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In the early years when Ācariya Mun first began wandering *dhutanga*, he started in the northeastern province of Nakhon Phanom. From there he traveled across the provinces of Sakon Nakhon and Udon Thani, finally reaching Burma, where he stayed for awhile before returning to Thailand by way of the northern province of Chiang Mai. Staying briefly there he then traveled into Laos, practicing the ascetic way of life in Luang Prabang and later Vientiane before eventually returning to Loei province. From this northeastern locale, he wandered by stages down to Bangkok, spending a rains retreat at Wat Pathumwan monastery. Following that retreat period, he took up residence in Sarika Cave, remaining there for several years. Only upon leaving Sarika Cave did he return to the Northeast region.

During all those years of extensive wandering, he almost always traveled alone. On only a few occasions was he accompanied by another monk, and even then they soon parted company. Ācariya Mun always practiced with a single-minded resolve, which kept him aloof from his fellow monks. He invariably felt it more convenient to wander *dhutanga* alone, practicing the ascetic way of life on his own. Only after his heart had been sufficiently strengthened by higher spiritual attainment did the compassion arise which made teaching his fellow monks a priority. Such compassionate considerations were the reason why he left the peace and tranquillity of Sarika Cave to journey back to the Northeast.

Biography of ācariya Mun

Previously, his early years of wandering *dhutanga* in the northeastern provinces had given him an opportunity to instruct some of the *kammaāhāna* monks he met there. In those days, he had found a large number of *dhutanga* monks practicing in various locations throughout the Northeast. In making this return trip, Ācariya Mun was determined to teach the monks and laity who trusted his guidance, putting all his energy into the task. Returning to the same provinces he had once wandered through, he found that monks and lay people everywhere soon gained faith in him. Many of them, inspired by his teaching, ordained as monks to practice the way he did. Even some senior *ācariyas*, teachers in their own right, discarded their pride and renounced their obligations to practice under his tutelage, their minds eventually becoming so firmly established in meditation that they were fully confident of their ability to teach others.

Monks among the first generation of Ācariya Mun's disciples included Ācariya Suwan, the former abbot of Wat Aranyikawat monastery in the Tha Bo district of Nong Khai province; Ācariya Singh Khantayākhamo,¹ the former abbot of Wat Pa Salawan monastery in Nakhon Ratchasima; and Ācariya Mahā Pin Paññāphalo,² the former abbot of Wat Saddharam monastery in Nakhon Ratchasima. All three of these venerable *ācariyas* came originally from the province of Ubon Ratchathani – all have now passed away. They were influential disciples whose teaching careers helped to perpetuate Ācariya Mun's legacy for the benefit of future generations. Ācariya Singh and Ācariya Mahā Pin were brothers. Before taking up the way of practice, they thoroughly studied the Buddhist canonical texts. They were two of the senior *ācariyas* who gained faith in Ācariya Mun, discarding their pride and renouncing their obligations in order to follow the practice as he taught it. Eventually, through their teaching efforts they were able to assist many people from all walks of life.

Next in order of seniority was Ācariya Thet Thesarangsi³ who presently resides at Wat Hin Mak Peng monastery in the Sri Chiangmai district of Nong Khai province. He is a senior disciple of Ācariya Mun whose exemplary mode of practice is so inspiring that he is highly revered by monks and laity in almost all parts of the country. His manner is always simple and down-to-earth, as one would expect with his exceptionally gentle, gracious, unassuming character. He conducts himself with perfect dignity, while people from all levels of society are captivated by his eloquent discourse.

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When it comes to temperament, or personal behavior, senior *ācariyas* differ in their natural qualities of mind and character. There are *ācariyas* whose personal behavior is an excellent example for everyone to emulate: those emulating them are bound to behave in a pleasing, amicable manner that's in no way offensive to other people. The personal behavior of some other *ācariyas*, however, is pleasing and appropriate only when practiced by them personally. Should others adopt the same style of behavior it's bound to appear false, immediately offending anyone exposed to it. So it is inadvisable for most people to imitate the idiosyncratic behavior of these *ācariyas*.

The personal conduct of *Ācariya Thet*, however, is unimpeachable in this regard. Following his sterling example, one is bound to develop the kind of pleasing, amicable demeanor appreciated by people everywhere. He has such a gentle, kindly disposition that it can be easily emulated without the risk of offending others. His example is especially appropriate for Buddhist monks, whose personal behavior should always reflect a truly calm and peaceful frame of mind. *Ācariya Thet* is one of *Ācariya Mun's* senior disciples who I believe deserves the highest respect. For as long as I have known him, I have always considered him to be an eminent teacher.

Next in line is *Ācariya Fan Ajāro*⁴ who now resides at Wat Udomsophon near the village of Na Hua Chang in the Pannanikhom district of Sakhon Nakhon province. He is widely known and lauded throughout the country for his excellent spiritual practice and his virtuous conduct. His mind excels in noble qualities, the most prominent being his immense loving kindness for people of all classes. He is a monk truly worthy of the enthusiastic devotion he receives from people of every region of our country. He genuinely puts his heart into helping people in any way he can, whether materially or spiritually – like one whose benevolence knows no bounds.

The next senior disciple I shall mention is *Ācariya Khao Anālyo*⁵ who presently resides at Wat Tham Klong Phen monastery in the Nong Bua Lamphu district of Udon Thani province. As he is one of the foremost meditation masters of our time, it's very likely that the reader is already familiar with his outstanding reputation. Both his mode of practice and his level of spiritual attainment are worthy of the utmost respect. He has always preferred to practice in remote, secluded locations with such single-minded resolve that his diligence in this respect is unrivaled among his peers in the circle of *dhutanga*

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monks. Even today, at the age of 82, he still refuses to allow his declining health to curtail his customary zeal. Some people have asked me, out of concern for his failing health, why he continues to put such strenuous effort into practice when in truth he has nothing further to accomplish. They can't figure out why he remains so active and energetic. I try to explain to them that someone, who has completely eliminated the contentious factors that exploit every weakness to sap energy and hinder progress, has no debilitating lethargy left to entrap his mind in a web of delusion. Meanwhile the rest of us have amassed such a debilitating mountain of laziness that it virtually obscures us from view. As soon as we get started on some worthwhile endeavor, we become apprehensive lest the fruits of our efforts overload our capacity to store them. We worry ahead of time about how exhausted we'll be when the work becomes difficult. In the end having failed to gather those wholesome fruits, we are left with an empty basket, that is, an empty joyless heart, drifting aimlessly with no hard-earned store of merit to fall back on. Instead, we fill our empty hearts with complaints about all the difficulties we face. So laziness, this blight in our hearts, keeps throwing up obstacles to block our way. Those who have cleansed this blight from their hearts remain persistent, persevering in times of hardship. They never worry about overloading their capacity to store the fruits of their efforts. Those individuals whose hearts are pure, unblemished Dhamma, cleared of all worldly defilements, stand out majestically in all situation. Somber, sullen moods never arise in their hearts, making them perfect examples for the world to follow.

Each of the above-mentioned disciples of Ācariya Mun has certain brilliant qualities buried deep within his heart, shining there like precious gems. People having the good fortune to meet such noble teachers are bound to be rewarded with amazing insights to gladden their hearts – an experience they will cherish forever.

Ācariya Mun taught several different generations of disciples, many of whom have become important teachers in their own right. Being a meditation master of great stature rich in noble virtues, he was wonderfully clever in the way he elucidated the path of practice and its fruits. It was as though he had a miniature *Tipiāaka* etched into his heart, as was so accurately prophesied by the initial *samādhī nimitta* he saw when he first began to practice. Traveling to many regions of the country during the course of his teaching career, he instructed large

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numbers of monks and lay supporters, who in turn developed a deep devotion for him and a genuine fondness for the edifying Dhamma he taught. His spiritual impact was a direct result of having realized within himself the true nature of that Dhamma. His words thus represented that Truth which he had fully comprehended – not mere guesswork, or conjecture about what the truth should be or might be. Being absolutely certain about the Truth arising in his own heart, he taught this same Truth to others. When Ācariya Mun left Sarika Cave to return to the Northeast for the second time, he was fully determined to teach the way to as many monks and laity as possible – both his previous acquaintances who had already undergone some training, as well as those who were just beginning to establish themselves in the practice.

The Dhutanga Practices

Ācariya Mun strongly believed that the observance of *dhutanga* practices truly exemplified the spirit of the ascetic way of life. He strictly adhered to these ascetic practices throughout his life, and always urged those monks studying under his tutelage to adopt them in their own practice.

Going on almsround every day without fail, excepting only those days when a monk is deliberately abstaining from food. Ācariya Mun taught his disciples that, when walking to the village for alms, they should always have mindfulness present and remain properly restrained in body, speech, and mind. A monk should never permit his mind to accidentally become prey to the various tempting sense objects contacting his eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, or mind while walking to and from the village on almsround. He stressed that mindfulness should bring their every movement, every thought, at every step of the route, under vigilant scrutiny. This should be treated as a sacred duty requiring reflection of the utmost seriousness each time a monk prepares to go on his morning almsround.

Eating only that food which has been accepted in the alms bowl on almsround. A monk should consider the quantity of food he receives in his bowl each day to be sufficient for his needs, as befits one who is content with little, and thus easily satisfied. For him it's counter-

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productive to expect extra food by accepting the generous offerings that are made later inside the monastery. Such practices easily encourage the insatiable greed of his *kilesas*, allowing them to gain the strength to become so domineering that they're almost impossible to counteract. A monk eats whatever food is offered into his bowl, never feeling anxious or upset should it fail to meet his expectations. Anxiety about food is a characteristic of hungry ghosts – beings tormented by the results of their own bad *kamma*. Never receiving enough food to satisfy their desires, they run madly around, desperately trying to fill their mouths and stomachs, always preferring the prospect of food to the practice of Dhamma. The ascetic practice of refusing to accept any food offered after almsround is an excellent way of contravening the tendency to be greedy for food. It is also the best method to cut off all expectancy concerning food, and the anxiety that it creates.

Eating only one meal per day is just right for the meditative lifestyle of a *dhutanga* monk, since he needn't worry about food at all hours of the day. Otherwise, he could easily become more worried about his stomach than he is about Dhamma – a most undignified attitude for one sincerely seeking a way to transcend *dukkha*. Even when eating only once a day, there are times when a monk should reduce his consumption, eating much less than he normally would at that one meal. This practice helps facilitate the work of meditation, for eating too much food can make the mental faculties sluggish and unresponsive. In addition, a monk whose temperament is suited to this practice can be expected to experience results invaluable to his spiritual development. This particular *dhutanga* observance is a useful tool for eliminating the greedy mentality of practicing monks who tend to be infatuated with food.

In this respect, the safeguards that society has introduced to protect itself operate in much the same manner as the safeguards of Dhamma. Enemies of society are confronted and subdued wherever they pose a threat to wealth, property, life and limb, or peace of mind. Whether it be fierce animals, such as wild dogs, snakes, elephants and tigers, or pestilent diseases, or simply pugnacious individuals, societies all over the world possess appropriate corrective measures, or medicines, to effectively subdue and protect themselves against these threats. A *dhutanga* monk whose mind displays pugnacious tendencies in its desire for food, or any other unwholesome qualities deemed distasteful,

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needs to have effective measures for correcting these threatening tendencies. Thus, he will always possess the kind of admirable self-restraint which is a blessing for him and a pleasing sight for those with whom he associates. Eating only one meal per day is an excellent way to restrain unwieldy mental states.

Eating all food directly from the alms bowl without using any other utensils is a practice eminently suited to the lifestyle of a *dhutanga* monk who strives to be satisfied with little while wandering from place to place. Using just his alms bowl means there's no need to be loaded down with a lot of cumbersome accessories as he travels from one location to another, practicing the ascetic way of life. At the same time, it is an expedient practice for monks wishing to unburden themselves of mental clutter; for each extra item they carry and look after, is just one more concern that weighs on their minds. For this reason, *dhutanga* monks should pay special attention to the practice of eating exclusively from the alms bowl. In truth, it gives rise to many unique benefits. Mixing all types of food together in the bowl is a way of reminding a monk to be attentive to the food he eats, and to investigate its true nature using mindfulness and wisdom to gain a clear insight into the truth about food.

Ācariya Mun said that, for him, eating from the bowl was just as important as any other *dhutanga* practice. He gained numerous insights while contemplating the food he was eating each day. Throughout his life he strictly observed this ascetic practice.

Investigating the true nature of food mixed together in the bowl is an effective means of cutting off strong desire for the taste of food. This investigation is a technique used to remove greed from a monk's mind as he eats his meal. Greed for food is thus replaced by a distinct awareness of the truth concerning that food: food's only true purpose is to nourish the body, allowing it to remain alive from one day to the next. In this way, neither the pleasant flavor of good foods, nor the unpleasant flavor of disagreeable foods will cause any mental disturbance that might prompt the mind to waver. If a monk employs skillful investigative techniques each time he begins to eat, his mind will remain steadfast, dispassionate, and contented – unmoved by excitement or disappointment over the taste of the food he is offered. Consequently, eating directly from the alms bowl is an excellent practice for getting rid of infatuation with the taste of food.

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Wearing only robes made from discarded cloth is another *dhutanga* observance that Ācariya Mun practiced religiously. This ascetic practice is designed to forestall the temptation to give in to the heart's natural inclination to desire nice, attractive-looking robes and other requisites. It entails searching in places, like cemeteries, for discarded pieces of cloth, collecting them little by little, then stitching the pieces together to make a usable garment, such as an upper robe, a lower robe, an outer robe, a bathing cloth, or any other requisite. There were times, when the dead person's relatives were agreeable, that Ācariya Mun collected the shroud used to wrap a corpse laid out in a charnel ground. Whenever he found discarded pieces of cloth on the ground while on almsround, he would pick them up and use them for making robes – regardless of the type of cloth or where it came from. Returning to the monastery, he washed them, and then used them to patch a torn robe, or to make a bathing cloth. This he routinely did wherever he stayed. Later as more and more faithful supporters learned of his practice, they offered him robe material by intentionally discarding pieces of cloth in charnel grounds, or along the route he took for almsround, or around the area where he stayed, or even at the hut where he lived. Thus his original practice of strictly taking only pieces of old, discarded cloth was altered somewhat according to circumstances: he was obliged to accept cloth the faithful had placed as offerings in strategic locations. Be that as it may, he continued to wear robes made from discarded cloth until the day he died.

Ācariya Mun insisted that in order to live in comfort a monk must comport himself like a worthless old rag. If he can rid himself of the conceit that his virtuous calling makes him somebody special, then he will feel at ease in all of his daily activities and personal associations, for genuine virtue does not arise from such assumptions. Genuine virtue arises from the self-effacing humility and forthright integrity of one who is always morally and spiritually conscientious. Such is the nature of genuine virtue: without hidden harmful pride, that person is at peace with himself and at peace with the rest of the world wherever he goes. The ascetic practice of wearing only robes made from discarded cloth serves as an exceptionally good antidote to thoughts of pride and self-importance.

A practicing monk should understand the relationship between himself and the virtuous qualities he aspires to attain. He must never permit pride to grab possession of the moral and spiritual virtues he

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cultivates within his heart. Otherwise, dangerous fangs and daggers will spring up in the midst of those virtuous qualities – even though intrinsically they're a source of peace and tranquillity. He should train himself to adopt the self-effacing attitude of being a worthless old rag until it becomes habitual, while never allowing conceit about his worthiness to come to the surface. A monk must cultivate this noble quality and ingrain it deeply in his personality, making it an intrinsic character trait as steadfast as the earth. He will thus remain unaffected by words of praise, or of criticism. Moreover, a mind totally devoid of conceit is a mind imperturbable in all circumstances. Ācariya Mun believed that the practice of wearing robes made from discarded cloth was one sure way to help attenuate feelings of self-importance buried deep within the heart.

Living in the forest. Realizing the value of this *dhutanga* observance from the very beginning, Ācariya Mun found forest dwelling conducive to the eerie, secluded feeling associated with genuine solitude. Living and meditating in the natural surroundings of a forest environment awakens the senses and encourages mindfulness for remaining vigilant in all of one's daily activities: mindfulness accompanying every waking moment, every waking thought. The heart feels buoyant and carefree, unconstrained by worldly responsibilities. The mind is constantly on the alert, earnestly focusing on its primary objective – the transcendence of *dukkha*. Such a sense of urgency becomes especially poignant when living far from the nearest settlement, at locations deep in remote forest areas teeming with all kinds of wild animals. In a constant state of readiness, the mind feels as though it's about to soar up and out of the deep abyss of the *kilesas* at any moment – like a bird taking flight. In truth, the *kilesas* remain ensconced there in the heart as always. It is the evocative forest atmosphere that tends to inspire this sense of liberation. Sometimes, due to the power of this favorable environment, a monk becomes convinced that his *kilesas* are diminishing rapidly with each passing day, while those remaining appear to be ever more scarce. This unfettered feeling is a constant source of support for the practice of meditation.

A monk living deep in the forest tends to consider the wild animals living around him – both those inherently dangerous and those that are harmless – with compassion, rather than with fear or apathy. He realizes that all animals, dangerous and harmless, are his equals in birth, ageing, sickness, and death. We human beings are superior to animals

merely by virtue of our moral awareness: our ability to understand difference between good and evil. Lacking this basic moral judgment, we are no better than common animals. Unknown to them we label these creatures 'animals', even though the human species is itself a type of animal. The human animal is fond of labeling other species, but we have no idea what kind of label other animals have given to us. Who knows? Perhaps they have secretly labeled human beings 'ogres',⁶ since we're so fond of mistreating them, slaughtering them for their meat – or just for sport. It's a terrible shame the way we humans habitually exploit these creatures; our treatment of them can be quite merciless. Even among our own kind, we humans can't avoid hating and harassing each other, constantly molesting or killing one another. The human world is troubled because people tend to molest and kill each other, while the animal world is troubled because humans tend to do the same to them. Consequently, animals are instinctively wary of human beings.

Ācariya Mun claimed that life in the forest provides unlimited opportunities for thought and reflection about one's own heart, and its relation to many natural phenomena in the external environment. Anyone earnestly desiring to go beyond *dukkha* can find plenty of inspiration in the forest, plenty of incentive to intensify his efforts – constantly.

At times, groups of wild boars wandered into the area where Ācariya Mun was walking in meditation. Instead of running away in panic when they saw him, they continued casually foraging for food in their usual way. He said they seemed to be able to differentiate between him and all the merciless 'ogres' of this world, which is why they kept rooting around for food so casually, instead of running for their lives.

Here I would like to digress from the main story a little to elaborate on this subject. You might be tempted to think that wild boars were unafraid of Ācariya Mun because he was a lone individual living deep in the forest. But, when my own monastery, Wat Pa Ban Tad, was first established⁷ and many monks were living together there, herds of wild boars took refuge inside the monastery, wandering freely through the area where the monks had their living quarters. At night they moved around unafraid, only a few yards from the monks' meditation tracks – so close that they could be heard snorting and thumping as they rooted in the ground. Even the sound of the monks calling to one another to come and see this sight for themselves failed

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to alarm the wild boars. Continuing to wander freely through the monastery grounds every night, boars and monks soon became thoroughly accustomed to each other. Nowadays, wild boars only infrequently wander into the monastery because ogres, as animals refer to us humans – according to Ācariya Mun – have since killed and eaten almost all the wild animals in the area. In another few years, they probably will have all disappeared.

Living in the forest, Ācariya Mun met the same situation: almost every species of animal likes to seek refuge in the areas where monks live. Wherever monks take up residence, there are always a lot of animals present. Even within the monastery compounds of large metropolitan areas, animals – especially dogs – constantly find shelter. Some city monasteries are home to hundreds of dogs, for monks never harm them in any way. This small example is enough to demonstrate the cool, peaceful nature of Dhamma, a spirit of harmlessness that's offensive to no living creature in this world – except, perhaps, the most hard-hearted individuals.

Ācariya Mun's experience of living in the forest convinced him just how supportive that environment is to meditation practice. The forest environment is ideal for those wishing to transcend *dukkha*. It is without a doubt the most appropriate battlefield to choose in one's struggle to attain all levels of Dhamma, as evidenced by the preceptor's first instructions to a newly ordained monk: Go look for a suitable forest location in which to do your practice. Ācariya Mun maintained this ascetic observance to the end of his life, except on infrequent occasions when circumstances mitigated against it. A monk living in the forest is constantly reminded of how isolated and vulnerable he is. He can't afford to be unmindful. As a result of such vigilance, the spiritual benefits of this practice soon become obvious.

Dwelling at the foot of a tree is a *dhutanga* observance that closely resembles living in the forest. Ācariya Mun said that he was dwelling under the shade of a solitary tree the day his *citta* completely transcended the world – an event that will be fully dealt with later on. A lifestyle that depends on the shade of a tree for a roof and the only protection against the elements is a lifestyle conducive to constant introspection. A mind possessing such constant inner focus is always prepared to tackle the *kilesas*, for its attention is firmly centered on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness⁸ – *rýpa*, *vedanā*, *citta*, and *dhamma* – and The Four Noble Truths⁹ – *dukkha*, *samudaya*,

nirodha, and *magga*. Together, these factors constitute the mind's most effective defense, protecting it during its all-out assault on the *kilesas*. In the eerie solitude of living in the forest, the constant fear of danger can motivate the mind to focus undivided attention on the Foundations of Mindfulness, or the Noble Truths. In doing so, it acquires a solid basis for achieving victory in its battle with the *kilesas* – such is the true path leading to the Noble Dhamma. A monk who wishes to thoroughly understand himself, using a safe and correct method, should find an appropriate meditation subject and a suitable location that are conducive for him to exert a maximum effort. These combined elements will help to expedite his meditation progress immeasurably. Used as an excellent means for destroying *kilesas* since the Buddha's time, the *dhutanga* observance of dwelling at the foot of a tree is another practice meriting special attention.

Staying in a cemetery is an ascetic practice which reminds monks and lay people alike not to be neglectful while they are still alive, believing that they themselves will never die. The truth of the matter is: we are all in the process of dying, little by little, every moment of every day. The people who died and were relocated to the cemetery – where their numbers are so great there's scarcely any room left to cremate or bury them – are the very same people who were dying little by little before; just as we are now. Who in this world seriously believes himself to be so unique that he can claim immunity from death?

We are taught to visit cemeteries so that we won't forget the countless relatives with whom we share birth, ageing, sickness, and death; so as to constantly remind ourselves that we too live daily in the shadow of birth, ageing, sickness, and death. Certainly no one who still wanders aimlessly through the endless round of birth and death would be so uncommonly bold as to presume that he will never be born, grow old, become sick, or die. Since they are predisposed toward the attainment of freedom from this cycle by their very vocation, monks should study the root causes within themselves of the continuum of suffering. They should educate themselves by visiting a cemetery where cremations are performed, and by reflecting inwardly on the crowded cemetery within themselves where untold numbers of corpses are brought for burial all the time: such a profusion of old and new corpses are buried within their bodies that it's impossible to count them all.¹⁰ By contemplating the truly grievous nature of life in this world,

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they use mindfulness and wisdom to diligently probe, explore, and analyze the basic principles underlying the truth of life and death.

Everyone who regularly visits a cemetery – be it an outdoor cemetery or the inner cemetery within their bodies – and uses death as the object of contemplation, can greatly reduce their smug sense of pride in being young, in being alive, in being successful. Unlike most people, those who regularly contemplate death don't delight in feeling self-important. Rather, they tend to see their own faults, and gradually try to correct them, instead of merely looking for and criticizing other people's faults – a bad habit that brings unpleasant consequences. This habit resembles a chronic disease that appears to be virtually incurable, or perhaps it could be remedied if people weren't more interested in aggravating the infection than they are in curing it.

Cemeteries offer those interested in investigating these matters an opportunity to develop a comprehensive knowledge and understanding of the nature of death. Cemeteries are the great gathering places of the world. All people without exception must eventually meet there. Death is no small hurdle to be easily stepped over before a thorough investigation of the issue. Before they finally crossed over, the Lord Buddha and his Arahant disciples had to study in the 'great academy' of birth, ageing, sickness, and death until they had mastered the entire curricula. Only then were they able to cross over with ease. They had escaped the snares of Māra,¹¹ unlike those who, forgetting themselves, disregard death and take no interest in contemplating its inevitability; even as it stares them in the face.

Visiting cemeteries to contemplate death is an effective method for completely overcoming the fear of dying; so that, when death seems imminent, courage alone arises despite the fact that death is the most terrifying thing in the world. It would seem an almost impossible feat, but it has been accomplished by those who practice meditation – the Lord Buddha and his Arahant disciples being the supreme examples. Having accomplished this feat themselves, they taught others to thoroughly investigate every aspect of birth, ageing, sickness, and death so that people wanting to take responsibility for their own well-being can use this practice to correct their misconceptions before it becomes too late. If they reach that 'great academy' only when their last breath is taken, it will then be too late for remedial action: the only remaining options will be cremation and burial. Observing moral precepts, making merit, and practicing meditation will no longer be possible.

Biography of Ācariya Mun

Ācariya Mun well understood the value of a visit to the cemetery, for a cemetery has always been the kind of place that encourages introspection. He always showed a keen interest in visiting cemeteries – both the external variety and the internal one. One of his disciples, being terrified of ghosts, made a valiant effort to follow his example in this. We don't normally expect monks to be afraid of ghosts, which is equivalent to Dhamma being afraid of the world – but this monk was one such case.

A Monk's Fear of Ghosts

Ācariya Mun related the story of a *dhutanga* monk who inadvertently went to stay in a forest located next to a charnel ground.¹² He arrived on foot at a certain village late one afternoon and, being unfamiliar with the area, asked the villagers where he could find a wooded area suitable for meditation. They pointed to a tract of forest, claiming it was suitable, but neglected to tell him that it was situated right on the edge of a charnel ground. They then guided him to the forest, where he passed the first night peacefully. On the following day he saw the villagers pass by carrying a corpse, which they soon cremated only a short distance from where he was staying. As he looked on, he could clearly see the burning corpse. He started to grow apprehensive the moment he saw the coffin being carried past, but he assumed that they were on their way to cremate the body somewhere else. Still, the mere sight of the coffin caused him considerable consternation, as he thought ahead to the coming night. He was worried that the image of the coffin would haunt him after dark, making it impossible for him to sleep. As it turned out he had camped on the edge of a charnel ground, so he was obliged to watch as the corpse was burned right in front of him. This sight upset him even more, causing him severe discomfort as he contemplated the prospect of having to spend the night there. Feeling very uneasy from the first sight of the corpse passing by, the feeling gradually intensified until he was so terrified that, by nightfall, he could hardly breathe.

It's pitiful to think that a monk can be so terrified of ghosts. I am recording this incident here so that those of my readers having a similar fear of ghosts may reflect on the tenacity with which this monk strove

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to confront his fear head on, and so take a valuable lesson from the past.

Once all the villagers had gone home, leaving him alone, his torment began in earnest. He could not keep his mind focused on meditation because whenever he closed his eyes to meditate, he saw a long line of ghosts moving toward him. Before long ghosts hovered around him in groups, an image which frightened him so much that all presence of mind deserted him, throwing him into a panic. His fear began in mid-afternoon, at the first sight of the corpse. By the time darkness fell all around, his fear had become so intense he was just barely able to cope.

Since ordaining as a monk, he had never experienced anything like this long struggle with visions of ghosts. At least he was mindful enough to begin reflecting: *The fear, the ghosts – all of it may simply be a delusion. It is more likely that these haunting images of ghosts are creations of my own mind.*

As a dhutanga monk he was expected to be steadfast and fearless when facing death, ghosts, or any other danger. So he reminded himself: People everywhere praise the fearless courage of dhutanga monks, yet here I am shamelessly afraid of ghosts. I'm acting like a total failure, as though I've ordained just to live in fear of ghosts and goblins without any rhyme or reason. I'm a disgrace to my fellow monks in the dhutanga tradition. I am unworthy of the admiration of people who believe we are noble warriors fearing nothing. How could I let this happen?

Having reminded himself of the noble virtues expected of a *dhutanga* monk, and roundly criticizing himself for failing to live up to these high standards, he resolved that he would force himself to face the fear directly from then on. The corpse that smoldered before him on the funeral pyre being the cause of his fear, he decided to go there immediately. Putting on his robe, he started walking straight for the funeral pyre, which he saw clearly glowing in the darkness. But after a few steps his legs tensed up, and he could hardly move. His heart pounded, his body began to perspire profusely, as though exposed to the midday sun. Seeing that this was not going to work, he quickly adjusted his tack. Starting with small, deliberate steps, he placed one foot just in front of the other, not allowing his forward motion to stop. By that time, he was relying on sheer strength of will to push his body forward. Frightened to death and shaking uncontrollably,

he nevertheless kept his resolve to walk on – as though his life depended on it.

Struggling the entire way, he eventually reached the burning corpse. But instead of feeling relieved that he had achieved his objective, he felt so faint he could barely stand. About to go crazy with fear, he forced himself to look at the partially burned corpse. Then, seeing the skull burned white from long exposure to the fire, he got such a fright that he nearly fainted straightaway. Bravely suppressing his fear, he sat down to meditate just a short distance from the burning pyre. He focused on the corpse, using it as the object of his meditation, while forcing his terrified heart to mentally recite continuously: *I'm going to die – just like this corpse, there's no need to be afraid. I'm going to die someday too – there's no point in being afraid.*

Sitting there grappling with his fear of ghosts and forcing his heart to repeat this meditation on death, he heard a strange sound just behind him – the sound of approaching footsteps! The footsteps stopped, then started again, slow and cautious as if someone were sneaking up to pounce on him from behind – or so he imagined at the time. His fear now reaching its peak, he was poised to jump up and run away, crying "Ghosts! Help!" But he managed to control this impulse and waited, listening nervously as the footsteps slowly drew nearer then stopped a few yards away. Poised to run, he heard a strange sound – like someone chewing, loud and crunchy. This sent his imagination racing: *What's it chewing on around here? Next, it'll be chewing on my head! This cruel, heartless ghost is sure to mean the end of me.*

Unable to stand the suspense any longer, he decided to open his eyes. Should the situation look drastic, he was prepared to run for his life – a far better option than just letting some terrible ghost devour him. Escaping death now, he reasoned, will give me the chance to resume my practice later with renewed diligence, whereas I gain nothing by sacrificing my life to this ghost. With that he opened his eyes and turned to look in the direction of the chewing, crunching sounds, all set to make a dash for his life. Peering through the darkness to catch a glimpse of the terrible ghost he had imagined, he saw instead a village dog, casually eating the scraps of food left by the villagers as offerings to the spirits as part of the local custom. It had come scrounging for something to fill its stomach, as hungry animals are wont to do; and it wasn't the least bit interested in him sitting there.

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Suddenly realizing that it was only a dog, the monk laughed at his own folly. Turning his attention to the dog, which showed no interest in him whatsoever, he thought: *So! You're the almighty specter that nearly drove me crazy. You've taught me the lesson of my life!* At the same time, he was deeply dismayed by his own cowardice:

"Despite my determination to confront my fears like a warrior, I was thrown into a panic as soon as I heard the sound of this dog scrounging for food – a mad *dhutanga* monk fleeing frantically for his life! It's a good thing I had enough mindfulness to wait that fraction of a second longer to discover the real cause of my fear. Otherwise, it would probably have driven me mad. Gosh! Am I really so grossly stupid as that? If so, do I deserve to continue wearing the yellow robes, the emblem of courage, for it denotes a disciple of the Lord Buddha, whose superior courage transcends all comparison? Being this useless, should I still walk for alms, and thus desecrate the food that the faithful offer with such respect? What can I do now to redeem myself after such a despicable display of cowardice? Surely no other disciple of the Buddha is as pathetic as I am. Just one inept disciple like myself is enough to weigh heavily on the *sāsana* – should there be any more, the burden would be enormous. How am I going to tackle this fear of ghosts that's just made me look so foolish? Hurry up! Take a stand, right this minute! It is better to die now than to postpone this decision any longer. Never again can I allow this fear of ghosts to trample on my heart. This world has no place for a monk who disgraces himself and the religion he represents."

With this self-admonition fresh in his mind, the monk made a solemn vow:

"I will not leave this place until I've overcome my fear of ghosts. If I have to die trying, then so be it! If I can't defeat this fear, then I don't deserve to continue living in such disgrace. Others might follow my bad example, becoming useless people themselves, thus further increasing the burden on the *sāsana*."

So he vowed to himself that, from that moment on, he would remain in that cemetery day and night as a way of dealing sternly with his fear. He focused on the corpse before him, comparing it with his own body, seeing that they were both composed of the same basic elements. As long as consciousness is there in the heart to hold everything together, then that person, or that animal, continues to

live. But as soon as consciousness departs, the whole combination of elements begins to disintegrate, and is then referred to as a corpse.

It was clear that his notion about the dog being a ghost was shamefully absurd; so he resolved that he would never again lend any credence to thoughts of being haunted by ghosts. As this incident clearly showed, his mind simply haunted itself with ghostly apparitions, and his fear was the outcome of this self-deception. The misery he suffered arose from such faith in this delusion that a mere dog, harmlessly scrounging for food, almost became a matter of life and death.

Recalling how deluded he had been for so long, trusting the self-deceptions that his mind constantly churned out, he thought:

“Although they’ve always been at work, this is the first time they have brought me so close to catastrophe. Dhamma teaches us that *saññā* is the master of deception,¹³ but until now I’ve never clearly understood what that means. Only now, inhaling the stench of my own living death, do I understand its significance: My fear of ghosts is nothing more than *saññā*’s deceptive trickery. From now on, *saññā* will never again trick me as it has in the past. I must stay put here in this cemetery until the ‘master of deception’ is dead and buried, so that the specter of ghosts will not continue to haunt me in the future. Only then will I agree to leave here. Now it’s my turn to torture to death this cunning, deceitful conjurer, then cremate its stinking corpse like that fleshly corpse I’ve just seen cremated here. Dealing a decisive blow to *saññā*’s insidious trickery – this is the only pressing matter in my life right now.”

The monk took up this challenge with such earnest resolve that whenever *saññā* caused him to suspect a ghost was lurking somewhere around him, he immediately went to that spot, exposing the deception. Forgoing sleep, he kept up this vigil throughout the night, until finally *saññā* no longer had the strength to assert its assumptions. In the early hours of the evening, he had been engaged in a struggle with external ghosts, in the guise of the village dog which had nearly been his undoing. Later, when he understood the situation and became conscious of his error, he turned his attention inward, battling his inner ghosts into submission. Beginning the moment he became aware of his folly, his fear of ghosts subsided and ceased to trouble him for the rest of the

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night. On subsequent nights, he remained alert, ready to confront any hint of fear using the same uncompromising stance. Eventually he transformed himself into a monk of incredible courage – in all circumstances. This whole experience had a profound and lasting impact on his spiritual development. His fear of ghosts gave rise to an outstanding lesson in Dhamma, thus converting him into a truly authentic monk.

I include this story in the biography of Ācariya Mun in the hope that the reader will gain some valuable insights from it, just as I trust the story of Ācariya Mun's life will prove to be of great benefit to people everywhere. As can be seen from the above story, visiting cemeteries has always been an essential *dhutanga* practice.

WEARING ONLY THE THREE PRINCIPAL ROBES is another *dhutanga* observance that Ācariya Mun followed religiously from the day he first ordained until old age and declining health eventually forced him to relax his strict adherence somewhat. In those days, *dhutanga* monks rarely settled in one location for very long, except during the three months of the rainy season retreat. They wandered through forests and mountains, traveling by foot the whole way since there were no automobiles back then. Each monk had to carry his own belongings – he could expect no help from others. For this reason, each monk took with him only as much as he could conveniently manage. Since it was awkward to be loaded down with too many things, only absolute essentials were taken. As time went on, this frugal attitude became an integral part of a monk's character. Should someone give him something extra, he would simply give it away to another monk to avoid accumulating unnecessary possessions.

The true beauty of a *dhutanga* monk lies with the quality of his practice and the simplicity of his life. When he dies, he leaves behind only his eight basic requisites¹⁴ – the only true necessities of his magnificent way of life. While he's alive, he lives majestically in poverty – the poverty of a monk. Upon death, he is well-gone with no attachments whatsoever. Human beings and *devas* alike sing praises to the monk who dies in honorable poverty, free of all worldly attachments. So the ascetic practice of wearing only the three principal robes will always be a badge of honor complementing *dhutanga* monks.

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Ācariya Mun was conscientious in the way he practiced all the *dhutanga* observances mentioned above. He became so skillful and proficient with them that it would be hard to find anyone of his equal today. He also made a point of teaching the monks under his tutelage to train themselves using these same ascetic methods. He directed them to live in remote wilderness areas, places that were lonely and frightening: for example, at the foot of a tree, high in the mountains, in caves, under overhanging rocks, and in cemeteries. He took the lead in teaching them to consider their daily almsround a solemn duty, advising them to eschew food offered later. Once lay devotees in the village became familiar with his strict observance of this practice, they would put all their food offerings into the monks' bowls, making it unnecessary to offer additional food at the monastery. He advised his disciples to eat all food mixed together in their bowls, and to avoid eating from other containers. And he showed them the way by eating only one meal each day until the very last day of his life.

WANDERING BY STAGES across the Northeast, Ācariya Mun gradually attracted increasing numbers of disciples at every new location along the way. When he stopped to settle in one place for some time, scores of monks gravitated to those areas to live with him. Having set up a temporary monastic community in the forest, sixty to seventy monks would gather there, while many more stayed close by in the surrounding area. Ācariya Mun always tried to keep his disciples spread apart, living in separate locations that were not too close to one another, yet close enough to his residence so that they could easily seek his advice when they encountered problems in their meditation. This arrangement was convenient for all, for when too many monks are living in close proximity, it can become a hindrance to meditation.

On the *uposatha* observance days, when the *Pāāimokkha*¹⁵ was recited, *dhutanga* monks came from various locations in his vicinity to assemble at his residence. After the recitation of the *Pāāimokkha*, Ācariya Mun addressed the whole assembly with a discourse on Dhamma, and then answered the monks' questions, one by one, until their doubts cleared up and everyone was satisfied. Each monk then returned to his own separate location, buoyed by the exposition of Dhamma he had just heard, and resumed his meditation practice with renewed enthusiasm.

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Although he sometimes had large groups of monks staying to train with him, he found them easy to supervise because they were all prepared to put what he taught into practice for their own spiritual benefit. Monastic life under his tutelage was so orderly and quiet that the monastery often appeared deserted. Excepting mealtimes and times when the monks assembled for meetings, a visitor coming at any other hour wouldn't have seen the monks. The place would have looked deserted with each monk having slipped into the dense forest to diligently pursue walking or sitting meditation in his own secluded spot, day and night.

Ācariya Mun often assembled the monks in the evenings at about dusk to give a discourse on Dhamma. As the monks sat together quietly listening, Ācariya Mun's voice was the only sound they heard. The rhythm of his voice articulating the essence of Dhamma was at once lyrical and captivating. Carried along by the flow of his teaching, his audience completely forgot themselves, their weariness, and the time that passed. Listening, they were aware only of the flow of Dhamma having an impact on their hearts, creating such a pleasant feeling that they could never get enough of it. Each of these meetings lasted many hours.

Within the circle of *dhutanga* monks, listening to a Dhamma discourse in this way is considered another form of meditation practice. *Dhutanga* monks have an especially high regard for their teacher and his verbal instructions. He constantly guides and admonishes them to such good effect that they tend to view his teachings as the lifeblood of their meditation practice. Showing the utmost respect and affection for their teacher, they are even willing to sacrifice their lives for him. The Venerable Ananda is an excellent case in point: He had such unwavering affection for the Buddha that he was willing to sacrifice his life by throwing himself into the path of the wild, charging elephant that Devadatta had let loose in an attempt to kill the Buddha.

In Ācariya Mun's case, *dhutanga* monks listened to his instructions with great reverence, enthusiastically taking them to heart. This was especially evident when he advised one of his monks to go live in a certain cave in order to give his practice new impetus. Monks, singled out in this manner, never objected, but faithfully followed his recommendations with genuine conviction, refusing to allow fear or concern for their safety to become an issue. Instead they were pleased, feeling that their practice was bound to be strengthened by

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living in the locations he recommended. This in turn infused them with determination to strive relentlessly both day and night. They were convinced that, if Ācariya Mun suggested a certain location to them, then their efforts there were sure to be rewarded with good results – as though they had received an assurance of success from him in advance. This could be likened to the assurance that the Lord Buddha gave to the Venerable Ananda, just prior to his *Parinibbāna*, when he told him that in three months time his heart would be free from all *kilesas*. He was predicting that the Venerable Ananda was certain to attain enlightenment, becoming an Arahant on the opening day of the First Sangha Council.¹⁶ It's obvious that devout obedience to the teacher is vitally important. It engenders an unwavering interest in practice, guards against carelessness and apathy, and so helps to anchor the basic principles of Dhamma in the disciple's heart. It facilitates the establishment of a common understanding between teacher and disciple so that instructions need not be repeated over and over until it becomes annoying and tiresome for both parties.

ĀCARIYA MUN'S SECOND TRIP to the Northeast was a cause for much interest and excitement among monks and lay supporters throughout the region. During that period, he traveled extensively teaching in almost all the northeastern provinces. He passed initially through Nakhon Ratchasima; then through Si Saket, Ubon Ratchathani, Nakhon Phanom, Sakon Nakhon, Udon Thani, Nong Khai, Loei, Lom Sak, and Phetchabun, and occasionally crossed the Mekong River into Laos to visit Vientiane and Tha Khek. He crisscrossed these areas many times in those days, but he preferred to remain longer in provinces that were mountainous and thickly forested because they were especially suitable for meditation. For instance, south and southwest of the town of Sakon Nakhon there were many forest-covered mountain ranges where he spent the rains retreat near the village of Phon Sawang in the district of Sawang Dan Din. The mountainous terrain in this area is so conducive to the ascetic way of life that it is still frequented by *dhutanga* monks today.

Monks wandering in such areas during the dry season usually slept out in the forest on small bamboo platforms. They were made by splitting sections of bamboo lengthwise, spreading them out flat, then securing them to a bamboo frame with legs, making a raised sleeping

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surface of about six feet long, three or four feet wide, and about one and a half feet above the ground. One platform was constructed for each monk and was spaced as far apart from another as the living area of the forest would allow. A large tract of forest allowed spacing of at least 120 feet with the thick foliage in between each platform acting as a natural screen. If the area was relatively small, or a large group of monks lived together in an area, then the spacing might be reduced to 90 feet intervals, though the minimum distance was usually 120 feet. The fewer the number of monks living in a particular area, the farther apart they were individually – being close enough to one another only to hear the distant sound of a cough or a sneeze. Local villagers helped each monk to clear a walking meditation track approximately 60 feet in length, which was located beside his sleeping platform. These tracks were used day and night for practicing meditation in a walking mode.

When monks fearful of ghost or tigers came to train under Ācariya Mun, he usually made them stay alone, far from the rest of the monks – a severe training method designed to draw attention to the fear so that the monk could learn to come to grips with it. He was required to remain there until he became accustomed to the wilderness environment, and inured to the tigers and ghosts that his mind conjured up to deceive him. The expectation was that, in the end, he would achieve the same good results as others who had trained themselves in this way. Then he wouldn't have to carry such a burden of fear indefinitely. Ācariya Mun believed this method accomplished better results than simply leaving a monk to his own devices, and to the very real prospect that he might never find the courage to face his fears.

Upon arriving in a new location, a *dhutanga* monk had to first sleep on the ground, collecting various kinds of leaves, or in some places straw, to make a crude mattress. Ācariya Mun said that the months of December and January were especially difficult due to the prevailing seasonal weather patterns, as the approaching cold weather met and mixed with the outgoing rainy weather. When it did rain during the winter months, a monk inevitably got drenched. Sometimes it rained continuously all night, and the umbrella-tent he used as shelter was no match for the driving rain and high winds. Still, he had no choice but to sit shivering under this makeshift shelter, enduring the dank cold and unable to move for it was impossible to see in the dark. A downpour during the daylight hours was not quite so bad. A monk still got wet, but at least he could see his surroundings and search for

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things in the forest to help shelter him from the elements without feeling totally blind. Essential items like his outer robe and his matches had to be kept in his alms bowl with the lid tightly secured. Folding his upper robe in half, he draped it around himself to keep out the cold and damp. The cloth mosquito net that hung from the suspended umbrella down to the ground formed a tent-like shelter that was indispensable for blocking out the windswept rain. Otherwise, everything got soaked and he had to endure the discomfort of having no dry robe to wear in the morning for almsround.

The months of February, March, and April saw the weather change again, as it began to heat up. Normally *dhutanga* monks then moved up into the mountains, seeking out caves or overhanging cliffs to shelter them from the sun and the rain. Had they gone to these mountainous locations in December and January, the ground would still have been saturated from the rainy season, exposing them to the risk of malarial infection. Malarial fever was never easy to cure. Many months could pass before the symptoms finally went away. It could easily develop into a chronic condition, the fever recurring at regular intervals. This kind of chronic malaria was locally referred to as 'the fever the in-laws despise', for its victims can eat well enough but they can't do any work because the fever is so debilitating. In such cases, not only the in-laws but also everyone else became fed up. No effective remedies for malaria existed then; so those who caught it had to just let it run its course. I myself quite often suffered from such chastening fevers, and I too had let them run their course as we had no medicines to treat malaria in those days. Ācariya Mun used to say that most of the *dhutanga* monks he knew during that period had been infected with malaria, including himself and many of his disciples. Some even died of it. Listening to those accounts, one couldn't help feeling a profound sympathy for him and his monks: he nearly died before gaining the necessary understanding to teach the way of Dhamma to his disciples, so they too could practice following his example.

Local Customs and Beliefs

Earlier, before Ācariya Mun and Ācariya Sao began wandering through the region to enlighten people about the nature of moral virtue and to explain the consequences of their actions and beliefs, the worship of spirits and ghosts had become endemic in the Northeast and a common aspect of everyday village life. Whether it was planting the rice, putting in a garden, building a house, or making a shed, an auspicious day, month, and year had to be determined for the start of every endeavor. Before any type of work could begin, propitiatory offerings were routinely made to placate the local spirits. Should those ritual offerings be neglected, then the least untoward thing – a common cold or a sneeze – was attributed to incurring the disfavor of the spirits. A local spirit doctor was then called in to divine the cause and pacify the offended spirit. Doctors in those days were much smarter than they are today: they unhesitatingly declared that this spirit, or that ghost, had been wronged, claiming that a certain offering or sacrifice would cure everything. Even if the supplicant was hacking and sneezing long after offering the prescribed oblation, it made no difference. Back then, if the doctor declared you cured, you were, and you felt relieved despite the symptoms. This is the reason I can so boldly assert that both the doctors and the patients of that era were very smart: whatever the doctor declared was final, and the patient accepted it without reservation. It was unnecessary to search for medical cures, since the spirit doctor and his ghosts could cure everything.

Later when Ācariya Mun and Ācariya Sao passed through these areas, reasoning with local inhabitants, and explaining the principles of truth, their preoccupation with the power of spirits and the agency of spirit doctors gradually waned. Today it has virtually disappeared. Even many of the spirit doctors themselves began taking refuge in the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha in place of the various spirits and ghosts they had been worshipping. Nowadays, hardly anyone engages in such occult practices. Traveling from village to village in the Northeast today, we no longer have to tread our way through offerings laid out for the spirits as we did in the past. Except for the odd group here or there, spirit worship is no longer an issue in people's lives. It's truly a blessing for this region that people no longer have to live their whole lives clinging to these beliefs. The people of the Northeast have long

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since transferred their faith and allegiance to the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha, thanks largely to the compassionate efforts of Ācariya Mun and Ācariya Sao to whom we all owe an immense debt of gratitude.

DURING HIS TIME IN THE REGION, Ācariya Mun taught the local people, applying all his strength and ability to render them as genuine human beings. He passed through some villages where the local 'wise men' asked him questions. They asked questions such as: Do ghosts really exist? Where do human beings come from? What is it that causes sexual attraction between men and women, since they've never been taught this? Why are male and female animals of the same species attracted to one another? From where did humans and animals learn this mutual attraction? Though I can't recall all the questions he was asked, these I do remember. I accept blame for any inaccuracies in what is recorded here as my memory has always been somewhat faulty. Even recalling my own words and other personal matters, I cannot avoid making mistakes; so my recollection of Ācariya Mun's stories is bound to be incomplete.

To the question "*Do ghosts really exist?*" Ācariya Mun's reply was:

"If something truly exists in the world, whether a spirit or anything else, it simply exists as it is. Its existence does not depend on the belief or disbelief of anyone. People may say that something exists or doesn't exist, but whether that thing actually exists or not is dependent entirely on its own nature. Its state does not alter according to what people imagine it to be. The same principle applies to ghosts, which people everywhere are skeptical about. In reality, those ghosts that frighten and torment people are actually creations of their own minds. They've come to believe that, here and there, dwell ghosts that will harm them. This in turn causes fear and discomfort to arise in them. Ordinarily, if a person doesn't mentally conjure up the idea of ghosts, he doesn't suffer from a fear of them. In a majority of cases, ghosts are just mental images created by those who tend to be afraid of them. As to whether there really are such things as ghosts in the world – even if I were to say that they do exist, there is still not enough proof to make skeptics into believers, since people have a natural tendency to deny the truth. Even when a thief is caught red-handed with stolen articles, he will often refuse to admit the truth. More than that, he'll fabricate an alibi to get himself off the hook and deny any wrongdoing. He may be

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forced to accept punishment due to the weight of the evidence against him; but, he will still continue to protest his innocence. When he is imprisoned and someone asks him what he did wrong to deserve that punishment, he will quickly answer that he was accused of stealing, but insist that he never did it. It is rare for such a person to own up to the truth. Generally speaking, people everywhere have much the same attitude.”

To the question “*Where do human beings come from?*” Ācariya Mun’s reply was:

“All human beings have a mother and father who gave birth to them. Even you yourself were not born miraculously from a hollow tree. We all obviously have parents who gave birth to us and raised us, so this question is hardly an appropriate one. Were I to say that human beings are born of ignorance and craving, this would cause more confusion and misunderstanding than if I gave no answer at all. People have no knowledge whatsoever of what ignorance and craving are, although they are present there in everyone – except, of course, in the Arahants. The trouble is people are not interested enough to make the necessary effort for understanding these things, so that leaves the obvious answer: we are born of our parents. This then opens me up to the criticism that I’ve answered too briefly. But it is hard to give a reply which goes to the truth of the matter, when the one asking the question is not really much interested in the truth to begin with. The Lord Buddha taught that both people and animals are born of *avijjā paccaya sankhāra... samudayo hoti*.¹⁷ The ceasing of birth, which is the cessation of all *dukkha*, stems from *avijjāya tveva asesavirāga nirodhā sankhārā nirodho ... nirodho hoti*.¹⁸ This condition is inherent within the heart of each and every person who has *kilesas*. Once the truth has been accepted, it becomes clear that it’s just this which leads to birth as a human being or an animal until the world becomes so crowded one can hardly find a place to live. The primary cause is just this ignorance and insatiable craving. Though we haven’t even died yet, we are already searching for a place to be born into and where we can carry on living – an attitude of mind that leads human beings and animals all over the world to birth and constant suffering. Anyone wishing to know the truth should take a look at the *citta* that’s full of the kind of *kilesas* which are frantically looking to affirm birth and life at all times. That person will undoubtedly find what he’s looking for without having to ask anyone else. Such questions merely display

a level of ignorance that indicates the inquirer is still spiritually inadequate. The *citta* tends to be the most unruly, conceited thing in the world. If no interest is taken in reigning it in, we will never become aware of how really stubborn it is, and all our noble hopes and aspirations will come to nothing.”

What is it that causes the sexual attraction between men and women and animals of the same species, since they've never been taught this? Ācariya Mun replied:

“*Rāgataōhā*¹⁹ is not to be found in any book, nor is it learned in school from a teacher. Rather, *rāgataōhā* is a stubbornly shameless condition that arises and exists in the hearts of men and women, causing those who have this vulgar condition to come under its spell and become vulgar themselves without ever realizing what’s happening. *Rāgataōhā* makes no distinction between man, woman, or animal, nationality, social status or age group. If it is strong it can easily cause disaster in the world. If there is insufficient presence of mind to restrain it and keep it within acceptable limits, sexual craving will become like runaway floodwater, overflowing the banks of the heart and spreading out to flood towns and cities, leaving ruin everywhere in its wake. Such a condition has always been able to thrive within the hearts of all living beings precisely because it receives constant nourishment and support – things which give it the strength to assert its suffocating influence continuously, sowing havoc and causing misery throughout the world. We hear only about floods occurring in towns and cities, and how they cause destruction to people and their belongings. No one is interested in noticing the flood of *rāgataōhā* engulfing the hearts of people who are quite content to let themselves and their belongings be ravaged by those surging floodwaters all year round. Consequently, no one understands the real reason for the on-going deterioration of world affairs because each and every person is contributing to and encouraging this situation by failing to recognize that *rāgataōhā* is directly responsible for the worsening situation. If we do not focus our attention on the real cause, it will be impossible for us to find any genuine sense of contentment.”

The original question asked only about that aspect of *rāgataōhā* concerning the attraction between people, completely ignoring the destruction instigated by *rāgataōhā* through hatred and anger. But in his explanation Ācariya Mun touched on the full range of detrimental results stemming from *rāgataōhā*. He said that it is *rāgataōhā* which

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dictates the passionate urges of men, women, and all the animals, facilitating the pleasure they find in each others company – this is a principle of nature. Nothing other than this gives rise to mutual affection and mutual animosity. When *rāgataōhā* uses its deceptive tricks for passionate ends, people fall in love. When it uses its deceptive tricks to bring forth hatred and anger, they inevitably hate, get angry, and harm each other. Should it wish to control people using love as a means, then people become so attracted to one another that there's no separating them. Should it wish those same people to fall under the influence of hatred and anger, then they'll feel an irresistible urge to do just that.

Ācariya Mun asked the lay people present: "Haven't you ever quarreled among yourselves? You husbands and wives who have been in love since before you were married? You asked me about it, but you should know a lot more about this matter than a monk does." To this they replied: "Yes, we've quarreled until we are sick of it and never want to again, but still we have another argument."

Ācariya Mun then continued: "You see, this is the very nature of the world: one moment there's affection, another moment there's friction, anger, and hatred. Even though you know it to be wrong, it's hard to correct. Have you ever seriously tried to correct this problem? If so, it shouldn't happen very often. Even a minimum effort should be enough to keep it under control. Otherwise, it's like eating three meals a day: in the morning you quarrel, in the afternoon you quarrel, and in the evening you quarrel – regularly around the clock. Some people even end up in divorce, allowing their children to become caught up in the conflagration as well. They are innocent, yet they too must bear the burden of that bad *kamma*. Everyone is affected by this blazing fire: friends and acquaintances keep their distance due to the shame of it all. Assuming both parties are interested in settling the issue, they should be aware that an argument is a bad thing, and stop as soon as it starts, and make an effort to correct it at that point. The matter can then sort itself out so that in the future such problems don't recur. For instance, when anger or aversion arises, first, think of the past you have shared together; and then, think of the future you will share living together for the rest of your lives. Now compare this to the malice that's just arisen. That should be enough to lay the matter to rest.

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“Mostly, people who go astray do so because they insist on having their own way. Without considering whether they’re right or wrong, they want to personally dominate everybody else in the family – something which just isn’t possible to achieve. Such arrogance spreads and rages, singeing others until everyone is scarred. Even worse, they want to exert their influence over everyone else in the world, which is as impossible as trying to hold back the ocean with your hands. Such thoughts and actions should be strictly avoided. If you persist in them they will bring your own downfall. People living together must adhere to and be guided by equitable standards of behavior when dealing with their husbands, wives, children, servants, or co-workers. This means interacting with them in a reasonable, harmonious way. Should others not accept the truth, it is they who are at fault for being so unreasonable, and it is they who will pay the price – not those who adhere firmly to guiding principles.”

ON THOSE OCCASIONS when Ācariya Mun had to teach large numbers of lay supporters, as well as the monks living with him, he would allot separate times for giving instructions. He instructed the laity from four to five p. m. He taught the monks and novices from seven p. m. onwards, at the end of which they returned to their huts to practice meditation. He tended to follow this routine on his first and second tours of the Northeast. On his third and final trip, after returning from Chiang Mai to Udon Thani, he changed this routine considerably. Rather than disrupt the sequence of events, I shall explain the adjustments he made later.

Ācariya Mun’s chief concern was teaching monks and novices. He took a special interest in those students experiencing various insights in their meditation by calling them in for a personal interview. It’s quite normal for those practicing meditation to have varying characters and temperaments, so the types of insights arising from their practice will vary accordingly – although the resulting cool, calm sense of happiness will be the same. Differences occur in the practical methods they employ and in the nature of insights that arise during meditation. Some meditators are inclined to know only things existing exclusively within their own minds. Others tend to know things of a more external nature – such as visions of ghosts or *devas*, or visions of people and animals dying right in front of them. They may see a corpse

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carried along and then dumped right in front of them or they may have a vision of their own body lying dead before them. All such experiences are beyond the capability of beginning meditators to handle correctly with any certainty, since the beginner is unable to distinguish between what is real and what is not. People who are not inclined to analyze their experiences carefully may come to a wrong understanding, believing what they see to be genuine. This could increase the likelihood of psychological damage in the future. The type of person whose *citta* tends to go out to perceive external phenomena when it 'converges' into a state of calm is quite rare – at most, about one in twenty people. But, there will always be someone in whom this occurs. It is crucial that they receive advice from a meditation master with expertise in these matters.

Listening to *dhutanga* monks as they relate their meditation results to Ācariya Mun, and hearing him give advice on ways to deal with their experiences was so moving and inspirational that everyone present became thoroughly absorbed in it. In explaining the proper method for dealing with visions, Ācariya Mun categorized different types of *nimittas* and explained in great detail how each type should be handled. The monks who listened were delighted by the Dhamma he presented, and so gained confidence, resolving to develop themselves even further. Even those who did not experience external visions were encouraged by what they heard. Sometimes the monks told Ācariya Mun how they had achieved a state of serene happiness when their hearts 'converged' into a state of calm, explaining the methods they had used. Even those who were as yet unable to attain such levels became motivated to try – or to even surpass them. Hearing these discussions was a joyous experience, both for those who were already well developed and those who were still struggling in their practice.

When the *citta* 'converged' into calm, some monks traveled psychically to the heavenly realms, touring celestial mansions until dawn; and only then did the *citta* return to the physical body and regain normal consciousness. Others traveled to the realms of hell and were dismayed by the pitiful condition of the beings they saw, enduring the results of their *kamma*. Some visited both the heavenly abodes and the hells to observe the great differences between them: one realm was blessed with joy and bliss while the other was in the depths of despair, the beings there tormented by a punishment that seemed to have no end. Some monks received visits from ethereal beings from various

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planes of existence – the heavens, for instance, or the terrestrial *devas*. Others simply experienced the varying degrees of calm and happiness coming from the attainment of *samādhi*. Some investigated, using wisdom to divide the body into different sections, dissecting each section to bits, piece by piece, then reducing the whole lot to its original elemental state. There were those who were just beginning their training, struggling as a child does when it first learns to walk. Some could not make the *citta* attain the concentrated state of calm they desired and wept at their own incompetence; and some wept from deep joy and wonder upon hearing Ācariya Mun discuss states of Dhamma they themselves had experienced. There were also those who were simply like a ladle in a pot of stew: although submerged there, it doesn't know the taste of the stew, and even manages to get in the cook's way. This is quite normal when many different people are living together. Inevitably, both the good and the bad are mixed in together. A person having effective mindfulness and wisdom will choose to keep only those lessons which are deemed to be really useful – lessons essential to skillful practice. I regret I cannot guarantee my own skillfulness in this matter. In fact, it's a problem we all face occasionally, so let's pass on and not worry about it.

On his second trip, Ācariya Mun remained teaching in the North-east for many years. Normally, he did not remain in the same place for more than a single rains retreat. When the rainy season was over, he wandered freely in the mountains and forests like a bird burdened only by its wings, contented to fly wherever it wishes. No matter where it lands in its search for food – a tree, a pond, or a marsh – it is satisfied and simply leaves all behind to fly off with no lingering attachment. It doesn't think that the trees, bark, fruit, ponds, or marshes belong to it. Like a bird, the monk who practices Dhamma, living in the forest, leads a life of contentment. But it's not easy to do, for people are social animals who enjoy living together and are attached to their homes and property. Initially, he feels a lot of resistance going out and living alone as Ācariya Mun did all his life. It is sort of like a land animal being dragged into the water. Once his heart has become closely integrated with Dhamma, however, the opposite is true: He enjoys traveling by himself and living alone. His daily routine in every posture remains entirely his own, his heart unencumbered by disturbing preoccupations. That leaves Dhamma as his preoccupation – and Dhamma promotes only contentment. The monk who is occupied

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solely with Dhamma has a heart that's cheerful and wonderfully content. He is free from the kind of hindrances which cause dullness or confusion; he is empty of all defiling preoccupations. He basks in a full-fledged, natural inner peace, never having to worry that it might alter or diminish in any way. This is known as *akālika* Dhamma: Dhamma which exists beyond space and time. It exists in the heart that has completely transcended conventional reality,²⁰ the source of all deception. Ācariya Mun was one well-gone;²¹ one completely contented in all his activities. Coming and going, sitting, standing, walking, or lying down – he remained completely contented. Although he led his disciples along this path, relatively few of the monks reached a high level of Dhamma. Yet even this small number is of great benefit to people everywhere.

WHEN ĀCARIYA MUN led his disciples on almsround he took various animals along the way as objects of contemplation, combining them with his inner Dhamma, and skillfully taught the monks who were with him. They clearly heard his every word. This was his way of teaching his disciples to be aware about the laws of *kamma*, in that even animals must receive the results of their actions. He would just point out an animal they came across as an example. Ācariya Mun insisted that animals should not be looked down upon for their lowly birth. In truth, animals have reached their time in the perpetual cycle of birth and death, experiencing the results of a past *kamma*. So it is with human birth as well. In fact, both animal life and human life consist of a mixture of pleasure and pain, each living according to the consequences of their own individual *kamma*. In one respect, Ācariya Mun brought up the subject of animals such as chickens, dogs, or cattle simply out of compassion for their plight. In another respect, he wanted to make others understand the variations in the consequences of *kamma*, indicating that – just as we have been brought to human birth by certain types of *kamma* – we too have passed through uncountable previous births of all sorts. Finally, he reflected aloud upon the very mysterious nature of those things that are responsible for birth as an animal – things that are difficult to fathom despite their presence in everyone. If we are unskillful in solving these problems, they will always be a danger to us, and we will never find a way to go beyond them. On almost every almsround Ācariya Mun spoke in this manner

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about the animals or the people whom he encountered along the way. Those who were interested in investigating these themes stimulated their mindfulness and wisdom, gaining useful ideas from him in this way. As to those who were not interested, they did not gain any benefit. Some probably wondered who he was talking about, since the monks had moved on by then and the animals he spoke about were no longer present.

IN SOME OF THE NORTHEAST PROVINCES, Ācariya Mun would give Dhamma instructions to the monks late at night on special occasions. Visible to Ācariya Mun, terrestrial *devas* gathered at a respectful distance and listened to his talks. Once he became aware of them he called off the meeting and quickly entered *samādhi*, where he talked privately to the *devas*. Their reticence on those occasions was due to the profound respect they had for monks. Ācariya Mun explained that *devas* of all levels were careful to avoid passing by the monks' dwellings on the way to see him late at night. Upon arriving they circled around Ācariya Mun three times before sitting down in an orderly fashion. Then the leader – *devas* of every plane have a leader whom they obey with great deference – would announce the realm from which they came and the aspect of Dhamma to which they wished to listen. Ācariya Mun would return their greetings and then focus his *citta* on that aspect of Dhamma requested by the *devas*. As this Dhamma arose within, he began the talk. When they had comprehended the Dhamma that he delivered, they all said “*sādhū*” three times, a sound that echoed throughout the spiritual universe.²² This exclamation was heard by everyone with celestial hearing, but not by those whose ears were like the ‘handles on a pot of soup’.

When his discourse on Dhamma ended, the *devas* again circumambulated him three times, keeping him on their right, and then returned to their realms in an elegant fashion – very different from we humans. Not even Ācariya Mun and his monks could emulate their graceful movements. For there's a great difference between the grossness of our bodies and the subtle refinement of theirs. As soon as the *deva* guests retreated to the edge of the monks' area, they floated up into the air like pieces of fluff blown by the wind. On each visit they descended in the same manner, arriving outside the monks' living area and then walking the remainder of the way. Always very graceful in their

movements, they never spoke making a lot of noise the way humans do when going to see an *ācariya* they revere. This is probably due to the refined nature of their celestial bodies, which restrict them from behaving in such a gross manner. Here is an area in which human beings can be considered superior to *devas* – talking loudly. *Devas* are always very composed when listening to a Dhamma, never fidgeting restlessly or showing any conceit that could disturb the speaking monk.

Ācariya Mun usually knew beforehand when the *devas* would be arriving. For instance, if they were planning to come at midnight, by early evening he was aware of it. On some occasions he had to cancel a scheduled meeting with the monks for that evening. At the appropriate hour Ācariya Mun left his walking meditation path and sat entering *samādhi* until the time approached for the *devas* to come. He then withdrew his *citta* up to the access level,²³ sending out the flow of his *citta* to see if they had arrived. If they had not arrived yet, he continued with his *samādhi* practice before sending his *citta* out again to check. Sometimes, the *devas* had already arrived or were just in the process of arriving. At other times, he had to wait, continuing his *samādhi* practice for some time before they came. On rare occasions, when he knew that they would be arriving late – like at one, two, or three a. m. – he would practice for a while and then take a rest, getting up to ready himself just before the *devas* were expected to arrive.

Gatherings of *devas*, who came to see Ācariya Mun, did not happen very often nor in very large numbers while he lived in the Northeast. They came only infrequently to listen in on his talks to the monks. But when they did, he would dismiss the monks as soon as he became aware of their presence, entering quickly into *samādhi* to expound on Dhamma for the *devas'* benefit. After he finished and the *devas* had departed, he would lie down to rest, arising in the morning as usual to continue his normal routine of practice. Ācariya Mun considered receiving *devas* a special responsibility. Since honoring one's promises is very important to them, he was always careful to be punctual. They were likely to be critical of a monk who missed an appointment unnecessarily.

Discussions between *devas* and monks are carried on entirely in the universal language of the heart, bypassing the multitude of conventional languages used by human beings and other types of animals. Arising from the *citta*, the substance of the inquiries turns into questions in the language of the heart which the inquiring individual clearly

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understands as if they were words in conventional language. Each word or phrase of the respondent emanates directly from the heart, so the questioner in turn understands the reply perfectly well. In fact, the language of the heart directly conveys the true feelings of the speaker, eliminating the need for explanations to clarify further, as might be required in conventional languages. Verbal communication is also a mechanism of the heart; but, its nature is such that spoken words often do not reflect the heart's true feelings, so mistakes are easily made in communicating its true intent. This incongruity will remain so long as conventional language is used as a surrogate medium for the heart's expression. Since people are unfamiliar with the language of the heart, their hearts cannot avoid using normal speech as a mechanism to facilitate communication, even though it's not very accurate in expressing the heart's true meaning. There is no possible way to solve this common dilemma – unless people learn the heart's own language and expose its mysteries.²⁴

Ācariya Mun was extremely proficient in all matters pertaining to the heart, including the skills needed to train others to become good people. The rest of us, though we are quite capable of thinking of these things for ourselves, insist on going around borrowing from others. That is, we tend to constantly travel from place to place studying under one teacher and then another. Even then, we fail to properly safeguard what we've learned, letting it slip through our grasp by forgetting what the teacher said. Thus we are left virtually empty-handed. The things we do not forget or let drop are our habitual failings: a lack of mindfulness, wisdom, and contemplative skill. Lacking the very qualities of Dhamma which instill a sense of hope in our lives, we are constantly disappointed in whatever we do in life.

ĀCARIYA MUN'S OWN MEDITATION practice, as well as his teaching duties, continued to progress smoothly, any undue disturbances having long since passed. Wherever he went he brought a refreshing calm and serenity with him. Monks and novices everywhere respected and revered him. As soon as the laity in an area heard of his arrival, they were delighted and rushed to pay him their respects with heartfelt devotion. A case in point is Ban Thum village in the district of Tha Khek where both Ācariya Mun and Ācariya Sao resided at one time or another.

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Shortly before Ācariya Mun arrived, the entire village began suffering from smallpox. The villagers were overcome with joy at the sight of Ācariya Mun's arrival, running out of their homes to welcome him and begging him to remain as their refuge. So in place of the spirits the whole village had been worshipping, Ācariya Mun had them take refuge in the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha. He guided them in the correct way to practice, such as paying daily homage to the Buddha and performing morning and evening chanting, and they gladly followed his instructions. As for Ācariya Mun, he performed a kind of internal spiritual blessing to help them; and the results were strange and marvelous to witness. Before his arrival, many people died each day from the smallpox. But from his arrival onwards, no one else died; and those who were infected quickly recovered. More than that, no new instances of the disease occurred, which astounded the villagers who had never seen or imagined such a miraculous reversal of circumstances. As a result, the community developed enormous faith in and devotion to Ācariya Mun which have persisted undiminished through each generation to the present day. This includes the local monastery's present-day abbot, who has a deep respect for Ācariya Mun. He always raises his joined palms in homage before beginning to speak about him.

Incidents such as this were made possible by the power of Dhamma in Ācariya Mun's heart which radiated forth to give comfort and happiness to the world. Ācariya Mun said that he set aside three times each day to extend loving kindness to all living beings. He would do this while sitting in meditation at midday, before retiring in the evening, and after rising in the morning. In addition to that, there were many times during the day when he sent loving kindness out specifically to certain individuals. When radiating all-encompassing loving kindness, he did so by focusing his *citta* exclusively inward and then directing the flow of his *citta* to permeate throughout all the worlds, both above and below, in all directions without interruption. At that time his *citta* had the power to extend its aura of brilliance to all worlds: limitless, all-pervasive, and brighter than a thousand suns – for there is nothing brighter than a heart that's entirely pure. The unique properties emanating from a *citta* of such purity brighten the world and imbue it with peacefulness in an indescribable and wondrous way. A *citta* having absolutely no impurities possesses only the cool, peaceful qualities of Dhamma. A compassionate, kindhearted monk with an absolutely pure heart can expect protection and reverential devotion

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from people and *devas* wherever he stays, while members of the animal kingdom feel no fear or danger in his presence. His *citta* constantly sends forth a gentle compassion to all beings everywhere without bias – much like rain falling evenly over hills and valleys alike.

Hardship and Deprivation

Upon leaving the province of Ubon Ratchathani, Ācariya Mun spent the next rainy season retreat at the village of Ban Nong Lat in the Warichabhum district of Sakon Nakhon province accompanied by the many monks and novices under his guidance. The lay men and women there reacted as if a truly auspicious person had arrived. They were all very excited – not in a frenzied way, but in an anticipatory way – at the prospect of doing good and abandoning evil. They abandoned their worship of spirits and ghosts to pay homage to the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha. At the end of the rains, Ācariya Mun went wandering again until he arrived in the province of Udon Thani where he traveled to the districts of Nong Bua Lamphu and Ban Pheu. He stayed at the village of Ban Kho for the rains retreat while spending the following rains in the Tha Bo district of Nong Khai province. He remained practicing for some time in both these provinces.

As mentioned previously, Ācariya Mun lived mostly in wilderness areas where villages were spaced far apart. Since the countryside was relatively unpopulated then, he could easily put the teaching into practice. Virgin forests abounded, full of great, tall trees which were still uncut. Wild animals were everywhere. As soon as night fell, their myriad calls could be heard echoing through the forest. Listening to such sounds, one is carried away by a sense of camaraderie and friendliness. The natural sounds of wild animals are not a hindrance to meditation practice, for they carry no specific meaning. The same cannot be said for human sounds. Be it chatting, singing, shouting, or laughing, the specific meaning is immediately obvious; and it is this significance that make human sounds a hindrance to meditation practice. Monks are especially vulnerable to the sounds of the opposite sex. If their *samādhi* is not strong enough, concentration can easily be destroyed. I must apologize to women everywhere because my intention here is not to criticize women in any way. It is the unsuccessful

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meditator that I am addressing here so that he may arouse mindfulness as an antidote to counter these influences and not merely surrender meekly to them. It's possible that one reason monks prefer to live in mountains and forests is that it allows them to avoid such things in order to relentlessly pursue the perfection of spiritual qualities until they reach the ultimate goal of the holy life.²⁵ Ācariya Mun enjoyed living in forests and mountains right up until the day he passed away, a preference which helped him to attain the Dhamma he has so generously shared with all of us.

Ācariya Mun said that if his meditation practice were compared to an illness, it would be a near-fatal one, since the training he undertook resembled physical and mental torture. There was hardly a single day when he could just relax, look around, and enjoy himself as other monks seemed to do. This was because the *kilesas* became tangled up with his heart so quickly that he barely had a chance to catch them. Should his mind wander for only a moment, the *kilesas* immediately gave him trouble. Once they had established a hold on his heart, their grip became ever tighter until he found it difficult to dislodge them. Consequently, he could never let his guard down. He had to remain totally alert, always ready to pounce on the *kilesas*, so they couldn't gain the strength to bind him into submission. He practiced diligently in this manner until he had gained sufficient contentment to be able to relax somewhat. Only then did he develop the strength of heart and ease of body necessary to teach others. From that time forward – monks, novices, and lay people from all over the Northeast sought him out. Ācariya Mun understood their situation and was very sympathetic toward them all. At certain times, so many people came to see him that there wasn't enough room for them to stay. He also had to consider the safety of others, such as the women and nuns who came to visit him. For in those days, many tigers and other wild animals were in the outlying areas, but there were very few people.

Ācariya Mun once stayed in a cave near Ban Namee Nayung village in the Ban Pheu district of Udon Thani province. Since many large tigers frequented the area around the cave, it was definitely not a safe place for visitors to remain overnight. When visitors came, Ācariya Mun had the villagers build a very high bamboo platform – high enough to be beyond the reach of any hungry tiger which might try to pounce upon the sleeping person. Ācariya Mun forbade the visitors to come down to the ground after dark, fearing that a tiger would carry

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them off and devour them. He told them to carry up containers for their toilet needs during the night. With so many vicious tigers there at night, Ācariya Mun refused to allow visitors to stay long. He sent them away after a few days. These tigers were not afraid of people – especially not of women – and would attack if given the opportunity. On some nights when Ācariya Mun was walking in meditation by the light of candle lanterns, he saw a large tiger boldly stalk a buffalo herd as it went past his area. The tiger had no fear of Ācariya Mun as he paced back and forth. Sensing the tiger, the buffaloes instinctively headed for the village. Nevertheless, the tiger was still bold enough that it continued to follow them, even while a monk walked close by.

Monks who trained under Ācariya Mun had to be prepared for anything, including the possibility of death, for danger was all around the various places where they practiced. They also had to give up any pride in their own self-worth and any sense of superiority regarding their fellow monks, thus allowing for a harmonious living situation as if they were different limbs on the same body. Their hearts then experienced a measure of contentment and, untroubled by mental hindrances, their *samādhi* quickly developed. When a monk is constrained by living under certain restrictions – for example, living in a frightening place where the food is limited and the basic requisites are scarce – his mental activity tends to be supervised by mindfulness which continuously restricts the thinking processes to the matter at hand. The *citta* is usually able to attain *samādhi* faster than would normally be expected. Outside there is danger and hardship; inside mindfulness is firmly in control. In such circumstances the *citta* might be compared to a prisoner who submits willingly to his fate. In addition to these factors, the teacher is also there to straighten him out should he go astray. The monk who practices while hemmed in by hardship on all sides will see an improvement in his *citta* that exceeds all expectations.

Nighttime in the forest is a frightening time, so a monk forces himself to go out and do walking meditation to fight that fear. Who will win and who will lose? If fear loses, then the *citta* becomes courageous and ‘converges’ into a state of calm. If the heart loses, then the only thing that emerges is intense fear. The effect of intense fear in such a situation is a sensation of simultaneously being both hot and cold, of needing to urinate and defecate, of feeling breathless and being on the verge of death. The thing that encourages fear is the sound of a tiger’s roar. The sound of roaring may come from anywhere – from

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the foot of the mountain, from up on the ridge, or out from the plains – but the monk will pay no attention to the direction. He will think only: “A tiger is coming here to devour me!” Walking all alone in meditation and so afraid that he’s shaking and useless, he is sure that it’s coming specifically for him. Not considering the broad terrain, it doesn’t occur to him that the tiger has four feet and might just be going somewhere else. His only thought is that the tiger is coming straight for his tiny plot of land – straight for this cowardly monk who is shaken by fear. Having completely forgotten his meditation practice, he has only one thought in mind which he repeats over and over again like a mantra: “The tiger’s coming here, the tiger’s coming here.” This negative train of thought merely intensifies his fear. The Dhamma in his heart is ready to disintegrate, and if, perchance, the tiger really were to wander accidentally into that place, he’d stand there mindlessly scared stiff at best; and at worst, something very unfortunate could happen.

It’s wrong to establish the *citta* with such a negative attitude. The ensuing results are bound to be harmful in some way. The correct approach is to focus the *citta* firmly on some aspects of Dhamma, either the recollection of death or some other Dhamma theme. Under such circumstances, one should never allow the mind to focus outward to imagined external threats and then bring those notions back in to deceive oneself. Whatever happens, life or death, one’s attention must be kept squarely on the meditation subject that one normally uses. A *citta* having Dhamma as its mainstay doesn’t lose its balance. Moreover, despite experiencing intense fear the *citta* is clearly strengthened, becoming courageous in a way that’s amazing beyond description.

Ācariya Mun taught his disciples that becoming firmly established in the practice means putting everything on the line – both body and mind. Everything must be sacrificed except that aspect of Dhamma which is the fundamental object of attention. Whatever occurs, allow nature to take its course. Everyone who is born must die – such is the nature of this world. There’s no point in trying to resist it. Truth can not be found by denying the natural order of things. Ācariya Mun taught that a monk must be resolute and brave in the face of death. He was particularly interested in having his disciples live in isolated wilderness areas infested with wild animals so that they could discover the virtues of meditation. Such places encourage the development of *samādhi* and intuitive wisdom. Tigers can definitely help to stimulate Dhamma in our hearts – especially if we don’t stand in awe of the

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Lord Buddha because we fail to trust his teaching, but we do stand in awe of tigers because we are convinced how vicious they can be. This conviction is a very effective aid for corralling the mind and focusing it on Dhamma, using fear as an incentive to meditate until Dhamma arises within. Consequently, when that inner Dhamma is finally realized, belief in the Lord Buddha and the Dhamma he taught will arise naturally. At that critical moment, when one is alone in the wilderness, dormant faculties of *samādhi* and wisdom will be stirred into action. If there is nothing to put pressure on the *citta*, it tends to become lazy and amass *kilesas* until it can barely function. A tiger can help to remove those *kilesas* which foster such a lazy and easy-going attitude that we forget ourselves and our own mortality. Once those insidious defilements disappear, we feel a sense of genuine relief whatever we do, for our hearts no longer shoulder that heavy burden.

Ācariya Mun emphasized that monks should go to practice meditation in places that arouse fear and avoid places that do not; otherwise, they were unlikely to achieve any strange and marvelous results. More than that, the *kilesas* might well lead them so far astray that they end up losing sight of the spiritual path, which would be regrettable. He assured his monks that unless they lived in an environment which forced them to focus internally on themselves they would find it difficult to attain a stable state of calm and their meditation practice would suffer accordingly. On the other hand, the results were bound to be good in places where they were always alert to the possibility of danger, since mindfulness – the skillful means for directing the effort – was inevitably close at hand. No one who genuinely hopes to transcend *dukkha* should succumb to the fear of death while living in what are imagined to be frightening places – like remote wilderness areas. When faced with a real crisis situation, the focus of attention should be kept on Dhamma and not sent outside of the sphere of one's own body and mind, which are the dwelling-place of Dhamma. Then the meditator can expect to experience a pervading sense of security and an inspired mental fortitude that are incontrovertible. In any case, unless that person's *kamma* dictates that his time is up, he will not die at that time – no matter what he thinks.

Ācariya Mun said that his inspiration for meditation was derived almost exclusively from living in dangerous environments, which is why he liked to teach his disciples to be resolute in threatening situations. Instead of merely relying on something vague like 'inherent

virtuous tendencies' – which are usually more a convenient fiction than a reality – in this way, they had a chance to realize their aspirations in the shortest possible time. Relying on the rather vague concept of virtuous tendencies from the past is usually a sign of weakness and resignation – an attitude more likely to suppress mindfulness and wisdom than to promote them.²⁶

To say a monk has confidence that Dhamma is the basic guarantor of his life and practice means that he sincerely hopes to live and die by Dhamma. It is imperative that he not panic under any circumstance. He must be brave enough to accept death while practicing diligently in fearful places. When a crisis looms – no matter how serious it seems – mindfulness should be in continuous control of his heart so that it stays steadfastly firm and fully integrated with the object of meditation. Suppose an elephant, a tiger, or a snake threatens him: if he sincerely resolves to sacrifice his life for the sake of Dhamma those things won't dare to cause him any harm. Having no fear of death, he will experience the courageous feeling that he can walk right up to those animals. Instead of feeling threatened, he will feel deep within his heart a profound friendship toward them which dispels any sense of danger.

As human beings we possess Dhamma in our hearts, in a way that animals do not. For this reason, our hearts exert a powerful influence over animals of all types. It makes no difference that animals are incapable of knowing this fact; there exists in our hearts a mysterious quality that has a soothing affect on them. This quality is the potent, protective power of Dhamma which softens their hearts to the point where they don't dare act threateningly. This mysterious power of the heart is something experienced internally by the individual. Others can be aware of it only if they have special intuitive knowledge. Even though Dhamma is taught and studied all over the world, it still remains a mystery if the heart has yet to attain any level of understanding in Dhamma. When the heart and Dhamma truly become one, all doubts concerning the heart and Dhamma disappear on their own because the nature of the heart and the nature of Dhamma share the same exquisite, subtle qualities. Once that state is reached, it is correct to say that the heart is Dhamma and Dhamma is the heart. In other words, all contradictions cease once the *kilesas* have been eliminated.

Normally the heart has become such an extension of the *kilesas* that we are unaware of its intrinsic value. This happens because the

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heart is so thoroughly impregnated with *kilesas* that the two become indistinguishable. The heart's real value is then obscured from view. If we allow this condition to continue indefinitely because we are indifferent about finding a solution, neither our hearts nor Dhamma will have any actual value for us. Even were we to be born and die hundreds of times, it would simply be a matter of exchanging one set of dirty clothes for another set of dirty clothes. No matter how many times we change in and out of dirty clothes we cannot escape the fact that we remain filthy. Which is certainly very different from someone who takes off his dirty clothes and exchanges them for nice clean ones. Similarly, the interchange between good and evil within the heart is an important problem that each of us should take personal responsibility for and investigate within ourselves. No one else can carry this burden for us and so give us peace of mind. It's extremely important that each and every one of us be aware that, in both the present and the future, we alone are responsible always for our own progress. The only exceptions are those, like the Lord Buddha and the Arahant disciples, who carefully developed themselves spiritually until they attained a state of total security. For them the job is completed, the ultimate goal secure. These are the Noble individuals that the rest of us take as our refuge, providing us hope for the future. Even miscreants who still understand the difference between right and wrong will take the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha as their refuge. They at least have enough sense to feel some remorse. Just as good people and bad people alike feel a natural dependence on their parents, so people of all kinds instinctively look to the Buddha as a dependable refuge.

ĀCARIYA MUN EMPLOYED many training methods with his monks to ensure that they saw clear results in their practice. Those who practiced with unwavering faith in his instructions were able to achieve such results to their own satisfaction. By following the power of his example, they became knowledgeable, respected teachers themselves. They in turn have passed on these training methods to their own disciples, so that they too can witness for themselves, through their own efforts, that the paths and fruits of the Buddha's teaching are still attainable today; that they have not completely disappeared. When looking at the life he lived and the methods he employed in training others, it is fair to say that Ācariya Mun followed a *practice of deprivation*. He and

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his disciples lived in conditions of virtual poverty in places where even the basic necessities were lacking. The simple daily requisites they depended on were usually in short supply. Encountering such an uncertain existence, those accustomed to living in carefree abundance would probably be utterly dismayed. There being nothing in this difficult lifestyle to attract them, they would surely find it most disagreeable. But the monks themselves, though they lived like prison inmates, did so voluntarily for the sake of Dhamma. They lived for Dhamma, and accepted the inconvenience and hardship associated with its practice. These conditions, which are seen as torture by people who have never submitted to them, were actually a convenient spiritual training ground for the monks who practiced in this way. Due to their determination to endure hardship and poverty it is appropriate to call this the *practice of deprivation*; for such living conditions naturally go against the grain. Monks had to literally force themselves to live in this way. During all their normal daily activities, they were required to resist the physical and mental pressure to simply follow their natural inclinations.

Sometimes it was necessary to endure days of fasting and hunger for the purpose of accelerating the practice of meditation. These periods, when monks abstain from food altogether despite their hunger, are days of uninterrupted dedication to the practice. The physical discomfort at such times is obvious, but the purpose of enduring hunger is to increase mental vigilance. In truth, fasting is a very suitable method for certain temperaments. Some types of people find that if they eat food every day their bodies tend to be vigorous but the mental endeavor – meditation – fails to progress. Their minds remain sluggish, dull and timid, so a solution is needed. One solution is to try either reducing the intake of food each day or going without food altogether, fasting – sometimes for a few days, sometimes for a longer period – and carefully observing all the while the method that gives the best results. Once it becomes apparent that a certain method is suitable, that method should be pursued intensively. For instance, should a monk discover that fasting for many days at a stretch is suitable to his temperament, then it's imperative that he accept the necessity of following that path. Though it may well be difficult, he must put up with it because he inevitably wants to gain the appropriate knowledge and skill to go beyond *dukkha*.

A person whose temperament is suited to long-term fasting will notice that the more he fasts the more prominent and courageous his heart is in confronting the various objects of the senses that were once its enemies. His mental attitude is bold, his focus sharp. While sitting in *samādhi* his heart can become so absorbed in Dhamma that it forgets the time of day; for when the heart contacts Dhamma there is no longer any concern with the passage of time or pangs of hunger. At that time, he is aware only of the delight experienced at that level of Dhamma which he has achieved. In this frame of mind, the conditions are right for catching up with *kilesas*, such as laziness, complacency, and restlessness, since they are inactive enough then for the meditator to get the better of them for the time being. If we hesitate, waiting around for a more auspicious time to tackle them, the *kilesas* will awaken first and give us more trouble. It's quite likely we'd be unable to handle them then. We could easily end up being 'elephants' for the *kilesas*, as they mount us, straddle our necks, and beat us – our hearts – into submission. For in truth our hearts have been the 'elephants' and the *kilesas* the 'mahouts' for an infinitely long time. A deep-rooted fear of this master makes us so apprehensive that we never really dare to fight back with the best of our abilities.

From the Buddha's perspective, the *kilesas* are the enemies of Dhamma; yet, from the vantage point of the world, the *kilesas* are considered our hearts' inseparable companions. It is incumbent upon us, who practice the Buddha's teaching, to battle the thoughts and deeds that are known to be our enemies, so that we can survive their onslaught, and thus become free of their insidious control. On the other hand, those who are satisfied to follow the *kilesas* have no choice but to pamper them, dutifully obeying their every command. The repercussions of such slavery are all too obvious in the mental and emotional agitation affecting those people and everyone around them. Inevitably, the *kilesas* cause people to suffer in a multitude of harmful ways, making it imperative for someone sincerely caring about his own well-being to fight back diligently using every available means. If this means abstaining from eating food and suffering accordingly, then so be it; one has no regrets. If necessary, even life itself will be sacrificed to honor the Buddha's teaching, and the *kilesas* will have no share in the triumph.

In his teachings, Ācariya Mun encouraged his monks to be courageous in their efforts to transcend the *dukkha* oppressing their hearts.

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He himself had thoroughly investigated the *kilesas* and Dhamma, testing both in a most comprehensive fashion before he finally saw the results emerge clearly in his own heart. Only after this attainment did he return to the Northeast to teach the incomparable Dhamma that he then understood so well.

ONE PROMINENT ASPECT of Ācariya Mun's teaching, which he stressed continuously during his career, was the Dhamma of the *five powers*: faith, diligent effort, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom. He said the reason for emphasizing these five factors was that a person who possessed them would always have something worthwhile to count on, no matter where he went; and, therefore, could always expect to make steady progress in his practice. Ācariya Mun separated them according to their specific functions, using them to inspire an indomitable spirit in his disciples. He gave them his own heartfelt interpretation as follows:

Saddhā is faith in the Dhamma that the Lord Buddha presented to the world. There's no doubt that each of us in this world is perfectly capable of receiving the light of Dhamma – provided we practice the way in earnest. We all accept the fact that we will have to die some day. The key issue is: will we die defeated by the cycle of *kilesas* and the cycle of *kamma* and its results? Or, will we overcome them, defeating them all before we die? No one wants to be defeated. Even children who compete at sports are keen on winning. So we should rouse ourselves and not act as if defeated already. The defeated must always endure suffering and anguish, accumulating so much *dukkha* that they cannot find a way out. When they do seek escape from their misery, the only viable solution seems to be: It's better to die. Death under those conditions is precisely defeat at the hands of one's enemy. It is a result of piling up so much *dukkha* inside that there's no room for anything else. Positive results cannot be gained from abject defeat.

If we are to die victorious, like the Lord Buddha and the Arahants, then we must practice with the same faith, effort, and forbearance as they did. We must be mindful in all our bodily and mental activities, as they were. We must take our task very seriously and not waver uncertainly like someone facing a crisis without mindfulness to anchor him. We should establish our hearts firmly in those causes that give rise to the satisfactory results that the Buddha himself attained. The

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sāsana is the teaching of a great sage who taught people that they too can develop wisdom in all its many aspects. So we should reflect on what he taught. We should not wallow in stupidity, living our whole lives in ignorance. No one considers the word 'stupid' to be a compliment. Stupid people are no use. Adults, children, even animals – if they are stupid, they are hardly any use at all. So if we remain stupid, who's going to admire us for it? We should all analyze this matter thoroughly to avoid remaining bogged down in ignorance. Wallowing in ignorance is not the way to overcome *dukkha*, and it is definitely not becoming for a *dhutanga* monk – who is expected to skillfully analyze everything.

This was Ācariya Mun's own personal interpretation of the *five powers*. He used it effectively in his own practice and taught it to his disciples as well. It is excellent instruction for inspiring mindfulness and wisdom, and an uncompromising attitude towards practice. It is highly suitable for *dhutanga* monks who are fully prepared to compete for the ultimate victory in the contest between Dhamma and the *kilesas*. This ultimate attainment is the freedom of Nibbāna, the long-wished-for supreme victory.²⁷

Graduated Teaching

Once a senior disciple of Ācariya Mun recalled that the many monks and novices living under his guidance tended to behave as though free from *kilesas*. Although they lived together in a large group, no one behaved in an unseemly manner. Whether they were on their own, in the company of others performing their duties, or attending a meeting, all were calm and composed. Those, who had never heard the monks discuss their levels of meditation with Ācariya Mun, might well suspect from observing them that they were all full-fledged Arahants. The truth became apparent only when he advised the monks on how to solve specific problems in their meditation. Each monk was advised according to his level of achievement: from basic concentration and wisdom techniques to the higher levels of concentration and insight.

Whether addressing the problems of individual disciples or instructing the whole assembly, Ācariya Mun always displayed the same

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uncompromising self-assurance. His audience was fully aware that the Dhamma he expounded was something he had actually realized within himself. He never relied on speculative assessments, such as, 'it could be like this' or 'it might be like that'. Those listening were also fully convinced that the Dhamma he taught existed potentially within all of them. Even though they had not achieved it yet, surely they would realize it for themselves one day, provided they did not falter in their efforts.

Ācariya Mun modified his talks according to the character and the level of his listeners' understanding, so that everyone who was present gained some benefit from the assembly. He was careful in explaining the teaching in all its stages, ensuring that listeners at different levels of meditation were able to understand and apply it to their individual practice in order to attain satisfactory results. When teaching lay people, he usually emphasized aspects of Dhamma that were suitable to their situation – such as, generosity, moral virtue, and meditative development – as the basis for their practice. He explained that these three *dhammas* are the basic criteria needed for birth in the human world and the foundation of the *sāsana*. Someone born as a human being must necessarily have cultivated these three *dhammas* in the past. At least one of them must have been previously developed to serve as a catalyst for being born fully human.²⁸

Generosity is a means of demonstrating one's goodwill. People, who are noble-hearted and considerate toward fellow human beings and animals in-need, sacrifice and share some of their own good fortune according to their means. Whether it's a gift of material goods, a gift of Dhamma, or a gift of knowledge of any sort, it is a gift freely given to benefit others without expectation of anything in return, except the good results of the act of giving itself. This also includes the generous gesture of forgiving those who behave wrongly or offensively. Those who are benevolent and prone to selfless giving are bound to be gracious people who stand out among their peers, irrespective of their physical appearance. *Devas*, humans, and animals all revere and cherish them. Wherever they go there will always be someone willing to help them. They never suffer acute poverty and hardship. Quite clearly, philanthropists in society are never out of fashion and rarely disliked. Even a wealthy, but stingy person looks forward to gifts from others – not to mention the hapless poor who have little hope of someone helping them. Due to the power of generosity, those who

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have developed a habit of giving will never be born into a world where they must live in hardship. Donors and their generosity have always served to maintain balance and prosperity in the world. As long as people still value self-sacrifice and extend a helping hand to one another, life on this earth will always have meaning. Generous people are inevitably hospitable and supportive which makes the world a better place to live. In this sense, generosity is absolutely essential for us all. Without it, life in this world would be a parched and barren existence.

Moral virtue is effectively a barrier that prevents people from abusing or destroying each other's material and spiritual wealth. It's the very basis of those special good qualities that every human being should have, and should never let slip away. People who do not have moral virtue to protect and maintain their inner wealth are like a fire raging through human society. Without morality's protective restraint, mistreatment and destruction would run rampant in the world to the point where there would hardly be an island of security left where a person could rest in peace. As long as people believe that material wealth is more valuable than moral virtue, they will have no real security. In such a case, even if the world economy were to flourish until material wealth was piled as high as the sun, the sun's heat would be no match for the scorching heat of an immoral world.

Moral virtue is the true foundation of human perfection that was personified by the Lord Buddha. He uncovered this truth, presenting it as a means by which a world confused and fearful of *dukkha* might rely on its restraining power to live in the cool, soothing glow of trust. Left to their own devices, people with *kilesas* will tend to think in ways that make the world oppressively hot. If these thoughts are allowed free rein, powered by the *kilesas* and untempered by even a hint of moral virtue, they will surely create innumerable poisonous 'monsters' that will spread throughout the world to devour everything in their path. The thoughts of a supremely virtuous person like the Lord Buddha, who totally eliminated the *kilesas* from his heart, produce only welcome peace and happiness in the world. Compare this with the thought patterns instigated by the *kilesas* that cause us, and everyone else, unimaginable trouble. The difference is obvious enough that we should want to search for a way to resolve this problem and stem the tide of such thoughts before it is too late. Moral virtue is like a medicine that counteracts infectious diseases as well as chronic ones. At the very

least, a patient who is sick with the '*kilesa*-fever' can find some measure of relief and hope of recovery in the practice of moral virtue. More than that, it may just effect a complete cure.

Out of his compassion, Ācariya Mun used to instruct lay people on both the merits of moral virtue and the faults of having no moral standard. These instructions went straight to the heart and were so impressive that, in hearing his advice to lay people, I found myself thinking that I too would like to keep the five moral precepts – forgetting that, as a monk, I was already observing 227 monastic rules! I was overcome with enthusiasm to hear him talk and lost my mindfulness for a moment. When I finally came to my senses, I was rather embarrassed, and did not mention it to anyone for fear that other monks might think me a bit crazy. In fact, I was a little bit crazy at that time since I forgot my own shaved head and thought about keeping the layman's five precepts. This is a problem we all face: when thinking in ways that are wrong, we end up acting wrongly in that manner as well. Therefore, we should be aware of our thoughts at all times – aware of whether they are good or bad, right or wrong. We must constantly rein in our own thoughts; otherwise, they can easily spin out of control.

Meditative development means training the mind to be clever and unbiased with respect to basic principles of cause and effect, so that we can effectively come to terms with our own inner processes, and all other related matters as well. Instead of abandoning the mind to unbridled exuberance, we rely on meditation to rein in our unruly thoughts and bring them into line with what is reasonable – which is the path to calm and contentment. The mind that has yet to undergo meditation training is similar to an untrained animal that cannot yet properly perform its appointed tasks and is, therefore, not as useful as it might be. It must be trained to do those jobs in order to gain maximum benefit from its work. Likewise, our minds should undergo training as a means of understanding ourselves as we carry out all our daily tasks, be they mental or physical, significant or trivial, gross or subtle.

Those who develop meditation as a solid anchor for the mind enjoy reflecting carefully on whatever they do. They are not likely to take unnecessary chances in a situation they are unsure of, when a mistake could hurt them or someone else who is involved. Meditative development brings definite benefits, both immediately and in the future,

but the most significant are those we experience here and now in the present. People who develop an aptitude for meditation will be successful at whatever they put their minds to. Their affairs are not conducted halfheartedly, but are well thought out with an eye to the expected benefits of a job well-done. In this way, people can always look back with satisfaction on the fruits of their labor. Since they are firmly grounded in reason, people who meditate have no difficulty controlling themselves. They adhere to Truth as the guiding principle for all they do, say, and think. They are mindful not to leave themselves open to the myriad temptations that habitually arise from the *kilesa* of craving – wanting to go there, wanting to come here, wanting to do this, wanting to say this or think that – which give no guidance whatsoever to right and wrong, good and bad. Craving is a very destructive defilement that tends to lead us repeatedly into misery in countless ways. In truth, we have no one to blame but ourselves, so we are left to accept the consequences as something regrettable, trying to do better the next time. When sufficient mindfulness is maintained we can reverse this trend. But if we do not have enough mindfulness to reflect prudently on these matters, everything we do will have adverse effects, sometimes irrevocably so. This is the real crux of the *kilesas* – they inevitably lead us toward misfortune.

Meditation is a good means for making a clean break with the unseemly business of the *kilesas*. Meditation techniques are arguably somewhat difficult to practice, but that's because they are designed to put pressure on the mind and bring it under control, much like trying to bring a monkey under control in order to tame it. Meditation techniques are actually methods for developing self-awareness. This means observing the mind which is not content to just remain still but tends instead to jump about like someone who's been scalded with hot water. Observing the mind requires mindfulness to keep us aware of its movement. This is aided by using one of a number of Dhamma themes as an object of attention to keep the mind stable and calm during meditation. A very popular method and one that gives good results is mindfulness of breathing.²⁹ Other popular themes include the use of a word such as "*buddho*", "*dhammo*", "*sangho*",³⁰ or *kesā, lomā, nakhā, dantā, taco* in forward and reverse order,³¹ or meditation on death,³² or whatever theme seems most suitable. The mind must be forced to stay exclusively with that object during meditation. Calm and happiness

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are bound to arise when the mind depends on a particular Dhamma theme as a good and safe object of attention,

What is commonly referred to as a 'calm *citta*' or a '*citta* integrated in *samādhi*' is a state of inner stability that is no longer associated with the initial object of attention, which merely prepared the *citta* by holding it steady. Once the *citta* has entered into *samādhi*, there exists enough momentum for the *citta* to remain in this state of calm, independent of the preparatory object, whose function is temporarily discontinued while the *citta* rests peacefully. Later, if time permits, attention is refocused on the initial Dhamma theme when the *citta* withdraws from *samādhi*. When this is practiced consistently with dedication and sustained effort, a mind long steeped in *dukkha* will gradually awaken to its own potential and abandon its unskillful ways. The struggle to control the mind, which one experiences in the beginning stages of training, will be replaced by a keen interest in the task at hand.

The *citta* becomes unforgettably calm and peaceful once it enters *samādhi*. Even if this happens only once, it will be an invigorating and indelible experience. Should it fail to occur again in subsequent attempts at meditation, an indescribable sense of loss and longing will linger in the *citta* for a long time. Only with further progress, as one becomes more and more absorbed in increasingly subtler states of calm, will the frustration of losing the initial state of calm be forgotten.

WHEN HEARING ABOUT MEDITATION, you may fret and feel mentally and physically inadequate to the task, and be reluctant to try. You may be tempted to think:

Fate has surely conspired against me. I can't possibly manage it. My duties and responsibilities both at home and at work make it difficult. There are all the social obligations, raising children and looking after grandchildren. If I waste time sitting with eyes closed in meditation, I'll never be able to keep up and make ends meet and I'll probably end up starving to death!

Thus, you become discouraged and miss a good opportunity. This way of thinking is buried deep within everyone's psyche. It may be just the sort of thinking that has prevented you from ridding yourself of *dukkha* all along; and it will continue to do so if you don't try to remedy it now.

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Meditation is actually a way to counteract and alleviate all the mental irritations and difficulties that have plagued us for so long. Meditation is not unlike other methods used in the world to relieve pain and discomfort; like bathing when we feel hot, and putting on warm clothes or lighting a fire when we feel cold. When hungry, we eat and drink; when ill, we take medicine to relieve the symptoms. All these are methods that the world has used to relieve pain and discomfort over the ages without anyone ever dismissing them as being too burdensome or too difficult to do. People of every ethnic and social group are obliged to look after themselves in this way. Even animals have to take care of themselves by searching for food to alleviate their discomfort and survive from day to day. Similarly, mental development through meditation is a very important means of taking care of ourselves. It is work that we should be especially interested in because it deals directly with the mind, which is the central coordinator for all our actions.

The mind is in the front line when it comes to anything relating to ourselves. In other words, the *citta* is absolutely essential in everything. It has no choice but to accept the burden of responsibility in all circumstances without discrimination or hesitation. Whatever happens, the mind feels compelled to step in and immediately take charge, unfazed by ideas of good and bad or right and wrong. Although some situations are so depressing they're nearly unbearable, the mind still boldly rushes in to shoulder the burden, heedless of the risks and its own inherent limitations. More than that, it recites its litany of thoughts over and over again until eating and sleeping become almost impossible at times. Still, the mind charges ahead refusing to admit failure. When engaging in physical activity, we know our relative strengths and when the time is right to take a rest. But our mental activities never take a break – except briefly when we fall asleep. Even then, the mind insists on remaining active, subconsciously churning out countless dream images that continue overloading its capacity to cope. So the mind lives with a sense of intolerable dissatisfaction, never realizing that this dissatisfaction arises in direct relationship to its heavy work load and the unbearable mental aggravation it generates.

Because it is always embattled, the mind could well be called a 'warrior'. It struggles with what is good and it struggles with what is bad. Never pausing to reflect, it engages everything that comes along. Whatever preoccupations arise, it insists on confronting them all

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without exception, unwilling to let anything pass unchallenged. So it's appropriate to call the mind a 'warrior', since it recklessly confronts everything that comes across its path. If the mind does not come to terms with this dilemma while the body is still alive, it will keep on fighting these battles indefinitely, unable to extricate itself. Should the heart's endless desires be indulged in without Dhamma to act as a moderating influence, real happiness will always be out of reach, regardless of how abundant material wealth may be. Material wealth itself is not a true source of happiness, and can readily become a source of discontent for the heart lacking inner Dhamma to serve as an oasis of rest.

The wise have assured us that Dhamma is the power which oversees both material wealth and spiritual well-being. Regardless of how much or how little wealth we acquire, we will enjoy a sufficient measure of happiness if we possess some measure of Dhamma in our hearts. Unsupported by Dhamma and left to its own desires, the heart will be incapable of finding genuine happiness, even with a mountain of valuable possessions on hand. These are merely physical and emotional supports that intelligent people can use wisely for their own pleasure. If the heart is not intelligent in the way of Dhamma, or Dhamma is absent altogether, the place where we live will resemble a wasteland, no matter what our choice. The heart and all its wealth will then end up as just so much accumulated waste – stuff that is useless for our spiritual development.

When it comes to being stoic in the face of adversity, nothing is as tough and resilient as the heart. Receiving proper assistance, it becomes something marvelous in which we can take pride and satisfaction under all circumstances. From the time of birth to the present moment, we have exploited our hearts and minds –mercilessly. Were we to treat a car like we treat our minds, it would be pointless to take to a garage for repairs, for it would have become a pile of scrap metal long ago. Everything that we utilize must receive some sort of upkeep and repair to ensure that it continues providing useful service. The mind is no exception. It's an extremely important resource that should be well looked after and maintained, just as we do with all our other possessions.

Meditation is a therapy designed exclusively for the mind. All of us who are truly interested in taking responsibility for our minds – which, after all, are our most priceless possessions – should care for them in the correct and proper way. This means training our minds

with suitable meditation techniques. To use the car comparison: it means examining the mind's various component parts to see if anything is defective or damaged; and then taking it into the garage for a spiritual overhaul. This entails sitting in meditation, examining the mental components, or *sankhāras*, that make up our thoughts; then determining whether the thoughts that surface are fundamentally good or harmful, adding fuel to the fires of pain and suffering. Thus, an investigation is undertaken to ascertain which thoughts have value and which are flawed. Then we should turn our attention to the physical components; that is, our bodies. Do our bodies keep improving with age or are they deteriorating as time goes by – the old year inevitably turning into a new one, over and over again? Does the body continue regenerating or does it inevitably wear down and grow older with each successive day? Should we be complacent about this by failing to mentally prepare ourselves while there's still time? Once we are dead, it will be too late to act. This is what meditation is all about: cautioning and instructing ourselves by examining our shortcomings to determine what areas need improvement. When we investigate constantly in this manner, either while sitting in meditation or while going about our daily tasks, the mind will remain calm and unperturbed. We will learn not to be arrogantly overconfident about life, and thus avoid fueling the flames of discontent. And we will know how to exercise proper moderation in our thoughts and deeds so that we don't forget ourselves and get caught up in things which may have disastrous consequences.

The benefits of meditation are too numerous to address, so Ācariya Mun kept his explanations to the lay audience at a level appropriate to their practice. His explanations to monks and novices were of a very different caliber. I have written down just enough here to give the flavor of his teaching. Some people may find that I've included certain things that seem excessive, or even distasteful; but the account would be incomplete if I did not convey all aspects of his teaching. I have made the effort to compile these teachings in the hope that the readers will encourage me with the benefit of their criticism. So you are welcome to criticize me for whatever you find to be inappropriate; but, please do not blame Ācariya Mun because he had no part in writing the book.

Ācariya Mun conducted higher Dhamma teaching only within the circle of his close disciples. But the author has somewhat of an irrepressible nature and cannot sit still; so, I have gone around,

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collecting oral accounts from all the *ācariyas* today who lived with Ācariya Mun in the past and are his disciples. I've recorded this information so that the reader may know something of his practice, even though it is not a complete account. Ācariya Mun's mode of practice was so uniquely resolute and uncompromising that one could almost say that none of his disciples can match him in the austerities he performed, the noble virtues he perfected, and the inner knowledge he so skillfully mastered. To this day he remains unexcelled.

ĀCARIYA MUN SAID that when he stayed in the forests and mountains of Udon Thani and Nong Khai, *devas* from the upper and lower realms occasionally came to hear Dhamma from him. Some groups came regularly every two weeks, others only once a month. *Devas* from that area did not come to see him nearly as often as those from Chiang Mai province. I shall relate those experiences in due course; but, for now, let me continue following the sequence of events so as not to confuse matters.

Ācariya Mun spoke of a huge city of *nāgas*, located under the mountain west of the Laotian city of Luang Prabang. While he lived there, the chief of those *nāgas* regularly brought his followers to hear Dhamma, occasionally in large numbers. The *nāgas* tended to ask far fewer questions of him than the *devas* of the upper and lower realms, who always had many questions for him. All these groups, however, listened to what he had to say with equal respect. During the time Ācariya Mun lived at the base of that mountain, the chief *nāga* came almost every night to visit him. Only on special occasions did he bring a large following; and in that case, Ācariya Mun always knew of their arrival in advance. Due to the remote location, he had little contact with people at that time, so he was able to be of particular service to the *nāgas* and *devas*. The *nāgas* did not visit very late at night – they came at maybe ten or eleven p. m. – which was probably due to his remote location. As a sign of their profound respect, the *nāgas* invited Ācariya Mun to remain living there out of compassion for them. They even arranged to protect him both day and night, taking turns to keep watch. They never came too close, maintaining a convenient distance always, yet close enough to observe anything that might happen. The *devas*, on the other hand, usually came later than the *nāgas* – at about one or two a. m. If he was living in the mountains, far from a village,

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the *devas* sometimes came earlier, say ten or eleven p. m. There was never a sure time, but normally the *devas* came after midnight.

DURING MIDDLE AGE, Ācariya Mun's normal daily routine was as follows: After the meal he walked meditation until noon and then took a short rest. Rested, he sat in meditation for an hour and a half before continuing his walking meditation until four p. m. After that, he swept the area around his dwelling, bathed, and again practiced walking meditation until about seven or eight p. m., when he entered his hut to sit again. If it did not rain after seated meditation, he walked again, until late at night. Or, if it was already very late, he retired for the night. He normally retired at eleven p. m. and awoke at three a. m. Ācariya Mun usually knew in advance when the *devas* would visit. If they were going to arrive later than midnight, he rested before receiving them. If they were expected to arrive between eleven p. m. and midnight, he first entered into *samādhi* and waited there for them. This is the daily routine that he maintained throughout that period of his life.

WHEN BOTH HEAVENLY and terrestrial *devas* wished to come on the same night, Ācariya Mun would receive the first group, give them a Dhamma talk, answer their questions, and then tell them that another group was soon coming. The first group then left in a timely manner and the other *devas* entered from where they'd been respectfully waiting at a distance. He then began speaking to the second group, discoursing on a Dhamma theme he deemed suitable for their temperament and level of understanding. Sometimes the chief of the *deva* group requested a certain topic. Ācariya Mun then focused his attention on that specific Dhamma theme. When he felt his heart in possession of this knowledge, he began his discourse. Sometimes the *deva* leader requested a discourse on a *sutta*, using an archaic title with which Ācariya Mun was unfamiliar. So Ācariya Mun asked and was told the present-day title. Usually Ācariya Mun could figure out for himself the *suttas* which were being requested; but occasionally he had to ask for clarification. At other times, the *devas* requested a *sutta* by a title of which he felt certain. But, as soon as he began to elucidate it, they informed him that he had made a mistake; that it was not the one they requested. To refresh his memory, they recited some verses from

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the *sutta*. After one or two verses he could usually remember it correctly. He began his discourse only when he was sure he had the right topic.

On rare occasions, the *devas* from the upper and lower realms all came to listen to Dhamma at the same time as the *nāgas*. This is not unlike various groups of humans all showing up to visit a teacher simultaneously. When this happened often, he scheduled their arrivals at different times for the convenience of all concerned. According to Ācariya Mun, even though he lived deep in the forests and mountains, he did not have much free time because he had to deal with so many groups of *devas* from different realms of existence. If on a particular night no *devas* from the celestial realms came to see him, then there were bound to be terrestrial *devas* from one location or another; so, he had little free time at night. Fortunately, there were few human visitors in those remote places. If he stayed near a village or a town, however, then human inhabitants from the area came to see him. He received these people in the afternoon or early evening, teaching the monks and novices afterwards.

The Difference is in the Heart

Having written about the *devas*, I shall now write about the human visitors who came to see Ācariya Mun. Being human, I am also included in this matter, but I still wish to apologize to the reader if there is anything unappealing or inappropriate in what follows. In some ways I have an incurably roguish character, as you will no doubt notice. However, I feel it necessary to record truthfully what Ācariya Mun told his disciples privately. I ask for your forgiveness, but I include this so that you may compare humans and *devas* and learn something from it.

Ācariya Mun said there was a great difference between humans and *devas* in the way they communicated with him and listened to his discourses on Dhamma. *Devas* of every realm, from the highest to the lowest, are able to comprehend the meaning in a discussion of Dhamma much more easily than their human counterparts. And when the discussion is over, their exclamations of approval – “*sādhu, sādhu, sādhu*” – echo throughout the spiritual universe. *Devas* of every realm have enormous respect for monks; not one of them show any sign of impropriety. When coming to listen to a monk discourse on Dhamma,

their comportment is always calm, orderly, and exquisitely graceful. Human beings, on the other hand, never really understand the meaning of a Dhamma discourse – even after repeated explanations. Not only do they fail to grasp the meaning, but some are even critical of the speaker, thinking: What is he talking about? I can't understand a thing. He's not as good as that other monk. Some who themselves have previously ordained as monks cannot keep their gross *kilesas* from surfacing, boasting: When I was ordained I could give a much better talk than this. I made those listening laugh a lot so they didn't get tired and sleepy. I had a special rapport with the audience which kept them howling with laughter. Still others think: It's rumored that this monk knows the thoughts of others. So whatever we think, he knows immediately. Why, then, doesn't he know what I'm thinking right now? If he knows, he should give some sign – at least indirectly, by saying that this or that person shouldn't think in such and such a way because it's wrong. Then we would know if he deserves his reputation. Some people come ready to find fault so they can show off their own cleverness. These types are not interested in Dhamma at all. Expounding Dhamma in their presence is like pouring water on a dog's back – they immediately shake it all off, leaving not a drop behind.

Ācariya Mun would often laugh when talking about this type of person, probably because he was amused by his occasional encounters with such 'clever' people. He said that some people who came to see him were so opinionated they could barely walk, the burden of their conceit being much heavier than that which an ordinary mortal could carry. Their conceit was so enormous that he was more inclined to feel trepidation than pity for them, which made him disinclined to talk to them about Dhamma. Still, there were certain social situations where this was unavoidable, so he struggled to say something. But as he was about to speak, the Dhamma seemed to vanish and he could think of nothing to say. It was as if Dhamma could not compete with such overbearing conceit – and so, it fled. All that remained was his body, sitting like a lifeless doll, being stuck with pins, and ignored by everyone as though he had no feelings. At such times, no Dhamma arose for discourse, and he simply sat like a tree stump. In cases like that, where would the Dhamma come from?

Ācariya Mun used to laugh as he described those situations to his disciples, but there were some in his audience who actually trembled. Since they weren't feverish and the weather wasn't cold, we can only

assume that they were shuddering from feelings of trepidation. Ācariya Mun said that he would not teach very conceited individuals unless absolutely necessary because his discourse could actually turn into something toxic for the heart of someone who listened without any feeling of respect. The Dhamma that Ācariya Mun possessed was truly of the highest order and of enormous value to those who established their hearts in the principle of goodwill, not considering themselves superior to Dhamma in any way. This is a very important point to keep in mind. Every effect has its cause. When many people sit together listening to a Dhamma talk, there will be some who feel so uncomfortably hot they almost melt and there will be others who are so cool they feel as if they are floating in the air. The difference, the cause, is right there in the heart. Everything else is inconsequential. There was simply no way he could help lighten the burden of someone whose heart refused to accept Dhamma. One might think that if teaching them doesn't actually do any good, it also would not do any harm. But that's not really the case, for such people will always persist in doing things which have harmful repercussions – regardless of what anyone says. So it's not easy to teach human beings. Even with a small group of people, invariably there were just enough noxious characters among them to be a nuisance. But rather than feel annoyed like most people, Ācariya Mun would simply drop the matter and leave them to their fate. When no way could be found to help reform such people, Ācariya Mun regarded it simply as the nature of their *kamma*.

There were those who came to him with the virtuous intention of searching for Dhamma, trusting in the good consequences of their actions – and these he greatly sympathized with – though they were far and few between. However, those who were not looking for anything useful and had no restraint were legion, so Ācariya Mun preferred to live in the forests and mountains where the environment was pleasant and his heart was at ease. In those places he could practice to the limit without being concerned with external disturbances. Wherever he cast his glance, whatever he thought about, Dhamma was involved, bringing a clear sense of relief. Watching the forest animals, such as monkeys, langurs, and gibbons, swinging and playing through the trees and listening to them call to one another across the forest gave rise to a pleasant inner peacefulness. He need not be concerned with their attitude toward him as they ran about in search of food. In this deep solitude, he felt refreshed and cheerful in every

aspect of his life. Had he died then, he would have been perfectly comfortable and contented. This is dying the truly natural way: having come alone, he would depart alone. Invariably all the Arahants pass into Nibbāna in this way, as their hearts do not retain any confusion or agitation. They have only the one body, the one *citta*, and a single focus of attention. They don't rush out looking for *dukkha* and they don't accumulate emotional attachments to weigh them down. They live as Noble Ones and they depart as Noble Ones. They never get entangled with things that cause anxiety and sorrow in the present. Being spotlessly pure, they maintain a detachment from all emotional objects. Which stands in sharp contrast to the way people act in the world: the heavier their heart's burden, the more they add and increase their load. As for Noble Ones, the lighter their load, the more they relinquish, until there's nothing left to unload. They then dwell in that emptiness, even though the heart that knows that emptiness remains – there is simply no more loading and unloading to be done. This is known as attaining the status of someone who is 'out of work', meaning that the heart has no more work left to do in the *sāsana*. Being 'out of work' in this way is actually the highest form of happiness. This is quite different from worldly affairs, where unemployment for someone with no means of making a living signifies increased misery.

Ācariya Mun related many differences between *devas* and humans, but I've recorded here only those which I remember and those which I think would benefit the discerning reader. Perhaps these asides, such as the *deva* episodes, should all be presented together in one section according to the subject matter. But Ācariya Mun's encounters with such phenomena stretched over a long period of time and I feel it necessary to follow his life story as sequentially as possible. There will be more accounts about *devas* later; but I dare not combine the different episodes because the object is to have the parallel threads of the story converge at the same point. I ask forgiveness if the reader suffers any inconvenience.

What Ācariya Mun said about *devas* and humans refers to these groups as they existed many years before, since Ācariya Mun, whose reflections are recorded here, died over 20 years ago. The *devas* and humans of that age have most probably changed following the universal law of impermanence. There remains only the 'modern' generation who have probably received some mental training and improved their conduct accordingly. As for the contentious people

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whom Ācariya Mun encountered in his life, probably such people no longer exist to clutter up the nation and the religion. Since then, there has been so much improvement in the education system; and well-educated people aren't likely to harbor such vulgar ambitions. This affords people today some relief.

AFTER LIVING AND TEACHING the monks and the local population in the Udon Thani and Nong Khai areas for a considerable time, Ācariya Mun moved eastward to the province of Sakon Nakhon. He traveled through the small villages in the forests and mountains of the Warichabhum, Phang Khon, Sawang Dan Din, Wanon Niwat, and Akat Amnuay districts. He then wandered to Nakhon Phanom through the district of Sri Songkhram, passing through the villages of Ban Sam Phong, Ban Non Daeng, Ban Dong Noi, and Ban Kham Nokkok. All these places were deep in the wilderness and infested with malaria, which, when caught, was very difficult to cure: a person could be infected the better part of a year and still not fully recover. Assuming one did not die, living through it was still a torment. As I've already mentioned, malaria was called 'the fever the in-laws despise', because those who suffered chronically from this illness were still able to walk around and eat, but unable to do any work. Some became permanent invalids. The villagers in that area, as well as the monks and novices who lived in the same forests, were frequently victims of malaria. Some even died from it. For three years Ācariya Mun spent successive rains retreats in the area around Ban Sam Phong village. During that time quite a few monks died of the illness. Generally, those monks were from cultivated areas where there was little malaria – such as the provinces of Ubon, Roy Et, and Sarakham – so they were not used to the forests and mountains. They could not live easily in those forests with Ācariya Mun because they couldn't tolerate the malaria. They had to leave during the rainy season, spending their retreat near villages that were surrounded by fields.

Ācariya Mun recounted that when he gave evening Dhamma talks to the monks and novices near the village of Sam Phong, a *nāga* from the Songkhran River came to listen almost every time. If he failed to arrive at the hour when the discourse took place, he would come later when Ācariya Mun sat in *samādhi*. The *devas* from the upper and lower realms came only periodically, and not as often as they did when he

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stayed in the provinces of Udon Thani or Nong Khai. They were always particular about coming on the three holiest observance days of the rains retreat – the first, the middle and the last day. No matter where Ācariya Mun lived, whether in towns or cities, the *devas* always came from one realm or another to hear his Dhamma. This was true in the city of Chiang Mai while he was staying at Wat Chedi Luang monastery.

The Well-digging Incident

A strange incident occurred while he was staying near the village of Ban Sam Phong. It was the dry season. About 60 to 70 monks and novices were living there, and there was not enough clean water available. The monks held a meeting with the villagers and decided that they would have to dig the existing well deeper in order to acquire a clean, adequate supply. After the decision was made, a senior monk requested permission from Ācariya Mun to proceed with the work. After listening to the request, Ācariya Mun remained quiet for a moment before he answered sternly in a rough voice, “No, it could be dangerous.” That was all he said. The senior monk was puzzled by the words “it could be dangerous.” After paying his respects to Ācariya Mun, he related the conversation to the monks and the lay people. Instead of agreeing with Ācariya Mun, they decided to proceed secretly with the plan.

The well was some distance from the monastery. At noon, when they thought Ācariya Mun was resting, they quietly went out to dig. They had not dug very deep when the earth around the top edge gave way and collapsed into the well, leaving a gaping hole at ground level and ruining the well with loose earth. Everyone was terrified: Having disrespectfully ignored Ācariya Mun’s warning, and showing a lack of mindfulness by failing to call off the project, they had caused the earth to cave in, almost killing someone in the process. They were afraid he would find out what they had done against his express wishes. They were extremely worried and felt chastened by their error. Together they quickly gathered wood to repair the mouth of the well, praying all the while for Ācariya Mun’s assistance in their efforts to dig out the loose earth and restore the well for use again. Fortunately, once they

appealed for Ācariya Mun's help, everything was put into good order with amazing ease so that some of them even ended up smiling.

As soon as the work was completed everyone fled the scene, afraid that Ācariya Mun might suddenly show up. Back in the monastery the monks and novices remained in a state of constant anxiety about what they had done. The closer it came to the evening meeting, the more apprehensive they became. They could all vividly remember Ācariya Mun's scoldings in the past when something of this nature had happened. Sometimes when they did something inappropriate and then forgot, Ācariya Mun knew and eventually brought it up as a way of teaching a lesson. The well incident was a serious misdeed that was committed by the whole monastery behind his back. How could he possibly have not known about it? They were all certain that he knew and that he was bound to mention it that evening, or at the latest, the very next morning. They were preoccupied with these uncomfortable feelings for the rest of the day.

As it turned out, when the time arrived no meeting was called. Instead of scolding them, Ācariya Mun mentioned nothing about the incident. Ācariya Mun was very astute in teaching his disciples. He knew very well about the incident and about many other mistakes made by the monks and novices. But he also knew about their anxiety. Since they obviously realized their mistake, scolding them at this point would have needlessly increased their deep remorse.

Ācariya Mun's early morning routine was to rise from seated meditation at dawn, then do walking meditation until it was time to put on his robes at the meeting hall before going for alms. The next morning, when Ācariya Mun left his walking path and entered the meeting hall, the monks were still worried about how he would deal with them. While they waited in anxious anticipation, Ācariya Mun turned the whole affair around by speaking gently and in a comforting manner designed to relieve their distress:

"We came here to study Dhamma. We should not be unreasonably audacious, nor should we be excessively afraid. Anyone can make a mistake – the value lies in recognizing our mistakes. The Lord Buddha made mistakes before us. He realized where he had gone wrong and strove to correct his errors as soon as he became aware of them. This kind of intention is noble, but still through ignorance mistakes can happen. From now on you should all take care to control yourselves

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under all circumstances. Using mindfulness at all times to watch out for oneself is the way of the wise.”

That was all he said. He just smiled broadly at the monks in a disarming way and took them on almsround as usual. There was no meeting later that evening, Ācariya Mun merely told everyone to be diligent in their practice. Three nights passed without a meeting. All during that time the monks and novices were still scared he would scold them about the well-digging incident. On the fourth night a meeting was called. But again, no mention was made of the incident, as though he knew nothing about it.

A long time later, after everyone had forgotten about the matter, it quite unexpectedly cropped up. No one had ever told him about the mishap, for the whole affair had been hushed up. Ācariya Mun himself never went to the well, which was quite a distance from the monastery. He began a Dhamma discourse as he usually did, speaking about various aspects of a monk's practice, about being reasonable and about having respect for the teacher and Dhamma. These, he said, led to the correct behavior of those coming to train and practice under a teacher. He stressed that they should especially take the issue of cause and effect very seriously, for this was the true Dhamma:

“Although you're constantly under pressure from your desires, you shouldn't allow them to surface and intrude into the sphere of practice. Otherwise, they will destroy Dhamma, the tried and true way to go beyond *dukkha*, gradually spoiling all of your hopes. Never should you go against Dhamma, the monastic discipline, or the word of a respected teacher, as this is equivalent to destroying yourselves. Disobedience merely gives impetus to those bad habits which are destructive to you and others as well. The earth around that well was more than just clay. There was also sand underneath. Digging too deeply can cause the sand, then the clay to collapse into the well, possibly burying and killing someone. That was why I forbade it. I thoroughly investigate everything before giving or refusing permission for any type of work. Those who are here for training should consider this. Some matters are exclusively internal, and I don't feel it necessary to reveal every aspect of them.

“What I did reveal was clear enough for you to understand; so why did you behave as if you didn't? When I forbid something, you go ahead and do it anyway. If I tell you to do something, you do the opposite. This was not a matter of misunderstanding – you understood

perfectly well. Being contrary like this displays the stubborn side of your character, dating from the time you lived with your parents who tolerated it just to keep you happy. It has now become an ingrained characteristic, buried deep inside monks who are now adults. To make matters worse, you flaunt it in the face of your teacher and the spiritual life you lead. Stubbornness in a monk of your age is unforgivable and cannot be tolerated as mere childish behavior. It deserves a stern reprimand. If you persist in being stubborn, it will further entrench this unfortunate trait in you, so that you will be appropriately branded as 'obstinate *dhutanga* monks'. Thus all your requisites should be labeled 'the belongings of an obstinate monk.' This monk is stubborn, that monk is shameless, the monk over there is dazed – until the whole monastery ends up doggedly disobedient. And I end up with nothing but hardheaded students. Once obstinacy becomes the norm, the world will break up from the strain and the *sāsana* will surely be reduced to ruin. Which of you still want to be a hardheaded monk? Is there anyone here who wants me to be a teacher of hardheaded monks? If so, go back tomorrow and dig out that well again, so the earth can collapse and bury you there. Then you will be reborn in a hardheaded heavenly paradise where the *devas* can all come and admire your true greatness. Surely no group of *devas*, including those in the *brahma* realms, have ever seen or lived in such a peculiar paradise."

After that the tone of his voice became gentler, as did the theme of his talk, enabling his audience to wholeheartedly reflect on the error of their stubborn disobedience. During the talk, it seemed as if everyone had forgotten to breathe. Once the talk was over and the meeting adjourned, the monks excitedly questioned one another to find out who might have dared inform Ācariya Mun of the incident, prompting this severe scolding which nearly made them faint. Everyone denied informing him, as each dreaded a scolding as much as another. The incident passed without a definitive answer to how Ācariya Mun knew.

SINCE HIS TIME AT SARIKA CAVE, Ācariya Mun possessed a mastery of psychic skills concerning all sorts of phenomena. Over the years, his proficiency grew to such an extent that there seemed to be no limit to his abilities. As the monks living with him were well aware of these abilities, they took strict care to be mentally self-controlled at all times.

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They couldn't afford to let their minds wander carelessly because their errant thoughts could become the subject of a Dhamma talk they might receive at the evening meeting. They needed to be especially vigilant during the meeting when Ācariya Mun was actually speaking to them. In those brief moments when he stopped speaking – perhaps to catch his breath, perhaps to observe something – if he detected any stray thought among the monks, he immediately made an issue of it. The tone of his voice changed dramatically as he mimicked the unmindful thoughts of one of those present. Although Ācariya Mun did not mention anyone by name, his tone immediately startled that individual who became quite frightened to ever dare think like that again.

Another time to be careful was when they followed him on alms-round. Those who were unmindful then were bound to hear about their wayward thoughts at the next meeting. Sometimes it was very embarrassing to have to listen to a talk on one's own wayward thoughts as other monks cast sidelong glances around the assembly, not knowing who among them was being reprimanded. But once discovered, all the monks and novices tended to react similarly in a positive manner. Instead of feeling angry or disappointed after leaving the meeting, all would appear cheerful and content; some even laughed as they inquired of each other: "Who was it today? Who got caught today?" It's remarkable how honest they were with their fellow monks about their errant thoughts. Instead of trying to keep his indiscretion a secret, the guilty monk would confess as soon as someone asked: "I'm really stubborn and I couldn't help thinking about ... even though I knew I was bound to get told off for thinking like that. When those thoughts came up, I forgot all about my fear of Ācariya Mun and just felt full of myself thinking such crazy thoughts. I deserved exactly what I got. It will teach me a good lesson about losing my self-control."

I would like to apologize to the reader because I don't feel very comfortable about writing down some of these matters. But these stories are factual – they actually happened. The decision to include them was a difficult one to make. But if what I recount is the truth, it should be all right. It could be compared to a situation in which a monk confesses to a disciplinary offense as a means of eliminating any sense of guilt or anxiety about its recurrence in the future. Thus, I would like to relate a few incidents from the past to serve as food for thought for all of you whose thoughts may cause you similar problems.

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In most cases, practicing monks received a severe rebuke from Ācariya Mun because of affairs pertaining to external sense objects. For example, sights and sounds are the most likely sense impressions to cause trouble. And the most likely occasion for monks to be scolded was the morning almsround. Walking to the village for alms is an essential duty of every monk. On these occasions, monks encounter sights and sounds, and are bound to think about them. Some become so infatuated with what they encounter that their thoughts swirl into disarray without their actual knowledge. These are the primary causes of mental distraction, enticing the mind even when one has no desire to think about them. By the time a monk regained mindfulness, it was time for the evening meeting and the tongue-lashing he received would prompt him to try to be more controlled. After a time, he again encountered the same enticing objects and reopened the sore. Upon returning to the monastery, he would receive another dose of 'strong medicine', in the form of another scolding, to apply to his sore. A great many monks and novices lived with Ācariya Mun and most of them had such festering sores. If one monk didn't get a dose of his medicine then another did. They went to the village and were confronted by attractive sights and sounds until they were unable to stay out of trouble. Consequently, upon their return to the monastery, when the opportunity arose, Ācariya Mun would have another go at them. It's natural for someone with *kilesas* to have a mixture of good and bad thoughts. Ācariya Mun did not give a lecture for every bad thought. What he criticized was the tendency to think in harmful ways. He wanted them to think in terms of Dhamma, using mindfulness and wisdom, so that they could free themselves from *dukkha*. He found that, instead of easing their teacher's burden with rightful thinking, monks preferred to think in ways that troubled him. Since many such monks lived with him, there were scoldings nearly every evening.

All of this serves to illustrate that Ācariya Mun's subtle ability to know the thoughts of others was very real.³³ As for those reprehensible thoughts, they did not arise intentionally but accidentally, due to occasional lapses in mindfulness. Nevertheless, as a teacher imparting knowledge and skill to his students, Ācariya Mun quickly sounded a warning when he noticed something inappropriate, so that the perpetrator could become conscious of his lapse and learn to be more self-controlled in the future. He did not want his students to get

trapped into such thinking again, for it promotes habitual thought patterns that lead directly to misfortune.

Ācariya Mun's teaching for the monks was thoroughly meticulous, showing great attention to detail. The rules of monastic discipline were taught in detail and *samādhi* and wisdom, belonging to the higher Dhamma, were taught in even greater depth. During the time he lived in Sarika Cave, he had already begun to master all levels of *samādhi* and all intermediate levels of wisdom. As for the highest levels of wisdom, I shall write about them later in the story when Ācariya Mun's practice finally reached that stage. After continuing his training in the Northeast region for a while longer, he became even more proficient. This enabled him to use his expertise to teach the monks about all levels of *samādhi*, plus the intermediate levels of wisdom. They in turn listened intently to his expositions, which never deviated from the authentic principles of *samādhi* and wisdom.

Ācariya Mun's *samādhi* was strange and quite extraordinary, whether it was *khaōika samādhi*, *upacāra samādhi* or *appanā samādhi*.³⁴ When his *citta* entered into *khaōika samādhi*, it remained only for a moment, and instead of returning to its normal state, it then withdrew and entered *upacāra samādhi*. In that state, he came into contact with a countless variety of external phenomena. Sometimes he was involved with ghosts, sometimes *devas*, sometimes *nāgas* – innumerable worlds of existence were contacted by this type of *samādhi*. It was this access level *samādhi* that Ācariya Mun used to receive visitors whose forms were invisible to normal sight and whose voices were inaudible to normal hearing. Sometimes his *citta* floated up out of his body and went off to look at the heavenly realms and the different levels of the *brahma* world; then, it traveled down into the regions of hell to look at the multitude of beings tormented by the results of their own *kamma*.

The terms 'going up' and 'going down' are relative, conventional figures of speech, referring to the behavior of gross physical bodies. They have very little in common with the behavior of the *citta*, which is something so subtle that it is beyond temporal comparison. In terms of the physical body, going up and going down require a degree of earnest effort, but in terms of the *citta*, they are merely figures of speech with no degree of effort involved. When we say that the heavens, the *brahma* realms, and Nibbāna are progressively 'higher' and more refined levels of existence or that the realms of hell consist of progressively 'lower' levels of existence, we are in fact using a physical, material

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standard to measure that which exists in a spiritual, psychic dimension. We might say that hell and heaven, which are considered to be lower and higher respectively, are in some respects analogous to hardened criminals and petty offenders who live together in the same prison, which itself is located in a community of law-abiding citizens. There's no distinction in kind between the two types of prisoners because they all live together in the same prison. And there's no distinction in kind between them and law-abiding citizens because they are all human beings living on the same land in the same country. What distinguishes them is the fact that they've been kept separated.

At least the prison inmates and the general public can use their normal sense faculties to be aware of each other. But beings in the different spheres of existence are unaware of each other. Those living in the hell realms are unable to perceive those who are in the heavenly realms; and vice versa. Both groups are unable to perceive the *brahma* world. And human beings, in turn, are unaware of all who are in these different realms of existence. Even though the flows of consciousness from each of these beings intermingle constantly as they pass through one another's sphere of existence, they are as oblivious of others as if theirs is the only group in existence.

Ordinarily, our minds are unable to know the thoughts of others. Because of this inability, we might then reason that they do not really exist. No matter how persistent these denials might be, we would be wrong because all living beings possess a mind. Even though we are not aware of the thoughts of other beings, we have no right to deny that they exist simply because we can't perceive them. We cannot afford to hold hostage the existence of things which are too subtle to see and hear within the limitations of our sense faculties. If we do, we are just fooling ourselves.

When we say that the heavens and the *brahma* worlds are arranged vertically in a series of realms, one shouldn't understand this in the gross material sense – such as, a house with many stories requiring the use of stairs or an elevator. These realms exist in a spiritual dimension and they are ascended in the spiritual sense by spiritual means: that is, by the heart which has developed this sort of capability through the practice of virtue. When we say that hell is 'down below', this does not mean descending into an abyss. Rather, it refers to descent by spiritual means to a spiritual destination. And those who are able to observe the hell realms do so by virtue of their own internal psychic

faculties. But those beings who 'fall' into these realms do so through the power of their own evil *kamma*. They remain there, experiencing whatever torment and agony is imposed on them by their own misdeeds, until they have completed their punishment and are released, in the same way that prison inmates are released at the end of their sentences.

From the very beginning of Ācariya Mun's practice, *upacāra samādhi* and *khaōika samādhi* were bound together because the nature of his *citta* was inherently active and adventurous. As soon as his *citta* entered *khaōika samādhi*, it instantly began to roam and experience the different phenomena existing in the sphere of *upacāra*. So he trained himself in *samādhi* until he was proficient enough to make his *citta* stay still or go out to experience various phenomena as he wished. From then on it was easy for him to practice the *samādhi* of his choice. For instance, he could enter momentarily into *khaōika samādhi* and then move out to access *samādhi* in order to experience various phenomena, or he could focus intensively and enter into the full absorption of *appanā samādhi*, where he would rest for as long as necessary. *Appanā samādhi* is a state of perfect calm that's absolutely serene and peaceful. Because of this, meditators may become attached to it. Ācariya Mun said that he was attached to this type of *samādhi* for awhile, but not for long, since he was by nature inclined toward wisdom. So he was able to resolve this matter himself and find a way out before complacency set in.

Anyone who is transfixed in *appanā samādhi* will make slow progress if they do not try to apply wisdom to examine it. Because it fills one with such happiness, many meditators are held fast by this kind of *samādhi*. A strong, lingering attachment forms, and the meditator yearns for more, overwhelming any inclination to examine things with wisdom, which is the way to eradicate all *kilesas*. Meditators who fail to receive timely advice from a wise person will be reluctant to disengage themselves and realize the path of wisdom. When the *citta* remains attached for a long time in such *samādhi*, conceits of various kinds may develop; such as, believing that this calm and happy state is none other than Nibbāna, the end of *dukkha*. In truth, when the *citta* 'converges' into the one-pointedness of *appanā samādhi* so that its focal point is experienced with the utmost clarity, it dwells fully absorbed in serene happiness. But, the *kilesas* that cause birth in all realms of existence simultaneously converge at the same focal point as well. If wisdom is

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not used to penetrate and destroy those *kilesas*, there is no doubt that future rebirths will take place. Therefore, regardless of the level of *samādhi* one practices, wisdom should be incorporated into the practice as well. This is especially true of *appanā samādhi*. Otherwise, the *citta* will only experience tranquility without evincing a capacity for resourcefulness and discernment.

BY THE TIME OF HIS SECOND TRIP to the Northeast, Ācariya Mun was well-experienced in the intermediate level of wisdom, since sufficient wisdom is necessary for having advanced to the Anāgāmi level of Dhamma. Otherwise, he would not have been capable of effective investigation at that level. Before reaching that level, one must employ wisdom to successfully pass through body contemplation. This requires seeing the attractive as well as the repulsive aspects of the body without getting caught up in either extreme.³⁵ The *citta* uses wisdom to isolate the attractive and repulsive aspects and then passes through the midpoint where these two extremes meet, having resolved all doubt and attachment concerning the body. This passage, however, is nothing more than a transitional stage along the way. It is analogous to taking an examination and passing with the minimum requirement, necessitating further study to achieve the maximum grade. Those who have penetrated to the Anāgāmi level of understanding must still train their wisdom until it reaches an even more refined degree of expertise before it can be said that they are full-fledged Anāgāmis. Should such a person then die, he would immediately be reborn in the fifth or *akaniñña* plane of the *brahma* world without having to pass through the four lower *brahma* planes.

Ācariya Mun recounted how he was delayed at that level for quite some time because he had no one to advise him. As he struggled to familiarize himself with the Anāgāmi level of practice, he had to be very careful not to make any mistakes. He knew from his experience in analyzing subtle aspects of Dhamma that the *kilesas* might undermine his efforts, for they were as equally subtle as the mindfulness and wisdom he was using to counter them. This made it very difficult to penetrate each successive level of Dhamma. He said it was absolutely incredible how hard he struggled to negotiate that dense, thorny thicket. Before he made his way through to come and kindly teach the rest of us, he suffered great hardship, making the arduous journey all alone.

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When the occasion was right, he used to describe this part of his practice to us. I myself was moved to tears in two instances while listening to his description of the terrible ordeal he faced at that time, and the amazingly subtle and profound nature of the Dhamma he attained. I wondered whether I had enough inherent virtue to enable me to crawl along in his footsteps, or whether I was destined to go the way of ordinary people in the world. But his words were very encouraging and always helped to sustain my resolve to persevere. Ācariya Mun said that whenever he accelerated his efforts to apply wisdom, his *citta* became weary of association with others and he became even more committed to his meditation practice. He knew at that stage that his practice still needed strengthening; yet he felt obliged to stay and train his disciples so that they might also develop some Dhamma principles in their hearts.

ĀCARIYA MUN LIVED for three or four years in the area of Ban Sam Phong village in Sri Songkhram district, Nakhon Phanom province. He spent one year at Ban Huay Sai village in Kham Cha-ee district of the same province, as well as the villages of Nong Sung and Khok Klang. He particularly liked staying in those places since they were all very mountainous. Nearby in the Pak Kut mountains were many *devas* – and tigers there were particularly abundant. When night descended, tigers would wander around his living area while the *devas* came to rejoice in hearing the Dhamma.

In the middle of the night, the roars of huge tigers echoed through the forest close to where he lived. On some nights a whole host of them roared together, much like a crowd of people yelling back and forth to one another. When the terrifying sounds of those enormous cats resounded through the darkness, the effect was indeed very frightening. There were nights when the monks and novices failed to get any sleep, fearing that the tigers would come to snatch and devour them. Ācariya Mun cleverly found ways to use their fears of tigers to spur the monks to practice diligently. Rather enigmatically, he would say: “Anyone who’s efforts are lazy – watch out! The tigers in this mountain range really love lazy monks. They find them especially tasty eating! So if you want to avoid becoming a tasty meal for a tiger, you had better be diligent. You see, tigers are actually afraid of anyone who’s diligently striving, so they won’t eat that person.” After hearing this, all the

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monks redoubled their efforts as though their very lives depended on it. They forced themselves to go out and do walking meditation, despite the roar of tigers all around the vicinity. Although they remained afraid, they believed what Ācariya Mun told them: that lazy monks could expect to be a tiger's next meal.

Their precarious situation was made even worse by the fact that they didn't have huts as they would in a monastery – only small platforms just big enough to sleep on which were very low to the ground. If a tiger became hungry there'd be no contest. Ācariya Mun related that on some nights huge tigers wandered into the monk's area, but then simply walked harmlessly past. He knew that tigers normally would not dare do anything for the *devas* were always on guard. When *devas* came for a Dhamma talk, they mentioned to him that they were protecting the area and would not let anything trouble the monks or cause them harm. Those *devas* also invited Ācariya Mun to remain in the area for a long time.

In truth, Ācariya Mun's admonition to the monks was simply a means of arousing fear so that they would take an increased interest in their practice. As for the tigers, they seemed to know that the monks' living area was a safe haven. Various kinds of wild animals, too, felt no need to be wary of hunters entering the monks' vicinity, for when the villagers knew where Ācariya Mun was staying, they rarely dared to hunt the area. They were concerned about the dreadful moral consequences. They were terrified that if anyone shot a gun in that area it would explode in his hands and kill him. Strangely enough, whenever he went to stay in an area teeming with tigers, those beasts would stop killing the domesticated cows and buffaloes around the local villages. Nobody knew where they went to obtain their food. These remarkable incidents were related by Ācariya Mun himself and later confirmed by many villagers in those localities where he had stayed.

An Impeccable Human Being

Another mysterious incident happened when a gathering of *devas* visited Ācariya Mun. Their leader began a conversation with him, stating:

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“Your stay here has caused much delight in all the *devas*. We all enjoy an extraordinary sense of happiness due to your all-embracing aura of compassionate love that permeates through the heavens and spreads across the earth. This aura that radiates from you is indescribable and wonderful beyond compare. Because of it, we always know where you are. This aura of Dhamma emanates from you and streams out in all directions. When you are teaching Dhamma to the monks, novices and lay people, even the sound of your voice resonates unbounded through the higher and lower realms. Wherever *devas* live they hear your voice – only the dead are deaf to it.”

I would like to write a bit more about this conversation between Ācariya Mun and the *deva*. Although I cannot vouch for its accuracy, I heard it from a reliable source. Ācariya Mun took up the conversation with this question: “If my voice really resonates as you say, why don’t human beings hear it as well?”

The leader of the *devas* replied:

“What would humans know about moral virtue? They couldn’t care less. They use their six senses to make evil *kamma* and create the conditions for hell within themselves all the time. They do this from the day they are born until the day they die. They are not nearly as concerned about moral issues as they ought to be, given their status as human beings. There are very few indeed who are interested in using their senses in any morally beneficial way. The amount of moral virtue in their lives is really quite limited. By way of comparison: in the time that it takes one human being to die and be reborn, repeatedly ten or even one hundred times, the average *deva* has yet to pass away even once—not to mention the *brahma devas* who have exceptionally long lives. The population of humankind is vast, and this in turn means a vast amount of negligence, for those who are heedful are few and far between. Mankind is supposed to safeguard the *sāsana*, and yet people themselves know precious little about the *sāsana* or moral excellence.

“Bad people know only evil. Their sole claim to being human comes from the fact that they are breathing. As soon as their breathing stops, they are immediately buried under the weight of their own wickedness. The *devas* know about this. Why shouldn’t they? It’s no secret. When a person dies, monks are invited to chant auspicious verses of Dhamma for the deceased. Why would an evil person listen then? From the initial moment of death, his consciousness is completely bound up by his evil *kamma*. So what chance would he have to come and listen to

Dhamma? Even while alive he wasn't interested. Only the living can hear Dhamma – if they have the interest and desire. But it's obvious that they're not really interested. Haven't you noticed them? When have they ever shown an interest when the monks chant Dhamma verses? Because they show no interest, it's obvious that the *sāsana* is not truly embedded in their hearts. The things that they're most infatuated with are sordid and disliked even by some animals. These are just the kinds of things that immoral people have always enjoyed more than anything else; and they never ever grow tired of them. Even when they are near death they still hanker after such things. We *devas* know much more about humans than humans know about *devas*. You, venerable sir, are a very special monk. You are quite familiar with humans, *devas*, creatures of hell, and beings of all sorts. That is why *devas* everywhere pay homage to you."

When the *deva* had finished speaking, Ācariya Mun asked him for clarification: " *Devas* possess divine sight and divine hearing, enabling them to see and hear over great distances. They know about the good and bad of human affairs better than do humans themselves. Couldn't you find a way to make humans more aware of right and wrong? I feel that you are more capable of it than we human teachers are. Is there any way you could do this?"

The *deva* replied:

"We *devas* have seen many humans, but we have never seen one as impeccable as you, sir. You have always extended loving kindness to *devas* and humans alike while acquainting them simultaneously with the great variety of beings in existence, from the grossest to the most refined. You have tried to teach them to accept the fact that *devas*, and countless other spheres of existence really do exist in this world. But still, generation after generation, from birth to death, people have never actually seen these beings. So what interest would they have in *devas*? At most, they may catch a glimpse of something strange, and, without considering the matter carefully, claim they have seen a ghost. How could they possibly hope to receive any advice about matters of good and bad from us *devas*? Although *devas* are constantly aware of them, humans aren't the least interested in knowing anything about us. By what means would you have us teach people? It's really a hopeless situation. We just have to let *kamma* and its results take their course. Even the *devas* themselves constantly receive the results of their

kamma. Were we free from it, we would all attain Nibbāna. Then we wouldn't have to remain in this difficult situation so long."

"You say that one may attain Nibbāna when one's *kamma* is exhausted. Do *devas* know about Nibbāna? Do they experience pain and suffering like other beings?"

"Why shouldn't we, venerable sir? All the Buddhas who have come to teach the world have taught without exception that we should transcend *dukkha*. They never instructed us to remain mired in suffering. But worldly beings are far more interested in their favorite playthings than they are in Nibbāna. Consequently, not one of them ever considers attaining Nibbāna. All *devas* remember and are very impressed by the concept of Nibbāna as it was taught by each and every Buddha to living beings everywhere. But *devas* still have a dense web of *kamma* to work through before they can move clear of their celestial existence and go the way of Nibbāna. Only then will all problems cease and this oppressive, repetitive cycle of birth, death and rebirth finally come to a halt. But as long as some *kamma* remains in an individual – be it good *kamma* or bad *kamma* – regardless of his realm of existence *dukkha* will be present as well."

"Are many monks able to communicate with *devas*?"

"There are a few but not many. Mostly, they are monks who like to practice living in the forests and mountains as you do"

"Are there any lay people with this ability?"

"There are some, but very few. They must be people who desire the way of Dhamma and who have practiced the way until their hearts are bright and clear. Only then can they have knowledge of us. The bodily form of celestial beings appears relatively gross to those beings themselves, but is far too subtle for the average human being to perceive. So only people whose hearts are bright and clear can perceive *devas* without difficulty."

"In the scriptures it says that *devas* do not like to be near humans because of their repugnant smell. What is this repugnant odor? If there is such an odor, why do you all come to visit me so often?"

"Human beings who have a high standard of morality are not repugnant to us. Such people have a fragrance which inspires us to venerate them; so we never tire of coming to hear you discourse on Dhamma. Those, exuding a repulsive odor, are people whose morality stinks, for they have developed an aversion to moral virtue even

though it is considered to be something exceptionally good throughout the three worlds. Instead, they prefer things that are repugnant to everyone with high moral standards. We have no desire to approach such people. They are really offensive and their stench spreads far and wide. It's not that *devas* dislike humans; but this is what *devas* encounter and have always experienced with humans."

When Ācariya Mun told stories about *devas* and other kinds of spirits, the monks were mesmerized: They forgot all about themselves, the passing time, and their feelings of fatigue. They wished that, someday, they also would come to know about such things; and this hope made them happy to practice. This was also the case when Ācariya Mun thought it necessary to speak of his past lives or the past lives of others. His audience became eager to know about their own past lives and forgot about overcoming *dukkha* and attaining Nibbāna. Sometimes a monk was startled to find his mind wandering in this way and admonished himself: *Hey, I'm starting to get crazy. Instead of thinking about freedom from dukkha, here I am chasing after shadows of a past that's long gone.* In this way he regained his mindfulness for a while, but as soon as it slipped again he would revisit those same thoughts. For this reason, many monks found it necessary to censure themselves on a regular basis.

ĀCARIYA MUN'S STORIES about the *devas* and other visiting spirits were quite fascinating. In particular, he spoke about how the ghost world has its share of hooligans just like we do. Bad characters, who cause disturbances, are rounded up and imprisoned in a place which we humans would call a jail. Different types of offenders are imprisoned in different cell blocks, and all the cells are full. There are male hooligan ghosts and female hooligan ghosts. And then there are the very brutal types, again either male or female. Ācariya Mun said that it was clear from the cruelty in their eyes that they would not respond to kindness and compassion.

Ghosts live in cities, just as we humans do. They have huge cities with leaders who supervise and govern them. Quite a few ghosts are inclined to be virtuous and thus earn high respect from both the ordinary ghosts and the hooligans. It's natural for all ghosts to stand in genuine awe of those among them who tend to possess great power and authority. This is not merely a matter of flattery. Ācariya Mun

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always claimed that the effects of evil are less powerful than the effects of goodness; and what he himself encountered in the ghost cities was further evidence of this. There are beings with accumulated merit who are nonetheless born into the ghost state as a result of their *kamma*, but, their virtuous characters never change, so they exercise great authority. One such individual is even capable of governing a large community. These ghost communities do not segregate into groups or castes as humans do. Instead, they adhere strictly to the authority of Dhamma principles. The effects of their *kamma* make it impossible for them to hold the kind of prejudice that people do. The nature of their existence is governed by the nature of their *kamma* – this is a fixed principle. The way we use authority in this world cannot, therefore, be applied in the world hereafter. Ācariya Mun explained this matter in great detail but, I'm sorry to say, I can remember only a little of it.

Ācariya Mun's visits to the ghosts were done psychically through *samādhi* meditation. As soon as they saw him they hurried to tell everyone to come and pay their respects to him, just as we humans would do. The chief ghost, who was very respectful of Ācariya Mun and had great faith in him, guided him on a tour past the many places where the ghosts lived, including the 'jail' where the male and female hooligans were kept. The chief ghost explained to Ācariya Mun the living conditions of the different types of ghosts, pointing out that the imprisoned ghosts were mean-hearted types who had unduly disturbed the peace of the others. They were sentenced and jailed according to the severity of their offense. The word 'ghost' is a designation given to them by humans; but actually they are just one type of living being among others in the universe who exist according to their own natural conditions.

ĀCARIYA MUN INVARIABLY liked to remain in and around mountains and forests for long periods of time. After having been in Nakhon Phanom for quite a while instructing the monks, he began to necessarily consider his own position. He often reflected on the nature of his own practice. He knew that he still lacked sufficient strength of purpose to finish the ultimate task before him. It became clear that as long as he continued to resist this call and remain teaching his disciples, his own personal striving would be delayed. He said that ever since he had

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returned from the Central Plains in order to instruct monks in the Northeast, he felt that his *citta* had not advanced as fast as when he was living alone. He felt that he had to accelerate his efforts once more before he could achieve the final goal and be free of all concerns about himself. At that time, Ācariya Mun's mother had been living with him for six years as an *upāsikā*.³⁶ His concern for her made it inconvenient for him to go anywhere. So, having secured her agreement, he decided to escort her to Ubon Ratchathani. He then left Nakhon Phanom with his mother and a large following of monks and novices, cutting straight across the Nong Sung mountains, through Kham Cha-ee, and coming out at the district of Lerng Nok Tha in the province of Ubon Ratchathani. That year he spent the rains retreat at Ban Nong Khon in the Amnat Charoen district of Ubon Ratchathani province. Many monks and novices stayed there with him, and he trained them vigorously. While he was there the number of monks and lay devotees, who gained faith and came to train under him, steadily increased.

LATE ONE EVENING Ācariya Mun sat in meditation and as soon as his *citta* dropped into calm a vision appeared of many monks and novices walking respectfully behind him in a nice, orderly fashion which inspired devotion. Yet, there were other monks who hurried past, walking ahead of him without respect or self-control. Others looked for an opportunity to pass him in a completely undisciplined manner. And finally, there were some who held pieces of split bamboo, using it to pinch his chest so that he could hardly breathe. When he saw these different monks display such disrespect – even cruelly tormenting him – he focused his *citta* carefully to look into events of the future. Immediately, he understood that those, who walked respectfully behind him in a nice, orderly fashion which inspired devotion, were the monks who would conduct themselves properly, faithfully putting his teaching into practice. These were the monks who would revere him and uphold the *sāsana*, assuring that it would flourish in the future. They would be able to make themselves useful to the *sāsana* and to people everywhere by maintaining the continuity of traditional Buddhist customs and practices into the future. Honored and respected by people on earth and beings throughout the celestial realms, they would uphold the integrity of the *sāsana* following the tradition of the Noble Ones, so that it did not decline and disappear.

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Walking past him carelessly without respect were the pretentious ones who thought they already knew it all. They considered their own meditation to be even superior to that of their teacher, disregarding the fact that he had previously guided them all in its proper practice. They were not the least bit interested in showing gratitude for his tutelage in matters of Dhamma because they already considered themselves to be clever experts in everything. And thus they behaved accordingly, which was ruinous not only to themselves, but also to the entire *sāsana*, including all the people who might come to them for guidance. Their minds poisoned by the errors of such monks, these people would in turn harm themselves and others, including future generations, without discovering whether they were on the right path or not.

The next group consisted of those who waited for the chance to pass him, signaling the start of a bad attitude that would develop and have repercussions for the future *sāsana*. Much like the previous group, they held a variety of erroneous views, causing harm to themselves and the religion as a whole. Together, they were a menace to the *sāsana*, the spiritual focus of all Buddhists. Because they failed to rightly consider the consequences of their actions, the *sāsana* was in danger of being utterly destroyed.

The monks who pinched Ācariya Mun's chest with pieces of split bamboo considered themselves to be astutely well-informed and acted accordingly. Despite their wrongful actions, they did not take right and wrong into consideration in thinking about their behavior. On top of that, they were bound to cause Buddhist circles and their teacher a great deal of discomfort. Ācariya Mun said that he knew exactly who were among this last group of monks, and that they would cause him trouble before long. He was saddened that they would do such a thing since they were his former disciples who had his consent and blessing to spend the rains retreat nearby. Rather than treating him with all the respect he deserved, they planned to return and bother him.

A few days later, the provincial governor and a group of government officials came to visit his monastery. The delegation was accompanied by the very same disciples who had led the assault on him in his vision. Without revealing his vision to them, he carefully observed their actions. Together they requested his support in soliciting money from the local people in order to build several schools in the area. They explained that this would help the government. They had all agreed

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to approach Ācariya Mun for assistance since he was highly revered by the people. They felt that the project would surely be a success if he were involved. As soon as he knew the reason for their visit, Ācariya Mun immediately understood that these two monks were the principle instigators of this troublesome business. It was represented in his vision of the assault. Later, he asked both monks to come to him and instructed them in appropriate behavior for a practicing Buddhist monk – someone who's way of life is rooted in self-restraint and tranquillity.

This story is recounted here to help the reader understand the mysterious nature of the *citta*: how it is quite capable of knowing things both apparent and hidden, including knowledge of things past and future, as well as of the present. Ācariya Mun exemplified this ability on numerous occasions. He conducted himself with total detachment. His thoughts never concealed any ulterior, worldly motives. Whatever he said stemmed from his knowledge and insights and was purposefully spoken to make people think. His intention was never to fool credulous people or to cause harm.

What is recorded here was told to his close inner circle of disciples – not just anyone. Thus the writer might be showing bad judgment in exposing Ācariya Mun's affairs. But I think this account offers those who are interested something useful to dwell upon.

Among present-day *kammaāhāna* monks, Ācariya Mun's experiences stand out for being uniquely broad in scope and truly amazing – both in the sphere of his meditation practice and the insights derived from his psychic knowledge. Sometimes, when the circumstances were appropriate, he spoke directly and specifically about his intuitive knowledge. Yet at other times, he referred only indirectly to what he knew and used it for general teaching purposes. Following his experience with the elderly monk, whose thoughts he read during his stay at Sarika Cave, he was extremely cautious about disclosing his insights to others despite his earnest desire to help his students see the errors in their thinking.

When he pointed out candidly that this monk was thinking in the wrong way, or that that monk was thinking in the right way, his listeners were adversely affected by his frankness. They invariably misunderstood his charitable intent instead of benefiting from it as was his purpose. Taking offense at his words could easily lead to harmful consequences. Thus, most of the time Ācariya Mun admonished

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monks indirectly for he was concerned that the culprits would feel embarrassed and frightened in front of their fellows. Without identifying anyone by name, he merely gave a warning in order to foster self-awareness. Even so, the culprit sometimes became terribly distressed, finding himself rebuked amidst the assembled monks. Ācariya Mun was very well aware of this, as he was of the most expedient method to use in any given circumstance.

Some readers may feel uncomfortable with some of the things that are written here. I apologize for this; but I have accurately recorded everything that Ācariya Mun related himself. Many senior disciples, who lived under his tutelage, have confirmed and elaborated on these accounts, leaving us with a vast array of stories.

GENERALLY SPEAKING, external sense objects pose the greatest danger to practicing monks. They enjoy thinking about sights, sounds, smells, tastes, bodily contact and mental images concerning the opposite sex. Though this is unintended, the tendency to do it is deeply ingrained in their personalities. Inevitably these were the primary subjects of Ācariya Mun's admonitions, whether given directly or indirectly. Monks had other kinds of thoughts of course, but unless they were particularly serious he wouldn't take much notice.

The evening meeting was the most important time by far. Ācariya Mun wanted the members of his audience to be both physically and mentally calm. He didn't want anything to disturb them, or himself, while he was speaking, ensuring that his disciples received maximum benefit from listening. If someone allowed wild, unwholesome thoughts to arise at that time, he was usually struck by a bolt of lightning – right in the middle of the thoughts that absorbed him, right in the middle of the meeting. This made the monk, who dared to think so recklessly, tremble and almost faint on the spot. Although no name was mentioned, Ācariya Mun's disclosure of the content of the offensive thoughts was enough to send a shock through the guilty one. Other monks were also alarmed, fearing that in a moment of carelessness they themselves might fall prey to similar thoughts. When lightning struck continuously during the course of a Dhamma talk, his audience succumbed to the pressure and sat very attentively on guard. Some monks actually entered into a meditative state of complete tranquillity at that time. Those who did not attain such a state were still able to stay calm and cautious

from fear that lightening might strike again if their thoughts strayed – or perhaps the hawk they feared was swooping down to snatch their heads!

For this reason, those monks residing with Ācariya Mun gradually developed a solid foundation for centering their hearts. The longer they remained with him, the more their inner and outer demeanors harmonized with his. Those who committed to stay with him for a long time submitted willingly to his vigorous teaching methods. With patience, they came to understand all the skillful means he used, whether in the daily routine or during a discourse on Dhamma. They observed him tirelessly, trying to thoroughly follow his example as best they could. Their tendency to desire Dhamma and be serious about all aspects of daily practice increased their inner fortitude little by little each day, until they eventually stood on their own.

Those monks who never achieved positive results from living with him usually paid more attention to external matters than to internal ones. For instance, they were afraid that Ācariya Mun would berate them whenever their thoughts foolishly strayed. When he did rebuke them for this, they became too scared to think of solving the problem themselves, as would befit monks who were training under Ācariya Mun. It made no sense at all to go to an excellent teacher only to continue following the same old tendencies. They went there, lived there, and remained unchanged: they listened with the same prefixed attitudes, and indulged in the same old patterns of thought. Everything was done in an habitual manner, laden with *kilesas*, so that there was no room for Ācariya Mun's way to penetrate. When they left him, they went as they had come; they remained unchanged. You can be sure that there was little change in their personal virtue to warrant mentioning, and that the vices that engulfed them continued to accumulate, unabated. Since they never tired of this, they simply remained as so many unfortunate people without effective means to oppose this tendency and reverse their course. No matter how long they lived with Ācariya Mun, they were no different than a ladle in a pot of delicious stew: never knowing the taste of the stew, the ladle merely moves repeatedly out of one pot and into another.

Similarly, the *kilesas* that amass immeasurable evil, pick us up and throw us into this pot of pain, that pot of suffering. No doubt, I myself am one of those who gets picked up and thrown into one pot and then into another. I like to be diligent and apply myself, but something keeps

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whispering at me to be lazy. I like to follow Ācariya Mun's example; and I like to listen and think in the way of Dhamma as he has taught. But again, that something whispers at me to go and live and think in my old habitual way. It doesn't want me to change in any way whatsoever. In the end, we trust the *kilesas* until we fall fast asleep and submit to doing everything in the old habitual way. Thus, we remain just our old habitual selves, without changes or improvements to inspire self-esteem or admiration from others. Habitual tendencies are an extremely important issue for every one of us. Their roots are buried deep inside. If we don't really apply ourselves conscientiously, observing and questioning everything, then these roots are terribly difficult to pull out.

ĀCARIYA MUN DEPARTED from Ban Nong Khon with his mother at the beginning of the dry season. They stayed one or two nights at each village until they arrived at his home village, where Ācariya Mun resided for a time. He instructed his mother and the villagers until they all felt reassured. Then he took leave of his family to go wandering in the direction of the Central Plains region.

He traveled leisurely, in the style of a *dhutanga* monk: he was in no particular hurry. If he came upon a village or a place with an adequate supply of water, he hung up his umbrella-tent and peacefully practiced, continuing his journey only when he regained strength of body and mind. Back then, everyone traveled by foot, since there were no cars. Still, he said that he wasn't pressed for time; that his main purpose was the practice of meditation. Wandering all day on foot was the same as walking meditation for the same duration of time. Leaving his disciples behind to walk alone to Bangkok was like a lead elephant withdrawing from its herd to search alone for food in the forest. He experienced a sense of physical and mental relief, as though he had removed a vexatious thorn from his chest that had severely oppressed him for a long time. Light in body and light in heart, he walked through broad, sectioned paddy fields, absorbed in meditation. There was very little shade, but he paid no attention to the sun's searing heat. The environment truly seemed to make the long journey easier for him. On his shoulders he carried his bowl and umbrella-tent, the personal requisites of a *dhutanga* monk. Although they appeared cumbersome, he didn't feel them to be burdensome in any way. In

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truth, he felt as though he were floating on air, having relieved himself of all concern about the monks he left behind. His sense of detachment was complete. His mother was no longer a concern for him, for he had taught her to the best of his ability until she developed a reliable, inner stability. From then on, he was responsible for himself alone. He walked on as he pondered over these thoughts, reminding himself not to be heedless.

He walked meditation in this manner along paths free of human traffic. By midday the sun was extremely hot, so he would look for a pleasant, shady tree at the edge of a forest to rest for awhile. He would sit there peacefully, doing his meditation practice under the shade of a tree. When late afternoon came and the heat had relented somewhat, he moved on with the composure of one who realized the dangers inherent within all conditioned things, thus cultivating a clear, comprehending mind. All he needed were small villages with just enough houses to support his daily almsround and, at intervals along his journey, suitable places for him to conveniently stay to practice that were far enough from the villages. He resided in one of the more suitable places for quite some time before moving along.

Ācariya Mun said that upon reaching Dong Phaya Yen forest between the Saraburi and Nakhon Ratchasima provinces, he discovered many forested mountain ranges that brought special joy to his heart. He felt inclined to extend his stay in the area in order to strengthen his heart, for it had long been thirsting to live again in the solitude of the mountains and forests. Upon coming across a suitable location, he would decide to remain awhile and practice meditation until the time came to move on again. Steadily he wandered through the area in this way. He would tell of the region's forests and mountains abounding in many different kinds of animals, and of his delight in watching the barking deer, wild pigs, sambor deer, flying lemurs, gibbons, tigers, elephants, monkeys, langurs, civets, jungle fowl, pheasants, bear, porcupine, tree shrews, ground squirrels, and the many other small species of animals. The animals showed little fear of him when he crossed paths with them during the day when they were out searching for food.

Those days, the forested terrain didn't really contain any villages. What few there were consisted of isolated settlements of three or four houses bunched together for livelihood. The inhabitants hunted the many wild animals and planted rice and other crops along the edge of

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the mountains where Ācariya Mun passed. Villagers there had great faith in *dhutaṅga* monks, and so he could depend on them for alms food. When he stayed among them, his practice went very smoothly. They never bothered him or wasted his time. They kept to themselves and worked on their own so his journey progressed trouble-free, both physically and mentally, until he arrived safely in Bangkok.

