

## *The Chiang Mai Years*

Venerable Ācariya Mun wandered *dhutanga* in the northern province of Chiang Mai for many years, spending the annual rains retreat in a different location each year. He spent one rains retreat in each of the following places: Ban Chom Taeng in the Mae Rim district, Ban Pong in the Mae Taeng district, Ban Kloi in the Phrao district, Ban Pu Phraya in the Mae Suai district, and Mae Thong Thip in the Mae Sai district of Chiang Rai province. He also spent rains retreats at Wat Chedi Luang in the city of Chiang Mai; in the mountains of Mae Suai district; and in the neighboring province of Uttaradit. Outside of the retreat period, he wandered extensively through the provinces of Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai for a total of eleven years, making it impossible to give a strict chronological account of all the village communities he passed through on his travels. In the following account, I shall mention by name only those villages having a direct bearing on the story as it unfolds.

Except for his stay at Wat Chedi Luang monastery, Ācariya Mun always wandered in solitude, staying in the wilderness, mountainous areas where danger was ever-present. It is the exceptional nature of his wandering *dhutanga* practice and the many insights into Dhamma, that arose along the way, which make Ācariya Mun's life story so significant. This strange and wonderful tale is unique among the stories of all the *dhutanga* monks who wandered alone. Ordinarily, such a lifestyle is believed to be bleak and lonely. Living in an inhospitable environment, oppressed by danger, and unable to eat or sleep normally, the sense of fear can be stifling. But Ācariya Mun was perfectly content living a solitary existence. He found it conducive to his efforts to remove the *kilesas* from his heart, having always relied on the method of striving in seclusion to accomplish that goal.

It was only later that other monks began to seek him out. For example, Ācariya Thet of Tha Bo district in the province of Nong Khai, Ācariya Saan, and Ācariya Khao of Wat Tham Klong Phen monastery lived with him for short periods of time. After training them for a while in the way of practice, he sent them off alone to find secluded places in sparsely populated forests where villages were far apart \_ perhaps at the

foot of a mountain, perhaps on a mountain ridge. Villages in that region were quite small, some consisting of only 4 or 5 houses, others 9 to 10 houses \_ just enough to support an almsround from one day to the next.

The *kammaāhāna* monks who followed Ācariya Mun during that period were extremely resolute, fearless individuals. They constantly showed a willingness to put their lives on the line in their search for Dhamma. Therefore, Ācariya Mun preferred to send them to live in places teeming with wild animals, such as tigers, for such places tended to automatically dispel complacency and stimulate mindfulness and wisdom, boosting the strength of the *citta* faster than could otherwise be expected.

Ācariya Mun himself thrived comfortably in the peace and quiet of these virtually unpopulated mountain regions. Though human contact was scarce, communication with *devas*, *brahmas*, *nāgas*, and other spirits from various realms of existence was normal for him \_ much in the same way that a person knowing foreign languages regularly communicates with people from other countries. Due to his long-standing fluency in this type of communication, his time spent living in mountainous regions was of special benefit to celestial beings.

It was also beneficial to the local hill tribes, who tended to be straightforward, honest, even-tempered people. Once they came to know his character and to appreciate his Dhamma, they revered him so much that they were willing to sacrifice their lives for him. Hill tribes and forest peoples such as the Ekor, Khamu, Museur, and Hmong are generally considered to be rather scruffy, unattractive, primitive people. But Ācariya Mun found them to be handsome, clean-looking people who were courteous and well-behaved, always treating their elders and local leaders with great respect. They maintained a good community spirit, and there were hardly any troublemakers in their villages back then. They placed so much trust in their elders, especially the village headman, that when he spoke everyone paid attention and obediently complied with his wishes. And they were not opinionated, making them easy to teach.

Those so-called wild, uncivilized jungles were actually inhabited by good, honest, moral people. There, unlike in the jungles of human civilization, theft and robbery were virtually unknown. Jungles

consisting of trees and wild animals aren't nearly so dangerous as the civilized jungles of human society \_ places teeming with all kinds of perilous *kilesas* where greed, hatred, and delusion are constantly on the assault. They inflict deep internal wounds, gradually eroding a person's physical and mental health until the damage becomes acute. Such wounds are extremely difficult to treat. In any case, most people can't even be bothered to look for suitable care. Though such *kilesa*-inflicted wounds tend to fester menacingly, those who are afflicted usually neglect their injuries, hoping they will somehow heal by themselves.

This sort of *kilesa*-infested jungle exists in the hearts of all human beings \_ men, women, monks, and novices \_ without distinction. Ācariya Mun said that he used life in the wilds as a means of cutting back this wild inner jungle, which otherwise could be so savage and disturbing that the heart never experienced any peace and quiet. At least by living alone in the wilderness he could quell the *kilesas* enough to feel comfortable and relaxed. He felt that this was the only sensible way to use our natural human intelligence, and thus not squander the good fortune inherent in human birth.

Monks who sought out Ācariya Mun in the wilderness tended to be especially courageous and self-sacrificing, so he trained them in ways that suited their uncompromising attitude and the harshness of their environment. Training methods that he found appropriate for himself were suitable for them as well. If necessary, they were willing to die to achieve their goal. As long as they lived, they were dedicated to the struggle for Dhamma in order to transcend the world and end the perpetual cycle of birth and suffering.

The training methods that Ācariya Mun employed with the monks he encountered in Chiang Mai differed from those he previously used. They were far more rigorous and uncompromising. The monks who came to train under his guidance were mostly resolute individuals. They paid scrupulous attention to the *kilesas* arising within themselves in an attempt to reduce their strength and choke them off. They were not concerned that his admonitions might be too harsh or too intense. In fact, the intensity of his tone increased as the Dhamma under discussion became more profound. Those focusing on a certain level of tranquility were reinforced in that calm state, while those concentrating on

investigative analysis followed every nuance of his reasoning to discover new techniques for developing wisdom.

The discourses that Ñcariya Mun delivered to his students in Chiang Mai were especially profound because his knowledge of Dhamma was by then complete. Another factor was the high degree of understanding that the monks who sought his guidance already possessed. They were absolutely determined to strive for higher and higher levels of Dhamma until they reached the ultimate goal. Besides his usual admonitions, Ñcariya Mun also had some very unusual techniques for thwarting the monks whose thoughts tended to go astray. He used these techniques to trap 'thieves' and catch them in the act. But these were no ordinary thieves. The thieves that Ñcariya Mun caught lurked inside the hearts of monks whose thoughts liked to steal away to everything imaginable in the usual way of the *kilesas*.

A strange incident occurred while Ñcariya Mun was staying in the mountains of Chiang Mai an incident that should never have happened in the circle of *kammaāhāna* monks. I hope you will forgive me for recounting what I heard. I feel it may be a thought-provoking lesson for anyone who finds himself in a similar situation. This story was known exclusively within the inner circle of Ñcariya Mun's senior disciples, and Ñcariya Mun's own assessment of the whole matter was crucial. A certain senior monk living with him at the time related the story as follows:

One afternoon he and another monk went to bathe in a rock pool located near a path leading to the fields of the local village, which was quite a long distance away. While they were bathing, a group of young women happened to pass by on their way to work in the fields something that had never before occurred while they were bathing. When the other monk spied them walking past, his mind immediately wobbled, his mindfulness failing him as the fires of lust flared up and began smoldering inside him. Try as he might, he couldn't manage to reverse this situation. While fearful that Ñcariya Mun might become aware of his predicament, he was equally afraid that he might disgrace himself. From that moment on, his mind was constantly fluctuating as he desperately tried to come to grips with the problem. Nothing like this had ever happened to him before, and he felt miserable about it.

That same night Ācariya Mun, investigating on his own, became aware that this monk had encountered something unexpected and was consequently very distraught, caught between feelings of infatuation and apprehension. The monk struggled through a sleepless night, trying to resolve the dilemma. The next morning Ācariya Mun did not say anything about it, for he knew that the monk was already fearful of him; confronting him would only make matters worse. When they met, the monk was so ashamed and apprehensive he was almost trembling; but Ācariya Mun just smiled amicably as though he didn't know what had happened. When it came time to go on almsround, Ācariya Mun found an excuse to address the monk.

"I can see how earnest you are in pressing on with your meditation practice, so you needn't go on almsround today. The rest of us will go, and we will share our food with you when we return. Providing food for one extra monk is hardly a problem. Go and continue your meditation practice so that the rest of us may share the merit you make as well."

He said this without looking directly at the monk, for Ācariya Mun understood the monk better than the monk understood himself. Ācariya Mun then led the others on almsround while the monk forced himself to do walking meditation. Since the problem arose due to a chance encounter and not an intentional one, it had been impossible to prevent. Realizing that, Ācariya Mun did what he could to assist him. He was well aware that the monk was doing his utmost to solve the problem; so, he was obliged to find a clever means of helping him without further upsetting his mental state.

When they returned from almsround, the monks shared their food with the monk, each putting some in his bowl. Ācariya Mun sent someone to inform the monk that he could take his meal with them or alone in his hut, whichever he preferred. Upon hearing this, the monk quickly went to eat with his fellow monks. Ācariya Mun ignored him when he arrived, but, later spoke gently to him in order to soothe his injured psyche and mitigate his sense of remorse. Although he sat with the other monks, he ate only a token amount of food so as not to appear impolite.

Later that day, the other monk, who had also bathed at the rock pool the one who would later tell this story became suspicious, being as yet unaware of the whole story. He wondered why Ācariya Mun treated that monk with a deference he had never seen before. He figured that since Ācariya Mun was being so supportive, his friend's meditation practice was undoubtedly very good. When he found the opportunity, he went to ask about his meditation. "Ācariya Mun said that you didn't have to go on almsround because you're intensifying your efforts, but he didn't indicate how good your meditation is. So, how is your meditation going? Please tell me about it."

The monk gave a wry smile. "How could my meditation be good? Ācariya Mun saw a poor, miserable soul and he's just trying to help, using his own skillful methods. That's all."

His friend persisted in attempting to get to the truth, but the monk continued to deflect his questions. Finally his friend confronted him directly. He asked, "What did you mean when you said that Ācariya Mun saw a poor, miserable soul? And how is it that he's trying to help?" Exasperated, the monk relented. "There is no need to tell Ācariya Mun about this. Anyway, he already knows me better than I know myself, so I feel fearful and ashamed in his presence. Did you notice anything unusual when we were bathing together at the rock pool yesterday?"

The other monk said that he hadn't noticed anything, except for a group of women passing by. So, the monk confessed, "That's just it. That's why I'm so miserable right now, and why Ācariya Mun wouldn't let me go on almsround this morning. He was afraid I would pass out and die right there in the village should I happened to see her again. How could my meditation be any good? Do you understand now how good the meditation of this miserable fellow is?"

The other monk was stunned. "Oh, my gosh! What is it between you and those women?"

"Nothing," answered the monk, "except blindly falling in love with one of them and having my meditation going to pieces. What appeared in its place was a beautiful image a crazy infatuation crushing down on my heart all night long. Even now this madness continues unabated, and I

just don't know what to do about it. Please, can you do something to help me?"

"You mean it still isn't any better?"

"No." The monk's voice sounded wretchedly pathetic.

"In that case, I have a suggestion. If you can't suppress this thing, then it is not prudent for you to stay here any longer things will only get worse. I think it's better that you move away from here and find another place to do your practice. If you don't feel up to asking Ācariya Mun about this, then I will speak to him for you. I'll inform him that you wish to go look for another secluded place because you don't feel so well here. I'm sure he will immediately give his permission because he is well aware of what's happening to you. He just hasn't said anything about it yet for fear of shaming you."

The monk readily agreed. That evening his companion went to speak with Ācariya Mun, who immediately gave his consent. But there was a caustic element latent here. Ācariya Mun said rather cryptically: "A disease arising from karmic attraction is hard to cure. Contagions spread quickly when their original cause still remains." And that was all he would say on the matter. Even the monk who went to speak with him didn't understand his connotation.

Everyone kept quiet about this matter. The monk never spoke directly to Ācariya Mun about it; his friend never mentioned it to anyone else; and Ācariya Mun kept the whole thing to himself. Although fully aware of the truth of the matter they all behaved as if nothing had happened. No one spoke openly about it.

The next day the monk went to take leave of Ācariya Mun, who consented without mentioning the matter. The monk then left and went to stay near another village quite a distance away. Had this not been a true case of karmic attraction, as Ācariya Mun had hinted, then surely the monk would have been well out of danger there. But, alas for the uncertainty of karmic consequences: things turned out exactly as Ācariya Mun had suggested. Shortly after the monk left Ācariya Mun, the young woman, who shared the same karmic connection, ended up moving to the other village by a fortuitous coincidence, and their paths

crossed again. This itself is very interesting, since it was most unusual for hill tribe women to stray so far from home.

Later, after Ācariya Mun and his group of monks had departed from the first village, they heard that the monk had disrobed, returning to lay life because he couldn't put up with the constant strain. His *kamma* had come full circle: he married the pretty Museur woman and settled in that village.

This was a genuine case of mutual *kamma*. Without such a karmic connection, how could it have been possible? The monk who told this story insisted that his friend became infatuated the moment he saw the woman, having never seen or spoken with her before. This was confirmed by the other monks who were living there. They lived together in the monastery the whole time, never having any occasion to get involved with the villagers. Besides that, they were living with Ācariya Mun in a place safe from such liaisons. There can be no doubt that an enduring karmic bond existed between them. The monk once told his friend that mere eye contact with her was enough to make him feel giddy and lose all presence of mind, and an irresistible passion gripped his heart so tightly he could scarcely breathe. Those powerful emotions plagued him relentlessly, leaving him in such an emotional quandary that he felt completely demoralized. Realizing his predicament, he tried to escape. But fate pursued him, again casting its spell over him. And that was it he succumbed.

Those who have never had such an experience may smile; but others who have, know that we cannot all imitate the Arahant Sundara Samudda by simply floating up and out to safety.<sup>1</sup> Normally, hill tribe people are not overly familiar with monks; but if *kamma* is involved, then such incidents can happen. No one is exempt from *kamma*, for *kamma* has jurisdiction over those who create it. Ācariya Mun was fully aware of this truth. Although he tried using skillful means to help the monk, the outcome was probably inevitable. For this reason, he didn't make any direct attempt to intervene. In the final analysis, in a world where everyone lives under the authority of *kamma*, matters must be allowed to take their natural course. I have included this story in the hope that it may serve as a timely reminder for anyone finding himself in a similar situation. As always, I trust you will forgive any indiscretion on my part.



Previously I mentioned Ācariya Mun's special talent for catching 'thieves', a technique for reading minds and catching stray thoughts that kept his students watchful and alert. When a *kammaāhāna* monk with an especially bold, resolute character came to see him in Chiang Mai, Ācariya Mun used this teaching technique to good advantage. Unlike those less earnestly committed, these monks were not apt to react in a negative way. Being fully dedicated to the cause of Dhamma, as soon as Ācariya Mun admonished them about their faults, they were willing to do their best to rectify them. No matter how pointedly he admonished them, they did not feel ashamed or apprehensive when their mistakes were exposed.

Ācariya Mun was a consummate teacher and his message went straight to the heart of his listeners. Whether sharing his own personal knowledge or pointing out the shortcomings of his students, he was always frank and outspoken. He remained candid and impartial in his criticism with the intention of giving as much help as he possibly could. His students were in no way contemptuous. They never refused to accept the truth; nor were they conceited about their own achievements, as often happens in a group of meditators.

His Dhamma explanations were invariably adapted to the individual needs of his students, touching only on the points that were essential to the individual's level of practice. When he determined that a student was practicing correctly, he encouraged him to step up his efforts. But when he felt that someone's meditation was faulty or potentially dangerous, he pointed this out as a way of encouraging the student to abandon that practice.

For monks who went to him with doubts or questions, his explanations were unerringly right to the point; and, as far as I know, his students were never disappointed. It's safe to say that everyone who went to him with a question about meditation practice, could have expected to receive expert advice, for meditation was his field of greatest expertise. His knowledge and understanding of every aspect of meditation were unparalleled. Every facet of his Dhamma teaching benefited from his lyrical presentation, captivating the listener and demonstrating an eloquence which no one today can equal. His comments on moral virtue were engrossing to his listeners, while his discourses on the different levels of *samādhi* and wisdom were exceptional. His audience

became so absorbed that, being satiated in the Dhamma they heard, their feeling of satisfaction often lasted for days thereafter.

During the period when Ācariya Mun pushed himself relentlessly toward realization of the Supreme Dhamma, he lived alone in mountain caves or forest retreats. As he waged an all out assault on the *kilesas*, his efforts were directed inward at all times. Only during hours of sleep did he relax this persistent introspection. Mindfulness and wisdom were his constant companions throughout that exhaustive investigation to uproot the *kilesas*. He carried on a continuous dialogue with the *kilesas*, mentally attacking and counterattacking them with mind-fulness and wisdom. His sheer determination to go beyond *dukkha* was the catalyst for these conversations, which were not rhetorical encounters. Rather, they were internal contemplations using mindfulness and wisdom to rebut the *kilesas*. No matter how they tried to evade him, no matter what tricks they used to rebuff or entangle him, Ācariya Mun used mindfulness and wisdom at each step of the way to follow their movements, and to corner and crush them into submission \_ until, finally, he emerged victorious. Wherever he found the *kilesas* still having the upper hand, he made an effort to upgrade his arsenal mindfulness, wisdom, faith, and perseverance increasing their strength with each new challenge until it exceeded that of his archenemy. Triumphant at last, as we already know, the world inside his heart shook *maggaññā* had destroyed the king of the *vaāā-citta*.<sup>2</sup>

This was how Ācariya Mun applied himself in the ultimate battle. He did not place any time constraints on his walking and sitting meditation as he strove day and night, wielding mindfulness and wisdom to secure victory. Having finally cleared through the dense jungle of *kilesas*, supreme-mindfulness and supreme-wisdom, that were his weapons of choice in this campaign, ceased to be meaningful or relevant. Mindfulness and wisdom became routine faculties to be engaged in normal mental processes. He used them to think about one of the many aspects of Dhamma or to engage in other mental activities, letting them fade away when their services were no longer required. Previously, they needed to be in a constant state of alert to combat the *kilesas*. Once victory was achieved, if nothing came along to stimulate his thoughts, he existed much as though he were mentally idle a simpleton. Mindfulness and wisdom, which had been caught up so long in the heat of intense struggle, were nowhere to be found. All that remained was a

timeless tranquillity that nothing could disturb, eclipsing everything else in his heart. Left totally to itself, free of all external influences, his heart did not think about affairs of the past or the future. It was as though everything had disappeared along with the *kilesas* only emptiness remained.

### ***The Boxer***

When Ācariya Mun accepted a group of monks as his students, he held regular meetings where he instructed them in the way of practice. If he noticed that a monk's attitude was unbecoming, or his behavior offensive, he took the opportunity to openly rebuke him. While in meditation, knowledge about the unseemly behavior of his students might arise in his mind as visual images, or else he might psychically read their errant thoughts. He then devised some cunning method to bring this to the culprit's attention, assuring that greater care and restraint was exercised in the future.

The visual *nimittas* that arose in Ācariya Mun's *citta* during meditation varied according to the overall situation of the person who was the principal cause of that vision. To give you an idea of the nature and the scope of his *nimittas*, there is the story of the monk who was a rather famous boxer as a layman. Giving up his profession to ordain as a monk, he developed a strong faith and decided to practice *kammaāhāna*. Aware of Ācariya Mun's excellent reputation as a revered meditation master, he set out to find the place where Ācariya Mun was staying. But as he set off, he unwittingly carried ten pictures of boxers in various boxing poses in his bag. With these photos, he traveled from Bangkok to Chiang Mai, searching for Ācariya Mun in that mountainous region. Finally arriving at Ācariya Mun's wilderness retreat, he paid his respects and explained his reasons for coming. Ācariya Mun accepted him without offering any comments.

During the night Ācariya Mun must have thoroughly investigated this monk; for, the following morning, when all the monks gathered to eat, he came in and immediately began speaking about the new arrival.

"This monk came here for the express purpose of learning about Dhamma. Looking at his behavior, I can find nothing offensive \_ it's commendable. Why then did he exhibit such dreadful conduct last

night? As I sat in meditation, he approached and stood right in front of me, just a few feet away. He then proceeded at some length to assume various boxing poses, before gradually backing away. As he slowly faded from my view, he continued to shadow box, kicking first right and then left as he went.<sup>3</sup> What's the story with this monk? Was he a boxer before he ordained as a monk? Is that the reason he gave me a lengthy boxing exhibition?"

While he spoke, all the monks, including the former boxer, sat motionless in bewildered silence. Ācariya Mun turned to the former boxer, whose face had gone pale.

"What do you have to say for yourself? What did you have in mind, behaving in such a manner? At least you didn't take a punch at me!"

As it was time to go on almsround, Ācariya Mun said nothing more that morning. Nor did he bring the matter up later, when instructing the monks at the evening meeting. But during the night he was again confronted with the same problem. So, he brought it up again the following morning.

"What's your real purpose for coming to me? Last night, there you were again, displaying your boxing skills, jumping and kicking all over the place. It lasted nearly all night. Such behavior is not normal for someone whose intentions are noble. What did you have in mind before you came to see me? And what are your thoughts now that you are here? Please tell me the truth, or else I won't be able to let you stay on here. I've never experienced anything quite like the events of the last two nights."

The monk sat trembling, his face ashen, as though he was ready to faint. One of the other monks, noticing his worsening condition, requested an opportunity to speak privately with him.

"Please be forthcoming and tell Ācariya Mun your true feelings about this matter. He's asking you about it only because he wants to ascertain the truth, not because he has any intention to hurt you. None of us, who are living here with him, are saints, free of *kilesas*. We are bound to make mistakes and so must accept his admonitions. All of us live here as his disciples. Being our teacher, he's like a father and a mother to us. As a teacher, he has an obligation to reprimand anyone who does

something noticeably wrong. A teacher must keep an eye on his students \_ for their own sake, educating them by questioning and criticizing them as circumstances require. I myself have been subjected to many such castigations; some even more severe than the one you received. Ācariya Mun has even ordered some monks to leave the premises immediately, only to relent and allow them to stay on when they realized their faults and accepted the blame. Please think carefully about what he just said to you. My own feeling is that you shouldn't be unreasonably afraid. If you have anything on your mind, just express it truthfully. If you feel you have done nothing wrong, or you cannot recall where you made a mistake, tell him straight out that you cannot seem to recollect your past errors. Then put your fate in his hands, letting him take what action he sees fit, and accept the consequences. The matter will then resolve itself."

When the other monk finished speaking Ācariya Mun continued:

"So what do you have to say for yourself? It's not that I want to find fault with you for no good reason. But as soon as I close my eyes I have to watch your antics blocking my view for the rest of the night. Why would a monk behave like that? It dismays me to see it every night. I want to know what kind of sinister motives you may have for persisting in such conduct. Or do you think that my own intuition, which has always been reliable in the past, is now playing tricks on me, and contaminating you in the process? I want you to tell me the truth. If it turns out that you're innocent, my intuition being at fault, then that means I'm just a crazy old monk who doesn't deserve to live with a group of students like this \_ I will only lead them astray. I'll have to run off and hide myself away like some lunatic, and immediately stop teaching others. Should I persist in teaching such crazy knowledge to the world, the consequences would be disastrous."

The other monk again encouraged his friend to speak up. Finally, the former boxer moved to answer Ācariya Mun. In a ghostly, trembling voice, he blurted out, "I'm a boxer", and then fell silent.

Ācariya Mun sought confirmation: "You're a boxer, is that right?"

"Yes." And that was all he said.

"Right now you're a monk; so, how can you also be a boxer? Do you mean you traveled here boxing for money along the way, or what?"

By this time, the monk's mind was in a daze. He could offer no coherent response to Ācariya Mun's inquiries. The other monk took up the questioning in an effort to help him regain his mental focus: "Don't you mean that you were a boxer in lay life, but now that you are a monk you no longer do that?"

"Yes. As a layman I was a boxer, but after ordaining as a monk I stopped boxing."

Ācariya Mun saw that his condition didn't look very good, so he changed the subject, saying it was time to go on almsround. Later, he told the other monk to go and question him privately, since his fear of Ācariya Mun prevented him from being coherent. After the meal this monk found an opportunity to put his questions in private. He discovered that the new monk had previously been a well-known boxer in the Suan Kulap boxing camp. Becoming disillusioned with lay life, he ordained as a monk and set off to find Ācariya Mun.

Once he had the whole story, the monk related it to Ācariya Mun, who made no further comment. It was assumed that this would be the end of the matter, especially since Ācariya Mun spoke directly to the former boxer during the evening meeting. But that wasn't to be the case. That night, Ācariya Mun again investigated the matter for himself. In the morning, he confronted the former boxer once more in front of everyone.

"It's not merely that you were once a boxer something else is hidden there as well. You should go and carefully reconsider this whole affair. If it was simply a matter of being a boxer in lay life, the matter should have been settled by now. It should not keep recurring in this way."

That was all he said.

Later, the monk who had become familiar with the former boxer went to see him. After further questioning he discovered that the new monk had the ten pictures of boxers in his possession. After looking at them, his friend became convinced that they were the cause of all the trouble. He advised him to either throw them away, or burn them. The boxer

monk agreed, and together they burned the whole lot. After that, everything returned to normal and this matter never surfaced again.

The former boxer was diligent in his practice, always conducting himself admirably. He lived contentedly with Ācariya Mun from then on. Ācariya Mun was always especially kind to him never again did he allude to his past. Afterwards, when the opportunity arose, his fellow monks teased him about that incident. Referring to his scolding from Ācariya Mun, he said, "I was half-dead and in such a daze I didn't know what was what, so I answered him like a half-dead idiot." Addressing the monk who helped him, he continued, "If you hadn't been so kind, I'd probably have gone hopelessly mad. But Ācariya Mun was remarkably clever \_ as soon as he saw I was losing my wits, he quickly put a stop to the whole affair, acting as though nothing had ever happened." This is an example of the type of visual *nimitta* that might arise in Ācariya Mun's meditation. He regularly used the knowledge he gained from such visions to teach his students \_ a means no less significant than his ability to read the thoughts of others.<sup>4</sup>

Ācariya Mun had more sensational experiences while living in Chiang Mai than during any other period of his life. Some of these phenomena appeared exclusively within his *citta*; others surfaced in the world around him. They included many amazing, stimulating insights knowledge of a kind never occurring to him before. Living alone in particular, he encountered a myriad of mysterious phenomena far too numerous to mention. The *citta* in its natural state of knowing is like that: knowledge and understanding arise continuously, both during meditation and in engagement with normal daily activities. It's strange, and truly wondrous, considering that the *citta* had previously been blind and ignorant, never imagining it possessed the ability to perceive the phenomena that arise each moment. It was as if such phenomena just came into being, even though they have actually existed since time immemorial.

Only when the *citta* enters into a state of total calm do these functions cease. All manner of phenomena are excluded from the *samādhi* state, so nothing arises to affect the *citta* in any way. As the *citta* rests with Dhamma, Dhamma and the *citta* merge. The *citta* is Dhamma, Dhamma is the *citta*. This is a state of complete unity where the *citta* and Dhamma are one and the same, without any trace of duality.

Conceptual reality does not exist: all concepts of time and space are transcended. There is no awareness of the body, or the mind, and concepts of pain and pleasure do not arise. As long as the *citta* remains there and doesn't withdraw from that state whether it's for a period of days, months, years, or eons then conventional realities such as *anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anattā* will not disturb it, for it is a state in which all duality ceases entirely. If, for instance, the mundane physical body were to break up and disintegrate while the *citta* remained quiescent in *nirodhadhamma* meaning the cessation of conventional reality the *citta* in that state would be completely unaware of what was happening.<sup>5</sup>

In truth, the state of *nirodha* is one in which the cessation of conceptual reality is only temporary not lasting for years, as that is highly unlikely. It may be compared to a deep, dreamless sleep. During that time, the sleeper is completely unaware of body and mind. No matter how long he remains in deep, dreamless sleep, that condition stays the same. Only after waking up does one become aware of normal physical and mental sensations.

Deep states of *samādhi*, including *nirodhasamāpatti*, all exist within the realm of relative, conventional reality, however. Only the *vimutti-citta* has gone completely beyond it. And if the *citta* entering into these *samādhi* states is already liberated from every aspect of relative, conventional reality, then that pure *visuddhi-citta* is in no way affected by such conventional levels of attainment. It remains *vimutti-citta*, free from all constraints of time and space *akālika*. It's absolutely impossible to conceptualize the nature of *vimutti-citta*, so any attempt to speculate about its qualities is only a waste of time and effort. The *citta* that enters into a state of total quiescence, free from all conceptual reality, simply ceases to function, as those conditioned phenomena that would ordinarily be involved with the *citta* temporarily disappear. Later when the *citta* has withdrawn from deep *samādhi* into *upacāra samādhi*, or back into the normal state of *visuddhi-citta*, it functions normally, receiving and processing sense data as it sees fit.<sup>6</sup>

Whether in *upacāra samādhi*, or in its normal waking state, Ācariya Mun's *citta* was always receptive to a multitude of phenomena. The difference was in the depth, scope, and quality of the experience. If wishing to investigate something thoroughly, he would enter into *upacāra samādhi* to get a more extensive view. Clairvoyance and



clairaudience, for example, require a state of *upacāra samādhī*. In this calm state one can perceive whatever one wishes to know about the forms and sounds of people and animals and much, much more. Fundamentally, it's no different from seeing with the physical eyes and hearing with the physical ears.

### ***Tigers in Disguise***

Ācariya Mun said that, excepting the few who had visited large towns in the region, most of the hill tribe people in Chiang Mai had never seen monks before. Early in his travels, Ācariya Mun and another monk went to live in the mountains about a mile and a half from a hill tribe village. They camped in the forest, taking shelter under the trees. In the morning, when they went to the village for alms food, the villagers asked why they had come. Ācariya Mun said they had come to collect alms. Puzzled, the villagers asked him what that meant. Ācariya Mun explained that they had come to collect offerings of rice. They asked him if he wanted cooked rice or uncooked rice. When he said cooked rice, they got some and put a little in each of their alms bowls. The two monks then returned to their camp and ate the plain rice.

Lacking faith from the very beginning, the villagers were very suspicious of the monks. That evening the village headman sounded the bamboo clapper to call everyone to a meeting. Referring to Ācariya Mun and his disciple, he announced that there were now two 'tigers in disguise' staying in the nearby forest. He said that he had yet to determine what kind of tigers they were, but they weren't to be trusted. He forbade the women and children to enter the forest in that area; and men who went were warned to go armed and in groups lest they should be attacked by the two tigers.

As it happened, Ācariya Mun was beginning his evening meditation at precisely the time the announcement was made to the village community. So, Ācariya Mun, who was the object of this warning, was also privy to the whole affair. He was deeply saddened by the senseless accusations; but, instead of feeling angry or discouraged, he felt only ineffable loving compassion for the local villagers. He was concerned that the majority might naively believe such slanderous talk and, therefore, be burdened by its dreadful moral consequences until they

died \_ at which time they might well be reborn as tigers. Early the next morning, he informed his disciple of what he had seen.

"Last night the village headman assembled everyone and announced that we are `tigers in disguise'. We were both accused of being tigers who are disguised as monks in order to deceive them into trusting us so that we can then destroy both their persons and their properties. Because of this, they have no faith in us at all. If we were to leave here now while they still harbor these negative thoughts, they may all be reborn as tigers when they die a grievous *kamma* indeed. So for their benefit, I think it's incumbent on us as monks to remain here and put up with the situation for a while. We must endure the ensuing hardships until they've changed their attitude before we move to another location."

Not only did the villagers distrust them, but groups of three or four armed men often came to keep an eye on them. Sometimes, they stood watching from a distance. But at other times, seeing Ācariya Mun walking meditation, they came closer and stared at him from the end of his walking path, or from the side of it, or even stood right in the middle of it. They glanced around, surveying the whole area for about 10 to 15 minutes, then left. This surveillance routine continued day after day for many weeks.

The villagers showed no concern whatsoever about the personal welfare of these two `tigers'. They were not interested in whether or not they had enough food and other necessities to survive. Thus, the living conditions of these two tigers were difficult in the extreme. The most they received on almsround was plain rice. On some days, it was just barely enough to satisfy them; on other days, it wasn't nearly enough, even though they drank a lot of water with it as well.

Since there was no cave or cliff overhang in which they could take shelter, they lived and slept under the trees, putting up with exposure to the sun and the rain. When it rained in that area, it tended to rain all day. After the rain abated and things dried out a bit, they went looking for dry leaves and grasses to construct a make-shift thatched roof, giving them some limited protection against the weather. It provided enough cover to survive from day to day, albeit with much discomfort. When it rained heavily, they sheltered under their tent-umbrellas with

the cloth sheeting hanging down around them as protection against the cold wind.<sup>7</sup> Often the rain was accompanied by strong winds that came howling down out of the mountains, blowing their umbrellas, soaking their belongings, and leaving both monks drenched and shivering. If it happened during the daytime, they could at least see what they were doing while collecting their requisites to look for some cover. But when it occurred at night, the situation was extremely trying. They were unable to see even as the rain poured down and the cold wind blasted through the trees, causing branches to break off and crash down around them. They were never sure of surviving this onslaught of rain, wind, cold, and loose debris flying at them from all directions. During such hardships, they just endured the best they could. They had to abide the heat, the cold, the hunger, the thirst, and the uncertainty of their existence while they waited for the villagers' mistrust to subside. Even though they received only plain rice, their supply was, at best, erratic. Drinking water was hard to come by; so they had to walk down to the foot of the mountain to fill their kettles, carrying the water back up to serve their daily needs. Despite such an impoverished existence, the villagers showed no sympathy for their plight.

In spite of the hardships, Ñacariya Mun felt free of anxieties and responsibilities as his meditation practice progressed unhindered. He took great pleasure from listening to the calls of the various wild animals in the surrounding forest. Seated in meditation under the trees late at night, he constantly heard the sounds of tigers roaring close by. Curiously, those huge tigers rarely ventured into the area where he was seated. Occasionally, a tiger did approach Ñacariya Mun. Perhaps, suspecting him to be wild game, it snuck in to have a look. But as soon as the tiger saw him make a move, it leapt off into the forest in alarm, and was never seen again.

Nearly every afternoon, three or four men came to check them out. They stood around whispering among themselves without a word to Ñacariya Mun, who, in turn, ignored their presence. When they arrived, Ñacariya Mun focused his *citta* on their thoughts. They, of course, never suspected that he knew what they were thinking or what they were whispering about. It's unlikely they even considered the possibility that someone could be privy to their thoughts, which they indulged in unrestrainedly. Ñacariya Mun focused his attention on everyone who came. As was to be expected of a reconnaissance party, he discovered

that they were primarily looking to find fault with him in some way. Instead of taking precautions against such findings, Ācariya Mun responded with great compassion. He knew that a majority of the villagers were subject to the corrupting influence of a small minority.

Ācariya Mun remained at this site for many months; yet, the villagers persisted in trying to catch him at suspicious doings. Their sole purpose was to find him doing something that would confirm their worst fears. Although they were sincerely committed to this, they never tried to chase him away: they merely took turns spying on him. The villagers must have been surprised that despite their consistent surveillance for months, they still couldn't catch him doing anything wrong.

One evening while sitting in meditation, Ācariya Mun became psychically aware that the villagers were assembled for a meeting concerning his case. He could hear the village headman questioning the others about the results of their surveillance: What had they been able to determine so far? Those, who had taken turns observing the two monks, said the same thing: they could find no evidence to confirm their suspicions. They were worried that their suspicious attitude might be doing them more harm than good.

"Why do you say that?" The headman wanted to know.

They replied: "As far as we can tell, there's nothing in their conduct to confirm our assumptions about them. Whenever we go to check them out, either they are sitting still with their eyes closed, or they're calmly pacing back and forth, not looking here and there like most people do. People who are tigers in disguise, poised to attack their prey, would hardly behave like that. These two monks should have exhibited some sort of incriminating behavior by now, but we've seen nothing so far. If we keep treating them like this, we may suffer the consequences. The correct approach would be to speak with them to find out about their motives. Presuming their motives to be sinister may well reflect badly on us all.

"Good monks are hard to find. We have enough experience to tell good monks from bad ones. These monks deserve our respect. Let's not hastily accuse them of treachery. To find out the whole story, let's go

speaking with them. Let's ask them why they sit still with their eyes closed, and why they pace back and forth what are they searching for?"

A decision was reached at the meeting to send a representative to question the monks. In the morning, Ācariya Mun spoke to his companion: "The villagers are beginning to have a change of heart. Last night they held a meeting about their surveillance of us. They have decided to send someone here to question us about their suspicions."

Just as Ācariya Mun foresaw, a village representative arrived that very afternoon to question him: "What are you searching for when you sit still with your eyes closed, or pace back and forth?"

Acariya Mun replied, "I've lost my *buddho*. I'm searching for *buddho* while sitting and walking."

"What is this *buddho*? Can we help you find it?"

"*Buddho* is the most precious gem in the three worlds of existence \_ a jewel of all-pervading knowledge. If you help me find it, that'll be excellent. Then we will all see *buddho* quickly and easily."

"Has your *buddho* been missing long?"

"Not long. With your help we'll find it a lot faster than if I look for it alone."

"Is *buddho* something large?"

"Neither large nor small, it's just the right size for all of us. Whoever finds *buddho* will become a superior person, able to perceive anything he wishes."

"Will we be able to see the heavens and the hells?"

"Of course. Otherwise, how could we call it superior."

"What about our dead children, and our dead spouses, can they be seen?"

"You can see anything you want once *buddho* is yours."

"Is it very bright?"

"It's much brighter than hundreds, even thousands, of suns. The sun is not able to illuminate heaven and hell, but *buddho* can penetrate everywhere, illuminating everything."

"Can woman and children help search for it too?"

"Everyone can help \_ men, women, young and old, all can join in the search."

"This superior *buddho*, can it protect us from ghosts?"

"*Buddho* is superior in countless ways. It is superior in the three worlds *kāma-loka*, *rūpa-loka*, *arūpa-loka*. All three of them must pay homage to *buddho*. No being anywhere is greater than *buddho*. Ghosts are very afraid of *buddho* they must bow down and worship it. Ghosts are frightened of people who search for *buddho* too, even though they haven't found it yet."

"This *buddho* jewel, what color is it?"

"It's a bright, sparkling jewel with countless colors. *Buddho* is a special asset of the Lord Buddha \_ a gleaming aggregate of knowledge, not a material thing. The Lord Buddha bequeathed it to us many years ago, but since then it's gone missing and we no longer know how to find it. But its location is not so important. If you're trying to find it, what's important is to sit and walk thinking "*buddho, buddho, buddho*" exclusively within your heart. Keep your attention focused within your body, not letting it wander outside. Fix your awareness firmly on the repetition of "*buddho, buddho*". If you can manage to do this, you may even come across *buddho* before I do."

"How long must we to sit and walk searching for *buddho* before we find it?"

"To begin with, sit or walk for about 15 to 20 minutes at a time. *Buddho* doesn't want you to spend too much time searching for it yet. It's afraid you'll grow tired and so be unable to keep up with it. Losing interest, you will not want to search anymore. Then you'll miss it altogether."

This is enough to get you started. If I elaborate any further, you won't remember it all, thus jeopardizing your chances of meeting *buddho*."

With these instructions in mind, the villager returned home. He didn't take leave of Ācariya Mun in any special way, because that was not the hill tribe custom. Deciding that it was time to go, he simply got up and left. As soon as he arrived at the village, everyone gathered around to hear what had taken place. He explained why Ācariya Mun sat still with his eyes closed and why he paced back and forth: he was searching for the precious gem *buddho* and not, as they had presumed, because he was a 'tiger in disguise'. He then explained Ācariya Mun's brief instructions on how to find *buddho*. Once the villagers knew the method, everyone from the headman on down to the women and older children began to practice, mentally repeating '*buddho*'.

Several days later, something truly amazing happened. The Dhamma of the Lord Buddha arose clearly in the heart of one of the villagers. While mentally repeating the word "*buddho*" over and over again as Ācariya Mun had suggested, one man in the village found Dhamma: his heart attained a state of peace and calm. A few days earlier, the man had dreamed that Ācariya Mun was placing a very large, bright-shining candle on top of his head. The moment Ācariya Mun set the candle on his head, his whole body, from the head on down, was brightly illuminated. He felt overjoyed as the radiance, spreading out around him, illuminated the surrounding area as well. Soon after he attained this state of tranquility, he went to tell Ācariya Mun about his achievement, and about the amazing dream he had prior to it. Ācariya Mun then gave him additional instructions on how to proceed with his practice. As it turned out, his progress was very quick: he was soon able to psychically know other people's thoughts. He informed Ācariya Mun of this very matter-of-factly in the forthright manner typical of forest people.

Sometime later, this man declared to Ācariya Mun that he had examined Ācariya Mun's *citta* and had clearly seen its characteristics. Playfully, Ācariya Mun asked if he could see much evil in his *citta*. The man answered without hesitation, "Your *citta* has no focal point whatsoever only an absolutely incredible radiance shining within. Your preeminence is unrivaled anywhere in the world. I've never seen

anything like it. You've been here about a year now, why didn't you teach me about this right from the beginning?"

"How could I teach you? You never came to ask me any questions."

"I didn't know you were a supreme master. Had I known, I'd have come for sure. Now we all know you're an extremely clever person. When we came asking you why you sat still with your eyes closed and what you were looking for as you paced back and forth, you told us your *buddho* was lost and asked us to help you find it. When asked to describe it, you said *buddho* is a bright, sparkling jewel, but in truth the real *buddho* is your heart. The missing *buddho* was simply a clever ploy to persuade us to meditate on *buddho* so that our hearts could become bright like yours. Now we realize that you're a supremely wise person whose only desire was for us to discover the supreme *buddho* in our own hearts, thus ensuring our long-term welfare and happiness."

The news of this man's attainment of Dhamma spread rapidly through the community, further arousing everyone's interest in *buddho* meditation so that even small children took it up. Their faith in Ācariya Mun thus reinforced, their reverence for his teaching steadily increased. No one ever mentioned 'tigers in disguise' again.

From that time on, the man who had learned to meditate carried Ācariya Mun's alms bowl back to his forest retreat every day after the almsround. After Ācariya Mun finished eating, he would then seek advice on his practice. On the days when he had business to attend to, he told someone to inform Ācariya Mun that he wouldn't be available to carry the alms bowl. Although quite a few men and women in the village learned to meditate, this first man was the most accomplished.

When people are satisfied, everything else naturally falls into place. For instance, previously these people were not the least bit interested in how Ācariya Mun ate or slept, or even whether he lived or died. But later when faith and respect arose in them, those things that previously were scarce soon became plentiful. Without having to be asked, the villagers joined forces to make him a walking path. They also built him a hut and a platform on which to sit and have his meal. When they came to help, they disguised their praises of him in reproachful tones.



"Look at that walking meditation path. It's all overgrown with vegetation. You'd have to be a wild boar to penetrate that thicket. And yet, you still insist on walking there. You're really weird, you know. When we ask you what the path is for, you say it's a place to search for *buddho* \_ I've lost my *buddho*. When asked why you sit still with your eyes closed, again you say you're looking for *buddho*. Here you are a supreme master, yet you don't tell anyone about it. You're the strangest person we've ever known, but we like you just the way you are. Your bed is a carpet of moldy smelling leaves strewn over the ground. How could you stand it all these months? It looks like a pig's lair. Looking at it now, we feel so sorry for you we could cry. We were very stupid, all of us. We didn't realize what a wonderful person you are. Worse than that, a few of us accused you of having sinister motives, convincing the rest to dislike and distrust you. Finally now the whole village trusts and reveres you."

Ācariya Mun said that, when hill tribe people decided to trust and respect someone, their belief was heartfelt and unequivocal. Their loyalty was unconditional they would sacrifice their lives if they had to. They took what they were taught to heart, conducting themselves accordingly. As they became more familiar with the method and more proficient in their practice, Ācariya Mun taught them to steadily increase the amount of time they spent doing *buddho* meditation.

Ācariya Mun stayed with those people for over a year \_ from February of one year to April of the following year until he finally left. However, because of his great compassion for them, taking leave of them was very difficult for him. They were very reluctant to see him go. They assured him that, were he to remain there until he died, the whole community would arrange for his cremation. Those people were willing to put their complete trust in him out of a deep sense of love and devotion. Unmistakably, they had seen for themselves the good results of his teaching. And to their credit, they were smart enough to see their own faults as well. Once they came to know him as a truly virtuous, highly respected monk, they realized their mistake and so begged his forgiveness. He forgave them, later telling his disciple that their amends were complete. This meant that the two of them were then free to go somewhere else.

But taking leave of them was no simple matter. Ācariya Mun said that it was moving beyond description to witness their affection and deep devotion as they beseeched him to stay. Having heard that he was preparing to leave, the whole village came out, weeping and pleading with him until the entire forest was disturbed by the commotion. It sounded as though they were mourning the dead. While explaining his reasons for leaving, he tried to comfort them, assuring them that such distress was unwarranted. He counseled self-restraint, which is the way of Dhamma.

When they calmed down, seemingly resigned to his departure, he began to leave his forest retreat. Then, something totally unexpected happened. All the villagers, including the children, ran after him. Surrounding him on the path, they proceeded to snatch away his requisites. Some grabbed his umbrella, his bowl, and his water kettle, while others clutched at the robes he wore or clung to his arms and legs, trying to pull him back again acting just like children. They were determined to not let him go.

Ācariya Mun was obliged once again to explain his reasons for leaving, consoling them until they calmed down. Finally they agreed. But no sooner had he started walking off than the crying began and they rushed to drag him back again. Several hours passed before he eventually got away. Meanwhile, the whole forest was disturbed by noisy scenes of hysteria that were heartrending to watch. The initial epithet 'tigers in disguise' meant nothing to them then. In its place had arisen deep reverence and attachment for a man of supreme virtue. In the end, these hill tribe people couldn't hold back their emotions. As they gathered around him crying and pleading, their many voices merged into a crescendo: "Hurry back to visit us again. Please don't be gone long, we miss you so much already it's breaking our hearts."

Having arrived in the area surrounded by suspicion and dissatisfaction, Ācariya Mun departed amid emotional scenes of affection and attachment. He had managed to turn something unseemly into something beautiful, so enhancing its value immensely as befits one ordained as a disciple of the Buddha. The Buddha's disciples never hold grudges or look to blame others. Should anyone dislike them, they will try to help that person with loving compassion. They never take offense at other people's misbehavior nor do they harbor feelings of animosity

that could lead to mutual recriminations. A heart full to overflowing with loving compassion inspires faith in those ablaze with *kilesas* by providing them with a peaceful, dependable refuge. A heart of such loving grace possesses virtuous qualities that are unparalleled in the world.

Later when listening to Ācariya Mun tell this story, we couldn't help sympathizing with the hill tribe people. We formed in our minds a clear image of those chaotic scenes in the forest as though we were watching a movie. We could imagine the villagers' potent faith, ready to sacrifice anything for this man of supreme virtue. All they asked was a chance to bask in his aura of loving kindness, thus continuing to enjoy a life of prosperity. So they cried and pleaded with him, clutching at his arms and legs, pulling on his robes and other requisites, until he returned to the small eating platform with the thatched roof that had been a source of such contentment. Though an incredibly moving occasion, the time had come for him to move on. No one can possibly negate the transient nature of the world. The driving principle of constant change keeps everything moving nothing can halt its progress. For this reason, when the right time came, Ācariya Mun had to leave, though he fully understood the position of those faithful villagers who were so emotionally attached to him.

Although Ācariya Mun was once labeled a 'tiger in disguise' by the hill tribe people, it is well known that he was, in truth, a 'pure one' who existed as 'an incomparable field of merit for the world'.<sup>8</sup> Ācariya Mun left that mountain community in order to follow his natural inclination \_ to be of the most benefit to the greatest number of people.

Buddhism is a priceless inheritance that has always been an integral part of our very existence. But, perhaps it too could fall prey to insidious accusations of being a 'tiger in disguise' much in the same manner that Ācariya Mun did. It could end up being severely damaged by people whose views are hostile to Buddhist principles and traditions. In truth, this process has already begun, so we should not be complacent. If we fail to fulfill our obligations, we may forfeit this inheritance, only to regret it later.

Ācariya Mun followed the way of *sugato*.<sup>9</sup> When living deep in the forests and mountains he was constantly of service to the hill tribesmen,

or else the *devas*, *brahmas*, ghosts, *nāgas*, and *garuḍas*. He was always compassionately assisting the world in some way or other. In human society he taught monks, novices, nuns, and lay people from all walks of life without exception. People everywhere sought him out to hear his instructions. They all gained an enormous benefit from his teachings, always delivered in a thorough, coherent manner that would be hard for anyone else to equal.

While he lived in the mountains of Chiang Mai, the hill tribe people received great joy, listening to his Dhamma discourses in the late afternoons. Later at night, he taught Dhamma to *devas* from various levels of existence, always responding to their many inquiries. Teaching *devas* was a heavy responsibility, since it was difficult to find another monk with the same psychic skills to stand in for him. Teaching people was a responsibility that could be delegated to others at least the people listening would gain enough understanding to derive some benefit if they made the effort. Ācariya Mun's relationship with *devas* of all realms was of primary importance to him. So his biography is interspersed with stories about them at different times in different places, right to the very end.

Not so long ago I went to pay my respects to a *vipassanā kammaāhāna ācariya* of the highest caliber, a senior monk with an exceptionally kind, gentle disposition who is greatly revered by monks and lay people all over Thailand.<sup>10</sup> When I arrived he was discussing Dhamma with several of his close disciples, so I took the opportunity to join them. We began by discussing various practical aspects of Dhamma, eventually coming around to the subject of Ācariya Mun, who had been his teacher. In the past, he lived under Ācariya Mun's tutelage in the remote mountains of Chiang Mai, training with him at a forest retreat that was several days walk from the nearest town. It's hard to find words to describe the many remarkable, amazing stories he told me that day. I shall relate the ones I feel are appropriate here, while the others I shall skip, for reasons I explained earlier.

This *ācariya* said that, besides his undoubted purity of heart, Ācariya Mun also possessed many unique abilities that inspired awe in his students and assured their vigilance at all times. He said he couldn't possibly remember all of the strange, unusual stories he had heard from Ācariya Mun; so, I urged him to tell me what he could remember. His

words would serve as a memorial a source of inspiration for future generations. This is what he said:

"Ācariya Mun knew everything I was thinking what more can I say? I felt as though I were on a tight leash day and night, such was the vigilance I applied to observing my mind. Despite my best efforts, he could still catch my errant thoughts, publicly exposing them for everyone to hear. My meditation was actually quite good while staying with him, but I couldn't always prevent stray thoughts from arising. We should never underestimate the mind's ability to think incessantly, day and night \_ non-stop. How many of us can catch up with our thoughts long enough to restrain them effectively? So I was constantly on guard, for he was better at catching my thoughts than I was! Sometimes, he brought up thoughts that I'd forgotten having. Suddenly, I was made to recall thoughts that had long since past."

I asked the *ācariya* if Ācariya Mun had ever scolded him. He told me:

"Occasionally he did; but, more often he read my thoughts, then used them as a way of teaching me Dhamma. Sometimes other monks were listening as well, which really embarrassed me. Fortunately, if other monks sat listening, Ācariya Mun never revealed the name of the offender he merely spoke about the relative merits of the thoughts in question."

I wanted to know why he thought Ācariya Mun scolded him sometimes. He said:

"Do you know the word *puthujjana*?<sup>11</sup> It means a mind denser than a mountain of stone, careening out of control. It doesn't consider whether thoughts are good or bad, right or wrong which was a sufficient reason for him to give a scolding."

I asked him if he felt afraid when Ācariya Mun scolded him.

"Why shouldn't I have been afraid? My body may not have been shaking, but my mind certainly was. I almost forgot to breathe at times. I have no doubt that Ācariya Mun truly did know the minds of others I experienced it myself. He could literally collect all my thoughts, then confront me with them later. For example, from time to time I rather foolishly thought about going off on my own. If such a thought

occurred to me at night, early the next morning, as soon as I encountered him, Ācariya Mun immediately started lecturing me: 'Just where do you think you're going? It's far better here than anywhere else. It's best that you stay here with me ...' and so on. He never let these thoughts pass undetected. 'It's more enjoyable here. Staying here and listening to the Dhamma is better than going off on your own.' He never would consent to my going. I believe he was worried that my meditation practice might deteriorate, so he tried to keep me under his tutelage the whole time. "The thing that terrified me about him was, day or night, whenever I decided to focus my *citta's* attention on him, I saw him staring back at me. It seemed he never took a rest! There were nights when I didn't dare lie down because I could visualize him sitting right in front of me, scrutinizing me every moment. Whenever I focused my *citta* on external objects, I invariably found him there looking at me. Because of this, my mindfulness was constantly alert.

"As his students, we were forced to be mindful. Following him on almsround, we carefully kept our thoughts under control, restraining our minds from straying beyond the confines of our bodies. Were we careless, we could expect to hear about it sometimes immediately. Consequently, we exerted mindfulness over our thoughts at all times. Even then, he could usually find something to lecture us about, and always with good reason. Inevitably, at least one monk among us gave Ācariya Mun cause to speak out. During the evening meeting, Ācariya Mun might speak in a scolding tone about some rather strange affair that seemed to make no sense. As soon as the meeting adjourned, the monks would quietly ask around to find out whose thoughts he was censuring that day. Eventually one of the monks confessed that, as strange as it might seem, he actually had been thinking such nonsense. Living with Ācariya Mun was a wonderful experience, for fear of him always promoted a mindful attitude within each of us."

This *ācariya* told me that when he first arrived in Chiang Mai, he went to stay at one of the local monasteries. Having been there less than an hour, he saw a car pull into the monastery grounds and come to a stop right in front of the hut he had just moved into.

"When I looked out to see who had come, there was Ācariya Mun! Hurrying down to receive him, I respectfully asked why he had come. He replied without hesitation that he came to pick me up. He said that

he knew the night before that I would be coming. I asked if someone had informed him that I would be arriving in Chiang Mai. He replied that it was beside the point how he learned of it he knew about it and wanted to be here, so he just came on his own. Hearing that, I became apprehensive. And the more I considered the implications, the more apprehensive I grew. Later, when I was living with him, all my fears were confirmed.

"If our minds were free of conceited opinions when we received his Dhamma discourse, then we became pleasantly absorbed in listening. His entire discourse was Dhamma pure and simple; and it engaged our full attention more than anything else we had ever heard. On the other hand, if a monk listened halfheartedly, burdened by the weight of worldly thoughts, then we soon perceived fire in his discourse, and the offending monk would promptly feel the heat. In giving a talk, Ācariya Mun was not concerned about whose *kilesas* his words might disturb his Dhamma rushed to confront the *kilesas* at just that point where they were most prolific.

"Occasionally, he did identify a monk by name, confronting him directly. 'Why were you meditating like that last night? That's not the right way to meditate, you must do it this way' Or, 'Why were you thinking like that this morning? If you want to avoid being ruined by such harmful thinking, then don't think like that again. Why don't you think and act in ways that the Lord Buddha has taught us? What's the matter with you? We're here to train ourselves in the way of Dhamma in order to get rid of wrong attitudes and erroneous thinking. We are not here to indulge our thoughts, burning ourselves with them the way you've been doing.' Those who wholeheartedly accepted the truth, lived contentedly with him, and he didn't say much to them. But any furtiveness caused him deep misgivings, as though the offending thoughts were fire burning him, and he would suddenly make a surprising comment about it. If, however, the monk realized his mistake and changed his attitude, then nothing further was said and the matter rested there."

### ***Powerful Magic***

One evening, a group of hill tribesmen from a village near Ācariya Mun's residence began wondering among themselves whether Ācariya

Mun had any magic formulas to ward off and chase away ghosts. So they decided to go the next day to ask if he had anything he could give them. Early the next morning, Ācariya Mun related this incident to the monks living with him:

"Last night while sitting in meditation I overheard a group of hill tribesmen in the village wondering if we monks might have some magic formula for warding off and chasing away ghosts . They intend to come here today to ask us about it. Should they come, give them the formula "*buddho, dhammo, sangho*" to meditate on. It's an excellent formula against ghosts, for the only things that ghosts fear in this world are the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. Not a single ghost would dare stand against them."

That morning, just as Ācariya Mun had foreseen, the hill tribesmen came to request a magic formula against ghosts. Ācariya Mun gave them the formula "*buddho, dhammo, sangho*" as well as the method for using it. Assuring them that ghosts were terrified of this formula, he told them to mentally recite "*buddho*", "*dhammo*", or "*sangho*", whichever they preferred.

With Ācariya Mun's instructions fresh in their minds, they began what they thought to be a ritual for warding off ghosts, unaware that, in truth, he had given them a meditation subject. Using this method, they attained *samādhi* before long. The next morning they rushed off to see Ācariya Mun and told him what had happened. He assured them that they were practicing the formula correctly, and because of that, ghosts in the area were terrified and bound to run away. Now protected by the power of Dhamma, they no longer had to fear ghosts. In fact, ghosts had already begun to fear even those people in the village who couldn't yet meditate.

Being inherently good, honest folks, hill tribe people were easy to teach. When Ācariya Mun instructed them to meditate each day, they took up the practice with such sincerity that before long some of them were getting exceptionally good results. Their hearts became brightly illuminated and they were able to know the minds of other people, including those of the monks in the monastery, just like the man in the previous story about 'tigers in disguise'.



On visits to the monastery they spoke to Ācariya Mun about their meditation practice, describing their extraordinary perceptual abilities. Some of the monks were astonished, and worried that these people might be able to read their thoughts. Though timid by nature, they nonetheless wanted to find out what the people knew. They couldn't resist the temptation of asking for specific information about their own thoughts. The hill tribesmen told them the truth. Still unconvinced, the monks challenged them. Unfazed by a display of their own ignorance, they cross-examined the hill tribesmen closely to find out if they truly could read thoughts. It was as though they believed that their minds were tightly sealed by hundreds of impenetrable layers. The hill tribesmen answered with the customary frankness of forest people who are uninhibited by social formalities \_ answers which left the monks feeling very vulnerable. After that, they remained apprehensive that these people might have access to everything they were thinking.

These same hill tribesmen casually informed Ācariya Mun that they knew about the state of his *citta*, having checked it out first, before checking on that of the other monks.

"What's my *citta* like \_ is it afraid of ghosts?"

"Your *citta* is devoid of all traces of conventional reality. All that's left is Nibbāna in a human body. Your *citta* is absolutely supreme it fears nothing."

After that, the villagers made no further mention of ghosts. Those accomplished in meditation informed the others who gradually came to have faith in Ācariya Mun and the Buddhasāna, thus losing interest in the business of ghosts. Every morning they gathered together in the village center to offer alms to the monks. Having placed some food in each monk's bowl, they received a blessing from Ācariya Mun. He taught them to show their appreciation by exclaiming "*sādhu*" together in a loud voice, allowing the *devas* to rejoice in their offerings and receive a portion of the merit as well. Each day the villagers responded faithfully by loudly calling out "*sādhu*". Ācariya Mun had them exclaim "*sādhu*", for he knew from the *devas*, who came to hear his Dhamma talks every night, that this sound reached them in the realms where they lived. Hearing this sound, they knew that Ācariya Mun was living in the area.

*Devas* who visited Ācariya Mun were invariably escorted by a leader who was in charge of the group. These groups represented many different realms of existence. Some were terrestrial *devas* from near and far. Many were from the various celestial realms mentioned in the Buddhist texts. When a group of *devas* intended to pay Ācariya Mun a visit, he always knew their time of arrival in advance. If he knew, for instance, that a group intended to arrive at two or three a. m., he would take some rest beforehand, getting up to enter *samādhi* only when the time approached to receive them. If, however, they were scheduled to arrive around midnight, he would first enter and then wait for them in *samādhi*. This was accomplished in two stages. First, he practiced normal meditation until he attained a deep state of calm, where he rested for a while. Then, as the time approached, he withdrew to just the right meditative level to receive his intended visitors. There, he knew intuitively whether or not they had arrived, or whether they were still on their way. Having acknowledged their arrival, he then discussed with them whatever seemed appropriate for their particular circumstances. Had he remained in a deep state of *samādhi*, his visitors would not have been able to have access to him. In normal waking consciousness, on the other hand, one would have to be a very skilled person indeed to be able to acknowledge and interact with beings from other realms. Even were he able to acknowledge them, it would still be easier to accomplish this at the appropriate level of *samādhi*. For this reason, *upacāra samādhi* the access gate is a level suitable to nearly every eventuality.

Ācariya Mun became an expert in these matters during his sojourn at Sarika Cave many years before. At that time, he had been an ordained monk for twenty-two years. By the time he passed away, after spending a total of sixty years in the robes, he had become a true master of these matters. Everyone in the world has the same potential for perceiving such phenomena as Ācariya Mun had \_ they need only to develop it. But, very few can develop his exceptional skills. However, even though they fell short of his total mastery, if people could develop at least some skill, it would be sufficient for witnessing such things. Instead, being unable to see them, people tend to believe that such phenomena do not actually exist in the world around them.

It's difficult to convince people who lack sufficient knowledge of Dhamma for endowing their hearts with a strong spiritual basis. Should

our hearts develop the principles of Dhamma principles certifying the true nature of all phenomena and gain the necessary skills, then no amount of denial could possibly negate what we clearly see for ourselves. Even if everyone on earth insisted on denying the existence of such things, it would merely be an empty denial. The true nature of what we perceive remains unchanged nothing can possibly alter it. Truth does not depend on beliefs or opinions of any kind. It is true according to immutable natural principles.

Ācariya Mun wandered far and wide throughout most of the remote and mountainous districts of Chiang Mai province, traveling more extensively there than in any other province. He remained in Chiang Mai much longer than he did in other places, largely because it was suitable for meditation. It was conducive to the many kinds of insights that were a unique feature of his practice. He claimed there were many reasons for his long sojourn there. First of all, the environment was suitable to meditation. Secondly, he felt sorry for the hill tribes people who needed his assistance, and was reluctant to abandon them. Although it was sparsely populated, many extraordinary individuals lived in that area. They needed proper training and encouragement to insure their steady progress and to avert disappointment and reversal to their old ways. And then there were all the *devas* whom he was determined to assist.

Groups of *devas* and *nāgas* usually came to ask questions and listen to his discourses at least twice a month. He said that, at night, he was always busy receiving visitors from all over the celestial and terrestrial realms. Before speaking with Ācariya Mun, the leader of each group would announce the approximate number of *devas* present on that occasion: for instance, ten or a hundred thousand celestial *devas* are here today, or one to ten thousand terrestrial *devas*, or five hundred to a thousand *nāgas*.

Almost daily, when he walked meditation in the late afternoon, Ācariya Mun would be informed of the hour of arrival of one group or another from these different realms. Occasionally, he received the information later on during seated meditation. There were nights when several different groups announced their impending visit; and he had to arrange specific times for each group so that their visits did not overlap. He did not have them come simultaneously, because relative spiritual

development varied among the different realms and his Dhamma teaching had to vary accordingly to be appropriate for each group. Since one group preferred hearing a certain aspect of Dhamma, while another group preferred something different, Ācariya Mun arranged separate visits to ensure that his discourse was suitable to everyone present. This was done for his own convenience, as well as that of his visitors. Such obligations were a major part of the reason for his long stay in Chiang Mai. As a matter of fact, the number of *devas* of all types who visited him there well exceeded the number of people, *nāgas*, *garuḍas*, and other spirits combined. In reality, very few individuals can achieve telepathic communication with *devas*, which is essential for teaching them.

*Devas* often complained to Ācariya Mun that, unaware of the existence of *devas*, human beings have no understanding about *devas* and are not interested in knowing that devic existence is another state of sentient existence adhering to the principles of *kamma*. Devic existence is irrelevant to most human beings, who fail to recognize that *devas* also have hopes and aspirations, just like everyone else. Rarely did *devas* encounter a man of supreme virtue, like Ācariya Mun\_ a man who possessed the intuitive insight to realize that animals, humans, *devas*, and all other forms of existence are undeniably real and should be honored as such. They could not help feeling an overwhelming sense of joy upon meeting him. They so enjoyed coming to pay him their respects, ask him questions and listen to his teaching. They wanted to imbibe his exquisite Dhamma to nourish their hearts, thus increasing their happiness and well-being and sustaining their whole existence. For this reason, *devas* everywhere venerate anyone possessing extremely high virtue.

Relating that *devas* are just as important as all other living beings, Ācariya Mun understood their intentions and sympathized with their meritorious aspirations. He stated that, intent on improving themselves, the *devas* who came to him for assistance greatly outnumbered the human beings who visited him. Still, they remain a mystery to people who lack the proper psychic skills. Though appearing on the surface to be an insoluble problem for human society, it need not be an insurmountable obstacle for a person wishing to truly know and understand these things. For those skilled in the ways of the *citta*, psychic communication is just as normal as any other aspect of human

experience. Certainly Ācariya Mun considered it commonplace, allowing him to function effectively with *devas* throughout his life. Regardless of where he lived, he always remained in contact with *devas* requiring his assistance. This was especially true in Chiang Mai province, because such beings preferred to contact him when he was living in remote, isolated places, free from human congestion. The forests and mountains of Chiang Mai were ideal in this respect. Ācariya Mun had few social obligations there, so he could devote more time to his *deva* visitors.

A strange incident occurred while he was living among the Musuer people deep in the mountains near Ikaw Village. A group of *devas* came to visit him from Germany. They wished to hear a discourse that would give them a 'victory formula'. Focusing his *citta* on their request, an appropriate Dhamma verse arose: "*akkodhena jine kodhajj*." It means *conquer anger with lack of anger*.<sup>12</sup> Ācariya Mun elaborated on this theme with the assembled *devas*.

"Conquer anger with lack of anger, remember this. For anyone hoping to achieve victory, this is the most important Dhamma to practice. Consider it well \_ it is the main source of peace and happiness in the world. Love and kindness \_ these are effective deterrence against an evil such as anger. By helping to reduce anger's power to destroy human and devic societies alike, loving kindness fosters peace and prosperity everywhere. Thus, this loving attitude is a prerequisite for social harmony\_ one we should all strive to develop. In a world lacking this victory formula, dissatisfaction and unrest will arise at the very least. At the extreme, the world will be consumed by mortal strife. Anger and resentment can never defeat our enemies, for they are evils that succeed only in indis-criminately destroying us and everyone close to us. The more anger is used, the more the world we live in becomes a sea of flames, burning uncontrollably toward total annihilation.

"Anger is actually a type of fire that's inherent in the nature of this world. Although it has no physical properties, it does succeed in creating havoc in its wake. So anyone desiring a stable, sensible world \_ a place worth living in \_ should realize the disastrous harm that the fires of anger and resentment can cause; and refrain from ever using them. Starting a fire like this merely causes oneself and everyone else to suffer. Mutual feelings of affection and loving kindness among all

living beings maintain the world in its proper equilibrium. Oppressive forces of unrestrained anger and selfish pride should never be allowed to run rampant, causing a never-ending cycle of destruction.

"With his acute wisdom, the Lord Buddha realized the indisputable harm caused by anger. He saw the value of loving kindness as a gentle force that can spontaneously join all living beings in a sense of mutual harmony and goodwill, for all share a common desire for happiness and a common dislike of pain. For this reason, he taught that love and kindness were powerful means of maintaining peace and security in the world. So long as living beings still have loving kindness in their hearts, there's every chance that their desire for happiness will be fulfilled. But should their hearts become estranged from thoughts of loving kindness, then even with all the material comforts, their lives will still be devoid of genuine peace and happiness. Angry, hateful people tend to encounter only trouble, feeling resentful and annoyed wherever they go.

"Once we know with certainty that Dhamma is something truly beneficial to us, we can clearly see that a heart full of brutality is like a blazing fire gradually destroying everything in its path. We must then urgently strive to overcome these dangers as best we can. You may never again get such a good opportunity; so, take advantage of it now and avoid regrets in the future. The world is in a constant state of change and that changing world is situated right here in the bodies and minds of us all."

Such was the essence of the 'victory formula' that Ñcariya Mun

gave to the *devas* from Germany. As soon as Ñcariya Mun finished speaking, they gave a thunderous "*sādhū*" in unison that echoed throughout the world systems. Ñcariya Mun asked how they knew where he was staying since, in human terms, they lived so far away. They replied that they always knew precisely where he was staying. More than that, *devas* from Thailand regularly visit the *devas* of Germany. In truth, *devas* don't consider the distance between countries like Thailand and Germany to be very great, the way human beings do. They simply think of it as an area through which they can easily and naturally pass back and forth. Whereas humans travel by foot or by vehicle, *devas* transport themselves by means of a supernatural power

that is equivalent to transferring consciousness to a particular destination it arrives there instantly. So *devas* can move around much more easily than human beings.

Ācariya Mun said that the *devas* from Germany regularly came to listen to his Dhamma talks, much in the same way that terrestrial *devas* came from all over Thailand to hear him. Both celestial and terrestrial *devas* tended to show their respect for him in a similar fashion. If Ācariya Mun was living with a group of monks, *devas* who came to see him never passed through the area where the monks had their living quarters. Besides that, they tended to arrive very late at night when all the monks were asleep. Upon arrival, they circumambulated Ācariya Mun clockwise, three times in a calm, composed manner. When they departed again circumambulating him clockwise three times they first withdrew to a respectful distance. When they reached the edge of his living area, they simply floated into the air like puffs of cotton. All types of *devas* demonstrated their respect for him in this fashion.

Ācariya Mun found the mountains of Chiang Mai to be an ideal environment for meditation. Heart free and mind unencumbered, he lived a life of complete ease, abiding sublimely in Dhamma \_ Dhamma was the enduring source of comfort in his life. With no intrusions taking up his time, he was free to meditate whenever he wished. He lived a very healthy, contented life there. As for his teaching obligations, the *devas*, who came only at night, were beings of a refined nature, so they were hardly a burden. Sometimes in the afternoon or early evening he gave helpful advice to the local lay community. The monks living under his tutelage assembled for instruction in the evening, at about seven p. m. Most of his students had already achieved a certain level of proficiency in the practice of *samādhī* and in the various stages of wisdom. Being wholly committed to the practice, they listened to his teaching, striving to attain *magga*, *phala*, and Nibbāna.

When Ācariya Mun taught a group of monks, whose individual levels of mental development varied, he always structured his discourses to encompass all levels of practice, from basic *samādhī* through the higher levels of wisdom to the most subtle level of all the realization of Nibbāna. Monks, skilled in meditation, became so absorbed in the successive stages of his discourse that they lost all sense of time and place. Practicing monks were usually given a talk lasting for at least

two hours. But the monks were less interested in the time than they were in the flow of his Dhamma discourse, as they were able to gradually increase their own understanding with each successive stage. Consequently, listening to Dhamma in an attentive, thoughtful manner is itself a valuable meditation practice, one that is equally as important as other methods. For his part, the teacher is determined that his audience realize the truth of what he teaches every step of the way. He points out the kind of thoughts that are truly harmful, as well as those that are truly beneficial; so, his students will understand which thinking is faulty and should be abandoned, and which has merit and should be developed further. More than at any comparable time, those focusing their undivided attention on the *citta* the focal point of Dhamma \_ can expect to attain some degree of calm in *samādhi*; or receive various techniques for investigating with wisdom, while they listen to the teacher discuss these topics. Thus, the diligent meditator can progress step by step while listening to his teacher's instructions. Receiving an insight into one aspect of Dhamma today, another aspect of Dhamma tomorrow, students manage to strengthen their mindfulness and wisdom every time they listen. Since the teacher has realized the Truth of Dhamma within himself, he can point directly to that same Truth existing within his students. Listening to his detailed explanations, they can progressively develop their skills in all aspects of *samādhi* and wisdom, allowing them to successfully pass through each level of meditation practice until they reach the highest Dhamma.

*Dhutanga* monks have always considered hearing Dhamma an essential part of their practice, one they seek to maintain as long as there is a skilled teacher to whom they can listen. For this reason, truly dedicated *dhutanga* monks like to search out a teacher who can guide them in their meditation practice. They cherish and revere a teacher in whom they feel they can put their complete trust. His advice is sincerely taken to heart, carefully contemplated, and wholeheartedly put into practice. They routinely consult with him, asking for specific advice on any doubtful points arising in their practice, then adjust their practice according to his recommendations. For this reason, *dhutanga* monks have always preferred to gather around eminently qualified meditation masters, such as Ācariya Mun and Ācariya Sao. Both of those great teachers had unusually large numbers of disciples among the *dhutanga* monks of Thailand's Northeast region.



But in Ācariya Mun's case, once he moved to Chiang Mai he resolved to avoid his fellow monks and practice deliberately on his own, without the added burden of responsibility that teaching entails. In the beginning, he wanted to accelerate his drive for the ultimate goal. Later, he found it conducive to living in comfort. All the same, he had to accept certain obligations to teach monks as well as lay people, and it's well known that he had many disciples all over Thailand. In the period before Ācariya Mun went off alone to make his decisive push in the wilds of Chiang Mai, he often mentioned that, spiritually, he still was not strong enough either in his own practice, or in his ability to teach others. So he resolved to go away and practice with the utmost diligence until no doubts of any kind remained in his heart. From that time on, he never mentioned anything about lacking sufficient strength.

### ***Big Brother Elephant***

Once Ācariya Mun was wandering *dhutanga* in the Chiang Mai mountains with two other monks, Ācariya Khao of Wat Tham Klong Phen monastery in Udon Thani province and Ācariya Mahā Thongsak of Wat Suddhawatt monastery in Sakon Nakhon province. As they reached a narrow gap in the path leading up the mountain, they chanced upon a large, solitary elephant whose owner had released it and then wandered off someplace. All they could see there was a gigantic elephant with huge six-foot tusks searching for food \_ quite a fearsome sight. They conferred among themselves about how to proceed. This was the only path up the mountain, and it allowed no room for going around the elephant. Ācariya Mun told Ācariya Khao to speak with the elephant, which was eating bamboo leaves at the side of the path. Standing about twenty yards away with its back to them, it had yet to notice their approach. Ācariya Khao addressed the elephant:

"Big brother elephant, we wish to speak with you."

At first, the elephant didn't clearly hear his voice, but it did stop chewing the bamboo leaves.

"Big brother elephant, we wish to speak with you."

Clearly hearing this, the elephant suddenly swung around to face the monks. It stood stock-still, its ears fully extended.

"Big brother elephant, we wish to speak with you. You are so very big and strong. We're just a group of monks, so weak and so very frightened of you, big brother. We would like to walk past where you're standing. Would big brother please move over a bit so that we have room to pass by? If you keep standing there, it really frightens us, so we don't dare walk past."

As soon as he finished speaking, the elephant immediately turned to the side and thrust its tusks into the middle of a clump of bamboo, signaling its intention to let them pass, unharmed. Seeing it facing the clump of bamboo, Ācariya Mun told the others that they could continue on as it would not bother them now. The two monks invited Ācariya Mun to walk between them, Ācariya Khao walking in front and Ācariya Mahā Thong Sak following behind. They walked past in single file only six feet from the elephant's rear end, without incident. But as they were walking away, the hook on Ācariya Mahā Thong Sak's umbrella got tangled by chance in some bamboo just a few yards past the elephant. It defied all attempts to extricate it, so he was forced to struggle with it for quite some time. Terrified of the elephant which was now looking right at him he was soon drenched in sweat. Fighting desperately to disentangle the hook, he glanced up at the eyes of the elephant, which stood there like a huge stuffed animal. He could see that its eyes were bright and clear. In truth, its countenance inspired affection rather than fear, but at that moment his fear remained strong. When he finally did get free, his fear subsided, and he realized that this elephant was a very endearing animal. Seeing that they were all safely past, Ācariya Khao turned to the elephant.

"Hey, big brother, we've all passed-by now. Please relax and eat in peace."

As soon as he finished speaking, the sound of crunching, breaking bamboo filled the air.

Later the monks praised this intelligent elephant, agreeing it was an animal that inspired affection and sympathy. The only faculty it lacked was the ability to speak. As they were discussing this, Ācariya Mahā Thong Sak was curious to hear Ācariya Mun's reaction, so he asked:

"Were you able to read that elephant's mind the whole time, from the moment we spoke to it until we passed clear of it? Since it was so endearing, I'd really like to know. When it first heard us call out, suddenly turning around to face us in an agitated fashion, I was sure it was about to charge and crush us to pieces right then and there. But as soon as it understood the situation, it had a change of heart almost like a person in an animal's body and quickly thrust its tusks into the middle of that clump of bamboo, standing very still. Clearly it seemed to be telling us: 'You little brothers can come now. Big brother won't do anything. Big brother has put away his weapons. Believe me, come along.' "

Ācariya Mahā Thong Sak then teased Ācariya Khao:

"Ācariya Khao is really amazing, speaking with an animal as though it was just another human being: 'Big brother, your little brothers are frightened and dare not pass. Please make way so that we can go by without fearing big brother.' As soon as it received this bit of flattery, it was so pleased that it immediately prepared to make way for us. But this little brother was really clumsy. I got past big brother only to get my umbrella hook caught up in the bamboo. Try as I might I couldn't get it free. It was determined to keep me there with big brother. My heart sank at that moment I was afraid that big brother wouldn't play fair."

Ācariya Mun laughed heartily hearing Ācariya Mahā Thong Sak teasing Ācariya Khao about being clever enough to talk to an elephant. He assured them that he had been paying attention to the elephant's mental state.

"Of course I was focusing my attention there. I've read the minds of birds and monkeys with far less reason than this. This was a matter of life and death, how could I avoid it?"

Ācariya Mahā Thong Sak wanted to know what the elephant was thinking when Ācariya Mun focused on it.

"When it first heard us, it was startled that's why it turned around so quickly. It thought only of preparing to fight. But seeing us dressed in yellow robes, it knew instinctively that we could be trusted, for it's quite used to seeing monks. Its owner has long since trained it not to

endanger them. So when Ācariya Khao addressed it in a pleasant tone, calling it 'big brother', it was hugely pleased and immediately got out of the way."

"Did it understand every word that Ācariya Khao said to it?"

"Of course it did. Otherwise, how could it be trained to haul logs down from the mountains? If it couldn't understand, it would probably have been disposed of as useless long ago. This kind of animal must be trained until it knows man's language well before it can be made to perform various tasks. This particular elephant is over a hundred years old. Look at its tusks they're almost six feet long. It must have lived among people for a long time. Its owner is relatively young, yet he's still able to drive it to work. How could it not understand human speech? It's certain to have no problem."

"What was it thinking when it turned and stuck its tusks into the clump of bamboo?"

"Well, it understood the situation, as I said, and so was giving way to us. It didn't think of doing anything else."

"Did you focus on its mind the whole time we were walking past it? What was it thinking just as we walked by?"

"All I saw was the elephant giving way. It wasn't thinking about anything else."

"The reason I asked: I was worried that as we were walking past it might have thought it would like to attack us just for sport, as animals sometimes do."

"You have an uncommonly prolific imagination, Mahā Thong Sak. If you enjoyed thinking and asking probing questions like this about matters of substance then you could certainly expect to transcend *dukkha* one day. But you're like most people you insist on wasting your time thinking about inane matters instead of useful ones, and you probably don't care to change. Are you going to keep pondering this matter, asking about that elephant all night without the slightest regard for Dhamma?"

With this warning, Ācariya Mahā Thong Sak dropped the whole affair. He was afraid that pressing the matter further would result in an even more severe rebuke.<sup>13</sup>

Many monks were rebuked for speaking carelessly to Ācariya Mun or speaking without good reason. Some even went mad afterwards. One rather obtrusive monk lived with Ācariya Mun for a short while. When Ācariya Mun made a comment, this monk liked to chime in expressing his own views. When he first arrived, Ācariya Mun frequently warned him to mind his own business. He advised him to keep a close watch on his thoughts and restrain the impulse to speak out. Monks dedicated to the practice must know how to properly conduct themselves. Those who are mindful will see the inadequacies of a mind that wants to flow out. But it seems that this monk was not as interested as he should have been in Ācariya Mun's teaching.

Ācariya Mun had a unique habit of taking the animals, or the people, that he encountered on almsround as objects of contemplation, using them to teach the monks walking behind him. He commented out loud on what he observed, as though speaking to no one in particular. One day, he spied a cute little calf playfully running around its mother. At first it didn't see the monks approaching; but as they came abreast, it looked around startled and raced to its mother's side, nuzzling in under her neck, then peering out to look at the monks with fear in its eyes. Seeing the calf run up to her, the cow quickly turned her head to look in the direction of the monks, then remained impassive, as animals do when they are accustomed to seeing monks daily. But the calf remained under her chin, staring out distrustfully. Observing them, Ācariya Mun commented in a general way about the difference between the reaction of the calf and that of its mother.

"That cow is quite unperturbed, but its calf is so frightened it looks like it wants to pick her up and flee.<sup>14</sup> As soon as it got a glimpse of us, it ran bawling to its mother for help. People are just the same they rush to find a reliable refuge. If they are near their mother, they will run to her. If they are near their father, they will rush to him. People invariably lean on family and friends for support. Rarely do they think about relying on themselves. When we are young, we expect to rely on other people in one way; when we grow up, we expect to rely on them in another way; and when we grow old, we still expect to rely on others in

yet a different way. Very few of us turn inward, looking for support within ourselves. By constantly looking for someone else to lean on, we tend to foster our own weakness and so never allow ourselves to become truly self-reliant.

"We monks are the same as lay people. Having ordained, we become lazy about studying. Worrying that it will be painful and difficult, we become lazy about practicing the way. We never seem to finish what we start, for no sooner do we have a good idea and begin to put it into practice than laziness creeps in, blocking our progress. Lacking the ability to help ourselves, we have to look to others for support. Otherwise, we couldn't carry on in this life. The maxim: *attāhi attano nātho* \_ oneself is one's own refuge is meaningless for us if we cannot breathe through our own noses. *Dhutanga* monks who are dedicated to the practice shouldn't always have to depend on others for life and breath.

"Listen to your teacher, think about what he teaches, and commit yourselves to attaining it. Don't let his teaching just slip through your grasp to no avail. Be persistent. Consider what he says and follow his example until you see the benefits within yourselves. Then you no longer need to lean on him for support. You'll be breathing through your own noses, meaning you will have developed the knowledge and wisdom needed to rid yourselves of *dukkha*. Gradually, you will become more confident, more self-reliant, until finally you become full-fledged, fully-independent monks in your own right."

Ācariya Mun brought up this matter to give the monks an almsround with him something to contemplate. As he paused for a moment, the rather obtrusive monk began to prattle away on his own without considering the impropriety of such an intrusion. Perhaps this monk's idiocy struck a dissonant chord deep within Ācariya Mun, for he turned around and gave him a severe rebuke that took the other monks aback, making them all somewhat apprehensive.

"You must be mad! You're like a rabid dog that pounces and chews furiously on any old piece of wood tossed at it. Why don't you look inside yourself where this madness arises. You'll go crazy if you don't curtail this sort of mindless prattle."

Ācariya Mun then turned around and walked back to the monastery without another word. Arriving at the monastery, the monks noticed something peculiar about the obtrusive monk he seemed stunned, eating very little. Seeing his odd behavior, the monks kept quiet, as if nothing had happened. They were afraid he would feel embarrassed. For the rest of the day life in the monastery continued as normal, each monk applying himself to his meditation. But later, during the night when all was quiet, they heard someone cry out in a deranged, incoherent voice. They immediately rushed over to find the monk lying in his hut, tossing deliriously about, mumbling something about being sorry for offending Ācariya Mun so rudely. Shocked by this sight, some of them hurried off to get the local villagers to help take care of him. They brought some herbal remedies for him to take, then massaged his limbs for a while until he finally calmed down and fell asleep for the rest of the night. The next morning someone took him to a doctor for treatment. His condition soon improved, though he did have occasional relapses. When he was well enough to travel, they sent him home. There was no further news about his condition after that.

Ācariya Mun's reprimands varied with circumstances. A mild scolding was usually sufficient to promote mindfulness in the present and increase vigilance in the future. However, if someone did something that prompted a severe reprimand, but lacked the good judgment to make use of it, then it could well be damaging, as we have seen. So monks living with Ācariya Mun tended to be exceedingly vigilant and always self-controlled. Just because they had lived with him for a long time didn't mean they could expect to get overly familiar with him, for he was the type of person who didn't readily countenance familiarity

in anyone. His students could never afford to be complacent sometimes even the deer that's wary of hunters gets shot.

### *Youthful Exuberance*

Occasionally, when the monks living with him were highly attained individuals, Ācariya Mun conducted himself in a naturally easy-going and relaxed manner, as one would expect among people of equal status who are all well-acquainted. He was not so stern and strict at such times. But his whole demeanor could change dramatically according to the situation. He behaved quite differently in one set of circumstances

than he did in another, treating each individual as a separate case. His disciples were constantly amazed at the quickness and novelty of his responses to the situations that emerged around him.

Ācariya Mun used to tell the monks an amusing story about his youth that illustrates his dynamic character. I shall retell it here for it demonstrates the incredible changes that a person can go through.

Back in the days when Ācariya Mun was still a young layman, he used to compete in local folk singing contests known as *maw lam*.<sup>15</sup> One day he attended a large fair in a neighboring village where thousands of people had gathered. Suddenly, he felt emboldened to get up on stage and sing in competition with a talented young woman who was a renowned folk singer in those parts. Perhaps he thought it would be fun to have a go at her on stage, or perhaps he felt a little bit in love \_ who knows? At any rate, jumping up on stage, he found the young woman quite willing to accept his challenge. By the time they sang through several sets of verses, it became clear that young Mun was losing the contest. As it happened, a savior appeared just in time. Chao Khun Upāli,<sup>16</sup> who was then a young man several years older than young Mun, had come to the same fair and was in the audience at the competition. Obviously his friend was losing badly, and things were getting worse with each new set of verses. Continued much longer, the girl would probably have driven him off the stage in disgrace, for she was a seasoned performer and young Mun was a mere novice. Acting on a bold impulse, Mun had leapt up on the stage only to meet a ferocious tigress, her mouth full of fangs, while he was just a pup sporting a few baby teeth. Jan, as Chao Khun Upāli was called then, anxiously thought that if his friend persisted, she would skin him alive, then sell his hide. He thought to himself: *Mun doesn't know a tiger when he sees one. He just sees a young lady \_ he doesn't realize he's about to be slaughtered. I'll have to do something now to save his hide. If I don't, it'll be on sale in the market for sure.* Having thought this, Jan jumped up on the stage and began shouting:

"Dammit Mun! I've been looking for you all over the place! Your mother fell from the top of the house I'm not sure if she's still alive or not. I saw her lying there in a heap on the ground and tried to help, but she insisted I go look for you. I've been running around all day trying to find you. I haven't eaten a thing and I'm worn out."



Both Mun and the young lady were stunned into silence by this ruse. Mun immediately asked about his mother's condition.

"Jan, how is my mother?"

Jan pretended to be so exhausted he could hardly speak.

"I think she's probably dead by now. I'm about to die myself now from hunger and exhaustion."

With that he grabbed Mun's arm, dragging him from the stage before a crowd of thousands of shocked onlookers, and ran with him as fast as possible. By the time they reached the village outskirts, Mun was desperate to find out more about his mother.

"What was my mother doing on the top of the house to make her fall?"

"I don't really know what caused her to fall. Seeing her lying there on the ground, I rushed to help. But she sent me right off to look for you, so I came straight away. I didn't have a chance to get the full story."

"As far as you could tell, was my mother going to die?"

"We're on our way now to find that out for ourselves."

When they had walked sufficiently far from the village that Jan reckoned Mun wouldn't dare go back alone at such a late hour<sup>17</sup> his whole demeanor abruptly changed as he frankly told Mun that nothing had happened to his mother.

"I put on that act because I couldn't bear to see your old lady mop the floor with you. I was afraid she'd skin your hide and sell it in the market. That would have been humiliating for me, and for our whole village. She was about to emasculate you there just for the fun of it. So I tricked you both into believing this story, at the same time convincing the crowd that you had to flee the scene because of a real emergency \_ not because you'd lost the will to fight. I rushed you away before anyone had a chance to catch on to my ruse. Even that feisty old lady of yours couldn't help being overwhelmed by my ingenious scheme. Did you see how taken in she was? Alarmed by what I said, she watched us leave with heartfelt sympathy for you and your mother. I saved you

from the hell she had in store for you. Now what do you think, wasn't that an ingenious scheme?"

"Oh no! What a shame! Damn you Jan, look what you've done to me! I was having a great time chopping her to pieces! By dragging me away, you spoiled my fun. I never imagined you'd do this to me. I'd like to have another go at her right now. I'd be the one sending her hide to the market!"

"Ha! You were being slaughtered, and I saved your life! And now you're bragging about how good you were. Maybe I should take you back right now so your old lady can put you on the chopping block again."

"Look, seeing she was a woman, I figured I'd go easy on her at first, hoping she'd get overconfident. When I had her where I wanted her, I planned to tie her up, throw her in a sack, and sell her to the highest bidder. You failed to understand my strategy I was baiting her, like a tiger luring a monkey."

"If you're so smart then how come you fell for my little sham to pull you away from her devilish clutches. You were so shocked you almost started crying shamelessly right in front of your lady friend. Who'd have ever considered you capable of bagging the old girl? It was obvious \_ she was about to tie you up and throw you off the stage in full view of thousands of people. Stop bragging so much Mun! You should appreciate my brotherly efforts to save you from defeat at the hands of that woman."

That night Mun and Jan both ended up missing the fair they had so looked forward to attending.

Although they were still in lay life at the time, such stories about these two sages matching wits were fascinating to hear. Despite the worldly nature of the conversation, it demonstrates how clever people converse \_ each new retort captures the imagination. When Ācariya Mun related stories about the two of them, we became so absorbed listening that we could almost visualize them as they spoke. There are lots of stories about these two men matching wits, but a few examples should be enough to give the reader an idea of what I mean. The clever ploys they used as young men gave an early indication of their intelligence.

Eventually entering the monkhood, both became great sages. Chao Khun Upāli Guōyāpamācariya and Ācariya Mun Bhýridatta Thera are renowned throughout Thailand as present-day sages of the highest caliber.

I have used the diminutives Jan and Mun because that's how Ācariya Mun himself told the story to his students during relaxed moments when there was a break in the usual tense, guarded atmosphere the monks felt when they were around him. I sincerely apologize to both of these esteemed venerables, and to the readers as well, if anything I've written is deemed inappropriate. Had I written the story in a more formal style, the meaning would not have come across so effectively. Such familiarity implies a mutual respect among peers and is commonly used between close friends of all ages. Moreover, I find it convenient to write the story the way I originally heard it. It allows us a glimpse of these two renowned elders as high-spirited youths having a good time, which we can then compare with our usual image of them as absolutely amazing monks who completely renounced the world.

Although Ācariya Mun preferred to keep to the present, rarely speaking about the past, he liked to sing the praises of Chao Khun Upāli's cleverness from time to time. On one occasion, when they were discussing the story of Lord Vessantara,<sup>18</sup> he asked Chao Khun Upāli about the mother of Lady Madrī, a character in the story. He hadn't seen her name mentioned in the scriptures, and thought perhaps he had missed it. Chao Khun Upāli's response was immediate:

"What, you've never seen or heard of Madrī's mother? Everyone in town knows about her. Where've you been looking that you haven't come across her yet?"

Admitting that he hadn't come across her name in the scriptures, Ācariya Mun wondered where it was mentioned.

"Scriptures? What scriptures? What about that loudmouth Mrs. Op who lives in the big house at the crossroads on the way to the monastery?"

Ācariya Mun was puzzled. He couldn't recall any mention of a monastery in the story. Which crossroads and what monastery was he referring to.

"You know, Madrī's mother whose house is right next to yours. How could you not know Madrī and her mother? How pitiful Madrī and her mother live in your own home village and you don't even recognize them. Instead, you go searching in the scriptures. I feel embarrassed for you."

The moment Chao Khun Upāli said that Madrī and her mother lived in his home village, Ācariya Mun caught on and was able to recollect them. Prior to that he was puzzled, for he kept thinking of the *Vessantara Jātaka* story. He said that Chao Khun Upāli was very clever at skillfully matching wits, using wordplay and riposte in unexpected ways to keep his listeners off balance, thus making them use their intelligence. Ācariya Mun used to laugh when he told us about falling victim to Chao Khun Upāli's little artifice.

Ācariya Mun spent one rains retreat near the village of Ban Nam Mao in the Mae Pang district of Chiang Mai province. Sakka, the heavenly *devarāja*, frequently came to visit, bringing a large retinue with him. Even in the dry season, when he went off into the mountains alone and stayed in Dok Kham Cave, Sakka brought his followers to visit him there. Usually numbering well over one hundred thousand on those occasions, they came more often and in larger numbers than other groups of *devas*. If some in his retinue had never come before, Sakka first explained to them the proper way to listen to Dhamma. Ācariya Mun usually took *mettā appamaññā brahmavihāra*<sup>19</sup> as the theme of his discourse because these *devas* were especially fond of that subject.

Being very isolated, tranquil places, Ban Nam Mao and Dok Khan Cave brought more groups of *devas* from many different realms to visit Ācariya Mun than did any of his other locations. These beings showed great respect for Ācariya Mun, and for the place where he lived. Upon entering the area, they were always careful to bypass his walking meditation path which the villagers had smoothed out with sand: it was sacrosanct. *Nāgas*, too, avoided passage across the path when arriving for a visit. On occasions when their leader had to pass through that area, he always circled around the head of the meditation path. Sometimes the *nāgas* sent a messenger to invite Ācariya Mun to attend a function, much as humans do when they invite monks to local functions. The messengers always avoided crossing his meditation path. Occasionally, when they were unable to avoid crossing over some of the sand that the

villagers had scattered around that area, they would first sweep the sand away with their hands, and then crawl across. Standing up again, they walked to Ācariya Mun's residence. Their behavior was always wonderfully composed.

Ācariya Mun believed that if human beings, the custodians of the *sāsana*, have a true interest in Dhamma and a deeply-rooted feeling of genuine self-respect, they should exhibit the same reverential behavior toward the *sāsana* as *devas* and *nāgas* do. Although we're unable to see for ourselves how those beings show their respect, the teachings of Buddhism address all such matters in full. Unfortunately, we humans are not as interested in them as we should be. We seem more intent on creating a stifling, negligent attitude within ourselves, thus failing to experience the kind of happiness we could otherwise expect. In truth, the *sāsana* is the wellspring of all virtuous conduct, which assures happiness to those adhering to the venerable principles of Buddhism.

Ācariya Mun continually emphasized that the heart is the most important thing in the world. A heart that is vulgar ends up vulgarizing everything with which it comes into contact. Much like a filthy body, it soils whatever it touches \_ no matter how nice and clean it may initially be \_ making it filthy too in the end. So Dhamma cannot escape being tainted by a vulgar heart. Even though Dhamma itself is perfectly pure, it becomes tarnished as soon as it's embraced by someone with a corrupt heart like a clean cloth being rubbed in the dirt. For example, when a wicked person tries to impress others with his knowledge of the Buddhist scriptures nothing good ever comes of it. Vulgar people who are stubborn and unyielding about religious matters are just the same; and no matter how extraordinary Buddhism is, they are unable to derive any of its benefits. They merely proclaim themselves to be Buddhists but they never understand the real significance of Buddhism and how it applies to them personally.

The actual truth about the *sāsana* is this: we ourselves are the *sāsana*. No matter how good or bad our actions are, whatever subsequent degree of happiness or suffering we experience all directly affect the *sāsana*. The word "*sāsana*" means the correct way of living as practiced by each individual. If we think the *sāsana* exists outside of ourselves, then our understanding is wrong, and so our practice too is bound to be wrong. Anything which is wrong is more or less useless. It can be made

useful only at the expense of the righteousness, dignity, and integrity of each individual. Put simply and clearly: if we are wrong in our hearts, then whatever we do turns out wrong. For instance, calculations don't add up; clothes don't fit properly; traffic regulations are ignored; married couples deviate from accepted norms, failing to honor their vows; parents and children are at logger-heads; wealth is ill-gotten, its distribution inequitable; the authorities flout the laws of the land which are designed to keep peace; rulers and their constituents cannot seem to work together for the common good according to the law, and so become distrustful, behaving like enemies.

Regardless of how we experience the harmful consequences, the disappointment and misfortune that result from wrong actions will inevitably arise right where they are committed in the heart. The cause being wrong, the effect is bound to be harmful. When we wrong someone, the harmful consequences from that action are unavoidable, even in cases where we are unaware of having wronged that person. The wrongdoer must necessarily receive the full results of his actions. It's no use thinking that we can somehow avoid the unpleasant consequences whatever they are, they will definitely manifest themselves someday. By remaining indifferent or negligent about wrongdoing, we face the clear prospect of personal misfortune here and now in this lifetime. Looking any further ahead than this would merely amount to grasping at shadows and missing the real issue. The *sāsana* is not a shadowy specter, deluding people into ignorance. It's a path that unerringly reveals the Truth in all its many aspects. Followers of the *sāsana*, who deviate from the path and then unfairly accuse it of having failed them, are inextricably compounding their own miserable predicament. The *sāsana*, as always, remains pure and unperturbed.

Ācariya Mun always stressed that people who accept the Truth, embodied in Buddhist principles, receive the blessings of Dhamma. Being cool and calm themselves, all their relationships tend to be the same as well. The world they live in is a peaceful place where they are unlikely to suffer the kind of contentious bickering that causes acrimony and engulfs both parties in heated recriminations. The reason people never experience the happiness they long for is that they allow a fiery, inflamed mentality to dictate their attitude in everything from business dealings to workplace, from legal proceedings to marketplace. Wherever they go, whatever they do they are as hot as fire, so they find

it hard to maintain a balance in their lives. Such people never seem to consider dousing the bonfire they constantly carry in their hearts so as to gain enough breathing room to relax, balance them-selves, and find some measure of happiness.

Ācariya Mun said that during his whole life as a Buddhist monk he enjoyed investigating the Dhamma taught by the Lord Buddha, whose incomparable breadth and depth are infinitely greater than those of the vast oceans. In all truth, the *sāsana* is so inconceivably profound and subtle that it's virtually impossible to investigate every aspect of it; and the results attained from each successive stage of the practice are so amazing that they defy description. He insisted that only his concern that others would think him crazy kept him from continuously prostrating himself to the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha. He would consider it his occupation otherwise, performing it easily and joyfully without ever experiencing fatigue or boredom. He was absolutely certain that, whatever happened, he would always be inseparable from the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha *akāliko*. In stark contrast, the world of *anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anattā* constantly smothers the hearts of living beings, leaving them forever distressed and resentful.

### *The Mysterious Effects of Kamma*

Once while he was meditating, deep in the Chiang Mai mountains, Ācariya Mun saw a vision of a woman and a small novice walking back and forth through the area, nearly every night in the late hours. Becoming suspicious after a while, he asked why they were there. They told him that they were worried about the fate of an unfinished *stupa*<sup>20</sup> which they were building together when they died. The small novice was the woman's younger brother, and they had worked together to construct the *stupa*. Their concern about the *stupa* and their regrets at having died before its completion made them feel a strong, persistent obligation to it. Although reborn into a state of anxiety, they were not as tormented by it as might be expected. Still, they could not feel decisive about being reborn into another realm of existence.

So Ācariya Mun advised them: "You should not be concerned about things that have already come and gone, for they are truly irredeemable. No matter how convinced you may be that you can turn back the clock it's just not possible. Anyone supposing they can will experience

nothing but frustration when their hopes fail to materialize. The future, having yet to come, shouldn't be clung to either. What has already happened should be let go of as being past. What has yet to arrive should be let go of as its time is not yet ripe. Only in the present is it possible to accomplish something meaningful.

"If your dream of building that *stupa* were meant to come true, then you would have had a chance to finish it first instead of dying unexpectedly. Now you are trying to deny death. Not only that, you still long to complete the *stupa* even though it is now wholly impossible. So, now you have erred twice in your thinking. If you continue on hoping to fulfill this wish, you will compound your mistake yet a third time. Not only is your thinking affected by this, but your future state of birth and your well-being in that state will also be adversely affected. Such an unreasonable aspiration should not be allowed to continue.

"In building a *stupa*, we hope to acquire merit and goodness not bricks and mortar. The value you obtain from building a *stupa* is the merit that you gain from this action \_ merit which results from your efforts and which rightly belongs to you. You shouldn't worry about gross material things like bricks and mortar that can never fulfill your desires anyway. People everywhere who gain merit by doing good deeds take with them only the merit they've thus acquired, not the material things they gave away as donations. For example, contributing to the construction of a monastery, a monk's residence, an assembly hall, a road, a water tank, a public building, or any other offering of material goods, are simply the outward manifestations of the good intentions of those wishing to be generous. They are not the actual rewards of generosity, meaning that material offerings themselves are not merit or goodness or heaven or Nibbāna, nor are they the recipient of such rewards. For, over time, all material things disintegrate and fall apart.

"The spiritual qualities that are gained from the effort and the generosity required to do charitable works are experienced internally as merit and goodness. The inspiration behind the good intentions to make such donations is the heart of each individual donor. *The heart itself is virtuous. The heart itself is meritorious. It is the heart that exists as heaven or magga, phala and Nibbāna, and the heart that achieves these attainments. Nothing else could possibly achieve them.*



"The unfinished *stupa* that you two were building lacked the conscious capacity to have good intentions for its own spiritual improvement. Your concern for it stems from a covetous mentality that is a hindrance to you even though it is directed at holding on to something good. Clinging to it is not in your best interest. Your procrastination here is retarding your progress to a favorable rebirth. Instead of trying to take the whole thing with you, had you two been satisfied with the merit you made from working on that *stupa*, you would both have comfortably gone on to a favorable existence long ago for merit is the mainstay of a good rebirth. And merit is never transformed into something bad. It remains virtuous forever *akālika*.

"It's a mistake to be unduly concerned for things past. There is no way you can possibly finish that *stupa* now, so you shouldn't set your hearts on such a hopeless endeavor. The power of the merit you have made impacts you here in the present. So, don't waste your time thinking about the past or the future when now you should be reaping the good results of what you've already done. Correct your thinking and soon you will be able to pass on, free of anxiety. Turn your attention to the present. It contains all the virtues necessary for *magga*, *phala*, and Nibbāna. The past and the future are impediments you must overcome without wasting any more time.

"I feel really sorry for you two. You've done some very meritorious work for the sake of a happy future, only to get so bogged down in your attachment to mere bricks and mortar that you can't freely move on. If you both make the effort to cut these attachments from your hearts, before long you will be free of all binding ties. The strength of your accumulated merit is ready and waiting to take you to the rebirth of your choice."

Ācariya Mun then explained to them the essential meaning of the five moral precepts, a code of conduct applying equally to all living beings.

§ First: Every living being values its own life, so no one should destroy that intrinsic value by taking someone else's life. This results in very bad *kamma*.

§ Second: All beings cherish their own possessions. Even if they don't appear to have much value, the owner values them nonetheless.

Regardless of its worth, nothing belonging to another person should be debased by theft or robbery. For such actions debase not only their possessions, but their hearts as well. Stealing is a terrible act so never steal.

§ Third: Husbands and wives, children and grandchildren, all love each other dearly. They do not want to see anyone taking liberties with their loved ones. Their personal rights should be respected and their private space should be off limits to others. Spousal infringement is extremely damaging to people's hearts, and as such is an act of incalculable evil.

§ Fourth: Lies and prevarication destroy other people's trust, causing them to lose all respect. Even animals abhor deceit, so one should never hurt others by using false, deceitful language.

§ Fifth: Alcohol is by its very nature intoxicating and immensely harmful. Drinking it can cause a perfectly normal person to go crazy and steadily waste away. Anyone wishing to remain a normal, sane human being should refrain from drinking any form of liquor because it damages physical and mental health, eventually destroying people and everyone else around them.

Each of these five moral precepts has its own special benefits. By maintaining the first one, we can expect to enjoy good health and longevity. By the second, our wealth and property will be safe from criminal attack or other misfortune. By the third, family members will keep faith with each other, and live contentedly without unwanted interference. With the fourth, we will be trusted because of our integrity. When our speech is charming and pleasant, humans and *devas* alike will respect and cherish us. Honest people pose no threat to themselves or anyone else. And by maintaining the fifth precept, we will be clever, intelligent people who are not easily misguided nor readily thrown into confusion.

People who maintain moral virtue tend to reassure living beings everywhere by promoting a sense of satisfaction and mutual trust. Immoral people, on the other hand, cause untold suffering by harming people and animals all over the world. Those who value their own existence should understand that all people value themselves similarly, and should, therefore, refrain from harming others in any manner. Due

to the supportive, protective power of moral virtue, honest, virtuous people can expect to be reborn into an elevated, heavenly existence. Thus it is vital to maintain high moral standards the result will surely be a heavenly destination in the next life. Remember this Dhamma teaching, practice it diligently, and your future prosperity is assured.

By the time Ācariya Mun finished advising the small novice and his sister, both were delighted by his teaching and requested the five moral precepts from him, which he gave them. Having received the moral precepts, they respectfully took leave of Ācariya Mun, and immediately vanished. The power of their accumulated merit and the goodness they cultivated from attending to his discourse and taking the five precepts, led the two to be quickly reborn in the *Tāvatiyāsa* heavenly realm.

They then regularly visited Ācariya Mun to hear his teaching. On their first visit they thanked him for his kind assistance in illuminating the way out of the vicious cycle they were in, allowing them to finally enjoy the pleasure of the heavenly existence they had anticipated for so long. They told him that they now realized the great danger that attachments pose to the heart, and the delay they can cause in moving on to a favorable birth. Having received his compassionate advice, they were able to transcend all their concerns and be reborn in a heavenly realm.

Ācariya Mun explained the nature of emotional attachments to them, pointing out that they are a hindrance in many different ways. The wise always teach us that at the moment of death we should be careful not to have emotional attachments to anything whatsoever. The danger is that we may recall, then, an infatuation of some kind, or even worse, angry, revengeful thoughts about a particular person. The moment when the *citta* is about to leave the physical body is crucial. If at that moment the *citta* latches on to a pernicious thought, it may get burned and end up being reborn into a realm of misery, such as one of the hells, or a world of demons, ghosts, or animals all miserable, unfavorable existences.

So when we're in a good position to train the *citta* when we are in human birth and fully cognizant of ourselves we must take decisive advantage of it. As human beings, we can realize our short-comings and quickly act to correct them, so that, later, when our backs are against the wall at the time of death we will be fully prepared to fend for

ourselves. We need not be worried about falling prey to the destructive forces of evil. The more we train ourselves to sever all emotional attachments, both good and bad, the better our position will be.

The wise know that the heart is the most important thing in the whole universe, for material and spiritual welfare are dependent upon the heart. So, they make a point of training their hearts in the correct way and then teach others to do the same. We live by means of the heart, and experience contentment and dissatisfaction by means of the heart. When we die, we depart by means of the heart. We are then born again according to our *kamma* with the heart as the sole cause. As it is the sole source of everything that befalls us, we should train our hearts in the right way so that we can conduct ourselves properly now and in the future.

When Ācariya Mun finished speaking the newly reborn *devas* were overjoyed by his teaching. Praising it highly, they said they had never heard anything quite like it before. Upon their departure, they circumambulated him three times, then withdrew to the edge of his living area before floating up into the air like wisps of cotton borne by the wind.

Once, while living in a deep mountainous region of Chiang Mai, far from the nearest village, Ācariya Mun saw an extraordinary *nimitta* arise in his meditation. The hour was three a. m., a time when the body elements are especially subtle. He had just awoken from sleep and was sitting in meditation when he noticed that his *citta* wanted to rest in complete tranquility. So, he entered into a deep state of *samādhi* where he remained for about two hours. Then, his *citta* began withdrawing gradually from that state and paused at the level of *upacāra samādhi* instead of returning to normal, waking consciousness. Immediately, he became aware of certain events.

A huge elephant appeared. Walking up to Ācariya Mun, it knelt before him, indicating that it wanted him to mount. Ācariya Mun promptly climbed up onto its back and sat straddling its neck. Once he was settled on the elephant, he noticed two young monks following behind him, both riding on elephants. Their elephants were also very large, though slightly smaller than the one he was riding. The three elephants appeared very handsome and majestic, like royal elephants that possess

human-like intelligence and know their master's wishes. When the two elephants reached him, he led them toward a mountain range that was visible directly ahead, about half a mile away.

Ācariya Mun felt the whole scene to be exceptionally majestic, as though he were escorting the two young monks away from the world of conventional reality forever. Upon reaching the mountain range, his elephant led them all to the entrance of a cave that was situated on a hill a short distance up the mountainside. As soon as they arrived, it turned around, placing its rear to the entrance. With Ācariya Mun still straddling its neck, it backed into the cave until its rear was touching the back wall. The other two elephants with the two young monks astride walked forward into the cave and each took a place on either side of Ācariya Mun's elephant, facing inward as he faced outward. Ācariya Mun then spoke to the two monks as if he were giving them his final, parting instructions.

"I have reached my final hour of birth in a human body. Having been completely cut off, perpetual existence in the conventional world will soon cease altogether for me. Never again shall I return to the world of birth and death. I want you both to return and fully develop yourselves first; then, before long, you will follow in my footsteps, departing this world in the same manner as I am preparing to do now. Escaping from the world, with its multitude of lingering attachments and all of its debilitating pain and suffering, is an extremely difficult task that demands unwavering commitment. You must exert yourselves and pour every ounce of energy into the struggle for this righteous cause including crossing the very threshold of death before you can expect to attain freedom from danger and anxiety. Once freed, you will never again have to deplore death and grasp at birth in the future.

"Having completely transcended every residual attachment, I shall depart this world unperturbed, much like a prisoner released from prison. I have absolutely no lingering regrets about losing this physical body unlike most people whose desperate clinging causes them immense suffering at the time of death. So you should not mourn my passing in any way, for nothing good will come of it. Such grief merely promotes the *kilesas*, so the wise have never encouraged it."

When he finished speaking, Ācariya Mun told the two young monks to back their elephants out of the cave. Both elephants had been standing perfectly still, one on either side, as though they too were listening to Ācariya Mun's parting words and mourning his imminent departure. At that moment, all three elephants resembled real, living animals, rather than mere psychic images. At his command, the two elephants, carrying the young monks, slowly backed out of the cave, facing Ācariya Mun with an imperiously calm demeanor all the while. Then, as Ācariya Mun sat astride its neck, the hindquarters of Ācariya Mun's elephant began to bore its way into the cave wall. When half of the elephant's body had penetrated the wall of the cave, Ācariya Mun's *citta* began to withdraw from *samādhi*. The *nimitta* ended at that point.

Having never experienced such an unusual *nimitta* before, Ācariya Mun analyzed it and understood its meaning as being twofold. Firstly, when he died, two young monks would attain Dhamma after him, though he didn't specify who they were. Secondly, *samatha* and *vipassanā* are valuable assets for an Arahant to have from the time of his initial attainment until the time he passes away. During this whole period, he must rely on *samatha* and *vipassanā* to be his 'Dhamma abodes',<sup>21</sup> easing the discomfort that is experienced between the *citta* and the five *khandhas*, which remain interdependent until that moment popularly known as 'death' – when the mundane *khandhas* and the transcendent *citta*<sup>22</sup> go their separate ways. At death, *samatha* and *vipassanā* cease to function, disappearing like all other mundane phenomena. Following that, nothing further can be said.

Most people would have been terrified to see the elephant they were riding bore its rear end into the wall of a cave. But in the event, Ācariya Mun felt unperturbed he simply allowed the elephant to complete its appointed task. At the same time, it was heartening for him to know that two young monks would realize Dhamma around the time of his death, either just before or soon after. He said it was very strange that, in his parting instructions to them, he spoke about his own impending death as though his time had already come.

Unfortunately, Ācariya Mun never revealed the names of those two monks. Hearing this story from him, I was so eager to find out their names that I completely neglected to consider my own shortcomings. I kept trying to imagine which of my fellow monks they might be. I've

kept an eye on this matter ever since Ācariya Mun passed away. But even as I write his biography I still don't have a clue who these auspicious monks might be. The more I think about it, the more I see the folly of jumping to conclusions.<sup>23</sup>

No one has admitted to being one of those monks which is understandable. Who would publicize their attainments like that? Such achievements are not rotten fish to be peddled about merely to attract a swarm of flies. Anyone attaining that level of Dhamma must possess a very high degree of intelligence and propriety. Would he then be so stupid as to broadcast his achievements so that fools could laugh at him while the wise deplore it? Only the gullible would get excited about such news like those in the story of the panic-stricken rabbit who, hearing a loud thud, imagined the sky was caving in.<sup>24</sup>

My own foolishness about this matter has eventually subsided, so I have written it down for your consideration. I deserve blame for any impropriety here, for such stories are usually shared only between a teacher and his inner circle of disciples so that no one is adversely affected. I know I deserve the criticism, and I hope, as always, that you will be kind enough to forgive me.

### ***Hungry Ghosts***

Giving helpful advice to nonphysical beings from many diverse realms of existence was a serious responsibility that Ācariya Mun continued to fulfill right up to the time of his death. He was in constant communication with such beings wherever he lived, but more so in the mountain regions. There, in remote wilderness areas, far from human habitation, one group or another visited with him almost every night. Even hungry ghosts, awaiting offerings of merit dedicated to them by their living relatives, came to seek his assistance. It was impossible to tell how long they had been dead, what family or nationality they had once belonged to, or even whether or not those ghosts had any living relatives left at all. In contacting Ācariya Mun they hoped that, out of compassion, he would assist them by finding their living relatives and telling them to make donations, dedicating a portion of the merit to the dead to help lessen their torment and suffering and make their lives more bearable. Many of them had already suffered unspeakable miseries in hell for such a long time that it was impossible to calculate

the length of their stay in terms of human existence. When they were finally able to rise clear of the hell realms, they still could not evade such misfortune sufficiently to experience some measure of comfort; instead, their suffering continued unabated. For beings who are stuck with the consequences of their evil *kamma*, it matters little which state of existence they are born into, since very little changes to help alleviate their suffering.

Hungry ghosts used to tell Ācariya Mun they had no idea how long it would take them to work their way through the consequences of their evil deeds. They clung to one desperate hope: if he could kindly inform living relatives of their plight, those relatives might be willing to share the merit of their good deeds with them, allowing them to escape from such unbearable torment. When he questioned the hungry ghosts about their relatives, they talked about another world altogether, one that was incomprehensible to him. Having died and been reborn in one of the realms of hell, some had remained there for tens or even hundreds of thousands of years in nonphysical existence before being released into another lesser state where they had to work through the remainder of their evil *kamma*. Their ghostlike existence then lasted another five hundred to a thousand nonphysical years, so it was quite impossible to trace their family lineage. Such was the cruel irony of their karmic dilemma: by the time that the most severe consequences of their *kamma* were exhausted and only the lesser aspects remained a state where they could finally receive assistance from their relatives they had lost all track of their families. So they had no choice but to suffer that karmic misery indefinitely, without any idea when it would end. Such ghosts resembled stray animals who have no owners to care for them.

Other hungry ghosts could be helped somewhat, for they died only recently and their *kamma* was not so severe meaning that they were in a position to receive merit dedicated to them by their relatives. Since they had living relatives whose names and addresses they could recall, Ācariya Mun was able to give them some assistance as long as their families lived in the vicinity where he was residing. Once he knew who they were, he looked for an opportunity to speak with them. He advised them to dedicate to their dead relatives, who awaited, the merit they made by performing special religious functions or more commonly, by daily offerings of food to the monks. Some ghosts are able to receive a portion of the merit made by generous people everywhere even though



it is not specifically dedicated to them. Therefore, Ācariya Mun always made such dedications while extending loving kindness to all living beings. According to the specific nature of their *kamma*, some ghosts can receive merit dedicated by anyone, while others can receive only the merit that is personally dedicated to them by their relatives.

Ācariya Mun said that ghosts live a very peculiar type of existence. From his extensive experience with them, he always found ghosts far more bothersome than any other class of nonphysical beings. Having no recourse to merit of their own, ghosts depend on and always feel indebted to others for their survival. Should these others fail them, the ghosts are left completely destitute. Their dependence on others puts them in the extremely difficult position of never being able to stand on their own.

Generosity and other forms of merit-making are vitally important as the key elements for laying a foundation of individual self-reliance in this and in all future lives. All living beings are the product of their *kamma*. They themselves must take full responsibility for the consequences they encounter. No one else can accept that responsibility because no one can experience the *kamma* generated by another. Births, both good and bad, and the relative degrees of comfort and pain one experiences therein, are the sole responsibility of the individual who created the circumstances that produced these outcomes. No being can substitute for another in this regard. Even those who expect no benefit from their actions still receive the karmic credit for them.

Ācariya Mun was an expert in matters concerning ghosts, *devas*, *brahmas*, *yakkhas*, *nāgas*, and *garuḍas*. Although he did not always reveal the extent of his knowledge, he had the ability to explore endless varieties of phenomena within the many gross and refined nonphysical states of existence that lie beyond the range of human perception. His stories about ghosts were quite hair-raising even those without fear of ghosts couldn't help but feel trepidation about the mysterious powers of *kamma*. He said that if only people could see their own and other people's good and bad *kamma* in the way they see substantive things, like water and fire, no one would dare do evil anymore than they would dare walk into a blazing fire. Instead, they would be eager to do only good \_ which has the cool, refreshing quality of water. Trouble would

gradually diminish in the world as each person worked to guard himself against the dangers of evil.

Once when Ñācariya Mun was explaining about heaven, hell, and the ghost realms to the monks, one of his senior disciples spoke up: "Since people cannot actually see heaven and hell or the various nonphysical beings like ghosts, *devas*, *garuḍas*, and *nāgas*, they can't fully understand the ultimate consequences of their actions. But you can see all those things, so wouldn't it be a good idea for you to elucidate them for the benefit of people everywhere? All are natural phenomena which were clearly understood by the Lord Buddha and his Arahant disciples. No one has ever faulted the Buddha and his disciples for teaching people about them, so I don't see why anyone should object to your doing so. People are likely to show the same appreciation for your amazing talents as we, your disciples, do."

Ñācariya Mun was adamant in his response:

"The kind of craziness that you suggest will destroy us both. I have never considered speaking out publicly about this matter. Should I do so, you and I and the rest of the monks sitting here would end up being a bunch of lunatics. And once the whole monastery has gone mad, what kind of monastic asylum do you think would accept us all? The *sāsana* was proclaimed and taught with discretion to be practiced, understood, and spoken about with discretion. This nonsense you suggest is it really a matter of discretion, or is it something foolhardy? Think about it. In my opinion, the very thought of it is crazy, let alone actually suggesting it. Even though people might survive listening to us talk about it, we ourselves would surely be doomed. So why bring it up?

"If you consider the tangible, visible things all around us, people everywhere are quite capable of dealing with them in an appropriate, reasonable manner. Although Dhamma is the Supreme Truth, it still counts on the involvement of people in the world, so we should always work to harmonize the proprieties of society with the Truth of Dhamma. The Buddha was the first to clearly know and understand the true nature of all phenomena. He spoke about them with absolute assurance, but he was always impeccably discreet in the way he handled these issues. Speaking publicly about any of them, he invariably took the specific circumstances and the people he was

addressing into consideration. He spoke then only with the utmost discernment and discretion.

"Knowledge and understanding about the diverse nature of nonphysical phenomena is a prerogative of the one who has attained that kind of perception. But talking away indiscriminately about such knowledge is quite abnormal, so normal people are reluctant to listen. This is not intended to be a criticism of anyone. Rather, what's important to keep in mind here is that those who do possess such knowledge should act properly according to the principles of Dhamma for their own benefit and for the benefit of everyone associating with them. Being convinced of the amazing nature of what we have perceived is not sufficient reason to speak out about things which may encourage others to go mad. Those people, who are keen on listening to such talk simply because their religious conviction is dependent on hearing about amazing phenomena, are already on the road to madness. So I don't approve of conviction and amazement of this kind. I'd prefer that the kind of discernment the Lord Buddha taught us be used by people in their convictions, and in their sense of amazement. Even though we aren't all exceptionally wise, at least there's hope that enough good judgment will be shown to maintain the *sāsana*, preserving it for the future.

"Let me ask you this: Suppose you had a certain amount of money which could be useful to you if you were clever, but harmful to you if you weren't. How would you handle it when going into a crowd of people to insure that both you and your money were safe?"

The senior disciple replied: "I'd take every reasonable precaution to look after my money."

"How exactly would you go about looking after it in a large crowd of people to avoid any possible danger?"

"If I felt it was appropriate to spend some of my money there, I'd take care to count out and hand over the necessary amount without allowing anyone to see the larger amount that I still had with me. That amount I'd keep well hidden from view to avoid any possible danger."

Acariya Mun then said: "Okay now, let's suppose that you possess a certain knowledge and understanding about ghosts and other

nonphysical beings. How would you handle that knowledge discreetly in relation to others so that it would be of some benefit to them without becoming an issue of widespread, public notoriety, which could be harmful to both you and the *sāsana*?"

"I'd have to use the same kind of care in handling such knowledge that I'd use in handling my money."

"Just a moment ago, you implied that I should broadcast my knowledge about such phenomena to the general public without ever considering the consequences. Why was that? I figure that the average discriminating person would never suggest what you just did, and yet you spoke right up. If you don't even have the common sense of the average person, what will anyone find to admire in you? I fail to see anything at all admirable in your thinking. Should someone reproach you for lacking judgment, how would you defend yourself when confronted with the truth of this accusation? Think about it: Which are the greater in this world, the wise or the foolish? And how would anyone be able to reasonably maintain the *sāsana* and preserve its continued welfare by following the suggestion you made to me just now?"

His disciple replied: "Thinking about it now, I feel that what I suggested was totally wrong. I spoke up because hearing about such amazing things has so inspired me that I wanted to share this knowledge with people everywhere. I assumed they would probably be inspired as well and so benefit enormously from it. But I never considered the obvious adverse consequences that such a disclosure would have for the whole *sāsana*. Please be kind enough to forgive me \_ I don't want to see this tendency to be indiscreet become ingrained in my character. I shall try to be more circumspect in the future so that it doesn't happen again.

"If someone reproaches me for lacking judgment, I will gladly admit my mistake for I clearly deserve the criticism. Until you asked me just now, I had never really considered whether or not the fools outnumber the wise. Now I realize that there must be many more fools in this world, since in our village communities there are very few wise people who care about moral issues. Mostly, people don't seem to know what they're here for and where they are going. They aren't very interested in thinking about why they do things and whether they do right or wrong,

good or bad. Being satisfied with whatever is easy and convenient at the moment, they simply let fate decide their future. I understand all this a lot better now. Those people who are capable of reasonably maintaining the *sāsana* and preserving its continued welfare must be wise and discerning people who lead others in an even, harmonious manner so that everyone can benefit from their example. A wise, discerning teacher is the cornerstone of success in the same way that a capable leader is essential to all affairs in all walks of life."

Ācariya Mun took up the discussion at this point:

"Since you're capable of understanding that a wise person is essential to the success of every endeavor, why don't you think about what's important in your own endeavors as a practicing monk? Spiritual endeavors, being very subtle, are difficult to fully understand. For this reason, only clever, discerning people can uphold the *sāsana* to perfection. Here I'm not referring to the kind of cleverness that causes destruction in the world and damage to the *sāsana*, but cleverness that discriminates wisely, making decisions favorable to one's material and spiritual prosperity. It's this type of cleverness that's implicit in the first two factors of the Noble Eightfold Path: *Sammā-diāāhi* and *Sammā-sankappo* \_ Right View and Right Thought. And these factors are personified by someone whose words and actions always follow the principles of wisdom.

"Even Right *Samādhi* is dependent on the analytical, probing wisdom of Right View to avoid becoming 'comatose *samādhi*'. When the *citta* converges into a state of calm, wisdom should always be there, playing a supportive role. Otherwise, how could those dedicated to understanding the true nature of all phenomena deal correctly with the knowledge arising within the *citta*, or the external phenomena with which it comes into contact? If wisdom is not there to help, one is bound to make mistakes in judgment.

"The diversity of internal and external phenomena that can become involved with *samādhi* is limitless, the perception of them being limited only by each individual's natural inclinations. Those so inclined will naturally perceive such phenomena and nothing can prevent them from doing so. But the key factor here is wisdom. Wisdom analyzes arising phenomena and then chooses the ones that are suitable to focus on, so

that the rest can be allowed to pass by without causing trouble. Those lacking wisdom will even have a hard time successfully getting through the *samādhi* practice: they will find themselves being pleased with this perception or displeased with that one, ecstatic about this, despondent about that \_ all are emotional reactions impinging on the heart, causing it to become attached. Unless wisdom is present to effectively deal with them, such disturbing emotional attachments can never be eliminated. Wisdom can be selective, ignoring what is superfluous to focus on what is essential thus indicating the direction in which one's practice should proceed.

"Our purpose in being ordained as Buddhist monks is to search for knowledge and wisdom so that we can develop those virtuous qualities admired by people everywhere. We aren't here to parade our ineptitude in front of the *kilesas* by succumbing to their devious tricks, but rather to develop clever tactics of our own to outmaneuver the *kilesas*, thus countering their tricks. Living without an adequate means of protection, we leave ourselves in a very precarious position. The principles of Dhamma and the monastic discipline are a monk's protective armor, while mindfulness and wisdom are his preferred weapons. If we want to remain steady in our practice and be constant in all situations, we must maintain mindfulness and wisdom in all our daily activities. Mindfulness and wisdom must permeate all that we think, say, or do \_ without exception. Only then can we be certain of our mode of practice.

"I'd really like to see all my students display uncompromising diligence in their efforts to transcend *dukkha*, using mindfulness and wisdom to oversee this work. You will thus make yourselves worthy recipients of the Buddha's outstanding teaching which stresses the importance of using skillful means in all circumstances. I have no desire to see my students floundering foolishly in a state of confusion about emotional attachments because complacency and laziness keep them from doing the work necessary to carry them beyond these dangers. So don't be indifferent to the work at hand.

"A practicing monk who is striving to cross beyond the world of *saṃsāra* is engaged in the noblest form of endeavor. No other kind of work is more demanding than the task of lifting the heart beyond the pain and suffering experienced in *saṃsāra*.<sup>25</sup> It requires unstinting effort on all fronts including a willingness to sacrifice your life. Entrust your

life to your own diligent efforts as they attempt to pull you from the abyss of the *kilesas*. Unlike other types of work, there is no room for ambiguity here. If you want to realize the wondrous results that you have yet to experience, you must persist in putting your life on the line for the sake of Dhamma. No other method can be expected to achieve the right result. You must be willing to give your life to transcend the world of *saṃsāra*. Only then will you be free of the burden of *dukkha* in future births.

"I myself never expected to survive and become a teacher, for my determination to transcend *saṃsāra* was much stronger than my concern for staying alive. All my efforts in all circumstances were directed toward a goal beyond life. I never allowed regrets about losing my life to distract me from my purpose. The desire to maintain my course on the path to liberation kept me under constant pressure and directed my every move. I resolved that if my body could not withstand the pressure, I would just have to die. I had already died so many countless times in the past that I was fed up with dying anyway. But were I to live, I desired only to realize the same Dhamma that the Buddha had attained. I had no wish to achieve anything else, for I had had enough of every other type of accomplishment. At that time, my overriding desire was to avoid rebirth and being trapped once more in the cycle of birth and death.

"The effort that I put forth to attain Dhamma can be compared to a turbine, rotating non-stop, or to a 'Wheel of Dhamma' whirling ceaselessly day and night as it cuts its way through every last vestige of the *kilesas*. Only at sleep did I allow myself a temporary respite from this rigorous practice. As soon as I woke up, I was back at work, using mindfulness, wisdom, faith, and diligence to root out and destroy those persistent *kilesas* that still remained. I persevered in that pitched battle with the *kilesas* until mindfulness, wisdom, faith and diligence had utterly destroyed them all. Only then could I finally relax. From that moment on, I knew for certain that the *kilesas* had been vanquished categorically, never to return and cause trouble again. But the body, not having disintegrated along with the *kilesas*, remained alive.

"This is something you should all think about carefully. Do you want to advance fearlessly in the face of death, and strive diligently to leave behind the misery that's been such a painful burden on your hearts for

so long? Or do you want to persist in your regrets about having to die, and so be reborn into this miserable condition again? Hurry up and think about it! Don't allow yourselves to become trapped by *dukkha*, wasting this opportunity you'll regret it for a long time to come.

"The battlefield for conquering the *kilesas* exists within each individual who practices with wisdom, faith, and perseverance as weapons for fighting his way to freedom. It is very counterproductive to believe that you have plenty of time left since you're still young and in good health. Practicing monks should decisively reject such thinking. It is the heart alone that engenders all misjudgment and all wisdom, so you should not focus your attention outside of yourself. Since they are constantly active, pay close attention to your actions, speech, and thoughts to determine the kind of results they produce. Are they producing Dhamma, which is an antidote to the poisons of apathy and self-indulgence; or are they producing a tonic that nourishes the delusions that cause *dukkha*, giving them strength to extend the cycle of existence indefinitely? Whatever they are, the results of your actions, speech, and thoughts should be thoroughly examined in every detail; or else, you'll encounter nothing but failure and never rise above the pain and misery that haunt this world."

Ācariya Mun's response to the monk, who suggested that he teach people indiscriminately about the unusual phenomena he experienced, was fierce and uncompromising. The gist of his reply makes for a remarkable Dhamma teaching one that is seldom heard. It seems unlikely that the monk deserved a condemnation as strong as Ācariya Mun's stirring rebuke might have suggested. Perhaps speaking up was his way of prompting Ācariya Mun into giving us a talk. As far as I could tell, if nothing out of the ordinary happened to strike his heart and provoke a response, Ācariya Mun preferred to speak in a smooth, easy manner — especially when the subject was very profound. At such times, however, his listeners often felt something missing and were not fully satisfied with his teaching. But if someone started something by asking him a question, or if he became annoyed hearing some monks talk ambiguously about Dhamma, or if their discussion piqued his interest, then the Dhamma in his heart began to stir and stream forth, expressing itself in unusual ways that lent fire and excitement to our listening.



Each time Ācariya Mun delivered a declamation of this kind his audience felt deeply moved in a way that's difficult to describe. I myself, having a rather rough temperament, always preferred listening to his fiery exhortations since they fit so well with my natural disposition. For this reason, I reckon that those monks who employed various means to provoke Ācariya Mun into fiery talks were in fact using their ingenuity to come up with clever provocations. Since they probably intended to benefit from his response, they were not entirely in the wrong. The resolute Dhamma expositions that inspired me the most invariably occurred when I asked him probing, prodding questions. His explanations then were bound to be directed personally at me, unlike the general explanations meant for all the monks. Once I had lived with him for some time, I came to know many different ways of eliciting his comments without waiting for him to bring these matters up himself in a general monastic meeting. Once Ācariya Mun and three or four monks were living in a secluded cave in Chiang Dao province. After passing three nights there, Ācariya Mun told the monks that, in his meditation, he had seen a spacious, inviting cave situated high up a steep mountain slope in the area nearby. He told them that many Paccekabuddhas<sup>26</sup> had resided there in the past, but that nowadays monks couldn't live there: the ascent was too steep and the location too high for finding a place within walking distance where they could obtain alms food. He told the monks to climb up the mountain to look at the cave, and insisted they take a supply of food with them. Since there was no path leading up to the mountain, they would have to climb as best they could until they reached the summit. The cave was situated a short distance from the very top.

Taking several lay people along, the monks made the climb to the summit where they found a beautiful, spacious cave, exactly as Ācariya Mun had predicted. The air was clear and the ambiance pleasant and inviting. The monks were so pleased with their discovery that they didn't want to leave. They would have preferred to remain there indefinitely, practicing meditation. Unfortunately, the cave was so high up and so far from the nearest village that they had no place to go for almsround. When the food they brought was nearly exhausted, they had to come back down to the cave where Ācariya Mun resided. Upon their return, he asked them about their impressions.

"Well, how was the cave, nice and inviting? Seeing an image of it in my meditation, I felt it was so beautiful and spacious that I wanted you all to go up and take a look. I was sure you'd like it. When we first arrived, I didn't think to examine this mountain to see what's here. When investigating it a few days later, I discovered how many strange, amazing things it contains. That cave you went to is constantly protected by terrestrial *devas*. Anyone acting improperly there can expect to feel the consequences. When I sent you up there, I forgot to mention that the cave is protected by *devas* and to warn you to restrain yourselves and behave properly the whole time. I didn't want you to be loud and noisy, which is unacceptable behavior for a monk. I was afraid that if the *devas* protecting the cave were displeased, they might cause you discomfort by precipitating something unpleasant."

The monks informed Ācariya Mun that they'd prefer to spend a longer time in the cave; but he insisted that, no matter how attractive the place was, it would not be possible to live there because no food was available. Ācariya Mun spoke of the cave in a very matter-of-fact way, as though he had actually seen it many times. Of course, he had never gone up there, the climb being too steep and difficult. Nonetheless, he spoke about it with the assurance of someone who knew for certain that the knowledge arising in his meditation was no mere illusion.

Ācariya Mun constantly warned his monks to behave in a careful, restrained manner wherever they went, for the *devas* living in those remote places prefer everything to be orderly and very clean. When terrestrial *devas* witness such slovenly behavior as a monk sleeping carelessly, lying on his back spread-eagled like a corpse, tossing and mumbling in his sleep like an idiot, they feel quite disgusted regardless of the fact that it's impossible for a sleeping person to control his actions. *Devas* often approached Ācariya Mun to explain how they felt about this matter.

"Monks occupy positions of reverence and esteem in the hearts and minds of living beings everywhere, so their deportment should be guarded and restrained at all times even while sleeping. As far as possible, a monk's appearance should be attractive and pleasing, never disagreeable or offensive. We hate to see monks behaving intemperately \_ like ordinary lay people showing little concern for the consequences. Especially since the circumspection needed to act with

restraint is well within their capabilities. It's not our intention to be critical of all monks. *Devas* everywhere are grateful for the opportunity to pay homage to those monks exhibiting exemplary behavior because we all appreciate virtue and dearly wish to uphold the *sāsana*. We mention this to you so you can warn your disciples to conduct themselves in a restrained manner that's appealing to human beings and *devas* alike. Monks, who are worthy of respect, will cause *devas* of all realms to feel an even deeper reverence for the *sāsana*."

In response to what the *devas* told him, Ācariya Mun always cautioned his disciples to keep all their requisites in a neat, orderly fashion when staying in remote mountainous areas favored by terrestrial *devas*. Even the foot-wiping rags had to be neatly folded and not just tossed in a heap. His monks were required to relieve themselves in appropriate places, and latrines were dug only after careful consideration of the surrounding area. Sometimes Ācariya Mun explicitly told the monks not to make a latrine under a certain tree, or in a certain area, because the *devas* residing there, or passing through on their way to visit him, would be displeased.

Monks who were already well acquainted with the *deva* world needed no such caution, for they were fully aware of the correct way to behave. Many of Ācariya Mun's disciples do possess this capability. However, because their proficiency in such matters is developed in the wilds, they are reluctant to speak about it openly, fearing that learned people everywhere will make fun of them. But within the circle of *kammaāhāna* monks, it's easy to determine their identity simply by listening to their discussions about various *devas* who came to visit them and the nature of their conversations with these nonphysical beings. At the same time, we can get an insight into each monk's level of spiritual attainment.

### ***The Hypercritical Nāga***

At one point Ācariya Mun spent some time living in Chiang Dao Cave — not the long cave in the middle of the mountain that has become popular with tourists, but one higher up the mountain. This cave was home to a great *nāga*<sup>27</sup> who had kept guard over it for a very long time. Apparently this *nāga* was rather conceited and had a tendency to be overly critical of monks. During his stay in the cave, Acariya Mun

became the object of this *nāga's* constant criticism. It found fault with nearly everything he did. It appeared incapable of accepting Ācariya Mun's thoughts of loving kindness, probably as a consequence of its long-standing enmity toward monks.

At night when Ācariya Mun wore his sandals to do walking meditation, the *nāga* complained about the sound of his footsteps: "What kind of a monk are you, stomping around like an unbridled race horse? The sound of your sandals striking the earth shakes the whole mountain. Did you ever think you might be annoying somebody with all that noise?"

It raised these complaints despite Ācariya Mun's composed manner of pacing softly back and forth. Hearing the criticisms, he took care to walk even more softly than before; but still, the *nāga* wasn't satisfied: "What kind of a monk are you, walking meditation like somebody sneaking around hunting birds?" Occasionally, Ācariya Mun's foot would stumble on a stone in the meditation path, causing a slight thumping sound which elicited another reproach: "What kind of a monk are you, bucking up and down your meditation path like a chorus dancer?"

There were times when Ācariya Mun leveled out the surface of his meditation path to facilitate smooth, easy walking. As he moved stones around and put them neatly into place, the *nāga* complained: "What kind of a monk are you, always moving things around you're never satisfied. Don't you realize that all your fussing about gives others a splitting headache?"

Ācariya Mun had to exercise special care with whatever he did at that cave. Even then, this opinionated *nāga* would find an excuse to criticize him. Should his body move slightly while he slept at night, he could sense psychically upon awakening that the *nāga* had been criticizing him for tossing, turning, wheezing, snoring, and so on. Focusing his attention on this angry, hypercritical *nāga*, Ācariya Mun always found its head sticking out, peering at him intently, as though it never took its eyes off him. Vicious-looking and mean-spirited, it refused to accept any merit dedicated to it and was determined to indulge in feelings of anger that burned like a fire inside its heart. Seeing that it compounded its evil *kamma* all the time, Ācariya Mun felt truly sorry for the *nāga*.

But as long as it showed no interest in reasonable discourse, it was impossible for him to help in any way. All it could think about was fault-finding.

On one occasion, Ācariya Mun explained the general principles underlying a monk's life, specifically mentioning his own purpose and intentions:

"My purpose for being here is not to cause trouble to somebody else, but rather to work as best I can for my own benefit and the benefit of others. So you should not entertain ignoble thoughts, thinking that I'm here to cause you harm or discomfort. I am here consciously trying to do good so that I can share the merit of my actions with all living beings without exception. That includes you as well, so you needn't be upset thinking that I've come just to annoy you.

"Physical activity is a normal feature of people's everyday life. Comings and goings are part of living in this world only the dead cease to move about. Although as a monk I am always self-composed, I'm not a corpse in repose: I have to inhale and exhale, and the force of my breathing varies from one posture to another. My breathing continues to function while I sleep, as does my whole body; so, naturally, there will be some sounds emitted. The same is true when I awaken and begin walking-meditation, or perform chores. There is some sound, but always within the bounds of moderation. When have you ever seen a monk standing frozen stiff like a corpse, never moving a muscle? Human beings don't behave like that.

"I try hard to walk as carefully and softly as possible, but still you complain that I walk like a race horse. In truth, an animal like a race horse and a virtuous monk mindfully walking meditation could not be more different, one from the other. You should avoid making such comparisons. Otherwise, you become a wretched individual aiming for a berth in hell. It's impossible for me to satisfy all your unreasonable whims. If, like everyone else, you expect to find happiness and prosperity, then consider your own faults for awhile and stop lugging the fires of hell around in your heart all the time. Only then will you find a way out.

"Criticizing other people's faults, even when they really are wrong, merely serves to increase your own irritation and put you in a bad mood. My behavior here is in no way improper for a monk, yet you keep carping about it constantly. If you were a human being, you'd probably be incapable of living in normal society you'd see the world as one big garbage dump and yourself as pure solid gold. Such feelings of alienation are due to emotional turmoil caused by your hypercritical attitude \_ which gives you no peace. The wise have always con-demned unjustified criticism of others, saying it brings terrible moral consequences. So why do you enjoy doing it with such a vengeance and such indifference to the painful consequences? I'm not the one who suffers from your criticism it is your own emotional health that's adversely affected. Such ill effects are quite obvious, so how can you be unaware that your whole attitude is wrong? I'm fully cognizant of everything you are thinking, and at the same time, I have always forgiven you. You concentrate on doing terrible things that consume your mind and ravage your heart as though you can't get enough of doing evil. Were your condition a disease, it would be an untreatable one.

"I have been trying to change your mental attitude, just as I've long been trying to help many other living beings. Human beings, ghosts, *devas*, *brahmas*, *yakkhas*, and even great *nāgas* far more powerful than yourself, have all accepted the truth of the Lord Buddha's teaching on *kamma*. None, except you, have angrily criticized the value of Dhamma, which is revered throughout the world systems. And you're so peculiar that you won't accept the truth of anything at all. The only pleasure you take is in making derogatory remarks and angrily censuring people who have done nothing wrong. You devote yourself to these as though they were propitious actions. But the wise have never thought that such actions foster peace and security. When you finally slough off the skin of this ill-fated existence, you won't encounter a pleasant, pain-free existence, unaffected by the evil consequences of your actions.

"I apologize for speaking so candidly about the principles of Dhamma, but my intentions are good. Nothing malicious is intended in my remarks, regardless of what misconceptions you may have. Since the very beginning of my stay here, I have tried to do everything in a careful, restrained manner, for I know that this is your home and I'm

concerned that my presence here may inconvenience you. Although I am well aware that you're an individual who delights in looking for things to criticize, I still can't seem to avoid being seen in a disparaging light. I myself experience genuine contentment, unaffected even by constant criticism. But, I worry that the repercussions of your dogged pursuit of evil will be extremely unpleasant for you. I did not come here in search of wickedness or evil. Being quite sure that everything I do and say emanates from a pure heart, I have no fear that my actions will incur any unpleasant moral consequences.

"As soon as intelligent people begin to understand the difference between secular matters and spiritual ones, they tend to appreciate virtuous conduct, admiring all wholesome, meritorious actions performed for the sake of peace and happiness. From ages past, the wise have always taught living beings to feel good about being virtuous. So why do you adhere to the maverick notion that it's all right to strip yourself of virtue and wallow in evil? You seem to detest virtue so dreadfully much that you can't be bothered to reflect on your own vices. Although I won't be experiencing the dire consequences that await you, still I fear for you in that miserable state. You must stop thinking in ways that are harmful, for the mean intent behind your actions has the power to deprive you of all moral value. Such undesirable consequences, bringing unimaginable torment, are what I fear more than anything else in the world. The whole world dreads old age, sickness, and death, but I don't fear them nearly so much as I fear evil and its attendant consequences.

"People with *kilesas* tend to eschew spiritual principles, preferring instead the things that religious tenets proscribe. So ordaining as a Buddhist monk to practice the Teaching and the Discipline requires us to undergo an agonizing character transformation. Even though I knew how difficult it would be to oppose the *kilesas*, I nonetheless felt compelled to join the monkhood and endure the severe hardship. The extreme discomfort caused by constantly opposing the *kilesas* that's what makes the practice so difficult. But if we desire to transcend *kamma* and the defiling *kilesas* that create it, we must endure such torment for *kilesas* always steadfastly resist the teachings of the Lord Buddha.

"I've come here to practice, living in this cave like a worthless social outcast, solely because I fear evil and its consequences. I did not come here to harm or trouble anyone. Nor do I feel contempt for any living being. I respect them all as friends whose lives are also subject to the law of *kamma*, and who are thus all of equal intrinsic value. I dedicate the merit of my actions equally to all beings with the hope that they may live in contentment wherever they may be. I have never taken the arrogant attitude that I'm a human being ordained as a Buddhist monk and therefore superior to my companions in birth, ageing, sickness, and death.

"You too exist within the sphere of *kamma*, so you ought to humbly reflect on how your own faults affect you. Criticizing others without proper consideration will never bring you good results it merely piles up the ill effects of bad *kamma*, which then linger on indefinitely. You should feel dismayed by your errant behavior and drop this dangerous practice. Only then can you hope to become a good individual with a chance for a better, happier birth in the future. Then your mean, angry heart will soften, and you can avoid being engulfed in misery forever.

"All living beings in the universe from humans and animals to *devas*, *brahmas*, and *yakkhas* cherish happiness and loathe suffering. They do not have an aversion for Dhamma simply because they can't yet put it into practice. Dhamma has always been the quintessential nature of the universe. Those beings who are in a position to practice Dhamma find great satisfaction in it for instance, human beings. Their state of birth makes them well suited to the practice of Dhamma.

"You yourself are a living being who's fully capable of distinguishing between good and bad, and thus choosing what's most beneficial for you. So why do you do just the opposite? I'm puzzled that you seem content to revel in those things which the wise abhor while scorning those which the wise applaud. You know about *dukkha* and you hate it, yet you strive to produce the very causes that bring you great unhappiness and discomfort. The wise tell us that our efforts to find fault with others produce consequences that cause greater and greater unhappiness exactly what you shamelessly do all the time. You may not be interested, but although I'm fully aware of your despicable thoughts, I've always forgiven you. I'm not angry or offended, but I do feel sorry for you. Thus, I have decided to tell you the plain truth. Should it prove



useful to you, I shall be pleased for your sake. I receive no unpleasant consequences from your thoughts for I'm not the one who engages in them. All I experience are peace, serenity, and loving compassion that have long been my heart's abode."

The *nāga* didn't make any comment as Ācariya Mun explained these various aspects of Dhamma, but it did experience the rise of some salutary thoughts while listening: *This monk talks a lot of sense. But right now I'm unable to do as he says, being still too content with my old ways. Perhaps I'll have more interest in my next existence. This monk has many awesome qualities he even perceives things that should be unknowable. How can he know my private thoughts? I live in a hidden world, yet somehow he sees me. Over the years, many monks have come to stay in this cave, but none have known about my existence, much less my thoughts. I've even forced some of them to flee because I couldn't stand having them around.*<sup>28</sup> *But this monk knows everything, including my thoughts. Even while sleeping he remains aware. Later, he can tell me exactly what I was thinking, as if he hadn't been asleep at all. Why am I so opinionated that I can't take what he teaches to heart and put it into practice? Like he said: I must surely have some very grave kamma. Despite knowing the despicable nature of my mind, he still makes an effort to explain how his daily activities are not intended to bother me. My present state of existence is certainly unfortunate. He's right when he says that I'm quite capable of distinguishing between good and bad. Yet I'm hampered by my wretched conceit, meaning that my next life will probably be just as unfortunate as this one and so on indefinitely.*

After a short pause Ācariya Mun asked the *nāga* if it had managed to understand any of his explanations on Dhamma.

The *nāga* replied: "I understand everything you so kindly explained to me. But unfortunately, I'm burdened by some very grave *kamma* and I've yet to grow weary of my wretched condition. I'm still debating this matter with myself and I haven't come to any definite conclusions. My heart tends to gravitate toward a state of degradation, as it always has, so it balks at listening to the Dhamma you are teaching."

Ācariya Mun asked the *nāga* what it meant by saying that its heart liked to gravitate toward a state of degradation.

The *nāga* answered: "My heart enjoys finding fault with you all the time, even though you've done nothing wrong that's just the way my heart is. I don't know how to convince myself of the harmful effects of this tendency so that I can correct it and practice the way of virtue from now on."

Ācariya Mun offered some encouragement:

"Careful consideration will convince you that such bad tendencies are truly harmful. Once you are persuaded, then evil will naturally begin to fade from your heart, ceasing to be so conspicuous in the future. But by assuming that these tendencies are beneficial and then encouraging them, you will naturally tend to think in an endless variety of ways that are detrimental to you. Unless you hurry to improve things now, you'll keep on doing evil until you are completely beyond help. I cannot do this job for you. I can give some guidance, but it's up to you to make the necessary adjustments in your character. The onus is on you to press ahead, trying to accomplish this as best you can. Once you do, you will see the dangerous aspects of your character gradually diminish as beneficial qualities develop, displacing them until all that's left is pure, simple virtue, untainted by any form of evil. By placing your faith in the Dhamma of the Lord Buddha, which has always helped living beings to transcend *dukkha*, you will always be contented living under its protective influence. Never feeling distraught, never disturbed, you will remain even-tempered in every situation. You won't be moved to praise one thing as good or criticize another as bad, and so suffer the resulting consequences conduct that's contrary to the way of the wise."

At the conclusion of these remarks, the *nāga* promised to make an effort to follow Ācariya Mun's advice. In the days that followed, Ācariya Mun kept an eye on it as he continued with his own practice. He noticed some improvement, as the *nāga* was able to restrict its hypercritical tendencies by exercising some measure of control over them. But he also noticed that this effort caused the *nāga* much consternation. So finding some excuse to leave the cave, he moved on which pleased the *nāga*. His association with it ended there.

From that time on, Ācariya Mun alluded to the story of this *nāga* as a means of elaborating on various aspects of human nature, for the personal benefit of those listening. The gist of what he said is worth

repeating here, hopefully so that the reader can learn some valuable lessons from his teaching.

Ācariya Mun explained that good and evil do not arise on their own but are dependent on habitual ways of behaving that gradually become part of one's character. If our tendency is to do evil, it is very difficult to remedy because everything we do tends to flow in that direction. If it is our tendency to do good, we become more and more skillful and assertive as we progress in that direction. For this reason, clever parents will try to train their children in the way of goodness from a very early age \_ before it becomes too late. When necessary they will entrust them to the care of someone who is suitably supportive so that their children's upbringing is not simply left to chance.

Children begin to learn about basic common principles from a very tender age. But unlike learning in the classroom, this learning process is not interrupted by time or season. Such basic common principles are more firmly implanted in children's characters than any of their school subjects, for these things exist all around them at home, in school, and everywhere else. Children are constantly taking lessons from what they see, hear, taste, smell, and touch in the world, remembering well what they have learned. A child's senses are its natural blackboard. The impressions imprinted there are pregnant with moral significance; that is, matters of good and evil. They constantly pick up impressions from their playmates and the adults in their lives, as well as from movies and other entertainment that is normally available to them. Such everyday impressions are a child's true teachers; and children are all too willing to learn new ideas that are constantly conveyed to them. Contact with evil affairs can definitely induce a child to follow evil ways, while good influences can definitely induce a child to go the way of virtue. Children naturally take the things they see and hear as examples to emulate; and, over time, this establishes a pattern of behavior that defines a child's character. Once these patterns have become ingrained, the children will speak and act according to the good or evil orientation thus established.

The fact that some people readily take satisfaction in doing evil and are unwilling to change, while others just as readily take satisfaction in doing good and cherish moral virtue all their lives, indicates the fundamental importance of character development. Those left to their

own devices easily abandon the effort to resist their bad tendencies even before they have seen enough satisfactory results to encourage perseverance. Consequently, basic character development is absolutely essential for all people. This means that nothing should be done carelessly or thoughtlessly, for once such tendencies become habitual they are difficult to correct. The importance of this principle becomes apparent as we strive to develop positive character traits until they become part of our very nature; for instance: being reasonable about how and where we travel; being reasonable about how we spend our money so that everyone in the family benefits; and being reasonable in our eating and sleeping habits so that we do not overindulge in them. All such exemplary behavior patterns should be enthusiastically developed until they become instinctive. The inner resistance we meet in the early stages of training will naturally give way to a smooth, easy character transformation. This transformation itself is sufficient proof that character training is well within our capabilities. But we must be willing to persevere in the beginning.

Training is required to make any kind of work successful. Just as we must undergo training in order to succeed in our professions, so the heart and mind must be trained in order to obtain optimum results. Only after death are we beyond the need for training. Wishing to gain proficiency in something, we must work at it, practicing until we are well-skilled in it. Character training develops a skill which is synonymous with virtue. Take this message to heart, consider it well, and put it into practice your efforts will surely be rewarded with a wealth of personal virtue. Such was the gist of Ācariya Mun's teaching on character training. I have included it here to help those who are developing Dhamma in this way.

### ***The Death of the Arahant***

While Ācariya Mun lived in Chiang Dao Cave, numerous *nimittas* appeared in his meditation, some of them quite extraordinary. Here I shall mention only a few. In the late hours of almost every night he received a wide range of *deva* visitors from the upper and lower celestial realms who arrived in groups of varying sizes at appointed times. Arahants also came regularly to hold inspirational conversations on Dhamma with Ācariya Mun. Each Arahant showed him the manner in which his passing away into total Nibbāna had occurred.<sup>29</sup> Some

were Arahants who had passed away in the Chiang Dao Cave, while others had attained total Nibbāna elsewhere. Such demonstrations were accompanied by an inspiring explanation of the sequence of events that had taken place.

Hearing Ācariya Mun talk about those Arahants, I felt dismayed and somewhat discouraged by my own unfortunate circumstances. There I was a human being with eyes, ears, and mental faculties just like Ācariya Mun; yet, I couldn't accomplish the things that he did. On the one hand, I was elated to hear his stories; on the other, I felt disheartened. I found myself laughing and crying at the same time, but I kept my tears to myself for fear that my fellow monks would think I was mad. In fact, at that time, deep inside, I really was a bit mad.

The inspirational conversations that Ācariya Mun had with the Arahants were so captivating that it's hard to find anything else in the world that compares with them. I shall try to faithfully recreate the essence of those conversations here, though I fear I may not do them proper justice. Here is the gist of what the Arahants said to Ācariya Mun.



"All Arahants possess superb qualities within their hearts that are most amazing \_ intrinsic virtues unsurpassed in the human and *deva* worlds. Each Arahant who appears in the world following the Lord Buddha does so only with the greatest of difficulty. Each is like a goldmine cropping up spontaneously in the middle of an emperor's imperial city \_ a very rare occurrence indeed. An Arahant's lifestyle contrasts sharply with worldly lifestyles because an Arahant's life is invigorated by Dhamma. Although his body is composed of the same physical elements as those of everyone else, the heart maintaining that body is pure, and such purity of heart invigorates every aspect of the physical element.

"You yourself have now completed the task of filtering from your heart all possible causes of existence, thus becoming one of the Arahants. Being one whose heart will never again give rise to birth and existence, you have become another incomparable source of merit for the world to venerate. So we've come to visit you now to show our appreciation for

your achievement, which because of its enormous difficulty, is seldom accomplished. Although many people desire to attain what you have, very few succeed when they are faced with the difficulties. People born into this world instinctively cling to their parents and relatives for support. Hardly any of them realize the importance of relying on their own hearts as their mainstay. The vast majority of people just drift aimlessly, accomplishing nothing of real value \_ their numbers are beyond reckoning. So the appearance in the world of a fully-enlightened Arahant is a remarkable event that benefits living beings throughout all the world systems. Your attainment of purity has made you an enormous boon for humans, *devas*, and *brahmas* alike. You are also well-versed in the universal language of the heart, which is far more important than any other form of communication. All the Buddhas, and certain categories of Arahants, use the language of the heart when giving assistance to living beings, for it is the universal language of sentient beings throughout the universe. Contacting and teaching nonphysical beings is achieved exclusively by means of this universal form of communication. Those communicating in the language of the heart can understand each other much more quickly and easily than would normally be the case."



After concluding his inspirational conversation with Ācariya Mun, each Arahant would then demonstrate the manner in which he had passed away into total Nibbāna. Nearly every Arahant who came allowed him to observe the posture in which this was achieved. Some Arahants demonstrated how they had died and passed into total Nibbāna while sitting cross-legged in *samādhi*. Some demonstrated how they were reclining on their right side in the 'lion's posture'<sup>30</sup> at that time. Others showed him how they were standing still in the middle of the meditation path; still others revealed how they were pacing back and forth in meditation at the time of their total Nibbāna. The sitting and reclining postures were the most common \_ relatively few Arahants passed into Nibbāna while walking or standing.

Their deaths were demonstrated in a precise manner, showing every detail right up to the final moment. As a seated Arahant passed away, he slumped over gently like soft cotton, while his body ceased to function and became perfectly still. It was more difficult to discern the

exact moment when an Arahant reclining in the 'lion's posture' passed away. His breathing was the only visible sign of life and that became ever more refined as he lay quietly, as if asleep, without the slightest movement in any part of his body, until his breathing gradually ceased altogether. Those Arahants who demonstrated death in a standing posture stood erect, assuming a reflective pose with the right hand placed on the left hand, head slightly bowed and eyes firmly closed. They appeared to reflect momentarily before slowly slumping into a heap on the ground \_ first in a sitting position, then slumping gradually further, until, softly, like cotton wool, they lay on the ground. Arahants, who died while walking in meditation, paced back and forth about six or seven times before gently slumping to the ground where they lay perfectly still.

When giving these demonstrations, the Arahants came to within six feet of Ācariya Mun so he could clearly view every aspect of their passing away, which created a lasting impression in his heart. Listening to him recount those episodes, I felt the urge to shed tears. I had to turn my face to the wall as this strange feeling overcame me. Otherwise, I might have created a stir, which could have become an embarrassing epilogue to this story. The total Nibbāna of those Arahants was accomplished with a serene gracefulness that stands in marked contrast to the distress typically suffered by most people at the time of death. I was so moved by hearing how each Arahant passed away that I simply couldn't hold back my tears. Those amazing individuals were taking final leave of the world of conventional reality with all its chaos and confusion \_ which is an amazing thing to contemplate. I am sure that anyone else who listened would have been deeply affected in the same way.

Three Arahants attained total Nibbāna at the cave in Chiang Dao \_ two while reclining in the 'lion's posture' and one while walking meditation. Prior to giving Ācariya Mun a visual demonstration of how his death had occurred, each Arahant gave him a detailed explanation of why he had chosen to pass away in that posture. Very few died while standing or walking. Many more did so while sitting, but the majority passed away while reclining. On the basis of what he had seen, Ācariya Mun came to the conclusion that over the centuries many Arahants had passed away in Thailand. As far as I can remember, they included the three Arahants at the cave in Chiang Dao, one in the Wong Phra Chan mountains, one at Tago Cave in Lopburi province, one at Khow Yai in

Nakhon Nayok province, and one at Wat Dhatuluang monastery of Ko Kha district in Lampang province. There were others as well, but unfortunately I can no longer recall them.

"Nibbāna" is a term used exclusively with reference to Buddhas, Paccekabuddhas, and Arahants, all of whom have expunged from their hearts every trace of the *kilesas* leading to future birth. It is not a term associated with living beings who still have *kilesas*, for those beings continue to accumulate the seeds of future births in their hearts constantly, thus making the designation "Nibbāna" entirely inappropriate for them. Having died here, they are reborn there; dying there, they're reborn somewhere else. Negligent human beings who've made no effort to develop virtuous qualities in this life so as to enhance their future lives, may well be reborn as animals after they die. The opportunities for birth as an animal are more numerous than those for birth in the much higher human, *deva*, and *brahma* realms. So those who prefer making bad *kamma* may be on one of the many paths to rebirth in the animal kingdom, which is far more diverse and extensive than the higher realms. But animals, humans, and *devas* all have one thing in common: the burden of emotional attachments that cause them to be reborn over and over again indefinitely. Consequently, the term Nibbāna does not apply to them.

The only ones who deserve the designation "Nibbāna" are those individuals who have completely eradicated the *kilesas* from their hearts extinguishing them forever, even while they are physically alive. At the moment of passing away, they have no lingering attachments that could bind them to the round of *saṃsāra* not even to the body that's starting to decompose. Absolutely no attachment or concern for anything anywhere exist in their hearts. Thus they bid final farewell to the world with no trepidation, having no expectations of experiencing karmic consequences in another realm of existence a source of endless frustration. The heart that has attained absolute freedom is constant, unchanging, and wholly contented. It harbors no expectations at all concerning conventional realities such as the body. Therefore, not even an atom of the conventional world could enter and affect the heart's state of total purity. The word "Nibbāna" refers to the total purity of one who is never agitated or melancholy neither sorrowful in life nor regretful at death but always imperturbably unchanging throughout.



Nibbāna is a special term used with reference to a special type of individual. No one who has yet to purify his heart would dare assume this title. Nibbāna is not a kind of personal property, like an orchard or a farm, which can be taken over by powerful interests even without the owner's consent. Whoever wants to take possession of Nibbāna must make the effort to develop it within the heart there is no hope for those who merely lie around waiting for it to appear.

Ācariya Mun, the subject of this biography, received inspirational Dhamma from many Arahants. He has received national acclaim and respect from faithful Buddhists everywhere. He achieved this renown by faithfully practicing the Dhamma until he realized the Truth in his own heart, where nothing false existed. He was able to see those things that are inherently false, like organic life; and as such, let go of them so they no longer burdened his heart. The true Ācariya Mun, no longer subject to change, was the Truth of the Dhamma he realized. That Dhamma remains true forever. Unlike all other things which are inherently unstable and so of limited duration, the passage of time has no effect whatsoever on it.

### *The Spiritual Warrior*

Ācariya Mun became seriously ill on many occasions while living deep in the wilderness areas of Chiang Mai sometimes he came very close to death. Had he been like most people, totally dependent on doctors and their medicines, he would probably have succumbed long before. But Ācariya Mun was able to survive by using the curative powers of Dhamma to treat himself. He said that as soon as the symptoms of illness began to appear the 'therapeutic qualities of Dhamma' immediately arose in response and began to effect a cure. Such was his temperament that normally he showed little interest in conventional medicines. Even in old age when his vitality was steadily declining, he continued to prefer the 'therapeutic qualities of Dhamma' to maintain well-being in his body elements.

Ācariya Mun once stayed with several other monks in a mountainous area full of malaria. One of the monks happened to contract the disease, but not a single medicine was available to treat it. When the fever was at its worst, it raged continuously all day. Ācariya Mun visited the monk every morning and evening to instruct him in the use of

investigative techniques for reducing fever meditation methods he himself always used with good results. But since their levels of spiritual attainment were so different, this monk was incapable of investigating in the same way as Ācariya Mun could. Each time his fever intensified, he had to simply wait for it to abate on its own. He had developed no effective methods for bringing it down himself. Eventually becoming rather exasperated, Ācariya Mun scolded him:

"It seems you're a Mahā<sup>31</sup> in name only, since the knowledge you have learned is obviously of no help when you really need it. What's the point of studying to be a Mahā if you're just going to waste a lot of paper and then come away empty-handed? The knowledge gained from studying should benefit you in some way, so I cannot figure out what you've been learning that's so completely useless. Here you are virtually dying of fever, but your learning can't help alleviate your condition even a little bit. What's the purpose of all that learning anyway? It doesn't make sense to me. I can't figure it out. I haven't learned any grade of Pāli studies not one. I have learned only the five *kammaāhāna*<sup>32</sup> that my preceptor gave me at my ordination, which I still have with me today. They are all I need to take care of myself. They don't make me weak like you you're as weak as you are educated. In fact, you are weaker than a woman with no education at all! You're a man and a Mahā, so why all this weakness? When you get sick, you exhibit no manly characteristics, nor any indication of the Dhamma you learned. You should take all your masculine equipment and exchange it for a woman's, thus completing your metamorphosis. Maybe then the fever will abate a bit. Seeing that you're a woman, the fever may be reluctant to torture you so much.

"Instead of seeing some reassuring signs of defiance and courage when I visit you, all I see is a weak display of self-pity. Why don't you investigate those *kammaāhāna* in the Pāli studies you've learned?

What does *dukkhayāriyasacca* mean to you? Does it mean weakness? When having a fever, just cry and long for your parents, is that what it means? If you cannot bear even the painful feelings arising from a fever, in a truly life-threatening crisis you'll be overwhelmed and unable to cope. Even now you can't manage, so how can you ever hope to understand the true nature of the Noble Truth of *Dukkha*? Anyone wanting to transcend the mundane world must realize unequivocally the

truth inherent in each of the Noble Truths. But as soon as the Truth of *Dukkha* awakens and begins to become a little active, you lie down and admit defeat. What do you expect to gain from that?"

Having given this fiery piece of advice to probe the monk's character, Ācariya Mun paused quietly for a moment. He then noticed that the monk was sobbing, tears streaming down his face. So Ācariya Mun quickly found an excuse to leave and return to his hut, telling the monk not to worry he would soon get better. He assured him that he had only pretended to give him a hard time.

Reconsidering the matter that night, Ācariya Mun decided to try a different type of medicine, since the remedy he had just prescribed was probably too harsh for the patient he just was not strong enough to take it. From the next morning onward, he changed his approach completely, never again displaying any fierceness with that monk. From then on he assumed a sympathetic, comforting attitude, pampering the monk in a way that was very uncharacteristic of him. His speech was sweet and gentle, like large quantities of molasses being poured out every morning and evening, until the whole area seemed sweet and fragrant, suiting that monk's outbreak of weakness perfectly. He watched over his patient's progress, giving him these sugarcoated pills every morning and evening until it was clear that both the patient and his fellow monks were contented. The patient continued to improve with each passing day until finally he made a complete recovery, a process that lasted many months. Obviously this particular medicine was effective beyond all expectations.

Such are the therapies of a clever doctor who always has the intelligence to adjust his treatments according to the circumstances and then administer them appropriately. Consequently, he is an excellent example for the rest of us who are searching for wisdom, which is why I have included the preceding incident. Those who are interested should be able to gain some benefit from reading it, for it concerns the skillful means of a clever man whose wisdom was so sharp that he was never stymied by any turn of events.

Rather than remaining passive in a critical situation, Ācariya Mun instinctively preferred to analyze the crisis with mindfulness and wisdom. When he was sick, or when his investigations uncovered some

particularly insidious *kilesas* that he found to be especially obstructive these constituted critical situations. Instead of feeling resigned, his *citta* responded by circling the problem day and night until he found an ingenious method to deal with the crisis, allowing him to overcome it gradually and move on unhindered. From the beginning stages of his practice to the very end, he invariably experienced good results from this approach.

When the monks living with him became ill, he usually advised them to develop meditative techniques for relieving the symptoms so they would not become overly dependent on medications. At the same time, he wanted them to develop those techniques into methods for investigating Dhamma. Ācariya Mun believed that physical and mental pain are direct manifestations of the Truth of *Dukkha*; and as such, they should be investigated until that Truth is understood. He did not expect his monks to simply succumb to pain as though they had never before received training in Dhamma.

Ācariya Mun acquired many techniques from the illnesses he suffered. He never let the pain of his illness subdue him without probing into the nature of that pain as best he could. At such times, he believed it imperative to investigate pain to the very limit of one's ability in order to determine whether or not mindfulness and wisdom can cope with the task at hand. When found to be deficient, they could be modified and improved until their performance is deemed satisfactory. When the highly trained forces of mindfulness and wisdom enter into combat with feelings of severe pain, the heart will not be apprehensive as it confronts the Truth of *Dukkha* which is a genuine Truth. Mindfulness and wisdom are then fully up to the task. They remain unshakable while being buffeted on all sides by an onslaught of pain coming from every conceivable direction. In the midst of this intense pain, they are able to narrow down the scope of their investigation until it focuses sharply on the very principles of Truth. Such mental training employs the factors of mindfulness, wisdom, faith, and effort, instilling them with greater strength and courage. For precisely this reason, Ācariya Mun liked to emphasize the investigation of painful feelings to his disciples. When the moment of truth arrives and the body is about to break up, one should experience no fear of the agonizing pain that emerges at that moment. Investigating as prescribed, the meditator clearly perceives the true nature of both body and feelings, meaning that he lives in comfort

and dies triumphant. Such is the path of the warrior who emerges truly victorious to become a superior individual. He conquers himself, becomes superior within himself and is fully contented.

Ācariya Mun was an exemplary teacher in every aspect of his practice. His persistence, fortitude, courage, frugality, and all-round ingenuity were outstanding qualities that put him in a class of his own in the present day and age. It would be very difficult for any of his disciples to surpass him. He possessed celestial hearing and celestial sight, as well as *paracittavijjā*: the ability to communicate psychically with beings as diverse as animals, humans, ghosts, *devas*, *brahmas*, *yamas*, and *nāgas*.<sup>33</sup> He could see not only animals and humans with their gross physical bodies, but also the subtle nonphysical forms of ghosts and *devas*. He knew the intimate joys and sorrows of human beings and could read their innermost thoughts.

Monks who lacked mindfulness to supervise their thoughts, letting their minds wander constantly, often became aware of those thoughts only when they heard Ācariya Mun give voice to them. Some of the more pathetic ones were so bemused that they did not realize Ācariya Mun was referring to them. It wasn't necessary to be in his presence just living together with him in the same monastic community was sufficient reason for caution. Any monk mindlessly giving rein to wild thoughts was sure to hear something unusual from Ācariya Mun when eventually they met. But especially at risk were those who dared to let their minds wander in his presence. It didn't matter what he was doing at the time he might be instructing the monks, or having a conversation, or whatever. He would give the culprit a tongue-lashing or use some unusual ploy to get his attention. Only when he felt disinclined to respond did he allow such thoughts to pass unchallenged.

According to the accounts of many senior disciples who lived with him in Chiang Mai, Ācariya Mun's mastery of such faculties as celestial hearing, celestial seeing, and thought reading, was so amazing it could be frightening. His ability to read thoughts was so lightening quick that those entertaining unwholesome thoughts almost invariably heard about it. Consequently, monks who lived with him needed to guard their sense faculties very carefully. If not, they certainly got caught for they could not elude his penetrating genius and find a safe way to hide.

Once, due to his fear of Ācariya Mun, a monk thought about the ferocity Ācariya Mun's admonitions. When the monk next saw him, Ācariya Mun immediately addressed the question.

"Almost everything we use from our food to our requisites to the robes we wear must pass through various stages of preparation before being turned into useful items. Rice must be planted, harvested, and cooked; wood must be cut, sawed, and planed; and cloth must be woven and sewn into robes. Isn't that right? These things don't become finished products ready for use or consumption unless a lot of work is done on them. Food and shelter are the product of man's labor. They do not simply materialize from nowhere. Only corpses are totally inactive, lying lifeless and having no need to provide for their own livelihood. With no reason to adjust their behavior, they have no need for a teacher to scold them and give instructions. But you are alive and still seeking a teacher's guidance. Yet you're unreasonably afraid of your teacher, citing his fierce admonitions as a rationale. Then again, if your teacher simply kept his mouth shut, you would probably accuse him of failing to teach you and thus be even more upset. In the final analysis, nothing quite suits you. Your thoughts jump around like a monkey jumping up and down in the trees. If it keeps jumping about long enough, it will jump on a rotten branch and end up in a heap on the ground. Which do you want to be? Do you want to be a monkey jumping on a rotten branch, or a monk with a teacher to guide you?"

Sometimes, he confronted the culprit directly, motivating him to become more mindfully aware of his own thoughts. At other times, he simply made some oblique, sarcastic reference to a monk's thoughts. The objective in either case was to warn a student that his thoughts had not passed into oblivion, but could return again to haunt him. He was made aware of his mistake so that in the future he could exercise more restraint in his thinking.

Sometimes, in order to inspire his disciples in their practice, Ācariya Mun gave a fiery discourse in which he offered himself as living proof of what could be achieved through perseverance and courage in the face of death.

"If you allow the fear of death to stop you from practicing meditation with uncompromising diligence, you will be obliged to come back and

die time and time again in future births. Those who can overcome their fear of death will be able to reduce the number of future births until eventually they transcend birth and death altogether. Never again will they return to bear the burden of *dukkha*. While persevering unflinchingly in the face of excruciating pain, I myself passed out three times yet I did not die. I managed to survive and become your teacher. None of you have ever persisted in your efforts to the point where you passed out, unconscious. So, what makes you so afraid of dying? If you don't actually experience what it's like to die, it is unlikely you'll ever see the wonders of Dhamma. Whether you believe it or not, this is the method I used to realize Dhamma. So there is no way I can teach you to merely take it easy: Eat a lot, sleep a lot, and be lazy then the *kilesas* will take fright. I cannot teach that because that's not the way to instill fear in the *kilesas*. Such an attitude will only amuse the *kilesas*: 'We thought these monks had come to be diligent, so why are they lying around like breathing corpses? These breathing dead are hardly worthy of admiration'."

After Ācariya Mun finished speaking, a certain monk in the audience thought to himself that persevering to the point of passing out was excessive: *If I have to reach the point where I pass out, unconscious, I don't want to go to Nibbāna yet. I'll just put up with the pain and suffering of this world like everyone else. I've got lots of company. If going to Nibbāna means pushing oneself to the extent of passing out, then whoever wants to go is welcome to do so, but I'm not going that's for sure. Life in the world is surely painful, but not nearly as painful as being rendered unconscious. Besides, if we have to pass out before we can attain Nibbāna that means there's not much difference between Nibbāna and a drug-induced coma. Who wants that? I certainly don't. I have no desire to pass out. Just seeing someone else faint scares me to death, let alone having it happen to me.*

Before long Ācariya Mun began speaking again, this time in heated tones that penetrated forcibly into the monk's reverie. "You don't believe me, huh? Do you think I'm lying to you just for fun, or what? If you do not trust me, please leave! Why stay here being a burden on this monastery? I did not invite you to come here you came on your own, so you should leave on your own. Don't wait to be thrown out! It's useless for you to stay here anyway the Buddha's teaching wasn't proclaimed for idiots like you! Your way of thinking is entirely inappropriate for a

monk wearing the yellow robes. A Buddhist monk is one who puts his faith in Dhamma. But since your ideas contradict the Lord Buddha's path to liberation, it is obvious that you don't trust me or the Dhamma. You are welcome to go anywhere to eat and sleep in comfort without having to trouble yourself with meditation practice. If you come to realize the Truth of Dhamma using this method, please come back and have mercy on this stupid old monk. I shall raise my clasped hands to the heavens to honor your gracious majesty's benediction!

"I teach the truth when I say that anyone expecting to transcend *dukkha* must be fearless when facing death. But you don't believe it's true. You figure it is better to die and be reborn in this world so you can continue carrying your burden of misery wherever you go. If you want to go on like this, that's your business. But, don't come here and contradict the teaching of the Lord Buddha. If you do, you will be a thorn in the Buddha's side and an obstacle blocking the path of those truly wishing to follow him. Opinions like yours are not only wrong, but, should you decide to give voice to them, you will become an enemy of Buddhism and religious people everywhere. I assumed that you came here to develop yourself spiritually and so uphold the *sāsana*. I never imagined you were going to ruin yourself and then destroy the *sāsana* and devoted followers of the Lord Buddha as well. But now I realize that you have come like an executioner to destroy everything. You'd better change your attitude right away. Otherwise, you will certainly ruin yourself and take a lot of other people with you and that would be a terrible shame.

"The Lord Buddha is said to have passed unconscious three times as he strived to attain enlightenment. Don't you believe it is true? If you don't, perhaps you suppose the Buddha was lying to us. A person like you, who ordains as a *dhutanga* monk but still refuses to trust the Buddha and his Dhamma, is someone devoid of intrinsic human value. Your opinions make you no different than a breathing corpse a living, stinking corpse that somehow manages to keep breathing from one day to the next. What do you say? Which path are you going to choose for your own safe passage? I have no better path to offer you than the one I have already specified. It is the path that the Lord Buddha and all the Arahants have taken. There is no easier, more esoteric path. I have followed this path from the time of my ordination up to the present, and it is the source of the Dhamma that I teach to all my disciples."



This was one of the most impassioned declamations ever given by Ñacariya Mun right to the point and full of fireworks. What I have recreated here is merely a sample, not the full substance of what he said by any means. Those listening were so shaken and intimidated they nearly sank through the floor. Never in their lives had they heard anything like it. By going straight to the point, these fiery expositions caused his audience to see the truth of his words, and thus submit to it, even as they felt frightened to death of him.

Realizing the truth of what he heard, the monk, whose thoughts provoked this barrage, gradually acquiesced until he accepted it totally and without reservations. As that happened, the intensity in Ñacariya Mun's voice gradually subsided until he sounded quite conciliatory. When he was convinced that the monk had accepted the truth, he finished speaking and adjourned the meeting.

As it disbanded, there was a stir of excitement. The monks asked one another who had dared entertain thoughts so perverse to have elicited such a fierce response from Ñacariya Mun that his voice raged furiously, like thunder and lightening. There must have been some provocation. Otherwise, he would never have given a blazing admonition like that. Those thoughts must have affected him so acutely that he couldn't resist unleashing the full force of his reason. Eventually, the monk in question owned up to the thoughts that I have mentioned before.

Normally *dhutanga* monks did not conceal their thoughts and opinions from one another. If their thoughts became the subject of Ñacariya Mun's rebuke, they invariably admitted their lapses in judgment when they were questioned later. Although the monks usually found it amusing when a fellow-monk was roasted by Ñacariya Mun, they also became conscious of their own shortcomings. Such shortcomings could be easily exposed on almsround, or on some other errand outside the monastery, where a monk encountered an emotionally stimulating object that stuck in his mind and became a preoccupation. Such indiscretion was likely to elicit the kind of fierce response that frightened everyone within earshot and prompted nervous glances all around. Terrified of Ñacariya Mun, ashamed in front of his friends, the culprit was usually shaking as he sat, rooted to his seat, with his head bowed and not daring to look up. When the meeting was over, the monks would ask around and find out that, as always, there was indeed

one in their group whose thoughts caused Ācariya Mun's rebuke. It was rather a pity, for those monks had no intention of offending Ācariya Mun. Like people everywhere with *kilesas*, they were emotionally susceptible to things in their environment. Their mindfulness was simply too slow in catching up with the lightening quickness of their minds thus, Ācariya Mun's frequent scoldings.

Ācariya Mun was extremely quick at reading other people's thoughts. Monks who lived with him had no doubts whatsoever about this. He was able to read our errant thoughts and then caution us about them with unerring accuracy. Only on occasions, when he could not be bothered to say anything, did he remain quiet. Though his rebukes were frequent, he did relax occasionally to let us catch our breath. Otherwise, we'd probably have suffocated to death. Because of my incurable restlessness, I myself was chastised more often than most. But those of us who endured and lived patiently with him over a long period of time were usually energized in our meditation practice. We developed a firm anchor in our hearts as a result of his exhortations which constantly forged, tempered, and beat our practice into shape. Constant vigilance, and the restraint it fostered, made it possible to cultivate the mindfulness and wisdom necessary to resist incidental temptations. In the context of the art of magic, it can be compared to learning the necessary skills and then testing them out against the teacher until one is impervious to attack. Calm and secure in the knowledge that their harmful potential has been neutralized, one can withstand guns and swords, unperturbed.<sup>34</sup> In the context of Dhamma practice, it means one can stand firm in the face of evocative emotions and temptations that normally arouse desire, without fear of being influenced or seduced. In other words, remaining unperturbed in all situations.

The trouble is, most people react to talk about Nibbāna by feeling oddly dejected and dismayed. It doesn't put them in a good mood as does talk about worldly matters. Having no personal experience of Nibbāna, they probably think that it's not as enjoyable as the humdrum things they are accustomed to. Not only has the present generation lost interest in Nibbāna \_ even our parents and grandparents were not much interested, nor did they encourage others to take an interest. At most, they may have encouraged their family to go to the local monastery from time to time to take the precepts and hear Dhamma. Perhaps they sometimes encouraged their families to do meditation practice to calm them down

a bit and keep their behavior within acceptable limits. Of course, one way or another they did manage to advise their family and friends to do just about everything else, until fed up with hearing their advice, most people no longer bothered to take it.

Undoubtedly, most people have already decided that Nibbāna must be a very silent place, there being no music or entertainment and no one to indulge them in their favorite pastimes. They probably see it as a place devoid of anything stimulating or exciting, and therefore, they don't want to go there. They fear dropping into a still, silent hell without a soul in sight: There would be no family, no friends, and no sounds, ever, of birds and cars, or laughter and crying. It appears to be a rather bleak, undesirable place in every way. So people who still harbor ambitions do not want to go to Nibbāna. And even if they did, they would be unable to go, for their ambitions would hold them back and make them hesitate.

People who can truly attain Nibbāna are those who have absolutely no worldly ambitions or involvements. Being neither passionate nor impassive, neither relaxed nor tense, but remaining perfectly balanced, they are naturally centered in the Middle Way. Having no desires, no expectations, and no longings, they take no enjoyment from worldly pleasures, which merely agitate the heart and cause frustration. Always imperturbable, they experience only an exquisite, serene happiness that contrasts sharply with the happiness of those whose hearts are corrupted by worldly concerns. Such mundane happiness, being ambiguous and fluctuating, is always fleeting, and unreliable. It resembles murky, muddy water. It's like food that's spicy, sour, bland, and salty all at once. Besides causing indigestion and uncomfortable drowsiness, it is not very appetizing. So people should carefully examine the things they encounter every day and test them to discover which ones are advantageous and which are not. Then they can filter out the unwholesome elements and prevent them from piling up in their hearts until their numbers overwhelm and there is no room to store them all. Otherwise, wherever they look, they will see only this accumulation of misery that they've collected.

When it comes to self-discipline, the wise are much more clever than we are. Everything they do, say, or think is directed precisely toward achieving their intended objective. They are not at odds with the Truth,

nor arrogant or conceited about their achievements. When cautioned, they quickly take the warning to heart as a useful lesson, which is quite different from the way the rest of us react. By following the example of the wise, we will become reasonable, moderate people who refuse to follow those desires that have ruled over our hearts for so long. Our efforts to overcome those desires will thus transform our hearts in a way that definitely results in a degree of contentment that's clearly evident to us. Even without millions in the bank, our own exemplary conduct, plus what little wealth we do possess, will be sufficient to keep us happy.

Clever people manage their lives in a way that is conducive to peace and security. They don't feel the need to rush around trying to make vast sums of money in order to maintain a sense of happiness in their lives. Wealth may bring a measure of happiness, but those who enjoy a moderate amount of wealth, righteously acquired, will inevitably be far more contented than those who acquire their wealth by unscrupulous means. Though its actual ownership is not disputed, dubious wealth doesn't really belong to its owner in any genuine sense. For under the laws of true justice, *kamma* condemns such gains, bestowing fruits of misery as just rewards for the future. Wise people view this prospect with great trepidation, but we, of lesser intelligence, still prefer to scramble headlong after our desires, selfishly indulging in pleasures that come along without ever getting enough to satisfy our appetites. No matter how hard we try, we never seem to experience the kind of contentment that we long for.

During his years in Chiang Mai, Ācariya Mun received numerous letters from Chao Khun Dhammachedi of Wat Bodhisomphon monastery in Udon Thani province. In his letters, Chao Khun Dhammachedi, who had been a disciple of Ācariya Mun since his youth, always invited him to return to Udon Thani. Ācariya Mun never replied to those letters, nor did he accept the invitation. Then in the year 1940, Chao Khun Dhammachedi traveled from Udon Thani all the way to the isolated region where Ācariya Mun lived to invite him personally, and thus gave him a chance to answer all the correspondence he had received. He told Chao Khun Dhammachedi that he had read all his letters, but he reckoned they were small and insignificant compared to the 'big letter' that had just arrived; so, now he was ready to reply. That said, both monks laughed heartily.

At the first opportunity, Chao Khun Dhammachedi personally invited Ācariya Mun to return to the province of Udon Thani where he once lived so many years before. Chao Khun Dhammachedi informed him that his disciples in Udon Thani, missing him very much, had asked him to invite Ācariya Mun on their behalf. This time he could not object he had to accept. Chao Khun Dhammachedi suggested they work out a timetable for picking up Ācariya Mun and escorting him back to Udon Thani. They decided on the beginning of May 1940.

As his departure from the mountain retreat became imminent, large groups of terrestrial *devas* pleaded with him to stay. Being very reluctant to see him leave, they told him that *devas* from all realms experienced peace and contentment while he lived there, due to the power of loving kindness which emanated from him and issued in all directions day and night. Feeling very happy in his presence, they all greatly revered him. They were unwilling to have him leave for they knew that their sense of contentment from his presence would soon fade. Even their social cohesion could be affected as a result.

Ācariya Mun told them that, having given his word, he must leave. He must honor his promise he couldn't possibly renege on it. Unlike most people, a monk's word is a solemn covenant. A monk is a man of virtue so he must remain true to his word. If he goes back on a promise, his virtue immediately disappears and his worth as a monk is then devalued. So a monk must preserve his moral integrity.

When May arrived Ācariya Mun and the monks accompanying him to Udon Thani left their mountain retreat and began the long trek to the city of Chiang Mai where they stayed at Wat Chedi Luang monastery. Ācariya Oon of Wat Tipayaratananimit monastery arrived with some lay supporters at about the same time to receive Ācariya Mun and to escort him to Udon Thani. Ācariya Mun remained at Wat Chedi Luang monastery for about one week. During that time, a large group of his local devotees came to persuade him to extend his stay in Chiang Mai for the benefit of everyone there. But having accepted the invitation to Udon Thani, he could not delay his departure.

Before he left, Chao Khun Rājakawi asked him to give a special talk on the occasion of Visākhā Pýjā<sup>35</sup> to serve as a remembrance for his many devotees. At that time, I had just myself arrived in Chiang Mai and so

listened to this discourse with great interest. He spoke for exactly three hours that day; and what he said was so impressive that I have never forgotten it. Here is the essence of what he said:

"Today is Visākha Pýjã. It celebrates the day the Lord Buddha was born, the day he attained enlightenment, and the day he passed away into *Parinibbãna*. The birth of a Buddha stands in marked contrast to the births of all other beings. In being born, the Buddha did not succumb to worldly illusions about birth, life, or death. More than that, through the power of his all-encompassing wisdom, he was able to realize the true nature of birth, life, and death \_ attaining what we call 'enlightenment'. At the appropriate time he bid farewell to his *khandhas*, which were the tools he relied on to develop virtue to perfection; and then passed away *sugato*, as befits a world teacher who is absolutely beyond reproach. Before departing his physical body, which had reached the end of its natural life, he bequeathed the Dhamma to the world, intending that it represent him and fulfill the role of teacher in his stead. Such a gift is worthy of our complete faith, and worthy of any sacrifice.

"As you know, we are born as human beings because we possess sufficient inherent goodness to make it possible. But we shouldn't take ourselves and our inherent goodness for granted by neglecting to develop virtuous qualities in this life to enhance our future lives. Otherwise, the human status we enjoy may disappear to be irrevocably eclipsed by a low, undesirable birth. Be it high status or low status with happiness of every possible degree up to the Ultimate Happiness, or pain and suffering of every possible degree down to the most excruciating we ourselves are responsible for our own life circumstances. Don't think that only those presently affected by adverse circumstances experience such things. As potential life situations, they are shared in common by everyone, becoming our own personal heritage if and when we create the conditions for them. For this reason, the Buddha taught that we should never look down on other people, holding them in contempt. Seeing someone living in misery or abject poverty, we should reflect on the possibility that one day we could also find ourselves in such a position, or one even worse. At the moment of reckoning, none of us has the power to avoid the consequences of our actions. All of us share the same capacity to make good and bad *kamma*, so it's possible that some day we will be in their position and

they will be in ours. The *sāsa* is a doctrine that we can use to examine ourselves and others, enabling us to correctly choose the best possible way forward. In this respect it has no equal.

"Throughout my many years as a monk I have remained firmly committed to the practice of examining myself, striving always to discriminate between the good and the bad things arising within me from moment to moment. I now clearly realize that the heart is the principal instigator in the creation of *kamma*. In other words, our hearts are the source of all *kamma* *kamma* that belongs solely to the one who makes it. There should be no doubt about this. Those doubting the existence of *kamma* and so, disbelieving of its effects blindly take their own situation for granted until they're beyond redemption. Although they've been born and raised by their parents, such people fail to see the value of the mother and father who gave them life and sustenance. They look no further than their own selfish existence, unaware of how awful it really is, for they care little that they were born and raised by parents who supported their growth and development in every way. A child's body is nourished by the food and drink its parents provide, allowing it to grow up strong and healthy. If such actions are not *kamma*, what then should they be called? And if the nourishment the body receives in this way is not the fruit of *kamma*, then what else, in truth, could it be?

"Obviously there is a root cause for all the goodness and evil, all the happiness and suffering experienced by people everywhere in the world. When someone's reckless thinking leads him to commit suicide there's a reason behind it. The root cause, *kamma*, manifesting itself within the heart, can have such an impact on a person that he actually takes his own life without realizing that the *kamma* he has already created is playing a role. What is that but total blindness?

"*Kamma* exists as a part of our very being. We create *kamma* every moment, just as the results of our previous *kamma* arise to affect us every moment. If you insist on doubting the existence of *kamma* and its results, then you are stuck at a dead end. *Kamma* is not something that follows us like a dog following its master. On the contrary, our very thoughts, speech, and actions are *kamma*. The true results of *kamma* are the degrees of happiness and suffering experienced by all beings in the world, including those beings who live out their lives unaware of *kamma*. Such ignorance is also a karmic consequence."

I myself listened to this talk with heartfelt satisfaction as I had long been keenly interested in Ācariya Mun. I experienced such a deep sense of joy about him and his Dhamma that I felt as if I were floating on air. I felt that I simply couldn't hear enough. I have given you the gist of what he said so that all of you, who had no opportunity to hear him speak, may understand something about the nature of your *kamma*. *Kamma* being something common to us all, it is possible you may recognize you own *kamma* in his words.

When he finished speaking, Ācariya Mun rose from his seat and prostrated himself in front of the main Buddha image. Chao Khun Rājakawī told him how much everyone had enjoyed the outstanding discourse he had just delivered. Ācariya Mun replied that it might well be his "final encore" since he probably wouldn't return to give another talk due to his declining years. This was his way of telling everyone present that he would not return to Chiang Mai again before he died. As it turned out, this was true Ācariya Mun never again returned to Chiang Mai.

After remaining several more days at Wat Chedi Luang monastery, Ācariya Mun finally left, heading first for Bangkok. Somdet Phra Mahā Wirawong and the other senior monks, together with scores of lay supporters, escorted him from the monastery to the train station. Also present was a host of *devas*. Ācariya Mun said that *devas* filled the sky around him in every direction as they, too, came to escort him to the station. They remained, hovering in the sky, even after he reached the station, waiting to send him off before returning to their respective realms. A chaotic scene ensued as he had to greet the scores of monks and lay people who were gathered there, while he simultaneously tried to psychically bestow his blessing upon all the *devas* who hovered in the air for a final blessing from him. In the end, he was able to turn his undivided attention to the *devas* and bestow his final blessing only after he had finished speaking to all the people and the train began pulling out of the station.

He said he truly felt sorry for those *devas* who held him in such high esteem that they were reluctant to see him leave. They showed all the same signs of distress and disappointment that human beings do. Some even continued to hover behind the train as it sped down the tracks, until finally Ācariya Mun felt it necessary to tell them to return to their



respective realms. They departed reluctantly, wondering if he would ever come back to assist them again. In the end they were to be disappointed, for he never did return. He never mentioned whether the terrestrial *devas* of Chiang Mai came to visit him later on when he lived in the provinces of Udon Thani and Sakon Nakhon.

