

Four Weeks As A Monk

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“**Namo tassa bhagavato, arahato, samma sambuddhasa**” .. On the airplane from Osaka, I feverishly repeated the words of the ceremony, over and over, trying to fix them in my mind. In two days I would be ordained, in another country, in a language I didn't know, and would have to learn, not only these words, but also the customs and behaviour expected of the Thai monk. Nervous? I had no time to feel nervous.

In another part of my mind, there was a sense of determinations, mingled with apprehension. Could I make good use of this time? For over a year, I had planned to come to Thailand, taking a long vacation from my job in Japan, and live as a monk for four weeks. But for much longer than that, I had felt how wonderful it would be to spend a long period practicing Vipassana meditation. Now was my chance! A chance to look within, to let the waves of thought and emotion subside, so that a deeper awareness could emerge more clearly.

All night I murmured, “Namo tassa bhavgavato....” And the rest of the ceremonial phrases, until by the time the plane landed in Bangkok, the Pali words were more or less fixed in my mind. Now the cheerfully busy atmosphere of Bangkok enfolded me, and within a few minutes of passing through customs, my good friends greeted me happily. I felt great to be back in Thailand, a year after my first visit to the “Land of Smiles”.

We sped north from Bangkok the next morning in a pickup truck. On the way, my friend told me how a monk should behave. “**Speak little, eat little, sleep little and meditate a lot.**” This, she said, was the motto of the abbot of Wat Amphavan, Phra Rajsuddhinanamangala who would be my kind host for the next month.

After we arrived, and paid our respects at the abbot's lodging (he was not there, as he was very busy), the secretary, **Ven. Narin**, made sure that my lodging was all right, and told me that I could ask him for anything I needed. It was reassuring to know that there was someone there who spoke English, since my knowledge of Thai was limited to "hello", "thank you" and "delicious!" Actually, whenever I have been to Wat Amphavan, there have been teachers who could speak English fluently. On my first visit to Wat Amphavan, **Mae-chi Soo Ngoh Sae Eng** had given me instruction in Vipassana, as well as helping me get oriented in the monastery. Soo Ngoh is a Singapore nun who is becoming more and more famous as a meditation teacher there. During this year's visit, she was fully occupied with teaching over one thousand people who came to meditate during a long school vacation. However, I was not left without a guide, for it happened that a senior monk, **Ven. Maha BoonChoo**, was staying at Wat Amphavan just at that time. He not only spoke excellent English, but was also a scholar, and well-versed in Vipassana meditation. The day before my ordination, he explained the meanings of the Pali words I was to recite, which made my entry into monkhood much more meaningful for me.

For two days, I rested, letting the stress of Japanese life dissolve in the peaceful ambience of the monastery. My lodging was a little house in a grove of trees surrounded by a wall. This compound contained housing for about eighty monks, each in his own house, as the Buddha ordained that each monk should have solitude, to pursue the monk's goal of serenity and awareness. Buddha Shakyamuni taught, *"That which accords with my teachings is that which is conducive to solitude, and conducive to dispassion."*

On the day of the ceremony, many people came to assist me, and guided me through every step of the unfamiliar rituals, from having my head shaved to offering a grand lunch to the assembled monks. With them looking after me, there was nothing

to worry about. Except for one thing: after eating some very spicy chili peppers, my stomach rebelled, and I thought it might be difficult to endure a two-or-three-hour ceremony with my digestion out of order. But one friend instantly saw my condition, and offered some medicine that pacified my stomach, and not a moment too soon. The ceremony began fifteen minutes later.

As before, friends guided me carefully throughout the ordination ceremony, and, although I had memorized the words, someone was always ready to prompt me when I hesitated, so everything went very smoothly, accompanied by numerous camera flashes. Later, both the abbot and my friend gave me photographic records of the ceremony. Fortunately, I guess I hadn't looked as nervous as I had felt.

After the ceremony, I went straight back to my little house. There was ample space for sitting and waling meditation, two of the three postures used for developing mindfulness and concentration in Vipassana. I was to practise both of these in alternation during the next four weeks, but the third, lying meditation, was beyond my power. Generally, as soon as I lay down, my mind shut off like a light. Sitting down in meditation posture is so easy, and at first we might think it's like doing nothing! But really meditating seems to me to be the hardest thing in the world to do well. The Buddha taught that the mind is like a monkey. It is so hard to control; yet only when we can, and have found the secret of peace and clarity, will we finally enjoy real happiness.

Throughout the stay at Wat Amphavan, the injunctions to speak and eat little were not difficult to follow. After all, since I don't speak Thai, there were few opportunities, or rather temptations, to waste time in idle conversation. However, some of the monks spoke English well enough to communicate their thoughts and feelings. They told me about their seep appreciation for the Buddhadhamma, and how they were trying to transform their lives into something wonderful by their meditation and daily conduct. These conversations, as much as anything else I

encountered at the monastery, helped me to strive harder in my practice. I still feel grateful to them for sharing their feelings of devotion.

As for eating, well, the food was certainly delicious and abundant, but after a few mornings of big breakfasts followed by waves of sleepiness on the meditation mat, I started eating less at mealtimes. **A monk eats, not for enjoyment, not to improve his appearance, but to sustain life and support his training.** So I tried to follow that principle.

The third and fourth parts of the motto, sleeping little and meditation a lot, were harder to apply. The first night after arriving, I slept for almost nine hours. The hectic schedule of working life in Japan had left me chronically exhausted, relying on coffee to get away with five hours of sleep a night and demanding days of classes and meeting. But after being in the serenity of the compound for a few days, I settled into a pattern of sleeping for six hours a night, and taking an hour's nap in the afternoon. I knew that some other monks slept much less than that, but when I tried to do that, my meditation sessions the next day turned into trips to dreamland. I just couldn't maintain alertness. So I compromised, and tried to sleep the minimum that allowed me to be alert during sitting.

And although I took every opportunity to meditate, knowing that four weeks was really such a short time, it was constant struggle for most of my stay. Yet it was a welcome struggle: I knew from the beginning that it would be difficult. The *“monkey mind”* is reluctant to focus, to let go of the wandering thoughts, of all its fears and fancies. **This deeprooted laziness is the reason why the Buddha had to spend so many lifetimes developing his compassion and wisdom, to arrive at the ultimate goal.** Again and again, I applied the method of mindfulness and concentration. Someday, I told myself, I'll get it right!

Outside the windows of my house, about twenty different species of birds made a wondrous music with their singing. Eerie and lovely to hear at the same time,

a very complex interweaving of their different calls. Whistles, chicks and chirps, percussive sounds and melodies all mingled together. But never mind that! I told myself, and returned to watching the rising and falling of my abdomen.

Inevitably, the time passed quickly. My Canadian friends who had done Vipassana meditation for weeks or months had told me that, no longer how long one stays in retreat, it always seems like a short time. It seemed that the first three weeks were spent, embarrassingly enough, in just reducing the babble of my thoughts and feelings, allowing a little quietness to develop. It was really only in the last week that my concentration started to become stronger. And then the day to leave arrived!

My new friends at Wat Amphavan said goodbye. The abbot gave me a talisman for good luck – or, more importantly, the help me remember this experience – and two books of photos of my time at the monastery. As I was leaving, I resolved to keep up my daily practice. In the end, everything a person possesses means nothing, really, even whatever knowledge or skills one might have won't help past this life. But whatever loving-kindness understanding one has developed can be a benefit to countless other people. And whatever happens after we die, if we live this life helping others to find peace and happiness, we are achieving something beyond the “monkey mind”. We can fulfil the promise of this human life.