

A Heart Released

Venerable Ācariya Mun said that he often traveled back and forth from the Northeast to Bangkok, sometimes taking the train to 'the end of the line', which extended only part of the distance in those days. All other times he walked *dhutanga*. Upon arriving in Bangkok on this trip, he went to Wat Pathumwan monastery, and stayed there through the rains retreat. During the rains he frequently studied Dhamma texts with the Venerable Chao Khun Upāli Guḍḍipamācariya at his monastery, Wat Boromaniwat.¹ Chao Khun Upāli invited Ācariya Mun to accompany him to Chiang Mai after the rains. So, during the dry season, they went to Chiang Mai by train. On the train Ācariya Mun remained in *samādhī* almost the whole time. Between Bangkok and Lopburi he laid down to rest; but after the train departed Lopburi and reached the foothills of Uttaradit, he entered *samādhī* and remained there for the duration of the trip to Chiang Mai. At the start of his meditation, he made a decision to withdraw from it only upon arrival at Chiang Mai, and then focused exclusively on his meditation. After approximately twenty minutes, his *citta* completely 'converged' into the very base of *samādhī*. From that moment on, he was no longer aware of whether the train was moving or not. Absolute stillness was all that his heart knew; all awareness of external phenomena, including his body, completely ceased. Any perception, that might have disturbed it, vanished from the *citta*, as though the world no longer existed, having disappeared along with all thoughts and inner sensations. The noise of the train, the other passengers, and all the things that were associated with the *citta* earlier were extinguished from his awareness. All that remained was his state of *samādhī*. The external environment faded out of consciousness from the moment his *citta* first 'converged' until he arrived in Chiang Mai, where his previous determination restored him to his normal state of consciousness.

When he opened his eyes to look around, he saw the surrounding buildings and houses of the city. As he began collecting his things in preparation for leaving the train, he noticed that the passengers and railway officials around him were staring at him in astonishment. When it was time to disembark, the railway officials approached him and, smiling cheerfully, helped him with his things, while everyone else in

the passenger carriage stared curiously at him. Even before he had stepped off the train, he was asked what monastery he was from and where he was going. He replied that he was a forest-dwelling monk without a fixed residence, and that he intended to go wandering alone in the remote mountains of the North. Inspired by faith in him, some of them asked where he would stay and whether anyone had agreed to take him there. He thanked them, replying that there was someone to receive him since his traveling companion was Chao Khun Upāli, a very senior monk and one who was highly respected by all in Chiang Mai, from the governor to the merchants and the general public. So it happened that a crowd of monks, novices, and lay supporters awaited to receive Chao Khun Upāli. There were even automobiles in waiting, which were quite rare in those days. Official government cars as well as private ones were there to escort them to Wat Chedi Luang monastery.

Once people learned that Chao Khun Upāli had returned to reside at Wat Chedi Luang, they came to pay their respects and hear him expound the Dhamma. Chao Khun Upāli took advantage of the many people present to invite Ācariya Mun to give a discourse on Dhamma. Speaking eloquently, Ācariya Mun enthralled the large audience so much that they wished it would not end. Starting from the basics, he gradually climbed step by step to the higher levels of Dhamma, where he ended his discourse to the sincere regret of all who were absorbed in his presentation. He then paid his respects to Chao Khun Upāli before he left center stage to find a place to relax by himself. Meanwhile, Chao Khun Upāli praised his talk before the whole assembly: "Ācariya Mun expounds Dhamma so eloquently that it is difficult to find anyone to equal him. He clarifies *muttodaya* the heart released, the land of absolute freedom in a way that leaves no room for doubt. Everything is so precisely illustrated that I myself couldn't possibly match his unique, engrossing style. The rhetorical fluency of this *dhutanga* monk is most extraordinary. Listening to him is a pleasurable, learning experience. His discourses never become stale or boring. He speaks of common, everyday things things we see and hear all the time but never pay attention to utilize. We recall their significance only after he mentions them. Ācariya Mun is an important *kammaāhāna* monk who uses mindfulness and wisdom to faithfully follow the path taught by the Buddha. He never tramples upon it in an unseemly, worldly manner. His talks employ a full range of expression: sometimes casual,

sometimes serious, sometimes emphatic, stressing specific points. He elaborates the profound complexities of Dhamma in a way the rest of us are hard pressed to do so candidly. He is quite capable of analyzing the disparate aspects of Dhamma and articulates them in a way that deeply affects our hearts. His commentary is so brilliant that it's hard to keep up with him. I myself have needed to ask him questions about problems I couldn't solve on my own, and he quickly and adeptly solved those problems with his wisdom. I have benefited in innumerable ways from his counsel.

"Since I was coming to Chiang Mai I wanted Ācariya Mun to accompany me, and he readily agreed. Although he did not specifically mention this to me, he probably agreed to come here because he knows Chiang Mai abounds in mountains and forests suitable for the spiritual life. Monks like Ācariya Mun are extremely hard to find. Even though I am his senior, I wholly revere the Dhamma within him and yet, he is still so humble and gracious towards me that I sometimes feel embarrassed. He has intended to stay here for only a short while before going off in search of seclusion. I must allow my friend to follow his inclinations as I dare not contradict them, for it is rare indeed to find such a monk. With his intentions being solely focused on Dhamma, we should wish him the best as he strives to improve himself. He can then be of greater benefit to us all in the near future.

"Those of you who have problems with your meditation practice, please go to him and seek his advice. You certainly won't be disappointed. But please don't ask him for powerful amulets, magic spells, or lucky charms to ward off danger, for they are all outside the way of practice.

You will just make yourself a nuisance to him for no good reason. You may well receive a reprimand don't say I never warned you! Ācariya Mun is not that kind of monk. He is a genuine monk, sincerely teaching people to know the difference between right and wrong, good and bad, virtue and evil. His teaching never deviates from the path of Dhamma. His way of practice and knowledge of Dhamma are true to the teachings of the Lord Buddha. No one else nowadays can convey such incredible ideas as he has presented me from our discussions on Dhamma. That has been my experience. I hold an immense respect for him in my heart, but, I have never told him this. Nevertheless, he may already know of it from his powers of intuition.

"Ācariya Mun is a monk truly worthy of the highest respect, and is unquestionably 'an incomparable field of merit for the world'. He himself never makes claims of noble attainments, though this is apparent to me when we discuss Dhamma in private. I am wholly convinced that he is firmly established in the third level of the Noble Dhamma. It is obvious from the way he expresses himself. Although he has never made statements of his specific level of attainment, I know for certain what it is: for the knowledge of Dhamma he has conveyed to me is absolutely consistent with that level as described in the Buddhist texts. He has shown me nothing but loyalty and respect, and I have never known him to be in any way stubborn or disdainful. He conducts himself with such humility that I cannot help but admire him from the bottom of my heart."

These were the words of praise that Chao Khun Upāli addressed to the lay followers, monks, and novices after Ācariya Mun gave his Dhamma talk and returned to his hut. Afterwards, monks who were present reported this speech to Ācariya Mun, who later recounted the story to his disciples when a good opportunity arose. The term *muttodaya* means "a heart released". Its mention in the short biographical sketch distributed at Ācariya Mun's cremation stems from that occasion in Chiang Mai when Chao Khun Upāli praised his noble virtues. The name stuck and was then passed down to future generations by word of mouth. According to Chao Khun Dhammachedi of Wat Bodhisomphorn monastery in Udon Thani, Ācariya Mun remained practicing in Chiang Mai from 1929 to 1940 when he left for the province of Udon Thani. More will be written later concerning his stay in Udon Thani.

Having lived at Wat Chedi Luang monastery for some time, Ācariya Mun paid his respects to Chao Khun Upāli and took leave to wander in search of solitude in the remote wilderness areas of the North. Chao Khun Upāli readily gave his permission, and so Ācariya Mun departed alone from Chiang Mai, beginning another journey. He had eagerly awaited the ideal seclusion he needed for a long time, and the perfect opportunity finally arose. Having been long involved in teaching others, it was the first time in many years that he had time alone. Initially, he wandered through the Mae Rim district in Chiang Dao, staying in the forested mountains there throughout the dry and rainy seasons.

His efforts had reached the crucial, final stage. He exhorted himself to strive earnestly to reach the final goal, whatever happened live or die. Nothing whatsoever would be allowed to interfere. Out of compassion he had taught his fellow monks to the best of his ability of this he had no doubt. The results of his guidance already began to show in some of his disciples. Now it was time to have compassion for himself, to educate and lift himself above and beyond those obscuring inner factors which still needed to be overcome.

The life of someone with social obligations and responsibilities is a life of distraction and of almost unbearable stress, never allowing adequate time for being alone. One must admit that this kind of life is a perpetual struggle to be endured, even though a person may have enough mindfulness and wisdom to avoid this burden somewhat and alleviate the stress so that it doesn't overwhelm him. The opportunities to practice meditation are limited; the results are likely to be minimal and not worth all the disappointments and difficulties.

This solitary excursion into the untamed wilderness was an ideal opportunity for him to disengage and live alone, aloof from all entanglements. Wild, remote forests are just the right kinds of places to live and practice for someone aiming to sever all residual attachments, both internal and external, from his heart. He can discard all the remaining concerns that might form the seeds of future existence the source of all forms of *dukkha* that brings menace in its wake and causes endless suffering. Remote forests are the right environment in which a persistent and diligent person can zero in on the fundamental causes of existence—the great internal masters of deception leading us astray and excise them quickly from his heart. While one is still far from reaching the shores of Nibbāna, little benefit can be gained from involvement in other people's affairs; for that is comparable to overloading a barge that is ready to sink even before it starts going. When the coveted goal of the holy life seemed within reach, Acariya Mun's compassionate concern for others dropped away, replaced by motivations of a more personal nature. He was no longer considering the suffering of others. His resolve was focused firmly on the realm of purity and he was concerned, lest he not reach it this time. Thus he reflected:

"Now I must worry about myself pity myself so that as a diligent disciple of the Tathāgata, I can live up to his exalted virtue of

unwavering perseverance. Am I fully aware that I have come here striving to cross beyond the world of *saṃsāra* and attain the goal of Nibbāna the freedom from all anxiety and *dukkha*? If so, what methods should be used by someone attempting to cross beyond the conventional world? The Lord Buddha first led the way and then taught us the Dhamma what kind of guidance did he give? Did he teach us to forget our purpose and start worrying about this and that as soon as we have gained a modest understanding of Dhamma?

"In the beginning, the Lord Buddha publicly proclaimed the *sāsana* with the help of a small number of Arahants, getting his message rapidly spread far and wide most properly so. But I am not in the same exalted position, so I must view my own development as paramount right now. When I have perfected myself, then benefits to others will inevitably follow. This view befits one who is circumspect and reluctant to waste time. I must reflect on this carefully, so I can learn a lesson from it.

"Right now, I am striving for victory in a battle between the *kilesas* and *magga*, the way of Dhamma, in order to win freedom for the *citta*. Until now its loyalties have been divided between these two rivals, but I aim to make Dhamma its undisputed master. If my persistence slackens and my powers of discernment are inadequate, the *citta* will slip from my grasp and fall under the ignoble influence of the *kilesas*; and they will ensure that the *citta* keeps turning in a never-ending cycle of birth and despair. But if I can keep up my persistence and keep my wisdom sharp, the *citta* will come under my control and be my own priceless treasure for the taking. "The time has come for me to put my life on the line and engage the *kilesas* in a fierce all out assault, showing no hesitation or weakness. If I lose, then let me die while battling it out. I will not allow myself to retreat in disarray so that the *kilesas* can ridicule me that will be a lasting disgrace. If I am victorious, I shall remain perfectly free for all eternity. So now, there is only one path for me to take: I must fight to the death with all my might for the sake of this victory. There is no other choice."

This is the kind of exhortation that Ācariya Mun used to embolden himself for the impending realization of the goal he had set for himself. It reflected his uncompromising decision to accept the obligation of striving for Nibbāna steadfastly both day and night whether standing,

walking, sitting, or lying down. Except when he rested to sleep, his time was wholly devoted to diligent effort. His mindfulness and wisdom circled around all external sensations and all internal thought processes, meticulously investigating everything without leaving any aspect unexplored. At this level of practice, mindfulness and wisdom act in unison like a Wheel of Dhamma, turning continuously in motion, irrespective of the body's action.

Later, when Ācariya Mun described his tremendous efforts during that time, his audience was so awe-struck by his Dhamma exploits that they sat motionless with bated breath. It was as though Ācariya Mun had opened the door to Nibbāna, allowing them a glimpse inside, without their having ever experienced Nibbāna before. In truth, Ācariya Mun was then in the process of accelerating his efforts toward the realization of Nibbāna. Although only a stage in the course of his development, it nevertheless moved those who had never before heard of such a thing, and they were always carried away by the awesome power of his achievement.

Ācariya Mun said that his *citta* had long attained the third *ariya* level of Anāgāmi; but, because of his continual obligations to his followers, he had no time to speed up his efforts as he wished. Only when he had the opportunity to go to Chiang Mai was he able to maximize his practice and accomplish his objective.

Chiang Mai's environment was conducive and his *citta* was well prepared. Physically, he was in excellent shape, fit to exert himself in every activity. His fervent hope was like the radiant sun, streaming forth continuously to reach the shore free of *dukkha* in the shortest possible time. He compared his inner struggle between Dhamma and the *kilesas* to a hunting dog, which, at full run, corners its prey, and it is only a matter of time before the prey is torn to shreds in the jaws of the chasing hound. There could be no other ending, for the *citta* was armed with *mahāsati* and *mahāpaññā* supreme-mindfulness and supreme-wisdom. They never lapse for a single moment, even when one has no intent to be vigilant. At this level, mindfulness and wisdom are fully present, reacting automatically to all matters arising within oneself. As soon as their cause is known and their true nature is clearly understood, one simply lets go of them. It is not necessary then to be in command, giving orders, as is the case in the initial stages of practice. When

equipped with habitual mindfulness and wisdom, there is no need for specific directions and calculated decisions to practice this or to investigate that, while having to simultaneously guard against lapses in attention. "Reason and result" are integrated into the nature of automatic mindfulness and automatic wisdom; so, it is unnecessary to search on one's own for reasons and skillful methods to encourage their operation. With the exception of sleep, all daily activities are the working arenas for this level of *mahāsati* and *mahāpaññā*. Just like spring water which flows steadily out of the ground all year round, they work ceaselessly.

The thinking process is taken as the focal point of the investigation, in order to find the true source of these thoughts. The four *nāma khandhas* — *vedanā*, *saññā*, *sankhāra*, and *viññāḍā* are the appropriate battleground for this superior degree of mindfulness and wisdom. As for the *rūpa khandha* the physical body it ceased to be a problem when one achieved the intermediate level of wisdom. This form of wisdom performs the tasks necessary for realizing the Anāgāmi stage of the Noble Path. To attain this exalted level, one must focus on the physical body, investigating it scrupulously in every detail until all misunderstandings and concerns about the body are forever banished.

When one comes to the final stage the path to Arahantship, it is absolutely essential to investigate the *nāma khandhas* so that one gains a deep and clear understanding about how all phenomena arise, briefly exist, and then vanish. These three aspects of the investigation converge in the truth of *anattā*. This means examining all phenomena as being empty of a permanent self: empty of being a man or woman, empty of being me or them. No self-entity whatsoever exists anywhere within mental phenomena.² To comprehend the true nature of the *nāma khandhas*, one must discover the fundamental principles underlying them and understand them deeply and clearly with wisdom. It's not enough that we anticipate results or speculate about their nature, as is the common tendency of most people who just prefer to do guesswork.

A theoretical understanding, acquired from learning, differs from a genuine understanding based on wisdom as the earth differs from the sky. People whose understanding is founded upon knowledge gained through memorization are very preoccupied with their own ideas,

always assuming that they are highly intelligent. In truth, they are completely deluded. Consequently, they become overly conceited and are reluctant to accept help and advice from anyone.³

This arrogant tendency is quite apparent when a group of scholars discuss Dhamma, each one constantly trying to champion his own intellectual theories. These meetings usually degenerate into verbal sparring matches, spurred on by this common attitude of self-importance, until everyone regardless of age, race, gender, or clan forgets to observe the proper etiquette expected of such 'civilized' people.

Understanding, based on wisdom, is ready to uproot all types of speculative views that continually manifest our conceit. Wisdom is prepared to ferret out and expose these erroneous views, penetrating every niche until the whole edifice of these *kilesas* comes crashing down. There is not one *kilesa* that can successfully withstand the penetration of the highest degree of mindfulness and wisdom.

In the Dhamma's arsenal, mindfulness and wisdom are the foremost weapons. Never have the *kilesas* been intrepid enough to defeat them. The Lord Buddha became the Supreme Teacher because of mindfulness and wisdom. His disciples became Arahants because of mindfulness and wisdom. Because of mindfulness and wisdom, they were able to see with insight into the true nature of things. They didn't uproot their *kilesas* by using learning, supposition, or mere guesswork. In the initial stages of practice, concepts recalled from memory can be used to delineate the boundaries of the way forward; but, one must exercise great caution lest this kind of conjecture causes delusion appearing in the guise of genuine truth.

When the Lord Buddha and his Arahant disciples proclaimed the Truth of his teaching to the world, they were proclaiming the way of wisdom _ the way that brings us to see the true nature of all phenomena. We practitioners of meditation must be extremely careful that the master of speculation doesn't sneak in and conjure up his tricks in place of wisdom. If we don't, we will be led to mistake mere concepts for true understanding, without ever removing a single *kilesa* from our hearts. We may find ourselves inundated with knowledge about salvation, yet unable to save ourselves. This is exactly what the Lord Buddha meant

when he advised the people of Kālāma not to believe in speculation or conjecture, and not to believe teachings handed down from the past or teachers who are considered to be reliable; but to believe that the principles of truth can be discovered within themselves by the wisdom within themselves. This is the surest kind of knowledge there is. The Lord Buddha and his Arahant disciples didn't need anyone to validate the authenticity of their attainment, for *sandiāhiko* is there within everyone who practices the Buddha's teaching in the right way.⁴

Ācariya Mun said that when he came to this last level of advanced practice, he became so intrigued with it that he lost all sense of time. He completely forgot the time of day, forgot to sleep, and then forgot how tired he was. Fearless and unshakable, his *citta* was constantly in position to oppose every type of *kilesa*, ready to excise them by their roots. From the time he left Wat Chedi Luang in Chiang Mai, he did not allow a single day to pass in vain. And before long, he reached the point of ultimate understanding.⁵

At the moment he set off alone, his *citta* began to express the dynamic characteristics of a daring thoroughbred stallion. It wanted to soar high and glide through the air, dive underground and then shoot up into the sky again. It felt inclined to venture out to experience the many countless variety of phenomena in the universe. He felt as if his *citta* was about to dig up and remove all of the *kilesas* in a single instant. The adventurous nature of his mindfulness and wisdom had long been hemmed in by social obligations. They were unable to move freely about in their preferred domain the observation and analysis of just those things Ācariya Mun had wanted to know about for such a long time. Now he was blessed blessed with the opportunity of leaping away and vanishing, finally able to give mindfulness and wisdom the chance to display their considerable prowess as they explored throughout the three worlds of existence.

Ācariya Mun investigated thoroughly, internally and externally. His mindfulness and wisdom penetrated all around constantly moving in and out, up and down all the while resolving issues, detaching himself, and then letting go as he cut, slashed, and pulverized every manner of falsehood with all the strength he could muster. Feeling unbound as a giant fish swimming happily in the ocean, he looked back on his entire past and saw only dark obstructive times lurking there, fraught with all

kinds of dangerous, inevitable consequences. His heart beat faster at the prospect of finding a way to save himself. Looking to the future, he saw before him only a majestic, empty expanse of brilliant illumination a view that completely surpasses any conventional understanding and is utterly beyond all description. So much so, that I find it difficult to elaborate any further for the benefit of the reader. I sincerely regret that I am unable to do justice to all the inspiring things Ācariya Mun said.

Ācariya Mun sat in meditation late that night, not too long after supreme-mindfulness and supreme-wisdom had reached the peak of their performance. Like a Wheel of Dhamma, they moved in unison as they rotated non-stop around the *citta* and everything related to it. He was residing at the base of a mountain, in a broad, open area covered with enormous flat rocks. Clear, open space surrounded him as he sat at the foot of a solitary tree the only tree in that entire area. This tree had abundant cool shade during the day, so he sometimes went to meditate under it.

I regret that I cannot recall what type of tree it was, or its exact location. As Ācariya Mun described this amazing event, I was so thoroughly overwhelmed by the magnitude of his achievement that I failed to remember any of the pertinent details what district and township he was in, or even the name of the mountain range. Hearing him talk of his great victory, I couldn't help thinking about myself. Was I going to simply waste my birth as a human being, carelessly throwing away the wonderful opportunity it gave me? Did I have enough spiritual potential to one day succeed in realizing that same Supreme Dhamma? Reflecting in this manner, I forgot everything else. I had no idea that, someday, I would be writing his biography.

At dusk Acariya Mun began walking meditation, focusing on *pañiccasamuppāda*, as the theme of primary relevance to this level of contemplation.⁶ Starting with *avijjā paccaya sankhāra*, he became so intrigued by the subject of 'dependent origination' that he was soon investigating it to the exclusion of all else. By the time he sat down at about nine o'clock, his mind was concentrated solely on scrutinizing *avijjā*, examining each of the interdependent conditions through to the logical conclusion, then reversing the order to arrive back at *avijjā*. Contemplating thus, he deliberated back and forth, over and over inside

the *citta* the focal point where birth, death, and *kilesas* converge with the principal cause *avijjã*.

Seated in meditation late that night, the crucial moment had arrived. The battle lines were drawn: supreme-mindfulness and supreme-wisdom the razor sharp weapons against *avijjã*, an enemy especially adroit at repulsing their advances then counterattacking, leaving its opponents in total disarray. Since time immemorial no one has dared to challenge its might, allowing *avijjã* to reign supreme and unopposed over the 'kingdom of birth and death' inside the hearts of all living beings. But at three a. m. that night when Ācariya Mun launched his final, all out assault, *the result was the total destruction of the king's mighty throne and the complete overthrow of his reign in the 'kingdom of birth and death'. Suddenly impotent and deprived of room to maneuver, the king could not maintain his sovereignty. At that moment avijjã perished, victim to a lightening strike of magnificent brilliance.*

Ācariya Mun described how that fateful moment was accompanied by a tremor that appeared to shake the entire universe. Celestial beings throughout this vast expanse immediately paid tribute to his supreme accomplishment, roaring an exclamation of approval that reverberated across the sentient universe, and proclaimed the appearance of another disciple of the Tathāgatha in the world. Overjoyed to have witnessed this event, they were eager to offer their congratulations. Human beings, however, were unaware of the momentous event that had just taken place. Occupied with worldly pleasures, they were too oblivious to care that, only a moment before, the Supreme Dhamma had arisen in the heart of a fellow human being.

When the awesome moment passed, what remained was *visuddhidhamma*.⁷ This pure Dhamma the true, natural state of the *citta* suffused Acariya Mun's body and mind, and extended its light in all directions. The experience aroused an indescribable feeling of great awe and wonder. His customary compassion for the world virtually disappeared, and with it, his interest in teaching other people. He was convinced that this Supreme Dhamma was far too profound and overwhelming in its greatness for people to ever truly understand. So he became disheartened in this respect, feeling disinclined to teach others. He felt it was enough to simply enjoy this wonderful Dhamma alone while still living in the midst of the conventional world.

Ācariya Mun reflected at length that night on the beneficence of the Lord Buddha. This Supreme Teacher, having fully realized the Truth, taught people who were receptive to his message so that they too could attain genuine deliverance. It was obvious that not a single falsehood was concealed anywhere within the Buddha's teaching. He spent the rest of that night tirelessly paying homage to the supreme virtues of the Lord Buddha.

Ācariya Mun had always been compassionate he was deeply sympathetic to the spiritual state of fellow human beings. But his *citta* had just attained a clarity that was so extraordinary in its brilliance and purity that he felt he could not possibly explain the true nature of this Dhamma to others. Even if he tried, ordinary people with *kilesas* could never hope to attain this exalted state of mind. More than that, hearing him speak in such superlatives, they could accuse him of insanity for daring to teach the world something that no good, sane person would ever discuss. He believed it unlikely that there would be enough sympathetic people to generate his enthusiasm for teaching. He was free to live a life of solitude for the remainder of his years. It was sufficient that he had fully realized his life-long ambition. He saw no reason to burden himself with difficult teaching responsibilities. It could end up being an example of good causes with bad effects: that is, his compassionate intentions could well turn into harmful results for contemptuous people.

Such was Ācariya Mun's frame of mind shortly after attaining the Supreme Dhamma a time when he had yet to focus on the wider picture. Eventually, his thoughts gathered on the Lord Buddha's guiding role in revealing the correct path of practice. Reviewing his attainment of Dhamma and the path he took, he saw that he, too, was a human being in the world just like everyone else, and undistinguished from others by any special characteristic that would make him the only person capable of understanding this Dhamma. Certainly, others with strong spiritual tendencies were capable of this understanding. By failing to broaden his perspective, his initial outlook had tended to disparage the spiritual tendencies of his fellow human beings which was unfair.

The Lord Buddha did not reveal the path of practice leading to *magga*, *phala* and Nibbāna for the benefit of only one individual. This

revelation was a gift for the whole world, both his contemporaries and succeeding generations. In total, the number of those who have reached *magga*, *phala* and Nibbāna, following the Buddha's teaching, is enormous beyond reckoning. In this respect, Ācariya Mun's achievement was definitely not unique, though he initially overlooked the capacity of others for similar achievement.

Carefully reviewing all aspects of the Buddha's teaching, he saw its relevance for people the world over, and its accessibility to anyone willing to practice correctly. These thoughts gave him a renewed desire to help others. Once again, he felt comfortable with the idea of teaching people who came to him for guidance and were receptive to his instructions. For in teaching Dhamma, the teacher has an obligation to treat Dhamma with respect by refusing to instruct anyone who is disrespectful or indifferent to what is being taught.

Some people can't help making noise while listening to Dhamma: they are obviously apathetic to the value of the Dhamma and the opportunity they have for hearing it. They appear oblivious to where they are or how they are expected to behave at that time. Such people see Dhamma as something quite ordinary. They have adopted a typically worldly attitude of being thoroughly indifferent to Dhamma, to the monastery, and to the monks. They see the whole lot as just commonplace. Under such circumstances, it is unconscionable to teach Dhamma: the teacher is then censurable and the audience fails to gain any real benefit.

Before he realized the Supreme Dhamma and then made it available to others, Ācariya Mun nearly gave up his life in the forests and mountains as he struggled relentlessly with every ounce of strength. After such heroic effort, the notion of bringing this precious Dhamma and having it simply dissipate in the ocean was inconceivable. When has that ever happened? After all, a monk is the type of person who considers everything scrupulously before he acts. Dhamma exists in a class by itself, so special attention must be paid to when and how it is presented to a public audience. Should these considerations be neglected in the presentation of Dhamma, the outcome might well prove harmful.

Dhamma is taught for the purpose of helping people in the world much like a doctor, desiring the well-being of his patients, prescribes

medications to cure sickness and relieve pain. But when people are unwilling to accept help, why should a monk worry about teaching them? If he really has true Dhamma in his heart, he is perfectly content to live in solitude. It's unnecessary for him to seek students in order to alleviate the discomfort and stress caused by an irrepressible urge to teach others the way an urge which merely adds to a person's sense of discontent, anyway. Lacking sincerity in the Dhamma that the Lord Buddha strove so earnestly to realize, such a person, though he calls himself a teacher, is one only in name.

Ācariya Mun said he had complete confidence that he was mentally and physically attuned to living alone because his heart was supremely tranquil, possessing genuine Dhamma. Dhamma means tranquillity. A heart filled with Dhamma is a heart whose serenity transcends everything. Ācariya Mun naturally preferred living in forested mountain areas since these places were conducive to dwelling sublimely with Dhamma.⁸ He considered teaching others to be a special situation. It was an obligation he performed occasionally and not an actual necessity as was living by Dhamma an essential aspect of his life to the very end. Otherwise, he would not have enjoyed a convenient daily existence.

When we possess Dhamma, understand Dhamma, and abide in Dhamma, we are unperturbed by things in the world, and so do not go searching for *dukkha*. Where Dhamma abides, there is happiness and tranquility. According to natural principles, Dhamma abides in the hearts of those who practice it; so happiness and tranquility arise in the hearts of those practitioners. It cannot arise in any other place.

Ācariya Mun was always extremely circumspect when teaching Dhamma. He never taught indiscriminately, for Dhamma itself is never indiscriminate. He never practiced Dhamma in a random fashion but always followed well-established principles, practicing within the confines of the Noble tradition recorded in the Buddhist scriptures. Understanding did not arise in him in a random fashion either it arose in progressive stages following the principles of truth. Ācariya Mun advised practicing monks to guard against being indiscriminate by always keeping the strictures of the Teaching and the Discipline in mind, since they represent the Buddha and the path of practice he followed. He stressed that the monk who maintains *maggā* and *phala*

and maintains the Teaching and the Discipline is one who is humble and unassuming, and always careful not to let his actions, his speech, or his thoughts go astray. Practicing thus, he will be able to stand on his own indefinitely. Having addressed the issue of teaching Dhamma to others, Ācariya Mun again turned his attention to the nature of his inner Dhamma. He said that the moment of realization, when Dhamma arises in all its glory within the *citta*, is a moment that's completely unimaginable. Dhamma's true nature reveals itself in a totally unexpected manner, as it is inconceivable and impossible to speculate about beforehand. At that moment, he felt as though he had died and been born again into a new life a uniquely amazing death and rebirth. The quality of awareness, intrinsic to this transformation, was a state of knowing that he had never before experienced, even though it had always been there, unchanging. Suddenly, then, it became apparent spectacular, and inconceivably amazing. It was this quintessential quality that caused Ācariya Mun to consider somewhat unconventionally that it would not be possible to teach others this Dhamma because they would never be able to truly understand it.

Since his early days of practice, Ācariya Mun always possessed a very dynamic character. That distinguishing characteristic was evident at the moment of his final attainment, which was so unforgettable for him that he would later tell this story to inspire his disciples. Once his *citta* had completely overthrown the cycle of repeated birth and death, it appeared to make three revolutions, circling around the newly-arisen *vivaāāa-citta*.⁹ Upon conclusion of the first revolution, the Pāli term *lopo* cutting off arose together with its essential meaning: at that moment the *citta* had completed the function of totally excluding all vestiges of relative, conventional reality. Upon conclusion of the second revolution, the Pāli term *vimutti* absolute freedom arose together with its essential meaning: at that moment the *citta* had completed the function of attaining total release. Upon conclusion of the third revolution, the Pāli term *anālayo* total detachment arose together with its essential meaning: at that moment the *citta* had completed the function of wholly severing all attachments. *Citta* and Dhamma were then one and the same *ekacitta ekadhamma*. The true nature of the *citta* is synonymous with the true nature of Dhamma. Unlike relative, conventional reality, there is no duality. This is *vimuttidhamma* pure and simple.¹⁰ It is absolute in its singularity and devoid of any trace of

relative, conventional reality within. This pure Dhamma is fully realized only once. It never requires further perfection.

The Lord Buddha and the Arahants become fully enlightened only once: the *citta* and Dhamma being exactly of the same nature, they have no need to search further. The *khandhas*, that make up their conventional existence, are then just *khandhas* pure and simple they contain no defiling elements. The *khandhas* of an Arahant remain the same as before, for the attainment of Nibbāna does not alter them in any way. For example, those *khandhas* responsible for thought processes continue to perform this function at the behest of their boss, the *citta*. By nature, the release of *vimutti* is already freed of any intermingling with the *khandhas*, the *citta* and the *khandhas* each existing as separate, distinct phenomena, each one true within its own natural state. They no longer seek to deceive or disrupt one another. Both sides exist peacefully in their distinct natural states, performing their specific functions until, at death, each constituent element goes its own separate way.¹¹

When the body finally dies, the purified *citta* attains *yathādīpo ca nibbuto*: just as the flame in a lamp is extinguished when all of the fuel is exhausted, so too goes the *citta* according to its true nature.¹² Relative, conventional realities like the *khandhas* are no longer involved with the purified *citta* beyond that point. In truth, nothing of the relative, conventional world accompanies this *citta* to create a cause for coming to birth in the future. Such was the essence of Dhamma that arose in Ācariya Mun's *citta* at the moment it completed the three revolutions expressing its dynamic character. That was the final occasion when the relative reality of the *khandhas* and the absolute freedom of the *citta* joined forces before finally separating to go their separate ways forever.¹³

Throughout the remainder of that night Ācariya Mun considered with a sense of dismay how pathetically ignorant he had been in the past, being dragged endlessly from one existence to another like a puppet. He wept as he thought of how he finally came upon a pool of crystal-clear, wondrous-tasting water. He had reached *Nong Aw*,¹⁴ that sparkling pool of pure Dhamma that the Lord Buddha and his Arahant disciples encountered and then proclaimed to the world over 2500 years ago. Having at long last encountered it himself, he tirelessly paid

heartfelt homage, prostrating himself over and over again to the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. Should people have seen him then, tears streaming down his face as he prostrated over and over again, surely they would have assumed that this monk was suffering immensely, shedding tears so profusely. They probably would have suspected him of beseeching the guardian spirits, living in all directions, to help ease his pain; or else of being on the verge of madness, for his behavior was extremely unusual. In fact, he had just arrived at the truth of the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha with utmost clarity, as epitomized in the maxim: *He who sees the Dhamma, sees the Tathāgata, and thus abides in the presence of the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha.* Ācariya Mun was simply engaged in the kind of conduct befitting someone who is overwhelmed by a sincere sense of gratitude.

That night celestial *devas* of all realms and terrestrial *devas* from every direction, paid tribute in a resounding exclamation of approval that reverberated throughout the world systems, and then gathered to listen to Ācariya Mun expound the Dhamma. But being still fully engaged in his immediate commitment to the Supreme Dhamma, he was not yet ready to receive visitors. So, he signaled to the assembled *devas* that he was occupied, indicating they should return on a later occasion. The *devas* then left, thoroughly delighted that they had seen a *visuddhi-deva* on the very night when he attained Nibbāna.¹⁵

At dawn, Ācariya Mun rose from his meditation seat, reflecting still on the unforgettably amazing Dhamma. Thinking back to the moment of final release, he recalled the three revolutions together with the profound subtlety of their essential meanings. He also reflected with appreciation on the tree that had sheltered him as he sat in meditation, and the local villagers who had always supported him with food and other basic needs.

At first, Ācariya Mun considered foregoing his morning almsround that day. He reckoned that the happiness he felt from his attainment was all that he needed for sustenance. But he could not help feeling compassion for the local villagers who had done so much for him. So, while he had no desire to eat, he nevertheless went on almsround. Entering the village that morning he fixed his gaze firmly on the people, having paid little attention to them before. As he gazed intently

at the people who came forward to put food in his bowl, and at those milling around the houses with children at play in the dirt, he experienced an extraordinary sense of love and compassion for them all. The whole village appeared to be especially bright and cheerful that day, with smiling faces beaming at him as people saw him come.

Upon return at his mountain retreat, his heart felt replete with Dhamma, while his body felt fully satisfied even though he had yet to eat. Neither body nor *citta* was the least bit hungry. Nonetheless, he forced himself to eat for the body's sake, since it requires nourishment to sustain its life. The food, however, appeared to have no taste. The taste of Dhamma alone permeated the whole of his body and his heart. As the Buddha said: *The taste of Dhamma surpasses all other tastes.*¹⁶

Eager to hear Dhamma, all the *devas* came to visit Ācariya Mun the following night. Both terrestrial *devas* and celestial *devas* arrived in groups, hailing from nearly every direction. Each group described the amazing radiance caused by the incredible power of his Dhamma the previous night. They compared it to a magnificent tremor that passed through all the celestial abodes in the vast realms of all the world systems. This tremor was accompanied by a fantastic incandescence that rendered the length and breath of the upper and lower realms ineffably translucent. They told him:

"Those of us with intuitive knowledge were able to see unobstructed throughout the entire universe due to the luminous quality of the Dhamma pouring forth from your person, venerable sir. Its brilliance was far more radiant than the light of a hundred or even a thousand suns. It is truly unbearable to think that there were those who missed seeing such a wonder. Only humans and animals, living futile earthbound existences, could be so incredibly blind and unperceptive as to have been unaware of last night's splendor. *Devas* everywhere were so stunned, astonished, and utterly amazed that they let out an emphatic exclamation of approval to express their exultation at the perfection of your achievement. If it were not such an absolutely amazing achievement, how could knowledge of it have been so widespread?

"You, venerable sir, are a person of saintly virtue, majestic power, and vast influence, capable of being a refuge to a great number of beings in numerous realms of existence. All will be able to find blessed comfort

in the shadow of your greatness. Beings of every class be they humans, *devas*, or *brahmas*, living underwater, on land, or in the air are rarely fortunate enough to encounter such perfection. We *devas* consider ourselves especially blessed to have met you, venerable sir, having the precious opportunity to pay our respects to you and to receive your beneficent teaching. We are grateful to you for expounding the Dhamma to brighten our hearts, leading us on the path of practice so that we can gradually become aware of how to improve ourselves."

When the assemblies of *devas* finally returned to their respective realms, Ācariya Mun began to reflect on the tremendous difficulties he had experienced in his effort to realize this Dhamma. Because his practice had entailed such exceptional hardship, he regarded it as *Dhamma at the threshold of death*. Had he not come so close to death, while struggling to reach freedom from *dukkha*, then surely he would never have attained that freedom.

The Spiritual Partner

Sitting in meditation after his final attainment, Ācariya Mun recalled a certain personal matter from his past one which he had not taken much interest in before. Here I would like to tell a story relevant to Ācariya Mun's past. I feel it would be a shame to leave out such an intriguing story, especially as this type of relationship may be following every one of you like a shadow, even though you are unaware of it. Should the story be deemed in any way unseemly, please blame the author for not being properly circumspect. As you may already have guessed, this is a private matter that was discussed only by Ācariya Mun and his inner circle of disciples. I have tried to suppress the urge to write about it here, but the more I tried to suppress it, the stronger this urge became. So I finally gave in and, after writing it down, the urge gradually subsided. I must confess that I'm at fault here, but I hope the reader forgives me. Hopefully, it will provide everyone, caught in the perpetual cycle of birth and death, something worthwhile to think about.

This story concerns Ācariya Mun's longtime spiritual partner.¹⁷ Ācariya Mun said that in previous lives he and his spiritual partner had both made a solemn vow to work together toward the attainment of Buddhahood. During the years prior to his final attainment, she

occasionally came to visit him while he was in *samādhi*. On those occasions, he gave her a brief Dhamma talk, then sent her away. She always appeared to him as a disembodied consciousness. Unlike beings from most realms of existence, she had no discernible form. When he inquired about her formless state, she replied that she was so worried about him she had not yet decided to take up existence in any specific realm. She feared that he would forget their relationship their mutual resolve to attain Buddhahood in the future. So out of concern, and a sense of disappointment, she felt compelled to come and check on him from time to time. Ācariya Mun told her then that he had already given up that vow, resolving instead to practice for Nibbāna in this lifetime. He had no wish to be born again, which was equivalent to carrying all the misery he had suffered in past lives indefinitely into the future.

Although she had never revealed her feelings, she remained worried about their relationship, and her longing for him never waned. So once in a long while she paid him a visit. But on this occasion, it was Ācariya Mun who thought of her, being concerned about her plight, since they had gone through so many hardships together in previous lives. Contemplating this affair after his attainment, it occurred to him that he would like to meet her so they could reach a new understanding. He wanted to explain matters to her, and thus remove any lingering doubts or anxieties regarding their former partnership. Late that very night and soon after this thought occurred to him, his spiritual partner arrived in her familiar formless state.

Ācariya Mun began by asking her about her present realm of existence. He wanted to know why she had no discernible form like beings from other celestial realms, and what exactly was her present condition. The formless being answered that she lived in one of the minor ethereal states of being in the vast sentient universe. She reiterated that she was waiting in that realm because of anxiety concerning him. Having become aware of his desire to meet her, she came to him that night.

Ordinarily, she didn't dare to visit him very often. Though sincerely wanting to see him, she always felt shy and hesitant. In truth, her visits were in no way damaging to either of them for they were not of such a nature as to be harmful. But still, her long-standing affection for him made her hesitant about coming. Ācariya Mun had also told her not to visit too often, for although not harmful, such visits could nevertheless

become an emotional impediment, thus slowing his progress. The heart being very sensitive by nature, it could well be affected by subtle emotional attachments, which could then interfere with the practice of meditation. Convinced that this was true, she seldom came to visit him.

She was quite aware that he had severed his connection to birth and death, including former friends and relatives and of course the spiritual partner who was counting on him with no lingering regrets whatsoever. After all, it was an event that had a dramatic effect throughout the world systems. But rather than rejoice with delight, as she would have done in the past when they were together, this time she felt slighted, prompting an unorthodox reaction. She thought instead that he was being irresponsible, neglecting to consider the loyal spiritual companion who had shared his suffering, struggling together with him through so many lifetimes. She felt devastated, now left alone in misfortune, clutching *dukkha* but unable to let go. He had already gone beyond *dukkha*, leaving her behind to endure the burden of suffering. The more she thought about it, the more she felt like one bereft of wisdom who, nonetheless, wanted to reach up to touch the moon and the stars. In the end, she fell back to earth clutching her misery, unable to find a way out of such grievous misfortune.

Despondent, hapless being that she was, and struggling to endure her misery, she pleaded with him for assistance: "I am desperately disappointed. Where can I possibly find happiness? I so want to reach up and touch the moon and the stars in the sky! It's just terrible, and so painful. You yourself are like the moon and the stars up in the sky shining brightly in every direction. Having established yourself in Dhamma, your existence is never bleak, never dreary. You're so completely content and your aura radiates throughout every part of the universe. If I am still fortunate enough, please kindly show me the way of Dhamma. Please help me bring forth the bright, pure knowledge of wisdom,¹⁸ releasing me quickly from the cycle of repeated birth and death, to follow you in the attainment of Nibbāna so that I will not have to endure this agony much longer. May this vow be strong enough to produce the results my heart desires, allowing me to attain the grace of enlightenment as soon as possible."

Convulsed with sobs of anguish, such was the fervent plea of that sorrowful formless being as she expressed her hopes of gaining enlightenment.

Ācariya Mun replied that his intention in wishing to see her was not to elicit regrets about the past: "People who wish each other well should not think in that way. Haven't you practiced the four *brahmavihāras*: *mettā*, *karuṅṅā*, *muditā*, and *upekkhā*?¹⁹

The formless spirit replied: "I have practiced them for so long that I can't help thinking about the closeness we once shared practicing them together. When a person saves only himself, as you have, it is quite natural for those left behind to be disappointed. I'm in misery because I have been abandoned without any concern for my welfare. I still can't see any possibility of easing my pain."

He cautioned her: "Whether practicing on your own or in concert with others, goodness is developed for the purpose of reducing anxiety and suffering within yourself, not for increasing them until, being agitated, you become all upset. Isn't that right?"

"Yes, but the tendency of people with *kilesas* is to somehow muddle through, not knowing which path is the right one for a smooth, safe passage. We don't know if what we are doing is right or wrong, or whether the result will be happiness or suffering. We know the pain in our hearts, but we don't know the way out of it. So we are left to fret about our misfortune, as you see me doing now."

Ācariya Mun said that the formless spirit was adamant in her complaints about him. She accused him of making his escape alone, showing no pity for her — she who for so long had struggled together with him to go beyond *dukkha*. She complained that he had made no effort to assist her so that she too could gain release from suffering.

He tried to console her: "When two people eat food together at the same table, inevitably one will be full before the other. It's not possible for both to be fully satiated at the same moment. Take the case of the Lord Buddha and his former spouse, Yasodhara. Although for many ages they had jointly developed goodness of all kinds, the Lord Buddha was the first to transcend *dukkha*, returning then to teach his former spouse so that later she also crossed over to the other shore. You should

consider this lesson carefully and learn from it, instead of complaining about the person who's right now trying his best to find a way to help you. I am earnestly searching for a means to help you cross over, yet you accuse me of being heartless and irresponsible. Such thoughts are very inappropriate. They will merely increase the discomfort for both of us. You should change your attitude, following the example of the Lord Buddha's former spouse an excellent example for everyone, and one giving rise to true happiness.

"My reason for meeting you is to assist you, not to drive you away. I have always supported your development in Dhamma. To say that I have abandoned you and no longer care for your welfare is simply not true. My advice to you emanates from a heart whose loving kindness and compassion are absolutely pure. If you follow this advice, practicing it to the best of your ability, I will rejoice in your progress. And should you receive completely satisfactory results, I will rest contented in equanimity.²⁰

"Our original aspiration to achieve Buddhahood was made for the express purpose of crossing beyond the cycle of rebirth. My subsequent desire to attain the status of *sāvaka*²¹ instead, was actually a desire aimed toward the same goal: a state free of *kilesas* and *āśava*,²² free of all *dukkha*, the Supreme Happiness, Nibbāna. As I've followed the righteous path through many different lives, including my present status as a Buddhist monk, I have always done my utmost to keep in touch with you. Throughout this time, I have taught you as best I could with the immense loving compassion that I feel for you. Never was there a moment when I thought of forsaking you to seek only my own salvation _ my thoughts were constantly full of concern, full of sympathy for you. I have always hoped to free you from the misery of birth in *saṃsāra*, leading you in the direction of Nibbāna.

"Your abnormal reaction feeling offended because you suppose that I've abandoned you without any concern for your well-being is of no benefit to either of us. From now on, you should refrain from such thinking. Don't allow these thoughts to arise, trampling all over your heart, for they will bring only endless misery in their wake a result incompatible with my objective, as I strive with heartfelt compassion to help you out.

"Escaping without a care? Where have I escaped to? And who is it I don't care about? At this moment I am doing my utmost to give you every possible assistance. Doesn't everything I've taught you arise solely out of such compassionate concern as I am showing you right now? The constant encouragement I have provided comes straight from a heart full to the brim with a compassion that exceeds all the water in the great oceans, a compassion that pours forth unsparingly, without concern that it might run dry. Please understand that helping you has always been my intention and accept this Dhamma teaching that I offer. If you just trust me and practice accordingly, you will experience the fruits of inner happiness for yourself.

"From the day I first ordained as a monk, I have sincerely practiced the way of Dhamma never for a moment have I thought ill of anyone. My motive in wanting to meet with you was not to deceive you, or cause you harm, but to assist you as best I can with all my heart. If you refuse to trust me, it will be difficult for you to find anyone else so worthy of your complete faith. You said you were aware of the universe trembling that night. That trembling, do you think it was caused by the 'Dhamma of deception' arising in the world? Is that why you're so hesitant about taking to heart the advice I have so graciously offered you? If you understand that Dhamma is indeed the Dhamma of Truth, then you should consider the trembling of the universe that night as a decisive factor in your faith, and take comfort in the fact that you still have great resources of merit. You are still able to listen to a timely exposition of Dhamma, even though your birth in that formless realm of existence should render such a thing impossible. I consider it my good fortune to be able to teach you now. You should feel proud of your own good fortune in having someone to come and rescue you from the hopeless gloom that your misguided thinking has caused. If you can think positively like this, I shall be very pleased. Such thinking will not allow *dukkha* to bind you so tightly that you can't find a way out. It won't allow Dhamma to be seen as something mundane, or compassionate concern to be seen as something malevolent."

As she listened to Ācariya Mun present these reasoned arguments with such loving compassion, his spiritual partner felt as though she was being bathed in a stream of celestial water. Gradually she regained her composure. Enchanted by his discourse, her mind soon became calm, her manner respectful.

When he finished speaking, she admitted her mistake: "My affection and my hopeless yearning for you have caused so much trouble. I believed that you had discarded me, going your own way, which left me feeling neglected. I became terribly disappointed. I couldn't stop thinking how useless and rejected I felt, with no one to turn to. But now that I have received the light of Dhamma, my heart is cool and contented. I can now put down the burden of misery that I've been carrying, for your Dhamma is like a divine nectar washing over my heart, cleansing it and making it bright. Please forgive me whatever wrong I have done to you through my ignorance. I am determined to be more careful in the future never shall I make such a mistake again."

When she finished speaking, Ācariya Mun advised her to take birth in a more appropriate realm of existence, telling her to cease worrying about the past. Respectfully, she promised to follow his advice, then made one final request: "Once I have taken birth in a suitable realm, may I come and listen to your advice as before? Please give me your blessing for this." Once Ācariya Mun had granted her request, she immediately vanished.

The formless spirit having departed, Ācariya Mun's *citta* withdrew from *samādhi*. It was nearly five a. m. and almost light. He had not rested the entire night. Having begun sitting in *samādhi* at around eight p. m., he had spoken with the formless spirit for many hours into the night.

Not long afterwards, the same spirit came to visit him again. This time she came in the bodily form of a beautiful *deva*, although in deference to the especially revered monk she was visiting, she was not adorned in the ornamental style customary of the *devas*.

Upon arriving, she explained to him her new situation: "After listening to your explanation, which removed all my doubts and relieved me of the misery that was tormenting me, I came to birth in the *Tāvatiyya* heavenly realm _ a celestial sphere full of delightful pleasures, all of which I now enjoy as a result of the goodness we performed together as human beings. Although I experience this pleasant existence as a consequence of my own good deeds, I can't help remembering that you, venerable sir, were the one who initially encouraged me to do good. On my own, I would never have had the wisdom capable of accomplishing this to my complete satisfaction.

"Feeling fortunate enough to be reborn in heavenly splendor, I am wholly contented, and no longer angry or resentful. As I reflect back on the immense kindness you've always shown me, it becomes apparent to me how important it is for us to choose discretely in our lives _ concerning everything from our work to our food to our friends and companions, both male and female. Such discretion is crucial for leading a smooth, untroubled existence. This is especially true when choosing a spouse to depend on, for better or for worse. Choosing a spouse merits special attention, for we share everything with that person _ even our very breath. Every happiness and every sorrow along the way will necessarily affect both parties.

"Those who have a good partner, even though they may be inadequate in terms of their intelligence, their temperament, or their behavior, are still blest to have someone who can guide and encourage them in dealing with all their affairs both their secular affairs, which promote peace and stability in the family, and their spiritual affairs, which nourish the heart. All other matters will benefit as well, so they won't feel they are groping blindly in the dark, never certain how these matters will turn out. Each partner being a good person, they compliment each other to create a virtual paradise within the family, allowing everyone to remain peaceful, contented, and free from strife at all times. Always cheerful, such a household is undisturbed by temperamental outbursts. All members contribute in creating this atmosphere: each is calm and composed, firmly established in the principles of reason instead of just doing whatever they like, which is contrary to the very moral principles that insure their continued peace and contentment. Married couples work together to construct their own future. Together they create good and bad *kamma*. They create happiness and misery, virtue and evil, heaven and hell, from the very beginning of their relationship onwards to the present and into the future _ an unbroken continuum.

"Being blessed with the chance to accompany you through many lives, I've come to realize this in my own situation. By your guidance, venerable sir, I have made goodness an integral part of my character. You have always steered me safely through every danger, never letting me stray in the direction of evil or disgrace. Consequently, I've remained a good person during all those lifetimes. I cannot tell you how deeply moved I am by all the kindness you've shown me. I now realize

the harm caused by my past mistakes. Please kindly forgive my transgressions so that no lingering animosity remains between us."

Assenting to the *deva's* request, Ācariya Mun forgave her. He then gave her an inspiring talk, encouraging her to perfect herself spiritually. When he had finished, she paid him her respects, moved off a short distance, and floated blissfully up into the sky.

Some of the resentful comments she made when she was still a formless spirit were too strange to record here, so I've been unable to recount every detail of their conversation; and for that I ask your forgiveness. I am not really that satisfied with what has been written here either, but I feel that without it a thought-provoking story would have been left out.

The Most Exalted Appreciation

On the nights subsequent to Ācariya Mun's attainment of *vimutti*, a number of Buddhas, accompanied by their Arahant disciples, came to congratulate him on his *vimuttidhamma*. One night, a certain Buddha, accompanied by tens of thousands of Arahant disciples, came to visit; the next night, he was visited by another Buddha who was accompanied by hundreds of thousands of Arahant disciples. Each night a different Buddha came to express his appreciation, accompanied by a different number of Arahant disciples. Ācariya Mun stated that the number of accompanying Arahant disciples varied according to each Buddha's relative accumulation of merit a factor that differed from one Buddha to the next. The actual number of Arahant disciples accompanying each Buddha did not represent the total number of his Arahant disciples; they merely demonstrated the relative levels of accumulated merit and perfection that each individual Buddha possessed. Among the Arahant disciples accompanying each of those Buddhas were quite a few young novices.²³ Ācariya Mun was skeptical about this, so he reflected on it and realized that the term "Arahant" does not apply exclusively to monks. Novices whose hearts are completely pure are also Arahant disciples, so their presence did not raise issue with the term in any way.

Most of the Buddhas who came to show their appreciation to Ācariya Mun addressed him in much the following manner:

"I, the Tathāgata, am aware that you have escaped from the harmful effects of that monstrous suffering which you endured in the prison of saṃsāra,²⁴ so I have come to express my appreciation. This prison is enormous, and quite impregnable. It is full of seductive temptations which so enslave those who are unwary that it is extremely difficult for anyone to break free. Of the vast number of people living in the world, hardly anyone is concerned enough to think of looking for a way out of dukkha that perpetually torments their bodies and minds. They are like sick people who cannot be bothered to take medicine. Even though medicines are plentiful, they are of no use to a person who refuses to take them.

"Buddha-Dhamma is like medicine. Beings in saṃsāra are afflicted with the painful, oppressive disease of kilesas, which causes endless suffering. Inevitably, this disease can be cured only by the medicine of Dhamma. Left uncured, it will drag living beings through an endless succession of births and deaths, all of them bound up with physical and mental pain. Although Dhamma exists everywhere throughout the whole universe, those who are not really interested in properly availing themselves of its healing qualities are unable to take advantage of it.

"Dhamma exists in its own natural way. Beings in saṃsāra spin around, like wheels, through the pain and suffering of each successive life _ in the natural way of saṃsāra. They have no real prospect of ever seeing an end to dukkha. And there is no way to help them unless they are willing to help themselves by holding firmly to the principles of Dhamma, earnestly trying to put them into practice. No matter how many Buddhas become enlightened, or how extensive their teachings are, only those willing to take the prescribed medicine will benefit.

"The Dhamma, taught by all the Buddhas, is invariably the same: to renounce evil and do good. There exists no Dhamma teaching more exceptional than this: For even the most exceptional kilesas in the hearts of living beings are not so exceptional that they can transcend the power of Dhamma taught by all the Buddhas. This Dhamma in itself is sufficient to eradicate every kind of kilesa there is _ unless, of course, those practicing it allow themselves to be defeated by their kilesas, and so conclude that Dhamma must be worthless.

"By nature, kilesas have always resisted the power of Dhamma. Consequently, people who defer to the kilesas are people who disregard Dhamma. They are unwilling to practice the way, for they view it as something difficult to do, a waste of the time they could otherwise spend enjoying themselves despite the harm such pleasures cause them. A wise, far-sighted person should not retreat into a shell, like a turtle in a pot of boiling water it is sure to die because it can't find a way to escape. The world is a cauldron, boiling with the consuming heat of the kilesas. Earthly beings of every description, every where, must endure this torment, for there is no safe place to hide, no way to elude this conflagration burning in their own hearts right there where the dukkha is.

"You have seen the truly genuine Tathāgata, haven't you? What is the genuine Tathāgata? The genuine Tathāgata is simply that purity of heart you have just realized. The bodily form in which I now appear is merely a manifestation of relative, conventional reality.²⁵ This form does not represent the true Buddha, or the true Arahant, it is just our conventional bodily appearance."

Ācariya Mun replied that he had no doubts about the true nature of the Buddha and the Arahants. What still puzzled him was: how could the Buddha and the Arahants, having attained *anupādisesa-nibbāna*²⁶ without any remaining trace of relative, conventional reality, still appear in bodily form. The Buddha explained this matter to him:

"If those who have attained anupādisesa-nibbāna wish to interact with other Arahants who have purified their hearts but still possess a physical, mundane body, they must temporarily assume a mundane form in order to make contact. However, if all concerned have already attained anupādisesa-nibbāna without any remaining trace of relative, conventional reality, then the use of conventional constructs is completely unnecessary. So it is necessary to appear in a conventional form when dealing with conventional reality, but when the conventional world has been completely transcended, no such problem exists.

"All Buddhas know events concerning the past and the future through nimittas that symbolize for them the original conventional realities of the occurrences in question.²⁷ For instance, when a Buddha wishes to know about the lives of the Buddhas who preceded him, he must take

the nimitta of each Buddha, and the particular circumstances in which he lived, as a device leading directly to that knowledge. If something exists beyond the relative world of conventional reality, that being vimutti, then there can be no symbol representing it. Because of that, knowledge about past Buddhas depends on mundane conventions to serve as a common basis for understanding, as my present visit illustrates. It is necessary that I and all of my Arahant disciples appear in our original mundane forms so that others, like yourself, have a means of determining what our appearance was like. If we did not appear in this form, no one would be able to perceive us.²⁸

"On occasions when it is necessary to interact with conventional reality, vimutti must be made manifest by the use of suitable conventional means. In the case of pure vimutti, as when two purified cittas interact with one another, there exists only the essential quality of knowing which is impossible to elaborate on in any way. So when we want to reveal the nature of complete purity, we have to bring in conventional devices to help us portray the experience of vimutti. We can say that vimutti is a 'self-luminous state devoid of all nimittas representing the ultimate happiness', for instance, but these are just widely-used, conventional metaphors. One who clearly knows it in his heart cannot possibly have doubts about vimutti. Since its true characteristics are impossible to convey, vimutti is inconceivable in a relative, conventional sense. Vimutti manifesting conventionally and vimutti existing in its original state are, however, both known with absolute certainty by the Arahant. This includes both vimutti manifesting itself by means of conventional constructs under certain circumstances, and vimutti existing in its original, unconditioned state. Did you ask me about this matter because you were in doubt, or simply as a point of conversation?"

"I have no doubts about the conventional aspects of all the Buddhas, or the unconditioned aspects. My inquiry was a conventional way of showing respect. Even without a visit from you and your Arahant disciples, I would have no doubts as to where the true Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha lie. It is my clear conviction that *whoever sees the Dhamma sees the Tathāgata*. This means that the Lord Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha each denote the very same natural state of absolute purity, completely free of conventional reality, collectively known as the Three Jewels."

"I, the Tathāgata, did not ask you that question thinking you were in doubt, but rather as a friendly greeting."²⁹

On those occasions when the Buddhas and their Arahant disciples came to visit, only the Buddhas addressed Ñcariya Mun. None of the disciples accompanying them spoke a word as they sat quietly composed, listening in a manner worthy of the highest respect. Even the small novices, looking more adorable than venerable, showed the same quiet composure. Some of them were quite young, between the ages of nine and twelve, and Ñcariya Mun found them truly endearing.

Ordinarily, the average person would see only bright-eyed, adorable children. Being unaware that they were Arahants, one would most probably be tempted to fool around, reaching out playfully to stroke their heads, without realizing the impertinence of doing so. When Ñcariya Mun spoke about this, I thought mischievously that I would probably be the first to succumb to the urge to reach out and play with them, despite the consequences. Afterwards, I could always beg their forgiveness.

Ñcariya Mun said that, although they were young novices, their behavior was very mature. They were as calm, composed, and impressive to see as all the other Arahant disciples. In short, all the Arahant monks and novices who accompanied each Buddha exhibited impeccable behavior worthy of the highest respect. They were neat, orderly, and pleasing to the eye like immaculately folded robes.

Ñcariya Mun had always been curious to know how walking and sitting meditation were practiced at the time of the Buddha. He also had questions about the proper etiquette to be used between junior and senior monks, and whether it was necessary for a monk to wear his formal robes while doing meditation. When such questions arose in his mind, invariably one of the Buddhas, or an Arahant disciple, appeared to him in *samādhi* and demonstrated how these practices were originally performed in the Buddha's day. For example, Ñcariya Mun was curious to know the correct manner of practicing walking meditation so as to show proper respect for Dhamma. A Buddha or an Arahant then appeared, demonstrating in detail how to place the hands, how to walk, and how to remain self-composed. Sometimes, these demonstrations included explicit instructions; at other times, the

methods were demonstrated by example. They also showed him such things as the proper way to sit in *samādhi*, including the most suitable direction to face and the best seated posture to assume.

Ācariya Mun had some strange things to say about how junior and senior monks showed their respect for each other. Ācariya Mun wanted to know how monks at the time of the Buddha conducted themselves with appropriate respect toward one another.³⁰ Shortly after this thought arose, the vision of a Buddha and many Arahant disciples appeared to him. The Arahants were of all different ages some were young, others older, a few being so old that their hair had turned completely white. A considerable number of small novices of all ages accompanied them. However, the Buddha and his disciples did not arrive together each Arahant arrived individually. Those arriving first sat in the front, while those arriving later sat further away without regard for seniority. Even those novices who arrived earlier sat ahead of the monks who arrived later. Finally the last monk, a very elderly man, arrived to take the last available seat way in the back; but the others showed no sign of shame or embarrassment. Even the Buddha himself sat down in whichever seat was available at the time he arrived.

Seeing this, Ācariya Mun was somewhat incredulous. Could it be that the monks at the time of the Buddha did not respect seniority? It was definitely not an inspiring sight. How could the Buddha and his disciples proclaim the *sāsana* and then expect people to have faith in it when the *sāsana's* leader and his closest disciples behaved in such an indiscriminate fashion? Instantly, the answer arose in his heart without the Buddha and his disciples having offered any comment: This was an instance of pure *vimuttidhamma* devoid of any trace of relative, conventional reality so there was no fixed order of propriety. They were demonstrating the true nature of Absolute Purity,³¹ being perfectly equal for all, irrespective of conventional designations such as young and old, or high and low. From the Lord Buddha on down to the youngest Arahant novice, all were equal with respect to their state of purity. What Ācariya Mun had witnessed was a conclusive indicator that all the Arahant monks and novices were equally pure.

This having been made clear to him, he wondered how they deferred to each other in the conventional world. No sooner had this thought arisen, than the vision of the Buddha and the Arahants seated before him

changed. Whereas before they had been sitting together in no special order, now the Buddha sat at the head of the assembly, while the small novices, previously in the front, sat in the last seats. It was an impressive sight worthy of the highest respect. At that moment Ācariya Mun clearly understood that this image represented the traditional way in which monks at the time of the Buddha showed each other respect. Even Arahants who were junior in rank were obliged to respect those of their seniors who were practicing correctly but still had *kilesas* in their hearts.³² The Buddha then elaborated on this theme:

"The Tathāgata's monks must live in mutual respect and friendship, as though they were all one single entity. This does not mean that they are friendly in a worldly way, but rather that they are friendly in the equal, unbiased way of Dhamma. When my monks live together, even in large numbers, they never quarrel or display arrogance. Monks who do not respect their fellows according to the principles of the Teaching and the Discipline of the Buddha, are not worthy of being called the Tathāgata's monks. Even though those monks may imitate the disciples of the Buddha, they are merely impostors making false claims. As long as monks respect each other according to the principles of the Teaching and the Discipline which substitute for the Buddha himself—and never violate these principles, then wherever those monks live, whenever they were ordained, whatever their race, status, or nationality, they remain true disciples of the Tathāgata. And whoever is a true follower of the Tathāgata must surely see the end of dukkha one day."

The Buddha and all his disciples vanished instantly the moment he finished speaking. As for Ācariya Mun, all his doubts had vanished the moment that vision appeared to him so clearly.

Concerning Ācariya Mun's doubts about the necessity of wearing the formal robes when doing meditation: one of the Arahant disciples appeared to him, demonstrating how it was unnecessary to wear them every time. He personally demonstrated when and how sitting and walking meditation should be practiced while wearing the formal robes, as well as the instances when it was unnecessary to wear them. Every aspect of a monk's robes was made clear to him, including the correct color for a monk's three principal robes. He showed Ācariya Mun ochre-colored robes that were dyed from the heartwood of the jackfruit tree in three different shades—light, medium, and dark brown.³³

