" way of chanting, changes in ritual, the wearing of the robe etc., and most importantly, a new strictness in adherence to the Code of Discipline.

Although the number of Dhammayutta monks was relatively small (it has never exceeded a tenth of the Sangha as a whole), the lineage's close links to the royal family ensured that within a short time it possessed formidable wealth, influence and prestige. King Chulalongkorn, King Mongkut's son and successor, appointed Dhammayutta monks to the top administrative positions in the monkhood throughout the country, using them both as agents of reform in the Sangha nationwide and also politically, as an important tool in Bangkok's "colonization" of the provinces. Characteristically for Siam, despite the fact that this second sect was established as a specific response to the alleged corruption of the first and usurped much of its prestige, overt conflict between the two was rare.

Room for serious discord was certainly there. The reformers' view of the existing Sangha was a demeaning one. They held that as Admission or *Upasampada* ceremonies in which members of the quorum are not legitimate monks, are automatically rendered null and void, and that a large number of monks in the Mahānikāya had, over the years, committed unconfessed expulsion offences, the existing lineage was therefore fatally compromised. Serious doubts had to be entertained as to whether any of the members of the Mahānikāya were in fact, technically speaking, monks at all. The Dhammayut movement began with King Mongkut requesting Admission afresh, on this second occasion from a quorum of Mon monks whom he believed to be "pure". This action set an important precedent. The new order was to define and legitimise itself by the asserted ritual correctness of its members' formal entrance into the monkhood.

Of course, there was another way of looking at it: the reformers were schismatics. But the implications of accusing the King of creating a schism in the Sangha, an act considered by the Buddha to have the same dire kammic results as such crimes as matricide or killing an enlightened being, were too serious for most to do more than mutter.

Ubon was chosen by King Mongkut as the centre for the propagation of the new order in Isan and he sponsored the construction of Wat Supatanarama on the banks of the Moon River close to the city, to act as its main base. During the second half of the nineteenth century Ubon became renowned for scholastic excellence. Many other Dhammayut monasteries were built in and around the city. Monks trained in Ubon spread the reforms into other areas of Isan. In 1892, when Mun Kamdooang, a native of Khong Jeeam district, decided to become a monk he chose to request Admission at one of the main Dhammayut monasteries, Wat Sri Tong (now Wat Sri Ubon) and then shortly afterwards moved to Wat Leeap, on the outskirts of the town to study under the well-known meditation

teacher, Ajan Sow.

Luang Boo Mun took the difference in lineage seriously. Over the years those who became his disciples – most of whom had originally entered the monkhood in one of the far more numerous Mahānikāya wats – relinquished their old affiliation in order to be formally admitted into the Dhammayut order. It was an opportunity that monks welcomed to put a past they now rejected behind them in a tangible way and to formally express their commitment to their teacher. By the early 1920's the group of Luang Boo Mun's disciples was growing rapidly and having a galvanizing effect on the Isan. Although primarily concerned with practising meditation in lonely places, they were not indifferent to the society they had renounced and that now supported them. In groups of two or three they would go on long treks through the countryside combining periods devoted to their own spiritual practices with preaching to the laity. Their stress on the abandonment of the superstitious animist beliefs (that had in many places smothered a supposedly dominant Buddhism,) and taking refuge in the Three Jewels, sometimes took on the nature of a crusade. Ajan Lee relates one such effort in his own village in northern Ubon.

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

Why then during Ajan Cha's early years in the monkhood did he never get to hear of Luang Boo Man's group, even though many of its members were natives of Ubon? Most probably because this new forest tradition had been more or less pressured out of the province. The adminstration of the Sangha in Isan had for many years been run by the Dhammayutta monk, Chow Khun Tisso, who shared the prejudices of many in his predominantly urban scholastic order. To him forest monks to him were unlearned mavericks, negligent in the practice of Vinaya, and perpetuating the irrational, unorthodox currents in the Sangha that the Dhammayutta reformers were seeking to eradicate. He considered Luang Boo Mun and his disciples to fall into this category and was their implacable opponent for many years. Whenever they entered the province he made life as difficult for them as he could. Consequently they spent most of their time in the more remote parts of northern Isan. Things changed somewhat from the late 1920's.

Tahn Jow Khun Upali, the famous Dhammayutta administrator and scholar, came from the same village as Luang Boo Mun, and did much to create the acceptance of his close friend in Bangkok. Jow Khun Tisso's views also changed later in his life after serious illness led him to seek meditation instruction from disciples of Ajan Mun. But by then Luang Boo Mun was on his sojourn in Chieng Mai and his disciples were forging ties to lonely areas of the Isan hundreds of kilometres to the north of Ubon. By the early forties there were few Dhammayutta forest monks in Ubon.

Ajan Cha's visit to Luang Boo Mun was then not simply that of a young tudong monk to the father of the forest tradition, but of a Mahānikāya monk to a Dhammayutta monastery. During his brief visit some of the more zealous of the newly converted monks urged Ajan Cha to follow their example and join the Dhammayutta Order, but he remained unconvinced. It seems that he felt it would be both unnecessary and disloyal. Anyway who could really know, even in Dhammayutta monasteries, that one's lineage was ritually pure all the way back to the Buddha's time? Apart from such objections, it may be that Ajan Cha's lack of enthusiasm was due to him sharing the general Mahānikāya exasperation at what was perceived as arrogance and conceit on the part of many Dhammayutta monks. (It is, after all, hard to be humble about purity). Perhaps he wanted to prove that Mahānikāya monks could practice just as well as Dhammayutta monks. It's impossible to tell; Ajan Cha never revealed his feelings on the matter. What we know is that one of the questions that Ajan Cha asked Luang Boo Mun during his visit was this central one of re-admission. Luang Boo Mun put his mind at rest: No, it was not necessary.

This is a somewhat surprising reply from Luang Boo Mun. One reason for it that has been suggested is that just prior to Ajan Cha's visit one of Luang Boo Mun's senior disciples saw Ubon split off from the rest of the Isan in a meditative vision. It is said that Luang Boo Mun considered this a sign that Ubon would not be a stronghold for the Dhammayutta forest monks in future, and he recognized in Ajan Cha the monk who would spread the forest tradition to the Mahānikāya Order and build monasteries in Ubon.

After only three days Ajan Cha left Nong Peu and, remarkably, did not return before Luang Boo Mun's death at the end of 1949. How is it then that with such little contact with him, Ajan Cha is so commonly considered to be a disciple of Luang Boo Mun, particularly amongst his own disciples? Can two nights of instruction count as basis for discipleship? Ajan Cha was once asked why he stayed with Luang Boo Mun for such a short time. He replied that a person with closed eyes could spend years close to a fire and still not see it, whereas someone with good eyes would not take long to see the light. If that statement reflects how Ajan Cha felt at the time it indicates an unusual self-confidence for one so relatively inexperienced in practice. He seems to be implying that he received from Luang Boo Mun something akin to what in other Buddhist traditions would be called a transmission. Although it might be objected that transmission is an idea alien to Theravāda Buddhism it certainly seems that following this meeting Ajan

Cha felt his path had been illumined. It is as if, to use another analogy, he felt that he had been given a clear outline of the work to be done and the tools to do it and all that remained was to apply himself to the task. Close proximity to the teacher was unnecessary.

The case for Ajan Cha as a disciple of Luang Boo Mun is then not based on re-admission, a formal declaration of Dependence or a close relationship with him. It rests rather with Ajan Cha's own conviction, frequently expressed, that whatever success he had achieved in his practice was the outcome of the short visit to Nong Peu. He felt that throughout his life he was true to the instructions that he received from Luang Boo Mun. He may then perhaps be called a disciple in spirit if not, strictly speaking, in name.

It must be said moreover, that in later years, the distance that Ajan Cha maintained from the Luang Boo Mun group, formally expressed in terms of nikāya, yet tempered by affinity and respect, allowed him a great deal of freedom in establishing his own way of teaching. The style of practice at Wat Pa Pong, as will be seen in future chapters, was one in which group practice and the creation of a sense of community, given little importance in most forest monasteries, was greatly stressed. It was Ajan Cha's distinctive contribution to the tradition.

Ajan Cha led his friends along the quiet paths that threaded through the PooPan mountains with a new-found confidence. The immediate result of his meeting with Luang Boo Mun was an unshakeable determination to realize directly in his heart the truths that had been so lucidly expounded by the great master. As the excellence and profundity of the Dhamma became more and more clear to him so did his taste for a life without it pall. He was ready, without melodrama or posturing of any kind, to put his life on the line.

Kindness of the teacher

Heedfulness and a sense of urgency are cardinal virtues for the spiritual aspirant. The Buddha taught monks to constantly recollect the fragility of life and the ever-present threat of death. At night they must reflect on all the various ways they might die before the following dawn: snake bites, scorpion bites, an awkward fall, appendicitis... the list is soberingly long. Dwelling in tropical forests, where one's insecurity is palpable and virtually impossible to forget, is particularly conducive to this kind of contemplation. Some days after leaving Luang Boo Mun, Ajan Cha had his first direct encounter with the fact that just as a gambler, irrespective of the length of his current winning streak, faces the same odds every time he throws the dice, similarly the fact that we have escaped death every day of our lives so far in no way weighs the odds in favour of our future survival.

Although few animals share man's wanton aggressiveness, if they have been startled or feel threatened, they may well attack to defend themselves. One night in a thick forest in

Nakon Panom, a roving pack of wild dogs caught the scent of Ajan Cha as he sat meditating in his glot. The motionless form of a cross-legged monk must have been a strange and unsettling sight to them. Within a few moments Ajan Cha was jerked from calm solitude to find himself face-to-face with a snarling mass of angry creatures, his only protection the cotton mosquito net hanging around him. Fear coursed through his body. With a supreme effort he steadied his mind and then, following an ancient tradition, made a solemn resolution.

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

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

In the cremation forest

The Thais have been conscious of living in a universe inhabited by unseen forces, benign and malevolent, for thousands of years. A blind disbelief in ghosts, even amongst the most materialist of modern urban dwellers, is unusual. Fascination with ghost stories is almost universal. Although materialist values are spreading relentlessly throughout Thai society, belief in spirits seems to lie deeper in the depths of the Thai psyche than rationalist probes can reach.

Many different kinds of ghosts are found in Thailand. Three kinds that can possess people are particularly feared: *pee dtai hohng* (victims of a violent death), *pee dtai tang glom* (women who, together with their child, have died during childbirth) and *pee borp* who, greedy for raw meat and offal, enter peoples bodies and voraciously chew away at their intestines. *Pee brayt* (Pāli: *preta*)are the hungry ghosts met with in Buddhist texts. They are horrifyingly ugly: gaunt and emaciated, with dishevelled hair, long necks, sunken cheeks, deep-set eyes and a very small mouth no bigger than the eye of a needle. They feed on pus and blood and having huge bellies as well as tiny mouths, their appetite is never satisfied. They dwell in cremation places and desolate areas and emit long, shrill and plaintive cries as they approach. One of their few sources of amusement seems to be frightening human beings. In the time and place in which Ajan Cha grew up (the Isan of

the twenties and thirties) fear of ghosts was normal and rational: they were all around. It is tempting to be patronizing about fears that one does not share; the heart of a forest does not inspire terror in a Western heart in the way that say the chambers of a Transylvanian castle might. In George Orwell's 1984, prisoners under interrogation are confronted with their deepest and most visceral fears in the dreaded Room 101. It may be helpful to consider while reading the following passage that the cremation ground was Ajan Cha's Room 101 and that he entered it of his own accord.

> It was late afternoon and I was scared stiff; I didn't want to go. I was paralyzed. I told myself to go, but I couldn't do it. I invited old Pakaou Gaaw to go with me. "Go and die there," I told myself. "If its time to die, go and get it over and done with. If it's all such a burden, if you're so stupid, just die!" That's the kind of thing I was saying to myself, even though, at the same time, I still really didn't want to go. But I forced myself, "If you're going to wait until you're completely ready you'll never go," I reasoned, "and you won't ever tame your mind." In the end I had to drag myself there. As I got to the edge of the forest I faltered. I'd never stayed in a cremation ground before in my life. The *pakaou* was going to stick close, but I wouldn't have it. I sent him off a good distance away. Actually I wanted him to stay really close, but I was worried that I'd become dependent on him. I thought if I had a friend close by, then I wouldn't be afraid and so I resisted the temptation and sent him away. "If I'm so frightened then tonight let me die. Let's see what happens." I was afraid; but I did it. Its not that I wasn't afraid – but I dared. "At the worst," I told myself, "all that can happen is that you'll die."
>
> Well as the dusk started to thicken a little – just my luck! – they carried a corpse, swaying from side to side, into the cremation ground. As I walked up and down I could hardly feel my feet touch the ground. "Get out of here!" my mind screamed. The villagers invited me to go and chant the funeral verses. I wouldn't have anything to do with it. "Get out of here!" I was still thinking, but after I'd gone a short distance I returned. They came and buried the corpse right by my glot and then made a sitting platform for me from the bamboo they'd used to carry the body. What should I do now? The village was two or three kilometres away. "This is it for sure. What shall I do?" "Just get ready to die" The old pakaou moved closer. I sent him away. "Just go ahead and die! Why are you so terrified? Now we're going to have some fun with this. If you don't dare do it you won't know what its like." Oh! It was such an intense feeling. It hardly seemed as if my feet were touching the ground. And it was getting darker and darker. "Where are you going to go now? Go right into the middle of the cremation ground. Die! You're born and then you die, isn't that the way it goes?" I battled with myself like that.
>
> After the sun had gone down I felt I should get into my glot. My legs were refusing to walk. My feelings urged me into the glot. I'd been doing walking meditation in front of it, opposite the grave. As I walked towards the glot it wasn't so bad, but as soon as I turned towards the grave, I don't know what it was, it was

as if there was something pulling at my back. A cold shiver would go down my spine. That's what the training is all about. You feel so frightened your legs refuse to walk and so you stop; then when the fear has gone you start again.

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

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

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

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

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

Late afternoon and here we go again. They carried in another corpse and it was an adult. It was even worse than the previous night. They were going to cremate it right in front of my glot. This was much worse. At least the villagers burned the body, but when they invited me to go and contemplate the corpse I stayed where I

was. When all the villagers had left then I went. “They’ve all gone home and left me alone with the corpse. What shall I do?” I don’t know what similes I could use to describe to you this fear, and in the night-time too. The fire had burned right down. The embers were red, green, blue. They spluttered and every now and again broke into flame. I couldn’t bring myself to walk *jongkrom* in front of the fire. As soon as it was completely dark I got into my glot as I’d done the night before. I sat in that thick forest with the smell of the corpse – burning smoke in my nostrils the whole night. It was worse than the night before. I sat with my back to the fire with no idea of sleeping. How could I sleep? I didn’t have the slightest desire to; I was nervous and wide awake the entire night. I was afraid and I didn’t know who I could depend on. “You’re here by yourself and you’ll have to rely on yourself. There’s nowhere to go; its pitch black out there. Just sit down and die! Where do you want to go anyway?” If you were just to follow what your mind told you, you’d never go to a place like that. Who would willingly put himself through such torment? Only someone with a firm conviction in the Buddha’s teachings of the fruits of practice.

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

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

It must have been about half an hour later that I heard the sound of someone walking back from the direction of Pakaou Gaaw. It was exactly like the sound of a human being! It came straight towards the glot as if determined to trample whoever was inside. I just sat there with my eyes closed. I wasn’t going to open them for anything. If I was going to die then let me die right there. When it reached me it stopped, and stood silent and motionless in front of the glot. I felt as if burnt hands were clutching at the air in front of me. I was sure the end had come. My whole body was petrified with terror. I forgot Buddho, Dhammo, Sangho, everything. All that existed was the fear; I was as stretched and tight as a

monastery drum. "Alright. You're there but I'm staying here." My mind was numb. I didn't know if I was sitting on a seat or floating in the air. I tried to concentrate on the sense of knowing.

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

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

With the overcoming of my fear it started to pour with rain – maybe it was the rain that falls on lotus leaves in the legend, the one that only makes you wet if you let it; I don't know. There was the sound of thunder, of wind and of rain, deafeningly loud. It rained so heavily all my fears of death were forgotten. Trees crashed down and I was impervious. My robes, every piece of cloth I had was soaked. I just sat there, quite still. Then after a while I started to weep. It just happened by itself. Tears streamed down my cheeks. Before that I'd been thinking how like an orphan I was, sitting shivering in the middle of the pouring rain. I thought that probably none of the people happily asleep in their houses would imagine that there was a monk sitting out here in the rain all night; they were probably snuggling up in their warm blankets. "Here I am sitting here soaked to the skin, what's it all about?" As I started dwelling on those thoughts a sense of the sorrowfulness of my life arose and I began to cry. The tears started to roll down my face. "That's alright, its bad stuff. Let it all run out until there's none left." That's what practice is.

I don't know how to explain what happened after that. After my victory, I just sat there and all these things took place in my mind. It would be impossible to describe them all, so many things I came to know and see, too many to relate. It reminded me of the Buddha's words: *Paccatam veditabbo vinnūhī*. To be seen by each wise person by themselves. That was really true. I was suffering out in the

middle of the rain and who could know how I felt? Nobody; only me. I was deeply afraid and then the fear disappeared. The people in the warm and the dry of their houses couldn't know what that was like. Only I could know that because it's paccatam. Who could I tell, who could I relate it too? The more I reflected on it the more certain I became and the more faith in the teachings and energy I had. I contemplated the teachings until dawn.

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

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

That morning Ajan Cha went on almsround shaking with a fever that he bore patiently for a week. At the end of that time he decided to go to a nearby monastery and convalesce. Ten days later he had recovered sufficiently to continue his wandering.

The nights were not so cold now and the day's heat stronger: soon the hot season would glue the world together into a dense, smothering blanket, penetrated only by an occasional sweet and cooling breeze. The water in the forest streams was diminishing rapidly and the paddy fields were as hard as rock and cracking. A heat haze reclined across the fields and sometimes Ajan Cha would see water buffaloes soaking in muddy pools of water that would soon be dry, only their placid heads above water. At the edges of hamlets women searched in the woods for edible roots and leaves to supplement their meagre hot season diet. Sometimes as he made his way through the thickly forested valleys of Nakhon Panom, heart uplifted by the huge hardwood trees – *yahng*, *pratoo* and *daang* – like grave, kindly sentinels on the path, a flock of startlingly green parrots would

sweep and weave through the forest in perfect formation. Eventually he arrived at his goal: Wat Pa Mettaviveka, the monastery of Luang Boo Ginree, one of the few tudong monks in the Mahānikāya order. It was to be the beginning of a long and fruitful association.

1946-1954, The Tudong Years

At the beginning of 1946 Luang Por set off on the trek westwards towards central Thailand, accompanied by his friend Pra Tawan. The two monks walked barefooted in the traditional manner of the wandering mendicant or *tudong* monk, carrying their iron bowls in a cloth bag on one shoulder and their glots[3] on the other. Villages were rare and the rutted tracks they walked along were often overgrown. It must have been a harsh baptism into the *tudong* life for Luang Por and his companion - one daily meal, days that were hot, and nights on the forest floor chilling and austere.

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

The villages were poor and, caught unprepared, the people living there had little close at hand to offer to the lean, dark monks that suddenly appeared out of the forest, walking slowly past their houses, heads bowed, silent as ghosts. As Luang Por and Pra Tawan passed through the hamlets of Srisaket and Surin, the villagers would rush out excitedly to put food into their bowls: plain sticky rice and a few chillies or a banana. Gradually the two monks got used to it and settled into a steady schedule of walking some fifteen miles a day. In the day, they usually walked in single file and the stubbornly rebellious thoughts surged into their minds as they went. In the evening they would look for a stream to bathe in, rinse out their under robes and having put up their *glots*[3] under a tree, spend the nights practising meditation.

Their first major test was the notorious Dong Payah Yen, a huge and dense forest that had until recent years virtually isolated the Isan plateau from the rest of the country. By this time although its wild elephants, tigers and boars were rarely seen on the cart tracks that the two monks walked along. Malaria was a constant danger: the cutting of the railway line to Isan a few years before had cost many lives. Poisonous snakes abounded, particularly cobras and the placid but highly venomous banded krait. In the evenings after putting up their *glots*, the two monks would chant Verses of Protection. Sitting

under a tree in the darkness, every sound was significant and threatening Even if the larger beasts left them alone, they were aware that a bite from one of the centipedes and scorpions in the dead leaves around, them, would mean an agonizing and sleepless night. But eventually the effects of their long walk would send the two young monks away to a tiger-less sleep.

Luang Por and Pra Tawan emerged from the jungle in the dry rice fields of Saraburi, unharmed. They decided to make their way northwards to the monastery of Luang Por Pow, a forest Ajan whose reputation had reached them on the trail.

A disappointment awaited them however: Luang Por Pow had died a few months before. Even so, the walk to Wat Kow Wongkot was by no means a wasted journey. Their destination proved to be a steep-sided and rock-strewn hill, honeycombed with caves in which the resident monks dwelt. Simple wooden platforms, a modest wooden *sala* and a kitchen nestling among the trees above them were the only visible sign of habitation. The raucous sound of the cicadas, rather than detracting from the silence, seemed somehow to be its voice.

Wat Kow Wongkot was a 'forest monastery', the textbook definition of which being any monastery [even theoretically, one completely devoid of trees] situated at least five hundred bowlengths [about 1 kilometre] from the nearest village. The forest monastery's geographical separation from the village makes clear its aim of maintaining the traditional life of the Buddhist monk, so often praised in the Buddha's discourses: its emphasis on seclusion, the training of body, speech and mind, and responsibilities to the local community not directly concerned with the timely teaching of Dhamma, reduced to a minimum.

The rationale of the forest monastery is that it is only through people realizing the various stages of enlightenment that the essence of Buddhism can be safeguarded and authentically transmitted from one generation to the next. The primary duty of monastics is to practice and directly experience the truth of the teachings and subsequently, through example and instruction, to inspire others to emulate them. In order to have a real impact on society and to guard their own integrity, they must practise what they preach.

An air of peaceful seclusion surrounds the forest monastery. Unlike the central, social role of the village monastery, it acts more as a counterpoint and honest mirror to worldly life and it was precisely in search of such a monastery that Luang Por had come so far. He felt inspired by the diligence and gentle aloofness of the monks of Wat Kow Wongkot and was keen to learn about the way of practice that Luang Por Pew had established there. Luang Por wanted to study the teachings written on the cave walls and continue his own study of the Monks' Discipline. So it was with these considerations in mind that Luang Por and Pra Tawan were granted permission to spend their first Rains Retreat as *tudong* monks at Wat Kow Wongkot.

A prominent characteristic of Luang Por's practice and in later years, of his teachings, was the emphasis that he laid on the Monk's Discipline. It was partly his frustration with the ignorance and disinterest that his fellow monks showed towards the *Vinaya*[1] that had led him to leave the village monastic system. But although an intellectual interest in the Discipline had been kindled early in Luang Por's monastic life, it was only after setting off on *tudong* that he felt able to approach it in a practical way, as a code to live by. Characteristically, he gave himself to an intense scrutiny of the two most detailed texts available - the classic fifth century manual *Visuddhi Magga* and the nineteenth century Thai commentary, *Pubbasikkha vannana.* These two works, especially the latter, deal with subtle [some might say nit-picking] details of the rules, in an antique dusty prose that would tax the enthusiasm of all but the most ardent. Luang Por studied them as avidly as one of more worldly tastes might devour best-sellers.

A Simple Monk

In the Samyutta Nikāya it is related that on one occasion Venerable Radha went to pay homage to the Buddha and requested a short teaching "so that having heard the Dhamma from the Blessed One, I might dwell alone, withdrawn, diligent, ardent and resolute. " Then having "delighted and rejoiced in the Blessed One's words he rose from his seat, and, after paying homage to the Blessed One, keeping him on his right, he departed." This was Ajan Cha's way also. He does not seem to have ever felt the need for close and continuous guidance from an enlightened teacher. Despite the profound impression Luang Boo Mun made upon him for instance, he stayed with that great master a mere two days and never returned for a second visit. Teachers were a resource that he drew upon to inform his own singular aspiration and self-discipline. Ajan Cha said that in the presence of teachers he would not usually ask many questions but preferred to listen, observe and learn from his own experience. It is not that he held a principled objection to such a commitment however. Indeed as a teacher himself, he stressed the importance of young monks spending the first five years of their monastic career in "dependence" on a senior monk. In later years he would tell his own disciples that they were luckier than he had been: in the first years of monkhood they received from him the kind of guidance that he had never had when he was their age.

Of the monks that Ajan Cha looked up to and praised to his disciples, the two that took pride of place, apart from Luang Boo Mun, were Luang Boo Thongrat and Luang Boo Ginree. These two monks were friends. They belonged to the small fraternity of Luang Boo Mun's disciples who maintained their affiliation with the Mahānikāya sect. Their personalities could hardly have been more different. While Luang Boo Thongrat was fierce and unconventional, Luang Boo Ginree was quiet and unobtrusive. Ajan Cha praised Luang Boo Thongrat's fearlessness and sense of humour, Luang Boo Ginree's simplicity, his ability to maintain mindfulness in all postures, and his patient attention to detail.

It was with Luang Boo Ginree that Ajan Cha had the most contact. He spent little time with Luang Boo Thongrat. Indeed no record survives of exactly when and how often they met, although their first meeting has become legendary thanks to Luang Boo Thongrat's greeting of the young monk he'd never met before with the words "So you're Cha, are you?"Ajan Cha's relationship to Luang Boo Ginree is clearer. It began in that hot season of 1950 and lasted until the latter's death in 1979. In the last years of Luang Boo Ginree's life he was cared for by monks sent from Wat Pa Phong by Ajan Cha.

Luang Boo Ginree had led an eventful monastic life. After receiving teachings from Luang Boo Mun and Luang Boo Sow, he had spent many years wandering on tudong, including over ten years in Burma. He was one of only a handful of monks of his generation to have visited the Buddhist Holy Places in North-East India. Yet by the time Ajan Cha knew him Luang Boo Ginree did not have the air of a hard and seasoned traveller. He wore about him, like an old well-used robe, a modest self-sufficiency and ease that spoke of someone with nothing more to prove to himself. He seemed content with what each moment brought him. Ajan Cha soon found that the fact that he rarely spoke was not mere taciturnity, but rather the fruit of a sweet, gentle nature so at home in silence that he rarely saw reason to disturb it with speech. He was an industrious man who would spend his days tinkering, pottering, sewing, cleaning. All of his requisites he made himself and used them until they fell apart. As he got older his appearance became ever more shabby and decrepit, but as Ajan Cha discovered, his mind remained bright and clean.

Ajan Cha's initial visit to Wat Nong Hee, Luang Boo Ginree's monastery was a short one. He found Luang Por Ginree's customarily elliptic and poetical advice on practice hard to understand, and yet intriguing. Every now and again a blunter teaching got through. He was impressed enough to decide to return for the rains:

> At that time I'd hear the teachers giving Dhamma talks about letting go, letting go and I still couldn't really understand. Luang Boo Ginree asked me to sew a set of robes. I went at it flat out. I wanted to get it over and done with quickly. Once the task was done, I thought, I'd be free of business and able to get down to some meditation. One day Luang Boo walked over. I was sewing out in the sun, totally unaware of the heat. I just wanted to get finished so that I could devote myself to meditation. He asked me:
>
> "What's the hurry?"
>
> "I'm hurrying to get finished"
>
> "When you've finished what are you going to do?"
>
> "I'm going to meditate."
>
> "After you've done that what are you going to do?"
>
> "I'm going to do so and so."
>
> "Then when you've finished that what are you going to do?"
>
> "I'm going to do so and so"
>
> "And then what will you do?"

There would be no end of this.

He said,

"Don't you realize that it's just this sewing that is your meditation. Where are you rushing off to? You've already gone wrong. Craving is flooding through your head and you've no idea what's going on."

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

No woman no cry

But the old demon of lust was still lurking in the shadows, biding its time. While practising at Wat Ban Dtorng in Nakhon Panom province, Ajan Cha became aware, with a mixture of excitement and fear, that he was the object of the glances and modest smiles of an attractive woman. To realize that he is desired adds a new dimension to a monk's imaginings, an extra twist of the knife. Ajan Cha began to look forward to and to dread in equal measure the meal time when he would be painfully conscious of the presence of the young widow of Ban Dtorng village.

A young widow is apt to be looked on with some suspicion if a sudden surge of faith carries her to the monastery every morning, especially if the wat contains young monks to see and be seen by. If in addition to her youth she is beautiful and wealthy, there may well be consternation in the kitchen, where the old ladies like to spice their pounding of green papaya with a sprinkling of gossip and speculation. Ajan Cha's devotee was soon noticed and resented. In Isan folklore, the wily young widow entrapping the innocent monk secretly chafing in his purity, is a familiar theme. Its popularity is perhaps due to the singularity of such a subtle courtship initiated, cued and paced by the woman rather than the man. At Ban Dtorng it was almost as if the protagonist was following the script of the minstrels. She would bring her son to the daily meal offering and ensure that he got close to Ajan Cha in a way that she could not herself. Before long Ajan Cha had conceived a warm affection for the boy and as his thoughts turned more and more to the mother, paternal feelings for the boy aggravated the wavering in his mind.

Desire has its own logic and imperatives. Resolutions that had such a short time before been so inspiring to him in his meditation practice now seemed to Ajan Cha flat and unconvincing. His mind was wrought by conflict. One night, the most compelling fantasies, ranging from the innocent and romantic to the coarse and obscene threatened to completely flood his mind. He realized in a cold sweat that the dam of his restraint was beginning to crack. A few minutes later his things were packed and he was urgently rousing his companion Pakaou Gaaw. "Can't you wait until tomorrow morning?" "No." Ajan Cha's voice was gruff in the darkness, "we're going right now." And so they left,

with Ajan Cha striding grimly along the dusty moonlit path and an old disgruntled pakaou some yards back, struggling to keep up.

A problem with robes

After Ajan Cha had abandoned the life of the wandering mendicant and established his monastery, Wat Nong Pa Phong, he would often, in the course of Dhamma talks to the Sangha, refer to his early days of practice. In relating his experiences as a young monk he would emphasise his own weaknesses and the problems he had faced, with a self-deprecating humour and frankness. Ajan Cha was a shrewd psychologist. He wanted his disciples to see that their teacher had been through the very same apparently boundless quagmire that they themselves were struggling through and had come out on the other side. On one occasion he recalled how in his first year of tudong he experienced a great craving for requisites and suffered accordingly.

> When I entered the circle of forest monks, their requisites all seemed so beautiful. Their bowls were immaculate and the colour and texture of their robes looked so good. I didn't have a single piece of cloth that wasn't unsightly. I wanted a new *jeewaun* (main robe). I still didn't have a two-layer *sanghāti* (outer robe). I was full of discontent.
>
> I went up to Seesonkrahm District and Luang Por Phut gave me an old robe that he'd been wearing for four years. I was really happy. The border was all torn, but I managed to find a discarded bathing cloth to make a patch. The colour of the patch didn't fit. It looked like the border stripe on the skirts that the local women wore. When I went on almsround everyone looked at me. They stared so much that I felt discouraged. It was a problem. I was embarrassed and re-dyed the cloth, but no matter how much I tried, it was just too old to take the colour well. Pra Kroo Jan had said to let him know if I needed any requisites, but I was determined not to ask for anything and so I just carried on like that, until Ajan Sawai observing my patience and my way of practice, sewed me a robe. That made me feel happy. If I'd asked for a robe from him at the start I would have been uncomfortable about receiving it, because it would have been acquired through expressing my desires. So my views flipped over. Now I looked down on anything that had been purchased, ordered or asked for. But if I acquired something without seeking it, even if it was not in particularly good condition, as long as it was still repairable it seemed wonderful.
>
> On that trip to Seesonkrahm I had one small *angsa*. I couldn't ask for another, it would have been an offence against the Discipline. I didn't know what to do. I wanted a new one. My mind was restless and agitated. I worried about robes so much that I worked out how to make a jeewaun. I planned out step by step what I'd do with the cloth, even though there was no sign of a prospective

donor. While I was walking jongkrom I'd be marking out the robe in my mind. Whenever I got some cloth, I thought, I'd be able to get down to work straight away. I was obsessed.

On almsround all I saw were the markings on the cloth. I went through it so often in my mind that I worked it all out. I was as absorbed in that imaginary robe as a flea or louse who'd made it its home. I'd never seen anyone make the two-layered sanghāti before but I worked it out: I was so interested and I had such a strong desire that I gave it a lot of thought. I determined the method of sewing the robe and of attaching the border, every last detail, until I could do it, until I could visualise it all very clearly. So when I was offered some cloth I was able to start straight away. Why not? I was proficient. I could cut the main robe and as for the two-layer sanghāti I was even more fluent. How could I fail to be after being so obsessed?

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

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

I sat down and started thinking, "Why did the Buddha make us monks suffer so much. You can't ask for cloth, you can't do anything to help yourself." I felt dispirited: both my jeewaun and my sabong were torn. I sat in meditation and was able to make a fresh resolve. I thought "Alright, whatever happens I'm not going to give up. If I've got no robes I'll just go naked." My mind was really fired up. I thought I'd take things to the limit and see what it would be like. From then on I wore robes patched front and back and gave up thoughts of changing them.

I went to pay respects to Tahn Ajan Ginree again. While I was staying with him I wasn't like the others and neither was he. He was watching me. I didn't ask for anything while I was there; whenever my robes ripped a bit more, I found cloth to patch them. He didn't invite me to stay and I didn't ask to stay, and yet I stayed anyway, steadily continuing my practice. We didn't speak to each other. It was almost like a kind of contest. Just before the Rains Retreat he must have told one of his relations that there was a monk come to stay whose robes were in tatters. He asked them to make a new set from some hand-woven cloth that had been offered

a short while before: thick, sturdy material dyed in jackfruit dye. The nuns sewed the whole thing by hand using "corpse-pulling thread". I was overjoyed. I wore that robe four or five years without a single rip. The first time I wore it, it looked like a big earthenware pot, because the new cloth was very stiff and didn't adapt to the shape of my body. When I walked it made a loud "sooapsahp sooapsahp" sound. With my sanghāti worn on top of it, the extra two layers of cloth made me look even more immense. If I'd worn that robe up a mountain and met a yellow tiger I'm sure it wouldn't have dared attack. Its roar would have died in its mouth. It would have been completely bemused by the stiff yellow figure in front of it. I didn't ever grumble about that robe and after I'd been wearing it for a year or so it started to soften up. I wore that robe for a long time and to this day I'm conscious of the debt of gratitude I owe to Luang Boo Ginree for giving it to me without being asked. It was great good fortune. From the time I received that robe my feelings of discontent left me.

When I looked at my actions from the past until the present and into the future, it made me remember that whatever volitional action isn't false and doesn't cause distress, makes one feel content and happy, that is good kamma. It was the opinion I held and perceiving its truth made it seem that things were starting to fit into place and so I accelerated my meditation practice for all I was worth.

Ajan Cha kept up his walking meditation even if the sun was fierce or the rain was pouring down, until the centre of his walking path was worn into a furrow. Luang Boo Ginree, on the other hand hardly walked at all. Sometimes he might be seen strolling up and down his meditation path two or three times and then sitting down in a shady place, start to patch a piece of cloth or//.

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

Ajan Cha was to say many years later that the longer he lived with Luang Boo Ginree the more he respected him He summarised the important lesson he had learned:

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

During the Rains Retreat, sexual desire – a thrashing, pounding storm of it – returned to assail Ajan Cha's body and mind just as he was putting everything into his meditation

practice. A modern interpretation might be that such single-minded introspection brought repressed desires to the surface. The most usual way for the forest teachers to describe this phenomena however, is to personalize the defilements as tyrants who have held sway over the mind for countless lifetimes, and now seeing a threat to their hegemony react violently with the most powerful forces at their disposal. Whatever the explanation, Ajan Cha suddenly found himself in that hot damp forest, engulfed in a realm of vaginas. Eyes open or closed, tens, hundreds of the hallucinatory images surrounded him, devastatingly real. The intensity of the lust was almost unbearable, as fierce in its way as the fear he had felt in the cremation forest. There was nothing to do but grimly endure.

Some explanation may be called for to make clear the full extent of Ajan Cha's predicament. The Buddha taught that on the path to enlightenment sexual desire can, and eventually indeed must be, completely transcended. To this end monks undertake an absolute form of celibacy in order to isolate and reveal the impermanent, unsatisfactory and impersonal nature of sexual desire, and thus uproot identification with it. The weight of the Discipline is thrown behind this practice by making intentional emission of semen one of its most serious offences. A monk who transgresses is liable to a period of penance and rehabilitation that is deeply embarrassing to him personally (he has, for instance, to [acknowledge his offence to the Sangha on every day of the penance) and inconvenient for the monastic community as a whole. Even if he stops short of masturbation, a monk who makes the slightest deliberate attempt to excite himself sexually or physically relieve sexual feelings, commits an offence. He is given, therefore, absolutely no choice but to face up to the tension of lust. Until liberating insight arises – and few are ever completely successful in their efforts to experience that – it is by patient endurance, calmness of mind and confidence in the value of struggling with such feelings that the monk must be sustained.

Ajan Cha was in constant fear of ejaculation. He did not dare walk jongkrom: he was afraid that if the friction of his sabong stimulated his penis too much he would be unable to control himself. He asked a layman to make him a walking path deep in the forest and at night time he would walk there, his sabong hitched up around his waist. It was a full ten days before the alluring visions and the lust they engendered finally faded. Many years later Ajan Cha told his oldest friend Phor Phut that the vaginas belonged to all his wives of previous existences. Perhaps his remark was spoken in jest, perhaps not, but whatever the origin of the visions, this episode was to prove the one last great hurrah of his sexual nature.

Sexual desire is a major problem for many young monks and in later years Ajan Cha was to speak of this incident to his disciples on a number of occasions. He was keen for them to see that such feelings were natural and that with determination could be transcended. He himself had survived the onslaught not through an intimidating amount of concentration or dazzling wisdom, but with good old-fashioned teeth-gritting endurance and a clear recognition that this, too, was bound to be impermanent. In 1968, when the

first biography of Ajan Cha was being written, he insisted that this episode be included. His biographer was rather uneasy about how such frank revelations would go down with the general public. It was not, after all, the usual bill of fare in the lives of saints. Ajan Cha said that if he omitted that passage, then he could just forget about the whole book.

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

Ajan Cha remained at Nong Hee until the hot season of the following year, 1948, when, under a searing sun, he resumed his wandering once more. But first, following the ancient tradition, he offered to Luang Boo Ginree a tray of candles, incense and toothwoods that he had made himself from the astringent *kotah* tree, and asked forgiveness for any faults he might have knowingly or unknowingly committed during his stay. Luang Boo Ginree praised Ajan Cha's dedication to practice but warned him of the distractions that might arise with his gift for expounding the Dhamma.

"Tahn Cha, everything in your practice is fine. But be wary of giving talks."

Sleeping on an old path

Some days into their walk, Ajan Cha and his companion Pra Leuam stopped overnight in a cremation forest that formed an oasis of green in a desert-like expanse of cracked earth criss-crossed with low crumbling dikes. Within two months, after the coming of rain and yearly planting, that sand and dust would be transformed into waterlogged paddy fields, a sea of vibrant rice plants. But now it baked under a harsh sun and on their return from almsround in the ramshackle village that languished a mile away to the north, the monks sweated profusely.

Two teenage boys followed them out of the village. They asked permission to accompany the monks as students and attendants. Having made sure that their families had no objection Ajan Cha agreed. He was moved by their resolution:

> These two lads were physically handicapped but they had faith in the Buddha's teachings and volunteered to share the hardships of the tudong life. They gave me plenty of food for thought. One of them had good legs and good eyes but was stone deaf. We would have to converse with him by making signs. The other one's eyes and ears were alright but he had a deformed leg that would

> often get caught in the good one as he walked along and make him fall to the ground. They followed us because it was their own deepest wish to do so and their handicaps couldn't deter them in any way.

The tudong monk has many hours a day to turn the light inwards on his mind which, as a result of the interest afforded it, often enters into a naturally reflective mode. The echoing call of a far-off gibbon, a decomposing snake on the path, a sudden cooling breeze – the small events of the day and the feelings they evoke become raw material for inquiry. Observations and insights which for the non-meditator would normally be drowned by the incessant internal din may acquire a powerful resonance. Walking along the bone-hard paths of Nakhon Panom, accompanied by the incessant shrill of crickets from the neighbouring trees – some covered in blossoms of lush, improbable pinks, yellows and reds, others shrunken and desiccated – Ajan Cha felt his mind turning to his new young companions. The boys' guts and determination seemed to him an excellent example of the power of the mind to overcome obstacles. They did not choose to be born with such difficulties and neither was it the wish of their parents, and yet their lives were dominated by their handicaps. As the Buddha had taught so often: all beings are born of their actions, are its owners and heirs. Nevertheless, through a wise response to one's kammic inheritance, Ajan Cha was reminded by these boys, dignity may be found.

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

> These boys are physically handicapped it's true, but if they wandered off the path into a thick forest they'd realize what was happening. Although I'm physically strong I'm handicapped as well – by the defilements in my mind. And if they were to lead me into a dark forest would I be aware of it? The boys are of no harm to anyone, but when people's minds are crippled by the defilements, then they can cause untold turmoil and distress to other people.

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

As they scouted for places to put up their glots Ajan Cha noticed a small overgrown path winding up through the jungle to the hill-side. He was reminded of an old folk saying that he had never really understood, "Don't sleep on an old forest path." He decided to ignore the advice and see what would happen. Ajan Cha sent Pra Leuam off some distance into the forest and then instructed the two boys to set up their places about half-way between the two monks. As for Ajan Cha he put up his glot right across the

overgrown path. After bathing, everyone began to practise meditation. Ajan Cha kept his mosquito net rolled up so that the two boys could still see him if they felt afraid. Late that night he finally laid down mindfully on his right side in the Lion's posture. He was lying across the old path, with his back to the forest, facing out in the direction of the village. At first it seemed that nothing would happen, that it was simply another groundless superstition. But just as sleep was about to draw him inwards Ajan Cha caught the faint sound of dry leaves crackling. Something large was moving towards him at a slow confident pace. As it got closer and closer Ajan Cha could hear the sound of its breathing and smelt on the wind the unmistakably rank odour that meant a tiger. He tried to lie as still as a rock, but one part of his mind panicked and he started to shake uncontrollably. Fear was short-lived however; the warrior spirit began to assert itself:

> Forget about life. Even if the tiger doesn't kill me, I'm going to die anyway. And if I die following in the footsteps of the Buddha then it's a meaningful death. If I've never killed and eaten a tiger in the past then it won't hurt me. If I have, let it eat me and settle the debt.

In times of intense fear the Buddha taught monks to recollect the virtues of the Triple Gem. He likened its salutary effect on the mind to the sight that an army's battle standard has on a soldier in the heat of battle. Recollecting the virtues of the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha, and the purity of his own sīla as his refuge, Ajan Cha felt immediately fortified. Meanwhile the tiger had stopped and was motionless behind him in the night. He could hear it breathing about four or five metres away. He felt the awful tension of waiting for the quickening of that breath and sudden huge lunge from behind him that would mean the end of his life. And yet now the thoughts and fears were somehow away from him, outside of his mind. The tiger did not move. A few moments later, Ajan Cha heard it turn around and slowly return into the depths of the forest. The sound of crackling leaves gradually faded.

The "Encounter with a Tiger" is an almost obligatory episode in the hagiographies of the great forest teachers of Northeast Thailand; indeed along with the unexpected encounter with a lover of previous lives (on almsround, at a ceremony; the girl swoons, the monk's legs buckle), it is one of the best-loved clichés. But of course a cliché is not an untruth – the incidents did take place – but perhaps it would only be fair to the almost-extinct Thai tiger to add that there are no known cases of them eating (or even snacking on the choicer parts of) a tudong monk. The tiger is by no means the most dangerous creature in the forest. When suprised or frightened by a human being, especially a monk, it will almost always, with dignity, leave the scene. Not so elephants. Although the Western image of the elephant tends to be of a genial beast who gives rides on its back, never forgets, and has a penchant for cream buns, in the wild it can be an unpredictable and casually violent colossus. Its way of dealing with annoying humans is either to stamp on them or grab them with its trunk and smack them against a tree. Luang Boo Mun considered bears the most dangerous creature and would give a special whistle to warn them of his coming. But fear is of course impervious to logic and statistics. There is something primeval and

evocative in the tiger. William Blake did not choose to compose a metaphysical lyric about an elephant. For Ajan Cha, being suddenly propelled into what he at least perceived as a life-and-death situation, summoned forth a power in his mind that he was not aware existed. He later said of this incident that as soon as he gave up all concern for his life, simply let go without regrets or fear, he was filled with a deep calm and contentment that was informed by a mindfulness and wisdom of great keenness. His mind was bold and unflinching, ready to face whatever happened. It was a marvelous thing.

Good Friends

> Alone should a monk sit, alone should he rest.
> Without laziness he should wander alone.
> Alone he should tame himself.
> Alone he should find joy in the forest life.
> [Dhammapada v.305]

Ajan Cha began to feel an almost physical hunger for solitude. As his practice progressed so did the sense of responsibility he felt for his companions appear as more and more of a hindrance to it. He realized that he had reached a point at which he needed to withdraw into himself and develop his meditation without external distractions. He discussed the matter with Pra Leuam who offered to take the two boys home. The next day the parting took place. Alone for the first time Ajan Cha strode purposefully away, and if a slight queasiness in the base of his stomach disturbed the feelings of excitement and exultation at a new-found freedom, he paid it no heed.

The following afternoon Ajan Cha came upon a deserted monastery just outside the village of Ban Ka Noy. It seemed an appropriate place for the work he had to do, and he put up his glot in the dusty hall. Alone at last, Ajan Cha felt untrammeled and free. He intensified his efforts, sustaining a close and alert awareness over his eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, not allowing his mind to seek the least distraction in the sensual world. This, he knew, was the most effective method of preventing a dissipation of mental energy, and enhancing his ability to focus on a single point in meditation.

Sense impressions can have as much impact on the meditator as strong variable winds on a tight-rope walker. Indulgence in the pleasurable sound of a young woman's voice singing in a nearby field, or eating a few mouthfuls too much of sticky rice at the morning meal are hardly evil acts. They can, nevertheless, throw the mind frustratingly out of kilter for many hours. On almsround Ajan Cha kept his eyes steadily downcast, responded to the enquiries of the local villagers in a taciturn manner – right now he did not wish for social visits from the faithful laity – and strived to keep a firm grasp of his meditation object on every measured step of the way. As soon as he had finished his meal and washed his bowl at the well, he would start to walk the first of the day's many hours of jongkrom. Even for a man of Ajan Cha's resilience however, his body did not always

measure up to the demands of his spirit. Before long Ajan Cha's feet were so swollen from his exertions that he had to reluctantly abandon his walking practice and devote himself exclusively to sitting meditation. It was three days before the severe pains in his feet subsided.

In the deserted monastery he dwelt in, small signs of former inhabitants were all around him. There were discoloured books behind the altar eaten through by termites, candle wax drippings on the floor. It was a created solitude, one born of rejection and so was sad in a way that the most remote mountain top or cave could never be. One day, to his exasperation, Ajan Cha began to feel lonely.

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

Ajan Cha said that when that thought arose he had an insight that he was to make use of from that day onwards:

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

Spontaneous Combustion

Ajan Cha continued on his wanderings looking for peaceful places to practice until one day he reached Ban Kohk Yaou where he came across a deserted monastery about half a kilometre from the edge of the hamlet. His mind felt light and tranquil. It was as if there was some kind of gathering of forces.

One night there was a festival on in the village. Some time after eleven o'clock, while I was walking jongkrom, I began to feel rather strange. In fact this feeling (an unusual kind of calmness and ease) had first appeared during the day. When I became weary from walking I went into the small grass-roofed hut to sit and was taken by surprise. Suddenly my mind desired tranquillity so intensely that I could hardly cross my legs quickly enough. It just happened by itself. Almost immediately the mind did indeed become peaceful. It felt firm and stable. It wasn't that I couldn't hear the sounds of merrymaking in the village; I could still hear them, but if I wished to, I could not hear them. It was strange. When I paid no attention to the sounds there was silence. If I wanted to hear them I could and felt no irritation. Within my mind it was as if there were two objects standing there together but with no connection between them. I saw the mind and its sense object established in different areas like a kettle and a spittoon placed by a monk's seat. I realized that if concentration is still weak you hear sounds but when the mind is empty then it's silent. If a sound arises, and you look at the awareness of it, you see that the awareness is separate from the sound. I reflected: "Well how else could it be? That's just the way it is. They're unconnected." I kept considering this point until I realized, "Ah, this is important: when continuity *(santati)* between things is broken then there is peace *(santi)*. Formerly there had been santati and now from it had emerged santi. I continued with my meditation. My mind was completely indifferent to all external phenomena.

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

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

Once my mind had reverted to normality a question arose: "What happened?" and the answer appeared, "These things are natural phenomena; there's no need to be perplexed by them." Those few words were enough for my

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

I dwelt in that state for as long as it wanted me. I don't know how such a place could exist; it was difficult to fathom and it's difficult to talk about. There's nothing that it could be compared to. The third time the mind stayed in that realm was the longest and then when the time was up it withdrew to a normal state. Those three times, what could they be called, who could know?

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

Wrong thinking

Ajan Cha continued his practice at Ban Sohk Yaou for another three weeks before resuming his walk through Nakhon Phanom. His meditation was firmer than it had ever been but it was time to leave. "If you come across a good quiet place and your meditation is going well then stay there for a while, but not too long," the great tudong masters teach. Ajan Cha was respectful of the wisdom of this saying, of how insidiously the germ of heedlessness breeds in the warmth of familiar surroundings. He left with no regrets.

As he passed through the small villages of Sri Songkram Ajan Cha felt a profound sense of calm and fluency pervading his mind. The Dhamma flowed effortlessly, both in answering his own doubts and also those of the villagers that some nights would thread

their way to his glot lit by their smoking torches, bearing him offerings of tobacco and betel nut. He crossed over the Mekong River in a villager's small canoe and made a pilgrimage to the relics of one of the great old Lao masters. On his return he stopped at a monastery outside Ban Nong Ga. At that time his old iron bowl had a number of cracks and small holes in it and the abbot offered him a replacement. It was another opportunity for Ajan Cha to reflect on his desires for requisites and to be reminded that his practice was still not as unshakeable as he would like. At Sohk Yaou he had experienced a profound level of peace but now, not too much later, defilements led him into delusion once more.

> They offered me a bowl, but it was cracked and it had no lid. Then I remembered once as a child taking our buffaloes out to graze and seeing other lads carving vines and weaving them into hats. So I asked for some rattan. I weaved a disk and a rectangle and then joined them. So I got my bowl lid – the only thing was it looked like a sticky-rice basket. On alms round it was a real eyesore. The villagers referred to me as the "big bowl monk". I just dismissed it.
>
> I tried again. I worked day and night on it. It was wrong kind of effort, fired by craving. At night time I would light a torch and sit there alone in the forest, working away. Then one night, while I was weaving the strips backwards and forwards, my hand knocked against the end of the torch and drippings from it scalded my hand. I still have the scar to this day. I came to my senses: "What am I doing? My thinking is all wrong. Here I am, a monk, going without sleep just to get robes and a bowl. This is the wrong kind of effort." I put down the work. I sat and thought things through and then I did some walking meditation. But as I walked my mind returned to the bowl lid and I went back to the work, completely absorbed, until just before dawn. I was tired; I took a break and began to meditate. As I sat the thought came again, "This is wrong." I started to drowse a little and I saw a vision of a huge Buddha. He said, "Come here. I am going to give you a Dhamma talk." I went towards him and prostrated. He gave me a discourse about the requisites; he said that they are merely the accessories of the body and mind. I woke with a start, my body shaking. I can still hear the sound of his voice to this very day.
>
> I'd learnt my lesson now. I'd been blinded by desire but now I stopped. I worked for a reasonable time and then rested, practising walking and sitting meditation. This was a really important point. Whatever work it was, if it was still unfinished and I put it aside and went to meditate my mind would still be attached to it; I couldn't shake it off. However much I tried to lever it out of the mind it wouldn't budge. So I took it as a training of the mind, a training in abandonment, in putting down. Whatever I did I determined not to finish it quickly. After working on the bowl lid for a while I would go and practise meditation but whether I was walking or sitting my mind would be wrapped up with the bowl lid. and wouldn't concentrate on anything else. I saw how difficult it

is for the mind to let go. It clings so tenaciously. But I gained another principle of contemplation. Don't hurry to get anything finished. Do a little and then put it down. Look at your mind. If it's still going round and round with the unfinished work then look at how that feels. That's when it starts to be fun. Battle with it.

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

I came to reflect on feeling. How can you let go of pleasant and unpleasant feelings when they are still present? Its like the bowl lid. If you see one you see the other. If you can train the one you can train the other. So this was the principle. Don't do anything with the thought of getting it finished. Put it down at regular intervals and go and walk jongkrom. As soon as my mind went back to worrying about the work, I'd tell it off, oppose it, train myself, talk to myself alone in the forest. I just kept fighting! Afterwards it was less of a burden. As I kept practising I found it easier to separate work from rest.

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

Later on I remembered that as a novice I'd once seen a monk using the sap of the *geeang* tree to varnish his bowl. So I thought I'd give it a try. I went down to Ban Kohk in Lerng Nok Tah District because there's a lot of geeang wood down there and I painted my whole bowl and the lid. A layman suggested putting it in a basket and lowering it down into a well so that it would dry more quickly; three days and it should be ready to use. Fat chance. I waited over a month and it still wasn't dry. I couldn't go almsround. I couldn't go anywhere. During meditation my mind would be worrying about my bowl. I spent my whole time lifting the basket up and down that well to check on whether the varnish was dry. I really suffered. In the end I realized that even if I left it in the water for a year it probably

wouldn't dry. So I asked a layman to bring some paper to wrap around the outside of the bowl so that at least I could go on almsround. I was afraid of the kammic consequences of asking the laypeople for a new one. I just endured.

Teachings from a barking deer

On a number of the occasions mentioned above – most notably in the cremation forest – Ajan Cha's distinctive way of reflecting on his experience has been seen: a series of questions and answers takes place in his mind, or a debate between two opposing viewpoints until the truth is arrived at, some valuable lesson learnt, some decision made. He relates these episodes as if part of him stands back watching this robust dialogue take place, observing the guile of defilement and the unfazed integrity of the voice of Dhamma within him. Another time on which that skill was in evidence, and indeed probably saved his life, occurred in the heart of the mountains of Nakhon Phanom.

Ajan Cha had not seen a single human being for some days. No villages meant no alms and he was starting to become weak from lack of food. He felt tired and light-headed, his legs rubbery on the uphill slopes, his breath short. And then a fever struck. As he lay in the shade of a tree too exhausted to move, he took stock of the situation: little water, no sign of a village and his body on fire. As Ajan Cha made peace with the realization that this time, it seemed, he would not escape from death, a disturbing thought arose in his mind. Suppose a hunter should discover his corpse and send news back to Ubon. How distressing and inconvenient it would be for his family to have to come such a long way to arrange a funeral. He groped in his bag for his identification booklet. If the worst came to the worst he would burn it so that nobody would ever know who he was. Just then he was roused from these sombre thoughts by the sound of a barking deer echoing loudly through the forested valley below. It made him ask himself:

"Do barking deers and other creatures get ill?"

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

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

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

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

"Yes, that's true."

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

Dhamma Weapons

On one occasion many years later Ajan Cha spoke of his tudong years as follows.

> In those days I didn't even have a water filter; requisites were very hard to come by. I had a tiny aluminium dipper that I was very possessive of. I still smoked in those days. There were no matches then and I used a flint made from a length of bamboo, with half a lemon skin as a cap. At nighttime when I was weary from walking jongkrom then I'd sit down and light a cigarette. I reckon that if there were ever any spirits around the sound of striking that flint *bok! bok!* in the middle of the night would have frightened them all away.
>
> When I look back on the days when I was practising alone, it was painful and full of the most extreme tribulations and yet at the same time I really enjoyed it. The enjoyment and the suffering went together. Pretty much the same as eating grilled *pegah* leaves dipped in chilli sauce and ground ginger. Its delicious – but it's hot! You're eating it and the snot's flowing down, but you can't stop because it tastes so good. You're eating away and at the same time you're groaning "Oh! Oh!" That's what the practice was like in those days.
>
> You have to be really tough to practice Dhamma. It's not a light thing. It's heavy. You have to put your life on the line. A tiger's going to eat you, an elephant's going to trample you, then so be it. You think like that. When you've kept your precepts purely there's nothing more to worry about: it's as if you're already dead. If you die then it's as if there's nothing to die and so you're not afraid. This is called the weapon of Dhamma. I've been on mountaintops all over the country and this single weapon of Dhamma has always triumphed. You completely let go. You're bold. You're ready to die. You risk your life.
>
> As I thought about it I saw how the weapon of the Buddha strengthens the mind. It's the best of all weapons. I kept reflecting, looking, thinking, seeing. When the mind sees, it penetrates things completely: suffering is like this, the cessation of suffering is like this. And so there's ease and contentment. But someone who sees suffering but is content with the peaceful feelings that arise and doesn't really penetrate suffering, they have no way of knowing this. If someone is unafraid of death, if they're ready to give their life, then they don't die. Let suffering go beyond suffering and eventually it comes to an end. Comprehend it, see the truth, see the nature of things. That has real value: it makes the mind staunch and indomitable. Do you think it would be possible for such a mind to be afraid of people, to be afraid of the forest, to be afraid of wild animals? It is unwavering.
>
> All this is called *vitakka*. Vitakka raises something up and then *vicāra* investigates it. These two things keep working together until you fully penetrate the matter and then pīti arises in the mind. My hair stood on end. I thought of

walking jongkrom or of the virtues of the Buddha or the Dhamma and the rapture seeped through my whole body and refreshed it. As I sat there, my mind overflowed with joy in my actions, how I'd overcome all the obstacles, and my hair stood on end and tears started to fall. I felt even more inspiration to struggle and persevere. There was no question of discouragement arising whatever happened. There was initial and sustained application of the mind and rapture and then a happiness that was accompanied by wisdom dependent on that application of mind and that firmly established happiness. At that moment, you could say it was dependent on the power of *jhāna* if you like, I don't know. That's just how it was. If you want to call it jhāna then go ahead. Before long vitakka and vicāra was abandoned, pīti disappeared and the mind was one-pointed, samādhi was firmly established and the peace that is a foundation for wisdom had arisen.

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

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

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

Saving the sweets

That year Ajan Cha spent the Rains retreat in a small monastery belonging to the Dhammayutta Order close to the Mekong River. Although he was now a monk of ten years standing and painstakingly scrupulous with regards to the Monk's Discipline, Ajan Cha was still affiliated with the Mahānikāya Order, whose general attitude in matters of Vinaya varied from relaxed to negligent. After some initial suspicion – they'd never heard of a Mahānikāya monk who took Vinaya seriously before— the resident community allowed him to join them as a "visiting monk" i.e. without any status in their hierarchy or rights to participate in formal meetings of the Sangha. (This procedure was, and in many places still is, common although the explanation now given is that it is

required by the difference in lineage). The unspoken rationale, as has been mentioned above, was that Mahānikāya monks were at worst not proper monks and at best impure ones. It might be expected that having put so much effort into studying the Discipline, Ajan Cha would find this galling, but he remained unfazed. He was well aware of the standard upheld in Dhammayutta monasteries and was willing to accept it. He later said that he reflected that what he was didn't depend on how other people treated him (he had found the good person).

In fact, Ajan Cha's scrupulousness about the Vinaya was to have ironic results. One of the rules in the Discipline states that a monk may not consume any foodstuff that has not been formally offered into his hands; if he deliberately touches un-offered food then it becomes unallowable for him. One morning after almsround, towards the end of the retreat, the abbot was walking past the kitchen when he noticed that the bamboo sections in which sweet rice was roasting were burning, and there was nobody around to rescue them. It was a shame, he was particularly fond of that kind of sweet. He stood caught in indecision. Then after looking around to right and left he quickly turned the bamboo sections over. Just at that moment Ajan Cha, who was living in a kuti quite close to the kitchen, happened to look out of the window and saw what took place. At the meal the old abbot noticed that Ajan Cha was not eating any of the roasted sweet rice. He asked him innocently whether he had taken any and Ajan Cha's even, polite denial caused the Abbot's face to turn a deep red over his bowl. A few seconds later he loudly confessed his offence to the embarrassed community.

This anecdote may seem a little puzzling. What did the old abbot do wrong? Surely it would not have been better for him to just leave the sweet rice there to burn? Wouldn't that have been attachment to rules and conventions? To a forest monk this would be a significant story. There is no police force or external authority to compel monks to keep to the Discipline. It is an honour system. Great value is put on honesty and integrity; concealing offences is considered particularly blameworthy. Senior monks rather than being considered above the rules are expected to be the most scrupulous in their adherence to them, particularly those dealing with the restraint of sensual desires. For a senior monk not only to fall prey to such desires, but then to conceal his offence and compound it by eating the food made unallowable, would severely compromise his position of authority.

Deathly messengers

Outside the monastery was a cremation forest in which a small open-sided pavilion stood humbly amongst the graves, and in this secluded spot Ajan Cha would spend much of his time. One day, while he was sitting in meditation in the pavilion, a crow swooped down to the slender branch of a nearby tree and began to crow loudly. Ajan Cha paid no attention to it. Seeing his indifference, the crow glided down from its perch and placed the dried grass it held in its beak on the ground in front of him. It stood there staring at Ajan Cha for a while and crowing insistently, " Gah! Gah! Gah!" He was struck by the

strangeness of the crow's behaviour. It was as if the grass was some kind of gift or sign. As soon as the crow noticed it had caught Ajan Cha's interest it abandoned the grass on the ground and flew away. Three days later the villagers carried the body of a thirteen year old boy into the forest. He had died of a fever and they buried him by the side of the pavilion.

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

The phrase "cool and sober sadness" is a translation of a difficult Thai term, *salot sangwayt*. The problem in rendering this phrase accurately is not merely one of language. It is a term that employs everyday words to describe an unusual experience, one that arises as a result of Buddhist meditation and as such not fully accessible to non-meditators, even Buddhist ones. It is both like and unlike ordinary sorrow; perhaps it might be called an elevated or transfigured sorrow. Intensive Buddhist meditation practice makes the mind extremely sensitive. But this is not the sensitivity of the highly strung, it is a receptivity to the truth of the human condition that is born of a calmness and stability of mind that in the ancient simile is said to reflect the nature of things like a still forest pool. Meditation imparts a profundity and universal context to the daily tragedies of human existence. Events are experienced as external expressions of the all-embracing instability and insubstantiality being investigated within. Ajan Cha saw in the ragged group of mourners that dragged past him, as if nakedly exposed, the pain that is inseparable from love and affectionate attachment, but that for most people only becomes apparent when its object is removed. He was filled with salot sangwayt.

The truths of human existence that Ajan Cha was confronted with in the cremation forest aroused him to even greater efforts. He further increased his hours of meditation practice and reduced still more his already meagre hours of sleep. He would keep walking jongkrom even as the rain poured down and created puddles around his feet. As a rice farmer he had ploughed the fields in such weather he reasoned, why could he not endure the rain for the sake of this far more valuable work?

One day, during a meditation session, Ajan Cha had a vision. In it he saw himself walking along a road and passing by an old man wracked by pain, groaning pitifully. He stopped, did not move towards the man, but stood contemplating the sad figure for some time and then walked on. Further along the way he saw a body lying in the dirt by the side of the road. It was a man on the point of death, terribly emaciated, his breath weak

and fitful. After stopping to contemplate this sight Ajan Cha continued on his way once more. Finally he came across a bloated and discoloured corpse, its eyes protruding grotesquely, its swollen black tongue cramming the mouth, running all over with maggots. The sense of sober sadness these images evoked was all-encompassing and remained clearly in his mind's eye in the following weeks, deepening his growing disenchantment with conditioned existence and his strong desire for liberation from the attachments that still bound him to it.

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

Poo Langka

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

> I'd reach so far and then stop. I'll make a comparison: it was if I was walking along and then stopped, sank down to the ground and was unable to proceed. Then I'd go back. (But I'm talking about my awareness, you understand, about my mind). I kept persevering but I'd just keep coming back to this same place and find myself in an impasse. Halted. That was one kind of feeling. The other was like this: I'd actually collide with a barrier before turning back.
>
> I kept up my walking and sitting meditation, but I'd keep finding myself back at this same place.
>
> "What is this?" I asked myself.
>
> "Whatever it is, just ignore it," came the reply.
>
> After quite a long time it ceased but then quite soon it returned. There was a constant demand for an answer in my mind, "What is this?"
>
> At ordinary times, outside of meditation sessions, this question would be there. My mind was still disturbed and it would keep pressing for an answer. I

didn't see this thing for what it was, not to the extent of being able to let it go and so my mind kept following it around.

I started to consider who might be able to help me with my problem and I thought of Ajan Wung, who I had heard was living on top of Poo Langkah mountain with a couple of novices. I didn't know him personally but thought that he must have some attainment to be able to live in such a way.

Ajan Cha climbed up the mountain and spent three nights discussing Dhamma with Ajan Wung. Many years later Ajan Cha's related their first conversation.

Ajan Wung – Once as I was walking I stopped and contemplated my body sinking down through the ground into the earth.

Ajan Cha – Were you fully aware of what was happening, Tahn Ajan?

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

Ajan Cha – Are you sure it wasn't a dream, sir?

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

Ajan Cha – Tahn Ajan, I've come to pay my respects to you because I'm at a complete loss what to do. My experience is different from yours; it's as if I'm walking on a truncated bridge that doesn't reach to the other side of the river. I stop. There's no way ahead and I don't know what to do and so I turn around and go back. This is in my samādhi. Or sometimes I carry on right to the end but there's nowhere to go and so I return. Other times there's some kind of obstacle blocking the path and I collide with it. I can't go any further. It's been like this for a

long time now. What is it, Tahn Ajan?

Ajan Wung – It's the end, its the furthest limit of perception. When it occurs in whatever form then just stand right there and be aware of that perception. If you stand right there it will be resolved; it will change by itself, without the need for any force. Simply be aware of the nature of the perception and the state of your mind, focus your awareness and then shortly the perception will change. It will change rather as the perceptions of a child change into those of an adult. A child might like to play with a kind of toy and then, when you're grown up you see those toys and feel no wish to play with them. You play with other things.

Ajan Cha – Oh. I see now.

Ajan Wung – Don't speak too soon! There's so many things that can happen, so many things. Just remember that in samādhi anything can happen. But whatever occurs it doesn't matter as long as you don't get caught in doubts about it. When you can maintain that awareness then these phenomena start to lose their significance. The conditioning power of the mind peters out. Maybe you look closely and you see a duck. And then before long the duck has changed into a chicken. You keep your eyes on the chicken and within moments it changes into a dog. You watch the dog and then its a pig. Its confusing, there's no end to it. Focus on the mind, concentrate on it but never think you've come to the end of these kind of phenomena, because before long they'll return. But you put them down. You merely acknowledge them and let go. Then there's no danger whatsoever. Focus on them in that way so that your mind has a solid base. Don't chase after them. Once you've solved this problem then you'll be able to carry on. There'll be a gap to pass through. Old perceptions or any new ones that arise in the future are all of the same basic nature; it's merely that some are more vivid and powerful than others. But no matter how marvellous or sublime such visions might be don't make anything of them. That's just the way they are. You must really cultivate this understanding.

Ajan Cha – Why is it that some people seem to have no problems, they don't suffer, they meet no obstacles, everything goes smoothly for them?

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

Ajan Cha's mind was cleared of doubts. He felt a great surge of energy and spent the next few days practising vigorously day and night, hardly bothering to rest. His mind now able to go beyond the barriers he had erected, he was able to investigate the four elements of solidity, cohesion, vibration and heat that constitute the physical world, and the true

and conventional nature of reality. After three nights Ajan Cha paid his respects to Ajan Wung and resumed his journeying. He realized the value of a wise friend.

> Yes, you can practice on your own, but it can be slow going. When you have only your own way of looking at things, you can get caught in a circle going round and round a particular problem; but if there's someone to point out the way it's quick, there's a new path of contemplation to pursue. That's how it is for everyone: when we get stuck we stick tight.
>
> I walked down from Poo Langka mountain and at its base I came to a deserted monastery. Just then it started to rain and so I went to take shelter underneath the sālā. I was contemplating the elements and suddenly the mind became firm. Immediately it was as if I'd entered another world. Whatever I looked at was changed. I felt that the kettle in front of me was not a kettle. The spittoon was transformed and so was my bowl. Everything had changed its state, in the way that your hand seems to if you flip it over from front to back. It was like a cloud suddenly obscuring the blazing sun. It happened in a flash. I saw a bottle and it wasn't a bottle, it wasn't anything, it was just elements. It had only a conventional reality, it wasn't a true bottle. The spittoon wasn't a true spittoon, the glass wasn't a true glass. Everything had changed. It changed back and forth and then I brought the awareness inwards. I looked at everything in my body as not belonging to me, but as all possessing a merely conventional reality.

As a result of this experience Ajan Cha summarized.

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

Ajan Cha decided it was time to return to Ubon and after stopping off to pay his respects to Luang Boo Ginree once more, he set out on the long walk southwards. As on previous journeys he broke his journey at Ban Pa Dtow. The villagers were pleased to see Ajan Cha again and many came out in the evenings to hear him discourse on the Dhamma. One night, a certain couple who had been faithful supporters since his first visits to the village, came up to ask Ajan Cha if he would accept their teenage son as an attendant and train him for admission into the monkhood. It was agreed, and some days later the boy

Tongdee, a slight, rather tense figure in fresh white robes and newly-shaven head, followed Ajan Cha out on the road to Ubon. It is extremely rare for inner transformations to keep pace with external ones and there must have been a wrenching in the boy's heart as he left his village for the first[6] time. When would he see his parents again? Or his brothers and sisters? Or his friends? Or the rice fields and woods he knew so well? We may imagine a few stifled tears as self-pity and fear did their work. And yet, at the same time, his heart surely thumped, at least a little, with the excitement and adventure of it.

After a journey of some ten days, they reached Ban Gor and put up their glots in the cremation forest. Soon Tongdee was joined by a lad called Teeang and the two of them prepared for the novice "Going Forth" together. When they had learned the necessary chanting thoroughly Ajan Cha took them to one of the large monasteries in the local town where its abbot conducted the ceremony. These two boys may then lay claim to be considered Ajan Cha's first two disciples.

During his stay at Ban Gor, Ajan Cha's mother, family, relatives and friends all came to visit. There would be a group of women following him back after almsround bringing "with-rice" dishes in the *pintos* hanging from poles on their bony shoulders. Bamboo-shoot curries, fermented fish, chilli sauce, leafy morning glory and bitter *sadow*, *okraung* mangoes and *namwah* bananas – the best of whatever they had – were all offered to Ajan Cha and the two bashful ravenous novices to eat with their inevitable ball of sticky rice. Then in the evenings, after their dinner, they would come again, accompanied by their men this time, back from their fields and rested. Ajan Cha had not been home for a long time and everyone was keen to see him, some perhaps as much to hear of his adventures in distant parts as to listen to Dhamma. This was the pre-television age when oral traditions were still strong and Ajan Cha was a magical speaker who could cast a spell on his listeners with his anecdotes and similes, the sheer power and flow of his words. It would be late at night before the villagers would get back to their homes, still basking in the afterglow of his oratory. And Ajan Cha was, in a certain sense, on a mission: he was intent on persuading his mother to keep the five precepts strictly. The more he practised the more confidence he had in the teachings and often his thoughts turned to Maa Pim and how he could inspire her to develop in the Dhamma. She was one of his first successes.

To his old friends Ajan Cha had changed. The outgoing and effervescent Cha they had once known seemed, in conversation, reserved, inward, somewhat aloof. But their sadness was tempered with respect and a sense of the rightness of it; the ideal of the monk and the behaviour appropriate to him was familiar to them, and it inspired them.

After fifteen days Ajan Cha and the novice Tongdee set off walking southwards towards

[6] Tongdee eventually found himself unsuited to monastic life, but Teeang went on to become abbot of Wat Gow Noy, the first branch monastery of Wat Pa Pong.)

the district of Gantaralak and put up their glots in a large unspoilt forest outside the village of Suan Glooay. It was a fine place to practice, lay support was strong and Ajan Cha decided to stay for the Rains Retreat.

Auspicious Dreams at Suan Glooay

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

One night he dreamt that someone offered him an egg which he tossed onto the ground. The shell broke and two chicks ran out, which he caught, one in each hand, where they immediately changed into small delightful boys, just learning to walk. A voice announced that the one in his left hand was called Buuntong and the one in the right, Buuntam. After a while Buuntong caught dysentery and died nestled in his hand. The voice said, "Buuntong is dead and now only Buuntum remains." Then Ajan Cha woke up. The question arose in his mind as to the significance of the dream and the answer appeared in response that it was merely a natural phenomena. His doubts disappeared.

The next night he dreamt that he was pregnant. His belly was swollen and it was difficult to for him to move around, and yet at the same time he still felt that he was a monk. Just before he was going to give birth he was invited to take his meal in a thatched hut in the middle of a field bounded by a stream. There were already three monks upstairs in the hut and they had started their meal. Ajan Cha was close to his time and so the laypeople invited him to eat down below by himself. As the monks above ate, Ajan Cha gave birth to a radiantly smiling boy with soft hair on the back of his hands and soles of his feet. Ajan Cha's stomach had shrunk. He felt as if he'd really given birth and checked to see if there was any blood or fluid to be cleaned up but it was dry and he was reminded of the birth of Prince Siddhartha. The laypeople started to discuss what would be the best thing for a monk who'd just given birth to eat and they decided on three fried doctor fish. Ajan Cha felt exhausted and didn't want anything but he forced himself to eat so that the donors would make merit. Before starting his meal he gave the child to the laywoman to hold and on finishing they gave it back. As he received it, the child fell from his hands and he woke up. Again when the doubt arose in his mind as to what the dream meant,

simply by reminding himself that it was a natural phenomena and nothing more, his mind was put to rest.

The next night Ajan Cha dreamt once more. This time he had, together with a novice, received an invitation to take his meal on a mountaintop. The path twisted up around the mountain like the whirls on a snail. It was a full moon day and the mountain was very high, its peak cool and verdant. An exquisite piece of cloth had been made into a sunbreak for them and they sat down in its shade. After some time they were invited down to a cave in the mountainside. Ajan Cha's mother, Maa Pim, his aunt Mee and a large number of laypeople were waiting with offerings of food. Maa Pim had brought watermelon and other fruits; Maa Mee had brought grilled chicken and duck. Ajan Cha joked with his aunt that if that was the sort of food she was fond of, she should move into town and she smiled broadly. After the meal Ajan Cha gave a Dhamma talk and then he woke up.

The meaning of the dreams remain unclear. Perhaps in the first one the child Buuntong ("Goldmerit") represents worldly wealth and Buuntum ("Dhamma-merit" but also the word for "orphan"), spiritual wealth. The second and third dreams are more obscure. The fact Ajan Cha never thought it necessary to explain them is, of course, an important consideration. If anyone had suggested interpretations to him (and only a Western disciple would have been so forward!) his most likely response would have been to laugh and tell them not to think so much. And yet, one can't help wondering, if the symbolism is irrelevant then why did he consider these dreams so important? We shall never know.

Dhamma medicine

At the beginning of 1950 Ajan Cha left Suan Glooay for Bangkok where he visited the famous meditation master Ajan Cha Sot in his temple in the suburb of Bahk Nam. He arrived in a subdued Bangkok. It was a hard dark time of incessant power struggles in the capital and some months after surviving a violent coup attempt, the American-backed Field Marshal Pibun was in the midst of a ruthless campaign to suppress dissent to his rule. (Among those particularly feeling his ire, politicians with the fledgling and short-lived Isan separatist movement). But although Ajan Cha walked the same hot pavements that had recently seen blood spilt, he moved through a different world, intent only on protecting his mindfulness amongst the rush of scooters and the enticing smells of the roadside stalls. Politics, in which transient forms of craving and suffering were played out on a national stage did not interest him in the least. He was searching for the root of things. His aloofness from the passions and prejudices of the day, Ajan Cha maintained throughout his life, even in the later years of prominence and fame. He is not known to have ever expressed an opinion on a political matter. His concerns were always with matters, that in his own words, "have an end".
After a few days Ajan Cha continued his travels onwards to the former capital of Ayudhya, which lies on the banks of the Jow Prayah River some ninety kilometres upstream from Bangkok. His destination was Wat Yai Chymongkon, an historic

monastery now adopted by the Dhammayutta order, whose resident community was loosely affiliated with the Luang Boo Mun group. It was to be Ajan Cha's home for almost two years.

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

The one anecdote we have of this period is of another severe illness. In his first year at Ayudhya, Ajan Cha fell ill with a serious complaint in his digestive tract that produced a painful swelling on his left side. The intense discomfort it caused was aggravated by the return of an old asthmatic problem. He was determined not to go to the local hospital and decided to treat himself by fasting and meditation, a regime traditionally referred to as *Dhammosotha* or "Dhamma medicine". For eight days and nights, subsisting on plain water and completely abstaining from sleep, he threw everything into his meditation practice. It would be a mistake to see Ajan Cha's quiet determination to take Dhamma as his refuge, even to the point of death, as fanaticism or recklessness. At that time and place, within the context of his practice and given the increasing confidence he felt in the power and resolution of his mind, it must have seemed the obvious and most rational thing to do. Nevertheless, even he admitted afterwards how amazed he'd been at the marvellous potential unlocked when his mind had been forced into a corner. The value of pushing oneself to the edge, to do more than one thinks one can do, was to be a recurrent theme in later teachings. After eight days Ajan Cha felt the illness to be abating and when Ajan Cha Chalooay requested Ajan Cha to start eating again he readily complied. All his illnesses had disappeared and they did not return.

Return to Isan

In the hot season of 1952 Ajan Cha made his way to Ubon once more. He had been away for two years and his arrival in Ban Gor caused a stir. In the evenings he gave Dhamma talks of a power and persuasion that had never been heard before. This was a fresh vital Buddhism, relevant to the villagers' daily lives and, most of them readily admitted, irrefutable. And yet it would be untrue to suggest it provoked revolutionary changes in the community's spiritual life. Not by any means did all of the villagers go to listen and be inspired. In a sense he was also the archetypal prophet-in-his-own-land. It would take many years for some members of his family to offer him more than a perfunctory respect. A common response, and one against which Ajan Cha would in the future wage a long struggle, was that what he said was true but beyond their capacity to live by. However, Ajan Cha had sowed some strong hardy seeds in his home village and already there were many, led by his mother, that hoped that before too long Ajan Cha would come back for

good and settle down in a forest not too far from Ban Gor.

Ajan Cha walked northwards. He had decided to return once more to Ban Pa Dtow and spent the Rains Retreat, his fourteenth, at Lahn Hin Dtaak a couple of kilometres outside of the village. Now a number of monks and novices were starting to gather around him and he led them in an austere and vigorous regimen. Often they would sit in meditation or walk the whole night. One time Ajan Cha explained (one imagines there had been a little underground grumbling):

> Don't attach so much to concepts. "Night" and "day" are just worldly conventions. In an ultimate sense there's no day and no night, no waxing moon and no waning moon. If we want to we can establish a new convention and treat night as day and day as night. If we don't create any distinctions between night and day then we can forget about time altogether and put forth a constant effort."

A sense of the atmosphere of those days is given by Phra Teeang,

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

During the rains retreat of 1953, Ajan Cha left Phra Ooan, a disciple of Luang Boo Ginree, in charge of the Sangha at Tam Hin Dtaak, and spent the three months alone in a small hut, on a nearby hill called Poo Goi. Every morning after almsround Ajan Cha would take his meal with the community and after ensuring that all was well would return to his hermitage three kilometres away. The only exception to this was on the full-moon and dark moon nights when he would walk down to the monastery to participate in the formal recitation of the Discipline and to offer his disciples some rousing instruction.

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

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

Many factors affect our ability to cope with and learn from illness and physical pain. The virtues of patient endurance and good humour are obvious examples. Other qualities particularly stressed in Buddhist practice are a bare mindfulness of the present sensation (which precludes blind reactions based on fear, anxiety and aversion causing mental distress and intensifying the pain); the ability to concentrate on an object and so at appropriate times anaesthetize the pain; and most importantly a wise understanding of the impermanent, unstable and impersonal nature of the body. Thus although the Buddha stressed the value of good health and roundly criticized the excesses of the various hurt-the-body-free-the-spirit religious groups of his time, it is also true that generations of monks have experienced significant progress in their practice through rising up to the challenge of illness. A prolonged period of physical discomfort firmly handcuffs the meditator to the nitty-gritty. An almost impenetrable (because virtually invisible) barrier is breached and mortality is revealed in its sad and desolate starkness. Illness affords little room for self-deception and none in which to hide. Practice is seen as an imperative.

To a forest monk illness and pain are then not the objects of fear and resentment that they generally are to the popular mind. While staying alone on Poo Goi, Ajan Cha fell ill with an agonizing inflammation of the gums. Rather than seek medicine he chose to endure the affliction. This was not a macho defiance of physical frailty or a gesture of contempt for a despised body. Rather it was a decision that stemmed from the recognition that a meditation practice unable to withstand physical discomfort is seriously flawed and one that can transcend it, immensely powerful. Ajan Cha alternated between using his powers of concentration to suppress the pain, and making the pain itself the object of his contemplations, staying with the sensation of pain without allowing the mind to harden into its habitual reactions of fear, aversion and worry. With the mind steadied in a calm equanimity he was able to investigate the inevitability of pain and disease to the human body, and to penetrate its impermanent and impersonal nature. After seven days Ajan Cha recovered. The pain in his gums faded and was gone.

For the welfare of many

At the end of the Rains Retreat, Ajan Cha left his mountain hermitage and returned to Wat Tam Hin Dtaak. When the rains were over and the cold season had begun in its characteristic way – one night unannounced, with gusts of the north wind: a stranger pounding at the door – he asked the monks and novices to move out of their kutis and

into the surrounding forest. Each person chose a solitary spot, put up his glot at the foot of a tree and continued his practice alone. Once a week, on *Wan Pra*, there would be a group meeting and Ajan Cha would give a Dhamma talk, which in the words of one monk, would be like a timely shower of rain to young plants beginning to wilt.

The monastic community continued practising in this way until the end of February 1954 when, Ajan Cha's mother, Maa Pim, his elder brother Lah and a small deputation of villagers from Ban Gor came to visit. They had heard the news that Ajan Cha had abandoned his wanderings and was now the head of a community of monks. They came as representatives of the people of their village with a formal request: would he please, out of compassion, for the welfare and happiness of them all, establish a forest monastery near Ban Gor. Ajan Cha said yes.

Despite its harshness, the people of the Isan retain a warm affection for their land and wherever they go in search of work – and these days they may be found all over the world – they rarely forget their home. Filial piety and *kataññūkatavedī*, a sense of gratitude for and a wish to repay the things one has been freely given, are amongst the most treasured virtues of the Isan people. They draw peoples' minds back to their home village almost inexorably. In the meantime they send monthly remittances to their parents and spouses, often a large percentage of their wage. On November weekends, at the end of the Rains Retreat hundreds of coaches can be seen on the Friendship Highway, their passengers singing to the sound of a high-spirited drumming as the migrant workers of Bangkok return to the villages of Isan to offer the annual Kathina robes and financial support to their home monasteries.

Monks are not completely indifferent to such sentiments. Although forest monks may often lose contact with their families for many years in the early part of their monastic life, eventually something usually draws them back to their home district. A great many of the forest monasteries of the Isan are situated outside the home village of the founding abbot, and in the nun's section one can usually find the abbot's mother and one or two of his sisters. Once monks are confident in their own practice and consider establishing a monastery, their thoughts inevitably turn to repaying the debt of gratitude they owe to their parents and to giving something back to the village in which they grew up.

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

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