

### *Unusual Questions, Enlightening Answers*

Upon arriving in Bangkok, Ācariya Mun went to stay at Wat Boromaniwat monastery, following the instructions telegraphed from Somdet Phra Mahā Wirawong. Before he departed for Udon Thani, many people came to see him at Wat Boromaniwat with questions. Some of these questions were rather unusual, so I have decided to include them.

Question: "I understand that you maintain only one rule instead of the full 227 monastic rules that all other monks keep. Is that true?"

Ācariya Mun: "Yes, I maintain only the one rule."

Question: "Which one do you maintain?"

Ācariya Mun: "My mind."

Question: "So, you don't maintain all 227 rules?"

Ācariya Mun: "I maintain my mind by not allowing any wrong thoughts, speech, or actions that would violate the prohibitions laid down by the Buddha, be they 227 in number or even more than that. Those who doubt whether or not I maintain the 227 monastic rules can think and say what they please. As for me, from the day of my ordination I have always maintained strict control over my mind, as it is the master of body and speech."

Question: "You mean we have to maintain our minds in order to maintain the moral precepts?"

Ācariya Mun: "What else would you maintain to develop good moral virtue, if not your mind? Only the dead have no need to look after their minds, much less their actions and speech. The wise have never claimed that dead people have a moral bias, it being impossible for corpses to show willful intent. If corpses did have morality, then it would be a dead and useless one. But I am not a corpse, so I cannot maintain a dead man's morality. I must do what befits one fully

endowed with both good and evil tendencies I must maintain my mind in moral virtue."

Question: "I've heard it said that keeping our actions and speech in good order is called morality, which lead me to understand that it's not really necessary to look after the mind. That's why I asked."

Ācariya Mun: "It is quite true that morality entails keeping our actions and speech in good order. But before we can put our actions and speech in good moral order, we must consider the source of moral virtue. It originates with the master of body and speech the mind which makes them behave properly. Once we have established that the mind is the determining factor, we must ascertain how it relates to action and speech so that they stay in good moral order that is a source of comfort to us and others alike. It's not only moral virtue that the mind must deal with. The mind supervises the performance of every activity we engage in, making sure that it's done in a proper, orderly fashion to produce excellent results each time.

"Treating an illness requires diagnosing its cause, then devising an effective cure before it develops into a chronic condition. Taking care of morality requires the mind to be in effective control. Otherwise, the result will be tarnished morality that's patchy, and full of holes. Such splintered, inconsistent virtue is truly pitiful. It moves people to live an aimless existence and inevitably causes an adverse effect on the entire religion. Besides that, it's not a source of comfort to the person practicing it, nor is it admired by his peers.

"I have never done much studying. After I ordained, my teacher took me as a wandering monk into the mountains and forests. I learned Dhamma from the trees and grasses, the rivers and the streams, the cliffs and the caves. I learned it from the sounds of birds and wild animals, from the natural environment around me. I didn't study the scriptures long enough to become well-versed in the teaching on moral virtue; and my answers to your questions tend to reflect that primitive education. I feel rather inadequate for my inability to provide answers that would be suitably eloquent for your edification."

Question: "What is the nature of morality and what constitutes genuine moral virtue?"

Ācariya Mun: "Being mindfully aware of our thoughts; knowing which things are appropriate to think about and which are not; taking care how we express ourselves by way of body, speech, and mind; controlling these three factors so that they remain within the confines of what is morally acceptable. By properly adhering to these conditions we can be confident that the moral nature of our behavior is exemplary and we are never unruly or offensive. Apart from such exemplary conduct in body, speech, and mind, it's difficult to say what genuine moral virtue is, since it's impossible to separate its practice from the person who maintains it. They are not distinct entities, like a house and its owner the house on one hand, the owner on another. Trying to distinguish between moral virtue and the person who maintains it is very problematic, so I wouldn't want to do it. Even the peace of mind resulting from the practice of moral virtue cannot actually be separated from that moral virtue. If morality could be isolated in this manner, it would probably have been on sale in the stores long ago. In such a case, people's moral virtue would probably become a lucrative target for thieves to steal and sell off to the highest bidder, leaving many people totally deprived. Like all other possessions, moral virtue would then become a source of anxiety. It would cause Buddhists to become weary of striving for it, and insecure about holding onto their acquisition. Consequently, the inability to know what precisely constitutes genuine moral virtue is a way to avoid the dangers arising from moral issues, thus allowing virtuous individuals a clever way to gain peace of mind. Being very wary of the inherent dangers, I have never thought of separating myself from the moral virtue that I practice. Those unwilling to make this separation remain content wherever they go, whatever they do, for they never have to worry about losing their moral virtue. Those who see it as something separate from themselves might worry so much that they end up coming back as ghosts after death to anxiously watch over their store of accumulated virtue. It would be like dying people who fret about their wealth, and therefore, get stuck in a frame of mind where they return as ghosts to keep anxious watch over their accumulated riches."

### *Complete Self-assurance*

One day the abbot of Wat Boromaniwat monastery invited Ācariya Mun for a private conversation with him.<sup>1</sup> He began with a question.

"When you are living alone in the mountains and forests, preferring not to be bothered by monks or lay people, whom do you consult for solutions when a problem arises in your practice? Even though I live in the capitol, which is full of learned scholars who can help me clear up my doubts, still there are times when I find myself so completely baffled that no one is able to help me resolve those dilemmas. I know that you usually live alone; so when questions arise, who do you consult or how do you deal with them? Please explain this to me."

Boldly, Ācariya Mun replied:

"Please allow me to answer you with complete self-assurance which I gained from studying fundamental natural principles: I consult Dhamma, listening to it both day and night in all my daily activities, except in sleep. As soon as I wake up, my heart is immediately in contact with Dhamma. As for problems, my heart carries on a constant debate with them. As old problems are resolved, new ones arise. In resolving one problem, some of the *kilesas* are destroyed, while another that emerges starts another battle with the *kilesas* that remain. Every conceivable type of problem, from the grossest to the subtlest, from the most circumscribed to the most comprehensive, all of them arise and are fought within the heart. Consequently, the heart is the battleground where *kilesas* are confronted and then eliminated each time a problem is resolved.

"I am not so interested in thinking about whom I would consult if problems arise in the future. I'm much more interested in attacking the immediate ones that set the stage for the *kilesas* lurking in the background. By demolishing them at every turn, I gradually eliminate the *kilesas* from my heart. So, I do not concern myself with consulting other monks to help solve my problems and rid my *kilesas*, for it's much quicker to rely on the mindfulness and wisdom that arise continuously in my heart. Each time I'm faced with a problem, I am clearly conscious of the maxim *attāhi attano nātho*<sup>2</sup> oneself is one's own refuge so I use methods I devise from my own mindfulness and wisdom to immediately solve that problem. Instead of trying to glean answers from the scriptures, I depend on Dhamma, in the form of mindfulness and wisdom, that arise within me, to accept the challenge and find a solution that allows me to proceed, unimpeded. Although some problems are so profound and complex they require a sustained,

meticulous investigative effort, they are no match for the proven effectiveness of mindfulness and wisdom in the end. So they too dissolve away.

"I have no desire to seek the companionship of my fellow monks just so they can help me solve my problems. I much prefer to live alone. Living all alone, solitary in body and mind, means contentment for me. When the time comes for me to die, I shall pass away unencumbered by concerns for the past or the future. At the moment my breath ceases, all other matters will cease with it. I apologize for answering your question so unintelligently. I'm afraid my reasoning wasn't very eloquent."

The abbot, who had listened attentively, was so wholeheartedly convinced by what he heard that he complimented Ācariya Mun.

"You are an exceptional person, as befits one who truly likes living alone in the mountains and forests. The Dhamma that you have presented here cannot be found in the scriptures because the Dhamma recorded in the texts and the natural principles of Dhamma arising in the heart are really quite different. To the extent that the Dhamma in the texts was recorded directly from the mouth of the Lord Buddha by those possessing a level of purity equal to his, to that extent, it is pure and unadulterated. But transcribers of the texts in later generations may not have been so genuinely pure as the original ones, so the overall excellence of the Dhamma as subsequently recorded may have been moderated by its transcribers. For this reason, it is understandable that Dhamma arising fresh from the heart would be different from what is recorded in the scriptures, even though they are both within the scope of what we consider "Dhamma".

"I have no more doubts concerning the question I rather stupidly asked you. Still, such stupidity does have its own benefits, for had I not made a stupid inquiry, I would not have heard your sagacious reply. Not only have I sold my stupidity today, but I have also bought a lot of wisdom. You might also say that I've discharged a load of ignorance to acquire a wealth of wisdom.

"I do have one other question though. After the Lord Buddha's disciples took leave of him to go out and practice on their own, they returned to ask his advice when problems arose in the course of their practice.

Once he helped clear up their doubts, they again returned to their respective locations. What was the nature of those problems that the Buddha's disciples sought his advice on?"

Ācariya Mun replied:

"When someone is available for help with quick, timely results, people, who by nature prefer to depend on others, will opt for the shortcut, certain that it is better than trying to go it alone. Except, of course, when the distances involved make traveling there and back entirely impractical. Then they are obliged to struggle as best they can, relying on the strength of their own mindfulness and wisdom, even if this does mean slower results.

"Being omniscient, the Lord Buddha could help solve people's problems and resolve their doubts much more clearly and quickly than they could expect to do on their own. Consequently, disciples of his, who experienced problems or had doubts, felt obliged to seek his advice in order to resolve them as quickly and decisively as possible. If the Lord Buddha were alive today and I was in a position to visit him, I too would go to ask him questions that I have never been able to resolve to my satisfaction. In that way I could avoid having to trudge along laboriously, wasting precious time as I've done in the past.

"Still, reaching definite conclusions on our own, while practicing alone, is a laborious task that we must all undertake, for, as I've mentioned, we must ultimately depend on ourselves. But having a teacher who elucidates the correct way of practice and then recommends the right methods to follow helps us see practical results quickly and easily. This contrasts sharply with results we achieve from guesswork when we are practicing alone. I have seen the disadvantages of such uncertainty in my own practice, but it was an unavoidable situation as I did not have a teacher to instruct me in those days. I had to make my way tentatively, stumbling and picking myself up, making numerous mistakes along the way. The crucial factor was my resolve, which remained single-minded and unyielding. Because it never lapsed, never waned, I was able to smooth out the rough patches in my practice, little by little, until I gradually achieved a true sense of satisfaction. That contentment gave me the opportunity to get my balance on the path of practice; and this,

in turn, allowed me to look deeply into the nature of the world and the nature of Dhamma in the way I've already mentioned."

The abbot asked many more questions of Ñcariya Mun, but having covered the most important ones, I shall pass over the rest.

While staying in Bangkok, Ñcariya Mun was regularly invited out to eat in private homes, but he declined, for he found it difficult to take care of bodily necessities after he finished eating.

When he felt the time was appropriate, Ñcariya Mun left Bangkok and headed for Korat where he had been invited to stay by devotees in Nakhon Ratchasima. Staying at Wat Pa Salawan monastery, he received numerous visitors who came to ask him questions. There was one which was especially interesting that Ñcariya Mun himself recounted to me \_ one which I have never forgotten even though I tend to be forgetful. Perhaps I suspected it would one day form part of his biography! This question was asked as a means of discovering the true nature of Ñcariya Mun's attainment, and whether he was actually worthy of the popular acclaim he received. The questioner was an ardent student of the way of *kammaāhāna* who earnestly sought the truth.

Questioner: "When you accepted the invitation to come to Korat, was it simply because you want to help your devotees here, or have you also come hoping to strive for the attainment of *magga*, *phala*, and Nibbāna?"

Ñcariya Mun: "Being neither hungry nor deluded, I am not searching for anything that would create *dukkha* and cause me trouble. Hungry people are never content as they are, so they run around searching here and there, latching on to whatever they find without considering if their behavior is right or not. In the end, their acquisitiveness scorches them like a blazing fire. Deluded people are always searching for something. But I have no delusion, so I am not searching. Those who are not deluded have no need to search. Everything is already perfect within their hearts, so why should they bother? Why should they get excited and grasp at shadows when they know perfectly well that shadows are not genuine truths. Genuine truths are the Four Noble Truths, and they are already present within the minds and bodies of all living beings.

Having fully understood these truths, I am no longer deluded; so what else would you have me seek? I'm still alive and people need my help, so I assist them it's as simple as that.

"It's much easier to find precious stones than it is to find good people with Dhamma in their hearts. One virtuous person is more valuable than all the money in the world, because all that money cannot bring the world the kind of genuine peace and happiness that a beneficent person can. Just one such individual is capable of bringing so much enduring peace and happiness to the world. The Lord Buddha and the Arahants are excellent examples of this. Each virtuous person is more precious than any amount of wealth, and each realizes that good deeds have far greater value than money. As long as they remain virtuous and people around them are contented, they don't care if they are poor. But fools, preferring money over virtue and virtuous people, will do anything to get money. They can't be bothered about the consequences of their actions, no matter how wicked or depraved they may be. Even the devil is so disgusted and so fearful they will wreak havoc among the denizens of hell that he's reluctant to accept them as inmates. But such fools care about only one thing: getting their hands on some money, no matter how ill-gotten. Let evil settle the accounts, and to hell with the devil! Virtuous people versus wicked people, material wealth versus the virtues of Dhamma, this is how they differ. Sensible people should think about them right now before it's too late to choose the correct path.

"Ultimately the varying results that we experience depend on the *kamma* we make. We have no choice but to accept the consequences dictated by our *kamma* — remonstrations are of no avail. It's for this very reason that living beings differ so widely in everything from the type of existence they are born into, with their different bodily forms and emotional temperaments, to the degrees of pleasure and pain they experience. All such things form part of one's own personal makeup, a personal destiny for which each of us must take full responsibility. We must each bear our own burden. We must accept the good and the bad, the pleasant and the painful experiences that come our way, for no one has the power to disown these things. The karmic law of cause and effect is not a judicial law: it is the law of our very existence a law which each one of us creates independently. Why have you asked me this question anyway?"

This remarkably robust response, which I heard about from Ācariya Mun as well as from a monk who accompanied him on that occasion, was so impressive that I have never forgotten it.

Questioner: "Please forgive me, but I have heard your excellent reputation praised far and wide for a long time now. Monks and lay people alike all say the same thing: Ācariya Mun is no ordinary monk. I have longed to hear your Dhamma myself, so I asked you that question with this desire in mind. Unfortunately, the lack of discretion in the way I asked may have disturbed you somewhat. I've had a keen interest in practice for many years, and my heart has definitely become more and more peaceful throughout that time. I feel that my life has not been wasted, for I have been fortunate enough to encounter the Buddhasāna and now have paid homage to a renowned teacher revered for his excellent practice and superb virtue. The clear, precise answer you gave me a moment ago exceeded my expectations. Today my doubts have been allayed, at least as far as is possible for one still burdened with *kilesas*. It's now up to me to carry on with my own practice as best I can."

Ācariya Mun: "The way you phrased your question prompted me to answer as I did, for in truth I am neither hungry nor deluded. What else would you have me search for? I had enough of hunger and delusion back in the days when I was still inexperienced in the way of practice. Back then, no one was aware of how I nearly died striving in the mountains and forests before I felt secure in my practice. It was only later as people began to seek me out that my fame started to spread. But I didn't hear anyone praising me at the time when I passed out, unconscious, three times and barely survived to tell about it. This renown came only long after the event. Now everyone lauds my achievements, but what's the use in that?"

"If you want to discover the superior qualities latent within yourself, then you must take the initiative and practice. It's no use waiting until you are dead and then invite monks to chant auspicious verses for your spiritual benefit. That's not what we call 'scratching the place that itches' don't say I didn't warn you. If you want to get rid of that itch, you must hurry and immediately scratch the right place; that is, you must intensify your efforts to do good in order get rid of your attachment and concern for all material things of this world.

Possessions like wealth and property do not really belong to us we lay claim to them in name only. In doing so, we overlook our true worth. The wealth we accumulate in this world can be used wisely to bring us some measure of happiness. But if we're very stupid, it can soon become a blazing fire that completely destroys us.

"The venerable individuals who transcended *dukkha* in ages past did so by accumulating virtuous qualities within themselves until they became an important source of refuge for all of us. Perhaps you think they had no cherished possessions in those days. Do you honestly believe that wealth and beauty are something unique to the present day and age? Is that why you're so immoderate and self-indulgent? Is our country so lacking in cemeteries to cremate or bury the dead that you figure you won't have to die? Is that why you're so rashly overconfident? You are constantly worried about what you will eat and how you will sleep and how to keep yourself entertained, as if the world were about to vanish at any moment and take everything with it. So you rush around scooping up such a mass of useless stuff that you can hardly lug it all around. Even animals don't indulge themselves to that extent, so you shouldn't assume that you are so much more exalted and clever than they are. Such blind ignorance will only make matters much worse. Should you fall on hard times in the future, who knows? You may find yourself even more destitute than the animals you disparage. You should start laying the groundwork for a proper understanding of this matter right now, while you are still in a position to do so.

"I must apologize for speaking so harshly, but it is necessary to use harsh language to persuade people to abandon evil and do good. When nobody is willing to accept the truth, this world of ours will see the *sāsana* come to an end. Virtually everyone has done a certain amount of gross, evil *kamma* in the past for which they must inevitably suffer the consequences. People who still do not understand this are unlikely to see their own faults enough to remedy the situation. Instead, they tend to fault the Teaching for being too severe and so the situation remains hopeless."

At this point the author would like to apologize to all you gentle readers for having been so presumptuous and indiscreet in what I've just written. My purpose was to preserve for posterity the way that Ācariya Mun taught Dhamma on certain occasions. I tried to present it in a

manner that reflected his speech as accurately as possible. I wanted to record it for the sake of those wishing to contemplate the truth of his teaching. Being thus reluctant to reduce the forcefulness of his remarks, I tried to disregard any qualms I had and wrote precisely what he said.

Wherever Ācariya Mun sojourned, people constantly came to see him about Dhamma questions. Unfortunately, I cannot recall all the questions and answers that have been recounted to me over the years by monks who were present on those occasions. I noted down and remember only those answers which especially impressed me. I have forgotten those that failed to make a strong impression; and now they are gone.

After a suitable interval, Ācariya Mun left Nakhon Ratchasima to resume his journey to Udon Thani. When his train pulled into the station at Khon Kaen, a crowd of local people were waiting to invite him to break his journey there and stay in Khon Kaen for awhile. Since he was unable to accept the invitation, his devotees in Khon Kaen were disappointed at missing the opportunity to meet with him.

Finally arriving in Udon Thani, Ācariya Mun went to stay with Chao Khun Dhammachedi at Wat Bodhisomphon monastery. People from the provinces of Nong Khai and Sakon Nakhon, as well as Udon Thani, were waiting there to pay their respects. From there he proceeded to Wat Non Niwet monastery where he remained for the rainy season retreat. Once a week on observance day, during the rains retreat that year, Chao Khun Dhammachedi took a group of public officials and other lay supporters to hear Ācariya Mun's Dhamma talks in the evening. It was, of course, Chao Khun Dhammachedi himself who had taken so much trouble to invite Ācariya Mun to return to Udon Thani. He had trekked through the thick forests of Chiang Mai to personally offer that auspicious invitation. All of us, who met Ācariya Mun and heard his Dhamma after he arrived in Udon Thani, owe Chao Khun Dhammachedi a sincere debt of gratitude. Chao Khun Dhammachedi was always keenly interested in the way of practice. He never tired of talking about Dhamma, no matter how long the conversation lasted. He was especially appreciative when the Dhamma discussion dealt with meditation practice. He felt great respect and affection for Ācariya Mun. Therefore, he took a special interest in his well-being while he stayed in Udon Thani, constantly asking people who had seen Ācariya

Mun recently how he was getting along. In addition, he always encouraged people to meet with Ācariya Mun and get to know him. He would even tirelessly escort those who did not dare go alone. His efforts in that respect were outstanding and truly admirable.

During the dry season following the rains retreat, Ācariya Mun preferred to wander off into the countryside, seeking seclusion where he could practice the way of Dhamma in a manner most suitable to his character. He liked to stay in the vicinity of Ban Nong Nam Khem village, which was located about seven miles from the town of Udon Thani. He lived for long periods in this area because it had pleasant forests that were conducive to meditation practice.

His presence in Udon Thani during the rains retreat greatly benefited both the monks and the general public from the town and surrounding districts. As news of his arrival spread, monks and lay people from the area gradually began to converge on the monastery where he resided in order to practice with him and hear his Dhamma. Most of these people had been disciples of his from the time he lived in the area before going to Chiang Mai. Upon receiving word that he had returned, they were overjoyed at the prospect of seeing him again, offering him alms, and hearing his advice. He was not very old yet, being only about 70 then. He was still able to get around without much trouble. By nature he tended to be quick and agile anyway, always ready to get up and move on, never staying too long in one place. He much preferred to wander with no specific destination, hiking through the mountains and forests where life was peaceful and undisturbed.

### *Past Lives*

In Udon Thani, just as they had in other places, the local people often came to Ācariya Mun with questions. While some of their questions were very similar to the ones that he had received many times before, the more unusual ones arose from the views and opinions of certain individuals. Among the more commonly asked questions were those dealing with past-life associations<sup>3</sup> of living beings who have developed virtuous qualities together over a period of many lives, and how such inherent character traits have continuity in their present lives. Other questions dealt with past-life associations of husbands and wives who

had lived together happily for many lifetimes. Ācariya Mun said that people had more doubts about these questions than any others.

As for the first question, Ācariya Mun did not specify the exact nature of what he was asked. He merely mentioned the question of past-life associations in a general way and gave this explanation:

"Things like this must originate with the establishment of volitional intent, for that determines the way the lives of specific individuals become interrelated."

The second question was more specific: How is it possible to determine whether the love between a man and a woman has been preordained by previous association in lives past? How can we distinguish between a loving relationship based on past-life connections and one which is not?

Ācariya Mun replied:

"It is very difficult to know with any certainty whether or not our love for this person or our relationship with that person has its roots in a mutual affinity developed over many lifetimes. For the most part, people fall in love and get married rather blindly. Feeling hungry, a person's tendency is to just reach out and grab some food to satisfy that hunger. They will eat whatever is available as long as it is sufficient for their day-to-day needs. The same can be applied to past-life associations as well. Although such relationships are a common feature of life in this world, it is not at all easy to find genuine cases of people who fall in love and get married simply due to a long-standing past-life association. The problem is, the *kilesas* that cause people to fall in love don't spare anyone's blushes, and they certainly don't wait patiently to give past-life affinities a chance to have a say in the matter first. All the *kilesas* ask is that there be someone of the opposite sex who suits their fancy \_ that's enough for passion to arise and impulsively grab a hold. Those *kilesas* that cause people to fall in love can turn ordinary people into 'fighters' who will battle desperately to the bitter end without respect for modesty or moderation, no matter what the consequences might be. Even if they see they have made a mistake, they will still refuse to admit defeat. Even the prospect of death cannot make them abandon their fighting style. This is what the *kilesas* that cause people

to fall in love are all about. Displaying themselves conspicuously in people's hearts, they are extremely difficult to control.

"Anyone who wants to be a reasonable, responsible person should avoid giving these *kilesas* their head, never permitting them to charge on ahead unchecked. So you must exercise enough self-control to insure that, even if you know nothing about your past-life associations, you will still have an effective means of reining in your heart \_ a means of avoiding being dragged through the mire and down a steep, dark precipice. Unless you are an accomplished meditator with an aptitude for perceiving various types of phenomena, you will find it very difficult to access knowledge about your past lives. Whatever the case, you must always have enough presence of mind to maintain proper self-control. Don't let those offensive *kilesas* burst their banks, pouring out like flood waters with no levee to contain them. Thus you will be able to avoid sinking deep into the great quagmire of unbridled love."

Questioner: "What should a husband and wife, who have lived together happily in this life and wish to remain together in the next life, do to insure that they'll be reborn together in the future? Is it enough that they both hold the same desire for meeting again in future lives?"

Ācariya Mun: "That desire merely creates the prospect of achieving one's intended objective; but if that desire is not accompanied by concrete action it will not bring the expected results. Take the example of someone who desires to be rich. If that person is too lazy to go out and earn his wealth, then there is no way he'll ever be rich. To stand any chance of success, an intention must be supported by a concerted effort toward reaching that goal. It's the same with a husband and wife who wish to maintain their loving relationship, living together happily in each successive life. To avoid being separated, their viewpoints must be analogous, and they must remain faithful to each other. They must refrain from taking advantage of each other because this destroys their mutual trust and leads to dissatisfaction. They must cherish virtue, behave properly, and trust each other. By establishing a mutual understanding about their partnership and then making a sincere effort to foster their future together by doing what is beneficial to it, they can expect to fulfill that desire for it is well within their power to do so. On the other hand, should the opposite hold true with either the husband being good while the wife is bad, or vice versa, with one or the other

doing only that which pleases him or her then no matter how many hundreds of resolutions they make together, they will all come to naught. Their very actions will perforce undermine their desire. And what about you? Do you cherish the desire to be together with your wife above all other wishes?"

Questioner: "I desire nothing more than the fulfillment of this wish. Wealth and all its trappings, rank, title, royal status, heavenly bliss, or spiritual attainment none of these would mean anything without my wife, who is my one true love. This is the major focus of every person's desire, so we must wish for a loving mate first of all; then other desires can be considered in due course. That is why I had to ask you about this matter first, although I was embarrassed and afraid you might scold me. Such is the reality of the world we live in, though people are often too shy to speak about it."

Ācariya Mun laughed: "That being the case, you have to take your wife wherever you go, right?"

Questioner: "I'm ashamed to say that it's really concern about my wife that has prevented me from ordaining as a monk all this time. I am worried that she'd be awfully lonely with no one there to advise and reassure her. My children just bother her for money to buy things, making a nuisance of themselves all the time. I don't see how they can offer her any security or peace of mind. I can't help worrying about her.

"There's another thing I don't understand. The Dhamma teaches that the heavenly realms are inhabited by both male and female *devas*, much like the human world. Beings there live a blissfully happy existence, enjoying a variety of pleasures that make it a very inviting place to live. But, unlike here on earth or in the heavens, it seems that no distinction is made between male and female beings in the *brahma* realms. Doesn't it get kind of lonely there? I mean, they have no one to cheer them up or humor them when they get in a bad mood. And Nibbāna is even worse \_ there is no involvement with anything whatsoever. One is absolutely self-reliant in every way. Without the need to depend on anyone or anything for help, there is no need for one to become involved with others in anyway. One is truly independent. But how can one possibly take pride in anything there? Ordinarily, someone reaching an exalted state like Nibbāna should expect to be honored and

praised by the other beings who live there. At least in the world, a prosperous person who has wealth and social status receives praise and admiration from his fellow human beings. But those going to Nibbāna find only silence there's no question of receiving praise and admiration from their peers. Which makes me wonder how such total silence can truly be a state of happiness. Please forgive me for asking such a crazy, unorthodox question, but unless I find out from someone who really knows the answer, this dilemma will continue to trouble me to no end."

Ācariya Mun: "The heavenly realms, the *brahma* realms, and Nibbāna are not reserved for skeptics like you. They are reserved for those who can realize their own true inner worth. Only such people realize the value of the heavenly realms, the *brahma* realms, and Nibbāna because they understand that the value of each successive realm increases relative to the virtuous qualities inherent in those who would attain them. Somebody like you can hardly dream of attaining such states. Even if you wanted to, you wouldn't be able to go as long as your wife was still around. Were she to die, you would still be unable to stop yearning for her long enough to start wishing for a heavenly existence. The way you feel, even the exalted *brahma* realms and Nibbāna cannot compare with your wife, since those states cannot take care of you like she can. Thus, you don't want to go, because you are afraid that you will lose the one who takes care of all your needs."

Ācariya Mun and his questioner both laughed heartily, then Ācariya Mun continued: "Even the kinds of happiness we experience here in the human world vary widely according to individual preferences. It is comparable to the way our sense faculties, which coexist in the same physical body, deal with different types of sensations. For example, the eyes prefer to see forms, the ears prefer to hear sounds, the nose prefers smells, the tongue prefers tastes, the body prefers tactile sensations, while the mind prefers to perceive mental objects each according to its own natural bias. They can't all be expected to have the same preference. Partaking of a good meal is one way to find pleasure. Living happily married together is yet another form of pleasure. The world has never been short of pleasant experiences, for they are an indispensable part of life that living beings everywhere feel obliged to pursue. There are forms of happiness experienced here on earth; there are others experienced in the heavenly realms, and still others in the *brahma* realms. Then there is the "happiness" of Nibbāna which is

experienced by those who have totally eradicated the vexatious *kilesas* from their hearts. Their happiness is something entirely different from the worldly happiness of those with *kilesas*.

"If the happiness you receive from your wife's company is really all you need, then why bother looking at sights and listening to sounds? Why bother eating or sleeping? Why bother developing virtuous qualities by giving donations, maintaining morality, or doing meditation? All you need do is live with your wife and let that happiness be the sum of all happiness you would otherwise receive from these sources. You could save yourself a lot of trouble that way. But can you actually do it?"

Questioner: "Oh no, sir! How could I possibly do that? What about all those times when we quarrel with each other? How could I make all my happiness dependent on her alone? That would just complicate my life even more."

Ācariya Mun said this man had a rather bold, forthright character and, for a layman, he had a very keen interest in moral virtue. He was deeply devoted to Ācariya Mun who usually made an effort to give him special attention. This man used to come to see Ācariya Mun and casually start up a conversation when there were no other visitors around. Normally, other people could not bring themselves to ask Ācariya Mun the kinds of questions he did. He was extremely fond of his wife and children, while his fond devotion for Ācariya Mun made him a frequent visitor at the monastery. If he came and found Ācariya Mun with visitors, he would simply pay his respects, then go off to help the monks with the air of someone who feels quite at home in a monastery. He chose those occasions when no visitors were present to ask the questions that intrigued him. And Ācariya Mun was kind enough to oblige him nearly every time.

Ācariya Mun was exceptionally clever at recognizing a person's basic character traits; and treated each individual according to his assessment. Whether speaking casually or giving a discourse, he always tailored his remarks to fit the audience, as you can no doubt see from what I have written so far.

While Ācariya Mun lived at Wat Non Niwet monastery in Udon Thani, numerous monks came to seek his guidance, and many spent the rains

retreat under his tutelage. In those days, Wat Non Niwet monastery was a much quieter place than it is today. There was very little traffic back then and very few people came to visit. By and large, people who did come to the monastery were those with a genuine interest in making merit and developing virtuous qualities unlike nowadays when people tend to come and disturb the monks' peaceful environment whether they intend to or not. Back then, monks could practice as they pleased without disturbance. Consequently, many monks developed themselves spiritually, becoming a source of contentment not only to themselves, but also to the local people who looked to monks for refuge.

Ācariya Mun instructed the monks in the evening. He usually began with a general explanation of moral virtue, followed by *samādhī* and then wisdom, going briefly through them stage by stage until the highest level of absolute freedom the essential goal of Dhamma. He then went back and gave a comprehensive exposition of how a monk should practice to attain the various stages of Dhamma that he had outlined. For monks engaged in meditation practice, he always emphasized the vital importance of mindful adherence to the monastic code of discipline.

"Only a monk who is firm in his discipline and respectful of all the training rules can be considered a full-fledged monk. He should not transgress the minor training rules merely because he considers them to be somehow insignificant. Such negligence indicates someone who feels no shame about immoral behavior, and it may eventually lead to more serious transgressions. A monk must strictly adhere to the monastic code of discipline to make sure that his moral behavior is not punctuated with unsightly blemishes or gaps. In that way, he feels comfortable and confident living among his peers. He need never be concerned that his teacher or his fellow monks will be critical or reproachful. For the inner monk in your heart to reach perfection, starting from Sotāpanna and progressing to Arahant, you must be steady and relentless in your effort to attain each successive level of both *samādhī* and wisdom. If you persevere in this manner, these faculties will arise and continue to develop until they are able to scrub clean that filthy mess of defilements in your heart.

"A monk's conduct and speech should be absolutely above reproach. His *citta* should be absolutely superb by virtue of the Dhamma qualities

that he develops step by step: *samādhī*, *paññā*, *vimutti*, and *vimuttiñāḍadassana*.<sup>4</sup> A monk should never be dreary or sad. He should never appear undignified, shunning his fellows because a guilty conscience is eating away inside him, troubling his heart. This is contrary to the way of the Lord Buddha, whose splendid internal conduct and external behavior were irreproachable. Following in his footsteps, a monk must muster the resolute courage to abandon all evil and do only good. He must be a man of integrity who is honest with himself and his peers while being faithful to the Dhamma and the Discipline. He will thus be supported by his exemplary practice everywhere he goes. The brightness of his mindfulness and wisdom will light the way as his heart will be suffused with the taste of Dhamma. He will never find himself trapped in a state of delusion with no means of escape. Such are the characteristics inherent in a true disciple of the Lord Buddha.

Study them carefully and take them to heart. Adhere closely to them as the basis for a bright, trouble-free future when you can claim them as your own valuable, personal possessions."

This was how Ācariya Mun usually instructed practicing monks.

Monks who had doubts or questions about their practice could consult individually with Ācariya Mun during the day when the time did not conflict with his daily routine. His daily life had a regular pattern which he tended to follow without fail wherever he stayed. Rising from his meditation seat early in the morning, he walked meditation outside his hut until it was time to go on almsround. After collecting alms food in the village and eating his morning meal, he again walked meditation until noon and then took a short rest. Once rested, he sat in meditation for awhile before continuing his walking meditation until four p. m. At four, he swept the open areas around his residence. When he finished, he bathed, and again practiced walking meditation for many hours. Upon leaving his meditation track, he entered his hut to do several hours of chanting. Following that, he again sat in meditation late into the night. Normally, he slept no more than four hours a night. On special occasions he went entirely without sleep, sitting in meditation until dawn. When he was young, he displayed a diligence in his practice that none of his contemporaries could match. Even in old age he maintained his characteristic diligence, although he did relax a bit

due to his strength, which declined with each passing day. But he differed significantly from the rest of us in that his mind showed no signs of weakness even as his health gradually deteriorated.

Such was the life of a great man who set a perfect example for us all. He never neglected his personal responsibilities, nor did he relax the relentless effort which had been such an important source of strength, spurring him on to that gratifying victory deep in the mountains of Chiang Mai, as we have seen. As human beings, we all possess attributes that should allow us to duplicate Ñcariya Mun's achievement. In actual practice, those able to achieve the kind of unqualified success that he did are far and few between. Despite the fact that the world is now grossly overpopulated, very few people indeed will see their hopes fulfilled by attaining this exalted goal. In the present age, such an attainment is very rare.

The outstanding difference between someone like Ñcariya Mun and the rest of us is the degree of diligence and determination he applied to the pursuit of knowledge and understanding, an effort firmly grounded in the four *iddhipāda*: *chanda*, *viriya*, *citta*, and *vimayāsa*.<sup>5</sup> And when the causes are so different, the results are bound to be radically different as well \_ so much so that it's almost unbelievable how varied they can be from one person to the next. But the good and bad results that people receive from their actions are evident everywhere in the world around us, and they cannot be denied. We must acknowledge the obvious: that a mixture of goodness and evil, happiness and suffering arises in each and every one of us. There is no way we can divest ourselves of them.

Among modern-day *ācariyas*, Ñcariya Mun's life story is splendidly unique. A rich story, it flowers and bears fruit from beginning to end. Magnificent every step of the way, it is a life worthy of everyone's heartfelt respect. He is now revered far and wide in places where people have heard about his excellent reputation. It's a great shame that so many Buddhists who were keenly interested in Dhamma never heard of him while he was still alive. Although they might have very much wanted to meet a man of such exceptional virtue, they never had a chance to do so. This was largely because he did not like to frequent crowded places like towns and cities. He found life in the mountains and forests far more satisfactory his entire life.

Many monks who were dedicated to the practice of Dhamma also experienced great difficulty in reaching him. The dirt roads were hardly passable in those days and anyway, there were no vehicles. They had to hike for days in order to reach the places where he liked to stay. Those who were unaccustomed to hiking just couldn't manage it. Their excuses for not going varied. Some monks were simply not courageous enough to accept the plain truth about Dhamma that he taught. Some were afraid that food and other necessities would be in short supply and of poor quality. Some were afraid they could not eat just one meal a day as he did. Where Ācariya Mun was concerned, monks tended to create any number of obstacles for themselves, most of them appearing insurmountable. Although their aspirations were sincere, such concerns amounted to self-imposed barriers that prevented them from gaining the benefit of their good intentions. In the end, they realized the kind of monk he really was only long after he had passed away and they heard the story of his life. He epitomized the *sāsana* which has preserved *magga* and *phala* from Lord Buddha's initial attainment down through the countless number of Arahants who have maintained *magga* and *phala* to this day. The essence of the *sāsana* has been transmitted by means of *supaḍḍipanno, uju, ñāya, sāmīcipaḍḍipanno sāvakaṅgho*<sup>6</sup> as practiced by all those who have attained *magga, phala*, and Nibbāna. They are like a vast stream of the great deathless ocean of Nibbāna, shimmering forth from the pristine nature of those who have practiced to perfection what the Buddha taught.

Ācariya Mun was one of the Arahants of this present age. He passed away not so long ago on November 10, 1949, about 20 years ago.<sup>7</sup> The story of his passing away will be described later when we reach the final chapter of his life. In any case, physical death has existed since time immemorial and will continue to exist as long as some form of conventional reality still remains. What arises must pass away. What remains unconditionally is the prodigious wonder of the Lord Buddha's infinite compassion, wisdom, and absolute freedom, all of which are enshrined in the *sāsana*. Such intrinsic qualities being exactly the same, Ācariya Mun's unqualified compassion, wisdom, and absolute freedom remain unchanged in the same way as those of the Lord Buddha. For us, it is essential that we faithfully practice the way laid down by the Buddha \_ the degree of success we have will depend on the amount of time and effort we put into the practice. This is something we should all

take an interest in while we are still alive. Without making an effort to practice, no results can be achieved, and the opportunity will be irrevocably lost.

One of the answers that Ñcariya Mun gave to the people of Nakhon Ratchasima especially caught my attention. Here is a summary of what he said:

"Don't think and act as if you, your family and friends, and the society you live in will never have to face the cemetery. Otherwise, when death comes \_ as it does to everyone in the world you will find yourself hopelessly unprepared and so risk sinking into the kind of unfavorable state no one would wish for. Whatever you think, say, or do should be accompanied by some recollection of the cemetery, which symbolizes death, for cemeteries and *kamma* go hand in hand. Reflection on death will encourage reflection on *kamma*, which in turn will cause you to reflect back on yourself.

"Don't get cocky, thinking you're so smart, when in truth you are always at the mercy of *kamma*. Such arrogance will merely lead to your own misfortune. You should never take the attitude that you are smarter than the Buddha that great, all-knowing teacher who, unlike people with *kilesas* who feel very cocky, never relied on conjecture. In the end, such people become trapped in the bad *kamma* that their own arrogant assumptions have created for them."

Such straight talk can be quite startling in its effect, inducing the listener to submit wholeheartedly to the truth about *kamma*. It cuts through all the self-importance that causes us to overlook our true place in this world. I have revisited the subject of *kamma* here for I feel that what I previously wrote on the subject is inadequate, since it failed to capture the full impact of what Ñcariya Mun taught. This oversight has just come to my attention, which shows just how unreliable our memories are. In fact, they easily mislead us, blocking the truth from view. So please forgive me for going over the same material again from time to time.

Ñcariya Mun had the knowledge and the ability to confer Dhamma excellence on his monk disciples. As a result, many of them developed into veritable Bodhi trees<sup>8</sup> in their own right. This type of Bodhi tree is

extremely difficult to plant and nurture to maturity for it tends to be surrounded by hazards. Many disciples of his who became senior *ācariyas* are still alive today. Some of them I have already mentioned by name. Ācariya Mun's senior disciples include such well-known *ācariyas* as Ācariya Sing and Ācariya Mahā Pin from Ubon Ratchathani, Ācariya Thet from Tha Bo in Nong Khai, Ācariya Fan from Sakon Nakhon, Ācariya Khao of Wat Tham Klong Phen in Udon Thani, Ācariya Phrom from Dong Yen village of Nong Han district in Udon Thani, Ācariya Lee of Wat Asokaram in Samut Prakan, Ācariya Chob and Ācariya Lui from Loei province, Ācariya Sim and Ācariya Tei from Chiang Mai, and Ācariya Kongma from Sakon Nakhon.<sup>9</sup> There are still many others whose names I cannot recall. Each of these *ācariyas* possesses certain exceptional qualities setting him apart from the rest.

Each is outstanding in his own distinct way, and all are worthy of the highest respect. Some being quite famous, they are well-known to monks and lay people across the country. Some by nature prefer to live in quiet seclusion. There are senior disciples of Ācariya Mun possessing exceptionally virtuous qualities who remain virtually unknown because they naturally prefer to live in anonymity.

More than any other teacher in the Northeast region of Thailand Ācariya Mun was able to firmly establish monks in *bodhidhamma*. *Bodhi* means wisdom. The *Bodhi* of the Lord Buddha is called Enlightenment; but in the case of these *ācariyas* I would prefer to simply call it *bodhidhamma*, as befits their humble status and the forest tradition to which they belong. Establishing a monk in *bodhidhamma* is very similar to raising a child. First the monk is taught how to develop a firm basis in moral discipline. Then he's taught how to use that moral excellence as a basis for his meditation practice, focusing inward to develop sufficient knowledge and understanding that will allow him to safely look after himself. The spiritual development of each and every monk represents an extremely difficult challenge because implanting virtuous qualities deeply into the heart of someone who is oppressed by the *kilesas* is always a very demanding task. The teacher must be on his guard at all times, exercising complete mastery over every type of *kilesa* so that the student remains earnestly motivated to undergo the training. Persistent practice under a good teacher allows the student a

chance to bring his own character into harmony with Dhamma and so steadily grow in confidence and determination.

On our own, we all suffer from *kilesas*. Everyone coming to train under a teacher is equally full of *kilesas*. So it is difficult for them to find the strength necessary to drag one another to safety. I believe the most difficult task any human being can undertake is that of trying to transform an ordinary monk into a monk who's truly worthy of the highest respect. That task is further complicated when the teacher tries to encourage the student to shift from his original, mundane position up to the transcendent levels of Sotāpanna, Sakadāgāmi, Anāgāmi and Arahant.<sup>10</sup> The degree of difficulty increases dramatically with each successive level of attainment. In all likelihood, insects will come along and chew at its roots, boring into them until the whole tree topples to the ground before the nascent Bodhi tree has a chance to sprout and branch out, developing into a useful specimen. This is what we usually see happen. Seldom do the roots grow deep enough to resist the ravages of wind, rain, and insects. When we plant an ordinary tree in the ground we can expect it to soon bear fruit. When, however, we try to establish a monk in Dhamma, he always appears on the verge of falling over. Even if no apparent dangers are on the horizon, he will go out looking for something to trouble him, thus causing himself a lot of harm. All of which makes developing a monk difficult indeed. If you don't believe me, just give it a try: ordain as a monk and try following the monastic discipline laid down by the Buddha. What's the bet you'll be hungry for supper before the sun has even set. Forgetting all about your newly-shaved head, you will be itching to travel about all the time, sight-seeing, listening to sounds, smelling this, tasting that, and touching things that are nice and soft. Morning, noon, and evening never will there be enough to satisfy your appetite. Soon you'll forget all about your status as a monk. It's unlikely that you will ever take an interest in cultivating that inner Bodhi tree, for your heart will never accept reason and persevere with the monk's training long enough to gain genuine peace of mind.

Left unattended, the Bodhi tree of the heart will gradually wither and shrivel up. Harmful influences will then have the upper hand. What Bodhi tree could stand erect against such an onslaught? The *bodhi* of a monk is sensitive to those influences, so his heart may easily be swayed by such discordant elements. If his *bodhi* cannot withstand the pressure,

it will topple hopelessly to the ground. Thus it is an extremely difficult task to establish *bodhi* properly. Those who have never tried to establish *bodhi* in their hearts don't know how potent those negative influences can be. They attempt to fertilize the nascent Bodhi tree with substances that only serve to stunt its growth, eventually ruining it altogether. Consequently, such Bodhi trees tend to have a dreary look about them, as if they were going to die at any moment from a profound shortage of noble virtue.

I have experience in planting such Bodhi trees and looking after them. And due to a lack of sound judgment, I've had my share of disappointments. So I am well aware of how difficult they are to establish and take care of. They always seem to be on the verge of withering up and dying. Even today I cannot say for sure whether or not this Bodhi tree of mine will grow and mature nicely, or simply deteriorate, since as a rule it threatens to take a turn for the worse. In fact, I haven't seen enough progress to be able to gauge the level of decline \_ steady decline seems to be the norm. Preferring to look for stimulation that is invariably harmful, this type of *bodhi* can easily destroy itself without any outside help.

Anyone who makes the agonizing effort to oppose his heart's natural inclinations until it submits to the authority of Dhamma is able to develop *bodhi* to perfection. Such a person is truly worthy of veneration. Ācariya Mun was a classic example of a teacher who develops *bodhi* so thoroughly that he becomes a reassuring source of comfort to all his disciples. Ācariya Mun carefully cultivated his Bodhi tree until the trunk was strong, the branches extensive, the foliage thick, and the fruits and flowers abundant. It was always a peaceful source of shade for those who sought to shelter there. Although he has already passed away, just reading the story of his life is enough to arouse faith in him and the Dhamma he practiced. It's almost as though he never passed away at all.

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