

10,000 Joys, 10,000 Sorrows  
This Precious Human Life

Part One

The Autobiography of  
Ajahn Achalo Bhikkhu





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*Ajahn Achalo Bhikkhu*  
*(Part One)*

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These recollections were written by Ajahn Achalo  
at the request of some of his long-term lay students.

They span the first twenty-six years of his life –  
the first half of his life at the time of writing.

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## FOREWORD

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Who do we encounter when we meet a Buddhist monk? The person who ‘went forth’ and ordained, a human finding an alternative form, or a new type of being entirely? As silly as this might sound, it is perhaps indicative of the slightly ambiguous state that monks occupy in popular consciousness. Many of us project our own beliefs, aspirations or prejudices onto monastics, and can view them as somehow beyond the mundane, earthly challenges that the rest of us face. This is, of course, totally unrealistic, as every *bhikkhu* was born a baby and raised through childhood to become an adult, just like everyone else. It’s just that, at some point, they chose to undertake formal training with the aspiration to go beyond earthly suffering, with the ultimate goal of attaining enlightenment (realising *nibbāna*). It is the being walking this path that we see wearing the robes; a human practising diligently to remove greed, hatred and delusion from their minds.

To meet Ajahn Achalo these days is to encounter a highly accomplished senior Theravāda monk, comfortable in this form, with more than 30 years of practice under his *radprakod* (a Thai monk’s belt). He is the founding abbot of Anandagiri Forest Monastery, a beautiful place that sits high on a forested hill in the Northern Thailand province of Phetchabun. He was granted Thai citizenship by the King of Thailand himself, and subsequently received the royal ecclesiastical title of Chao Khun Phra Raj Vajiranyanamuni. These are no small achievements, especially for a ‘Western’ monk.

He is kind, good humoured, wise and serene, and his talks, guided meditations, writings and pilgrimages continue to inspire many. But it was not always this way and, as any Buddhist will tell you, it will

not always be the case. Change is inevitable and what occurs depends on causes and conditions. The focus of this book is on the causes and conditions that led the young aspiring actor Brett from Brisbane to be ordained as a *bhikkhu* in the conservative Thai Buddhist forest meditation tradition in Northeast Thailand. Not exactly a path well trodden.

Most tourists or casual observers appreciate the beauty of Thailand's temples and monasteries, and respect the quiet dignity of the monks who maintain them and preserve their religious traditions. Fewer might appreciate the differences between various Buddhist traditions, even within the largely Theravāda world of Southeast Asia.

The Thai Forest Tradition is, by its very nature, one of the less flashy and, some might say, welcoming of the Buddhist schools. So, it can seem a bit impenetrable, almost alien, without the relevant Buddhist cultural background to understand it. And herein lies the great value of this book; it represents a unique opportunity for the reader to glimpse how a 'modern' person has experienced traditional patriarchal celibate monasticism.

As Ajahn Achalo says himself in the pages that follow, frankness and truthfulness are truly bedrocks of his practice, so this recollection is no glorification project or idealistic reminiscence. The challenges of Brett's early years and the subsequent difficulties involved in committing to the monastic life are covered with very little nostalgia, and the reader may even find some sections confronting or jarring. I would argue that this is a great strength of this autobiography.

As a professional writer and editor myself, I greatly appreciate the frank, truthful and uncontrived manner of Ajahn's sharing. Many people attempt to write in a particular style, but Ajahn Achalo, with a sharp memory for detail and natural story telling abilities simply tells it like it was.

That a slightly lost and lonely man with a sensitive, somewhat artistic temperament eventually chose to become a disciplined meditation warrior (that is what forest meditation monks are) in a strict renunciant order, and has gone on to be so successful in this role is amazing. But to read how this happened, with all the doubt, dirt, and despair suffered along the way, makes it that much more relatable and inspiring. But of course it was not all difficulties that Ajahn Achalo experienced. He met with many wonderful blessings along the way as well, in the form of useful practices and teachings, encouraging and inspiring teachers, and difficult yet ultimately supportive environments within which to struggle and grow.

It is also quite fascinating to consider how Brett's sensitive nature persisted into his life as Ajahn Achalo, changing into something more skilful and sustainable. His creative drive and intuitive nature have given rise to many writings, projects and pilgrimages, and brought something different to his role as a Buddhist communicator. His willingness to cover the more spiritual, esoteric and divine aspects of Buddhism creates a bridge between the often cynical gaze of the 'Western' observer and the wonderful world of Buddhist cosmology. This kind of spiritual exploration is not often found in English-language Theravādan literature, and as such should be treasured.

I might add that Ajahn Achalo's story is particularly inspiring to me. We were both born in Australia in 1972, within days of each other, so our cultural origins are very similar. Our paths crossed very briefly in the early 1990s when Brett was a barista in a Sydney coffee shop near the university I was attending. However, it was many years later, under very different conditions, that we first really communicated. This time with me studying Buddhism through the Thai Forest Tradition, rather than literature at uni. He was even one of the chanting monks at my own temporary ordination. Having such a learned teacher from a similar cultural background has been so supportive for my practice.

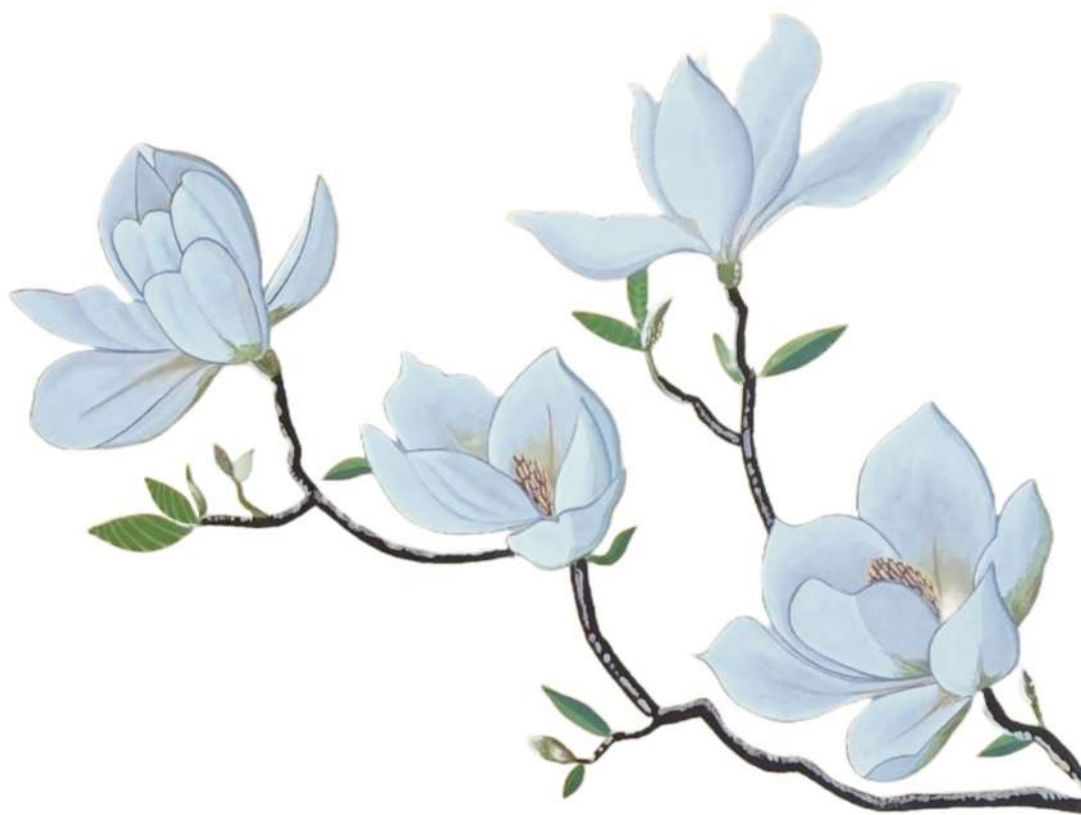
My sincere hope is that this autobiography educates and inspires many more Buddhists, be they newly minted or old hands. It illustrates very clearly that sticking to disciplines that train and uplift the mind will eventually result in positive progress. Furthermore, perhaps it will help us to empathise with the human being inside the robes, with strengths and weaknesses, whose committed practice proves that anyone can make progress on the path to peace beyond suffering.

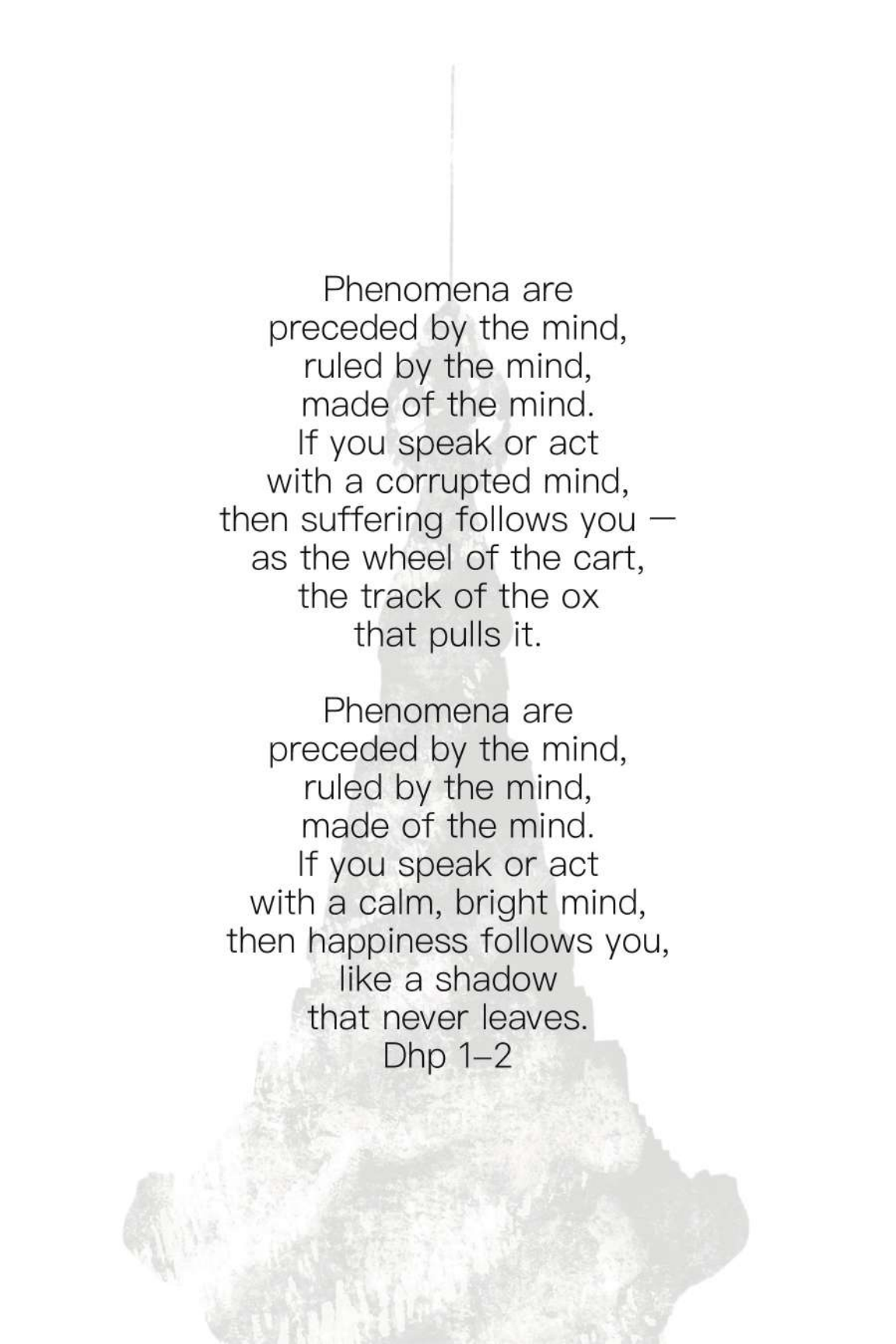
*Sean Mooney*





# Preface





Phenomena are  
preceded by the mind,  
ruled by the mind,  
made of the mind.  
If you speak or act  
with a corrupted mind,  
then suffering follows you —  
as the wheel of the cart,  
the track of the ox  
that pulls it.

Phenomena are  
preceded by the mind,  
ruled by the mind,  
made of the mind.  
If you speak or act  
with a calm, bright mind,  
then happiness follows you,  
like a shadow  
that never leaves.

Dhp 1–2

## P R E F A C E

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At the request of some of my long-time students in Southeast Asia, I committed to the project of writing an autobiography. In doing so, I considered that the book should contain some life lessons – if I was to write something about my life, how might those who read it benefit from the story? And as an act of contemplation and circumspection, I realised I could also benefit from reflecting on my life to check a few things for myself. What have I actually learned in this lifetime and how did I learn it? Who and/or what were my teachers? Had I recognised all of the blessings of this life? Had I felt an appropriate amount of gratitude for these? What about the various challenges and hardships – had I fully accepted these to be the workings of *kamma*? Had I offered forgiveness to everyone and everything? As the title of this work would suggest, and just as everyone experiences in their own lives, there were some painful times as well as some very joyful times.

Although I am an abbot and a teacher who leads pilgrimages, retreats, and gives Dhamma talks online, I am actually a little more introverted than outside observers might assume. I am the type of person who likes familiarity, intimacy, and a family-like quality of warmth when engaging with others, supplemented by spending a lot of time alone each day. This is the tone of my life and in the community at the monastery where I usually live, and it is also in the tone of a lot of the teachings I give. Every monk, every nun, and every practitioner will have latent tendencies and preferences – only the Buddha has uprooted all character traits – and my preference is for creating warm, intimate, friendly environments. With that also comes a quality of disarming frankness and truthfulness – no secrets in the family, as it were. This is the general tone and approach I have taken in writing this autobiography, which might

seem a little bit unusual coming from a member of a conservative tradition.

I decided that the best approach for me as the writer would be to take the reader by the hand, as it were, including them as a friend, sharing intimately, and bringing them with me on my journey through life. I hope that by taking this approach, when eventually I am on my knees respectfully listening to my teacher's teachings you will feel that you are right there alongside me and will be able to hear those teachings as if they were spoken directly to you. If I do my job correctly as a narrator, hopefully that will be the outcome – I want you to feel included, close, and connected to the process, and receive those teachings for yourself, and to interpret them in whatever manner is appropriate for your life, wherever you are. The Buddha explained that the gift of Dhamma is the highest gift. It is in this spirit that I share these writings generously and openly, as a sincere gesture of reciprocity and gratitude for the teachings and teachers of this life.

Those who know me will already know that I believe in truthfulness, and in being frank, open, and transparent. Truthfulness is a very large part of my character and has been for as long as I can remember. Some people might be offended by my frankness at times, though my intention is never to alienate or offend anybody – different things will speak to different people of different cultures, ages, and at different stages in their life and practice. It is with this understanding that I share freely; but as monks often say in their Dhamma talks, please take what is useful and leave aside what isn't. In my experience as a teacher thus far, however, there are always several appreciative people for every one who is offended. Most Buddhist practitioners have a healthy appetite for all types of truth: personal, interpersonal, and the ultimately 'impersonal' truth.

Ever since childhood, I have always been outspoken in sharing – as I perceived it to be – the truth, so much so that this manifested as being quite argumentative with my parents and teachers at times. This

was never for the sake of being argumentative, but if I didn't agree with someone or my interpretation of the truth didn't match someone else's, they would know. Although this caused some chafing for both myself and others, this quality, I think, was a large factor in what eventually led me to find the Buddha's teachings and surrender to them. The *need* to seek out and honour the truth made it possible to change countries and live with different weather, different food, different friends – to start over from scratch. If you hold truth and truthfulness as an ideal, then when you find something that resonates with that search, you're willing to make big sacrifices to honour it.

It should be noted that before I was a monk, I wasn't a monk. In my writing, I have aimed to present my life exactly as I experienced it – as an Australian boy, an Australian teenager, an Australian young man, and eventually as a novice monk and a junior monk in Thailand. I think this is important because I want to illustrate to the reader that monks are human beings too: they start out as ordinary beings, but they choose to rise to the challenge of committing to a difficult training, and it is this training that will eventually enable them to develop insight, as well as noble and beautiful qualities.

In the pages that follow, I have written openly about the difficulties I experienced as a child and an adolescent in my relationships with my mother and father. I have tried to be truthful, fair, and compassionate in writing about these challenges and difficulties, without blaming others for my suffering. These difficulties may seem unnecessary to mention to some people, and yet I am sure that others who had even greater challenges with their parents will be able to resonate. I hope that readers will be able to receive some empathy from my story and take heart in reading about this person who went on to become a monk and a teacher, developing good and wholesome qualities despite (or perhaps even, in part, because of) those difficult and painful experiences.

Writing this autobiography has been an interesting and rewarding experience. As a *bhikkhu* who holds the principle of the ‘middle way’ very dear, I have been repeatedly aware while writing these words that there are always several ways to present any given story. We can simply leave out the ugly bits if we want to and overemphasise the inspiring parts. Or alternatively, we can overemphasise the difficult parts. With the middle way in mind and in the spirit of balance, fairness, and truthfulness, I haven’t always included the very peak or the very worst of my experiences; rather, I have aimed to convey a general sense for how things truly were at any given period of my life.

This book covers the early years of this life – my childhood, adolescence, and early years of monkhood – up to the age of twenty-six. If life and time permit, there may be a part two one day. Writing an autobiography in your early fifties may seem a bit early, but I’m glad I wrote this account sooner rather than later, as some of the memories had definitely already started to fade.

Something that became more apparent to me during the process of writing was how many blessings were present throughout my life. As we get older, we hopefully gain greater perspective on our lives and recognise where we could have been more fair, kind, understanding, or forgiving of certain people and situations in our past. I didn’t always appreciate the blessings that were present, but there is a certain wisdom that comes with age and from ongoing Buddhist practice – through contemplating *kamma* and cultivating forgiveness, for example. It was a joy to recognise more fully the goodness that has touched this precious human life.

I am grateful that through writing this book I was able to connect more deeply with my dear mother. Reviewing my childhood in detail as an adult allowed me to relate to her, and to my memories of her, from a new perspective with greater compassion and admiration. Now, when I look back at the challenges, I mostly feel gratitude because I can see what I learned from the difficult times and the immense goodness that

was also present alongside the pain. I think it's quite normal for human beings to struggle with holding on to grudges or self-righteous anger for a time – and then to struggle with forgiveness – but the ability to skilfully reflect upon difficult experiences from the past can give rise to wisdom and compassionate understanding.

I have particularly enjoyed recollecting and sharing the goodness of my teachers and the other significant blessings I have met with along the journey of this lifetime – times spent living and practising in meditation centres, training monasteries, forest monasteries, and in the jungle, and the things I have learned from these people and places. I am especially happy to share a glimpse of my teachers from a more intimate and personal perspective, as I write about living and practising with monks such as Ajahn Sumedho, Ajahn Pasanno, Ajahn Jayasaro, and Ajahn Anan. I hope that reading about these experiences may prove to be an exercise in *Sanghānussati* for the reader – recollecting the noble qualities of the Sangha. May you also rejoice in your incredible fortune to have met with the Buddha's teachings, because meeting with these teachings and having this opportunity to practise is truly like winning the *samsāric* lottery.

As a young monk, I loved to read the biographies of great meditation masters such as Luang Por Mun, Luang Por Thate, Ajahn Lee Dhammadharo, and Master Hsu Yun, and would listen enraptured when Ajahn Jayasaro read us parts of the life of Ajahn Chah. This autobiography is intended to be something of a bridge between those great, accomplished masters and that of a more ordinary practitioner in this day and age. My life story cannot compare to any of those accomplished monks, but the world is changing quickly, so people today (especially those in their twenties and thirties) might relate more easily to the story of someone closer in age and experience to them. I hope that this book may serve as an example of a life committed to the training and disciplines taught by the Buddha – a life that is laying the foundation and developing the qualities for a future, final life, just like those of the masters.

Readers who aren't already familiar with my teachings will quickly notice that I have a strong, unrelenting, and unshakeable faith in past lives, rebirth, other realms, and beings in other realms. This might seem unusual or surprising for a monk born and raised in Australia – I think I've had several recent past lives in Asia! I have always had an intuitive belief in these things, and I have written about some of my childhood experiences that further confirmed these beliefs in the chapters that follow. It should be noted that I have lived as a monk in Thailand for a long time now – for more than half of my life, in fact – and have travelled extensively around the holy sites in India and China. Here in Asia, belief in rebirth, heavens, and heavenly beings is quite normal. These topics were constantly spoken about by the Buddha and his monk disciples, as documented throughout the Sutta Piṭaka and Vinaya Piṭaka, and are unequivocally interwoven into the Dhamma teachings. To many of us in Asia, it would actually seem a bit strange to leave these things out, so I hope that any doubtful readers will at least be open to their existence.

I would like to take a moment to acknowledge several people who have assisted significantly with the task of bringing this publication into being. I would like to thank Ajahn Pavaro, Mae Chee Emily, and Elizabeth Stasis-Rowe for their kind and generous assistance with editing and proofreading of the text; Ajahn Khema for his assistance with graphic design; and Mae Chee Emily for the formatting and presentation of the digital publication.

It is my sincere hope that, through writing and sharing this book, I am able to convey the depth of my faith and conviction in Buddhist teachings and practices, and through this, inspire people to deepen their own commitment and conviction. Faith in such goodness gives rise to energy and joy – these are qualities that we all need. Through sharing my life's story, I hope to encourage readers to see that nurturing a view of unshakeable optimism over the long term – across multiple lifetimes – is indeed very pragmatic and useful. With such a view, we understand that

every skilful gesture and effort is of great value, and that every kind deed and act of patience will definitely be rewarded.

We can take heart in understanding, with great conviction, that the periods in our lives which seem dry and tedious will most certainly be replaced by periods of inspiration, growth, and joy, so long as we diligently sow the causes. By committing to cultivating *dāna*, *sīla*, and *bhāvanā* (generosity, ethical conduct, and mental cultivation), things will get better and better for us all. The outer world might not get better – the world is indeed crazy these days, shaped by the *kamma* of eight billion human beings – but as individuals, if you commit to the Buddha’s path, then your own future becomes brighter and brighter.

When life is hard and things get difficult, don’t give up, just keep going. Work harder and be consistent. I learned this from my teachers in this lifetime – both my parents at home in Australia and my Ajahns in the monasteries. I also learned it from my own good efforts over decades. Effort brings about results: more insights, a wiser perspective, less suffering, greater wellbeing. I can personally attest to that – and this is what I wish for you too.

I sincerely hope that the story of this life may serve as an encouragement to you, wherever you are in your life and practice. May the 10,000 joys and 10,000 sorrows of your own life be your teachers. May you ‘keep your mind in the middle’ throughout the vicissitudes of life, growing wiser, tougher, and more kind by the day. And lastly, may we all progress steadily towards the liberation of mind.

All good wishes,

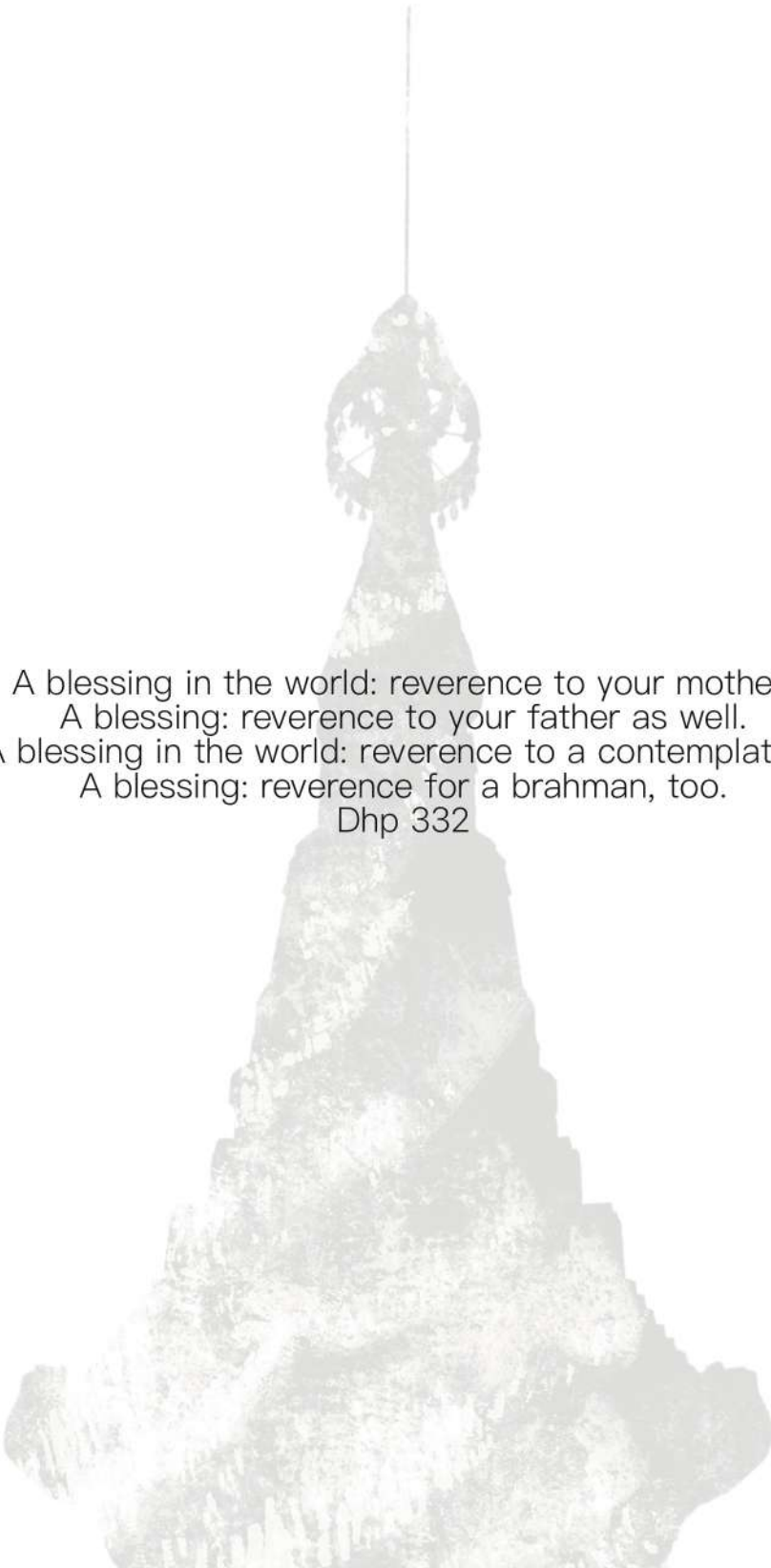
*Ajahn Achalo Bhikkhu*



# Chapter I

From Darkness to Light





A blessing in the world: reverence to your mother.  
A blessing: reverence to your father as well.  
A blessing in the world: reverence to a contemplative.  
A blessing: reverence for a brahman, too.  
Dhp 332

## CHAPTER ONE

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### *From Darkness to Light*

When beginning to write down the details of a true story, it is hard to know where exactly to begin, because there's always a story before the story, and a story before that since beginningless time. The story that comes immediately before my own story, however, is that of my parents. So, with proper deference, let us begin with them.

A word of warning, though – I've titled this work *10,000 Joys, 10,000 Sorrows* for good reason. We will have to traverse through some of the sorrows of these *samsāric* incarnations before moving on to some of the joys. Even so, a story of moving through darkness towards light is always of value, since this is what all of us must do.

I suppose it would be interesting to have something of an explosive beginning, so let's start with my mother. I've had a couple of long chats with her recently and have gotten clearer on some of the details.

Angela Mary Smith was born in London on May 31st, 1939. In September of 1940, the houses on either side of her early childhood home were bombed by German forces during the initial fifty-seven consecutive days of bombings that marked the start of the Blitz on London. Her sister, Shirley, was two years older, and her younger twin sisters, Marie and Claire, were born in an underground tube station in the middle of a bombing raid. Although she was only sixteen months old at

the time, Angela still clearly remembers the air raid sirens and searchlights scanning the skies.

My mum told me that the only emotion she recalls from her very early childhood is fear. Her father was in the Royal Air Force and fighting in the war, so it was only women and scared children who were around at the time. The government moved people away from London during and after the bombings, and Angela soon found herself in a new home across the road from an apple orchard on Reddish Vale Road in Manchester.

My mother says that she didn't really have much of a childhood as such, for as soon as she could walk and talk she was tasked with helping her mother with household chores. Her mother, Jessie, originally of Scottish origin, busy with small twin daughters, would send young Angela out on her own to catch the double-decker bus to the grocery store to pick up the daily rations.

Although Shirley was older, Angela was a full head taller, so her mother tended to see her as the most responsible. Angela was frightened during these excursions. There had been a notorious serial killer known as the Wartime Ripper, who had brutally murdered several women in London in 1942, and although he had been caught and executed, the stories of his atrocities had made a deep impression on the minds of the women and children in England at the time.

In trying to put a positive spin on the difficulties of my mother's earliest years, one can say that Angela learned to be independent, resilient, courageous, helpful, and productive from an early age. This was fortunate, because there were more challenges to come.

Her family emigrated to Australia at the age of eight or nine (she cannot remember the year exactly). She remembers a lot of seasickness during the seemingly endless ten week journey. She also recalls an Egyptian man attempting to snatch her during a walk along the banks of

the Suez Canal. Fortunately, the captain of the ship had explained to the children that they all needed to hold each other's hands in a chain-like manner so as not to be plucked away. A man grabbed the little blonde-haired, blue-eyed Angela by the ankles and pulled hard, but to no avail – the chain links held strong.

My father's early childhood in Australia was not quite so harrowing. He was born in the country town of Innisfail, North Queensland, but lived in an even smaller country town called Inglewood in Southern Queensland – a cattle grazing and tobacco growing area about 250 kilometres west of Brisbane.

His mother, Helene, was a second generation Australian of German descent. There was a picturesque hill called Melton Hill in those parts that Helene really loved, and so she named her firstborn son after it: Melton Clendon Hansen, born on July 31st, 1937. Despite the posh sounding name, everyone just called him Mel. He had an elder sister, Leslie, and two younger sisters, Janice and Marilyn.

I met my grandmother on my father's side only a handful of times. I remember that she was a very handsome woman – tall, lean, and olive-skinned, with high cheekbones and good bone structure.

Interestingly, my grandfather, Lesley Hansen, was also an air force officer, but in the Royal Australian Air Force. Similar to my mother's experience, he was also away much of the time during my father's early childhood due to the war. Officer Lesley Hansen was stationed in Darwin, where there were serious concerns about a Japanese invasion from the north. Apparently, his position had been more of an administrative one rather than an active fighting role.

My father used to tell me stories of riding his bicycle with his best mate, whose parents owned the local Greek café. (Apparently, the chocolate milkshakes at the Greek café were second to none!) He would set traps to catch rabbits and get up early in the morning before school to

ride through the winter frosts to see what he'd caught. He would give the rabbits to his mother to make rabbit stew.

Rabbits are considered an invasive pest in Australia, especially in Queensland, where they are banned even as pets. Even so, I was horrified by these stories – my generation generally did not go out catching animals for food, and as a little boy I would literally cry if an animal died in a movie on television!

My father would say, 'I just don't understand you, mate. At your age I was out catching rabbits!' But I was always a sensitive kid.

Looking back at what had been positive in my father's early life, I have the sense that the natural environment around Inglewood must have been very beneficial. There was plenty of sunshine and wide open spaces, and it was a very safe place for young boys to be gallivanting around the countryside amongst the cows and kangaroos. There was also a weir where they enjoyed swimming.

I heard only a little about my father's relationship with my grandfather; perhaps it was a painful subject that he was reluctant to discuss. Dad said that his mother had been a really good mother – he got along well with her and his sisters – but he didn't talk about his father.

Once my grandfather had returned from his military service, he became the town clerk, a chief administrative role in the local council. Apparently, my grandfather was also a gambler who liked to bet on the horses; he would listen to the races over the radio. Whenever he lost he would fall into a foul mood, and sometimes, if he could catch him, he would viciously beat my father with a cane.

From what I've observed during my lifetime, everyone's life seems to be a combination of blessings and curses depending upon each person's particular *kammic* inheritance. On one hand, the father was

beating his son, and on the other hand, his mother and sisters were warm, loving, and kind.

Despite my grandfather's occasional impetuous cruelty, he did also pay a considerable sum to give his son the very best private school education that was available in Queensland. Because there was no secondary school in the area, Lesley sent Mel to boarding school in Brisbane at the age of twelve. This was probably for the best, given the circumstances at home, but he would not escape the cane there either – corporal punishment was also a part of life at boarding school in those days.

Boarding at the Anglican Church Grammar School in East Brisbane, my father received an excellent education. He complained that the mealtime portions were of equal size for every student. He was taller than most of the boys and very athletic, being on both the swim team and the rugby team, so he always felt hungry. (This became justification for having huge evening meals for the remainder of his life!)

He must have paid close attention in class and been diligent with his homework, as he seemed to retain a lot of the information. Even many years later when I was a teenager, we would watch television together as a family in the evening and my father could answer ninety percent of the quiz show questions correctly. At the time, my parents often complained about their financial limitations, so it frustrated me immensely that he would not go on *Sale of the Century* and bring home some of that cash or a brand new car! I was sure that he could win, but he said he was too scared of the possibility of losing on national television.

In comparison to the years that my father attended boarding school, my mother had not been as fortunate. Perhaps not surprisingly, the marriage between my mother's parents fell apart soon after they emigrated to Australia. Angela would have been around nine years old at the time. There must have been a lot of stress involved in losing your house during the war, moving to a new country, trying to find work, and

so on – and no doubt being a war veteran had left certain traumatic scars. I never met my grandfather on my mother’s side, and my mother does not even remember his first name, as she only ever knew him as Dad.

One day, a few months after arriving in Australia, my grandmother told her four daughters that they were going on a nice holiday together, but instead she took the four girls to St Vincent’s Home for Children in Nudgee, a suburb on the east side of Brisbane – and left them there.

St Vincent’s was an orphanage run by the Sisters of Mercy, a Catholic order of nuns. I assume she believed that the nuns would be compassionate towards her children – which was probably a reasonable assumption – but unfortunately, they were not. If it was indeed a holiday, it turned out to be a holiday in hell, and sadly, the sisters were not at all merciful.

Overall, this seems like a truly awful thing for my grandmother to have done, but perhaps she felt she had no other choice. My mother was not able to fill in many details on these matters, as she never asked her mother about the particulars of the marriage breakdown or why she chose to leave her and her three sisters at the orphanage. I find it extraordinary that my mother never asked about these things, but when I challenged her on this, she replied that in those days children didn’t dare question their parents very directly, especially about awkward subjects.

The single mother’s pension had only recently been introduced in Australia, and several categories of single mothers were excluded. If the woman left her husband, for example, she would not be eligible. Perhaps making a new life in a new country while raising four girls on her own was simply too overwhelming or burdensome. In any case, the next time she saw her mother – which was not until after she had finally left the orphanage – Jessie had taken a new husband and changed her name to Patricia. The previous husband was not talked about.

My mother recalls enduring bitterly cold weather without shoes or socks, cold showers, threadbare blankets, and poorly prepared, not very nourishing food that contained flies and flakes of paint. But the worst part was the various punishments for alleged misbehaviour: whippings with leather straps, or being locked in a cold, dark cellar with rats and without food or water – sometimes for days. If you tried to run away, hounds were released to catch you! It sounds like the stuff of a terrifying horror movie – and indeed it was. But sadly, it was all very real.

Various commissions and government-led inquiries at both state and federal levels were later held to investigate child abuse in children's residential institutions in Australia. It was found that the children at St Vincent's had certainly been abused. Compensation was eventually awarded to every child who had lived there during certain years; as a result of the investigations, it was simply assumed that all had suffered significant abuse.

An official apology was also given by the Prime Minister himself for the government's failure to protect vulnerable children. My mother received some compensation. It was not a very large amount of money and didn't mean much to her, but she did say that the formal apology and official acknowledgement of the abuse did mean something – they were helpful in the ongoing process of healing.

It was one of those tragic situations where children who had been raised in the dysfunctional environment of the institution later went on to become full-time caregivers themselves, repeating the same – or perhaps even worse – abuse that they had received themselves. The 'inmates' were literally running the institution: institutionalised multi-generational abuse, I believe it is called.

My mother made a point not to tell her children about her experiences in the Catholic orphanage until we were around fifteen years old. She didn't want the stories of her haunted childhood to haunt ours as

well. I appreciate that she waited until we were older to share them with us.

Because of Angela's experience of abuse at the hands of the Catholic nuns, and my father's experience of corporal punishment from the Anglican brothers at boarding school, our parents did not allow their children to attend religious education classes or go to church – at all. Of course there are many good-hearted Christians out there, but those were not the ones my parents had encountered, and they were not taking any chances. I went to church only twice as a child, and both times were wedding ceremonies. My parents said that we could choose a religion – if we wanted one – once we were adults. (That turned out interestingly!) Nevertheless, we did have chocolate eggs and hot cross buns at Easter and exchanged gifts under the Christmas tree at Christmas time.

All children, I should think, are haunted to some degree by their parents' inner phantoms. It was obvious to her children that Angela was quiet and withdrawn at times, and there were the occasional bad days when we might suddenly get a tongue lashing. Mel was not good at connecting on a heart level either. If it were a later era, our mother would probably have sought out and benefitted from therapy. I truly wish this had been available to her – and to my father as well, though he never would have consented. The lack of benevolent, warm, loving father figures in both of my parents' early lives had definitely affected them, as had the beatings, the sense of abandonment, and the gratuitous punishments. Yet they still became hard-working, law-abiding, responsible, and productive citizens. They were good people with some issues – like most people.

I often felt the atmosphere in my childhood home to be quite cold, and because I was a sensitive child, I was deeply affected by the lack of warmth and the absence of deep, intimate conversations with my parents during my childhood and adolescence. By the age of about twenty-five, once I had the maturity of an adult to reflect upon these things, I realised that neither of my parents had skilled mentors when

they were teenagers. They had both lived in institutions bereft of warm-hearted, parent-like role models. No one had taught them how to have intimate conversations or how to express empathy or deep care, because they had never experienced this for themselves. It was a language that they had not learned and simply could not speak at the time. My desires and expectations for more love and connection, although understandable, had been unrealistic. They did the best they could with the skills they had, and they did much better than the examples that they themselves had.

It must be said, for the sake of balance, that my parents made up considerably for their lack of psychological sophistication in our upbringing by being sincere and consistent in their efforts to have enjoyable family outings – long drives up to Brisbane each year to attend the Royal Easter Show to go on rides and eat junk food, rainforest walks in the local national parks, and weekly trips to the beach during the long summers. Dad loved to body surf with his sons, and Mum cheerfully handed out our usual Sunday lunch at the beach: hot chip sandwiches with ketchup, plastic cups full of Coke, and creamed buns for dessert. We may not have talked deeply about much in those days, but we were a family that did things together – that was my parents' way of creating communion and camaraderie in our family.

When I look back now, I feel gratitude for the parts of my upbringing that were very good, and I am actually impressed that my parents held things together as well as they did. My father brought home every pay cheque and gave it to my mother for housekeeping and budgeting. My mother, on the other hand, cooked most of our meals, cleaned the house, and washed, dried, and ironed the clothes. They both spent all of their spare time on the weekends renovating the house. On this level there was consistency, dependability, safety, and security – something that millions of children these days would benefit greatly from. They were responsible and dutiful parents, somewhat affected by their childhood traumas, but moral and dependable. They had a good

work ethic and they were capable, which is something that children learn through observation.

I have made a point of reading some of the testimonials from other children who had been at the same children's home as my mother. Many contend with far more serious psychological issues and very serious substance addictions. I am sure that my mother was abused just as much, but I suspect that a close and somewhat warm relationship with her mother in the first nine years of her life gave her a stronger foundation and greater resilience than the children who had lived at the orphanage from a younger age. I also think that she was fortunate, when still quite young, to have married a good, strong, predictable, and loyal man who served as a very stabilising influence in her life.

When my mother was around fifteen years old, and after about six years of living in the children's home, my grandmother had her four daughters released from St Vincent's. They came to live with her and her new husband in Caloundra, a fishing town on the Sunshine Coast of Queensland.

Although she learned to read, write and do mathematics, my mother never received a high school certificate. This was an issue that hindered many people once they eventually left these residential institutions, and many were subsequently caught in a cycle of poverty. But my mother was obviously very intelligent and observant, and she had curiosity and initiative. (Even as a child, this was obvious to me from observing her work around the home – cooking, cleaning, gardening, sewing, renovating the house, and so on.)

She worked as a hairdresser's apprentice at sixteen, which she enjoyed, but her stepfather caused some obstructions with the paperwork and the apprenticeship sadly fell through. Angela's resilience, however, soon saw her with a new job at a women's clothing boutique on the main street in town. Through this job, my mother met other young women

around her own age and learned about the possibility of greater opportunities down in Brisbane, the capital city of Queensland.

In 1957, at the age of eighteen and feeling the urge to broaden her horizons, Angela moved away from the then sleepy fishing town of Caloundra to Brisbane. She stayed in a hostel at first, then moved into a share house with three of her new friends. In Brisbane, she quickly found work in a boutique located on Queen Street, the city's main shopping street. Marcia Gowns specialised in evening dresses, debutante gowns, and bridal wear. Here she worked as an assistant and also as an in-house model for potential customers.

With her blonde hair, blue eyes, petite waist, and shapely figure, the proprietors quickly recognised Angela's potential as a model and sent her to a finishing school to learn the appropriate deportment and manners expected when dealing with the well-to-do clientele. There she learned the etiquette of which knives and forks to use for each dinner course, wearing silk gloves, holding her head with noble bearing, and even how to walk up and down stairs in high heels, among other things.

Angela wanted more independence and to meet new people. She had noticed some chic-looking usherettes coming and going from the same building where she attended her deportment classes. She decided to dress up nicely one day in order to go and meet the manager of the Vogue Theatre. He took one look at the well-dressed, well-mannered Angela and gave her the job.

I asked my mother why she wanted to be an usherette: she explained that in those days, models, flight attendants and usherettes were seen as the cool, 'in' crowd. She wanted to be cool too.

Meanwhile, my father's father, Lesley, had passed away suddenly from a cerebral haemorrhage at the age of fifty-two. (My present age!) He simply fell over on the floor dead one day. I believe my father was in his last year of high school when this occurred. Before his

death, my grandfather had already pre-paid for his son to complete an accounting degree at a college in Brisbane, but, surprisingly, my father never followed through with going to college.

When I asked my mother why she thought Dad had not followed through with the accounting degree, she felt it was because he wanted to drink beer and play snooker and football with his mates in his spare time – which meant he needed a salary.

He had done well at school, did well at work, and excelled at football. He was a disciplined man, but just didn't want to be cooped up inside a classroom anymore. So instead, with his good grades from a prestigious school, he easily found work as a clerk in the accounting department of General Motors-Holden. The company had an assembly plant and offices in Fortitude Valley, a suburb on the east side of Brisbane.

Mel had also qualified for the local A-grade rugby league team, the Fortitude Valley Diehards. In those days, unfortunately, even the best players were paid very little and they all had other full-time jobs. They trained on Tuesday and Thursday nights, and played on Sundays.

At that time, there was a popular dance and concert hall in Brisbane called the Cloudland Ballroom. It was famous for its sprung hardwood dance floor, and was the largest ballroom in the country, accommodating up to a thousand dancing couples. It had huge chandeliers and was rather grand. In the 1950s it was also used for rock concerts – Buddy Holly performed there in 1958.

Angela went to Cloudland on Saturday nights with her cool usherette friends, while Mel went with some of his workmates and football buddies. It was the time of jiving, swinging and twisting to the sound of bands with saxophones and trumpets, as well as the usual lead and bass guitars. There were even some black-leather-jacket-wearing biker gangs, called 'bodgies', who predated the punk rockers of the

seventies. Their female counterparts were called ‘widgies’. (Imagine the aesthetic of the T-Birds and the Pink Ladies in the movie *Grease*.) My parents were never punk rockers of any kind, but they did enjoy good music and dancing.

One Saturday night at Cloudland, Angela was standing off to the side with one of her girlfriends when a fit, tall, dark, and handsome man started walking towards them from the other side of the dance floor. Angela’s friend started fan-girling and swooning, ‘Oh my god! It’s Mel Hansen, the Valley’s football player! He’s coming over to us!’

My mother had no interest in football and had never heard of Mel before – even so, he completely ignored the swooning girl and asked Angela if she’d care to dance. And dance they did.

To make a long story short: there was a period of courtship, an engagement, and a wedding. Helene, Mel’s mother, approved of Angela, and his sisters adored her. After their marriage, my father had insisted that Angela quit her usherette job because it involved shift work.

When I asked my mother how she felt about that, she responded, ‘Well, in those days it was love, honour, and obey – and all of that crap!’

‘But did you love him?’ I asked.

‘Yeah, I loved him.’

So Angela got a job in the McWhirters building in Fortitude Valley selling ribbons and lace, but before too long she was ‘barefoot and pregnant in the kitchen’, as she explained. Angela gave birth to her first son, Jonathan, who they called Jon. Two years later Dianne was born, and two years after that came Jane.



*My parents just after their engagement, aged 19 and 21*

Mel did not want to be a clerk all his life, nor did he wish to go back to school, so he decided to aim towards owning his own business. Shortly after my twin brother, Troy, and I were born, Dad found work as a salesman at a Holden car dealership on the Gold Coast. My parents moved to that area from Brisbane, and Mel learned the ins and outs of the trade. He and my mother took out a mortgage and bought a home, renovating it on the weekends, and then, after some time, sold the house at a profit. They did this repeatedly. Mel was working full-time at the car dealership and my mother was working full-time raising five children – and yet they also worked on their renovation projects at the weekends.

After renovating and selling several homes in this way, my father had saved enough money to buy and run his own car dealership in the small country town of Mullumbimby, in Northern New South Wales. ‘Mel Hansen Holden’ was established.

For a period of time, we lived in a small rented two-bedroom home by the railroad tracks while they saved to build a much larger home of their own. With the profits they had saved from the new business, they built a house in a new housing development called Ocean Shores. Mel, Angela, and – by then – us six children moved into the Ocean Shores home when I was three years old.

My first memories of my parents start from when Dad was thirty-eight and Mum was thirty-six; they were neither young nor old. My eldest brother, Jon, was fifteen; my eldest sister, Dianne, was thirteen; my other sister, Jane, was eleven; my twin brother and I were three; and Craig, our youngest brother, was eighteen months old. That’s right – three teenagers and three toddlers all living under the same roof at the same time! My mother had wanted a fourth child after having had a stillborn baby, and when she did eventually conceive again, she got twins! Apparently, after my mother found out the results of her scan, she came home, fell into bed, and cried. My father and elder brother, on the other hand, cried with joy. Later on, while taking an early and less effective version of the contraceptive pill, our mother conceived our younger brother.

Since we have already mentioned ‘love, honour, and obey’ in this chapter about my parents, it would make sense to also mention the ‘until death do us part’ aspect of their wedding vows. As I touched on earlier, both of my parents had some challenges with their communication skills, so every now and then there would be a build-up of pressure that culminated in an argument. These arguments consisted mostly of my mother telling my father the various ways in which he had let her down, and how unhappy she was about it. During those times, I actually used to wish that they’d go ahead and get a divorce.



*Troy (7), Craig (5) and Brett (7)*

But whenever I complained, my father would simply say, ‘She’ll be alright again in a couple of days, mate. It’ll blow over – just wait and see,’ which was actually true.

Once all six children had left home, my parents became closer to each other, and I am pleased to report that they became happier as they grew older – which was a wonderful thing to observe. I think my mother learned a bit more about human psychology and having reflective conversations from watching talk shows like *The Phil Donahue Show* while doing the ironing, and my father learned from movies and current affairs programs.

There is a sense of true care and connection in my chats with my mother these days – we have both come a long way with time. Without the stress of children and a mortgage, my parents became very good friends in their old age. Their speech was gentler. They would go for long walks along the beach together and cared for one another, attending

doctor's appointments together and reminding each other which medications to take for various issues.

I was humbled by my previous impatience towards them, and marvelled instead at the true and deep commitment they had to one another. The patience and forgiveness that they demonstrated in their decades long relationship was admirable. Australia is a huge country, and with their children's careers, commitments and relationships scattering them in many directions, Mel and Angela really needed to depend upon one another – and they did.

As a monk, I would usually visit my parents for a week or so every two years (airline tickets need to be offered, and this was what I was able to manage). About ten years ago, by some curious synchronicity, I happened to be present at the doctor's office to hear the results of an MRI scan – my father had developed an inoperable malignant tumour in one of his lungs. This was perhaps not so surprising, as he had smoked a packet of cigarettes a day for forty years before finally giving up around the age of sixty.

The doctor advised that chemotherapy would slow the tumour's growth and give him some more time, however, it was likely that the tumour would eventually start growing again. Dad did get the chemo, and it did give him a few more years. It was interesting to watch the way he related to the tumour. He never talked about having cancer, but would rather refer to it as 'that thing in my lung'.

I felt that both of my parents were in denial that the tumour was a death sentence – I had certainly felt that as a gut punch in the doctor's office that fateful day. I remember feeling frustrated that they weren't acknowledging that Dad would be leaving this life soon and should be doing some inner work in preparation. But their stoicism and dogged determination definitely did have some positive effects: Mel was able to live at home, feed and bathe himself, and go to the bathroom unassisted until just ten days before passing away.

When he eventually moved into a hospice just a kilometre or so from their home, he said to my brother Craig, ‘Mate, I don’t think I’m gonna make it.’

My brother answered, ‘No, Dad, you’re not.’

My father then said, ‘The thing that frustrates me the most is that I have to leave your mother to live alone.’ This statement revealed the depth of his commitment to his wife.

My brother said, ‘I promise you we’ll make sure she’s alright, Dad,’ to which he replied, ‘Thanks, mate.’

A few days after that conversation with my brother, my mother woke with a start at around one o’clock in the morning. She got dressed and quickly left the house. Jane, my elder sister who had come from the Gold Coast to be a support, heard her and asked, ‘Mum, what are you doing? Where are you going?’

Angela answered, ‘I’m going to be with your father.’

Jane wanted to drive her – to go with her as well – but Mum said she wanted to walk and go alone.

Angela walked into the hospice, alone and in the dead of night, sat by her husband’s bedside and quietly held his hand. A few minutes later, he passed away. She was holding his hand when he took his last breath and departed from this life. She felt that she had kept her marriage vows – ‘until death do us part’.

Mel was Angela’s first love, and Angela was Mel’s first love. They were married for fifty-seven years before my father passed away.

When I spoke to my eighty-five-year-old mum the other day, she had just passed the mandatory driver’s test for people of her age in

Australia. She had asked me to think of her on the morning of the exam, and during the test she was wearing a blessed bracelet that I had given her. Angela walks my sister Jane's golden retriever most days for a minimum of five kilometres. She shops and cooks for herself, and lives alone unassisted – all of which are points of pride for her.

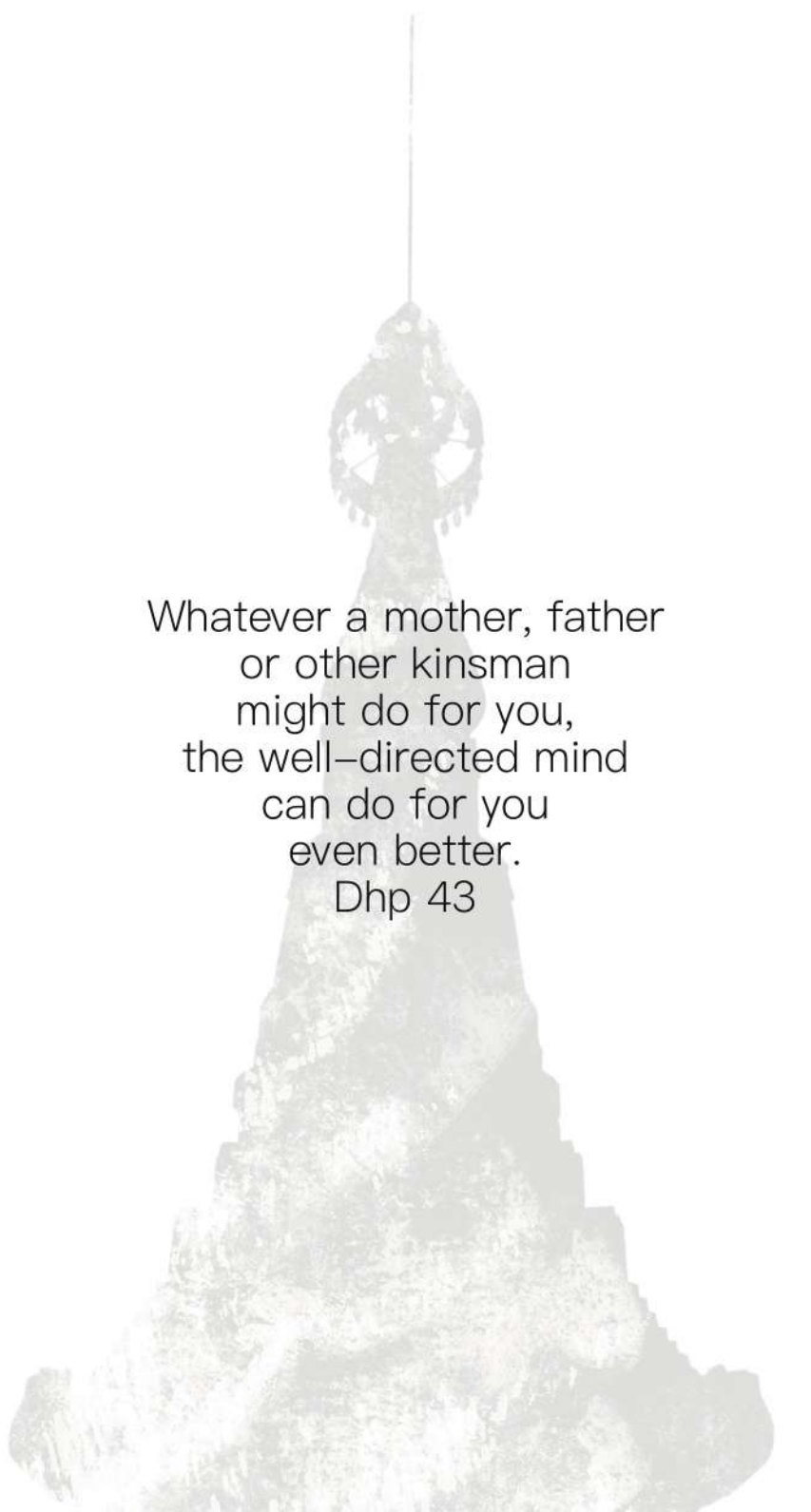
My parents were diamonds in the rough – and I will write freely and openly about the good *and* the bad I experienced in my childhood and adolescence – but they were diamonds. Angela still is.



# Chapter 2

The Early Years (Age 3-10)





Whatever a mother, father  
or other kinsman  
might do for you,  
the well-directed mind  
can do for you  
even better.

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## CHAPTER TWO

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### *The Early Years (Age 3-10)*

I was born at 5:50 am on June 4th, 1972 at the Princess Alexandra Hospital in Brisbane, Queensland. My three older siblings were eight to twelve years older, and although not unplanned – my mother wanted a fourth child after giving birth to a stillborn baby some years earlier – twins had certainly not been a part of the plan. I, Brett Melton Hansen, was the first of two boys, arriving about twenty minutes ahead of my brother, Troy Donald Hansen. I don't know how twins decide who gets to go out into the world first – but I think he has resented me for it ever since! You will recognise my father's name as my middle name, and Troy's middle name was the name of my father's best friend.

My parents lived in Brisbane at the time of our birth but later relocated a couple of hours' drive south. They moved between several houses – renovating and upgrading them to sell at a profit – before we eventually moved to the suburb of Ocean Shores, where my memories first begin.

Before recollecting any particular events from the early years of my life, let me first tell you a little bit about the place where we lived. Ocean Shores, in the Byron region of far Northeastern New South Wales, was an interesting place. As a newly established housing development it had beautiful smooth, wide roads with a great stormwater drainage system, and yet, hardly anyone was living there in those days! There was also an eighteen-hole golf course in the middle of the development which was very close to our house.

I remember when riding my tricycle (or scooter or BMX bike as I got older) I could see the homes of the Loom and Crawford families way off in the distance towards the left of our house, and the McDonalds' house way off to the right. Most of the lots were vacant at that time; as such, this was a wonderful and safe place for young boys to ride bicycles. We were physically very close to the ocean, but it took ten minutes to circle around the estuary that ran between our house and the beach to get there.

Our favourite local beach was called New Brighton. It did not resemble Brighton in England at all, because there were no houses or shops nearby and every time we went there we literally had the several-miles-long beach all to ourselves. Also, the weather was usually fabulous – big blue skies, dark blue ocean, gentle breezes, and moderate temperatures. It was an amazing childhood playground. The silica-rich sand was soft and white, and made squeaking noises when you walked on it, and the waves were good for body surfing. Looking towards the right you could see Cape Byron on the horizon, the most easterly point on the Australian continent.

There were no shark nets or lifeguards at New Brighton beach but this didn't seem to bother anyone; we just trusted that we'd probably be okay and, lucky for us, we were. We did, however, know some not-so-lucky stories: my sisters knew a surfer guy who was killed by a shark off Byron Bay, and during their engagement period my parents scrambled out of the surf upon hearing a shark alert, then watched a pale body drained of blood being taken away on a stretcher. So we certainly knew that shark attacks were possible, however, when weighing the odds we all chose to take our chances.

As children we learned to tell whether there was a strong undercurrent or sideways rip in the sea by looking at how the waves were breaking. We would walk as far as it took to find a place where the waves were good and swimming seemed safe. We had been taught that if we ever got caught in a rip, not to swim directly against it, but to swim

diagonally towards the shore and to be willing to swim for longer, but less strenuously. Once you got out of the pull of the rip, you could then swim directly towards the shore.

Ocean Shores and New Brighton might sound modern and English, but we were within easy driving distance of many small towns with traditional Aboriginal names. The small township of Billinudgel was just a kilometre from our home. Every year the birthday of Ma Ring – the nearly 100-year-old proprietor of Billinudgel’s local pub – was a big event, even making the local news. Murwillumbah was half an hour’s drive away, along beautiful roads winding through rainforest.

Then there was Mullumbimby, a twenty minute drive away, where my twin brother and I went to preschool. And by the time I was four, my father had sold his Holden car dealership in Mullumbimby and had built a larger Toyota dealership in Ballina, a larger town about a forty minute drive south of Ocean Shores. This might illustrate how, in my early childhood, we lived in a ‘wannabe’ suburb, surrounded by stunningly beautiful and largely uncultivated wilderness, and with many place names referencing the native peoples who came before us. (These days the area is much more built-up and criss-crossed by four lane highways.)

Looking back, I can’t locate a very first memory from this lifetime which stands out in particular. A few swirl around that all seem to be from around the age of three – that’s when conscious memory begins. My earliest memories are of playing with my twin brother, Troy, and younger brother, Craig, while we were all still in nappies. When my mother called us, it was always as a group. So my earliest memories are of being part of the threesome called ‘Brett, Troy and Craig’.

I also remember spinning the upside-down lids of saucepans on the tiled kitchen floor at my mother’s feet. She would let me do it for a while until the noise of spinning and clanging lids became too much. Sometimes she would pry my fingers off the saucepan lids by distracting

me with leftover cake batter or cookie dough in the mixing bowl. I would scrape up the sticky mix and lick it off my fingers.

My mother once told me that she developed a sense for knowing, more or less, what her three toddlers were up to by the noises we were making – or not making. She would keep one ear open while cleaning or preparing meals in the kitchen, listening to the goings on in the TV room where we were corralled. Cheerful gibberish and idle chatter was fine; a little bit of squabbling, also fine. Loud crying meant there was an issue, but what scared her most of all was a protracted period of silence.

One day, when the silence had dragged on for too long, she walked in to the TV room only to find that the television itself had been quietly pulled over onto the floor. Now facing downwards, the back had been taken off, and wires, tubes and assorted thing-a-me-bobs were being extracted and scattered very carefully all around. The fact that her three charming rascals didn't electrocute themselves on this occasion seems to be somewhat of a miracle. Mum broke the silence with a horrified scream.

I cannot actually remember this occasion, but I suspect that I would have been trying to find the *Sesame Street* and other cartoon characters inside. After all, to a child's mind, they did appear to be living inside that box.

One thing I do clearly remember was the arrival of the new colour television. I must have been about three years old at the time, so that would have made it 1975. When the new 'idiot box', as my grandmother called it, was turned on, I was genuinely shocked to discover that Kermit the Frog was actually green, Grover was blue, Big Bird was yellow, and Mr Snuffleupagus was brown! For years I thought they were complementary shades of grey.

Another early memory from the same period is of my twin brother and me quietly climbing over the galvanised iron chain link fence

in our backyard to go explore alongside the lake directly behind our house. The reason I remember this, I think, is because of the pain of climbing the fence. We had to pinch the metal wire between our big and second toes very tightly, inching up slowly, then swing over and climb down the other side using the same method. I remember the space between my toes hurting while doing this manoeuvre, but it never seemed to stop us.

Craig, who was eighteen months younger than us, was too young to be able to get himself up and over the fence so he would stare at us through the bars with great curiosity, perhaps silently cheering on our antics on the other side. After not too long, our mother – ‘the Sheriff’ – would discover that we had escaped yet again, and horrified screams and scoldings would ensue. She did confess many years later to being secretly impressed by the fact that three toddlers could so effectively cooperate in silence to accomplish such acrobatic feats. Once our older siblings Jon, Dianne and Jane came home from school, there was more help around to keep us younger ones out of trouble.

Childhood was a very confusing time: trying to work out what was allowed and what wasn’t, and what was funny and what wasn’t. One time when my maternal grandmother was visiting, I decided to try out her talcum powder which she had left on the bathroom cabinet. I was so impressed by the silky smooth whiteness and fresh fragrance that I decided to completely cover myself with it from head to toe.

This caught the attention of my brothers, so I smeared them thoroughly from head to toe as well – emptying the entire container! On that occasion, because everyone thought it was very funny, none of us got smacked. In fact, a Polaroid photograph was taken to immortalise the moment. There were other occasions, however, when even though I thought something was very funny, our mother did not – and I would get spanked on the bottom with one of the wooden spoons.



*Brett, Craig and Troy, covered in talcum powder*

Around this time, I remember waking up to the sounds of my eldest sister, Dianne, practising the piano. It was always one of three songs: Beethoven's *Für Elise*, *Chopsticks* (of course), or the theme song to the movie *Love Story*. I never got bored of those tunes. In fact, I thought it was truly magical the way that Dianne could get music to come out of that pianola. It also had the rolls that you could put in and listen to the works of classical composers such as Beethoven and Mozart. We boys thought it was great the way the keys moved by themselves, as though the spirits of the great composers were playing invisibly in the living room.

There was a lot of music in my early childhood. To this day, I tend to learn more easily through listening and also visual stimuli, more so than through reading; so I still vividly remember the songs. Dad often played Tom Jones and Neil Diamond in those years; later on, it was more frequently the Beatles, Cat Stevens, and Elvis Presley's love songs. My older sisters played a lot of David Bowie and a New Zealand band called Split Enz. The B-52s' hit *Rock Lobster* was a frequent flyer, as well as *Hot August Night*, *Ziggy Stardust* and *Love Me Tender* – all of these songs formed the soundtrack to my early childhood.

We three younger boys watched a show called *Countdown* on Sunday evenings with our teenage siblings. *Countdown* showed interviews and performances from up-and-coming rock and pop bands, as well as music videos of the current Australian top ten singles; I guess it was a precursor to MTV. The whole family used to watch a singing show called *Young Talent Time*, as well as *Donny & Marie* [Osmond].

Watching television together was a big thing in the seventies and eighties. Mum and Dad would sit on sofa chairs, Jon, Dianne and Jane were on beanbags, and Brett, Troy and Craig sat on the carpet leaning against one of the beanbags. There were only three or four television channels in Australia in those days – there were no smartphones or tablets, and no Netflix or YouTube! We had to read the TV guide printed in the Sunday newspaper to choose something to watch, and the family would all watch it together.

Angela's cooking was inspired by the traditional fare of England – the 'mother country'. Meat and three veg with a hot dessert was the usual evening meal. Typical dishes she would prepare for us were corned beef with white sauce, pork chops with apple sauce, steak or sausages in braised onion gravy, or roast lamb, beef, or chicken. These were usually served with mashed potatoes, steamed carrots, and peas or beans, and roasts were served accompanied by roasted pumpkin and potatoes. Condiments were always on the table: salt and pepper, Worcestershire sauce, mint sauce, and tomato sauce.

There was a period of a couple of years when my parents were quite well-off financially and we would go out to eat on Friday nights. Sometimes we would go to a restaurant called Mexican Mick's in Byron Bay, or, alternatively, to Pizza Hut at Kirra Beach. I preferred Pizza Hut because for some reason I found the smell of the cornmeal tacos at Mexican Mick's to be really insufferable. The Pizza Hut was a walk-in, sit-down restaurant with a very nice salad bar. We would stuff ourselves with pizza, garlic bread, salad and Coke.

My father cooked a barbecue outside on the patio on Saturday nights to give my mother a break. On these nights my mother only needed to make a simple tossed salad. Sunday nights we typically had baked beans on toast and finished any leftovers from the previous week's meals.

Living in a somewhat remote housing development, my mother had to drive half an hour to the town of Tweed Heads to get to a decent supermarket. Tweed Mall had a large Coles New World supermarket, but before going shopping we would stop in at a coffee and doughnuts shop adjoining the car park. The smell of the freshly cooked doughnuts rolled in cinnamon sugar was absolutely dizzying. Mum would have a cappuccino and each of us boys would have a doughnut.

As it was the seventies, we didn't use seat belts or baby seats in the car. I remember being very happy lying on the floor behind the driver's seat, one knee resting against it and the other against the back seat, and my head resting on the raised rear axle hump. The hum and whiz of the road underneath was comforting and the vibration was like a massage. The greatest hits of the seventies would be playing on the AM radio, which was comforting as well. I remember an eclectic playlist of Boney M, John Denver, Dionne Warwick and Fleetwood Mac from those trips in the car. The way that the treetops whizzed by quickly but the clouds moved by more slowly was endlessly fascinating to me from my vantage point on the car floor.



*Mel, Jon, Jane, Troy, Craig, Angela, Brett and Dianne, 1976*

Now, at 192 centimetres tall, I find it amazing that I could have ever fit into such a small space! I am not entirely sure why, but this seems to be my happiest early childhood memory. I loved the drive to and from the shopping centre from my cosy little spot on the floor, with the funky music playing in the background and the trees and clouds whizzing by far above – and a hot cinnamon doughnut waiting for me at the shopping centre!

I remember my father used to play golf with my elder brother when I was around four or five years old. Rather than drive to the clubhouse and play all eighteen holes, they walked a nearby shortcut onto the golf course from our house and played just the last nine holes. Dad would ask if I wanted to tag along; usually my brothers and I would go with them.

We had a deal that if we found any golf balls in the ponds and marshes or in the tall grass off to the sides of the fairway, our father would give us money for them – then we could buy a roll of Life Savers sweets or a box of Tic Tac mints at the shop in the clubhouse. Usually we would find a ball or two, but if we didn't, we would sneak a ball out of our father's golf bag when he wasn't looking, pretend that we'd found it, and then sell his own golf ball back to him!

I have a terrible feeling that this 'Plan B' was something I had proposed to my brothers, and that I was the one who executed it whenever necessary. Nine holes of golf and the walk back home was a long way to go on five-year-old legs, and by hook or by crook, my little brain told me some sugar was both appropriate and necessary to make the round trip.

There were plenty of attractions on the golf course. While searching for balls in the ponds, I used to love kneeling down to smell and look at the purple water lilies growing close to the edge. I found it fascinating the way the leaves and flowers rose out of the water yet had no water on them. I would look at the buds still unopened under the water with deep interest, and I loved watching the way the bees collected pollen from the yellow stamens at the centre of the flowers. The fragrance, especially if we had gone early in the morning, was transporting.

Watching the little guppy fish nibbling at the surface of the water was fascinating as well. There were white herons with long legs walking around in the ponds, and other kinds of waterfowl too. Crows, plovers,

parrots, cockatoos, kookaburras, and galahs could be seen and heard in the skies and the trees. The purple water lily, however, was my favourite thing to look at and also my favourite fragrance to enjoy.

If it was winter, the knees of my trousers would get soaked with dew from kneeling on the grass, and my hand would stay cold for a long time any time I reached into the chilly water to pull a ball out of the pond. I also remember the steam of our breath when talking or simply breathing out. But, in general, the winters were short, and spring, summer, and autumn were long in Northern New South Wales.

Because we had about eight months a year of mostly sunny days with temperatures averaging between fifteen and twenty-five degrees Celsius – arguably the best weather in the entire country – I developed a warped sense of what weather should be like!

Another of my earliest conscious memories is of my father when he occasionally slipped a disc in his back while playing golf – he needed to lie down a lot and crawl around at home for a few days until it healed. We kids thought it was fun having Dad at home crawling around from room to room on the shag pile carpet. I would ask if I could climb onto his back and ride him like a horse. He graciously consented for a while until the bouncing, yee-hawing, and mimed lassoing caused him too much pain. Then he'd wince and say, 'I think that's enough for a while, mate.' I also remember him drinking a beer in the evenings, and he used to let me taste it – without fail I always thought that it was awful.

Troy and I started preschool around the age of three, I believe. It was probably around the time we were four years old that I told an even bigger lie than the golf ball trick. After Mum had dropped us off at preschool, we were walking up the front stairs to enter the building and I heard one of the teachers say, 'Where did this cake come from?' and the assistant teacher reply, 'I don't know.'

My four-year-old brain understood that cake was up for grabs and it didn't want to miss out because of any uncertainty about its origin, so I turned to my twin brother and said, 'Let's tell them that it's our birthday!'

Troy looked horrified and said, 'They'll ask us what we got as presents!' to which I quickly responded, 'Tell them what we got for Christmas.'

We entered the building and I confidently announced, 'It's our birthday today!'

Sure enough, at morning tea recess they gave us a little party! The whole class sang *Happy Birthday* to us and we got to blow out the candles and eat a piece of cake. However, while they were singing *Happy Birthday* I nearly burst into tears. I felt so ashamed and self-conscious about this big lie. I was sick to my stomach with shame and fear, and my insides were squirming uncontrollably.

When my mother came to pick us up, the teachers asked, 'Angela, why didn't you tell us that it was the twins' birthday?' to which my mother responded, 'Because it's not their birthday!'

Later in the car, she scolded me so much: 'How could you say that? Why did you do that? What were you thinking? How could you do that to me? I feel so embarrassed!'

The answer was simple: there was cake and I wanted a piece of it. If you look at it one way, being able to quickly formulate and implement a strategy was probably a sign of intelligence, but if I hadn't felt any shame then that might have been a sign of sociopathy! I think I was just a kid figuring out what was acceptable and unacceptable behaviour – I was certainly much more reluctant to tell big fibs after this excruciating experience.

Another somewhat traumatic event I remember from preschool was when the teacher noticed that although I was good at colouring and drawing, I never made any cut-outs with scissors. She came to me one day, scissors in hand, and insisted that I come and cut something out – however, what she didn't know was that my mother had sternly forbidden me from ever even touching scissors. Consequently, I was terrified, and I ran over to the side of the room, pulled a cupboard out from the wall, and hid behind it in fear, squatting on the ground.

I eventually noticed how extreme my reaction had been and began to question myself on this matter. Later that day, when I was alone at home, I went straight to my mother's sewing box and took out her large sewing scissors. I examined them to try to see just what was so scary about them, and seeing nothing too terrifying, I went back to my bedroom and duly started taking snips out of my bedspread. When my mother came into the room she yelled at me, and I explained that the teacher had scolded me for *not* doing cut-outs. The next day, my mother scolded the preschool teacher as well!

My mother was of the opinion that children should be disciplined if they were truly naughty – she was a believer in the 'spare the rod, spoil the child' philosophy, as it were. When asking for something in the Hansen household you always said 'please', and when you received it you always said 'thank you'. If you hurt someone's feelings or made a mistake you said 'sorry', and if you made a mess you helped to clean it up. We were taught to brush our teeth every morning and evening, and to always wash our hands after going to the bathroom. We had a bath every night as toddlers, and, later, we took hot showers. We did not talk with our mouths full.

These standards were strictly enforced. We were clean and well-mannered, but we were allowed to run around barefoot in the backyard or ride our bikes barefoot if it was just a short distance. Sometimes we would ride our bikes around for hours and our mother didn't mind –

that's how safe it was in the area where we lived. So my upbringing was a balance of discipline and freedom based on trust.

With regard to being disciplined, there was usually a system of warnings. You would be warned, but if you continued doing whatever it was that was deemed unacceptable then there would be consequences. In my memory, it always seemed to be me who got smacked! This is probably fair enough because I was something of a ringleader and usually talked back. Every now and then, if I had been particularly recalcitrant, my mother would say to my father, 'Mel! Discipline your son!'

My father would usually send me to my room. I suspect that because of his own experiences of being beaten by his father he really did not want to hit his son. Therefore, having been egged on and nagged by my mother to do so, he would take a few minutes to work up the willingness and then come up to my bedroom. This worked to my advantage, because I would quickly put on every pair of underwear that I had, then pull up my shorts or trousers to conceal the fact. When my father took off his belt and whipped me on my bottom through my clothing, I pretended to scream and cry out. When he left the room and my brothers came in to check on me, I would already be laughing. This didn't happen very often, and my father never cottoned on to the fact that although there was crying, there were no actual tears.

When we were five years old, my twin brother, Troy, and I started school half a year earlier than usual. The headmistress needed to increase student numbers in order to avoid losing a teacher, so she asked my mother if we could help them out with this. The school bus would pick us up right in front of our house. It served both the local primary school and high school – as well as the Catholic private school – so we were on the same bus as our older siblings.



*Troy and Brett (age 5), first day at school, 1978*

As the smallest kids on the crowded bus, the driver made us sit in an area directly adjoining his seat. We had to sit cross-legged and hold on to an iron bar. I remember that Mr Hamilton, the bus driver, had strong body odour, and that my hands had a sour smell after holding the old iron bar. If we talked or laughed too much, Mr Hamilton would pinch us – not surprisingly, I didn't like him.

I really loved my kindergarten teacher, Mrs McCormack. She had a way of talking to the children as though they were her friends. I distinctly remember her describing – to our class of five- and six-year-olds – her honeymoon weekend away with her husband. Nothing too graphic, but she did say that she loved the feel of her husband's beard when he kissed her!

I also remember that she had been impressed by the toast at their hotel because it was crunchy on the outside yet warm and soft on the inside, and melted in her mouth. I think it was the joy, love, and appreciation she expressed in her description that made such a deep impression on my mind. However, after she hit me on the hand with a ruler one day, I fell out of love with her.

Why did she hit me? When playing outside one day after it had rained, I found an earthworm wriggling on the concrete. As a six-year-old boy, the obvious thing to do was to pick it up. A girl nearby, Lisa McDonald, who was also my neighbour, looked aghast when she saw me do this, and so naturally I decided to throw it in her direction – at which she screeched and burst into tears.

Mrs McCormack came running over and demanded to know what had happened. Lisa dlobbered on me, and Mrs McCormack made me hold out my hand while she hit it with a ruler. I remember being very affronted! I felt that Lisa should have been the one to get smacked for being so stupid – it was only an earthworm, after all.

For the first two years, Troy and I sat together in class, until the teachers felt that separation would be better for us. In grade two, my teacher Mrs Pearce – who was also the headmistress of the school – was handing out books to the children sitting on the floor around her one day when a book fell and hit me. I admonished her, saying, 'Hey! That book hit me in the head, Miss!' to which she responded, 'Good, because you talk too much!' Not surprisingly, I didn't like her much after that.



*Brett and Troy (age 6), first day of grade one, 1979*

In grade three, when I was eight years old, some of the kids were playing tag. On this day, a girl called Chrissie McElwain was chasing me, and when she caught up to me she actually held me against a wall and kissed me on the mouth! She was a tall blonde girl with blue eyes and olive skin – quite attractive really. But I was mortified; I felt so transgressed! I stopped playing tag and quite literally never spoke to her again.

Everyone's life, from birth to death, is a unique combination of pleasure and pain, *sukha* and *dukkha*, as they are known in the Pāli language. Mine was no different, even in childhood.

Around the age of five, coming home from school, getting off the school bus and entering the front door, the smell of baking would fill my nose. My mother often baked cookies and puddings of various types, and the smell was divine. I would rush into the kitchen excitedly, 'Mummy, Mummy, what did you bake? Can I have one!?' and she would often reply by yelling, 'Get off my clean floor with your dirty shoes! I just mopped it! Get out!'

I can still recall the sad, sinking feeling of those occasions – our mother was very absorbed in her domestic tasks. There were nutritious and delicious meals; there was cleanliness, security and order; and there was upbeat music. School was fine – I always had friends and I did quite well academically – but sadly, there was never a ‘Hello darling, how was your day at school?’ when I arrived home on the school bus in the afternoons.

If you tried to show Angela a painting or a drawing that you had made at preschool or primary school, she would say, ‘Hmm,’ without ever really looking at it. No drawings were proudly put on the refrigerator, held in place with fridge magnets, in our home. There was frequently the command to go and watch television or to go play outside with your brothers, instead of a shared conversation with loving eye contact. I would take my painting to my bedroom and put it on my desk, and by the next day it was gone, presumably thrown in the garbage. It left the impression that one’s efforts were not good enough, not worthy of interest, nor worthy of celebration. I’m sure that this also had a deep effect on the self-esteem and confidence of my brothers and sisters.

My mother might well attest that the selfless act of caring for her children from dawn to dusk every day was indeed a supreme act of love – and there is truth in that. But as a child, my reality was not based on these practical expressions of her love; it was based on feeling. So, even though I didn’t feel that her care was very warm, there was obviously both care and love.

Although the familial atmosphere at our house could be cold, it was usually sunny, warm and safe outside. I was lucky that I had brothers and a safe, naturally beautiful neighbourhood in which to play. Riding around together on our BMX bikes was fun – and there was always a hot, home-cooked meal when we returned.

Until we were big enough to sit at the dinner table with the grown-ups, we three boys would eat at the kitchen counter. This suited us

just fine because we could discreetly have fights flicking peas at one another with our spoons. I used to love making mashed potato volcanoes with ketchup lava inside. If you hit it really hard at the right angle you could get the lava to squirt out quite impressively. My sisters cleaned the kitchen and washed the dishes after dinner, and they would complain about the mess, but because our mother didn't see the actual evidence, we usually got away with it.

My elder brother, Jon, left home when I was five and joined the army. He did not visit us very often so we did not become very close. My eldest sister, Dianne, had a natural warmth and nurturing instinct that was lacking in my mother. She loved her little brothers dearly. Dianne would show some interest in my school work and would ask questions about my day at school. She was ten years older and seemed very grown up to me.

One time, Dianne and her best friend, Rhonda, came to our primary school to play the guitar and sing songs. I was amazed by the performance and shocked to discover that my very own sister seemed to me to sing as well as the singers in the Swedish pop group ABBA! (Troy and I had our beloved ABBA school bags at the time.) Dianne helped our mother out with chores quite a lot, so she would often bathe us boys in the evening when we were very young, and she seemed to enjoy taking care of us. She was kind and I loved her very much.

Of course, as we become adults it is important to learn how to relate to our parents (and/or our other parental figures) from a more mature and individuated place. Writing these recollections now, looking back on my childhood from the vantage point of being a man in his fifties and having heard stories of many other people's parents, I have developed a sense that I fared quite well in the worldwide lottery of parents. They were far from perfect, like most of us, but they were not maliciously or deliberately neglectful or abusive. Sadly, in the course of being a friend, mentor and teacher over these past decades, I have met many people whose parents were truly abusive.

I was also blessed to have other nurturing influences that manifested throughout my childhood, adolescence and early adulthood alongside the influence of my parents. I will write about some of these good-hearted people who were positive influences on my life in later chapters.

While composing these first chapters about my early childhood years, I have come to recognise more deeply the influence my parents have had on shaping my character by way of example more so than by the things they said to me. For example, being given the freedom as a young boy to ride my bicycle unchaperoned and to swim in the Pacific Ocean without shark nets and lifeguards, I developed a healthy sense of courage, trust, and fearlessness. We paid attention to our surroundings but did not focus on potential dangers with unhealthy or obsessive fear. I learned to trust that things would probably be okay, and if they weren't, then I could deal with them in the moment. This deeply ingrained attitude no doubt played a significant role in giving me the courage to leave my country of birth at the age of twenty-one to try something completely different from anything I had ever done before.

My willingness to take on the enormous project of building a Buddhist monastery from scratch – despite having no background or experience in building, engineering, or project management – was certainly influenced by the countless hours I observed my parents building, creating, and renovating houses throughout my childhood. Through their example, I learned to trust that I would be able to work it out as I went along and could ask for advice from more experienced professionals whenever it was needed, just as my parents had done.

One thing that my mother and I bonded over was our mutual appreciation and love of the beauty of nature. She would bring me with her to visit gardening stores – knowing that I was the child who would appreciate it most – and take the whole family for forest walks in the local national parks. Whenever there was an especially beautiful flower on one of her shrubs, she would invite me out to appreciate it with her. I

now attribute these early experiences as a factor influencing my enthusiasm in embracing the reforestation project when establishing Anandagiri Forest Monastery. It is also curious to note that there are more flowering trees and shrubs here at Anandagiri than I have observed at other forest monasteries.

These days, I am very happy to have a warm and loving relationship with my mother, where meaningful conversation is a frequent occurrence. We don't see each other in person very much, but we chat on the phone frequently and she has visited my monastery in Thailand twice. I believe that there have been some occasions where I was even able to mentor her to some degree and help her grow. She frequently tells me that she loves me and is proud of me, and I sincerely return the sentiment to her. Similarly, for the last ten years of his life, whenever I spoke to my father on the phone, he would always end our call with the same statement: 'I love you. I'm proud of you and I miss you a lot.'



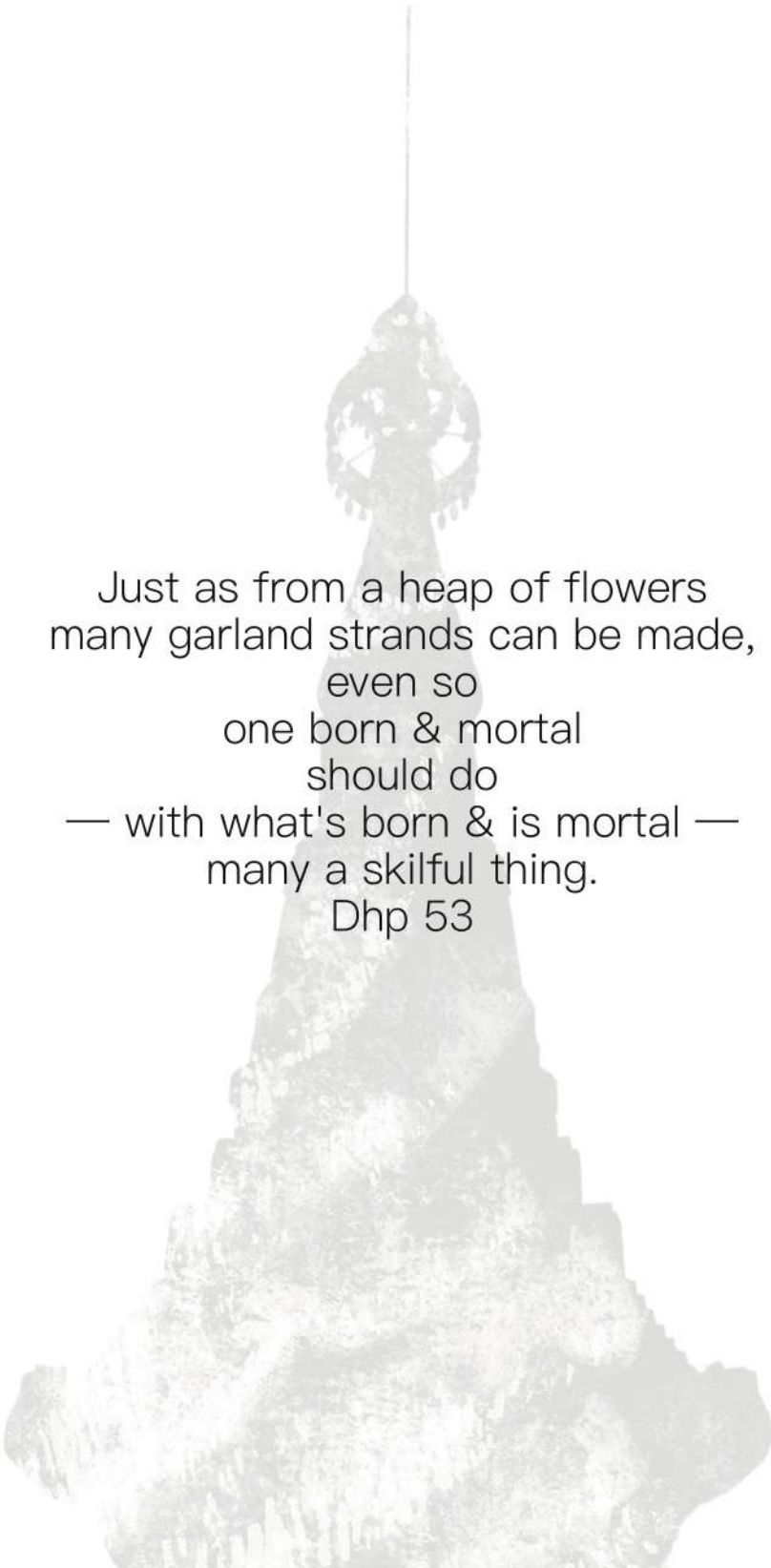
*Angela offering almsfood at Anandagiri Forest Monastery, 2019*



# Chapter 3

Early Signs (Age 3-10)





Just as from a heap of flowers  
many garland strands can be made,  
even so  
one born & mortal  
should do  
— with what's born & is mortal —  
many a skilful thing.  
Dhp 53

## CHAPTER THREE

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### *Early Signs (Age 3-10)*

There is certainly a long striking distance, both physically and culturally, between the life of a non-religious, middle-class Australian child and that of a Buddhist monk living in the forests of Thailand. But looking back, I believe there were many tell-tale signs, even in childhood, which hinted at Buddhist practice in previous lives and suggested an affinity for my future life of renunciation and meditation. Here are several from the first ten years of this lifetime.

#### ***A Water Lily Fascination***

True lotus flowers are not native to Australia, but water lilies are commonly found growing in ponds and lakes. Unusually for a child of four or five, I loved to stare at the purple water lilies in the ponds of the golf course near our house and would become completely engrossed in them, amazed by the way the leaves and flowers grew out of the water yet had no water on them. I would also become completely transported by the subtle fragrance of these water lilies.

The image of the lotus flower – a symbol of transcendence rising above the mud and the water, untouched or unsullied by either – is a powerful metaphor frequently used in Buddhist scriptures. Perhaps in a previous life I had been exposed to, and had become appreciative of, this symbolism, and this was what inclined my young mind towards these flowers in such an engrossing and contented fascination.



*Australian water lily*

Certainly neither my father nor my brothers shared this appreciation – with the result that I was typically left to run after them, huffing and puffing, in order to catch up.

### ***A Sophisticated Contemplation***

One day, alone in the playground at primary school when I was about six years old, I had a strange experience. I became totally engrossed in a particular train of thought – a deep contemplation that led to a firm conviction. It is difficult to explain, but I will try my best.

I truly believed that I was already dead and that my soul, the real ‘me’, was currently floating up on a very long skyward journey – as long as a human lifetime – up to heaven. While the true ‘I’ was slowly floating upward, I was merely watching this little boy in the playground go about his life – a life that was just a memory of a life already lived – and this

would continue to play out before my eyes without any actual involvement from ‘me’. I had the feeling that ‘this little boy isn’t me, what I’m perceiving is just memories’, and I knew I just had to get by moment to moment – and it was going to take a long time – because the real ‘me’ would eventually reach heaven once this memory of a life I was watching came to an end.

Not surprisingly, I couldn’t explain to the teacher why I was late to class, other than saying I just needed some time to myself. I once wrote a short story describing this contemplation and this belief – that I was actually experiencing a memory of a life being played out while I was, in reality, already on a journey to heaven – as one of my writing assignments in first grade. I included a picture of a corpse floating upwards in the middle of the sky. My teacher, Mrs Caveny, actually read it aloud to the class. I believe she was Roman Catholic and had been touched by the image of me floating up to heaven.

Of course, this belief that I was only living out a memory while ascending to heaven didn’t make any sense at the time, but in terms of its sophistication, coming from a six-year-old, there are some interesting aspects to note. Wondering whether one is actually alive in the present moment, or is merely experiencing the memory of a life, demonstrates, I think, my contemplative and questioning disposition even as a young child.

Because of this experience – existing in an in-between state (floating to heaven) in anticipation of a future life (in heaven) while experiencing the memory of a life already lived (a ‘previous life’, the little boy in the playground) – I developed a strong conviction in the existence of higher realms and an afterlife. Perhaps I already had a latent belief system of multiple lives existing along a time continuum and across multiple spheres of existence. This is particularly interesting given that I was brought up in a non-religious family.

### ***A Terrifying Lucid Dream***

Some time around the age of six, I experienced an extremely lucid nightmare. I can still recall it vividly, and now believe that it may have been a kind of contemplative meditation experience occurring within the sleeping state. In the dream, I was a child lying alone on my bed. A wind began to blow – I can only describe it as the breath of death; it was mean and unrelenting, and destroyed everything in its path. As it blew, all of the trees outside were uprooted and blown away, as was all of the grass, and eventually the roof and walls of our house. The sky turned an awful dark purple colour, and the ground had become lifeless brown dirt.

I was completely alone and terrified in that barren netherworld. Then an entity started to walk towards me – a skeleton wearing a dark purple cloak. I could hear the sound of his skeletal feet crunching on the earth and stones as he approached. I woke up screaming and crying before he reached me, and quickly ran to the TV room where my parents were watching the evening movie. They reassured me, ‘It was just a dream... just a dream,’ and consoled me with a piece of chocolate. I remember being very afraid to go back to sleep.

The Buddha describes the conditioned world in which we exist as ‘the realm of death’. He further says that through the act of being born we constantly walk with death, because all conditioned phenomena arise and then cease. This dream was seemingly a visual metaphor for this teaching and truth, complete with a scary phantom-like entity, the grim-reaper-like character – an archetype of death (perhaps an embodiment of *Māra*, a being in Buddhist cosmology whose name literally means ‘bringer of death’ and who is the embodiment of ‘that which kills’).

Looking back now, to experience a dream like this at such a young age suggests I might have contemplated and become familiar with these themes before. Perhaps its occurrence was the result of past vows and determinations to remember the fleeting nature of the conditioned

world in all future lives, in order to continue on the noble path towards *nibbāna* and avoid becoming deluded and distracted by the fleeting and unfulfilling conditions of the world.

### ***Inquisitiveness and Argumentativeness***

Around the ages of five and six, during drives in the car when we were all together on the weekends, I would often bombard my parents with questions about anything and everything. It would get to the point where my father would forbid me from asking any more questions for the remainder of the drive, at which point I would ask, ‘But why? Why can’t I ask any more questions?’

Sometimes I would also answer back if I was not satisfied with the answers I received. I did the same thing with my teachers at school; all of my report cards said that I was intelligent but disruptive in class. As a little boy, I remember paying very close attention in class, as I really wanted to know how and why things worked. I also had many questions pertaining to the deeper meaning and purpose of life.

### ***Curious and Confused About God***

As was usual at the time in the Australian public school system, I attended weekly Christian religious education classes in primary school from about the age of seven. The sweet old lady who volunteered to teach the scripture class gave me a Bible and explained that someone called ‘God’ had created the entire universe, and that he had given his only son, Jesus, to die for my sins.

This was confusing to me, but I genuinely wanted to understand what she was telling me. So one day, when my father came home from work, I asked him, ‘Dad, if God created the world and me, and I am a boy, then how come Jesus is God’s only son? Don’t I count? Aren’t I

God's son too?' To this my father replied, 'God didn't make you, mate – your mother and I did.'

I persisted, asking, 'If God created the world, how come there are poor people in Africa? Why can't he make it better?'

At this point my father said some rude things about Christianity and further continued with, 'You don't need that guilt trip in your life, mate.' Following this conversation, he wrote a letter to the headmistress requesting that his children be exempt from religious education.

Thereafter, the three Hansen boys always went to the library during religion class, along with one Hindu girl and one Jehovah's Witness girl. So rather than have my questions about love, life and the universe answered, I instead happily entertained myself reading *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* and other Roald Dahl classics. I do remember, however, feeling torn, because I liked the kindness of the sweet old lady and I genuinely wanted to know if God was real – I had a hunger and yearning for a deeper meaning to life even at that age.

### ***Awareness of Vast Empty Space***

I was around the age of five when my eldest brother, Jon, who had finished high school, moved away from home and joined the army. My eldest sister, Dianne, was still at home doing her high school finals. She had her provisional driver's licence and was allowed to drive unsupervised so long as she displayed the 'P' plate clearly in the back window of the car. We had a white pick-up truck, called a 'ute' in Australia, as well as a Toyota Cressida station wagon.

Dianne would occasionally go to the beach with Jane and invite her brothers to come along as well. We three boys would sit in the back of the ute, enjoying the sunshine and the wind in our hair. Once we

arrived at the beach, we would all go for a swim, after which Dianne and Jane would commence sunbathing.

Troy, Craig and I would normally stay in the ocean longer, then make sandcastles and perhaps wrestle a bit. We'd wash the sand off ourselves and then go and lie down in the sun. We didn't know as much about skin cancer then as we do now; we would put zinc cream on our noses – and that was it. It was the fashion of the day for girls to have a dark brown, full-body tan, so my two sisters would sunbathe topless: first lying on their back, then on their stomach, then on one side, then on the other. For us energetic young boys this seemed to take ages and ages. I remember being happy at first, then very bored, then restless – but once I had surrendered to the fact that we were stuck there until my sisters were fully baked, something quite wonderful would happen.

Listening intently to the sound of the waves of the Pacific Ocean lapping up against the beach, I would notice that there were so many layers of sound occurring within such a vast expanse of space: the sound of big waves crashing, of small waves crashing, and of waves receding – some very close by, some at a distance, and some a long way away. While intently listening to all of the waves, my mind would eventually find an awareness that could listen to all of the sounds impartially, or rather, simply be aware of all of that noise and movement, until, somehow, the awareness of the vast space became the mind's experience. Boredom and restlessness fell away, and my mind would become truly at ease.

When Dianne finally announced, 'Okay! Time to go home now!' I would feel strangely peaceful and not want to talk very much. Looking back now, I view these experiences as the beginnings of my meditation practice in this lifetime. Awareness of the 'space element' – the fifth element in Buddhist texts, in which the four elements of earth, water, wind and fire manifest – was probably my first meditation object. Perhaps I had cultivated similar meditation practices previously.



*New Brighton beach, 2024*

More than forty years later, I still remember these experiences. I couldn't tell you exactly how many times they occurred – it may have been just once or several times – but I know it only happened around this age, because once I became a teenager with more complex thoughts and emotions, it no longer happened. In any case, I believe that having had such a safe, spacious, and naturally beautiful environment in my early childhood was an important factor in keeping me somewhat sane and grounded through some of the challenges I would face in the coming years.

### ***The First Buddha Statue***

I still remember the first time I ever saw a Buddha statue – in this lifetime anyway. I was nine years old, and my mother had brought us to visit her youngest stepbrother on the Gold Coast. Uncle Terry was a paraplegic – he had jumped off a boat without realising how shallow the water was and, sadly, hit his head on the sand and broken his neck. He was confined to a wheelchair and had a live-in carer named Anne.

I remember that on the kitchen bench in his house there was a white ceramic statue of a man in robes, with very long earlobes and a bump on his head, sitting in full lotus position. My mother admired the statue and asked Anne what it was. She replied it was a statue of the Buddha. My mother asked Anne if she was a Buddhist, and she replied that she was. In 1981 there were very few Buddhists in Australia, and the more recent trend of selling mass-produced Buddha statues – resin figures in homeware stores and concrete ones in garden centres – began much later.

A popular television series, *Monkey*, about a monkey god and a Chinese Buddhist monk who travel together to India in search of sacred texts, aired a few years after this. (For a long time after watching that series, I thought the Buddha had been Chinese!) Watching that TV show, I would occasionally remember seeing that first Buddha statue. In fact, I still remember exactly what it looked like to this day – it certainly made an impression.

### ***Requesting to be Vegetarian***

When I was about ten years old it suddenly – and quite profoundly – dawned on me that the ‘lamb’ my family was eating meant that we were eating a baby sheep, that ‘beef’ had once been a cow, and ‘pork’ had once been a pig. Chicken and fish was kind of obvious already, but once it all came together in my ten-year-old mind and I thought about it a bit, I developed a heavy sense of sadness and a recognition of a certain unjustness. I was mortified that we were eating so many animals!

I felt so strongly about this that I asked my mother at the dinner table one evening if I could become a vegetarian. She answered, ‘No, I don’t have time to cook special meals just for you!’ She did, however, soon begin replacing one meal per week with a vegetarian meal. Spinach and feta cheese pie wrapped in filo pastry, served with a fresh garden

salad, became my mother's signature vegetarian dish. Everyone liked it. Combined with baked beans on toast on Sundays, I was able to have two vegetarian dinners per week.

I'm sure there weren't many ten-year-old boys in regional Australia in 1982 asking their mothers if they could be vegetarian! This might suggest some previous familiarity with vegetarianism. I did become a vegetarian later – the day I left home at seventeen – and I remained a strict vegetarian for five years. After taking on the practice of eating one meal per day as a novice monk, I began eating small amounts of meat.

### ***A Pervasive Sense of Dislocation***

As a child, I frequently and repeatedly experienced a strong gut feeling that I was simply in the wrong place – the best way to describe it is that I felt as though I had been born in the wrong place. I never attempted to describe this feeling to anyone at the time because I had no idea what or where 'the right place' might actually be. I worried that I would sound stupid if I tried to describe my inner confusion, so I just kept it to myself. But there were many times when I looked at the faces of my parents and siblings at the dinner table and wondered to myself, 'Who are you people!?' It wasn't that they were bad people, but for some reason they felt very unfamiliar to me, and I felt very out of place amongst them.

With regard to what was being taught in school, I also had a fairly consistent sense of inner questioning going on, wondering, 'Why do I need to know this? How is this relevant or useful?' There was a deep sense that the education that I was receiving was simply not the right one – it felt like a waste of time. In response to this, I found myself unwilling to give my heart to it fully because I just didn't trust it and I couldn't see the value in it.

I consistently hovered around the A- and B+ territory in my grades and never fully applied myself, despite feedback from every single one of my teachers, who insisted that I could do better. At the same time, I had no idea what a more suitable education might look or sound like. This inner sense of dislocation, or mislocation, was very painful – it felt like a kind of curse – and rather than fade with time, it actually got worse the older I got.

Looking back, however, I see that there were benefits to this painful inner conflict, as it compelled me to search for deeper meaning in life – something that felt truly ‘right’ for me. This inner conflict also restrained me from committing to an unfruitful path or getting stuck in an unproductive situation.


It wasn’t until years later, on my first visit to Thailand, that the feeling of dislocation I had carried since childhood finally lifted. Now, after decades of meditation and living in Asia, I have come to believe that most of my recent lifetimes were lived in Asia as a Buddhist. If true, this would explain those feelings of unfamiliarity and dislocation that I experienced as a child and as a young adult living in Australia. There were more signs that manifested later in my teenage years, but we will come to those in later chapters.



# Chapter 4

Our World is Turned Upside Down  
(Age 11-13)





Even the evil  
meet with good fortune  
as long as their evil  
has yet to mature.  
But when it's matured  
that's when they meet  
with evil.

Even the good  
meet with bad fortune  
as long as their good  
has yet to mature.  
But when it's matured  
that's when they meet  
with good fortune.  
Dhp 119–120

## CHAPTER FOUR

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### *Our World is Turned Upside Down (Age 11-13)*

*10,000 Joys, 10,000 Sorrows* – it is time to relate some of those sorrows. Something very painful happened to our family when I was eleven years old, and our lives were changed forever. A confluence of unfortunate events led to a huge financial disaster for our family.

At one point around 1980, my father decided to sell both his car dealership and our home in order to build a larger, nicer home with a swimming pool and a view of the Pacific Ocean – this was our home in Ocean Shores. He also had a fishing trawler built so that he could change his means of earning a living. He had a good friend who had gone into fishing, and he imagined this change would afford him a more flexible lifestyle than an office job with many staff to manage.

My father took out a mortgage in order to embark upon these two new endeavours. Perhaps because his previous businesses had been successful, and his experience of renovating and building homes over the years had gone relatively smoothly up to this point, he optimistically assumed that everything would go to plan – but nothing did.

The home took longer to build than planned, as did the construction of the boat. This meant my father found himself without an income as well as paying rent for longer than he had budgeted for. If it had been just these two frustrating delays, everything probably would have been okay, but due to high inflation in Australia at that time there was a very sudden and aggressive tightening of monetary policy,

followed by a rapid increase in interest rates – culminating in a deep financial recession.

Our family got caught up in this perfect storm. By this point, we had moved into our beautiful new home with its fabulous sea views and my father's business was operational, but the interest rates on his loan just climbed and climbed. In the space of about two years, official interest rates rose by more than four percentage points – which equated to a roughly fifty percent increase in interest payments – so the income he earned from fishing alone was no longer sufficient to cover the exorbitant interest charges. If I remember correctly, my father explained to me that he had taken out a bank loan with an interest rate of twelve percent, which was already very high for a mortgage, and at one point, just before the bank repossessed our house, the interest rate had risen to an extraordinary eighteen percent.

When I was eleven years old, we came home from my grandmother's funeral in Caloundra – Jessie, my maternal grandmother, had passed away due to pneumonia – to find that an official-looking letter had been slid under the door. The letter, from the bank, announced that my father's boat had been repossessed; the boat had already been relocated to a different harbour and would be auctioned off to recover the debt my father owed on our home.

My father was now left with no source of income. For the first time in his life, he had no choice but to go on unemployment benefits. To make matters worse, while the boat was moored unattended in a different harbour waiting to be sold, thieves stole expensive radar equipment that was no longer covered by my father's insurance. Subsequently, when the boat was auctioned, it sold for significantly less than its original value.

Another cruel letter arrived soon after this, announcing that the bank would be repossessing our family home. We were given one month to vacate it.



*Brett, Troy, Mel, Dianne, Jon, Angela, Craig and Jane, 1985*

At this stage, Dianne was studying and working as a nurse in Sydney, Jane was studying to be a journalist at a university in Queensland, and Jon had already left home years earlier. So it was just my parents, Mel and Angela, and the three youngest sons, Brett, Troy and Craig, who faced this devastating situation.

Somehow, my mother found a rental home for us in Scarborough, a suburb in the city of Redcliffe, Queensland, about a three hour drive north of Ocean Shores at the time. My father found casual work through an old friend from his football days.

We were given little warning about all this. Our parents told us that we would be changing homes and schools in a matter of days.

In spite of the dire circumstances, we never went without three square meals during this time; however, there were no new clothes or shoes, and no outings anywhere. My mother stopped cooking desserts, and my parents kind of just stopped talking to their children. I guess on one level we knew that something was up, but it wasn't until the house was repossessed that we realised how bad the situation was. Even so, they always managed to keep a roof over our heads.

Obviously, this was beyond painful for my parents. My father had owned several very successful local businesses and had even been the president of the Ocean Shores Golf Club at one point. My mother had enjoyed playing tennis with the other Ocean Shores ladies once a week as well. There were various dinner parties, gatherings at restaurants and other social events that they enjoyed attending, but now they decided to just disappear without telling anyone. They 'felt' that they had no choice, but in doing so they experienced utter heartbreak and embarrassment; they had lost their business and their dream home. It was an 'ego death' as much as it was a financial disaster, and they wanted to go and hide somewhere where nobody knew them.

My mother told us that we were not allowed to tell anyone that we were leaving or the reason why, which added an extra level of trauma to the experience for us. It was as though something was so suddenly and inexplicably wrong with us, both as a family and as individuals, that we had to just disappear from everyone's sight in an instant and without any kind of explanation. I was made to feel as if we were an embarrassment.

Consequently, we did not receive any condolences or good wishes from our friends or teachers, and we did not get to say a proper goodbye to anyone. Personally, I felt a kind of nameless shame after this incident that is difficult to describe, and it affected my confidence and self-esteem for many years to come (at least in part – this was also in combination with other factors.) I do, however, understand that my parents did not want the added shame of having to explain their situation to others. They were just too shocked and bruised to talk about it at the

time. They needed to run away, hide, and lick their wounds, like injured animals.

I have often wondered why none of their friends – at least, that I'm aware of – called or popped in on them during that time. In small country towns, everyone knows everyone's business, so people surely must have known that my father's boat had been repossessed by the bank within days of it happening. My parents had probably been quietly withdrawing from their social circle for some time, but even so, good friends would have made a call. I find it sad that they had no true and sincere friends at this terrible time in their lives.

I only recently learned from my mother some of the more painful details from those days. They did not have enough money to pay for a removalist or to pay the bond on the new rental property, but even so, my mother found ways to make the move happen. When she first spoke with the removalists, she negotiated to pay them with her pianola. The removalists willingly agreed and moved us to Queensland.

As for the rental bond, she made a deal with the owner (who was interstate but in the process of selling the rental home) that she would help her to sell the house by allowing people to view it at any time of the day or night and would ensure the house was always clean and presentable for prospective buyers. Fortunately for us, our kind landlord agreed and allowed us to move in – and without a bond!

We came home from school one day to find a huge removal truck in our driveway and all of our things already packed in boxes. The sofas, dining table, and even the curtains were all packed away. We got in the car with our black cat, named Sooty, and drove up north. There was no time for goodbyes to the beach or the ocean, or to the golf course with its pond filled with beautiful water lilies. We drove on, past the turn-offs to Billinudgel, Murwillumbah, and the Tweed Mall, and simply kept on going. We arrived in Scarborough mid-evening and walked into a house I'd never seen before, in a town I'd never been to before. The removalists

arrived an hour later and we all pitched in to help our parents with the unpacking.

It was twenty-three years later that I had the chance to visit my early childhood home again. When I did visit, I lay down on New Brighton beach for a long time, with my hands placed over my heart, and allowed myself to say a very belated ‘goodbye’, ‘thank you’, and ‘hello again’ to the beach, my long lost friend. Scarborough has a beach, but it is shielded from the waves of the open ocean by Moreton Island – it could never compare to my childhood love of the ocean and New Brighton beach.

My father told me many years later that he had thought seriously about suicide during that period, but because he had three sons and a wife depending upon him, he put those thoughts aside and resolved to do the best he could. My mother, although furious and devastated, told my father she would stick with him in raising their children and was willing to start again, doing what they had done before – renovating houses and reselling them – in order to slowly get back on their feet.

‘We’ve done it once before – we can do it again,’ she told my father.

Because of the depth of the recession at that time, the bank sold our home for half of its original value. My parents were informed that there was no surplus at all after the auction – the bank simply recovered its capital and left my parents with nothing but an official record of bankruptcy. Now forty-two and forty-four years old, they had lost the entirety of their life savings, all of which had been invested in their dream home.

My mother was very angry for years about what she saw as my father’s mismanagement of their resources. Although it is true that, had he managed his business and investments differently, things might have turned out otherwise – but to be fair to him no one at the time could have

predicted that interest rates would rise so high so quickly. Nor could anyone have imagined that the bank would repossess both the business and the house only to sell them for half their value.

It was an unimaginable nightmare. Now, strongly believing in the law of *kamma*, I can look back and see that this was just something that we had coming, something we had to endure.

I did not – and still do not, to be frank – know how such economic policy could have been allowed or tolerated in a country like Australia in the early 1980s and again in the early 1990s. Interest rates skyrocketing so high and so quickly? Hundreds of thousands of families must have lost their homes and businesses. I remember, later on during the next recession of the early 1990s, watching Treasurer Paul Keating on television in his well-cut Italian suits, explaining that ‘this is the recession that Australia had to have’. But he looked like he was doing just fine!

This experience left me with a deep distrust of governments, banks, and politicians in general. In my lay life, I never took out a loan or owned a credit card – what my family experienced profoundly shaped the way I conduct my financial affairs. Now, as the founding abbot and co-builder of Anandagiri, we proceed with any building project only once we have most of the required funds already in the bank.

Living in our new suburban home in Scarborough, not only did I miss my sister Dianne and her magical piano playing that I used to wake up to, but now I also missed the ocean and the long drives through the Northern New South Wales rainforests. And my father simply stopped playing music around this time – Neil Diamond and Tom Jones had been silenced. It was a two-storey house and the record player was on the lower floor, so sometimes I would put on records loudly for myself. That was the year Michael Jackson’s *Thriller* album was released, and at least the zombies could dance in the bleakness.

We had lost our other friends, but luckily we three boys still had one another. Riding bikes around suburban streets and swimming in the still water of nearby Moreton Bay could not compare with the open roads and surf beaches of Ocean Shores, but we always had each other to complain to about our sense of loss. We also had an Atari video game console by then, so we did spend a fair amount of spare time inside playing *Space Invaders* and *Donkey Kong*.

We started at our new school mid-term, studying a different curriculum than previously because we had moved to a different state. On the first day, as I walked into the classroom alone, some of the boys looked at my leather sandals and burst out laughing, one of them calling out, ‘This one wears sandals!’ I had never been laughed at or mocked when entering a room before, and the experience cut very deeply into my eleven-year-old mind.

At our old primary school in Mullumbimby – widely known as a hippie town – sandals were commonly worn by the hippies’ children and kids like us, but here in the suburbs they apparently weren’t cool. I only had one pair of shoes at that stage, having outgrown all my other shoes, so the next day I put my sandals in my school bag and entered the classroom barefoot. Nobody laughed at that. After a couple of weeks of going to class barefoot, my mother bought me a new pair of velcro running shoes because I told her I needed them for sports class. Suddenly, I was the first person in the class to have the trendiest new shoes.

Fortunately, I really liked my seventh grade teacher, Mrs Nicholson. She was a rather plump lady with a quality of big-hearted love that was palpable and comforting. She actually seemed to enjoy the wittier and more argumentative kids, and she had an obvious respect for the students in her care who were individuals – or ‘Aussie larrikins’, as you might call them. She cut us a lot of slack, though she would draw a firm line if anyone went too far. She and I got along very well.



*Troy, Craig and Brett, 1985*

Because my father was between jobs, he took a temporary job packing shelves at a warehouse. He had to get up at 4:00 am to catch a bus to work. Seeing my father willing to do modest and tiring jobs to pay the bills and feed his wife and children was a valuable thing to witness. He didn't give up or collapse into self-pity; he simply did what he needed to do. And when he arrived home again at around 4:00 pm, some twelve hours after leaving the house, he would greet his children with warmth.

Looking back on this time, and with all things considered, I am grateful for this brief experience of relative poverty. I think it impressed upon me a deep resolve never to mock anybody simply for being poor. Had our family become increasingly affluent, it is quite possible that I

may have become somewhat arrogant or patronising towards people of lesser economic means.

My deep tendency towards compassion and generosity, which has been consistent throughout my adult life, was probably shaped in part by having been humbled by life's circumstances in childhood. I believe that as a child, I formed a deep resolution never to add to a person's shame or mental anguish unnecessarily, and to always try to help people in need whenever I am able. As always, character tendencies cultivated in past lives may well play a role in this too.

After about six months, my father got a good job as the manager of a Holden car dealership in Brisbane, and my mother, true to her word, helped our landlord to sell our house in Scarborough. And so, once again, we moved to a new home and a new school.

Although my father now had an executive position and was again earning a good income within just six months of losing both his business and his home, he and my mother chose to live in a rather unusual rental property. Set on five acres of farmland, we moved to a hippy artist's rural property on the outskirts of what was then becoming the sprawling suburbs of Logan City, just south of Brisbane. It was surprising to us, but I think they chose it, at least in part, because it was cheap and would allow them to start saving towards a deposit for a new home of their own.

The house itself had an entire wall of full-length sliding glass windows at the back, looking out onto the gum trees. It also had a huge fireplace with a large, cone-shaped copper dome in the middle of the living room. There was a small artist's loft studio on the second floor, with windows on all four sides. The hallway floor was made of paving bricks. All of these features were new and unusual to me – I had only ever lived in homes with wall-to-wall carpet.



The kitchen roof leaked in many places when it rained, so my mother had to put out pots and pans to catch the drips. The sound was very musical, as different drips would fall at different paces, making a different noise depending on the vessel they fell into. If it rained a lot and the dam overflowed, some of the water would wash over the kitchen floor!

The property came with several types of animals. Two ducks, named Henry and Henrietta, would occasionally walk through the kitchen and poop on the floor before my mother chased them away. The two purebred Burmese cats, Felix and Tiffany, had been house cats before we moved in, so they were allowed inside at all times – something that had never been allowed before in our previous homes. They loved to chase each other from one end of the house to the other. There were also guinea pigs and even a brown cow that lived in the back paddock – if she was lying down, I would sometimes go lean on her and talk to her. I can't remember the name of the cow, which is a bit strange since we only had one of those, but I do remember the names of the two albino guinea pigs, Margot and Jerry. As an eleven- and twelve-year-old boy, I really enjoyed all the pets that came with that house!



The interesting thing I noticed about my parents during the time we lived in that particular house was that they seemed the happiest I had ever seen them. My mother seemed to really enjoy the leaking roof, the pooping ducks, the wrestling cats, and the overflowing dam. I think there were several reasons for this: my parents had somehow managed to get back on their feet to some degree after the terrible shock of losing their business and home, but also because there was no one to compare ourselves to anymore – no trying to keep up with the Joneses. On this property we were isolated from our neighbours and never met them. Dad would go to work in his suit and tie, and Mum would dress up a bit to go shopping, but when they were at home they just hung out in their most comfortable, daggy clothes.

The school bus used to pick us up in front of the house and take us, along with the other kids from out in the countryside, to Shailer Park Primary School. This was a new school in a new suburb back then. I am told that this is quite a rough area now, but as a new suburb back in those days, it seemed to be quite middle class. The bike riding along country roads was better than it had been at Scarborough, for sure.

As the beautiful beaches of the Gold Coast were within a one hour drive of this new home, happily the beach became a part of our lives once again. On most Sundays between the months of October and April, we would go to the beach. The beaches were much more crowded, but at least there was the sun and the surf. Music was once again in our family's lives, as we would listen to the radio all the way to the beach and back. I do remember being fairly happy during this period. I think it was a combination of my parents being happy and of us living very close to nature.

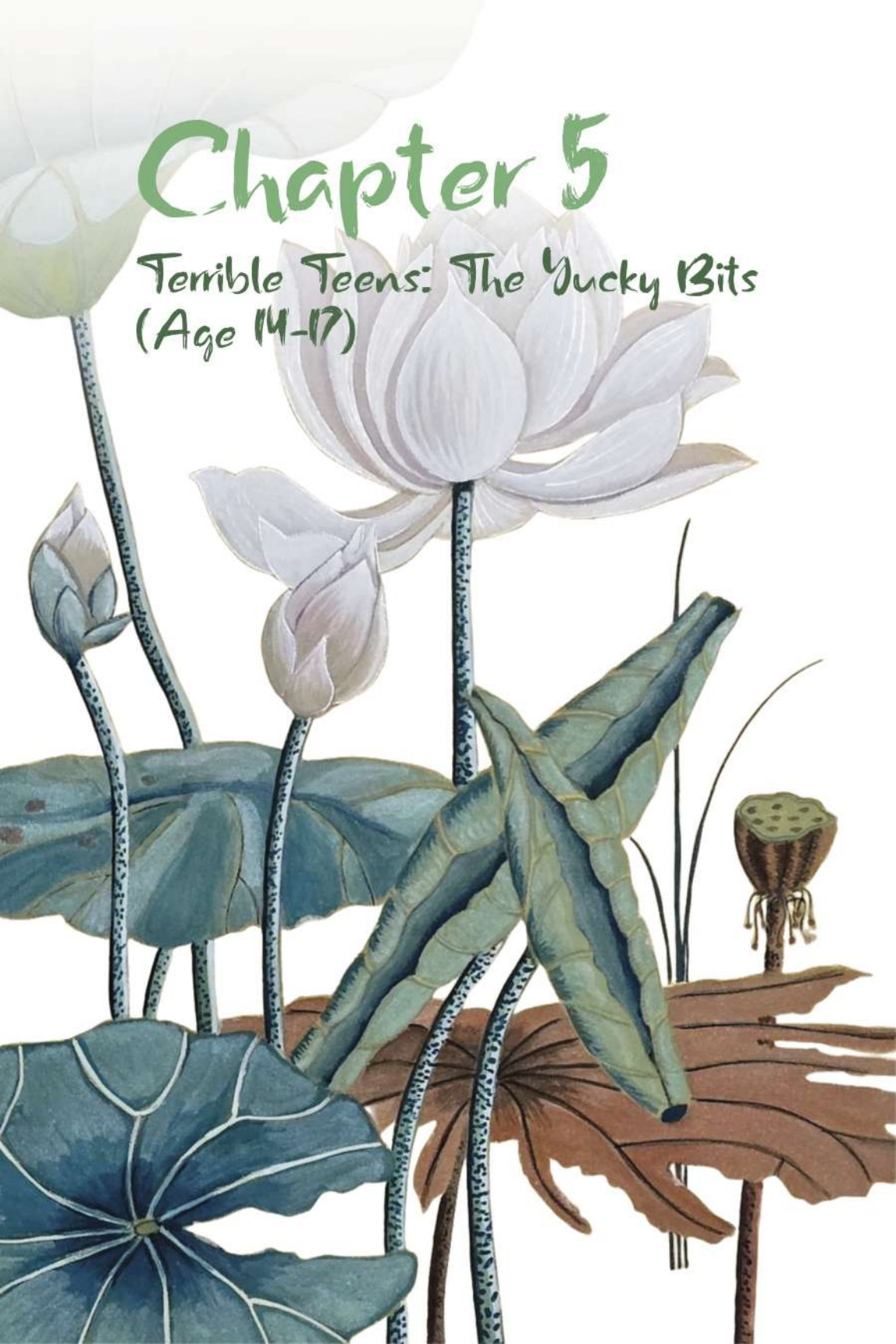
We lived in that house for about two years – I believe I had my twelfth and thirteenth birthdays there. The living room was quite large, so my parents also held Jane's twenty-first birthday party there. Jane was very studious and very ambitious; she studied full-time, worked part-time, and was also elected to the student union at her university, so we didn't see her very much.

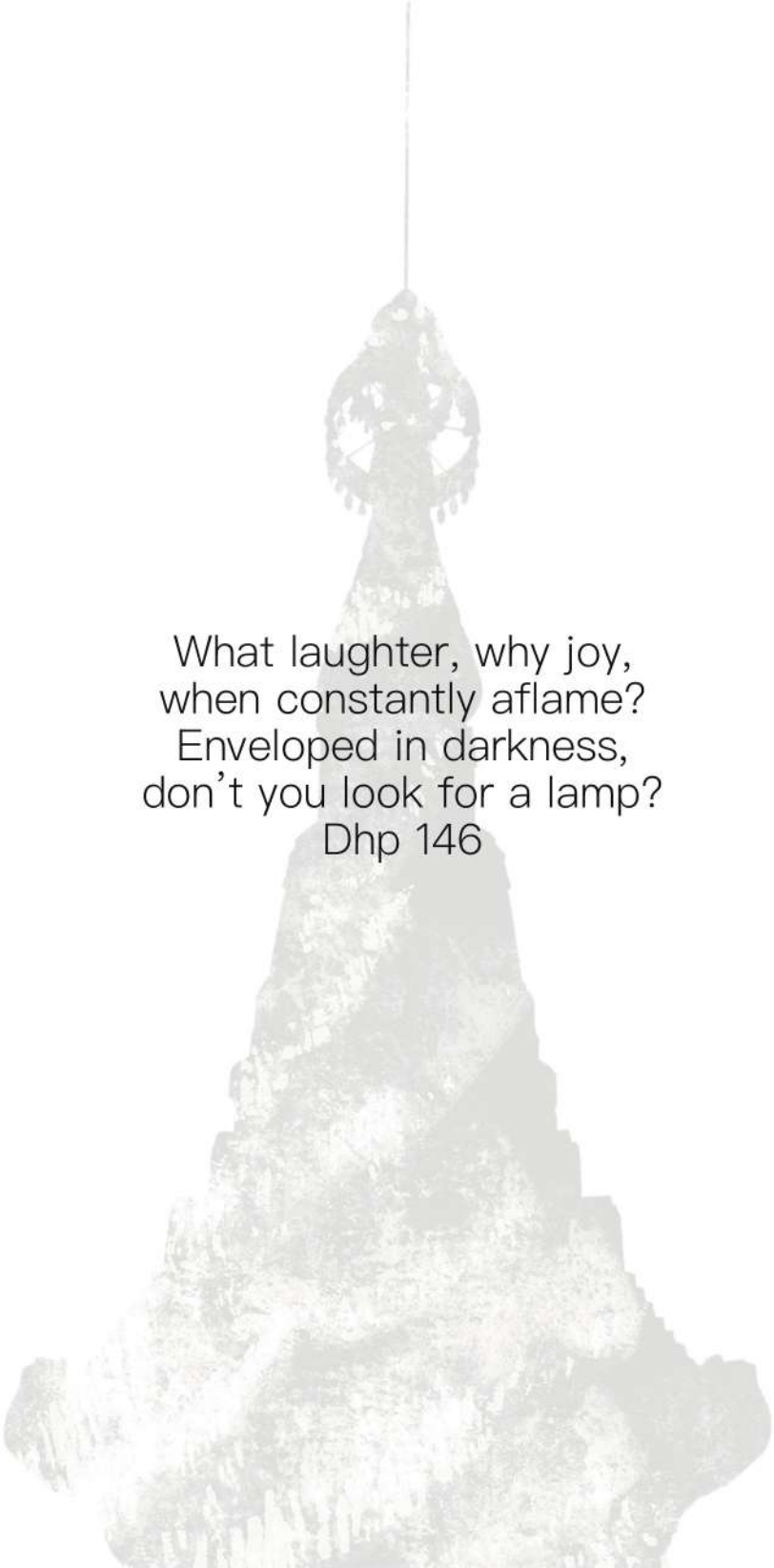
But, like everything in life, things constantly changed with the ebb and flow and flux of conditions. I was very fortunate to experience this period of relative happiness and stability between the ages of eleven and thirteen, because the next few years were much more challenging.



# Chapter 5

Terrible Teens: The Yucky Bits  
(Age 14-17)





What laughter, why joy,  
when constantly aflame?  
Enveloped in darkness,  
don't you look for a lamp?  
Dhp 146

## CHAPTER FIVE

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### *Terrible Teens: The Yucky Bits (Age 14-17)*

Having fallen back on old skills, my father settled into his well-paying job as the managing director of a new car dealership. After making some enquiries, he realised that he might be eligible to apply for a mortgage from a building society in order to purchase a house. It turned out that a loan could, in fact, be secured, but due to his age it had to be paid back within fifteen years, making the repayments quite high. After considering the matter deeply, my parents felt that they did not really have much choice if they were to have any financial security in their old age. They therefore set about looking at homes, land and builders' display homes. Eventually, they found a small block on the edge of a new suburb, surrounded by semi-acreage blocks, as well as a builder who was willing to build them a home within their budget constraints.

What could have been a not-so-sad story of my parents getting back on their feet unfortunately became a story of bitterness for a period of years, at least on the part of my mother. Their new three-bedroom home, with front and back yards, was a little smaller and a little less beautiful than many of the other homes in their suburb, and a far cry from the four-bedroom house with a swimming pool and sea views that we had lost. On top of this, there was not much money left over after the mortgage repayments and utility bills were paid. My mother reacted to these circumstances with anger and resentment.

I don't particularly want to write any words that reflect poorly on my mother and father. As a human being I love them and, as an adult, I

have true empathy for their strengths and limitations. Nor do I wish to write words that may reflect poorly upon myself. But in an autobiography grounded in truth there is really no way around it: a chapter about these times has to be included.

A large part of why I am telling my personal story – the good, the bad, and the ugly – is to share an example of a living human being who faced major challenges in childhood, yet was determined and eventually disciplined enough to go beyond them, not becoming defined or constrained by them. When I write these words now, as a happy and whole human being who enjoys a fulfilling life, it is almost like looking back on another person's life or a distant past life. And yet, it was my life back then, so it must be included.

Buddhist monks espouse the virtues of gratitude and filial piety and, indeed, there is much to be grateful for in these challenging years, which coincided with my 'terrible teens'. They are an important part of both my parents' stories and my own. Most notably, I don't think I would have been so oriented toward finding a secure inner refuge at such a young age had there not been some bruises of the heart – some suffering that inspired, or rather compelled, a search for a path that would lead to the end of suffering.

However, before I write much more about these dark days my mother and I experienced, I think it would be helpful and appropriate to remind the reader that, forty years later, things are very good between us. It is a great blessing to me that my mother is still in my life. At the time of writing, I have in fact recently returned from Australia, where I visited my mother for several days.

As an eighty-five-year-old widow, she is doing very well, all things considered. Angela is fiercely independent, sharp as a tack – and proud of it. She still drives a car, does her own grocery shopping, and cooks for herself. She remembers her appointments as well as the bus timetable to various places. These days, whenever any of her five

remaining children visit her (sadly, my sister Jane passed away from a brain tumour a year ago), or any of her grandchildren or great-grandchildren for that matter, Angela welcomes them warmly. She is proud of all of her children and has learned over time to express this more affectionately. As each of her children left home, Angela became aware of just how much she loved them, and how very much she missed them.

During my most recent visit, we went on some of her favourite local walks in the Tweed Coast area of Northern New South Wales, walking my sister's Golden Retriever. On several occasions, a good friend of mine in the area kindly helped me to take my mother out for a nice lunch – something I have always tried to do whenever I have visited her over the past ten years. Some close students of mine transfer funds to my friend who facilitates the outing. It feels like a small reciprocal gesture after having eaten so many of my mother's home-cooked meals. We also shared a few cappuccinos and some delicious pieces of Aussie carrot cake.

Angela is grateful to still have her health, mobility and mental faculties. I would say that some of my mother's most prominent qualities these days are gratitude and graciousness. We have both come a long way, and I am grateful that neither of us gave up on our relationship during the more difficult times. While spending those days with my mother, I was able to observe how my other siblings would frequently call to check in on her – it seemed to me that contact with her children has become Angela's greatest joy.

Now, going back to 1985... After losing her home and life savings, Angela had endured a tremendous loss and could have benefited from therapy as well as a loving circle of friends, but at that time she had neither. My father was more stoic and immersed himself in his work life; he was simply getting on with it. But, compounded by the challenges of her own early childhood, I think Angela felt deeply ripped off by life. Disaster had struck one too many times. She became quite stuck for a

few years, and that was painful both for her and for those around her. Her loss also affected her confidence and self-esteem. It seemed to me that she was frustrated by life's circumstances, but could not find the motivation to do anything about them.

Our mother would have bad days when her speech was very harsh, particularly towards my father and me. I – unlike my brothers or my father – had a tendency to talk back and challenge some of her assertions, which was never appreciated. I always had this tendency, even if it meant getting a clip behind the ear! Coming home from school, we were never sure whether our mother would be cheerful, or quiet and withdrawn, or angry and ready to pick a fight.

It was a terrible thing to observe: watching someone compare themselves to others, wanting more and resenting what had been lost can turn a happy person into a very bitter one. On one level it was true that much had been lost, and that life with the pressure of their mortgage was difficult and tedious. Yet on another level, the house and yard were actually quite nice, food was abundant and nutritious, and a small outing on the weekends always seemed to be possible.

Even the predictable and dependable routine that bored my mother offered a kind of security that many people only dream of. There was a regular pay cheque and a man who brought it home dutifully. There were safe roads, benevolent weather, and good shopping centres. Our living standards were higher than those of most people in the world. Even so, Angela was very unhappy. Part of me wished we could go back to living with the cow and the ducks and be happy in an old, leaking house being 'nobodies', rather than living on the edge of a new suburb feeling like resentful 'wannabes'.

To make matters worse, my mother liked watching that awful television programme *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*, which seemed to feed her resentment even further. I hated that show. It is curious that even at the age of thirteen or fourteen I was not impressed by how many

houses or cars rich people had. I seemed to have an ingrained, visceral revulsion towards ostentatiousness. I would have been far more interested to know whether the celebrities were nice people, and whether they shared any of their wealth. I also felt a similar shrinking away from gratuitous violence.

Since this was the mid-eighties there was no internet and we had only the one television which was in our living room. If you didn't like what was on the telly, you had to go find something else to do in another room. Whenever my mother watched *Lifestyles* or my dad watched a violent war film, I would retreat to my bedroom to listen to cassettes. At that stage I was sharing a bedroom with my twin brother, Troy. When our elder brother Jon gave us his old record player, I began listening to vinyl records, often with headphones so I could play them very loudly. It was a useful form of escapism.

I do think that my parents' bitterness with regard to not being as wealthy as they felt they ought to be played a role in my developing distrust of the pursuit of materialism as life's primary goal. At one point my father wanted me to become a medical doctor, while my mother felt that I would make a better lawyer due to my argumentativeness. When they asked me what I hoped to do as an adult, I simply answered that I did not know. When they suggested that, if I did not know, it would be best to follow their advice in the meantime, I was adamant that I could not do that.

'Why not?' they asked.

My response was very frank, and no doubt very painful to hear. 'Because if I follow your advice, I will end up like you – and I don't want to be like you!'

Angela likely has a very different perspective or version of events from those years – her late forties and my early teens – but I can only relay my own experience. It seemed to me that my mother resented

the way her life had been reduced to a relentless round of domestic tasks. Her life's focus was keeping a clean house, and feeding and clothing her husband and three sons, yet she clearly wanted much more from life: more personal fulfilment, enrichment, excitement, or inspiration – a parallel life beyond that of wife and mother. At the time, however, she was not able to find an opening or a way to manifest this. Feeling beaten down and trapped, she resented those around her and vented those feelings regularly.

There was a period of around six months when Angela had a part-time job at the university in Brisbane where Jane was studying. She worked as the cashier in a games room, where students had to buy tokens to play the machines. She was a little happier during that time – being able to get out of the house for a few hours each day and having a little money to spend on herself.

The strength of my mother's character during this period lay in the discipline, dutifulness and consistency she brought to all of her tasks. The house was clean, the garden neatly weeded, and a hot meal was cooked and served every evening from Monday to Saturday. (On Sundays we ate leftovers and baked beans on toast.) Clean clothes and socks were always folded neatly and placed at the ends of our beds, and a sandwich and an orange or apple was ready in our lunchboxes to be taken to school each day. Arriving home from school, we were allowed a glass of orange juice and two cookies. My father was also very dutiful and consistent, but he just didn't seem very interested in his sons. He would come home and open a beer, eat his meal and watch TV. Even though all of the physical necessities of life were provided for, it was the emotional side which felt lacking.

Angela expected her children to do well at school, yet complained bitterly about the cost of textbooks, uniforms, and shoes. Neither of my parents ever attended a single parent-teacher evening, of which there were a couple every year. Although we were supported on a physical level and expected to perform very well academically, it seemed

they were never truly interested in providing the emotional support needed to make that possible.

On the emotional level, I remember feeling almost cursed. It may sound like a terrible thing to say, but I truly believe that my mother was jealous of the opportunities her children were getting and the futures that they might have. A future with choices and adventures – choices that she never had.

I am sorry to say that my father's indifference during those years felt like a different kind of curse – it was an indifference punctuated by occasional harassment. Despite never attending a single parent-teacher meeting throughout all of my school years, and never asking to see or read a single written assignment or to look at any test results, he would scold me roundly when my report card contained an A- or a B+ because the teachers would write that 'Brett could have done better if he applied himself properly.' Yet he never nurtured or supported any of his children to achieve his high academic expectations of them. Having been sent away to boarding school at a young age himself, it appeared that he simply did not have those skills.

I felt quite angry towards my parents for what I perceived as a lack of warmth or genuine interest in the inner lives of their children. I was also angry with my father for not supporting his wife to get therapy or find a rewarding hobby, and I told him as much, but the men of his generation did not believe in such things. The atmosphere at home definitely affected my academic performance. For my part, a grade point average of 88.5 percent was good enough for me. I did well, but could never quite bring myself to do my best.

I can see now that there was a part of me that did not allow myself to do as well as I could at school out of rebelliousness toward my parents. I had a stubborn pride. I allowed myself to do only as well as I thought my parents deserved me to do – so a B+ it was. There was also a deeper sense that what I was learning lacked relevance or importance,

that there was no deeper meaning to it, so it didn't touch me deeply enough for me to give myself to it fully. This sense of searching for something more meaningful haunted my adolescent self throughout those years.

So, rather than apply myself to studying, I preferred to lose myself in music in my bedroom. Around the age of fourteen I started to wear a lot of black clothing and listen to depressing indie music from Northern England. To quote *Unloveable* by The Smiths, one of my favourite bands at the time: *'I know I'm unloveable, you don't have to tell me. Message received loud and clear, loud and clear. I wear black on the outside 'cause black is how I feel on the inside.'*

As a teenager, I had been bored at school because most of what we were learning did not seem relevant, useful, or interesting to me. I was not being offered a meaningful purpose or direction in life, and I was very frustrated by this. There was a period of time, lasting a couple of years, where I actually felt quite suicidal, particularly around the age of fourteen. It was a curious and complex combination of emotions, musings, longings, and intuitions that were at play.

More love at home would definitely have helped; however, it was not just a simple calling out for love, nor a basic desire for annihilation, and neither was it a rebellion or desire for attention. There was a kind of wholesomeness mixed in with the morose, for I had a very deep intuition that there were definitely other realms, other worlds, and other lives – lives lived in the past and those yet to come in the future. This manifested as a kind of confidence and a 'knowing' that there were definitely happier existences elsewhere. I truly felt like I had been born in the wrong place and had landed on the wrong planet with the wrong people. I wondered whether I could send myself back to some in-between-lives state to renegotiate the terms for a more suitable situation.

One morning, at the age of fourteen, I decided to take matters into my own hands. I dressed for school as usual and waited for my

mother to leave for work, then I told my brothers that I would not be going to school that day. It was sports day, so this did not surprise or alarm them because I had stayed home on sports days several times before. (I never enjoyed competitive sports.)

First, I wrote a goodbye note. Then I looked in our medicine cabinet and decided to consume most of what was in there. There was quite a lot of paracetamol, as well as some aspirin, cold-relief medicine, antihistamines, and mild sedatives. Now this might seem like a pathetic or half-hearted attempt at suicide, but I was no expert on drugs and I genuinely believed that these would do the job. I consumed the concoction and went to my bed, thinking that I would not wake up in that house ever again.

My mother would normally drive half an hour to park her car at a shopping centre and catch a bus into the city where she worked, before making her way home again the same way. On this particular day, however, Angela had a mother's intuition that something was wrong. She called my father at his work and told him to pick her up immediately and drive her directly to her car. She then sped home. It was the only time she ever did that.

When my mother arrived home, she found me lying on the kitchen floor, kicking at the oven. I had wandered out of my bedroom in some kind of delirium and laid down on the kitchen floor. She wanted to know what was wrong with me, but when I tried to answer her I was slurring my words.

My twin brother had also arrived home from school by then. Eventually, they realised that I had overdosed on medications and somehow managed to get me into the back of the car. My mother kept telling my brother not to let me slip into unconsciousness. She raced to the nearest hospital, where I was quickly rushed to the emergency department to have my stomach pumped. I remember screaming at the top of my lungs while around eight people held me down, but that is the

last thing I remember. At the time, I didn't understand that they were trying to help me. After the stomach pump, I was admitted to intensive care for the night.

Apparently my eldest sister, Dianne, who was working in London at the time, called my mother later that evening and specifically asked, 'How is Brett?' She, too, had also sensed that something was wrong.

When I woke up in intensive care in the early hours of the morning, the room was dark, and my father was sitting beside the bed, holding my hand and sobbing. He kept repeating, 'I love you, mate... I'm so sorry... I love you.' It is a strange thing to say, but I remember feeling genuinely surprised and thinking, 'Oh, he does love me.'

Many people do, in fact, die from acetaminophen/paracetamol overdoses, often after a long, painful and drawn-out death resulting from liver failure. Large doses of antihistamines can also be fatal. I was fortunate that my stomach was pumped and my system flushed before sustaining serious liver damage. Although I did not appreciate or understand this at the time, I was even more fortunate not to have succeeded in taking my life, because it is unlikely that I would have been able to choose a more salubrious one if I had succeeded. It is far more likely that I would have found myself born into a more difficult situation, with fewer opportunities for happiness.

Before being released from hospital, I had to pass a psychiatric evaluation. I repeatedly told the doctor and psychiatric nurse that I was fine and did not need therapy. I was terribly embarrassed, but put on a cheerful face. The doctor explained that if I did need help, now was the time to say so, so that appointments could be arranged. At the time, however, I didn't think that therapy would help. To be honest, looking back now, I feel it probably would have been helpful; we could all probably benefit from therapy at times, provided the therapist is well-

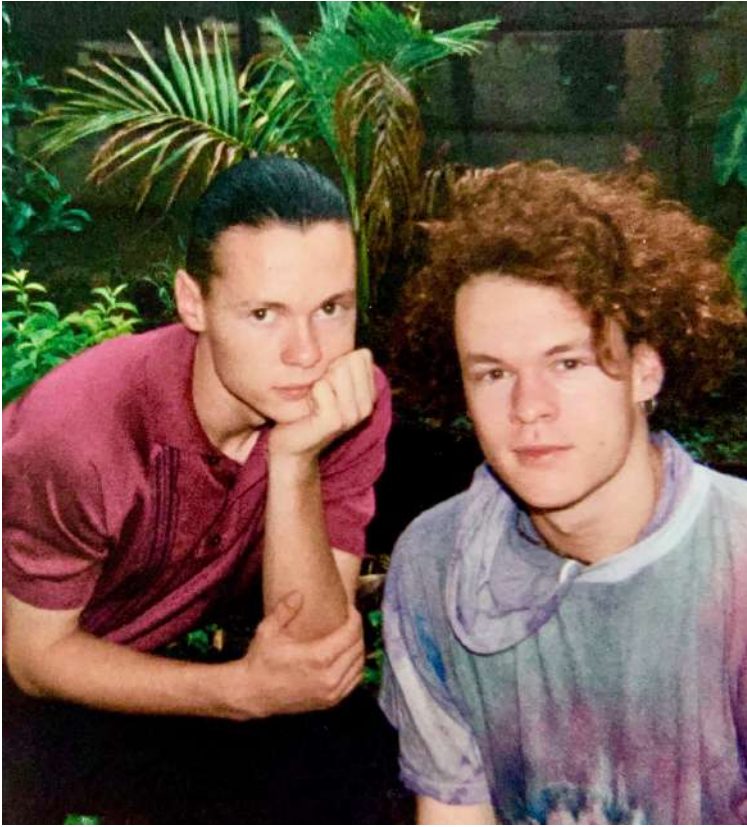
trained and skilled. However, I did genuinely feel that I was going to be okay.

I was a changed person after this experience. Although I cannot recall anything that may have occurred in my unconscious state during the several hours between having my stomach pumped and waking up in intensive care, I awoke with a new intuitive ‘knowing’ and a different perspective on my life. I knew that there must be something worth living for in this world, and I had a new-found confidence and determination to find it.

Had some guardian angels rallied at my side and held an emergency conference, injecting perspective and a sense of optimism into my mind? Or had the extreme act uncovered some old intuitive wisdom from the recesses of my young psyche? Could the attempted suicide have acted as a kind of initiation by fire, bringing forth a new archetypal constellation within me? I don’t know. All I knew was that I was different.

Once back at home, I had a very firm talk with myself, and I made a very clear decision and resolution. I said to myself, ‘Okay then... If you were brave enough to kill yourself, then why not be brave enough to make your own decisions for yourself, to live the best life you can, and try to find some purpose in life?’

In making this resolution, a commitment to my deepest, innermost self, I gave myself permission to ignore the advice of my parents and teachers if it didn’t make sense to me, and to be open to other influences until I found something that fit. This had not been my original intention – for what I really wanted was to completely escape from my situation – however, one upshot of my attempted suicide was that my parents nagged and criticised me less afterwards. They realised that I was more sensitive, and potentially more volatile, than their other children. Don’t get me wrong, they still nagged and scolded me, but they cut me more slack and eased up on displacing their own frustrations onto me.



*Troy and Brett, 1989*

When I was fifteen years old, my father really wanted me to study algebra, calculus, and chemistry in the two final years of high school. I don't know why or how this works, but taking the 'Mathematics and Science' stream tends to lead to higher scores for tertiary entrance qualifications. He wanted medicine to at least remain an option for me at university, which required a very high score. When I told him that I didn't want to study these subjects, he ordered me to 'Just do it!'

A form had to be completed to select subjects for these final two years, and it required a parent's signature. Normally, I consider that being deceptive or telling lies is wrong, but on this occasion I did something

deceitful that really felt like it was the right thing to do at the time. I ticked the boxes for subjects in the ‘Humanities and Arts’ stream, including Social Mathematics, a basic mathematics subject focused on practical numeracy such as balancing a ledger and long multiplication. I forged my father’s signature on the form.

Six months later when I brought my report card home and my father found out, he was furious. I responded to his fury by raising my own voice, saying, ‘It’s my life, not yours!’

That year I came first in my grade in Social Mathematics, causing my father to grumble, ‘See, I told you you were smart enough to do algebra and calculus!’ Maybe so – but I would have hated it.

In general, my parents were somewhat anti-religion and never talked about spiritual matters. But there were a couple of things that occurred around this time that seemed to open up my own spiritual worldview. One happened when I was fifteen. I woke up at precisely midnight with a strong sense that there was a cold and angry presence in the room with me.

When I looked up from my bed, I swear that I could see my mother’s mother staring at me angrily! She had passed away four years earlier. It was an intensely real and lucid experience. Around that time my mother had been telling her teenage sons certain things about her childhood, which affected my feelings towards my grandmother. I had been somewhat of a favourite of hers, and it was as if she was saying to me, ‘Hey! What did I ever do to you personally except be kind!?’ That seemed a fair enough question to ask.

About ten years later, after all of us kids had left home, a similar phenomenon occurred. One day, as my parents were talking about my grandmother, a sewing machine that my mother had been using suddenly started sewing all by itself! When I heard about this story, it seemed to corroborate my sense that my grandmother, Jessie Sinclair, was indeed

still lingering after her death. It just became obvious to me that there are definitely other realms, and subsequent lives after death. Incidentally, I believe that my grandmother has since moved on to a better situation.

Another occasion that sparked another connection for me to the spiritual dimension occurred one Sunday afternoon when I was fifteen years old. Some friends and I had caught the train from suburban Logan into Brisbane to attend a Hare Krishna teaching and chanting session (which included a free vegetarian meal) at their centre in the inner city. The devotee offering reflections that day mentioned the law of *kamma* and the reality of reincarnation.

The effect of simply hearing these words was quite profound: I instantly recognised and believed these things to be accurate and true. However, the need to believe in Lord Krishna did not stick. From that time, I have never doubted *kamma* and rebirth even for a moment. Although I know that many people struggle to accept this aspect of Eastern spirituality literally, for me it was a calm and sober acceptance that actually gave life greater meaning.

Back in those days, trapped in a suburban home as Mel and Angela's teenage son, it was definitely painful to feel at times more resented than loved. I remember those years as being quite sad for me. As well as feeling a deep sense of hurt and feeling directionless, I also responded to the situation with some angry emotions and speech of my own. It has truly been a blessing in my life that Buddhist practices have helped me to heal those relationships and move on completely from those strained times. In Buddhist cosmology, the human realm lies sandwiched between the heavenly and hell realms and, as such, often contains much sorrow as well as joy.

It was not all bad by any means, though. There were some lovely shafts of light that found their way into my life in the form of friends, friends' parents, a couple of school teachers, and even chance meetings with kind strangers. I will write about many of these in the next chapter.

In the interest of balance, having described my father as stoic and indifferent in many respects, it must also be acknowledged that he set a positive example to me in ways not necessarily expressed through a heartfelt connection between father and son. Like my mother, he was consistent and dutiful. He had a strong work ethic and was industrious. In addition to his nine-to-five job during the week, Mel spent Saturdays renovating, upgrading, and extending our house, slowly and methodically working his way through each job. He read manuals, visited the hardware store, and taught himself hands-on, through trial and error. Slowly but surely, a veranda was built at the front of the house, or a shaded pergola and paved patio came together at the back.

Eventually my father developed his skills sufficiently to build a two-storey extension onto the existing house, adding a double garage on the lower floor and a master bedroom with en-suite bathroom, walk-in wardrobe and sitting room above. My mother was relieved to have a four-bedroom, two-bathroom house, as she felt that this was more respectable than a smaller home. He usually took Sundays off – this was the day we would go on some sort of family outing.

Given that my father's training and work experience was in management and accounting, the building skills he developed were quite impressive. He rarely asked his sons to help, except when there was something long or heavy that needed lifting, so his building work went on in a kind of parallel reality to my own life. Even so, watching him decide to tackle something unfamiliar and then follow it through patiently and sincerely until it was done was an important example to me. It helped me to shape a certain courage and willingness to learn new things throughout my life, without feeling the need for formal qualifications, such as a university degree, in order to do so. For this, I am immensely grateful to my father.

Because my mother was focused on securing some financial security for her old age, and because she controlled the household purse strings, we received no pocket money at all during our teenage years.

There were birthday presents and Christmas gifts, but no cash – ever! None of our high school friends could ever believe it. They all received an allowance of varying amounts, but our mother was determined to channel every available resource into the building budget, intent on increasing the resale value of the house.

Our parents did, however, encourage and support us in getting part-time jobs. If we wanted a new pair of jeans or shoes, a new album, a haircut, or to go see a movie, we had to work for it. I worked at Burger King, my twin brother worked at Pizza Hut, and my younger brother worked at a restaurant called Tucker's Diner in a nearby petrol station. My mother would drop us off at work, and my father would pick us up afterwards.

In hindsight, I am actually really grateful for my parents' attitude and approach to money and work. It taught us that we had to work for what we wanted, and not to take things for granted. These days I know many people who worked hard to become wealthy and then gave their children everything they could possibly want; those children often grew up lazy, entitled, and ungrateful, and it breaks their parents' hearts. From the moment I left home at the age of seventeen after graduating from high school, I never once asked my parents for money. They taught us to work hard and to pay our own way.

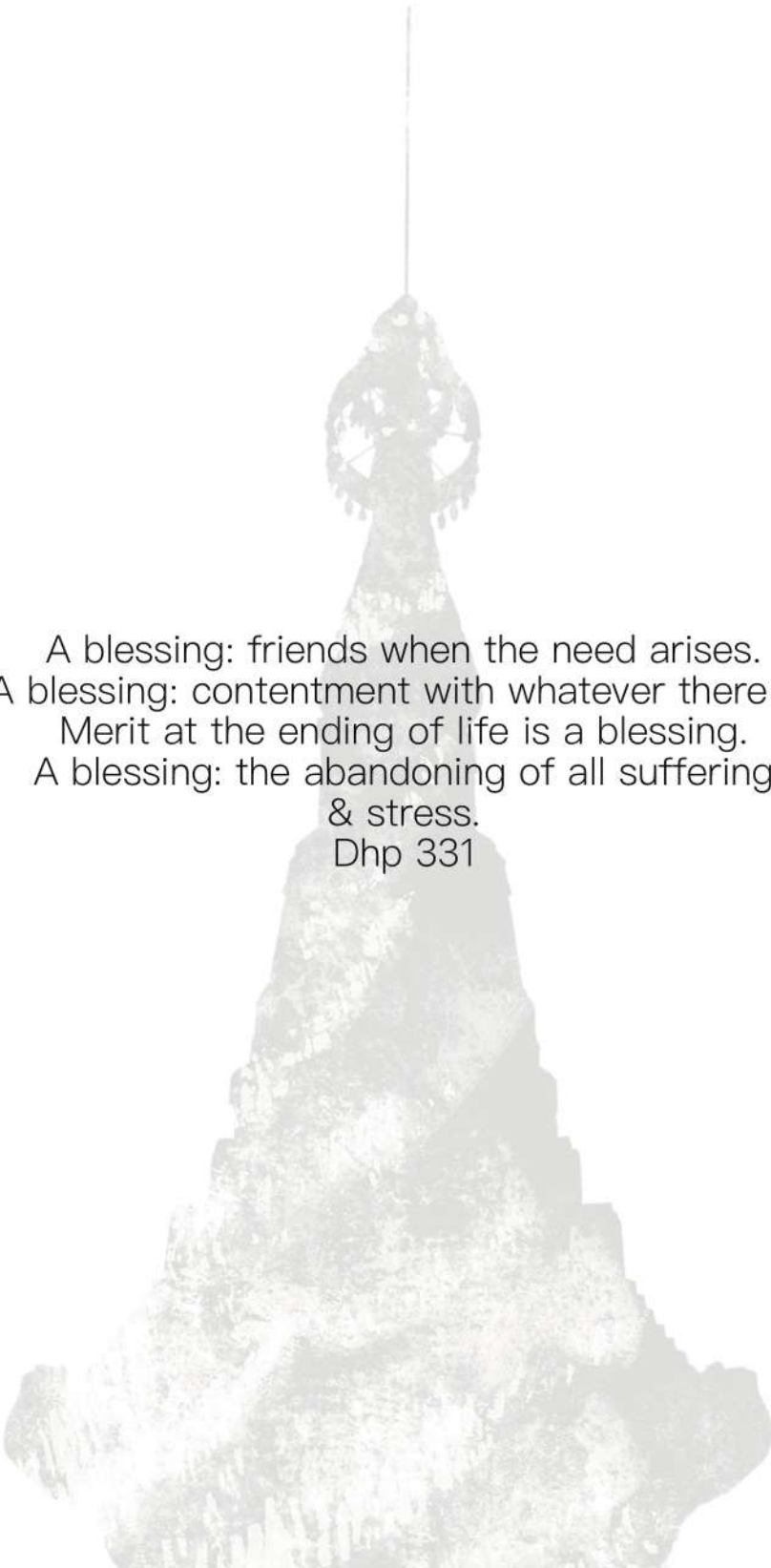




# Chapter 6

Terrible Teens: The Happy Bits  
(Age 14-17)





A blessing: friends when the need arises.  
A blessing: contentment with whatever there is.  
Merit at the ending of life is a blessing.  
A blessing: the abandoning of all suffering  
& stress.  
Dhp 331

## CHAPTER SIX

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### *Terrible Teens: The Happy Bits (Age 14-17)*

When I was twelve years old, living in the funky hippy artist's house with the cow, ducks, and guinea pigs, a lovely development occurred in my life not long after I began my first year of high school. A friendly boy in my homeroom class, David Bunic, invited me over to his house one Saturday. It was some distance to ride on our BMX bikes, and because I didn't know the way, he met me halfway and I followed him back to his place.

Once at his house I met his mother Maria, his father Michael, and his sister Svetlana, who we simply called Lana. David's parents had emigrated from Yugoslavia and Romania. David was a big guy for his age – tall and broad-shouldered – but his disposition was very gentle and loyal. Lana, who was a couple of years older than us, was seriously into art and music, and was also very warm and good-natured. They had a friendly Border Collie named Lassie.

It is a strange thing to describe, but from the moment I entered the Bunic home I felt welcomed and included: David's friend was also the family's friend. Lana was always playing cool music, and Maria always seemed to be cooking something delicious.

It was my good fortune that when my family moved to the new house with the new mortgage, it was much closer to David's house. We started walking home from school together, and I would often follow him

back to his place to hang out, chat, and listen to music, before going home in time for dinner.

Maria always served dinner early and she would insist that I eat some of her cooking with the family. She always cooked rich and comforting food – creamy, cheesy pasta or macaroni, or perhaps an Eastern European-inspired layered potato dish, followed by an equally indulgent dessert of creamy, layered honey sponge cake or ridiculously sweet baklava.

The contrast between the evening meal scene at David's house compared to mine was so starkly different it was almost humorous. Maria would gaze lovingly at her son, whom she simply adored, watching him eat her cooking with a smile on her face. She looked at me with the same loving warmth. She became like a surrogate mother to me, and she probably has no idea how much her love meant to me during that time. At some point, I began to call her 'Mama Maria'.

When I returned home, my biological mother would spoon food onto our plates somewhat mechanically, the spoon clanging loudly against the ceramic plates as she dished out mashed potatoes and peas. Angela cooked balanced meals, but she did not appear to enjoy doing so.

People often ask whether my twin brother and I were especially close, or whether we shared a strong empathic bond like some twins do. Sadly, this was never really the case. We were not identical twins; we arose from two separate eggs fertilised by two separate sperm. We shared a great deal of experience and certainly had a brotherly camaraderie – riding bikes, swimming in the ocean, playing with LEGO together, etc. – but on another level, Troy just did not seem that interested in being genuinely close. I came to suspect that he may well have preferred to have our mother's womb all to himself right from the beginning and resented me for cramping his style. I was bigger, louder, and did better at school academically, and none of these things helped our relationship.

When I look back at family photographs from our childhood, I can see clearly just how much bigger I was physically than Troy, and how much more engaging and outgoing I seem. Somehow I am often in the front and he is a little ways back, appearing shy. I did not intend to be bigger and louder or to take up more space but that is probably how it played out much of the time, and I can see that this would be frustrating.

Troy and I shared a bedroom for many years, but according to my memory at least, it seemed he hardly ever talked to me. Whenever I tried to initiate a conversation, he seemed to only half listen. I was naturally more chatty and engaging, and because I tended to wake up feeling cheerful, from about the age of four I would sneak into our younger brother Craig's room early in the morning to liberate him from his cot and bring him back to our room to play. We would have a great time together.

For some reason, Craig and I were closer and more affectionate towards each other, even from a very young age. Of course, it is perfectly normal for siblings to feel closer to one brother or sister than to another. Fortunately, my younger brother freely expressed his love for his big brother, and that relationship was a blessing in my life.

At some point in my adult life, I came to the conclusion that my twin brother didn't really like me, or just wasn't very interested. It always seemed to be that I was the one who wrote the letter or the email, sent the message, or initiated the birthday phone call before I would get a response. Even to this day, if I see something that I think Troy may like – some architecture or a piece of art – I make a point of taking a photo and sharing it with him, yet he never reciprocates these gestures. To be fair, he does keep me well informed if any family member has a health scare, a serious illness, or an injury, and I am grateful for this.

Troy might well disagree with my observations and conclusions, and no doubt he has his own version of his experience of our

relationship. In any case, I sincerely wish him well. He has a lovely wife and they seem quite happy together, and I am happy for them.

At the age of thirteen, within just a month or so of becoming friends, my relationship with David felt more like that of a brother than a newfound friend. We genuinely wanted to know how each other was feeling, and what the other thought about various things. We enjoyed sitting next to each other in class and making each other laugh. By the age of fifteen, David already had hair on his chest and weighed one hundred kilograms! I was tall for my age, but David was big in every respect – and if anyone dared tease me at school, I knew that my best mate had my back.

We shared many interests. Of all our classes together, we enjoyed art and theatre classes the most. David made mixtapes of music he knew I liked for me to take home. Much to his mother's embarrassment, David dyed his hair a very bright red, and I soon followed suit by dyeing mine a dark blue-black. We were the quirky, cool kids that looked and dressed a bit strangely, mixing up new and second-hand clothes from thrift stores. We had a nice little friendship group that hung out together at lunchtimes. I had other friends, but David was my best friend.

It was with David and Lana that I went to the Hare Krishna restaurant and heard their teachings on *karma* and rebirth – concepts that deeply resonated with me and helped me to shape a more spiritual worldview. I can only assume that I had cultivated some goodness, and perhaps even engaged in spiritual practices, with David and his family in a past life, because another significant event in my spiritual journey occurred when I was with them one day.

I was almost sixteen when David invited me to join him, his mother and his sister to spend a week at their timeshare apartment at the beach on the Gold Coast. We had a lot of fun playing tennis, swimming in the pool, and going to the beach, but it was on the drive home that something wonderful happened which quite literally changed my life.

As we were setting out back towards Logan City, another car threw up a stone that cracked our front windscreen. Maria decided to have it repaired immediately, and she quickly found a garage that could do the job. The repair was going to take a couple of hours, so this gave us time to wander around the streets of Coolangatta. We passed a New Age bookstore that also sold crystals and decided to go in and look around.

The lady we met inside was very sweet and welcoming. She encouraged us to pick up the stones and crystals to see if any of them resonated with us, explaining that some stones or crystals would simply feel right. I liked a dark green aventurine that fit neatly into my palm. She talked a little about how to use the stones in conjunction with ‘white light meditation’.

When I asked about how to do the meditation, she explained that it was best to lie down in a quiet place, relax with your arms by your side, and simply visualise white light shining down from above – over your face and head, and all the way down to your feet and toes. She said to do this for about ten minutes, imagining the light sweeping over and through the body, washing away any darkness or negativity. She stressed that, after relaxing and enjoying the meditation, it was important to ‘seal’ the white light, making it like a bubble with a clear force field around it, and then to make the affirmation, ‘I am safe and protected.’

I started practising this meditation every day – religiously, one might say – just before going to school. I do not know this woman’s name and I never saw her again, so I was never able to thank her in person, but in that fortuitous half-hour she became my first formal meditation teacher. I can still remember the gentleness of her high-pitched, breathy voice. The practice made me feel more relaxed and happy, and after each ten minute meditation I felt I had a little more inner calm. Any day where I didn’t do it, I felt like something was missing in my life. Seeing the positive benefits I experienced from this practice, I became more interested and receptive to learning about other meditation techniques.

Who would ever imagine that a freak broken windscreen could lead to such a blessing? Curiously, the shop was called The Bodhi Tree Bookstore. I didn't learn anything about the Buddha or Buddhism that day, but in hindsight it seems it was a good premonition or sign of things to come. As simple and relaxed as it was, this white light meditation was a very good introduction to more formal meditation disciplines.

These days, my old friend David lives in a rural setting and shares a loving relationship with his long-time partner and childhood sweetheart, Carol. They built their own house and make their living growing and selling flowers. They are a very sweet, uncomplicated, and non-materialistic couple. His parents moved to live closer to them once they were established and settled down in the remote area.

I had been experiencing a kind of spiritual longing since around the age of thirteen, and was open to all possibilities. One school friend, Alexander, was a Jehovah's Witness; he shared some magazines with me and invited me to go to church with him, but somehow it just did not resonate. Another friend, Lisa, took me to her Catholic church where I met her priest, but once again I didn't feel a connection. I liked the Hare Krishnas and the vibe at their centre – the chanting, the incense, and the delicious vegetarian Indian food – but, once again, there were still aspects of their worldview that I could not fully embrace. Opening up to blessings from the heavens in the form of non-denominational, universal white light, however, was something that I found meaningful. I was relieved to have discovered it – and very happy to embrace it.

There was yet another painful upheaval in my life at the age of sixteen. We had moved away from my childhood friends when I was eleven years old, and now, after having established friends and relationships with teachers in adolescence, my parents decided to move once again – just one year before our high school graduation. My father had found a better paying job, and my parents felt that if they sold their house with its new extensions they could buy another and pay down some of the mortgage with the profits of the sale. After that, they planned

to continue renovating the next house with the hope of selling again and eventually becoming mortgage-free. It was certainly true that after going bankrupt in their mid-forties, my parents were very determined to get back on their feet financially.

It was also true that it really sucked to be uprooted again in the middle of my senior years of high school. To make matters worse, we were moving from a suburban area to a rural one. Why was that an issue? We had been cool kids at Shailer Park High School, but with our funny haircuts, strange taste in music, and pale skin, we were seen as weirdos at Nambour High School. (I had been deliberately avoiding sunshine to try to look more like my guitar-wielding heroes from Northern England.) The farm boys and surfer kids at our new school teased and sneered at us.

At our new house, unfortunately, there were no fast-food places nearby, so we were unable to find part-time jobs. This meant that we didn't have any money to catch the train to go see our old friends. So not only did we lose the freedom of financial agency, but we also lost our old friendships. This change in circumstances did not bode well for my relationship with my parents, which was already strained. As an adult, I can certainly understand the difficult choices that they had to make, but as a teenager I thought they were being very selfish. I felt that I didn't owe them any favours in the future.

Oftentimes, however, there are blessings to be gleaned from challenging life circumstances. There were several really lovely teachers at Nambour High, and conversations with them were instrumental in helping me through that difficult period – and, in the process, I was learning skills for navigating difficult times yet to come. Around this time, I also gained some skills in setting goals and making aspirations.

I enjoyed reading novels as a teenager. One of the books we studied in our final year English class was E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India*. We also watched the film adaptation. One day, our teacher invited

the school counsellor to present a slideshow and speak about her recent trip to India. Now *this* was a subject that was truly interesting to me! I devoured every slide and hung on Ms Morissova's every word.

She was unlike anyone I had ever encountered before. She had a sparkle in her eyes, a vigour in her movements, and seemed to radiate a different kind of aura – she was bright, alive, and enthusiastic about life. She had a purple tinge to her auburn hair, and wore an iridescent green dress. I was fascinated. The fact that I still remember this nearly forty years later says something about the impression she made on me.

She mentioned that anyone could make an appointment to speak with her privately if they wished. I wanted to spend more time with this person, but I was too shy to initiate an appointment. A school friend, Shannon Hannagan, who had moved to Nambour from Melbourne the same year and was facing similar struggles, met with Ms Morissova first. She said their conversation had been helpful and encouraged me to meet with her – she even made the appointment for me.

When I sat down in the chair across from Ms Morissova, she told me I could call her by her first name, Jana. She asked how things were going, and I immediately burst into tears. There was something about her presence, her sincere inquiry, and genuine eagerness to listen that extracted the grief from my heart. She handed me a box of tissues, telling me to cry as much as I needed and to talk whenever I was ready. Once my chest-heaving cries became smaller sobs, she explained how crying releases healing hormones in the body, and how the heart chakra becomes fully open after a good cry. She wasn't judgemental at all; she was completely accepting.

I told her about how sad I was to have left my old school and best friends for a second time, how much I hated this new school, and how mean I felt my parents were. I told her that I had no clue what I was going to do with my life, and that I couldn't even imagine making it through the remainder of the school year.



*With Toni Bartlett, a high school friend from Nambour High, 1989*

Our meeting was scheduled for forty-five minutes, but we talked for so long that I missed the school bus home – not that I would have wanted to get on it anyway, with my swollen eyes and tear-soaked face. I had been holding on to a lot of grief and anger, and had not found a way to process or release it, so when it started to come out within that safe space, it simply poured out. Jana offered to drive me home and even invited me to her place for a cup of tea. She told me to call my mum and tell her that the Human Resources teacher would be dropping me home by 6:30 pm, in time for dinner.

We had a lovely time together, talking about her life experiences as well as my struggles. After she made us cups of chamomile and lemongrass tea, we sat cross-legged, facing each other on a big, fluffy carpet, sipping our tea. There was no sofa in her living room – just the carpet, some cushions, and a small table in the corner with a Buddha

statue on it. Jana had previously suffered a spinal injury and healed it through yoga. For a time, she had smoked marijuana to manage the pain, but eventually gave it up because it dulled her mind. (It was also illegal in Australia at that time.) She also meditated regularly.

She even offered to give me a tarot card reading! Jana said the cards indicated that I would have a happy and successful life, I would travel a lot, and, although I would not have any biological children of my own, I would be involved in parenting the children of many other people. She said that I had a very bright aura and a lot of angelic protection around me. Although I had longish hair at the time, she also said that in her mind's eye she saw me with very short hair.

As strange and unfamiliar as all of this was, it was also really wonderful to have a kind adult look at me and tell me that everything was going to be okay. It gave me some hope. I was also relieved to have finally met a human being who was dynamic and fully present, who said interesting things, and who was not half-dead – which was how most people appeared to me back then. Jana was happy to schedule future counselling sessions with me, but she did ask that I not mention the tarot cards or her past drug use to anyone else, especially my parents. I happily agreed. Since she has retired and medical marijuana is now legal in many countries, it seems okay to share this now.

In later sessions, Jana encouraged me to cross off each day on a calendar so that I could see that time was passing and this difficult year would eventually end. She also urged me to apply myself to my studies and get the best grades I possibly could. She explained that life always involves paperwork – even when travelling one needs passports and visas – and that having credentials is a good thing, because it opens doors and allows us to have more choices. I still think of Jana Morissova with loving gratitude to this day; she remains a reminder to me that one sincere conversation and a little kindness can change a person's life.

Another kind teacher, Mrs Hogan, announced one day during school assembly that she would be offering a workshop on backpacking and international travel preparedness for anyone who was interested. She believed that young people should travel and see more of the world, and suggested taking a gap year to learn more about oneself before beginning university and committing to a career path. It was generous of her to broaden our horizons in this way – many of us had never heard of, let alone considered, such possibilities before.

I attended her workshop with a mixture of shyness and awe, wondering if I would ever be brave enough to travel overseas. I had no money at all, so it was a complete fantasy at the time, but even so, I was intensely curious about the possibility. Mrs Hogan explained about passport and visa applications, travellers' cheques, concealed money belts, backpacks, water purification, and more.

I did make it through that year, graduating in the class of 1989 and thus completing high school. In those days, the state of Queensland issued tertiary education scores, with a maximum score of 1000. A student's score determined which university courses they could apply for – the higher the score, the more options were available. I received a score of 885, which correlated pretty closely with my B+/A- efforts. Under pressure from my parents, I applied for a place in the Bachelor of Behavioural Sciences programme at Griffith University in Brisbane and was accepted.

Sadly, that same year my grandmother on my father's side developed advanced Alzheimer's disease. She began wandering away from her home and was unable to find her way back again, and she could no longer recognise her own children. For her safety, she had to move to an aged-care facility. I will never forget how awful my usually stoic father looked on the day he took his mother there. He did not cry, but he threw up, hung his head in his hands, and then went to lie down for several hours.

As sad as this was, it also meant that a small house in the Brisbane suburb of Ashgrove was now sitting empty. My father's sisters agreed that it would be best to have someone living there to take care of the house and mow the lawn in the interim. Having access to low-cost accommodation at this point in our lives was incredibly helpful. We were expected to pay a small amount of rent each week, just enough to cover the land taxes and water rates, and with part-time jobs we would actually be able to get by.

Therefore, with a place at university open for me, and feeling as though I couldn't get away fast enough, Troy and I left our parents' home just one week after high school graduation and moved to Brisbane.

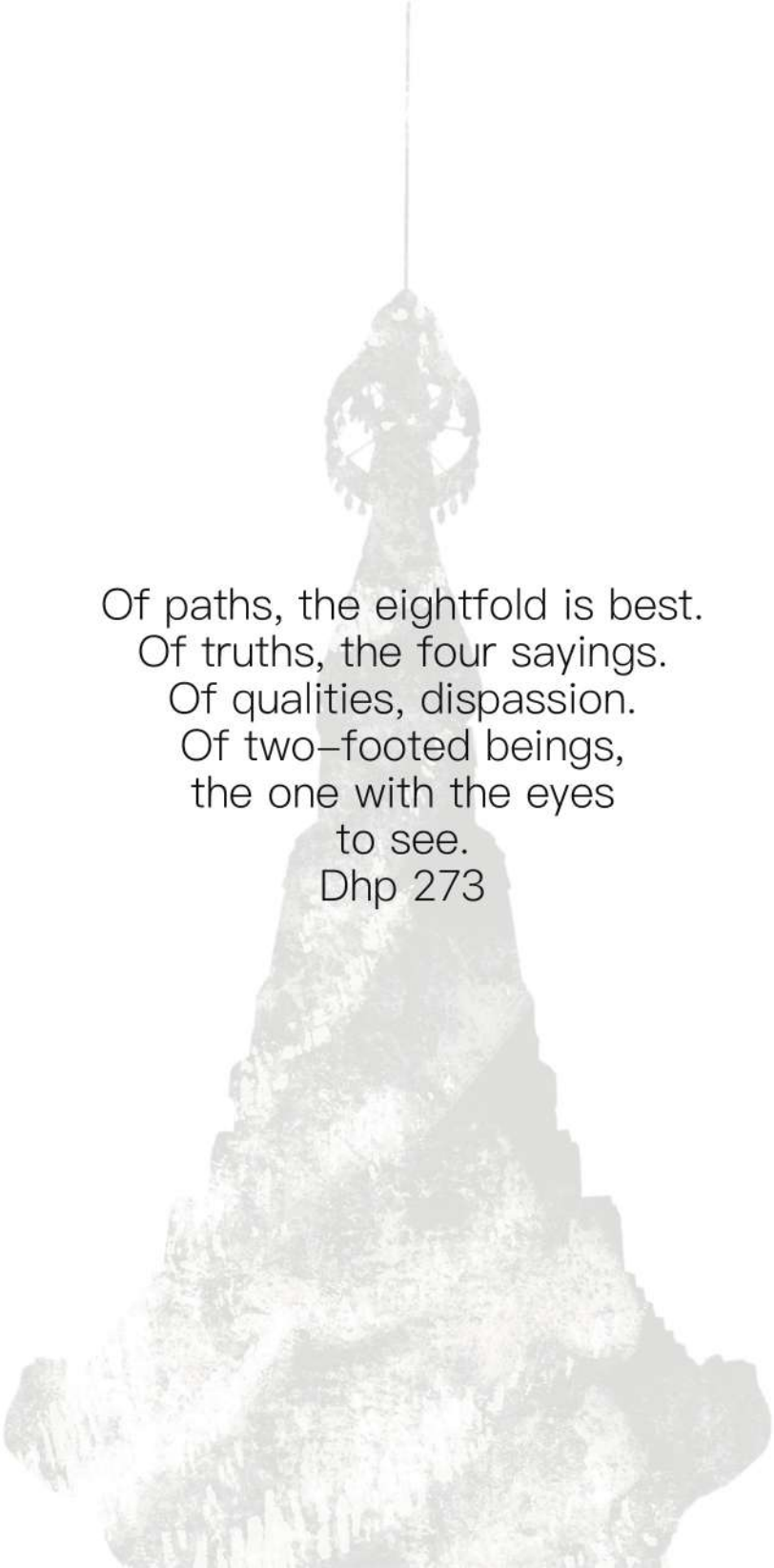




# Chapter 7

*Searching for Meaning in Brisbane  
(Age 17-19)*





Of paths, the eightfold is best.  
Of truths, the four sayings.  
Of qualities, dispassion.  
Of two-footed beings,  
the one with the eyes  
to see.

Dhp 273

## CHAPTER SEVEN

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### *Searching for Meaning in Brisbane (Age 17-19)*

About a week after our high school graduation, my twin brother and I moved into our grandmother's recently vacated house in the quiet, leafy suburb of Ashgrove, in Brisbane's western suburbs. Neither of us had connected very deeply with living in the rural parts of the Sunshine Coast and we could not get away fast enough. Although it had seemed like a very long time for a sixteen-year-old, we had only spent one year living there. During this time I had barely spoken to my parents. Needless to say, this must have been a difficult period for them as well. However, once I moved out I did call my parents every Sunday. I loved them, but I had been very angry at them.

Troy and I were keen to get back to the suburbs, just a short bus ride away from many possible adventures in the big city. The house was quite small, with two bedrooms, a front sitting room, a dining room, a small kitchen, and a long enclosed back veranda room, but it was perfect for our needs. My bedroom had two tiny windows – both in the same corner – which made it dark and unwelcoming. After some deliberation with my brother, we turned that bedroom into the TV room, and I made the front sitting room, which had many windows along two walls, into my bedroom.

Curiously, although I had slept on a raised bed all my life and had not yet had any exposure to Buddhism or Buddhist practices, I chose to place a mattress directly on the floor in my new, breezy bedroom. It just felt right. I decorated the room with many brown items, including a

brown floor covering, hung brown tribal masks on the wall, and placed indoor plants all around the room – all growing in brown terracotta pots. I suspect that my affinity for the colour brown, even as a teenager, might be due to previous lives spent practising in monks' brown robes.

I had received a letter in the mail informing me that I had been accepted into the Behavioural Sciences programme at Griffith University. This letter required me to reply by ticking one of two boxes to indicate that I either accepted the placement or declined it. In my heart of hearts, I knew that I wasn't up to it. I already felt that twelve years of formal education had delivered very little in the way of wellbeing or any real sense of direction or purpose, and I strongly doubted that a few more years was going to be useful to me. If there was an option to defer for a year, I might have taken it, but there was no third box to tick.

Instead, I declined the placement but did not have the courage to tell my parents. I told them that I had deferred so I could save some money before studying the following year. I knew it was not good to lie, but I also knew that I needed some space without being hassled by anyone. Troy did accept his place in a teaching degree with an arts minor and began to explore and enjoy photography.

Living in this quiet, sunny suburb away from my teachers and parents, with longer periods of free time and no one telling me how I should interpret or navigate the world, I could begin to feel the edges of my being, and the space around my body and mind, for the first time in my life. At times I felt an exhilarating sense of freedom; at other times – which sometimes stretched on for days – I felt disoriented and lost. Nevertheless, I did start making decisions for myself. The first was to become a vegetarian, the second was to opt out of university, and the third was to get my ear pierced.

My elder sister Jane had worked at Lennon's Hotel, a four-star hotel in the centre of the city, while she was studying at university. She kindly called the manager and asked him to consider giving her younger

brothers a job. We had an interview and were soon employed as banquet waiters. I had to take out my earring before every shift, and we had to wear cummerbunds and bow ties at work, which felt very strange. We were expected to arrive for work properly attired, but unfortunately neither of us knew how to put a proper crease in a shirt or a pair of trousers. Our mother's prompt response was to drive down from the Sunshine Coast to Brisbane to instruct us in the important skill of using an iron.



*Troy, Angela and Brett, before work at Lennon's Hotel,  
Christmas Day, 1989*

The work paid only some of the bills, and it was quite physically demanding. It entailed carrying large, heavy trays loaded up with meals into the banquet room, then even heavier trays stacked with dirty dishes and cutlery back to the kitchen. One had to be very agile on one's feet, despite the weight, in order to dodge gesticulating guests holding court after one too many drinks. As the work at Lennon's was irregular, I later got a job at an Italian restaurant called Enzo's in the inner-city suburb of Woollongabba.

In those days, job vacancies were listed in the Sunday newspaper. I had seen the listing and called to arrange an interview. The fact that I was already employed at Lennon's Hotel was a significant factor in Enzo's decision to give me the job. The regular four nights of work meant that I could manage my budget properly.

At Enzo's, I had to wear white jeans with a red-and-white striped T-shirt, and I hated this uniform as much as I hated the bow tie and cummerbund! There was a live singer who played a piano accordion, accompanied by a violinist, on Friday and Saturday nights. On those evenings it really did feel as though we could have been in Italy, with all of the singing and loud conversation, copious amounts of cigarette smoke mingling with the pungent fragrance of Italian herbs and garlic, and the many glasses of *vino*. I don't know how many times I heard 'Quando Quando Quando' or 'When the moon hits your eye like a big pizza pie... that's *amore*'. I stunk terribly after work and couldn't wait to get home and bathe.

I worked as the drinks waiter. As well as opening bottles and pouring wine, I was also trained as a barista – a skill that would later prove useful in securing several future jobs. Yes, that's right: I learned how to make cappuccinos and macchiatos on the job, from Italians, in an Italian restaurant. The funny thing is I never once drank a cup of coffee, I just didn't like it back in those days. I had been raised drinking tea with a dash of milk and a teaspoon of sugar since I was a child, and I stuck with that.

Having witnessed how stupid and obnoxious drunk people can behave in both of these jobs, even as an eighteen-year-old I quickly developed a distaste for excessive alcohol consumption. Based on my experiences in the hospitality industry, to this day I still make a point of being friendly, patient, and kind towards waiters, cleaners, and other service-oriented workers. If they have time, I always ask them a few personal questions to demonstrate that I recognise their humanity and do not see them merely as ‘staff’. I also always encourage my students to leave a tip whenever they take me out for a meal.

On my quiet days at home, I would often lie down on the bed, dappled in bright Queensland sunshine, and wonder what to do with my life. It was a sincere and open inquiry, but I had no answers. I knew that I wanted my life to have significant meaning and purpose, and I hoped that whatever purpose I was yet to find would also affect the world and other people in a positive way. But what was it? That was my conundrum. I was also quite determined not to become stuck on an unfulfilling path that I could not escape from later.

For my eighteenth birthday, my mother gave me the complete works of Thomas Hardy. She had found them in a second-hand store and thought I might appreciate them. I read several of his novels with great relish: *Jude the Obscure* and *The Mayor of Casterbridge* were particular favourites. Perhaps this melancholy, intensely thoughtful, turn-of-the-century English writer could help me glean some meaning in life – or perhaps not. I was also a frequent moviegoer on half-price Tuesdays at the Hoyts cinema complex. Perhaps the movies held some clues to the meaning of life as well?

It should be mentioned that when I refer to ‘quiet days at home’, both my twin brother and I liked to play music loudly on our record player. We spent far too much of our limited income on buying records. I later learned that some of our elderly neighbours thought we were devil worshippers because we wore so much black and listened to gothic punk music. Our favourite bands hailed from Northern England, and had

names like The Sisters of Mercy, The Mission, and The Jesus and Mary Chain. Looking back, I do regret that we played music so loudly, but eighteen-year-old boys will be eighteen-year-old boys.

The idea that some people assumed I was satanic is quite bizarre to me. I literally couldn't walk past a flower without smelling it, or encounter a dog or cat without stopping to pat it, and even cartoons could make me cry. And this is not to mention the sad novels I loved to read. I did wear a lot of black clothing, though, and combined with the loud, grungy music we played in the evenings, perhaps from the outside we did appear a little dark.

When Troy was at university and I was home alone, I preferred to listen to quieter, more reflective indie folk-pop. I still remember many of the lyrics from my favourite album at the time, *16 Lovers Lane* by the Brisbane band The Go-Betweens. These are from the track *Love is a Sign*:

*I'm ten feet underwater  
Standing in a sunken canoe  
Looking up at the water lilies  
They're green and violet blue  
Still the sun it finds  
A place to light me  
Still the sun it finds  
That it's warm beside me  
Green and violet blue  
No matter what you say  
No matter what you do  
I wanna be the one...  
... and love is a sign.*

I listened to so much music at that time that I seriously considered writing and singing songs as a potential career path. I even began writing lyrics in my spare time and attended some singing workshops. However, the truth was that I was never going to have the

kind of confidence and self-esteem required to stand up and sing in front of drunken pub crowds – which is how such careers usually begin – and no one was going to offer an album contract to an unknown like me. (This was long before people could produce and distribute their own music to find an audience through alternative avenues.) Although this career path would ultimately never come to fruition, dreaming about it was helpful and gave me a little hope at times.

One day, some female friends that I knew from high school dropped in for a visit. They were evidently expecting to have a fun chat with their old school mate, but they were shocked by my mood on that day and asked, ‘Are you okay? You seem really sad.’

They had caught me in one of my more pensive moments and looked genuinely concerned. I didn’t really know how to answer. All I could tell them was that I wanted to do something meaningful but had not yet found what that was. The intensity with which I craved a meaningful direction in life was – and still is – difficult to describe. I was intensely frustrated, yet ruthlessly determined in a way I think most people are not. As yet, all of my pent-up energy had no clear goal to be channelled towards.

During this time, I increased the length of my white light meditation sessions and often went to the Hare Krishna centre on Sunday afternoons. I even began reciting the Krishna mantra on a rosary gifted to me by one of the ordained devotees. I felt a kind of blissful rapture when I chanted the mantra late at night, even though I did not fully trust that feeling or the teachings I heard during the Sunday gatherings.

Late one night, my twin brother came home from work and checked in on me while I was chanting my mantras. I must have looked unusually quiet and somewhat spacey, which was out of character, because he asked, ‘Are you alright mate?’ and I slowly answered, ‘Yeeeahh...’

I told him I was meditating, which he was okay with, though he still looked a little concerned. When you are not feeling entirely okay, it is difficult to convince people that you are. My friends were worried about me, and to be honest, so was I. I wasn't doing anything that would be considered self-harming – I was just a bit lost.

There was a girl I had been secretly fond of in high school at Shailer Park, before we had moved away to Nambour. One day I decided to call her and ask whether she would like to come over for a visit. To my pleasant surprise, she agreed. Debbie Gardener was a lovely young woman: reflective, sensitive, and fun. She also had her own unique and slightly quirky sense of fashion and enjoyed reading novels and listening to music as much as I did. Within a short time she became my closest friend, and we became romantically involved.

Debbie still lived at home with her parents and two sisters. With Debbie back in my life, there was noticeably more warmth and joy in my life. I often spent weekends with her and her family, and we all got along very well.

Debbie's elder sister, Jodi, had a car, and sometimes she would pick me up after I finished work at Enzo's. Jodi, her best friend Kerry, and my girlfriend Debbie were all beautiful young women. Whenever these three beautiful women arrived to pick me up from the restaurant, some of the other waiters were literally green with envy. I would greet each of them with a kiss and a hug, and one waiter in particular would say, 'You are one lucky man!' before shaking his head in disbelief and adding, 'I just don't get it.' He couldn't see what they saw in me.

I wanted to say, 'Some of us are appreciated for our wit, charm, and intelligence, mate,' alluding to the fact that he had little of any of these said attributes. Instead, I just smiled smugly.

Debbie's entire family adopted me, so I suddenly had new parents and sisters, as well as a beautiful girlfriend. Like me, Debbie was

also working in hospitality. She had been accepted into university but had decided to defer commencing her social work degree for a year, so I now had a friend to go to the movies and do other fun things with. We scoured second-hand clothing stores and record shops together, dyed each other's hair, and went to the Hare Krishna centre on Sundays. We also sang songs together: we liked the English band The Sundays and the American duo The Indigo Girls. We even considered going busking together, but I was too shy for anything beyond our private concerts.

After that first year away from home had passed, I found the courage to tell my parents that I wasn't going to go to university after all. Dad was frustrated and Mum was exasperated. After a year of waiting tables and barista work, though, I decided to sit the exam to qualify for employment in the Queensland Civil Service. Perhaps if I had a better-paying job I could save some money and go backpacking.

The exam was held in a huge hall at the Brisbane Showgrounds, and there must have been well over five hundred people sitting it. To my shock, I received a phone call for a job interview just two weeks later, and after the interview I suddenly had a job. I must have scored quite well on the test.

My mother was so excited: if I wasn't going to university, then at least I could have a stable job with the government. She came down to Brisbane and we went shopping together to buy sensible clothes at the Myer Centre in the Queen Street Mall.

The only problem was that I hated this clerical job even more than waiting tables! I had to answer the phone by saying, 'Hello, this is Brett Hansen from the Department of Employment, Vocational Education, Training and Industrial Relations. How can I help you?' And when my fantasies of throwing myself through the plate-glass windows and crashing down with a splat on the sidewalk below became a bit too compulsive, I knew that this job wasn't going to work out. So I quit after just two months, and once again my mother was devastated. Mostly, I

was just sorry to have wasted so much money on sensible clothes that I would likely never wear again.

I did visit the Hare Krishna community farm in Murwillumbah just before quitting that job, having developed some inkling that spirituality could help address some of my existential angst. Unfortunately, bathing golden idols with milk on the full moon and eating food blessed with mantras did not give me a clear direction, nor did it assuage any of my doubts about their teachings. One-pointed devotion to a blue deity with many girlfriends was not something that I could take on as my life's path. As beautiful as Krishna was, and as lovely as his followers were, it just didn't resonate. The food was delicious, however, and I also developed an appreciation of Indian incense.

Further study was not my calling, the civil service was not for me, and, evidently, neither was the path of *bhakti* – so what was I to do? For the first time in my life, I registered to claim unemployment benefits, and once again I had to find a new job. This time, though, I wasn't in a hurry; I knew I needed time and space to really think about what I should do next.

Some people might say that not pursuing a university degree when you have the option to do so, and quitting a good full-time job, are both failures in life – and certainly my parents felt that way at the time. However, even then, as lost as I felt, I did not see either choice as a failure. In a way, I actually saw them as small victories, because I knew I was searching for something more meaningful in life and was determined not to settle for anything less.

I hadn't yet found what I was looking for, and I still couldn't articulate exactly what it was. As determined as I was not to get trapped in a dead-end path, I was equally determined to keep searching until I found the right one.

With the internet, YouTube, and long-form podcasts available these days, people can search for and study almost anything from wherever they are in the world. Today we have easy access to any number of interesting subjects and different worldviews, however, back in 1991 we did not have any of that. But one day during this period of unemployment, I was walking through a department store with Debbie when a very strange thing occurred.

I saw a book on a shelf that appeared to have a circle of white light shining around it.

I said, ‘Debbie, can you see that?’

She answered, ‘What?’

‘That book over there... I can see white light shining from it!’

Debbie couldn’t see it, but there was literally a halo around that book that I could see with my ordinary eyes.

We went over to investigate what it was. The book was called *Reaching for the Other Side* by an Australian New Age author, Dawn Hill. The book was about manifesting your life’s path, and it contained visualisations, prayers, and positive affirmations. If I remember correctly, it cost twenty dollars. I was broke at the time, but since I had been so strongly drawn to the book, Debbie kindly bought it for me. Nothing like that – seeing an object glowing in front of me – had ever happened before.

The book explained that if we want to find our path and life’s work, we need to request guidance from our spiritual guides. It contained an interesting prayer, and after reading the book, I committed to reciting this prayer every day. Although the prayer invoked the power of Christ – something I had never previously resonated with – there was much in it that did feel right. I believe it went something like this:

*In the name of Christ, I call upon the Spirits of Light,  
To stand guard at the doorway of my soul,  
To protect me from the forces of darkness and deception,  
And to lead me on the Path of Love, Light and Truth.*

I wasn't sure whether I resonated with Jesus Christ, but I was open to the idea of being protected, and I certainly resonated with finding and pursuing a 'Path of Love, Light and Truth'. The author also recommended the white light meditation that I had already been doing for some years. After receiving this 'sign' and this gift, I committed to doing the prayer, followed by a longer session of white light meditation, every day.

I was an intense guy. The search for ultimate truth, romance, and sexuality, although it brought some warmth, also stirred up confusion and, perhaps not so surprisingly, had not fulfilled my desire for true and deep meaning. (I will elaborate further in the next chapter.) At a certain point, Debbie and I decided that we should no longer be romantic partners. This decision was mostly mine, and I did hurt Debbie's feelings at the time, but we truly did remain best friends. And being the beautiful woman that she was, both inside and out, she soon found another man.

Many years later, I apologised to Debbie for having been so intense and self-absorbed. She said she had no regrets and shared with me that although she agreed I had been moody and intense, she mostly remembers that we had had a lot of fun together. We sang together often and saw many great movies and shows. We could always talk through our feelings about things as well. Debbie was one of the great loves of my life, and I will always be grateful for her friendship during those difficult years.

After about eighteen months of living with Troy at our grandmother's house, I moved, along with Debbie, into a share house with a couple of friends from high school.

St Brigid's Catholic Church, a tall, imposing red-brick building, stood at the top of the hill behind this house in Red Hill. Sometimes, towards the end of one of my extended lying down white light meditations, I would remain in a relaxed and somewhat receptive state. On several occasions, a rather lucid vision would come to mind. I was walking along a concrete path, away from St Brigid's church, when suddenly a strong wind would pick up from behind me. The wind slammed leaves into my body, and they continued skipping along the path ahead of me.

I had the sense that there was some powerful, as yet unnameable force pushing me from behind. I did not know whether this force was good or bad, but I could sense a kind of inevitability. I remember telling Debbie on several occasions that I felt something was pushing me somewhere, and it was going to take me far, far away. I didn't know what it was or where it would take me – it was actually a bit scary.

In hindsight, I believe this vision, which occurred repeatedly but only when my mind was especially sensitive after meditation, was an intuition that a potent spiritual or religious force (as symbolised by the church) was pushing me toward meaning and purpose. Later, I was able to put a name to this force – *kamma* – which would eventually lead me to rediscover Buddhist practice and find my way back to a religious life.

But not yet. It was around this time that I started to consider acting more seriously as a potential career. I got it into my head that if I was going to be an actor, I had better make myself look more handsome. I was broke at the time, so joining an expensive gym was not an option, but there was an Olympic-sized swimming pool just a short bike ride away.

In those days, the pools were operated by the city council and the entrance fee was very cheap. So, as a way of using my spare time more skilfully, I decided to take up swimming in order to gain a more shapely form. At first, just doing a few laps was really hard. On my first visit, I

think I only managed three or four laps, puffing a great deal in between. But I stuck with it, going every other day and adding one lap each visit. Slowly, my stamina increased, and once I reached twenty laps, I decided to stay at that number for a while.

I began to notice how at ease I felt while swimming, and how a deep sense of calm and peace remained for a period of time afterwards as well. I had finally found a way to channel some of my restlessness and anxiety. Encouraged by this, I decided to double my efforts and worked up to forty laps per visit – swimming one kilometre, three or four times per week. And as you can imagine, my body definitely developed a nicer shape.

Looking back now, I can see that this regular swimming discipline was actually a form of meditation practice. Counting strokes, deep breathing, and the need to be present in the body – so as not to crash into the end of the pool or other swimmers – probably increased mindfulness and functioned as a kind of *samatha*, or calming, practice. I was hooked.

If I remember correctly, I was unemployed for only a couple of months. During that time, Troy had started a weekend job at a groovy little coffee shop housed within a large homewares store, but he found it too difficult. With just one staff member on the weekends, a sudden rush of customers made it quite stressful to prepare gourmet sandwiches, serve cakes and muffins, and make all of the individually ordered coffees, all while keeping on top of the washing up as well. Once he secured a new job at a larger coffee shop with more staff, he told me that his current job would soon be available.

It was very thoughtful of Troy to help both me and his boss in this way. I met with the manager and offered to give it a go. He liked me and was happy to take me on. He asked if I thought I could handle the job, or whether I would soon quit like my brother. I explained that I liked

the idea of having a variety of tasks and thought I might enjoy the challenge. I committed to staying on for at least a few months.

All things considered, I really enjoyed this job. It was true that it could be very stressful around lunchtime, but the mornings and afternoons were quieter, so there was time to prepare for the rush and clean up afterwards.



*Craig, Troy and Brett, 1991*

There were many regular customers who I got to know over time – so much so that it felt like I got to have long, ongoing conversations with scores of sweet people. I found that when people came in for coffee, they generally wanted to relax and chill out a bit, not wanting to find any issues with things. Several times a day, I would be chatting cheerfully with little groups of ladies who worked at the cosmetics counters and had wandered in from the department store upstairs. They literally brought a cloud of perfume along with them whenever they came in for their coffee break, and they loved to flirt with me.

The old-school background music piped in from the homewares store seemed strange and boring at first, but it grew on me over time. Staples included tracks by Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald, Frank Sinatra, and Harry Connick Jr., along with various artists singing Cole Porter songs. There would be some Joe Cocker, Van Morrison or Sting to mix things up when the boss's son was working a shift. I soon found myself crooning along to the words of *My Funny Valentine* and *The Lady is a Tramp* while making sandwiches and washing dishes.

Another perk of the job was that whenever cakes would go beyond their 'best served by' date, I could eat as much of them as I liked. Afterwards, at the end of the work day, I would rush off to the pool and swim two kilometres in order to avoid getting too fat!

After several months, the manager who had trained me quit, and his bosses asked me to consider taking over the Monday-to-Friday management of the coffee shop. With two staff members working during the week, the management role was actually a little easier and would definitely provide a more livable wage.

One day, when I popped in to visit Troy at the coffee shop where he worked, one of his co-workers, having heard that I liked meditation, made an interesting recommendation to me. She told me about a *vipassanā* meditation centre in the Blue Mountains that offered ten day meditation retreats, and thought I might benefit if I ever had the chance

to attend. I certainly made a mental note, but nothing really clicked in that moment – I had no idea what *vipassanā* meant at the time. In hindsight, I recognise that this was probably an attempt by the ‘Spirits of Light’ to answer my sincere prayers.

While visiting my parents on the Sunshine Coast, another interesting thing occurred. I was walking along the main shopping street of Caloundra and entered a side mall called The Strand Arcade. A tarot card reader had rented one of the empty shops just for a week and was offering full readings for fifty dollars. I only had twenty, but she kindly agreed to give me a reading anyway.

She was young and beautiful, with very short hair and bright, shining eyes. She had a very thorough and unique method of divination, combining tarot cards, playing cards, numerology, and palm reading. I told her my birth date and time, and selected cards from the decks. After arranging my cards, she considered the lines on my palms and proceeded to give a stunning reading.

‘You will be moving to a bigger city, within a period of three... yes, probably three months. You are also going to move to another country within two... yes, probably two years.’

She also said that I would travel a lot in future and would speak several languages. I wouldn’t have much money, but I shouldn’t worry, because my friends would pay for me.

This seemed simply unbelievable at the time. How would I learn several languages or travel so much? It sounded so exotic, and also very demanding. Even more baffling was the idea of my friends paying for me. I couldn’t imagine any of my current friends doing that. Looking back in hindsight though, literally everything she said came true.

I asked her about my career and whether I would become a famous actor one day.

‘No,’ she said, ‘but you will be renowned within your field of expertise.’

‘What would that be?’ I asked.

She was frustrated that she couldn’t see it clearly, but insisted, ‘Don’t worry. You are going to be successful and happy.’

I also asked her about a new romantic relationship I was hoping to begin at the time.

She replied very bluntly, ‘Oh, it’s already over. It’s not going to happen.’ She continued further, ‘Actually, you’re not going to have much sex or get married this lifetime. But don’t worry – you’re going to have a great life and be very happy!’

Naturally, as a nineteen-year-old, I was devastated. Hardly any sex? Why not!? At least she had repeatedly insisted that I was going to find my way and forge a meaningful and happy life.

The job at the coffee shop worked out well for over a year before I began to feel restless. The salary was okay, but I wanted more from life than friendly people, good cake, and cool music. I aspired to make a difference in the world, discover true meaning and purpose, and I also hoped to travel.

After attending evening acting workshops at the Brisbane-based Actors Centre, I decided to move to Sydney, the largest city in Australia, to further explore this avenue. Perhaps as a movie actor, I might get paid well and learn more about the world. The Actors Centre in Sydney had more teachers, more drop-in workshops, and a greater variety of courses to attend. The fortune teller had told me that this would not be my path, but since I saw no other option at the time, I felt that I at least had to try.

I moved to Sydney just short of three months after that providential meeting with the fortune teller. Make no mistake: moving alone to such a large city at the age of nineteen was really scary. At that time, Brisbane had a population of around one million people, but many people commented that it still felt like a large country town. You would often bump into people you knew when walking around town, and I had good friends a half-hour train ride south, and family just a one hour train ride north. Although it felt limited and boring on one level, on another level it also felt safe.

Sydney, on the other hand, was Australia's biggest city, with a population four times larger than Brisbane and far more culturally diverse. I knew hardly anyone there. My elder sister Jane lived in Sydney, but she was very busy with her work as a television journalist so she wasn't going to have much free time to hang out with her younger brother.

I had no idea where I would live, work, or how I would pay for acting classes, but I had a strong sense that if I wanted to find what I was searching for in life, then I had to be willing to leave the old behind and open myself to the new. It was an important step in learning to be courageous. I had enough savings to pay for a rental bond and a couple of weeks' worth of living expenses, but if I didn't find work or affordable accommodation quickly then I was going to be in trouble.

I decided to take the train down from Brisbane to Sydney. The idea of slowly chugging along just above the earth seemed less anxiety-inducing than flying, and it would give me extra time to digest the fact that I was really doing this. It also meant that I could take two big suitcases instead of one.

A friend of a friend had a spare bedroom in her apartment and agreed that I could stay with her in King's Cross. The train pulled into Central Station around 8:00 pm, and I remember that it was dark and

cold. Everything looked unfamiliar and everyone seemed self-absorbed, cold, and indifferent.

So although we didn't have search engines or podcasts back in those days, we did have public libraries, New Age bookstores, 'Spirits of Light', tarot card readers, and word of mouth. I sensed that I was going to have to depend upon a mix of prayer and providence – and believe me, I would be needing plenty of both.

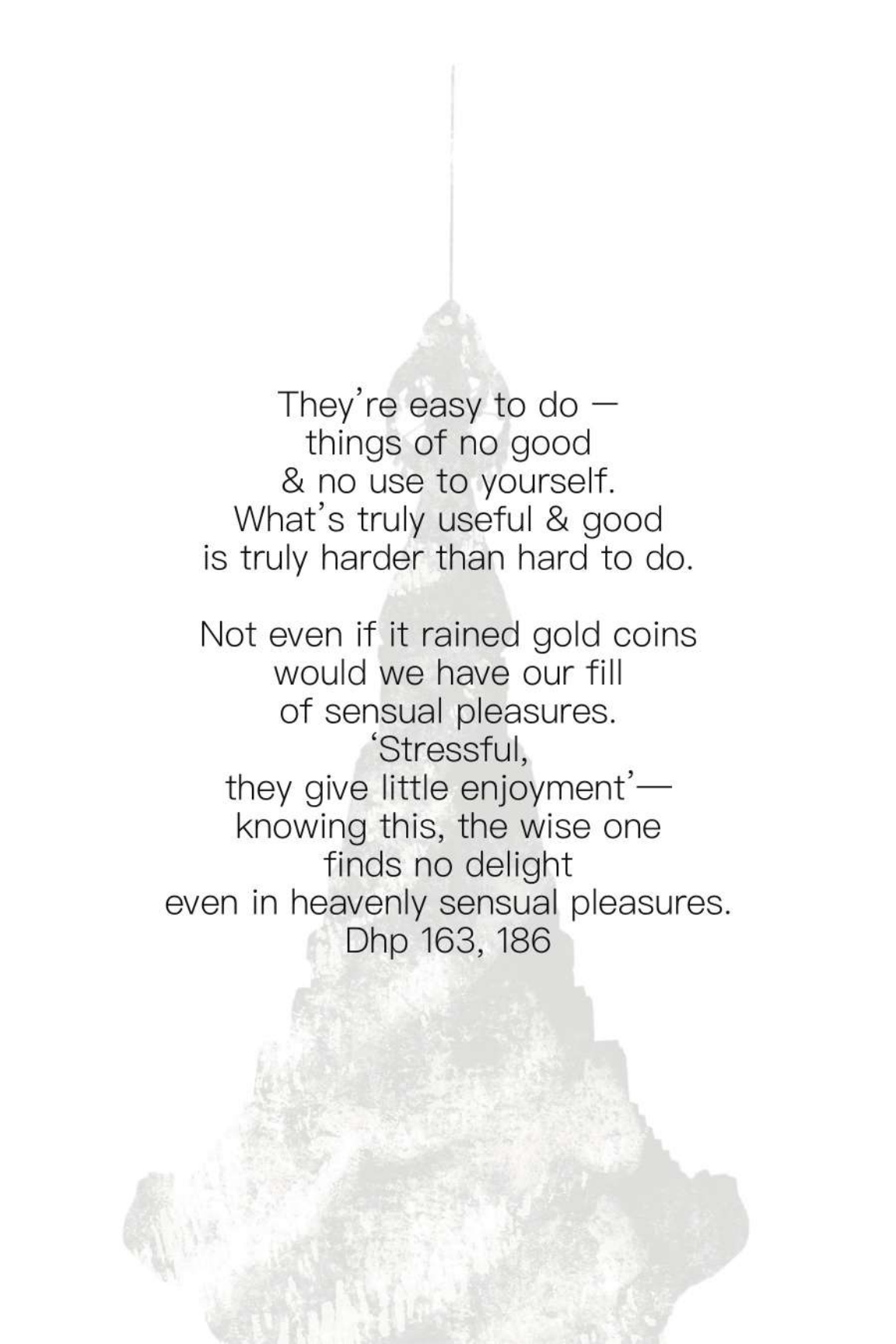




# Chapter 8

*Searching For Meaning In Sydney  
(Age 19-21)*





They're easy to do —  
things of no good  
& no use to yourself.  
What's truly useful & good  
is truly harder than hard to do.

Not even if it rained gold coins  
would we have our fill  
of sensual pleasures.

‘Stressful,  
they give little enjoyment’—  
knowing this, the wise one  
finds no delight  
even in heavenly sensual pleasures.

Dhp 163, 186

## CHAPTER EIGHT

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### *Searching for Meaning in Sydney (Age 19-21)*

Having arrived in Sydney by train in the evening, I made my way to the taxi stand and gave the driver the address of a townhouse where Candace – or Candy, as I knew her – had said I could pick up a key to her apartment. The taxi then drove me to her apartment, where I let myself in with my suitcases and made my way to the spare bedroom.

Candy was a very intelligent young woman who had been accepted into law school. This is no small accomplishment in Australia, as it requires extremely high academic distinction. She had deferred her studies for a year in order to save money for living costs while at school in the coming years.

The next morning she told me she was working as a receptionist at a brothel! There had been no signage on the townhouse where I picked up the keys the night before, but this was hardly surprising, since both operating and working in a brothel were still illegal at the time. She always came home from work very late and was still sleeping when I got up, and she seemed somewhat depressed when we did get a chance to talk, so I had my suspicions that her work was not entirely secretarial.

This was my introduction to the big city; I was now – or so I assumed – living with a high-class prostitute! But who was I to judge? Having worked minimum wage jobs for years, I certainly understood the logic. She must have earned at least ten times more per hour than I did in any of my coffee shop jobs. Regardless of what Candy did to make

money, she was kind enough to help me out in my moment of need, and for that I was grateful. Even so, I couldn't help but notice that there was less sparkle in Candace's eyes and less joy in her step than when I'd last seen her in Brisbane six months earlier.

Over the next days, Candy recommended rental agencies and places to look for work. I also had to learn to navigate a much bigger and more complicated public transport system. People in Sydney felt colder and more withdrawn than the people of Brisbane, and the streets and train stations seemed darker somehow – at least in the inner city.

A real-estate broker gave me the keys to take a look at a studio apartment in Woolloomooloo – another one of those great Aboriginal names – and I liked it. It had one window that let in light but looked out onto a blank, though clean, wall. The walls of the studio were thick and the building was secure. Although it was small, with a tiny kitchenette and a tiny bathroom, it was clean and quiet, and that was enough. I would have to do my washing at a laundromat, because there was nowhere to wash or hang clothes, but that was fine. This would be my little cocoon – a place to retreat from the big city, to ponder and dream about my future.

Hyde Park and the Royal Botanic Gardens were both just a short walk away, and from inside the apartment you could hear the ringing of the bells from nearby St Mary's Cathedral. Just the next suburb over in Darlinghurst, there were many coffee shops along Oxford Street.

Once I had moved into my new place, I hit the pavement in Darlinghurst, copies of my résumé in hand, to enquire whether any work was available. I had no phone number for people to contact me, though, so that was going to be a challenge. However, after just a few days of pounding the pavement, the owner of one of the shops buzzed my door ringer from below and asked if I could start work in a couple of days.

I worked at a coffee shop called Cappuccino City, right next to a large pub and across the road from the Odeon Cinema. (All have since closed down.) I mostly took evening shifts so that I could go to acting workshops, go to the movies, swim, or work out during the day. Working there was good – having colleagues gave me an anchor and a sense of connection to my new environment. I still felt lonely, though, because I didn't yet have any truly close friends.

I visited an acting agency, but this did not go as I had hoped. Sitting in the office of the agent and looking at the pictures of the many very beautiful people plastered all over the walls, I realised that this industry was extremely competitive and these people were viewed merely as products. I felt a strong, visceral response. I was not an entirely unattractive man at that age, but just looking at those beautiful faces and fabulous physiques made me feel ugly and insecure. I knew I did not want to feel constantly inadequate or insecure, I did not want to be aggressively competitive, and I certainly did not want to be a product – so I stood up and walked out. So much for my acting career!

Even so, I did still go to acting classes when I could afford them. There were various types of classes, including improvisation, acting for the camera, and script reading and analysis. My favourite workshop, with my favourite teacher – a wonderful actress named Roslyn Gentle – was called 'Creating a Real Response'. She spoke about an emotional tone scale, and to help give rise to the appropriate emotions required by the script, Roslyn taught a method that combined meditation and visualisation.

In hindsight, I can recognise that my interest in acting was more an interest in contemplation than a serious career move. I wanted to understand the human predicament. Why are we the way we are? What makes us tick? And is there any real hope of fulfillment and true happiness? The movies that I frequently went to see and the novels that I read were also an extension of my study and contemplation of life. Yet I still did not feel that I was getting any answers.

Back in the early nineties, if you worked minimum wage jobs and lived very frugally, it was still possible to have enough money left over to see a movie at the cinema on half-price day and attend the occasional acting workshop. I was very frugal with food, eating only muesli at home, which I mixed myself in bulk. I was lucky that I could eat my main meal at my place of work.

These days, sadly, I think you would have to work two jobs just to pay rent in inner-city Sydney, so in that regard I was fortunate. The swimming pool entrance fees were still cheap, and there were training sessions and aerobics classes that were heavily subsidised by the city council. I even took boxing classes. I never actually fought anyone – I just punched bags and pads held up by the trainer. The trainer did comment once that he hoped he would never be on the receiving end of my left hook – but nobody ever was!

Naturally, as a twenty-year-old with a tall, fit body in a big city like Sydney back in the early nineties, relationships and sex were also of some interest to me. As a strictly celibate monk for the past thirty years, however, it would be inappropriate to write in great detail about my sexual exploits as a young man. As interesting as those stories might be, that type of writing belongs to a different genre and would need to be penned by a different author.

Those times quite literally feel like a past life to me now. At the same time, though, to omit any mention of this aspect of my experience also seems somehow remiss. Suffice it to say that I did, as the saying goes, ‘sow my wild oats’. I experimented and indulged at times, and completely abstained for periods as well. I hurt some people’s feelings, and I had my feelings hurt too. This was part of my study of life – of being human and of relationships.

There was indeed lust – and even ‘being in love’ once or twice. But none of these experiences or relationships did much to help me find true meaning and direction in life. In fact, they seemed to add to my

confusion. Without mentioning any individual names or specific places, I will share a little of my experiences and observations to illustrate the process that was going on in my heart and mind at that time.

I learned that the notion that you could satisfy your sexual desires and then feel genuinely satisfied was, in fact, a lie. There was always a fresh desire for more. Maybe other people have a different experience, but my mind, when affected by sensuous desire, was insatiable. Honest conversation about this did not seem to exist – at least not as far as I could tell. This was exasperating. In popular culture, which was the only culture I had access to at the time, there was no suggestion that moderation is best, that quality is better than quantity, or that these passions must be handled with caution and care. Madonna was literally on a world tour telling everyone to express themselves! I suppose in the big city, sex sells. Everywhere I looked, I saw the message that ‘more is better’ or ‘go for it – embrace your passions and fulfill your desires!’ There was no suggestion of any other approach.

I definitely noticed that love and sexual passion were not the same thing, but I didn’t yet have the vocabulary or maturity to articulate this, or even to get my thoughts straight on the matter. There was no ‘love-and-sex-in-the-city’ user manual for a young man that made any sense. It confused me that my mind would be thinking of another person in a sexual fantasy while, at the same time, my body was making love to someone I genuinely cared for in my better moments. I hated seeing this in myself, and I wondered what was wrong with me. Why was it like this? How could this be so? Had I not found the right person yet? It was completely perplexing. But when I did try things out with someone new, I still felt unfulfilled. Then I hated myself for betraying the feelings of people who cared deeply for me.

Of course, I understand now that the more you feed sexual passion, the more it gets out of hand. This is simply the nature of lust when it is excessively indulged. Lust really is a very different

phenomenon from love, and yet people in committed relationships somehow have to marry the two together.

Discovering that love and lust were ultimately unsatisfying was extremely frustrating to me, and I admit that I felt quite ripped off. If the movies were to be believed, if you loved someone attractive and they loved you back, then you could make love whenever you wanted and you should be happy. Right? But alas, I was not happy.

It took me about eighteen months to realise that being able to have sex with the person you wanted, whenever you wanted, was not actually sexual liberation – it was enslavement to sexual passion. To be clear, I was not promiscuous in the extreme; I was quite moderate compared to some of my acquaintances back then. But I was no saint either, and I did not want to be the person I was becoming. I felt that this sense of being enslaved to sexual desire was turning me into a horrible person – someone even I didn't like.

I started to deeply question what was going on in my mind. I am immensely thankful that there was some innate goodness, some moral compass, that was becoming alarmed. It would still be a little while longer before I found a safe container in which to manage these energies – the Buddhist teachings and disciplines, worldview, and understanding of human psychology would bring much more clarity to these matters a couple of years later – but at the age of twenty I was a hot mess!

Somewhat incongruously, though, I continued with my daily prayers seeking guidance, and practicing white light meditation. I did these religiously – thank goodness – because I think these practices were helping to manifest a better destiny and direction.

At work one day, one of my workmates, who was studying at the Sydney College of the Arts, told me about the ten day silent *vipassanā* meditation retreat in the Blue Mountains. Both she and her brother had done it, and both recommended it. I made a mental note – this was the

second time I had heard about this retreat. The first time was in a coffee shop in Brisbane a year earlier, and now for a second time, in a coffee shop in Sydney.

After I had lived in Sydney for around five months, my sister Jane broke up with her boyfriend of several years. She was feeling lonely and a bit depressed, so she asked if I would come live with her in her two-bedroom terrace house in Erskineville, in Sydney's inner west. I moved in with Jane and also got a new job at a coffee shop in Glebe, owned by the son of the owner of the previous place I had worked. I much preferred the more laid-back, slower vibe of this new coffee shop, and found it easier to make friends with my new co-workers, who seemed very down to earth. I made some real friends there.

Not long after moving in with my sister, my old best friend Debbie decided to drop out of university and move down to Sydney as well. Sadly, her boyfriend had recently accidentally overdosed and died in his sleep. Understandably, this left Debbie feeling very shaken. She decided she did not want to be a social worker after all and wanted to experience living in a different, bigger city. She needed the change and wanted to spend time with her old friend, so Jane was kind enough to let Debbie come and stay.

It was wonderful to have her friendship back in my life. Debbie moved in with us for a month or so, until she found a job and a place of her own, both in Glebe, so we saw each other quite often.

My sister had to get up early each day to listen to the news – keeping a pulse on current affairs was important for her job. She would work all day, then come home and go for a jog before watching the evening news and current affairs programmes. I found these to be too confrontational and depressing, and I preferred to retreat to my bedroom whenever the television was on. So although we lived in the same house, I didn't actually see Jane that much.



*Troy and Brett, 1991*

We did, however, sometimes go for a run together at weekends from Bondi Beach to Bronte Beach and back, and then have lunch. This was lovely. We joked about the futility of burning calories only to replace them again immediately!

One thing that I struggled with at this stage of my life – but realised in hindsight was probably a good thing – was a tendency to observe my life and surroundings with a great deal of suspicion, non-commitment, and constant questioning. My sister described me as the most irreverent person she knew – and coming from a journalist, that is quite a statement. Yet it was true: I was suspicious of, and critical of, politicians, the military, the police force, millionaires, academics, the clergy – just about everyone, really.

Jane was genuinely shocked, and quite sad, when I later became a devout religious practitioner. She hadn't realised that what was driving the irreverence was a sharp faculty of discernment searching for something trustworthy enough to genuinely revere – and once I had found that thing, I committed deeply. Jane, however, preferred the cynical and sarcastic version of my former self. I did have a way of combining irreverence with humour and sharp wit, and this, together with my gift for sarcasm, meant that I could be quite funny at times.

At this stage in my life, however, I could not yet give myself over to anything fully and simply be content. For example, I once attended an all-night rave: a huge dance party with famous DJs, surprise guests, world-class lighting and laser shows, and the like. Within an hour I was already sitting off to the side, observing the scene as if from another planet. It was almost as though I were mentally noting 'movement', 'lights', 'sounds', 'hearing', and mumbling to myself internally, 'I just don't get what all the fuss is about. This is really not that much fun.'

This response might be normal at the age of forty or fifty, after a hundred raves, but I was only twenty. Eventually, I caught a taxi home and was in bed by midnight. Other friends of mine who attended danced all night until dawn; they probably had some good drugs.

This was another area in which I was a bit strange compared to my friends. Aside from trying a couple of ganja (marijuana) cookies – which I really didn't enjoy – I didn't take recreational drugs. Even though some of the people around me were popping acid and ecstasy pills, and on one occasion even snorting cocaine, I had a very strong gut sense not to get involved. I would usually have two drinks, and then, after an hour or so, an inner voice would say quite firmly, 'Time to go home now.' Whenever I heard or sensed that trustworthy inner voice, I listened to it and followed.

When I agreed to meet my friends at a nightclub – which I did a couple of times a month – I would go for a swim or take an exercise class first, then go home and take a nap. When the alarm went off at 10 pm, I would get dressed and head to the club, arriving at around 11 pm. I would hug my friends, dance a little, have my two drinks, and then leave by 12:30. It felt as though I was forcing myself to go through the motions; I would literally pretend to be having fun until I just couldn't stand it any more.

I was only going to clubs because I was young and living in the big city, and I felt I should go along with my friends. They would start partying at 9 pm and stay out until 3 am, going from club to club. They appeared to be having a great time, but I just didn't get it. I did enjoy turning up looking pumped and fresh, and receiving compliments when everyone else was already a sweaty mess – but that quickly wore thin. I would much rather have gone to see a movie or had a nice dinner at home with a friend. The fact that I could not be happy in the way others seemed to be confused me.

In hindsight, I think the quality that was functioning in my mind was 'mindfulness and clear comprehension', arising due to meditation practice in past lives. My deep inner conviction to avoid drugs was also, no doubt, the result of having kept precepts strictly in many past lives. And I suspect that the firm inner voice that would announce when it was time to go home may well have been a guardian angel, making sure things didn't get too out of hand.

The commitment I had to exercising may also have been a way that past habits of strict discipline manifested in this life. In a word, you could say that I was 'religiously' committed to exercise. By the age of twenty-one, I was swimming two kilometres three times per week, which I alternated with days of jogging, aerobics, or boxing training. I exercised strenuously six days per week, with only one day off. No one forced me to do any of this; I just felt that the discipline and surge of healthy endorphins helped keep me sane. Swimming, in particular, was literally

like a meditation. It gave me time to clear my head, to be in and aware of my body, and to feel refreshed.

Similarly, the world weariness I had felt since my early teens was quite possibly the manifestation of inner wisdom. In seeing the limitations of conditioned reality and worldly pursuits, I was compelled to search for a path leading to something more dependable. Although the manifestation of these qualities may have been the result of skilful cultivation in past lifetimes, experiencing their effects in this lifetime was not at all pleasant. I felt like an outsider wherever I went and whatever I did, and I was constantly fault-finding with myself and everyone else.

Always seeing the faults, limitations, and drawbacks in conditions felt like a curse. I often wondered, ‘Why can’t I just be like other people?’ I suspect that intuitive wisdom, cultivated in the past, may have been at the root of this ‘curse’, because it was also spurring me onward to find a true remedy. It was as though there was a thorn in my side that only the Three Refuges could possibly remove.

Curiously, several people at my new place of work in Glebe had also done the ten day meditation retreat in the Blue Mountains. This retreat kept being mentioned again and again, and I finally decided to commit. My interest in acting classes had gradually faded over the months, while my interest in meditation was steadily increasing. I wrote to the *vipassanā* centre expressing my interest in attending a retreat and, shortly afterwards, received an application form in the mail. About a week later, I was notified that my application had been accepted.

My memory of the timeline is not exactly precise, but I think I had been in Sydney for about eight months by this time and attended the retreat in May 1992, just a few weeks before my twenty-first birthday. I do remember that it was during the period when I was living with my sister and Debbie, because I remember feeling torn about leaving Debbie alone in the big city not long after she had just arrived. She encouraged me to attend nonetheless, knowing how important it was to me.

My sister Dianne and her family lived in the Blue Mountains, so Debbie and I decided to visit them and go for a bushwalk in the national park before I was due to begin the retreat at Blackheath. We caught the train from Central Station, got off at Lawson, and had lunch with Dianne and her young children. She then dropped us at the beginning of a well-known walking track nearby. The walk was meant to take two to three hours, after which her husband Doug would collect us at the park entrance and drop me off at the meditation centre in the early evening. But things did not go as planned.

It was a wonderful sunny afternoon when we started out on the walk through gorgeous old-growth forest. It was exhilarating to be in such stunning nature, breathing clean, fresh air. But about an hour and a half into the walk, when we were down in the valley portion of the loop trail, a strange and very thick mist suddenly descended. Even though it was only mid-afternoon, through a combination of being in a shaded section of the trail under thick tree cover and the heavy mist that lingered directly above the damp ground, visibility became so poor that we could no longer make out the path. The light that did shine through the mist was strangely hazy. All we could see were blades of long grass poking up here and there, and no outline of the path was visible. We were amazed that visibility could change so dramatically and so quickly.

I told Debbie to stay in place so that I could find my way back to her, then tried going both forwards and backwards from where we had come, but I couldn't see the path. Debbie also tried and encountered the same difficulty. It was only about 3:30 in the afternoon, but it already looked like dusk. This was a very serious situation, because there were steep cliff faces at points all along the trail, and just a few steps in the wrong direction could easily mean falling to one's death. The possibility of spraining an ankle was also very high. It was extremely frustrating, but there seemed to be no way around it: we both agreed that we should stay put until the mist cleared, which we hoped would be very soon.

An hour passed, and then another. It got darker and darker, and the mist only grew heavier as time passed. We eventually found shelter under a small rocky overhang with some fairly flat boulders underneath, but we had no food, no water, no insect repellent, no sleeping mats or sleeping bags – and, to make matters worse, we were both wearing thin cotton shirts. It was already late autumn, and temperatures drop quickly at this elevation.

All told, we spent around fourteen hours huddled in the dark on those boulders under the rocky ledge. Sometimes I hugged Debbie from behind; when our hip bones began to hurt, we would roll over and she would hug me instead. Sometimes we sang songs, sometimes we laughed, and sometimes we cried. There was no way to sleep, due to the constant mosquitoes and the intense shivering.

Those miserable hours just stretched on and on. This experience has definitely made it into my top five most miserable experiences of this lifetime. At least it happened in good company. Neither of us blamed the other, and we both understood that we just had to get through it.

Fortunately, when dawn came the mist had already lifted. Bizarrely enough, the path was suddenly right in front of our faces, clear as day. We soon found our way to the entrance of the park, where my sister's husband was waiting for us. He was eating a doughnut and drinking a coffee, both of which I eagerly snatched from his hands and shared with Debbie.

Doug drove us back to their house, where we warmed ourselves in front of the fire and ate porridge between taking phone calls from my parents, brothers, and sister, reassuring them that we were fine. Hardly anyone had slept that night, it seemed. The weather report said that the temperature had dropped to just four degrees Celsius (thirty-nine degrees Fahrenheit) overnight – literally the temperature of a refrigerator. We had essentially been sitting in a fridge for about twelve hours wearing only light cotton shirts.

My family teased me for years afterwards for having a terrible sense of direction, which really wasn't true – but Aussies are like that. If you're lucky enough to survive a disaster or a traumatic experience, you also have to survive the teasing that follows afterwards.

I had missed registration and the orientation talk for the retreat the night before, and I was wondering if I might be about to fall ill, as the glands in my throat were swollen and sore. But I thoroughly surprised myself on this occasion. Whereas the most sensible response to such an experience might be to crawl into bed for a couple of days – to lick one's wounds and sleep off the trauma – I decided instead to call the retreat centre and see whether they would still allow me to attend. Traumatized or not, I still wanted to sit the retreat.

I explained the situation and added that I had already taken time off work and had been really looking forward to it. To my surprise, the kind retreat manager agreed to let me sit the retreat. He said I could listen to the recorded orientation talk in a separate room and then join the other retreatants afterwards.

I have often wondered if any supernatural forces were at work in manifesting that thick, eerie mist that day. It really was a strange occurrence. I was meant to enter the retreat that afternoon – had I taken the experience as a sign that attending the retreat was not meant to be, my life might have turned out very differently. I also wonder if a guardian angel guided me to call the retreat manager the next morning, because it was out of character for me to be so resolute and stoic so soon after such a significant trauma. In Buddhist cosmology, we all have demons tugging at our feet and angels hovering above our heads. The various kinds of *kamma* we have made influence which side gains the upper hand – and sometimes it can be quite a tug of war.

In a way, this 'getting through the cold night on the hard rocks' experience turned out to be a good primer for the ten day meditation retreat, because, oh my goodness, was I in for a rude surprise! The

strictly silent retreat entailed twelve hours of formal sitting meditation each day, all on the floor, with no yoga or walking meditation allowed. There was a break for breakfast, lunch and afternoon tea, as well as a fifteen minute break between two long sitting sessions in the afternoon. But once in the hall, you were expected to sit in silence for two to three hours at a time. We each had a meditation mat, *zafu*, and even a small meditation stool to place under one's buttocks with your legs folded underneath – but even so, for a body not accustomed to that much sitting... oh my Buddha, the pain!

Up until this point, my experience of meditation had involved lying comfortably on my bed, visualising white light, and consciously relaxing. A very different method was taught at this retreat: to be mindfully aware of feelings in the body as they arose, stayed for some time, and then ceased. Tape-recorded instructions were given by the Indian-Burmese teacher Goenka-ji. He explained that we should sweep our awareness from the crown of the head down to the toes, paying attention to sensations on the skin in particular, and then sweep awareness back up again from the toes to the top of the head, doing this continuously throughout the session.

That was all very well and good in theory – but what about the shoulder pain, back pain, knee pain, and the dull, numb, throbbing pain in the buttocks? These feelings impinged far more than subtle tingling sensations on the skin. And what about the mental pain: the restlessness, boredom, and irritation, all slowly turning into angry resistance? I was completely unprepared for the amount of pain in my body and mind when forced to sit quietly with it. Goenka-ji kept repeating, 'Staaart agaaain... staaart agaaain...' in his thick Indian accent. 'Sweep *en masse* with a quiet mind... aalert and attentive mind...' But the mind was anything but quiet, at least at first.

I did not realise – nor had anyone who recommended the retreat warned me – that these ten days were going to be the most difficult in all of my life! Those beaming baristas brimming with enthusiasm... I had to

wonder if their smiles had been sadistic. There was *sooo* much pain manifesting in the body, which was not yet trained to sit in meditation posture, hour after hour after hour. If the shoulder pain abated, then the knee pain replaced it. If the knees settled down a bit, the lower back ached instead. Sometimes it was the shoulders, knees, and back, all screaming at once. It was even harder than the night in the refrigerated forest – at least that ordeal lasted only one night.

At the same time, there were some truly wonderful experiences during the retreat – events that completely changed the trajectory of my life – and for that, I will always be grateful.

Each evening, a video was played of Goenka-ji giving some reflections. It was only then that I learned the retreat methods were based on the teachings of the Buddha. I had signed up for a Buddhist-style retreat without even realising it – so my Buddhist practice in this lifetime began with twelve hours of sitting per day. It was during one of these evening reflections that I had the first life-changing experience of the retreat.

Goenka-ji explained that the Buddha had insight into the Four Noble Truths. The First Noble Truth was the truth of suffering, or unsatisfactoriness. He explained that all conditioned phenomena share the characteristic of unsatisfactoriness – that no condition can truly satisfy us – and that even pleasant experiences were ultimately just lesser forms of suffering, because eventually they too will cease. This might sound simple, but I had never heard anyone put this into words before. Everyone I had ever known was either running around trying to make conditions satisfactory or complaining because they weren't.

In that moment, it was as though the penny finally dropped. The thoughts in my head began to explode: 'That's what I have been noticing! That's why I'm not satisfied! And that's why I *can't* be satisfied!'

And then I realised: ‘I’m not crazy... I’m a Buddhist!’

I felt tremendous relief at this realisation. I was not alone in noticing the perception of unsatisfactoriness or in the experience of dissatisfaction.

Goenka-ji then explained the Second Noble Truth: that the cause of our suffering is our attachments and cravings. Once again, the penny dropped. I just knew that this was true! I had not been able to describe or explain it, but as soon as I heard it articulated, I knew it was true. We cause the problem ourselves, and we have to fix it ourselves. We can’t blame others – we have to grow up and take responsibility, as hard as that may be.

Goenka-ji further explained that release from all of this was possible, and that there are disciplines to help one realise this release – the Third and Fourth Noble Truths. I felt a moment of true optimism, for what seemed like the first time in my life.

I wasn’t quite sure yet why we had to sit with all of this pain, but this teacher was the first I had ever encountered who was saying things that made good sense. So, if he said that the sitting was important, I tried to take heed. I did sleep in one morning until an assistant came and tapped me on the arm, saying, ‘Brett, it really is in your best interest to attend all of the sessions.’

I wanted to scream at him, ‘I know what is in my best interest – and I need to sleep in today!’ But I went off to the session instead.

To be honest, I thought about running away a few times – it really did seem too hard. The problem was that the manager had my wallet, and where we were staying was quite remote. It was much too far to walk to my sister’s place.

It was on the afternoon of day eight when something truly wonderful happened; the second life-changing experience of the retreat. I was trying to do the sweeping method, trying to be mindful of sensations, and there was a lot of pain, as usual. But then, in an instant, suddenly and unexpectedly, all of the pain just disappeared. My mind felt cool and spacious, full of contentment and peace – the most peaceful it had ever been. This experience probably only lasted for about ten seconds before all of the pain came crashing back again.

This was unlike anything I had ever experienced. There was an instant and deep recognition, and I knew, ‘*This* is what I have been looking for! It’s true – the real source of happiness is inside us. It’s experienced in the mind! This is why I haven’t gotten busy with a career I didn’t trust... I’ve been waiting and searching for *this!*’

After this experience, I understood why the retreat had to be strictly silent, and why the formal sitting sessions had to be so consistent and intense. If one were still feeding the normal modes and habits of ‘being’, as well as of perceiving oneself and others, it would be very unlikely that a person – especially a beginning meditator – would be able to directly experience more subtle levels of reality. And this is precisely what a *vipassanā* retreat is supposed to lead to. *Vipassanā* literally translates as ‘insight’ – ideally, insight into deeper truth.

Another interesting thing I experienced during this retreat was the experience of being with men who were silent, gentle, and quietly supportive of one another. I had never experienced anything like this before – at least not in this lifetime – and yet this complete lack of competitive vibe, and absence of joking or jarring comments, felt comfortable and familiar. I had experienced some teasing during high school, which left me feeling a bit suspicious of men in general. It was lovely to see and feel that there were many good, kind men around as well.

Toward the end of the retreat, Goenka-ji explained that if we wanted truly good results from meditation, then we had no choice but to continue to practise with genuine consistency. Just as athletes must train or musicians must rehearse, meditators must also be disciplined and consistent. He strongly urged the yogis to commit to two hours of meditation per day once the retreat was over: one hour in the morning and one hour in the evening. Although that sounded like a lot, I was definitely inspired, and I committed to it very deeply.



*Performing a scene during an acting workshop*

I had a rather intense journey back to Sydney on the train. It was as though I could feel the light that I had glimpsed during the retreat quickly being subsumed by darkness again. It had been so encouraging, and such a relief, to have experienced such peace. But the feeling that it was all slipping away made me shed some heavy tears. I must have been quite a forlorn sight – a strapping young bloke crumpled up against the window, wiping away tears.

There was a strong intuitive sense that I would definitely find that brightness again, and experience the spacious vistas from atop the plateau. But this wouldn't happen before travelling through some dark valleys first. I guess I still had some worldly *kamma* to work through.

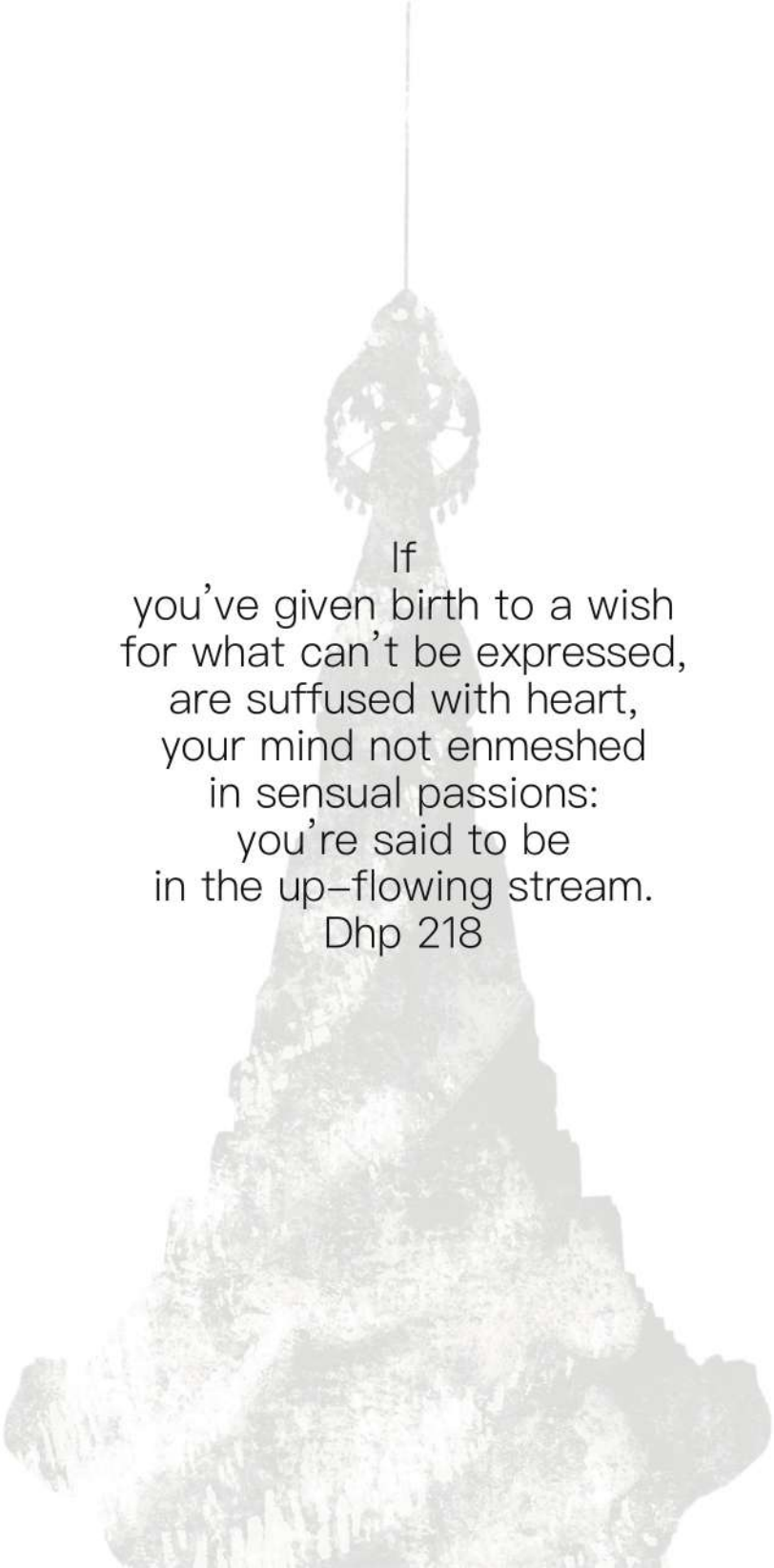




# Chapter 9

All Signs Point to Thailand  
(Age 21)





If  
you've given birth to a wish  
for what can't be expressed,  
are suffused with heart,  
your mind not enmeshed  
in sensual passions:  
you're said to be  
in the up-flowing stream.  
Dhp 218

## CHAPTER NINE

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### *All Signs Point to Thailand (Age 21)*

Once back in Sydney, trying to explain the meditation retreat experience to Jane and Debbie was a challenge. Understandably, people wanted to hear about an interesting or amazing experience – they wanted me to be able to tell them an engaging story. But how do you explain that the highlight of ten days of intensive effort was a minute or so of deep calm and contentment? A tiny island that had been aloof from an ocean of discontent – in the quality versus quantity equation, quality was definitely of greater value. The experience was ineffable yet profound, empty yet full. Words couldn't really do it justice.

No matter how I tried to explain it, it just didn't sound that impressive. But when they saw how committed I was to my new routine of formal sitting for an hour in the morning and again in the evening, they could certainly tell that I had been deeply affected. Back at work at the vegan macrobiotic café, several people noted that I seemed calmer.

A few weeks later, I attended my twin brother's twenty-first birthday party in Brisbane. I guess it was my party too, but Troy had organised it, so it felt more like his, and as I had been away for a couple of years I felt like a bit of a stranger there now. Although it was nice to see so many old friends, I couldn't help feeling that everyone present at the party seemed silly and superficial somehow; being tipsy from alcohol was definitely a factor. No doubt, it was also the case that the acting classes I had been attending, the artsy movies and intense novels I had been watching and reading, combined with the meditation practice, had

me feeling, sensing, experiencing, and interpreting things on a deeper level than my old friends. I am aware that this sounds judgemental, but that's just the way I felt at the time.

Of course, I kept my thoughts to myself as best I could and put on a cheerful demeanour, but I could sense that I was moving in a very different direction – mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. I had always been a deep thinker underneath a thick veneer of cheerfulness, but my intensity was seeping through now and the veneer was wearing thin. I didn't feel like performing or playing games.

When people asked how the acting was going, it was uncomfortable, and I didn't really know how to respond. It was awkward because I had been away for almost two years and couldn't really hold anything up to show for it. I was still just working in cafés and had even stopped going to acting classes. I wasn't the person that I used to be anymore, but I hadn't become someone or something else entirely either. Besides the social awkwardness of the occasion, I did feel more centred and grounded, and less lost, and this was something – at least to me.

After the birthday party I met up with one old friend for a quieter and deeper conversation. I tried to explain how strange it was to feel like you were crashing your own birthday party. Drew was more intuitive than many of my old acquaintances and he shared that he was actually feeling some grief about the changes that were happening in me. He said that he could already tell that the meditation practice was going to take me far away from my old friends. Interestingly, he himself decided to move from Brisbane to London just a year or so later – I guess that most people's lives eventually take them away from their childhood friends.

Some of my work friends in Sydney had also noticed me changing, and after a couple of months one of them approached me and said, 'Hey, don't feel the need to change too much. Some of us really like you just the way you are.' The problem was that *I* did not yet like myself;

I wanted to continue to change, and I was determined to do so. A process had begun that couldn't really be stopped.

After my experiences at the *vipassanā* retreat, I found that I did not have the same level of commitment to exercise back in my daily life in Sydney. Although I still did it, I was not as driven as before. I allowed my abdominal area to expand slightly and soften. Meditation was better when this part of the body was relaxed. It was nice not to be forcing myself to try to be so lean. My interest in fashion and movies also weakened significantly.

Debbie found a new home, a new job, and a new relationship – she was doing very well – and I could feel our relationship was changing. Although we still saw each other from time to time, a kind of natural falling away was happening. It's quite funny to remember that she said to me one day, 'I am not actually like you! I don't want to change the world and I don't want to be enlightened. I just want to live a nice, boring, ordinary life... I even like watching bad television!'

The last part of her statement was a protest against how particular I was about the type of entertainment I consumed. Debbie liked drinking beer and playing pool. I liked intense, sad movies and meditation.

A month after the retreat, my meditation practice came down to around forty-five minutes twice per day, and after three months it had become just one forty-five minute session per day. This is a very common post-retreat experience. However, the commitment to daily practice was rock solid, and it had definitely changed me.

I was still experimenting with sensuality and trying to find a way to 'be' in this world. As part of this ongoing experimentation, one day I agreed to go on a picnic with two of my female workmates from the vegan café to Lady Bay, a secluded nudist beach with beautiful bay views in Sydney Harbour National Park. We stopped off at a delicatessen

on the way to buy a bunch of gourmet goodies and a bottle of champagne for our lunch.

The most interesting thing about this occasion – which is why I am mentioning it – is that the picture from the outside was quite dramatically juxtaposed with the process that was occurring inside my mind. I was sitting on my beach towel, naked in the sun, on this beautiful white sand beach under a cloudless blue sky, staring out at the bay. My friends were also sitting there, bearing their beautiful, youthful breasts and, meanwhile, I had my pert pectoral muscles to show for myself.

We were sipping champagne and munching on freshly baked focaccia with avocado, olives, sun-dried tomatoes, feta cheese, and snow pea sprouts. Moments later, a shirtless man with big bulging muscles drove up to the beach on a jet ski selling ice creams. It was a surreal scene.

Now, being immersed in such refined sensuality, you might think that I would simply be enjoying myself, intoxicated by the pleasant tastes, sights, sounds, and feelings – but I was not. Recognising the ostentatiousness of our picnic, I knew full well that I was pushing at the edges of sensual indulgence, and I silently asked myself, ‘Are you truly happy and content in this moment right now?’

I amazed myself by admitting that I was not. It was not that anything was lacking or not good enough; it was just that, as good as it was, it simply was not entirely satisfying.

I considered the situation further. If I were to commit to working harder in order to have more money, what would I be able to do? Find a nicer beach? More beautiful friends? Tastier food? Better wine? Nicer weather? I could clearly see that even if the quality of all of these things were a bit better, there was still no way that it would be any more satisfying, because my friends, the beach, the weather, the food, and the wine were all already really good – and I still wasn’t happy!



*Lady Bay, Sydney Harbour National Park*

I wasn't miserable either; I just wasn't satisfied. Seeing this, doing anything in order to become rich just seemed pointless to me at that moment. Although I had not found a clear direction in life as yet, I was able to begin ticking things off that were not worth pursuing: sensual pleasures did not fill up the hole inside.

I didn't share the topic of this contemplation with my mates. We just rubbed sunscreen on each other's backs and lay face down on the sand after stuffing ourselves silly. Interestingly, one of those friends now meditates every day along with her partner, and does at least one month long retreat each year.

Many months earlier, I had experienced a few moments of superior fulfilment on day eight of the meditation retreat, but by now that experience seemed elusive and unattainable. I had understood the concept that conditioned phenomena are by nature fleeting and

unsatisfactory, but even so, how is a person supposed to live a life that contains at least some satisfaction? That was the question I was now grappling with.

When I fully embraced daily mindfulness meditation, using the method I had learned at the retreat, I put aside my previous daily prayer for guidance. But then, about nine months after the retreat, an interesting thing occurred. Even with my helpful meditation practice, recognising that I still lacked clear direction in my life, I was overcome with an intense kind of frustration. I needed something more. Motivated equally by frustration and aspiration, I made a very specific resolution.

As I stepped out from the café onto the footpath of Glebe Point Road one Wednesday night after work, I looked skyward and made a different kind of prayer – different in terms of sincerity and intensity. I said:

**‘Okay, I admit it – I don’t know how to be truly happy! But if you show me some signs, if you show me the way to True Happiness, I promise that I will follow them!’**

It was as though I was picking up the conversation with the ‘Spirits of Light’ once again, but this time at a higher volume, and with more intensity and determination. It is hard to explain just how deeply I emoted that imploring prayer in that particular moment. It was as though it came from every molecule of this four-element body, right down to and through the bones, and from every iota of consciousness wrapped up in and around it. In a sense, it was a strange prayer – equal parts utter exasperation and sincere aspiration. I did not know if any beings heard it, but I felt I had broadcast it to the heavens to the best of my abilities, with intense mental conviction.

After the prayer, some very interesting things did start to happen. A couple of days later, someone forgot a book – *The Lonely Planet*

*Guide to Thailand* – at the café during my shift. A close friend from high school had been to Thailand, and so had one of my co-workers. I had always hoped to travel one day, so I took the book home to read a little. In the preface, the book mentioned that ninety-five percent of the population was Buddhist.

I knew that the method of meditation I practised was Buddhist, and I looked through the colourful pictures of temples and monks scattered throughout the pages. ‘Hmm, is this a sign?’ I wondered. The person who had forgotten the book came back soon after and asked for it, so I didn’t have a chance to read very much, but it certainly got me thinking about Thailand.

We used to get paid in cash; our wages were put in an envelope and left inside the till. When I received my pay the following week, I opened my wallet to put the money in and noticed an unusual coin. There were strange letters and a man I didn’t recognise on one side, and buildings with unusual shapes – probably religious in nature – on the other. My workmate Katrina said that it was Thai baht; she recognised it from her holiday there. When I heard this, something strange happened: the hair on my arms stood on end and I had a strong sense of ‘Ahh! A second sign!!’

When I worked the evening shift, I had to change the oil in the fryer once a week after closing time. I would turn up the music and sing along quite loudly to make the clean-up less boring. Sometimes people would stare at me from outside the café and applaud – which usually made me blush and go quiet.

The café sold vegan macrobiotic Japanese food – inspired by Japanese cuisine and influenced by macrobiotic theory. The brand name of the fryer was Dorf, if I recall correctly. The reason I mention all of this is because there was no particular reason for anything Thai to appear in this setting.

I had probably been changing this oil for about a year without ever noticing it, but one night, as I was screwing a short galvanised pipe onto the outlet so that the oil could flow into a big bucket, I saw that there was one word stamped on the pipe: THAILAND. It was too much; I almost fell off my little stool! Not ‘Made in Thailand’, just ‘THAILAND’ – almost as if I was being told, or even commanded, to go.

How did such an artefact wind up in such a place, I wondered. And why was it even written in the English language? Clearly, it was a sign. I jumped up, looked towards the heavens, and declared, ‘Okay! I got the signs! I vow that I will leave for Thailand in exactly ten weeks’ time.’

I do appreciate that this might be a strange way to go about making decisions, but the decision had been made. When I explained my decision to Debbie, she surprised me by saying that she wanted to come along too. We had both intended to travel and see more of the world one day, and now was as good a time as any.

I was still working at the coffee shop next door, as well as the vegan café, and I asked for any available extra shifts from both places. It was tiring to work that much, but I had a goal. We both knuckled down at work and saved what we could.

After eight weeks, I had a passport and a one-year open return ticket, but I still had no money. It was not easy to save on minimum wage. What to do? A vow is a vow, so I sold my bed, my computer (I had been thinking of writing a novel), my Turkish rug, and my treasured bicycle.

As the day of departure drew near, I had scrounged up around \$1,000, which has a value of approximately \$2,500 today. It wasn’t a lot, but if we lived as frugal backpackers we could certainly get by for a few months. Thailand was considered a cheap travel destination for Aussies back in the early nineties.



*The three signs pointing to Thailand*

Of all the auspicious signs that seemed to support my travelling to Thailand, the final one was the most amazing and providential. An attractive young lady walked into the vegan café one day and asked if there were any jobs going. I answered that there probably would be, as I would be leaving soon. When she asked about my reason for leaving, I replied that I was going to Thailand.

‘Why?’ she asked.

Winter was approaching, and I told her that I hate winter and like beaches, and that because I was a meditator, I was interested in studying Buddhism further.

Then she said the most astonishing thing: ‘Oh, I just came from Thailand yesterday. I spent some time on a tropical island. There was a meditation centre there, with teachers who spoke English.’ Although she hadn’t attended any retreats, she had visited the centre and mentioned that it had a view of the sea. I asked her to write down the name of the island and the meditation centre.

And so this complete stranger, a backpacker from Canada, had randomly walked into my workplace and given me a crucial address in

Thailand just five days before our departure. In those days, before the existence of Google or TripAdvisor, word of mouth was often the only way to discover these hidden gems.

Once on the plane, even with Debbie by my side, I was really nervous.

‘What are we doing?!’ I said.

But Debbie seemed more excited than nervous. ‘We’ll be fine’, she replied, tapping me reassuringly on the arm.

The plane was an overnight Alitalia flight to Rome, stopping to refuel in Bangkok. Even though we were sitting in the non-smoking section, there were so many smokers on the plane that we might as well have been smoking the whole time ourselves.

We arrived at around 5:00 am with red eyes and sore throats. The predominantly Italian-born passengers gave the pilot a hearty round of applause when we landed safely.

Looking out of the airport windows onto the tarmac, I observed how lean and light-footed the Thai men walking around in their various uniforms seemed, compared to us slouching Aussies.

I said to Debbie, ‘Look at the way they walk – they’re like cats!’

That was how they really appeared to me: graceful and sleek, and slightly sneaky looking.

We caught a taxi to Khaosan Road, the famous road with many backpacker hostels. We marvelled at the highway system: there was a highway next to a highway, and in places a highway above us as well. The way the road undulated, unlike Australian roads, was a bit

unnerving, especially since the driver was whizzing along very fast, but we arrived safely soon enough.

It was early morning and we had no idea where to go. The operator of a quiet backstreet hostel was riding around in the back of a *tuk-tuk* looking for clientele, and she convinced us to jump in with her. The guesthouse was modest but fine, considering our budget.

Debbie and I shared a bedroom, and sometimes the actual bed again. With the anxiety we were feeling, we both appreciated the company. We were exhausted from the overnight flight, so we tried to nap, but couldn't sleep for very long due to our excitement and the heat.

We made our way back to Khaosan Road to have a look around. It must be so obvious to hawkers and potential con artists which tourists are 'fresh off the boat'. Every step we took must have looked both clumsy and cautious, and we were literally stopping on the side of the road to read our guidebook, sweating profusely as we did so.

A friendly-looking Thai man approached us and said, 'Hi, where are you from? How long are you staying?'

We answered, 'Australia. Not sure how long – at least a month.'

He said, 'You are very lucky! The Thai government is having a promotion to attract tourists, so during this time there are no taxes on gemstone jewellery for foreigners. Even Thai people have to pay, but for tourists – no have to pay!'

Now Debbie and I were not the slightest bit interested in buying gemstones, and quite frankly, promoted and discounted or not, our budget would not accommodate it.

We tried to explain, but the guy was very persuasive: 'Okay, you just come and look only. Don't like? Don't buy. No problem!'

As we didn't have anything else to do, we thought we could at least admire the craftsmanship, and maybe see some other things that might actually interest us. Our guy drove us in a *tuk-tuk* to his shop about half an hour away and pulled up outside. We had a quick look around, but our lack of interest must have been obvious and we felt awkward. As he was clearly not going to get any commission, the guy just took off and left us there.

We literally had no idea where we were, in a foreign city of eight million people where no one seemed to speak English. Before trying to work out how to get back to the guesthouse, we found a nearby restaurant and ordered some food by pointing at pictures.

Just the day before, Debbie's boyfriend had given her one piece of advice at the airport back in Sydney: 'Remember, don't trust anyone!'

At the time I had thought that advice was too cynical, wondering what kind of holiday would you have if you didn't trust anyone. But he had a point – we had better start being at least a little bit suspicious of strangers, which was everyone in this country.

Waving down *tuk-tuk* drivers, we tried to tell them to take us to Khaosan Road, but our Aussie accents were completely unintelligible. Several just shook their heads and drove away, leaving us to eat their dust. Then we realised there was a section of translated words in our guidebook, and Khaosan Road was listed there. We pointed to the Thai script and the driver immediately understood.

Back at the guesthouse, we both felt a bit traumatised by our day's outing and had an early night. I sat in meditation before sleeping.

The next day, I believe, we visited some of the famous 'must-see' temples in Bangkok. Although I was a practising Buddhist – meditation anyway – I was not yet familiar with the practice or concept of bowing

before statues of the Buddha. And to be honest, all the red and gold looked rather garish to my Western eyes at the time.

With the traffic jams, the noise, the heat, and the pollution, pretty quickly Debbie and I were feeling over it in Bangkok, and began to consider where to go next. It was possible to catch an overnight bus to Surat Thani in Southern Thailand directly from Khaosan Road. From there, it connected to a ferry service that went all the way to Koh Phangan, the tropical island with the meditation centre on it. It was going to be a long schlep, but we had come, in part, to have an adventure, so we decided to do it.

Once outside the city of Bangkok, the bus seemed to be whizzing along very fast. It was a little unsettling, but we were stuck on the bus now. We tried to nap, but it was difficult because the roads were bumpy, the air conditioning was freezing, and the bus swerved often as the driver overtook trucks along the way.

At around 1:00 am, I was half asleep with my head pressed against the glass when I suddenly heard a very calm but firm voice resound loudly in my head. It said, 'There is a possibility that you are about to die.'

The bus was overtaking someone, probably at around one hundred and thirty kilometres per hour, when the driver suddenly swerved back into the correct lane. As he did so, a large oncoming vehicle whizzed past us, probably also travelling at around one hundred and twenty kilometres per hour. I swear we missed it by only inches! The bus swayed violently from left to right several times as we were buffeted by the wind created by the other vehicle.

I looked at Debbie and said, 'Jesus, that was close!'

Then I told her, ‘You know, just before we almost hit that vehicle, I heard a voice as clear as day saying, “There is a chance that you’re about to die.”’

To my astonishment, Debbie responded, ‘I heard the exact same voice say the exact same thing!’

We resigned ourselves to the fact that we wouldn’t be sleeping during the journey, and that we might die before we arrived at our destination.

It is not uncommon in Thailand for buses to crash from time to time, killing the driver and many of the passengers. We hadn’t known this at the time, of course, but we were getting a crash course (no pun intended) in some of the differences between a developed nation and a developing nation.

The Thai government has since introduced checkpoints and a log system along the main tourist routes, where drivers must report their departure times so it can be determined whether or not they have been speeding. Drivers are also required to take proper rest between jobs.

In any case, we made it to the wharf intact and had some breakfast before the ferry departed. The boat ride took a couple of hours, and we enjoyed observing the different colours of the sea in the Gulf of Thailand – a light turquoise compared to the dark blue of the ocean in Australia.

As we drew closer to the shore of Koh Phangan, a smiling young man showed us a folder of photos and encouraged us to come stay at the resort where he worked. Behind him, a young woman, also holding a folder, tried to warn us about something, shaking her head and mouthing, ‘No good... no good.’ But he won us over with his charm and the inviting pictures of long beaches.

We headed over to the pick-up truck with our backpacks, along with a couple of other tourists who had also been convinced to go to the same resort. The ride, sitting in the open tray of the pick-up, was bumpy but quite fun. After about twenty minutes we arrived at the ‘resort’ – a word with a broader meaning in Thailand than in Australia.

This resort was much more modest than we had expected. We were shown to a large, spacious bungalow. The owner apologised that there was no electricity, and assured us that it would be working by the next day. We put down our bags and had a look around. We did notice that the beach in the photographs was not the same beach that adjoined the resort, but we didn’t think too much of it, assuming that the long white beach might be just a short walk away. We then headed to the restaurant for lunch.

In the restaurant was a very large German man who had been on the boat and in the pick-up with us. He was angry to the point of fury. He was standing, red-faced, waving his fist at the young man and yelling, ‘You liar! You cheat! You scumbag! This is not the place in your photo!’ He looked as though he might actually throw a punch if he could catch the little rascal.

Then, to everyone’s surprise, the cook – a slightly framed, sweet-looking young man with long, wavy hair – jumped out from behind the counter wielding a very large kitchen knife. His eyes looked different to the German man’s: crazed and suddenly black, with an eerie quality of fixed concentration. If the German had tried to hit the other young Thai guy, I had no doubt that the cook would have driven the knife into him right there and then.

Debbie and I looked at each other in complete and utter disbelief. We had never seen anything like this in our lives. The German stormed off in an angry huff, the Thai guys slowly calmed down, and the owner came over smiling, apologised, and asked us what we would like to eat. It was totally surreal. So much for tropical paradise in the land of smiles!

After lunch, back in the room, I shook my head and asked Debbie with typical Australian sarcasm, ‘So are you enjoying your holiday as much as I am? We nearly died on the bus last night and almost saw a knife fight just now!’ We were both shell-shocked.

I wanted to lie down for a while, telling Debbie that I needed to rest and meditate, after which I would like to go for a walk when the weather had cooled down. Debbie joined me for the midday rest, but when I was meditating she went for a walk by herself.

‘Are you sure?’ I asked.

‘I’ll be fine,’ she said.

A couple of hours later, Debbie returned and triumphantly exclaimed that there was a much nicer resort, with a long, beautiful beach just as we had hoped for, only a fifteen minute walk away up and over a small hill.

‘They even have electricity!’ she exclaimed. We agreed to move there the next day.

We spent a couple of days at the nicer resort at Haad Yao, processing our recent experiences. Neither of us had ever encountered people who would lie straight to your face while smiling, simply for the sake of making money. Fortunately, the people at the new resort all seemed extremely sweet, honest, and kind.

Another thing I was processing, to be honest, was my disappointment with the beaches. We are truly spoiled in Australia: deep blue oceans, long white sandy beaches, and waves that are fun for body surfing. The water in the Gulf of Thailand was lukewarm, and there weren’t really any waves to speak of. The sunsets were very nice, though, and so were the coconut shakes. We perused our guidebook and considered what to do later in our trip.



*Haad Yao beach, Koh Phangan*

After a few days, I arranged with the resort owner to get a ride into the main town, from where we would catch another ride to go visit the meditation centre and the beaches on the other side of the island. We walked up the hill to the meditation centre, where we found a large signboard explaining the rules and regulations of the centre, the retreat schedule, and a place to sign up for the next ten day retreat. The next one was starting five days later, and we both decided to sign up for it.

We also moved into a new beach bungalow at Haad Rin, the beach famous for its full moon parties. Haad Rin had more shops and restaurants, and some places even played a movie at 8:00 pm.

One evening after dinner, Debbie stayed at the restaurant to watch *Thelma & Louise*, while I wandered down to the beach to stare at the sea, which was black and murky at night. I was in a very pensive mood. At some point, a group of Thai men came over to chat, then asked me if I was interested in spending the night with a young boy they had with them, who looked to be about fourteen.

I literally couldn't believe it and replied, 'I'll be fine, thanks. I'm not interested.'

I felt confused and very sad for the boy, who was somehow managing to smile. I suppose there is a market for such things, which is why they had approached me, but it sickened my heart. So far, I was not impressed with Thailand, but I didn't want to go back to Australia yet either.

Debbie, on the other hand, was doing much better than me. She was just going with the flow and enjoying her holiday. She wandered down to the shore and asked me why I looked so intense. I told her that I wasn't really enjoying the holiday yet, and that I had been hoping to find something good – or better – here, not worse. She then offered some advice, which I reacted strongly to.

'Your problem is that you just don't know how to be content. You're a good-looking guy. You're smart and you have so many choices in life. But nothing is ever good enough for you. At some point you just have to decide that something is good enough and stick with it!'

Of course, there is some truth that there is value in practising contentment, but at the same time, surely we should aspire to something truly good in our lives?

I responded quite passionately, 'There is simply no way I can be content with going back to my old life in Sydney. It's not possible. So I'm telling you, I am not going to go back until either I have changed, or my life has changed!'

Debbie didn't really know what to say. 'Well, alright then... and how are you going to do that?' I answered that I didn't know yet, but that I really hoped the meditation retreat would help.

Debbie could be content in a way that was not possible for me. At times I envied her for this, and at other times I pitied her. I knew that my life needed to have profound value and meaning, and that it must be genuinely beneficial to others as well. I was simply not going to settle for anything less. I did not yet know how to manifest this, but I was damn well determined to try.

The next afternoon I went for a jog, when something rather profound occurred. It was about a week before my twenty-second birthday, and we had been in Thailand for about a week already. Jogging uphill along a red dirt road, I marvelled at how much sweat pours out of the body, and how red and itchy your skin becomes when exercising in such a tropical climate – nothing like running in the more temperate conditions of Sydney – when I came to an open spot amid thick forest with a clear view of the ocean.

I stopped for a few moments to catch my breath, looking out at the Gulf of Thailand through the trees – aware of the earth beneath my feet, the forest around me, the sky above my head, and the ocean before me – when suddenly and unexpectedly I was struck by a feeling of being *at home*. It was deeply visceral, as though something in my bone marrow was tingling from head to toe, and as if some subtle body consciousness recognised something familiar in the environment that day.

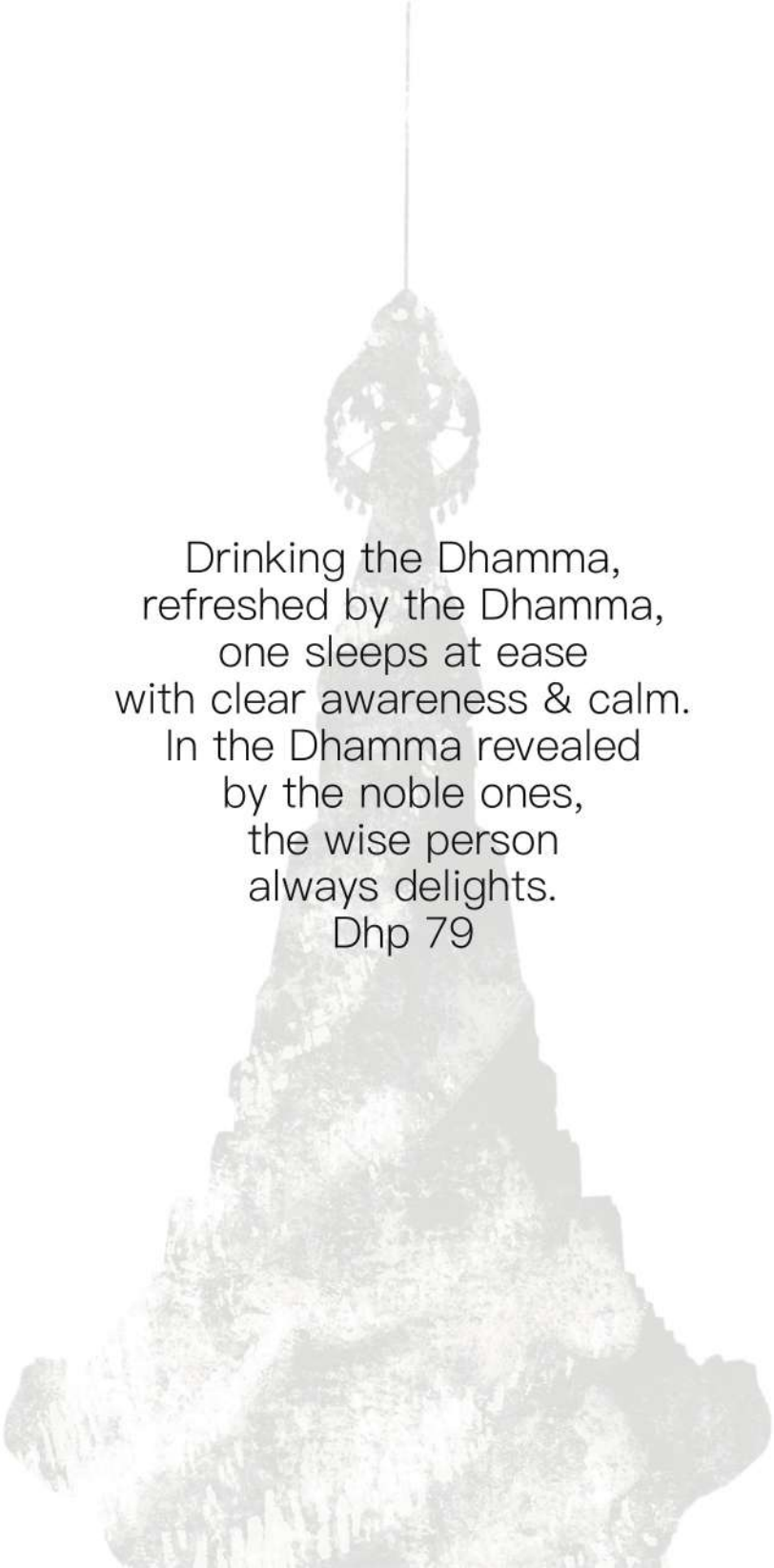
Although there was no one around, and I was in a country where I couldn't speak or understand a single word, for the first time in my life I felt at home. In fact, everything around me felt more like 'home' than Australia ever had. I was deeply affected by this intuitive sense of connection, and it gave me hope. It was the first moment in my life in which the feeling of dislocation I had experienced since childhood was not present.



# Chapter 10

The Meditation Centre  
(Age 22)





Drinking the Dhamma,  
refreshed by the Dhamma,  
one sleeps at ease  
with clear awareness & calm.  
In the Dhamma revealed  
by the noble ones,  
the wise person  
always delights.  
Dhp 79

## CHAPTER TEN

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### *The Meditation Centre (Age 22)*

Debbie and I made our way from Haad Rin to Wat Kow Tahm meditation centre on the first day of the retreat. There were about forty other participants, and each of us had to fill in a form and be interviewed by the teachers before being accepted.

This was my first glimpse of the teachers: an American man named Steve and an Australian woman named Rosemary, a married couple who appeared to be in their early forties. They had previously lived in Australia, but had been based in Thailand for some years by that time. Curiously, my first impression was not very positive; they looked very boring to me, like high school mathematics or science teachers – none of whom I had ever liked – with their simple white button-up, short-sleeved shirts, grey-streaked hair worn in a very plain style, and calm demeanour.



*Steve and Rosemary*

Even so, the interview went well enough and I was accepted to attend the ten day retreat. We were then shown to our accommodation. Men and women stayed in separate areas, and I was given a very small room with thin woven bamboo walls and a thin woven mat on the floor.

The retreat required strict silence, and the schedule incorporated discourses, sitting and walking meditation, and some guided meditation sessions. There was also a daily yoga session after the morning meditation.

I was very enthusiastic about the retreat at first. Walking meditation was a revelation, and I found it to be an important practice for integrating a meditative presence of mind into more ordinary activity.

However, by the end of the second full day I was experiencing a lot of resistance. The teachers seemed boring and the schedule felt oppressive. My inner dialogue was saying, ‘Okay, I get it. Meditation is important. I’ll get back to meditating one hour in the morning and one hour in the evening – but I want to leave the retreat.’

I kept trying to make eye contact with Debbie, to see if she would be willing to leave with me, but she avoided my gaze. Once she had decided to do the retreat, she had committed.

Late in the afternoon that day, while externally going through the motions of walking meditation and inwardly plotting my escape, something interesting happened. I heard a voice interrupt my inner dialogue. It was that familiar voice with a sense of reassuring warmth that I sometimes heard; the same voice that would tell me to leave the nightclub or bar after an hour or so, and the same voice that had warned me of impending death on the bus just a few days earlier.

This time, however, the voice was very firm and almost scolding. It gave me an ultimatum, the words resounding in my heart and head: ‘We got you here – now do the work!’

It continued: 'Because if you don't pace up and down here in this place, then you will be doing it in one of three places: in jail, a mental institution, or a HIV ward.'

I was startled, completely taken aback.

Now, I am aware that this probably sounds quite crazy to someone who is not a 'psychically sensitive intuitive empath', which, if I had to try, is one way I would describe the conventional self of Achalo Bhikkhu in this lifetime. Of course, I often experienced the usual types of internal chatter, but allow me to stress that I did not hear a lot of different voices at a lot of different times, and this was not the symptom of a pathology such as paranoid schizophrenia. This warm but firm, reassuring voice, which resounded in the core of my being, arose only occasionally. I tended to trust it, and it never suggested anything harmful or untoward.

After hearing those words on that occasion, something quite terrifying and disorienting occurred. The feeling of warmth that I had intuited to always be by my side, ever since I woke up in hospital after my attempted suicide at the age of fourteen, simply disappeared. There was now a cold and empty vacuum around me, where just moments before I had felt support. I had assumed this feeling of warmth and support was an aspect of my own being, but when it suddenly vanished, I felt very alone.

Although some people may feel this is a bit of a stretch, my interpretation of this experience is that some protective guardian angel, or 'Spirit of Light', had indeed been guiding me toward the 'Path of Love, Light and Truth' for some time up until that moment. Whoever he, she, or they were, I believe this guardian probably helped me in many ways over the years, including helping me to find that glowing book years earlier (by making the book glow!), prompting the various people who had suggested or encouraged me to do the *vipassanā* retreat, and

helping to manifest the three signs – the book, the coin and the pipe – at my place of work.

However, on this occasion they were employing a type of tough love, by making me feel what it was like not to have their support any more. This explanation was what seemed – and still seems – the most plausible to me.

And now, here at Wat Kow Tahm on Koh Phangan island, was where I was supposed to cultivate and walk ‘the Path’, both literally and metaphorically. My prayers had been answered, and I was being informed that I ought to be gracious and humble enough to follow through on my pleas for guidance. It was time to sit down, shut up, and listen; to stop lamenting and start taking responsibility. (Still an ongoing process!)

The warning about prisons and hospitals was particularly sobering. At that moment, I did not consider this to be my most likely trajectory, as my behaviour had generally been tending towards greater circumspection. However, it must be borne in mind that it would take only one slip-up to contract HIV. Just one isolated incident in a lonely or reckless moment could do it.

There were no pre- or post-exposure prophylaxis guidelines in those days, and treatments had limited effectiveness and many unpleasant side effects. At that time, the stress of a HIV-positive status would certainly have been challenging to anyone’s mental health. Since I had heard this warning as plain as day, I made a mental note to be extra careful in the future.

After this admonition, I really did listen much more closely to the teachers, and the retreat deepened for me in many significant ways. My first impression of Rosemary and Steve as being like science or mathematics teachers was not entirely off. A significant component of their teaching emphasised training the mind to think in a wise manner, on

specific subjects, in order to bring about specific results – which is, in fact, a very scientific approach.

But these were not inconsequential equations or abstract theories. These were equations conducive to a tangible increase in wellbeing. In this regard, these maths teachers taught something I actually valued.

They taught several reflective meditations. One was aimed at helping one to recognise one's own good fortune, relatively speaking, compared to the opportunities most people have. This gives rise to a sense of recognising the blessings in one's life, counteracting excessive fault-finding or feelings of depression and dejection.

Another reflective meditation involved contemplating the impermanent nature of experience and opportunity, the inevitability of death, and the fact that we do not know when death will come. Once again, this reflection gives rise to recognition of one's current opportunities and helps to cultivate focus and clarity about what is most important in life.

It is probably quite normal for people in their early twenties to look at people in their forties and perceive them as boring and irrelevant. The vanity and arrogance of youth can be just awful – I know mine was – fuelled by thinking that celebrities were significant or important. I can specifically remember attending my sister Jane's thirtieth birthday just a few weeks before travelling to Thailand and thinking, 'Wow, it's really all over for her now.' That is how much emphasis I had been placing on looking youthful. But after a couple of days of listening, meditating and contemplating, I was becoming more open and willing to listen to wise words, even from boring-looking people.

I was beginning to realise that life experience and extensive study, combined with meditation practice, could lead to a wiser perspective – something one rarely hears about in popular culture or modern day society. As naïve and absurd as it may sound, I did not know

this because I hadn't met people like Steve and Rosemary before. Most people seemed full of themselves and full of nonsense, as far as I could tell.

Steve and Rosemary had distilled Buddhist contemplative practices into their retreat in a succinct and concentrated manner, having both studied the ancient texts and practised with several contemporary Thai meditation masters at their monasteries.

I noticed that the wise reflections we were encouraged to do led to a more balanced, appreciative and focused mind, which in turn led to more contentment and gratitude. The realisation that an unruly mind, thinking unskilfully, could be restrained and gently redirected in a more skilful direction was revolutionary and very encouraging to me, because my untrained mind had a habit of often making me feel very miserable.

My faith, respect and gratitude towards the Buddha were also deepening, in recognition that these practices had all been taught by him. Practising these contemplative meditations, combined with sustaining mindful awareness during sitting, walking and standing meditation, helped me to understand that Buddhist practice could be utilised in many areas of life.

I had struggled in Sydney with the sense that there was something of a gulf between formal meditation and the rest of one's life. Now I was beginning to glimpse the depth of broader Buddhist disciplines and their potential to cultivate a much more dynamic and resilient wellbeing.

Meditations on loving-kindness and compassion were also very helpful and encouraging. Simply knowing that a human being could train themselves to put down negative emotions by consciously inclining the mind towards intrinsically wholesome ones was a new perspective and gave me hope. Yes, my unruly mind would need a lot of training, but

knowing there was a training discipline that could be embraced and cultivated was a cause for optimism.

A note had been pinned up on the noticeboard: teachers' assistants were wanted at the centre. Free food and accommodation were available to those willing to help out, and there was time to meditate several times per day. This piqued my interest. It was fascinating to notice that I had gone from wanting to run away on day two to deciding, by day eight, that I would certainly be applying to stay on at the centre long-term.

On the afternoon of the ninth day of the retreat, the teachers allowed the retreatants to talk for half an hour. Debbie rushed over to check in. She explained that she had avoided my gaze on day two because she really wanted to do the retreat, and also wanted to support me in doing it, since I had been so determined before it started. I thanked her for her stoicism and support.

She shared that she had had a good experience. I described how restlessness had almost got the better of me on day two, and yet by day three I had completely settled into the retreat – and by day eight I had decided that I would ask Rosemary and Steve for permission to stay on at the centre as an assistant.

Debbie was surprised by this. We agreed that we would travel around Thailand a little more first, and then I would come back to the island.

After the retreat, I met with Steve and Rosemary, thanked them for their teachings and the opportunity they had given to the retreat-goers, and mentioned my interest in helping out. They said I would be very welcome to come back and stay whenever I was ready.



*Noticeboard for the meditation centre at Wat Kow Tahm*

A lovely elderly nun, known as a *mae chee* in Thai, came to give the group a blessing before we departed. She was genuinely very happy that we had completed the retreat. Smiling broadly, her eyes brimming with happy tears, she invited us to please come back again.

Mae Chee Ahmon had founded Wat Kow Tahm, and when Rosemary and Steve visited the small monastery, she had apparently asked them to please stay on and teach the foreign backpackers. She felt strongly that many tourists coming to Asia were actually searching for something deeper – a spiritual refuge – yet were finding only sex, drugs, and alcohol on the beaches. She wanted to make her monastery available so that foreigners could have the opportunity to study and practise *Buddha-dhamma*, and to experience an inner refuge and deeper peace.

Mae Chee Ahmon had arranged for her nuns to cook all the food during the retreat. It was deeply moving to witness such selfless kindness from this sweet old nun. This was the first time I had glimpsed this

aspect of Thai culture. It was something truly deep, rare and special – an extraordinary, altruistic generosity and kindness – and here it was, just a few hundred metres from the beach, up on a small mountain.

Debbie had a good experience but did not commit to a daily meditation practice afterwards. I re-established a standard for myself of two meditation sessions per day, but this time I began with ten minutes of contemplation before switching to breath meditation, rather than the body sweeping method I had learned at the *vipassanā* centre in the Blue Mountains.

We decided to relax on the beach for a couple of days, and then head back to Bangkok so we could catch the train to Chiang Mai in Northern Thailand. There, we did some cultural activities, such as visiting the museum and attending a traditional dance show, and we bought souvenirs and gifts for friends back home at the night bazaar.

We also went on a four day trek in the mountains of rural Chiang Mai province, complete with an elephant ride and a bamboo river-raft journey. I tried to be excited, but I mostly felt sorry for the hill tribe villagers, as well as the elephants.

All of this was fine, but by then my heart was at the meditation centre. Debbie was considering going to Vietnam for a week or so at the end of her six week holiday, but my budget could not accommodate that. Eventually, she decided to accompany me back to Koh Phangan, and then travel on from there to visit another, more remote island.

And so, true to form, and just like the wonderful friend she was, Debbie dropped me off at the centre. We hugged, and she headed off on her own, before returning to her life in Sydney.

In addition to the teachers, there were two other assistants: an American woman called Abby, and Monika from Switzerland. These two became my new mates. Both had completed a few retreats with

Rosemary and Steve before and were committed to keeping the ethical precepts and meditating twice per day.

There were also four white-clad Thai nuns: Mae Chee Ahmon, the senior nun and founder of the monastery; two elderly nuns, Mae Chee Pang and Mae Chee Guea; and a younger nun, Mae Chee Ganniga. There were also a couple of monks staying at Wat Kow Tahm, but they kept to their own section of the *wat*, so we did not have much contact with them.

In general, there was one retreat taught each month. We could sit a retreat with them one month, and the following month assist as back-up support for the retreat by receiving guests, showing them to their rooms, and explaining practical matters, for example. We would also clean their accommodation before and after the retreat, and wash all of the sheets and pillows.

Outside of the retreats, Steve would assign some work to the assistants to do each day after breakfast. This could include cleaning, sweeping leaves (there were always a lot), laundry, painting, general upkeep of the centre, and the like. We had a private interview with either Steve or Rosemary scheduled once per week, where we could ask questions about our meditation practice. We were also allowed one day off per week; this was an opportunity to go into town to get personal items, or make phone calls home to family and friends.

This time at the meditation centre was a really wonderful and special time. I felt that I had a lifestyle that was enjoyable and spiritually nourishing, and the conversations I had with the teachers were very helpful. They both mirrored back different noble qualities. Rosemary in particular was very warm and tender, and would always share a fun story that was relevant to my current doubt, interest, or challenge. Steve was more pragmatic and methodical, and I benefited from an infusion of that as well.



*Mae Chee Ahmon, sitting between Steve and Rosemary*

The other assistants were also good company. Abby, being a more serious type, helped to keep me in line, and Monika, being a bit more cheeky, was always good for a bit of a gossip or a laugh.

The Thai nuns were also really fun! The centre was surrounded by coconut tree plantations, and they often cooked curries with fresh coconut cream. I would help the nuns peel the husks off the coconuts, and Mae Chee Pang, a nun in her seventies, would laugh heartily in her distinct guffawing manner while finding an opportunity to spank me on my bottom while I was doing so! In the absence of any real physical touch at that time, the occasional spanking from an eccentric, adopted granny was appreciated. Both of the elderly nuns had missing teeth, but their clothes were always immaculately white, which is quite a feat when living in a forest in the tropics.

There was a nice spot at the *wat* with a view of the Gulf of Thailand. Watching the way the tropical storms rolled in was both dramatic and beautiful. The different shades of colour – greens, purples and blues – within the big cumulonimbus clouds were amazing.

Watching the clouds over the sea was a different kind of consciousness-expanding meditation. Cloud, sky and horizon meditation helped me to get out of my head and see my thoughts from a broader perspective.

It was an interesting manifestation of supportive *kammās* that led me to that particular island and to the community living there at that time. When I look back, I am very grateful for everything that it was, because I really doubt that I could have been happy living a similar lifestyle – keeping the ethical precepts strictly, doing volunteer work, and meditating twice per day – in Australia. Although it was spiritually nourishing, it also entailed resisting a lot of restlessness and sensual cravings.

The fact that there was spicy coconut cream curry for breakfast, funny, earthy nuns as companions, dramatic tropical storms, expansive sea views, and an adventure to Malaysia or Northern Thailand on the horizon all helped to keep me wholesomely contained at the age of twenty-two. This experience was a kind of a sobering up and growing up – a humbling – that helped to prepare me for what was to come next.

Steve and Rosemary went away for a couple of months during the hottest months, and then again during the wettest months, so I took the opportunity to do a traditional Thai massage course in Chiang Mai. I also did some backpacking in Malaysia, including a one month meditation retreat at the Malaysian Buddhist Meditation Centre in Penang.

The one month retreat in Malaysia entailed strict silence and twelve hours per day of alternating sitting and walking meditation – it was really difficult and intense. I learned some valuable methods and techniques, particularly the technique of mental noting, which was helpful for staying with the meditation object. It could also be used to label a hindrance in order to get some autonomy and space from it.



*Looking out over the Gulf of Thailand from Wat Kow Tahm*

Altogether, I spent about eight months away from Australia on this first trip overseas – five of those months at the meditation centre on the island – and eventually my meagre resources ran out, so I had to return to Australia. By then, I had sat three ten day retreats and assisted two retreats with Rosemary and Steve, attended one thirty day retreat, and meditated twice per day during those eight months. I felt that I was going back to Australia as a different person, and that my life would be different from the one I had been living before.

Sonja, one of my workmates at the vegan café in Glebe, had decided to travel solo through Thailand and India, while her long-term partner, José, remained in Sydney. She had visited me at the centre and sat one of the retreats. Although I had been closer to Sonja back in Sydney, José had told her to relay the message that I would be welcome to stay with him whenever I returned. This was very helpful, since I had no furniture or household items to return to and no money to pay rent.

José's place was also within walking distance of where I used to work, and the manager at the vegan café kindly gave me my job back.

Now back in Sydney, something happened that I had not anticipated. I would wake up in the middle of the night, sit upright and feel with deep intensity that I was simply in the wrong place. It felt dark and dangerous, and I wanted to go back somewhere safe. I would calm myself down with loving-kindness meditation and go back to sleep, but when I awoke in the mornings there were already tears streaming from my eyes.

The degree to which Australia had felt like the 'wrong' place in my childhood was exacerbated now. Thailand had felt 'right'. I missed living in Thailand so much that, for the first couple of weeks, my first conscious moments each day were an experience of involuntary grief – I missed my home. This was certainly a challenge to my hopes of reintegration in Australia.

José walked out from his bedroom late one evening only to find me, sitting upright and bug-eyed on the couch in the living room, trying to calm my challenged mind state. Concerned, he asked, 'Are you okay?'

I had to respond, 'No, not really – but I will be.' I explained how much I missed living in the meditation centre, surrounded by kind and virtuous people.

On my first evening shift at the café in Glebe, an old friend popped in, exclaiming, 'I just knew you were back! I could feel it!'

Donna and I had worked together at the café before, but now she worked at another branch on the North Shore of Sydney. She was another 'sensitive type', and she had driven over especially to welcome me back.

Debbie was also still living and working in Sydney, but we had grown somewhat apart by this time. We still loved each other, but I had

my ever-deepening relationship with Buddhism and other spiritual practices like yoga, and Debbie had a serious and deepening relationship with a young man who would eventually become her husband.

Fortunately, Donna appeared in my life quite serendipitously and was a wonderful best friend to me during this time. Donna was a vegan, a meditator and a serious yoga practitioner, and she studied shiatsu and natural medicine. She also had a little car, which was both useful and afforded fun adventures on our days off.

I found a cheap studio apartment in the inner-west suburb of Marrickville – directly under the flight path of Sydney International Airport. The planes were my alarm clock, as they would start landing from 6:00 am each morning, and I actually enjoyed watching them descend gracefully from the sky from my one large window – I never drew the curtain.

The studio apartment became quite a nice little space to live and meditate in. Donna helped me paint the apartment a deep and serene shade of blue called Riviera Sky, and for balance I painted the little kitchenette fire-engine red. We left the bathroom its original colour of magnolia white. I set up a lovely little Buddhist shrine in the corner, and I bought a futon mattress which could double as a bed at night, as a sofa during the day, and as a massage bed whenever I had clients come for traditional Thai massage.

Donna and I shared a special quality of friendship. We could, and did, talk about everything together, and at other times we would simply find a quiet grassy field or beach to lie down in silence. We were quite happy being silent in each other's company. Sometimes we meditated together, or sometimes I would meditate and she would do yoga, or vice versa. We cooked for one another, and Donna would often stay overnight – it was not a sexual relationship, neither of us wished to complicate things in that way – and she would often bring me to a yoga class in the

mornings. (I also continued doing the yoga I had learned from Rosemary on the island.)

I felt okay if she stayed over and okay if she did not. It was a very easy, loving friendship without much sticky clinging. As a confident, dynamic and capable young woman, she was what we in Australia would call ‘a really good mate’, and it was also as intimate a friendship as there could possibly be – a true gift at that time in my life. Having Donna to love helped me to manage the grief of missing Thailand.

It probably seems a bit strange, when reading the autobiography of a monk, to hear me mention repeatedly how much I loved and cherished certain friendships and relationships. There were other dear friends who meant a great deal to me as well, both men and women. The reason I have not mentioned each one of them individually is that they are not central to the story, but they were indeed loved.

It is important to recognise that monks are human beings too, who at a certain point in time decide to take on a cloistered life of celibacy – but before we were monks, we were not monks! Love and appreciation are important emotions for any human to feel. When one takes on a higher training, he or she aims to transform these emotions into their most boundless and impartial counterparts, for the ability to love, to care, and to appreciate are the very foundations of the four *brahmavihārās*. As sincere Buddhist practitioners, one cultivates the purest forms of loving-kindness, compassion, and appreciative joy, in balance with the equanimity that arises from wisdom.

I think in some people’s minds there is the assumption, or stereotype, that monks and nuns are people who couldn’t survive in the outside world, or people who were not loved, or perhaps who had their hearts broken to the point of needing to run away. While this might be the case for some, among the many monks and nuns I know personally I dare say that any of these situations would apply only to a minority.

It seems more likely that the love of goodness itself becomes so powerful that the more contracted forms and expressions of love can be laid aside in order to embrace and cultivate a broader and more expansive love. This process, however, involves real people with real feelings. Coming and going from my country of birth, leaving behind people I loved and who loved me, and witnessing how these relationships changed as I changed did involve some pain. As priorities shifted, the inevitable falling away entailed a certain amount of grief, confusion, and longing, because even with a deep conviction about the direction I had to take, leaving behind the people I loved was not easy. One of my teachers once described it as being like dying and being born again within the very same lifetime.

In addition to my friendship with Donna, this stage of my life was quite a happy one because I finally felt more inwardly secure, and I felt I had a noble direction to go in. At the same time, another process was also occurring in parallel. My family felt I was becoming a strange, unrecognisable person. My social circle shrank significantly because I no longer drank alcohol, went out to nightclubs, or went to shows and concerts. Some of my friends liked me better the way I was before. Inevitably, there was some sadness in relation to this, and yet I noticed that I was more content when I was alone than I had ever been previously. We human beings are complex creatures, perhaps especially so as young adults trying to make sense of the world.

As part of my deepening Buddhist practice, I visited St Vincent's Hospital in Darlinghurst to ask if I could volunteer in their hospice ward. The volunteer coordinator was very happy for me to come once a week. I ran errands for the patients or offered massages. This was a sobering experience. Over the weeks I became quite close to several of the patients as they approached the end of their lives, including Sue, who had advanced liver cancer; Paul, who had AIDS; and another dear man, whose name I've forgotten, who had advanced multiple sclerosis.

Only a month or so into my new Buddhist lifestyle back in Sydney, which was going quite well, José, who worked as a taxi driver, stopped by my apartment and sprang a surprise on me. He told me to sit down, as he had something important to say.

When I sat down, he began, ‘I’ve noticed that you seem different since you came back from Thailand. There is a quality of clarity and depth in your eyes that wasn’t there before, and a certain calm in your aura.’

He continued, ‘I’ve decided that I want to do the same meditation retreat that you did, and I hope to get similar results. But I don’t want to go alone, and I don’t want to wait a long time. So I’ll tell you what: I will offer you your ticket if you agree to come along with me.’

Donna, who was present at the time, added to the surprise by saying she could pay the rent on my apartment while I was away, as it would be convenient for her to stay there while she was doing her naturopathy course in the city. I was reminded of what the tarot card reader had said a couple of years before – that I would travel a lot and that my friends would pay for me. It was uncanny.

Steve and Rosemary would be offering a twenty day retreat for old (previous) students in just two months’ time. The first ten days of the retreat would be equivalent to their usual retreats, but a smaller group of old students could continue for another ten days, receiving more detailed teachings and additional one-on-one interviews. There was no denying that I wanted to go back to Thailand to study and practise Buddhism more deeply, so we agreed to leave together in approximately seven weeks’ time.

That would give me time to save a little bit of money, and I would be able to show José around the island before the retreat commenced, so that he could get his bearings and would be okay without

me while I attended the longer retreat. If I was going to go to Thailand again, I decided that I should stay for two or three months, since Donna could cover the rent for that time.

So within just three months of my return to Sydney, I was back on the same Alitalia flight to Thailand, this time with José by my side. It was great to be back on Koh Phangan, to see the teachers and the nuns, and to have the opportunity to meditate intensively again.

During the longer retreat, the teachers gave additional teachings on understanding and taking the Triple Gem – the Buddha, the Dhamma (his teachings), and the Sangha (his well-practised community) – as a refuge. They also demonstrated traditional Thai-style bowing, explaining that we could bow to the Buddha statue whenever we entered or left the meditation hall if we wished. I was very happy to do so.

A curious thing occurred during this retreat, which was memorable because it was the very first time such a thing had occurred in my meditation. I was meditating as usual, trying to be mindful of the breath. There was some brightness in the mind, as though the mind was looking inwards, and a different view came into focus. I saw a black snake rise through my anus and up my spine – and I felt it as well! Once the snake had risen and disappeared, my mind saw a 360-degree panoramic sunset. With my physical eyes closed and my body sitting inside a meditation hall, I was experiencing an open sky in shades of amber and burnt sienna.

At first I thought I should not dare mention it to the teachers, as the part involving the black snake had been quite creepy and I wasn't sure whether its meaning was good. But it was such an unusual experience, and I really wanted to understand what had occurred, so I told Steve about it the next time I saw him. He actually smiled and looked pleased.

He explained that this was a classic kundalini rising experience. Steve felt that the energy in my subtle body had lifted from the base chakra, which is red in colour, up to the next chakra, which is orange. He further explained that I would likely experience the world a little differently from now onwards, from a less heady and more inwardly heart-based space. In any event, I was relieved that my teacher did not think there was anything to be concerned about.

After the twenty day retreat, I met two individuals who made recommendations to me, thinking I might be interested in pursuing Buddhist practice more seriously and in a more conducive atmosphere than my life back in Sydney.

One woman told me about the possibility of teaching English to novice monks in a large Mahāyāna monastery in Taiwan. Apparently, I would be able to attend the chanting and meditation session every morning and evening, and work during the day. Food and lodging were provided, and a small stipend was paid.

Another man mentioned that there was a monastery in a forest in Northeast Thailand that had been established for English-speaking men to study the traditional form of Buddhist monasticism. There was no charge to stay there, so long as one kept to the schedule and helped with the daily chores and any additional work.

The man, who had recently visited, explained that the forest monastery welcomed men to train as ordained monastics in gradually increasing stages of commitment: first as an eight-precept postulant for three to six months, then as a novice monk for a year. After this initial period, one could commit to full ordination as a monk, with a recommended five year minimum commitment. Both situations seemed very interesting.

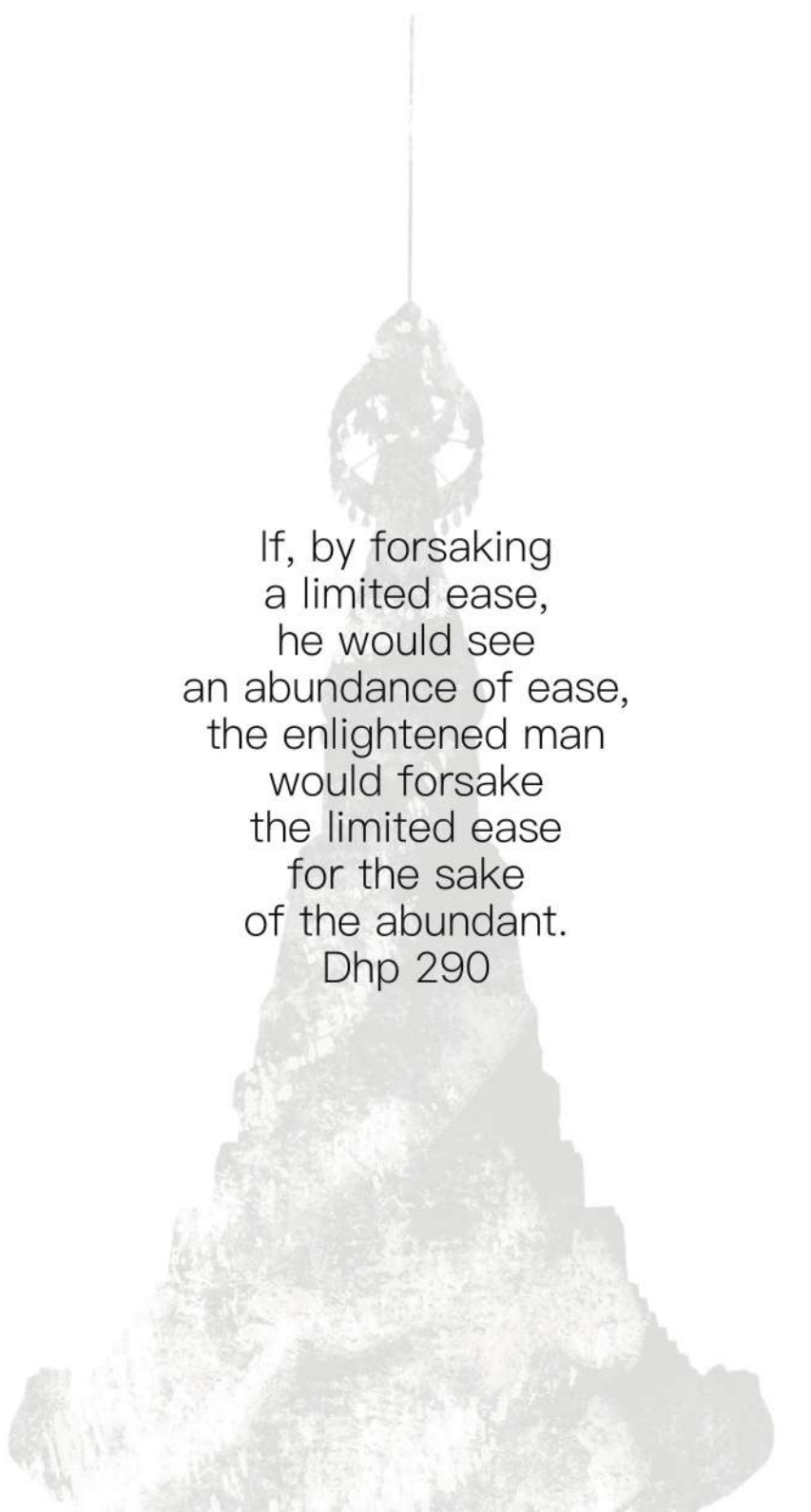




# Chapter III

The Forest Monastery  
(Age 22-23)





If, by forsaking  
a limited ease,  
he would see  
an abundance of ease,  
the enlightened man  
would forsake  
the limited ease  
for the sake  
of the abundant.  
Dhp 290

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

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### *The Forest Monastery (Age 22-23)*

After I had completed the retreat, José and I went to visit a long, deep freshwater lake on the west side of Koh Phangan island. While living at the meditation centre the previous year, I would sometimes go there to swim on my day off. I really missed swimming in the Olympic-sized pools of Australia, especially when the weather was hot – which it always was. This particular lake was probably even longer than fifty metres, and extremely deep as well. It was usually unfrequented by other people, and it was a wonderful place to swim.

José's retreat did not seem to have affected his mind in the same way that the intensive retreats affected mine. He had become most interested in a couple of the female participants. He felt that the way a meditator's eyes sparkled added to their attractiveness. Just like a water buffalo, he was wanting to wade into the clear water and stir up some mud, at least that's how it sounded to me – but at least he was enjoying his holiday.

He admonished me for talking too much about meditation, beyond what people's level of interest might be. I couldn't help it, because by this time it was the only thing I was interested in.

I was mindful that there was a very important decision to be made. It felt as if I was choosing whether to turn left or right at a fork in the road: Northeast Thailand or Taiwan?

Wading in that deep, cool pond, ripples radiated outwards in all directions from where I was treading water, and there was no ground beneath me. This juncture in my life felt like that. A decision had to be made, and there was absolutely no certainty about which choice would be the right one, as I'd never been to either place – but if I stayed still, I would drown. Turning right would mean going to Taiwan to live and work in a monastery. Turning left would mean going to a strict practice monastery, participating as one of the practitioners, and keeping the same schedule as the monks.

Had I not spent many months as an assistant helper at Wat Kow Tahm the year before, I doubt I would have felt ready to consider trying the strict Thai forest monastery. I had already experienced the lifestyle of working as a helper at the centre, and had felt the limitations of that, so I was pulled towards what felt like the next clear onward step – should one choose to keep going. And so I chose to go to the forest monastery in Northeast Thailand.

José stayed on Koh Phangan island while I made my way back to Bangkok. By this stage, I felt happy seeing myself as a Buddhist, and I was more interested in visiting some of the more famous ancient temples and paying my respects, rather than getting involved in the typical backpacker scene.

I also picked up a couple of light-coloured, lightweight clothing items while I was around Khaosan Road. It turned out that they were actually a bit too elegant considering where I was going, but old habits die hard, and a bargain was always hard to resist. I recall selecting a white shirt made of a kind of lace material, feeling that it might breathe a bit more, as well as some light linen trousers in a natural fibre colour.

After a few days in Bangkok, I caught an overnight sleeper train to Ubon Ratchathani by myself. The experience reminded me of the time I had left Brisbane to move to Sydney a few years earlier. I was fully cognisant that this journey might actually be just the first few steps of a

much longer one, so, just as on that earlier occasion, I preferred to take the slower transport option so I could take my time to process the gravity of the situation. It all felt a bit scary, but somehow the rocking and relatively slow motion of the train carriage, along with its accompanying loud noises, were comforting.

There was a beautiful golden sunrise over the rice fields of the northeastern plateau in the morning, and I noticed how flat and dusty the landscape seemed.

We pulled into Ubon Ratchathani train station at about 7:00 am. I was the only Caucasian at the station, and I noticed that many of the locals were giving me lovely, big warm smiles; it had a very different vibe from the tourist traps on the islands and in Bangkok.

I grabbed my backpack, found a *tuk-tuk* driver and showed him the name of the monastery in my guidebook. He knew exactly where to go, confirming to me: ‘Wat Pah Nanachat. Wat Pah Nanachat.’ When translated into English, it is called The International Forest Monastery.

About fifteen minutes later, we pulled onto a paved concrete road leading into a tall, dark, old-growth forest that had somehow managed to remain standing, despite being completely surrounded by rice fields.

The moment I stepped out of the *tuk-tuk*, the sound of loud chanting erupted from within a large nearby meditation hall.

‘YOH... SOH... BHAGAVAAA... ARAHAM... SAMMAAA... SAMBUDDHO...’

When I say erupted, I mean it. The chanting was loud and full of devotion. I had never heard anything like it. Everyone’s voices blended harmoniously, rising and falling together in melodious waves. There must have been more than a hundred people chanting together in unison. Everyone was wearing white clothes.

Although everything was unfamiliar, I had a strange sense of being a vessel at sea that had just pulled into a deep and protected harbour, and it felt like coming home.

I wandered towards the hall and put my backpack down to the side, trusting it would be okay. I then took off my sandals and went inside. I bowed to the large brass Buddha statue and sat in a meditation posture towards the front, figuring that I would just meditate since I didn't know any of the chanting.

As well as the hundred-plus lay devotees, I noticed a long row of mostly Caucasian monks sitting on a raised dais that stretched all the way along the wall. They all looked thin, serious, and austere. Their robes were a darker brown compared to the bright orange colour I was familiar with. They all appeared to be sitting in full lotus posture, with their knees flat on the floor and no mat underneath.

I thought to myself, 'Whoa, these guys are hardcore!' and suddenly felt more than a little self-conscious in my linen pants and lace shirt. I later learned that the monks were sitting with one leg tucked to the side in a polite posture called *phap-phiap* in Thai.

One monk then walked towards me, crouched down and said, 'Could you please go and sit closer towards the monks in the men's section? Where you are sitting now is the women's section.'

I looked behind me, and it was true – there were only women behind me! On the other side of the hall there were a few men, but I hadn't even noticed that there were distinct sections because the men were far less noticeable, being outnumbered ten to one.

A Thai man recited something in Pāli, and the senior monk then bowed, stepped up onto a large throne-like seat, and sat down. He also began reciting sentences in Pāli, which all the people in the hall repeated

after him. The Thai man then recited a few more sentences, and the Caucasian monk started giving a discourse, or lecture, in Thai.

I was amazed by this monk. Despite the palpable austerity, he also had a certain Hollywood-esque appeal, with a tall, lean frame, broad shoulders, a sharply defined jawline, and very intense blue eyes. Despite the fact that he was the senior monk, he looked quite young. The fact that he could sit with both knees flat against the mat beneath him, and speak this foreign language so fluently only added to my awe. The people in the hall listened respectfully in complete silence.

I later learned that the monk's name was Tahn Ajahn Jayasaro. He was thirty-six years old and had been a fully ordained monk for sixteen years by that time. I also learned that the reason there were so many people and so many formal proceedings that day was because it was the weekly lunar observance day, similar to a Sunday service for Christians.

After the various proceedings were finished, the laypeople all bowed together and filed out of the hall. The same kind monk came over to me again and mentioned that I could take some food, then come back and meet the senior monk after the meal.

After I had eaten, I went to pay respects to Tahn Ajahn Jayasaro, and asked for his permission to stay on for a while. He seemed kind and graciously allowed me to stay. He pointed out a place in a small garden where I could sit and wait for the guest monk who would give me some instructions and an orientation, explaining the schedule and the requirements for staying at the monastery. If I wanted to stay longer than three days I would be required to shave my head and eyebrows. I was fine with that.

At first, I would have to stay in a shared dormitory, but I would be able to move to a *kuti* – a small cabin-like hut, a typical monk's dwelling – if I stayed longer.



*Tahn Ajahn Jayasaro*

The daily schedule was as follows:

*3:00 am: Morning bell*

*3:30-4:00 am: Morning chanting*

*4:15-5:15 am: Meditation, followed by cleaning the hall*

*6:15 am: Alms round*

Lay guests were expected to sweep the paths during the alms round. After the alms round, there was around an hour of personal time before the meal.

*8:00 am: The meal*

*9:30-10:00 am: Chores*

After chores, there was time for personal practice. I was told that there were periods when the community sat together in meditation before tea in the afternoon, but that was not the case during my stay.

*4:30 pm: Afternoon tea*

*7:00-9:00 pm: Evening chanting and meditation*

It all sounded rather intense, but I had come to stay at the forest monastery to give it a go, so that's what I did. There were a couple of other young guys, a Canadian and a Frenchman, also staying in the dorm. I found some simple white clothes that had been left behind by previous guests and changed into them.

My initial impressions were correct – there certainly were a lot of challenges at Wat Pah Nanachat! Waking up at 3:00 am was not easy, and I had strong drowsiness to work with; at the meditation retreats I had previously attended, the first meetings had started at 5:00 am.

The sleeping situation was also challenging. There were mats, but no mattress to speak of, so I often woke up with hip-bone pain during the night and had to roll over to sleep on my other side. Similarly, when sitting, there was a mat but no cushions to prop up the buttocks, which meant I experienced more shoulder and back pain than usual.

During sweeping time, there were many, many mosquitoes. I also found it frustrating to have to break a sweat and get all hot and bothered for an hour of sweeping leaves every morning, as this was the only cool part of the day.

At the mealtime, being at the end of the line, by the time the laymen could help themselves to the offerings at the table, the food that remained after the monks had passed through was not very palatable. Northeastern Thai food has a lot of fermented fish products and very strong chilli peppers. Both the smell and the taste were hard for me to

tolerate, but there was no choice. When you are hungry enough, you find a way to manage.

A highlight of the schedule was afternoon tea, when the entire community would sit together under the abbot's *kuti*, and share a cup of coffee followed by a cup of cocoa. Ajahn Jayasaro would usually read something to the community, and there would be some discussion afterwards.

This was where I began to get a sense of what the monks were like and how they thought about things. Ajahn Jayasaro always had something edifying to contribute to the dialogue, but, to be honest, I didn't really like the monks at first. They were undoubtedly intelligent, but they were also intense, somewhat hypercritical, and not very joyous.

What was very strange for me to observe, however, was that I consistently had an intuitive sense that I was exactly where I needed to be – despite both the outer and inner chafing.

There was an English monk who had recently visited Cambodia and had fallen unwell with some kind of ongoing irritable bowel syndrome. He needed especially bland food to be prepared for him. I offered to personally cook and serve his meal each day, and I would also give him a massage in the afternoons. This more personal contact with a member of the community was helpful, as was having an excuse to leave the intensity of the monastery to go out and buy ingredients.

Despite the fact that Wat Nanachat intuitively felt like the right place to stay, I could only withstand it for a fortnight on that first visit. I decided to go to Chiang Mai to do a second Thai massage course in the interim. In one way, I simply needed some time to process the fact that I would be returning to the monastery for a longer period. It was a bit like coming up to take a breath in preparation for a longer and deeper submersion.

As a sensual twenty-two-year-old, with attachments to looking, feeling, and smelling nice, and to eating things that tasted good – as well as being someone who enjoyed the company of kind and fun young female friends – moving in full-time with those intense monks (none of whom wore deodorant or cologne) and surrendering to the extremely early mornings, hard floors, mosquitoes, and end-of-the-line food was going to require a tremendous amount of resolve.

I paid my respects to Ajahn Jayasaro and took my leave. He specifically praised me for attending all of the meetings, doing my chores, and taking on the extra duty of caring for the sick *bhikkhu*. He said I was welcome to come back anytime.

As I write, I am mindful that this was thirty years ago. These days, there are insect screens on the *kutis*, and enough blankets that you can fold one up and place it beneath you for cushioning when you rest. There are also meditation mats *and* cushions, and some not-too-spicy vegetarian food is cooked daily in the kitchen, along with some brown rice. There is still only one meal per day and very early morning rises at 3:00 am, but it is more comfortable for the residents today than it was back then. All things considered, this is probably a good thing.

In Chiang Mai, I enrolled in a ten day Thai massage workshop and established a routine of meditating in one of the ancient temples in the old part of town before going to class. I had deliberately chosen to stay in an older-looking guesthouse with long-term Thai residents rather than one of the newer places full of Western backpackers, thinking that I would be less tempted to go out partying. Not that partying was ever really my thing, but when you make new friends while travelling they will often try to coerce you – and backpackers tended to be quite hedonistic while on holiday.

Choosing this guesthouse, however, turned out to be a mistake, because most of the native Thai residents were actually young go-go girls who worked at the nearby nightclubs every evening! Obviously, there

was no way I could have known this at the time I booked. These local young ladies took a very keen interest in the unusual, gentle-looking Australian who meditated every day and studied traditional massage.

Inevitably, I ended up going out with them on a couple of evenings, including on my twenty-third birthday – complete with dancing on the bar! Having learned my dance moves in Sydney’s nightclubs, I could certainly bust a move, and even got a big round of applause. Nothing too debauched happened during this time, thank goodness, and I actually enjoyed getting to know these young women – where they had come from, and what they hoped to achieve in life.

Writing this now, I am cognisant that my twenty-third birthday was the last time I ever went out dancing at a bar, and the last time I ever had an alcoholic drink – I think I literally had just one. At least I left the scene with a bang!

I was determined not to unlock my door when I heard knocking at one or two in the morning, as one of the girls was just coming home from work. This girl, whose nickname was ‘Beer’, had noticed that I was not amorously inclined towards her or any of her friends, so she had brought along a young man from the gay go-go bar. She was knocking on my door in the wee hours of the morning hoping to introduce him to me, but I wouldn’t open the door for him either! They did not understand the strange bulletproof quality that I seemed to possess towards their advances. I had already been shot too many times, so I was quite resolved to dodge any new bullets.

Getting a glimpse of the sad tawdriness of the bar girls’ lives was actually quite beneficial for my *saṃsāric* perspective and growing world-weariness, and for subsequently finding the resolve to return quickly to the monastery. Meeting these bar girls also helped me to be less judgemental; they were kind human beings from poor rural villages. Several of them were working in the bars to send money home to their parents, or help a sibling finish school, and they lived in the hope that a

foreigner would fall in love with them and rescue them as a means of upward mobility.

I returned to Ubon after two weeks in Chiang Mai. The sixteen hour bus ride was gruelling. The bus itself was fine, but the air conditioning was extremely cold, and sixteen hours is simply a very long time to sit on a bus. I envied the ability Thai people seemed to have to sleep through most of it.

Perhaps it is because Thais raise their babies differently from Australians, which later helps them to fall asleep so easily in public. Thai families talk, work, and laugh as normal throughout the day, and the baby simply learns to sleep whenever it is tired, literally in the middle of everyday life. As a result, they seem to have less need for private space and quiet environments. Those of us who had our own bedrooms with thick brick walls often have more difficulty falling asleep in public.

Back at Wat Pah Nanachat, I was allowed to move into a small *kuti*. It was very small – literally two by two and a half metres. Having a quiet space during the middle of the day was nice. There was no electricity, so in order to see anything at night, and first thing in the morning when you woke up, you had to light a candle.

The wooden walls were made of very old timber that had darkened over time, and the shutter windows were wooden as well. This, combined with the heavy foliage of the tree canopy above and surrounding the *kuti*, sometimes made it feel quite dark and oppressive inside.

It was only a couple of weeks before the community would enter the three month rains retreat. As such, the community was working more than usual during the morning work period after the meal, cleaning and preparing for the retreat, when they would engage in less work.

I happily joined in, helping to saw jackfruit trees into smaller logs for use on robe washing day, when the monks would hand cut wood chips from the heartwood to add to boiling water to make dye for washing and re-dying their robes. We waxed the wooden floors of the *kutis*, rubbing them shiny with the halves of coconut husks, and together we removed excessive leaf build-up from the central areas of the monastery and cleaned out water tanks in anticipation of fresh rainfall.

I had extended my three month tourist visa for an additional month, which was possible without leaving the country. After the time I had already spent on Koh Phangan, in Bangkok and Chiang Mai, and at the monastery during my previous visit, I now had approximately eight weeks left on my visa. This would allow me to stay for a seven week period at the monastery on this second occasion, which I was resolved to do. This would give me enough time to feel out the situation and get a sense of whether it truly was right for me – and whether I was right for it.

Staying at Wat Pah Nanachat, I saw hundreds and hundreds of sweet Thai families – including poor rice farmers, city dwellers, teachers, nurses, and wealthy business people – come to the monastery to make offerings and listen to teachings. Regardless of their background, they all behaved beautifully, smiled kindly, and spoke gently.

It was an important glimpse into the lives of many ordinary people from good homes. Their faith, love, and appreciation for the Buddha and the monastic community were very palpable and deeply moving, as was their ongoing generosity. It made me aware that there were many hundreds of good forest monasteries receiving similar support throughout Northeastern Thailand, which is something of a heartland of the Thai Forest meditation tradition.

I was very moved to witness this and to be a part of it, and my love for the nation of Thailand and her kind and gentle people started to become very deep.

The time to enter the rains retreat arrived, and the period of working and cleaning came to an end as the community formally entered the retreat.

A couple of other young men had arrived and were intending to commence the training toward becoming monks. The first step, wearing white-coloured robes, is to formally take on the eight precepts. As I was also considering the possibility of 'going forth', Ajahn Jayasaro allowed me to join this ceremony and formally take the precepts alongside the others, as he felt I would gain a better sense of the training by drawing closer to the monastic community.

Becoming a *pakhow* (literally 'white cloth' in Thai) meant that I would now join the alms round each morning, walking barefoot behind the monks, instead of sweeping leaves.

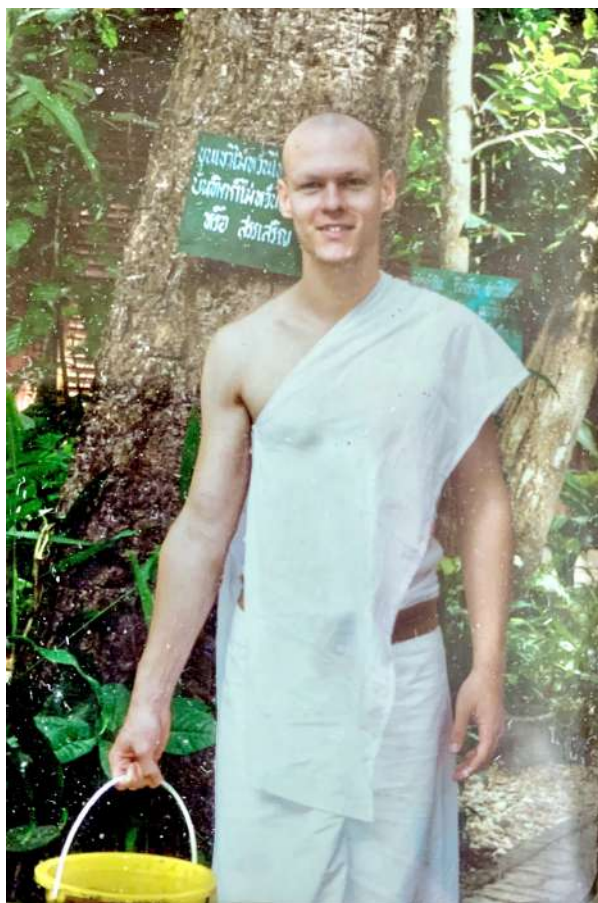
As we left the cover of the forest each morning, I found the way the golden light of dawn struck the ochre robes of the monks – making them glow with golden warmth – to be very moving. The monks emerged from the dark forest and walked silently into the dawn light, heads down, in lines of four or five, before splitting off to take different routes through the villages, each between three and five kilometres in length.

Witnessing the monks walking for alms with the backdrop of the mist-laden, bright green rice fields felt timeless and holy to me. Most of the farming families would have one representative – usually the mother or grandmother – make offerings on behalf of the household. She would typically offer a small ball of glutinous rice to each monk, and perhaps a banana or some biscuits. In Northeastern Thailand, it was customary to offer rice on the alms round, and later bring curries and vegetables to the monastery separately in tiffin containers.

Seeing this line of people waiting silently in front of house after house, day after day, giving their alms quietly and respectfully, was very

moving. Some of the older folks had literally been doing this every day without fail for many decades.

The beauty of the morning light, the charm of the rural scenery, and the generosity of the faithful was a helpful counterbalance to the pain of walking barefoot for several kilometres on dirt roads scattered with sharp stones, all on a completely empty stomach. My delicate ‘city’ feet screamed with pain. It took quite some time for the skin to toughen up and become less sensitive, but eventually it did.



*Pakhow Brett*

After the alms round during the rains retreat, the *pakhows* also joined the monks for an hour each day to study the monastic rules before the meal. Each rule and its origin story from the time of the Buddha was read aloud, and then one of the more senior monks would explain how Ajahn Chah, the founding father of the community at Wat Pah Nanachat, had interpreted and practised it.

Ajahn Chah was believed to have been an *arahant*, a fully enlightened disciple of the Buddha. Ajahn Jayasaro had lived with him as a young monk. Ajahn Chah was held in the utmost esteem – there were photographs of him alongside the Buddha statues that we bowed to each day.

The monks kept two hundred and twenty-seven precepts, and the community gradually studied each and every one of them with the intention of following them both in spirit and letter. I found this quite tedious and dizzyingly exhausting, especially on an empty stomach after a long walk, having already been awake since 3:00 am. Still, one had to give credit to the sincerity and integrity with which the community honoured the Buddha by following the training rules that he laid down. Through listening to the origin stories, I was also tangentially learning a lot about the Buddha and the establishment of his monastic community.

The standard of celibacy practised by Thai Forest monks, I learned, is probably the most strict of any religious order in the world. It completely precludes the intentional emission of semen under any circumstances. To have sexual intercourse, even once, would mean that they would cease to be a monk from the very moment the sexual organ entered any orifice more than a mere millimetre.

Monks could not touch women, nor could they give or receive objects directly from a woman's hands – items had to be placed on a cloth instead. Monks were not even permitted to touch a man, let alone a woman, if their mind was affected by lust, and even lewd or sexually suggestive speech was completely forbidden.

It was a very tight and strict container in which to live, but I had to admire that these people actually managed to live within such parameters. I also couldn't help but notice that the Buddha had made it completely impossible for any kind of sexual abuse to occur if the monks kept these rules. This was admirable. The issue of whether or not I could live within these standards at the age of twenty-three was yet to be determined, but I was sincerely trying.

We learned that there had been an unbroken lineage of monks since the time of Gautama Buddha, and that keeping all of these precepts had been a support to their impeccable virtue, while also serving as a tool for training mindfulness and circumspection.

Ajahn Chah and his teachers, Luang Por Kinaree, Luang Por Tongrat, and especially Luang Por Mun, were mentioned frequently. There was talk amongst the monks, which trickled down to us, about which monks living in Thailand in the present day and age were reputed to have 'finished their work' – those believed to have attained to enlightenment or liberation. This was quite a different sort of education.

Through studying the monastic rules, we also learned about the Buddha's teaching and psychic abilities. On the side, there was talk about which monks still living today could actually read people's minds and see their past lives. This was both exciting and intimidating to me – I would need to polish my mind before meeting any of them!

During the rains retreat, there was a group meditation session in another hall, referred to as the outside *sala*, in the afternoons from 2:00 to 4:00 pm. We were expected to sit for the first hour, with walking meditation allowed in the second hour.

Sometimes I really struggled with unholy lustful thoughts and energies, painful doubts, self-loathing, or aversion (towards other members of the community, the place itself, and/or the pain in the body).

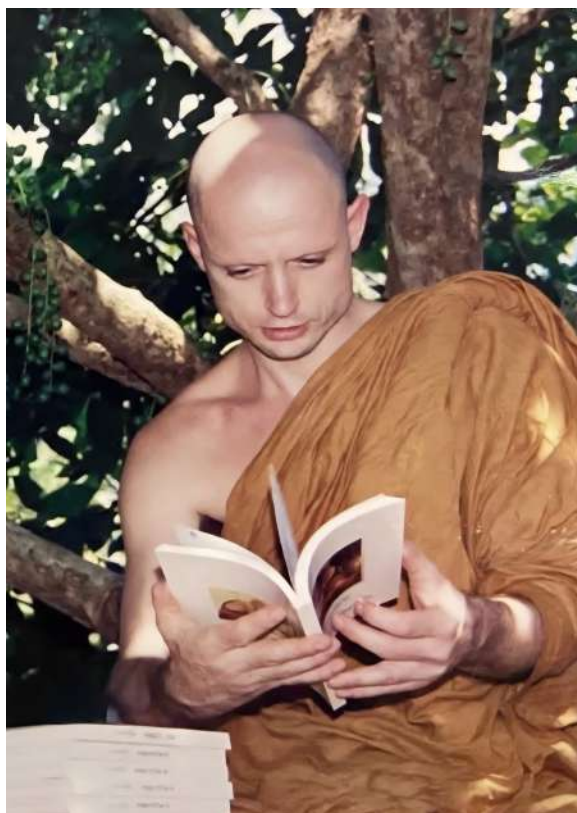
When it was bad, it was really bad, as there was no means of escape or distraction.

At other times, however, the mind would become quite bright and peaceful, so much so that when I got up to do walking meditation, or to walk to the abbot's *kuti* for tea, I felt almost as though I was floating. There were a lot fewer thoughts in my mind after a peaceful meditation. These peaceful periods and experiences were really something else – they were a taste of what the training was leading towards, and helped me to experience the inner potential of the mind, at least from time to time.

Impressively, every single night during this retreat period, Tahn Ajahn Jayasaro gave a discourse. He spoke in a manner intended to give the monks confidence in the value of what they were doing. He explained that the Buddha – who had the most merit and the most profound abilities of anyone in the world – could have chosen any lifestyle he wished, and yet he chose to live as a celibate *bhikkhu*.

He explained further that the rules of the monastic discipline came directly from the Buddha himself, which meant that they come from a source of purity and were utterly noble and trustworthy. He added that the additional rules of monastic etiquette practised at Wat Pah Nanachat had come from the mind of Ajahn Chah, a contemporary *arahant*, and were therefore also utterly noble and trustworthy.

Ajahn Jayasaro encouraged us to embrace and surrender to the training with confident and happy hearts. I can recall that, one evening, while listening to one of Ajahn Jayasaro's talks, something within me 'died'. Something inside me surrendered with faith to the Buddha's teachings and training so completely that I knew that it would no longer be possible for me to be happy as a layperson, and that it was only a matter of time before I would have to become a monk.



*Tahn Ajahn Jayasaro*

This realisation was not necessarily a happy one. Although there was a growing inner confidence about the training and glimpses into deeper peace, the idea of becoming a full-time, strictly disciplined, celibate monk was quite daunting.

Most of the foreign monks had completed university degrees before they chose to go into robes, from what I could gather. They were more ‘heady’ than I was in some respects, and I did not feel confident that I was the best type of candidate, but I derived some encouragement from the fact that the greatest meditation monks of the previous century

in Thailand had oftentimes come from simple rice farming families. No degree was required.

I had also been observing how various lay guests came and went, some of them seeming more serious and disciplined than I. They often had some kind of duty or obligation that they had to return to – elderly parents in need of care, a wife and children, a business, a mortgage, etc. – and yet here I was with no large obstruction to speak of. So although I didn't quite feel fully qualified to ordain as a monk, I also felt that it would be reckless to forgo the opportunity.

When I observed the way that the elderly village ladies held up their rice containers to their foreheads after offering rice to the monks each day, making their silent dedications and aspirations, I had a sense that I too must have done this in many previous lives in order to be presented with this current opportunity.

I also had a terrible sense that, with my somewhat artistic temperament, I was either going to be very good, or very *not* good, this lifetime. It was not very likely that I would manage to maintain a middle ground between these two without the support of spiritual friends. And since I believed in heaven and hell, the choice – although hard – was also kind of obvious: there was no choice.

The weeks seemed to go by slowly at first, but then, sure enough, the seven weeks came to an end. This second trip to Thailand had been even more spiritually significant than the first, for I was now planning to return to Australia, not to reintegrate and establish a wholesome Buddhist lifestyle, but rather to save up enough money to return to Thailand and survive until I could become a monk, give away all of my belongings, and say goodbye to my family and friends.



# Chapter 12

Pakhow Brett - Samanera Achalo  
(Age 23)





The mindful keep active,  
don't delight in settling back.  
They renounce every home,  
every home,  
like swans taking off from a lake.  
Dhp 91

## CHAPTER TWELVE

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### *Pakhaw Brett – Samanera Achalo (Age 23)*

Not surprisingly, my previous employers in Sydney would not take me back full-time now. Having observed the trajectory of my earlier employment stints with them, they understood that I would not be sticking around for very long. They did, however, call me in for the occasional shift if they needed additional staff. Fortunately, I had developed some skill in traditional Thai massage, having completed two ten day intensive practical courses, so I set about trying to find clients.

My dear friend Donna was very happy to see me, but she was not entirely happy about my decision to become a monk. She couldn't quite wrap her head around why a young man would choose to live in an all-male community, or why I would choose never to have sex. As an Australian woman – and a naturalist of sorts – neither of these things made any sense to her, nor did they seem natural, which is fair enough.

In her heart of hearts, Donna wanted her friend to be happy, so we agreed to disagree on some things and continued to be good yoga and meditation buddies. She respected my discipline and commitment, just as I respected her many abilities and deep knowledge.

Of course, my choice was more about living within an environment that provides spiritual support. You don't get to choose all of the specific details when joining a conservative and ancient tradition. If it was possible to have sex once a month and to have close friendships with women, and still be supported as a monk, I would have thought that

was great! But that is not the way the Buddha established his monastic order, and I trusted that he had good reason for this. The monks are supported by the laity because of their strict discipline and high standards of renunciation, not because their life is comfortable.

The lease on my studio apartment was coming up for renewal in a month, and I decided not to renew it. This meant the rental bond – an entire month’s worth of rent – would be returned to me. That was enough to cover a one-way ticket back to Thailand. I would work as much as I could during that last month in Sydney, give away my few remaining possessions to friends, and then head up to Queensland to say goodbye to my parents.

I officiated over a small ceremony in which I burned some personal items in the enamel bathtub. I burned several years’ worth of poetry and song lyrics that I had written, along with an expensive portfolio of modelling and acting photographs. To me, this fire *pūjā* symbolised the relinquishment of vain and self-indulgent pursuits, and of false paths that could not possibly lead to true peace.

Donna came to me, crouched down, put her hand on my shoulder, and said, ‘I don’t really understand why you’re doing this. Is it really necessary? Are you okay?’

To her, it looked like an act of self-hatred, watching the images of my youthful self go up in flames, and she felt sad about it. But I was able to look her in the eye and calmly explain how it was important for me to truly put those worldly ambitions aside in order to fully embrace my spiritual goals. I was not acting out of hatred, but rather cutting away attachments and freeing up my energy.

While in Sydney, I said my goodbyes to my sisters, Dianne and Jane, and to my good old friend Debbie, as well as a few other good friends I had made in my years living and working there.

I gave some of my most cherished second-hand clothing store finds to a friend, a fellow Brisbane boy who was studying at the National Art School in Sydney: a shirt with Vincent van Gogh paintings printed all over it, as well as an especially wild but very cool paisley design shirt. I felt a tug of pain in my heart when I handed over a large box of my favourite vinyl records to another friend. These albums had given much joy and empathy to a confused young man. Although there was no place for these songs in a forest monastery, they would still occupy space in my mind for a long time to come!

When planning this trip to Thailand, I knew that I intended to leave Australia for what would probably be a very long time, but my parents did not know this as yet. I wanted to spend some pleasant time with them so they could see firsthand that I was doing well, but that might prove challenging if I stayed for too many days in a row. In my experience, we had the happiest times together when my visits were shorter, so I came up with a bit of a strategy.

For some time, I had wanted to work as a volunteer server at one of the *vipassanā* retreat centres as an expression of gratitude for the first retreat I had done a couple of years earlier. There was now a centre not too far from my parents' house on the Sunshine Coast, so I planned to spend a week with my parents, serve on the retreat, and then spend another week with them. That way, our time together would be broken up a little, reducing the chances of falling into old patterns of reactivity, while still allowing me to spend a proper amount of time with them – an appropriate gesture before saying goodbye.

My twin brother picked me up from Brisbane airport on his big Ducati motorcycle. He showed me how fast it could go on a stretch of straight highway – 160 kilometres per hour! – even with me and my backpack sitting behind him. It was both exhilarating and terrifying, and the experience left me feeling quite worried for my brother's safety.

I spent some time with him and his girlfriend before catching the train up to my parents' place. Troy had decided to drop out of university to pursue a career in photography, for which he had a genuine talent. He was also planning a trip to Europe.

My parents lived in a rural area at that time in a two-storey house they had built themselves. They lived in the upper storey, and the lower storey was for their children or relatives whenever they visited. This worked well, as it meant I could have my own space for yoga and meditation when needed, and walking along the countryside roads was also quite pleasant.

I made a concerted effort not to be defensive or contrarian if my parents said anything I found to be challenging, triggering, or obnoxious. And I also made a point not to be challenging or obnoxious myself! I cooked several meals, making sure to wash the dishes afterwards. Sometimes my father dried the dishes, standing next to me as I washed; it was nice to bond in that simple way.

I had resolved in advance that I would quietly leave the living room if I felt the television viewing was too intense. If my dad wanted to watch a war movie that was fine – during that time I could meditate.

There were a few occasions when we talked a little about my time in Thailand and how much I had learned from living in the monastery. My parents asked questions about daily life at the monastery and how it functioned. I mentioned that my next visit would be longer because I was considering becoming a novice monk, just to try it out for a year or so.

After a few days, my mother surprised me by saying something very moving: 'I can tell that you seem quite happy now. You seem more settled on the inside. I used to worry about you so much when you were younger, because I just didn't know what you would do in life, but I always knew that you would find your niche. And I really think that you

have. So I just want to say, if you do decide that you want to be a monk, you have my blessing.'

So that went quite well! It was quite revealing and refreshing to hear my mother say this at the time. I was able to glimpse a genuine loving concern, thoughtfulness, and care that had evidently been underneath the outward nagging all along.

She continued further, saying that the reason she had given me such a hard time when I was younger was that she was so worried about me.

I was impressed by my mother's acute intuitive sense – it was something she had not articulated much before. I was glad that we were both relieved that I had seemed to have found my way.

It felt good to serve at the *vipassanā* retreat. I was the head cook, applying some of the skills I had learned at the vegan macrobiotic restaurant.

While serving on the retreat, I learned from one of the other volunteers, Jacob, that it was possible to make good money picking strawberries at one of the local strawberry farms. We both decided we wanted to do this after the retreat.

Wow... Picking strawberries, now *that* was back-breaking work! Jacob and I stayed in a large tent at a nearby campsite, and I could tell that my father really respected the fact that I was doing this honest, hard work and paying my own way. He demonstrated his support and approval by picking us up each morning and driving us to the farm on his way to work. The farm operator dropped us back at the campsite at the end of the day.

My rental bond refund had come through, and I had saved some money from massaging in Sydney and picking strawberries on the

Sunshine Coast. I was therefore able to buy my ticket back to Thailand – this time, a one-way flight from Brisbane.

This time, the turnaround between my visits to Thailand was only two months, and although I didn't know it at the time, it would be three and a half years before I saw my parents again.

At first I had planned to stay in Bangkok with a Thai friend I had met at the monastery, teaching English and learning some Thai for a couple of months before returning to the monastery. That plan changed after just a few days in Bangkok. I dreamt that a huge tsunami was coming; I was running and running as fast as I could and only just escaped it. I woke in a panic and decided to head straight back to the monastery.

Returning to Wat Pah Nanachat felt good. The community was experiencing more people coming and going, both monastics and laypeople, now that the rains retreat had ended. This felt somewhat disorienting compared to my experience a few months earlier.

At that time, two senior monks shared the role of abbot at Wat Pah Nanachat, allowing each of them the opportunity for longer periods of quiet retreat. When I returned, Ajahn Jayasaro was about to take leave for a one year period, and a monk named Ajahn Pasanno was returning from a year-long retreat to take up the abbot's duties. I felt some sadness that the abbot who had inspired me so deeply was leaving, and my first impression of Ajahn Pasanno was that he seemed rather plain and boring by comparison. He was forty-six years old at the time, and had been a *bhikkhu* for twenty years.

Over the years, I have trained myself not to entirely trust my first impressions of people, because, much like my initial impressions of Steve and Rosemary, my first impression of Ajahn Pasanno had not been very good; and yet, in time, all of these people had a profoundly positive influence on my life.

Ajahn Jayasaro was referred to as Tahn Ajahn by the community in those days, which means ‘Venerable Teacher’. Because Ajahn Pasanno was both senior in years as a monk and around ten years older than Ajahn Jayasaro, he was referred to as Ajahn Yai, meaning ‘Big Teacher’ – which I found curious, as he was actually quite a bit shorter than Ajahn Jayasaro.

Ajahn Pasanno’s manner of speaking when giving Dhamma discourses did not flow as smoothly as Ajahn Jayasaro’s and contained more *umms* and *errs*, but he had a certain grounded quality and his words carried weight. He was well respected by both the monks and the local Thai community. He also had a reputation for being quite fierce, which I was not exactly excited about, but the Ajahn Pasanno that I came to know was actually very kind.

The quality of groundedness that surrounded this ‘Ajahn Yai’, which I had initially perceived as ‘boringness’, soon revealed itself to be Ajahn Pasanno’s superpower. There was an incredibly consistent quality of steadiness and evenness to him. I noticed that he was present at every morning chanting, every alms round, every afternoon sitting session, every leaf sweeping session, and every all-night practice vigil held on the weekly lunar observance days. Ajahn Pasanno was consistently always just *there*. He was dependable, and he was always on time – usually slightly early, in fact.

On this second visit to Wat Pah Nanachat, it was Ajahn Pasanno who officiated over the ceremony in which I took on the eight-precepts training and donned the white robes. In an effort to get to know him better, I offered to massage his feet for fifteen minutes or so after afternoon tea. He was happy to accept.

As strange as it may sound, I grew to trust Ajahn Pasanno very deeply through physically touching his feet. I could palpably feel a certain quality of decency and sanity, which engendered feelings of trust.



*Tahn Ajahn (Ajahn Jayasaro) and Ajahn Yai (Ajahn Pasanno)*

I soon learned that he was willing to listen patiently as I rambled on about whatever I found challenging about life at the monastery, or whatever pain I was processing from my past. He encouraged me to continue following the schedule, being helpful, and to keep up my meditation practice. He assured me that the monk's lifestyle and training definitely did work, so long as one was sincere and consistent, and that one would get back from the life whatever one was willing to put into it.

Over time, Ajahn Pasanno became like a father to me. The age difference between us worked well in that respect. My own father was a good man, but he was never quite fully present for his children in the way that Ajahn Pasanno was for his monks. Ajahn Pasanno had lived and trained for a period of years with Ajahn Chah, a deeply respected meditation master. No doubt, following Ajahn Chah's example had imparted a certain quality of presence to him, combined with the gravitas that comes from two decades of intensive meditation practice.

During this period at Wat Pah Nanachat, I was able to attend a *bhikkhu* ordination. Two samaneras, or novice monks, Tahn Punnyo and

Tahn Siripannyo, went forth into the higher training of fully ordained *bhikkhus*. I was keen to observe and study the procedure.

This particular ordination, however, was somewhat unusual. Tahn Siripannyo was the son of a famous Malaysian billionaire, and Mr Krishnan had flown into the otherwise sleepy backwater of Ubon Ratchathani in his private plane, along with his much younger wife. Naturally, this caused a bit of a kerfuffle. Tahn Siripannyo's mother was Thai and thus he already spoke fluent Thai. He had already been a novice at Wat Nanachat some years earlier for a period of time, and he exuded a quality of confidence and determination. Although he was inspiring in his strict adherence to the training, I felt it was safer to admire him from a distance.

Tahn Punnyo, on the other hand, exuded a lovely quality of kind gentleness, and he soon became an important mentor and friend to me. He was the type of monk who was always happy and available to have a cup of tea and a chat – he respected sensitivity and vulnerability, being a sensitive fellow himself. He had gone forth in England a few years earlier and had disrobed after a couple of years, so he was familiar with the ordination process and had a broader view of the training situations in other monasteries around the world. I benefited from his friendship, experience, patience, and wise counsel, and came to love him like an older brother.

After a couple of months, I had to make a visa run. To obtain the specific visa issued to men intending to ordain and sponsored by a monastery, I would have to leave the country and go to a designated Thai embassy to receive a letter of support from the Department of Religious Affairs (now known as the National Office of Buddhism) in order for the visa to be issued. In those days, most aspirants travelled to the Thai embassy in Penang, Malaysia.

Flights were expensive – this was before the days of low-cost airlines – so everyone travelled by train instead. This first train from

Ubon Ratchathani to Bangkok took around nine hours, and the second train from Bangkok to Butterworth took another twenty hours. It was a rather epic journey to have to make, but everyone who planned to ordain had to do it.

I caught both trains, then a minivan, and then a ferry, before finally arriving in George Town, Penang. I found a guesthouse and put my bags down. Seeing that there was still enough time before closing, I headed straight to the Royal Thai Consulate. But there was a problem – my letter of support had not yet arrived from Bangkok, and consequently the visa could not be issued.

What should I do now? How much longer would it take? Although I liked George Town, with its interesting combination of Chinese, Malay, and Indian culture, I had just spent six weeks in a forest monastery and I didn't really feel like hanging out in a large cosmopolitan town.

I remembered the retreat centre, the Malaysian Buddhist Meditation Centre which offered retreats in the style of Mahāsi Sayādaw, where I had stayed previously in George Town. I decided to ask for permission to stay and do a two week retreat while I waited for the letter to arrive. So I sat another intensive retreat, committed to the schedule of twelve hours per day of alternating sitting and walking meditation.

I was confident that the letter would arrive during those two weeks, and at the end of the retreat the kind lady in the office allowed me to phone the consulate. No letter. I requested to stay for another week, and the volunteers at the centre kindly accommodated my request so long as I kept to the schedule. But at the end of that third week, there was still no letter. I hadn't been worried before, but by this stage I really did feel bummed out.

I decided to return to the consulate and asked them to please call their main office in Bangkok in an attempt to try to ascertain what might

have gone wrong. The Thai man at the consulate did make a call, but was not able to bring clarity to the situation. With great disappointment, I decided to apply for a standard tourist visa instead, so that I could return to Wat Pah Nanachat.

After eating some nice Indian food in George Town's Little India district, I sat across the road from a very colourful Hindu temple, noticing the many black ravens flying above it and landing on it. To me, they looked inauspicious, like bad omens.

I started to wonder, 'Maybe I just don't have enough merit to become a monk. Too much bad *kamma*? Maybe I have to call my sister Jane and ask her to buy me a ticket back to Australia from Malaysia.' I would pay her back when I could.

I felt quite dejected and shattered. It was at that moment that I looked above my head and noticed a tiny Bodhi tree sapling sprouting out of the rain gutter directly above me. It was a sign! That was all it took: I should keep trying and not give up.

And so I made the long journey back to Ubon, returning unvictorious to Wat Pah Nanachat.

In the following days, a kind Thai monk who assisted the foreign monks with their visas made a few calls and learned that the Department of Religious Affairs had been moving offices in Bangkok, and that the relevant civil servant had not received the request letter sent from Wat Pah Nanachat. The process was started all over again, and this time the monk checked that the support letter had been issued and received by the embassy before I left for Malaysia again.

I made another gruelling trip, and sure enough, this time the letter was there and the appropriate visa was issued. Khun Apisit, the Thai friend I had met at the monastery and with whom I had stayed for a few days in Bangkok at the beginning of this trip, had offered to sponsor

the costs of this unanticipated second visa run. Eighteen months later, he would become a monk himself.

Ajahn Pasanno took me and one other *pakhow*, a Dutch man named Patrick, to be ordained as novice monks, with the Venerable Ajahn Mahā Ahmon presiding as preceptor. How serendipitous that my preceptor shared the same name as Mae Chee Ahmon from the meditation centre on Koh Phangan!

It was a very modest affair, attended by Ajahn Pasanno, my new friend Tahn Punnyo, and a Sri Lankan laywoman by the name of Savitri. I appreciated the quiet intimacy of the ceremony – more people looking on would have exacerbated my nervousness.

In the Thai Forest Tradition, each novice receives a new name from the Pāli language when they ordain, as chosen by their teacher. The name depends upon the day of the week on which one was born, and each name has a meaning. It is chosen either to highlight a strong quality that one already possesses, or to serve as an encouragement to further develop a quality that would be beneficial to one's path of practice. Ajahn Pasanno, having observed my sensitivity and tendency to swing between feeling inspired and dejected, gave me the name Achalo, which means 'unshakeable' or 'not shaking'. I liked it.

All my life I had never really felt that 'Brett' was my name. Receiving this new name from Ajahn Pasanno felt very affirming. My name just felt right at last.

Afterwards I distinctly remember feeling relieved that I had made it to this island of safety, and when we arrived back at Wat Nanachat I thanked Ajahn Pasanno for having had me ordained.

He smiled and responded, 'That's okay... Now be a good novice.'



*Samanera Achalo*

It was February 29th, 1996, and I was twenty-three years old. Normally, the training period for a novice monk at Wat Pah Nanachat is one year before they can fully ordain as a *bhikkhu*. The second most senior monk at the time joked that because I had been ordained on February 29 – a day that occurs only once every four years – my novice training period ought to be four years.

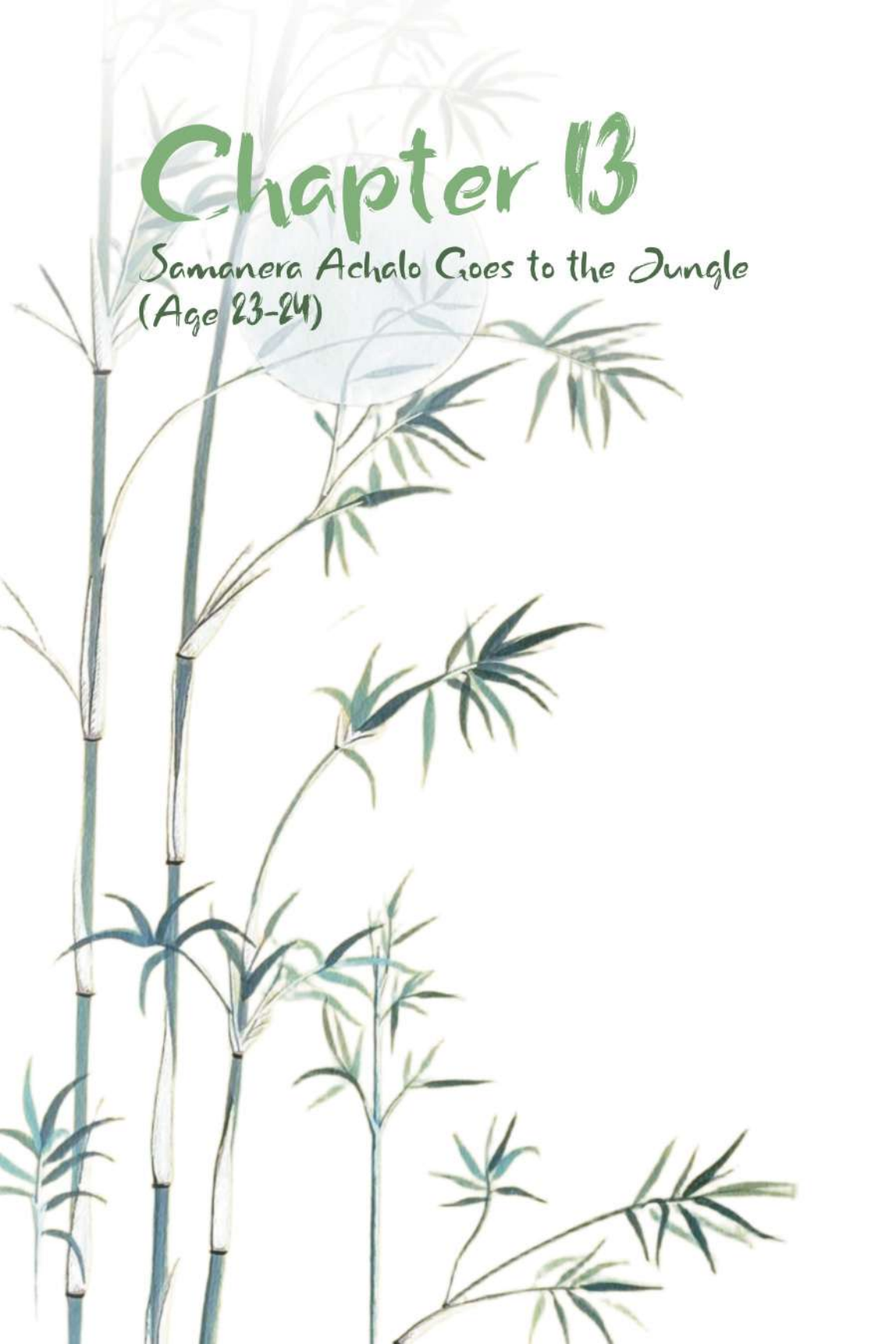
In those first few months, I would sometimes wake up startled in the middle of the night and wonder for a moment where I was. Having lived most of my life in suburban brick houses, sleeping in beds with thick mattresses in spacious rooms with wall-to-wall carpet, the strangeness of the scene would baffle me for a second or two when I turned on the flashlight and saw only brown cloth, and the brown wooden walls and floor.

Then I would remember, ‘I’m a Buddhist monk living in a forest monastery in Northeast Thailand,’ and a warm, relieved, and happy feeling would always arise in my heart.



# Chapter 13

*Samanera Achalo Goes to the Jungle*  
(Age 23-24)





It's not easy to endure isolated forest  
or wilderness dwellings.

It's not easy to maintain seclusion,  
not easy to enjoy being alone.

The forests, as it were,  
plunder the mind of a monk  
who has not attained concentration.

MN 4

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

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### *Samanera Achalo Goes to the Jungle (Age 23-24)*

While walking on *tudong* during a period of retreat a few years earlier, Ajahn Pasanno had wandered through a tin mine adjoining thick jungle very close to the border of Myanmar. The operators of the mine invited him to practise in the forest and showed him a special area on a high plateau with a crystal clear stream flowing through it.

The presence of the stream flowing under the forest canopy had a natural cooling effect during the sweltering hot season, and there were even a couple of waterfalls with deep pools at their base which were ideal for bathing. The trees were very tall, offering much shade, and the undergrowth was not too thick.

The sound of gibbons singing in the treetops and the loud flapping of hornbill wings could be heard in the mornings. Elephants, tigers, and bears were known to pass through the area from time to time. It was a forest meditation monk's dream come true.

Ajahn Pasanno found the area to be very suitable and stayed for many months. After his retreat, he discussed with the mine operators the possibility of bringing groups of monks to practise there during the hot season, and they welcomed the idea. This remote retreat location became known as Samnaksong Dtao Dtam – Hermitage of the Black Turtle – named after the black turtles that had been spotted in the streams there.

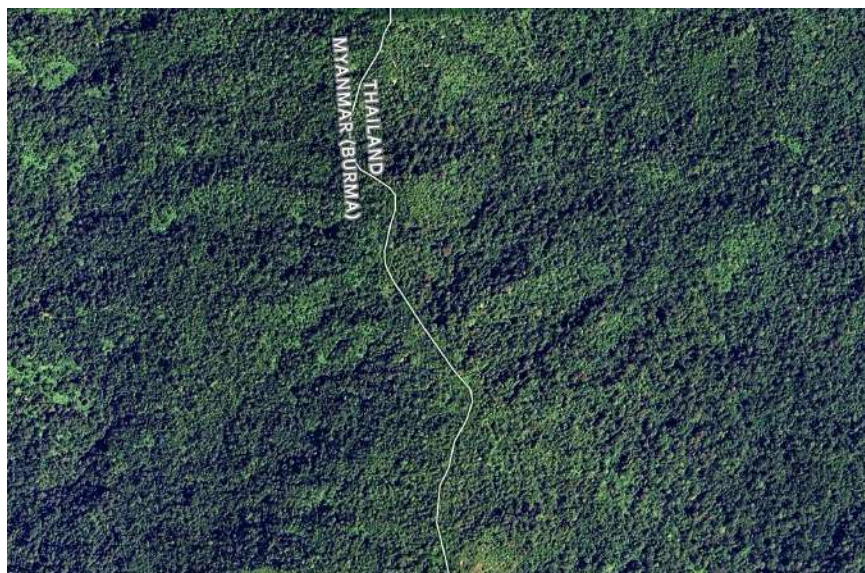
For several years, much of the Wat Pah Nanachat community would go to Samnaksong Dtao Dtam in mid-February to stay for two to three months, avoiding the hottest months of March and April in Ubon. It was a more spacious time for the community, allowing increased efforts at meditation with fewer chores and communal activities, and a chance to live in a way similar to how the forest monks of old would have experienced.

I had been a novice for approximately four days when we boarded the bus together to Kanchanaburi province. If I remember correctly, there were around ten monks and two novices in our group.

We were dropped off at a place between Kanchanaburi city and Samnaksong Dtao Dtam where it would take us four days to walk into the jungle. Ajahn Pasanno could have arranged four-wheel-drive vehicles to drive us in, but in order to experience and honour the efforts and lifestyle of the wandering forest-dwelling monks of old – an important part of the Buddha’s living legacy – it was tradition to commence the retreat period by walking in. It is also a lifestyle that often produced the greatest meditation masters.

We walked along dirt roads with little shade and without sunscreen. We walked in rubber flip flops which gave no arch support. And we did not have backpacks, but rather carried shoulder bags held in place by a piece of cloth tied in a knot, securing the bag on the left to the one on the right – it was definitely not very ergonomic.

All of the Caucasian monks were pink or turning red with sunburn by the end of the second day. At that point, we turned off the road onto a walking path that perhaps used to be a dirt road but had since become overgrown. This section was steeper but more shaded, and there were vines with thorns that would catch our bare arms or shins and occasionally tear a hole in the cloth robes we wore.



*Satellite image of thick jungle at the Thai-Myanmar border*

I guess that some of the monks were having fun and experienced this as an adventure, being out on the wild open road with the sun on your shoulders and nothing but sky above your head. But since childhood, I had always hated camping. And this was camping with sunburn, blisters, scratches, the lumpy ground as a mattress, and rice, bamboo shoots, and instant noodles for our one meal per day, cooked by our Burmese guides.

As I was literally the most junior member of the posse, I kept my grumbling and inner misery to myself, but I don't know how many times I quietly thought, 'What on earth have I gotten myself into!?'

When we eventually arrived in the valley with its small *sala*, toilets, and a small area of flat concrete, I felt a sense of relief. We bathed and tended to our scratches and blisters from the medical kit.

The pathway up to the plateau where we would be staying had neat steps that had been cut into the earthen path. The branches growing across the path had been cleared, so the walking was much easier here. Up on the plateau, there were fairly flat paths which led to the different individual sites.

Some Burmese workers from the tin mine, who were very skilled at making things out of bamboo, had made a raised bamboo platform the size of a double bed at each of the sites. They had also smoothed out a walking meditation path and dug a pit toilet. Each site was within walking distance of the stream, and the sound of gently flowing water could be heard constantly.

We all set to work sweeping the paths. The most senior monks chose their spots first, and the junior monks chose from what remained, but all of the sites were quite nice. Now that I had a bed, some flat space, a clear stream and a swept path, I felt more confident that I might survive this jungle retreat.

The forest was quite beautiful. Its tall, thick tropical canopy made it darker than the forests I had seen in Australia. There were several types of bamboo growing beneath the canopy: a really gigantic type, and several smaller, more dainty types as well. Many of the trees were fifty to sixty metres tall, and the giant bamboo stalks were easily over ten metres. People imagine that forests are quiet and peaceful places, but the jungle was teeming with birds and insects making a loud and constant cacophony of sound – even at night the crickets continued to make noise.

A few modest accessories provided some respite from the environment. We each had a nylon flysheet above our bamboo platform as protection from light rain, as well as an umbrella (a *klod* – or *glot* – in Thai) from which we could hang a mosquito net. Rubbing a little Vaseline around each leg of the platform would prevent ants from crawling up.

We were alone for around twenty-three hours per day, only seeing each other at the mealtime and then for a cup of cocoa around 4:00 pm. Long conversations and visiting one another were looked down upon and discouraged, and I found the evenings particularly difficult.

When there was less than the light of a half-moon, the old-growth jungle was extremely dark after sunset, and when there was no moon it was pitch black except for the occasional firefly. The giant bamboo tended to make creaking noises – and even loud banging and exploding sounds – as the temperature dropped.

It is difficult to explain how it felt to meditate alone in the pitch black night, surrounded by millions of trees while wildlife roamed freely in the forest. Lighting a candle was helpful to create a small bubble of light and to feel some warmth, but it also had the unwanted side effect of making the person who lit it literally glow in the dark, so that anyone or anything could see you quite clearly.



*Typical monk's klod and mosquito net hung over a bamboo platform*

Waves of fear came and went: eyes wide open and alert when practising walking meditation, ears on hyper-alert trying to differentiate between the gurgling noise of the trickling stream and the falling of small branches, while listening for the potential sound of approaching footsteps. Falling asleep while the senses were so hyper-vigilant was not easy.

It was extremely obvious that the nylon sheet above my head would offer precisely zero protection from a large falling branch, or a potential python ambush from above. Similarly, the nylon mosquito net would not offer any protection from claws or teeth. It was necessary to depend a great deal upon loving-kindness meditation to fall asleep, and even then, I would still wake up frequently.

I did a lot of death contemplation, preparing the heart to surrender should the moment of death suddenly arrive. This is one of the reasons why forest monks practise in the jungle: to heighten the clarity of the mind, to brighten it with mindfulness and loving-kindness, and to come more fully into the present moment. The benefits of the practice are real, but the process itself was not necessarily pleasant. I felt quite anxious and highly strung during the first week or so of living in the jungle – it was certainly no walk in the park!

Although I never saw a tiger in person, we did see footprints and excrement from time to time, so we knew that they were living amongst us. I could feel, see and hear that we were living in an enormous patch of forest. This was evidenced by the variety of birds and animals – monkeys, civet cats, squirrels – and their clawed footprints left in soft, moist earth. Although much of the jungle on the Thai side of the border had been largely cleared, the patch of forest where we were staying was directly connected to a massive area of jungle in Myanmar. (At least it was massive thirty years ago – I am not sure how much remains now.)

I was on my walking meditation path late one afternoon when I distinctly heard a large animal approaching from some distance away.

There were the clear sounds of a large creature banging into branches and undergrowth along the way as it walked. I knew that it couldn't be a tiger because they are known to approach quietly from behind, but bears, wild boars and even a type of wild bull were potentially dangerous.

A fallen tree lay across the ground at the end of my walking path. As the noises got closer and closer, I decided to stop and do standing meditation, eyes open, facing the direction of the approaching animal.

Sure enough, an Asiatic black bear jumped over the log and stood there staring at me, panting and swaying from side to side.

If provoked or feeling threatened, these bears can attack humans, so I just recited 'Bud-dho... Bud-dho... Bud-dho...' in my heart until it dashed off to the side. My mind was definitely very still afterwards.

When the weather is good, practising meditation in the forest can be truly lovely. I had some peaceful meditations, and meditating by one of the waterfalls on a sunny afternoon was delightful, as was watching the fireflies dance in the moonlight on evenings with mild weather. The challenge, however, was learning how to keep the mind in the middle, because when it was great it was like heaven – and when it was hard it was like hell.

The weather could change quickly but there was some forewarning whenever a storm was blowing in; the sound of blustery wind in the treetops became very loud and branches started falling all around you. We each had a large plastic garbage bag to keep our things dry. If your robes and cloth got drenched, they were difficult to dry and would soon become very smelly. It was a particularly manky, mouldy, sour smell which was as awful as it is difficult to describe.

During storms, I would sit in the middle of the raised bamboo platform, half-naked and curled up with my arms hugging my knees, and just wait it out as I was whipped by the wind and cold rain. Those

tropical storms could last for hours. Sometimes I laughed at the absurdity of it, and other times I cried. Sometimes I was scared to die, and at other times I wanted to! I wondered what my parents would think if they could see me in such a situation – and I resolved never to tell them about the practical realities of living in the jungle at Dtao Dtam.

After the initial exciting and hyper-vigilant phase, my mind fell into a somewhat dark and dejected state as the retreat progressed. I was a city boy who had been a novice monk for all of two weeks at this stage, and I was not really ready to spend that much time alone in a jungle without the warmth of close companionship. So for the first month I was scared of tigers, but in the second and third months I wanted one to come and eat me! At least then I could die in the robes while attempting to do something noble.

One afternoon, a couple of months into the retreat, something quite scary happened. It was also quite interesting on another level.

I could feel that I wasn't okay; my mind had a strange, wordless, inner shrieking quality to it. I had a strong intuition that I should lie down on the bare earth and try to be as still as possible. As I did so, it was as though my mind stretched out before my eyes, further and further, until there was a distinct snapping sound. I knew I had to lay perfectly still and not flinch while I waited for my mind to slowly put itself back together again.

It was literally the strangest thing that I have ever experienced. Altogether, this experience – stretching, snapping and recalibration – took a couple of hours. Afterwards, it was as if nothing had occurred at all.

People usually talk about 'snapping' in the context of going crazy or losing their temper, but I think that this might have become what psychiatrists would call a psychotic break, had I not laid very still on the ground and patiently waited for the experience to pass. From this, I

learned something very valuable, and at a very deep level, about ‘trusting in knowing-awareness’ and not freaking out.

I won’t go into detail about the other challenges except to mention them very briefly: the ticks, the leeches, spiritual companions contracting malaria, the ungodly stench at mealtime of everyone’s damp robes that hadn’t dried properly in weeks, the same bland, cold food every day for months. Suffice it to say that oftentimes the outer circumstances did not provide much comfort, but the opportunity to take an honest look at the human body and the human situation was very helpful for reducing lust, cultivating dispassion, and stabilising sobriety.

As Thai Forest monks, we read the biographies of the great masters of our lineage – Luang Por Mun, Luang Por Tate, Luang Por Lee Dhammadharo, and of course our beloved Luang Por Chah – and develop confidence in the profound value of practising in the forest. It would be nice to write about the profound insights that a meditator can experience when practising for an extended period in the jungle with little external input to feed the sense of personal identity, allowing the sense of self to lessen and fall away, and seeing the body as just elements at one with nature – the trees, the stream, and the breeze. But it would not be truthful to say that I experienced this on my first visit to the jungle.

The truth is that the overarching theme of my first intensive retreat was a sense of self that was significantly struggling. Did I walk meditation? Sure. Sit meditation? Sure. Chant? Sure. But I did not experience much peace – I was still standing, but I was punch-drunk and numb, like a standing knockout.

At the time, I felt that this retreat had been a failure for me in terms of progress in my practice, and I felt humiliated. However, I have learned over the years that one has to expect to fail at times while trying to accomplish something extraordinary. It is rare that people in the world would even try to do such a thing. Failing a little is not the same as

complete failure – we must learn not to sacrifice the good on the altar of the perfect. Although things did not come together perfectly, they did not completely fall apart either. I had kept my training rules, I had made an effort at meditation, I had survived living as a young monk in the jungle for three months, and I had kept my sanity. Yes, I had unskilful thoughts at times, but I did not follow them.

Although my first couple of experiences at Dtao Dtam were quite overwhelming, I also recognise that to even have such an opportunity to practise was no doubt the result of past prayers and aspirations. It is rare and special to have that much solitude and time to meditate, in proximity to other virtuous meditators, and with all requisites provided – these are all incredible supports. These days Samnaksong Dtao Dtam has a resident senior monk, and when groups from Wat Nanachat come to stay in the hot season, there are more group meetings and opportunities to check in with one another.

In hindsight, I realised that I probably would have struggled less if I had thought to create more structure within each day. I had done seven intensive retreats as a layperson before becoming a novice, where I had depended upon an outer form and a schedule set by others. I could have simply come up with a schedule for myself to keep, with set times for sitting and walking meditation, chanting, reading a book or some *suttas*, and napping. With a more structured schedule, the whole experience might have been much less daunting and I probably wouldn't have felt so unmoored.

On future visits, I did get better results when I implemented a schedule for myself – I experienced peaceful meditations, spacious inner vistas, wise perspectives, and insights. Altogether, I returned to Samnaksong Dtao Dtam another six times in the following nine years, spending close to a year and a half on retreat there.

I came to see practising in the forest as one of my main teachers in this lifetime, and in some respects see those retreats as an initiation by

fire – the fire of austerities – that helped to develop qualities like resolution, patience, determination, forbearance, and trust. These are all qualities that I have needed to draw on and depend upon in different phases of life, and I feel only gratitude for those opportunities now.

I was not the only monk to face challenges during these retreats in the jungle. Over the years, many of my brothers caught malaria while practising at Dtao Dtam, but I was fortunate that I never did. One novice went a bit crazy for a while after having been circled three times by a black panther in the dark of the night. I was spared from that too, though the ‘being circled by a panther’ part would have made a cool story.

At the same time as when I was staying in the jungle with them, I know one monk who saw a Bengal tiger, one who saw a leopard, and another who saw a black panther – but my over-protective guardian angels only ever allowed me to meet a bear. I did wake up in the middle of the night one evening to the sound of something growling behind my head, but to this day I have no idea what it was – I was not about to move or shine a flashlight in its face, whoever or whatever it was!

One clear and immediate benefit of the retreat period in the jungle was the incredible sense of gratitude we all felt when we returned to the monastery and could have four walls and a roof over our heads once again. After a jungle retreat, living in a strict forest monastery was a cakewalk! There were no leeches waiting to attack you every time you set your feet down on the ground, and the food was much more filling and tasty as well.

Because he was the abbot of Wat Nanachat at the time, Ajahn Pasanno had not joined the group on retreat – he had to stay at the monastery to hold down the fort. It was good to see him when we returned.

Once back at Wat Nanachat, I had the opportunity to become one of Ajahn Pasanno’s personal attendants. It is part of our monastic

tradition that junior monks help to take care of the senior monks. This added some stress to the daily schedule in some respects, but it also provided more structure and more contact with the Ajahn. My friend Ajahn Punnyo shared the duties with me.

In some respects, being an attendant was a bit like being a butler. As Ajahn's attendant, I would go to his dwelling at 3:15 am to carry his outer robe, shoulder bag, and sitting mat to the meditation hall and set up his sitting place. I would then receive his outer robe, sitting cloth, and shoulder bag after the morning meeting at 5:30 and take them to the dining hall to set up his sitting place there. It was also the role of the attendant to help place his robe upon his shoulders, and then kneel in front of him to help do up the tag.

On alms round, I would carry his bowl until we came to the first person to give alms, and then carry his bowl back to the monastery after the last almsgiver. One had to rush ahead to be in place to wash the Ajahn's feet when he returned.

We even helped to bathe the Ajahn in those days, by heating up the water in a big bucket, pouring water over him gently, then applying soap to his back and washing it. (The Ajahn wore a cloth around his waist and washed his own private area.) We would wash the bathing cloth that served as his undergarment every day, and wash his three monastic robes in boiling water once per week.

Ajahn Pasanno had also helped attend to Ajahn Chah in this manner. Attending to the senior monks was – and still is – a way to train the younger members of the community to be mindful of the needs of other people besides themselves.

It also opened up opportunities to ask questions. Sitting by the Ajahn's side after the meal when he received guests, in case he needed anything, was another way to learn from him by watching how he interacted with people and listening to his comments and answers.

Probably the hardest part of being an attendant was during the meal itself. It was tradition that the junior monks would not take a bite of their meal until the *bhikkhu* to the right of them had started eating. It was also customary that the attendant should be kneeling in front of the Ajahn by the time he had finished eating and pushed his bowl away from himself, ready to place his bowl mindfully on its stand on the floor, and then wash and dry his hands. This left a limited amount of time for the attendant to eat his own meal.

The difficult part was that Ajahn Pasanno ate his meal in approximately fourteen minutes. It took about a minute after he took his first bite before I could take my first bite, and then I had to finish my meal one minute before he did in order to be in place by the time he had finished eating. This meant that I had twelve minutes to eat my one meal of the day. This caused both some anxiety and some indigestion – and if you could not eat enough, it also caused fatigue later in the evening.

Despite the challenges, being able to draw close to Ajahn Pasanno was very helpful to me at that time. When a moment opened up, he was always happy to answer a question or listen to a challenge or concern. This was worth surrendering personal time and the luxury of extra time for eating. We established a close relationship which endures to this day.

As a novice at Wat Nanachat in that first year, I would say that there were on average about six days per week when I thought about disrobing at some point during the day. The lifestyle was very difficult and I missed comfort, rest, relaxation, milder temperatures, and physical intimacy. But I also knew that I would be just as miserable – although in a different way – if I did disrobe, so it was a question of whether to be miserable in robes or to be miserable in lay life. At least I wasn't hurting anybody living this life. I also took some comfort in the fact that the Thai people appeared to derive joy from seeing and supporting foreign monks.

As junior monks in training, we were often reminded of a statement made by the Buddha to a monk who was struggling: ‘It is better to live the holy life with a tear-stained face than to fall back to the lay life... Bear it, *bhikkhu!*’ We were also reminded of another teaching of Venerable Ajahn Chah, who had once said: ‘The suffering of laypeople is just suffering, but the suffering of monks is suffering that leads to the end of suffering.’

Despite often feeling like I was dying, whenever I saw my face in the mirror while shaving, there was brightness and clarity streaming out of the eyes and a relaxed countenance to the face. I also saw a lack of pretense and projection. I saw a good human being who was trying to do better.

Aside from the six days I thought of disrobing, curiously there was also one day per week where both mind and body felt light and bright, meditation was easy, and a quality of subtle and simple joy buoyed the heart effortlessly. One might call it serenity, tranquillity, or contentment. It was a noble quality of happiness that came from knowing I hadn’t harmed anyone or anything, and recognising that I was managing to live a difficult life with dignity.

On those days I was happier than I had ever been in my life back in Sydney. There was also the awareness that, if I were to leave the monk’s life, this kind of joy and dignity would likely elude me. Quietly, I hoped that there would be more good days and less difficult ones if I stuck with the training.

Around the half-way point of the rains retreat, Ajahn Pasanno decided to take his two attendants for a change of scenery. He visited the monks at Wat Poo Jom Gom, a branch monastery of Wat Nanachat in a national park on the border of Laos, to encourage them in their practice. The environment there was much more open and spacious than at Wat Nanachat. It was a very rocky area with shallow pools of water all around and lovely wildflowers beginning to sprout. If you walked up a

ridge there was a grand view of the Mekong River below and the forests of Laos on the other side.

The monks at Wat Poo Jom Gom were inspired and practising diligently. The senior monk had been reading *suttas* and was eager to discuss them with Ajahn Pasanno. Tahn Siripannyo had learned one of the hardest and longest Pāli chants – the thirty-five minute long *Pāṭimokkha* recitation of the monks' rules – in just six weeks. Meanwhile, I had been struggling to fully memorise the basic morning and evening *pūjās*.

Ajahn Pasanno had brought Tahn Punnyo and me along in part as a reward for being good attendants, and although I enjoyed the change of scenery, I did not find the trip very beneficial. In seeing how focused and disciplined the monks were, I compared myself and lost heart. I thought, 'Wow, if that is what being a monk is supposed to look like... that's not what I am doing!'

I felt humbled and resigned, and I decided I would disrobe in about five weeks' time at the end of the rains retreat. I thought to myself that I should feel content with having been a novice who did one jungle retreat and one rains retreat. This was something to be proud of, and would help to lay the foundations for perhaps being a better monk in a future life.

It is tradition in Thailand for monks to shave their head and eyebrows before the fortnightly *Pāṭimokkha* recitation. I decided I wouldn't shave my eyebrows from that point onwards, thinking I would be disrobing soon anyway. I wanted to be attractive to a new potential lover – one of my first priorities – and eyebrows would be helpful! Seeing my eyebrows poking through would also encourage me, reassuring me that it was just a matter of weeks before I could escape the tightness of this monastic cage.

A few days later, on head shaving day, I was sweeping around Ajahn Pasanno's *kuti*. As planned, I had shaved my head but not my eyebrows. My brows were not particularly dense so I didn't think anyone would notice, but Ajahn Pasanno did! He mentioned that I had forgotten to shave my eyebrows.

When I told him that I would be disrobing once the rains retreat was over, he looked surprised and asked, 'When did this happen?'

I explained that while the other monks were studying *suttas* and learning the hardest chants in a matter of weeks, sometimes the only way I could get through a meditation session was by thinking about sex! I felt that my efforts just weren't cutting the mustard and I would never be a really good monk, so it was best to just bow out graciously and exit stage left, being grateful for the opportunity I had been given.

Ajahn Pasanno gave me a very kind and skilful reflection on this occasion. He asked, 'Were you having these kind of thoughts a year ago?'

I answered, 'Yes, of course.'

'Well, did you think they were so evil back then? Or did you think they were just normal?'

I responded, 'I guess I thought they were normal.'

Tahn Ajahn continued, 'Although it is not inspiring at times, it is normal. But the fact that you now have more of a sense for what is wholesome and skilful – and what is not – is actually growth.'

He continued further, 'You know Achalo, it's not so much about getting the monk form perfectly together on the outside as it is about the process that is occurring on the inside. I think that you are growing and I

think that you are doing well. Don't compare yourself to the other monks – just keep being sincere and go at your own pace.'

Believing that I was indeed a blemish on the face of the Sangha, I had thought that the abbot would agree with me and allow me to leave. But the fact that he mirrored back to me the goodness of my efforts and gave me his vote of confidence meant the world to me.

Seeing that I had listened and felt his words, and that my countenance had softened, Ajahn Pasanno had one more thing to say to me.

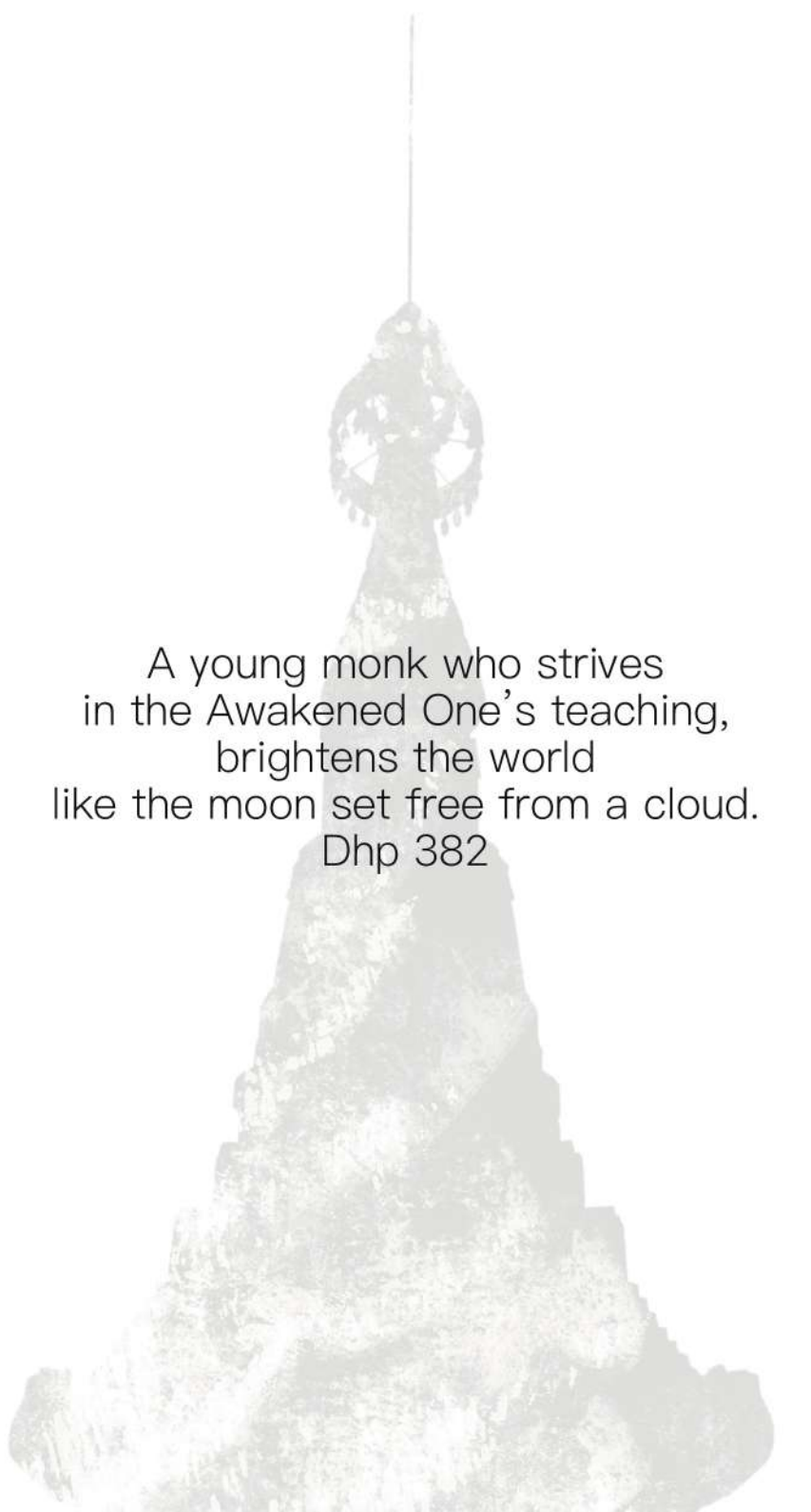
'Now go and shave your eyebrows!'



# Chapter 14

Wrestling with Māra in England  
(Age 24)





A young monk who strives  
in the Awakened One's teaching,  
brightens the world  
like the moon set free from a cloud.  
Dhp 382

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

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### *Wrestling with Māra in England (Age 24)*

Once the rains retreat – three months of sustained, intensive practice – had ended, the atmosphere in the monastery lightened up considerably. The weather became cooler, drier, and less oppressive. The morning meetings were made optional for a month if people preferred to meditate alone in their *kuti*. This month was also the period when monastics travelled to various monasteries to attend one another's *Kaṭhina* (a ceremony held once a year after the completion of the rains retreat, where the lay community offers cloth and other requisites to the monks), so there was quite a bit of movement during this time.

It was interesting to experience how the same place and the same community could feel quite different during different seasons. It felt as though there was a collective breathing in and intensifying during the rains retreat, and then a collective breathing out afterwards. It was important for me to notice this – the pressure cooker was not set to full steam for the entire year, making the lifestyle more sustainable perhaps.

Without the communal early morning meetings and mandatory study of the monastic rules after alms round each day, the schedule was less intense and more spacious. I was able to reflect a little upon my level of willingness to continue with the training. Things were going okay, but there were significant changes on the horizon.

Ajahn Pasanno had made the decision that he was going to leave Wat Pah Nanachat to assist Ajahn Amaro, an English-born monk, in

establishing a branch monastery in Northern California. He would no longer be resident in Thailand, so the matter of who was going to take his place as abbot the following year was to be discussed by the community.

After bonding quite deeply with Ajahn Pasanno over the previous year or so, this felt quite destabilising. I already wasn't feeling quite ready for the next jungle retreat in just a few months' time, and I wanted to know who my abbot and teacher would be before I could fully commit to anything further.

My friend Tahn Punnyo, who had previously been ordained in England, mentioned that he felt I might like it there. He described the monastery in England as more gentle, more friendly and chatty, and less wilful and macho.

The most senior monk from the community in England, Ajahn Sumedho, would be passing through Wat Nanachat over the Christmas and New Year period, and would lead a ten day retreat. I was interested to meet him and open to the possibility of continuing as a novice monk in a different environment. Once he had arrived, I was able to join several outings with Ajahn Sumedho, including visiting his preceptor.

I observed that there was a grandfather-like quality of warmth that exuded from Ajahn Sumedho, and I found him to be very friendly and approachable. The fact that he would make the effort to visit his preceptor, even at sixty years old and after having been a monk for over thirty years, was very touching.

During the retreat, I observed that his style of giving Dhamma talks was very reflective, and he had a keen wit and ironic sense of humour, all of which I appreciated. The meditation method he encouraged was very relaxed and spacious, and he seemed to enjoy encouraging the junior monks.

Both Ajahn Pasanno and Tahn Punnyo had mentioned to Ajahn Sumedho that I was considering continuing the training in England, and when I asked him if I would be welcome, he replied that he had heard good things about me and that I was very welcome.

After Ajahn Sumedho's retreat, the international Sangha members living in Thailand at the time, as well as several abbots from overseas, convened to discuss who would be the next abbot of Wat Pah Nanachat. After no one truly capable of the position volunteered, Ajahn Jayasaro announced that, despite the fact that he really did not want to do it, he felt strongly that his teacher Ajahn Chah would have wanted him to rise to the occasion and continue leading the community. He offered to take on the role of abbot for a period of five years as a practice and as an offering.

Even though this was very noble of Ajahn Jayasaro, because I was still struggling with the training and the environment at Wat Nanachat, hearing the words 'I really don't want to do it' left me feeling somewhat cold. I could not help but suspect that if he did not really want to take on the role, he might not do the job very well or be truly energetically present and available to the monks under his guidance. I felt that I needed an abbot and a teacher who sincerely wanted to be there.

In hindsight, I recognise that I underestimated Ajahn Jayasaro's goodness and nobility. It later became obvious that just because he had not really wanted to do it did not mean that he would not rise to the occasion and fulfil his duties very well. Ajahn Jayasaro was definitely among the best abbots that Wat Pah Nanachat has ever had, if not one of the best abbots in Thailand, but I had no way of knowing that at the time.

Pondering the situation deeply, and to help me determine whether or not I should take full ordination as a *bhikkhu*, I decided I should go to Amaravati Buddhist Monastery in England to investigate monastic life under Ajahn Sumedho.

Some kind South African lay friends who were staying at Wat Nanachat at the time offered to cover the cost of the ticket to London, and within about a month I had a visa and a travel date. Intending to be as modest and frugal as possible, I requested the cheapest ticket, which turned out to be on Kuwait Airways with two stopovers.

I never imagined the day would come when I would be flying to England to go and live in a Buddhist monastery as a monk – it seemed surreal – but that day did come. Even more surreal was walking around Kuwait International Airport on a layover in the middle of the night, in the middle of the desert in the Middle East, observing the sheikhs proudly swanning around in their white sheets while I walked around in brown ones. Yet again, I was in a strange and unfamiliar place where I did not know a single person. The winds of *kamma* can certainly blow us in strange directions.

The other strange thing was that most of the people on the plane had been Filipino; I guess the men were labourers and the women were housekeepers. I felt sad for them, thinking about them living and working in the desert so far from their tropical island homes and separated from the warmth of their loving extended families.

The next leg of the journey was from Kuwait to Romania. After just a few hours, we landed in Bucharest International Airport and I saw snow for the first time in my life! As we exited the plane, walking down onto the tarmac and across to the terminal, I couldn't resist crouching down and feeling what snow felt like. It felt cold! People looked at me as though I was very strange – I suppose I was.

Inside the terminal was another surreal scene of macho men and red-lipped voluptuous women, many of whom were wearing tall fur hats and smoking cigarettes in a strangely sexual manner. Conversations were occurring all around me, yet I did not understand a single word. I tried not to stare, but the scene was fascinating.

I had no money to buy myself a drink, and no one knew anything about monks and their rules there, so I spent a few hours feeling both thirsty and seriously out of place. In time, I boarded another flight, this time bound for London.

Landing at Heathrow Airport was scary. We had to remain in a holding pattern until we were given permission to land. Not understanding the wonders of radar and air traffic control, the scary thing was the sheer density of the cloud cover. Every now and then I saw the flashing lights of another plane out of the window in the distance, also flying in circles, and I couldn't help wondering how on earth we could be flying around in the clouds above one of the world's busiest airports and not be about to crash into another plane! Once we were given permission to land, I counted three distinct layers of clouds as we descended.

By the time we disembarked I felt very jet-lagged and discombobulated. Normally I have a pretty good memory for such details, but I have no recollection whatsoever of who picked me up from the airport, what time we arrived at Amaravati, or who showed me to my room.

It's funny what the human mind chooses to remember, but what I do recall is that everything in England smelled different, and that my room in particular smelled old. It was the middle of winter and freezing outside, so the room had a heater and a thick duvet, and I quickly fell into a deep sleep.

I had arrived in the middle of the three month winter retreat – when conversations were discouraged – and the only person I knew at the monastery was Ajahn Sumedho. Morning chanting and group meditation were at 5:00 am and breakfast was at 7:00 am. It was strange that it was still pitch black at seven in the morning – I had never experienced that before – and the grass, paths, trees, and shrubs were all wet with fog.

There was an interesting breakfast scene. You would serve yourself some thick porridge, then go and sit on a mat in a circle. Being the most junior, I sat towards the back. After everyone had eaten, Ajahn Sumedho would give a Dhamma reflection, and then the work monk or nun would assign chores. There was another group meditation session after chores and again in the afternoon, and then chanting and meditation later in the evening.

It was a strange time to arrive and try to assimilate into a new community because people weren't talking very much, and I soon discovered that I did not like winter in England and I missed Thailand – especially the tropical climate, the spicy flavoursome food, and the friendly Thais.

I don't mean to sound negative, but having lived in Australia and then Thailand, I really hated what seemed to me to be the pathetic quality of insipid light that seeped through the layers of clouds in winter. The bare trees which had lost their leaves looked dead and creepy to me. Walking on muddy, mushy trails was depressing, and the cold seemed to bite into you. It was not cool or refreshing or invigorating, it was just damn well icy cold – wet and cold! Even the stone and brick houses appeared to be covered in mould and lichen; they looked lacklustre, dank, and depressing. The horses were nice, though, and the people we passed along the walking paths would always say hello.

Fortunately for me, there was another novice monk who soon became my friend. Samanera Anando was a sensitive chap with a cheeky sense of humour, a sharp sarcastic wit, and he liked to tease. He could usually manage to get a laugh out of me. He would pop into my room to chat every now and then, and would invite me to go walking in the Hertfordshire countryside when the schedule allowed.

The dark, cold wintry environment and the intensified efforts in meditation, combined with little conversation, had a very strange effect on my mind – something I hadn't expected or prepared for. I started

experiencing some very dark and pensive moods, as well as intense and disturbing dreams.

One night I dreamt of a *Māra*-like figure. (*Māra* represents the personification of evil or unwholesome qualities in Buddhism.) This figure looked very much like me, except more powerful, and the energy around him was intensely sexual. He was wearing tight black leather clothing and had two dogs with him, one on either side. The dogs were tall, black, and mean, with long sharp teeth. They were snarling at me and wore a kind of chrome armour. I suppose you might call them ‘Hounds from Hell’. The dogs turned into liquid quicksilver that seeped beneath my feet, making me almost lose my balance.

The *Māra* figure looked at me and said just one word: ‘F#@K!’

Power, lust, contempt, avarice, and menacing ill-will exuded from him. It was awful and very unnerving.



*Samanera Achalo, Ajahn Sumedho and Samanera Anando*

In hindsight, if I were to interpret this dream, I would say that this was negative *kamma* that I had produced through sexual activities in my youth swelling up in the mind, wanting to find expression and an outlet once again, now that my life was contained within the strictest adherence to celibacy.

A few nights later, something even more disturbing happened. I was fast asleep when something burst through my door, waking me up. It was an intensely black figure that radiated an eerie yellow light in all directions. Whatever it was, it did not wish me well. Terrifyingly, I could still see this image even though I was now wide awake. I slammed the door shut on it with my mind.

This experience really freaked me out. It seemed to have occurred in a parallel reality – in a state between sleep and wakefulness – but it was an extremely lucid experience and seemed very real. I do not have the ability to discern exactly what this experience was or its significance, but if I were to guess, I would suspect that this was an actual *Māra deva*, a heavenly being with wrong views who tries to obstruct those intending to do good. These two experiences made me very wary of the long, dark, silent winter nights.

I was concerned that I would sound quite mad if I told people about these experiences, but at the same time I might actually go mad if I didn't! I thought that some of the senior monks would have some experience with such phenomena, so I decided to approach the abbot.

Although Ajahn Sumedho was still living in residence, he had semi-retired as abbot, and a lovely senior monk, Ajahn Viradhammo, was the acting abbot at the time. He had not had any personal experience of such visual phenomena, but he was confident that Ajahn Sumedho would be able to help, so he encouraged me to approach him and request a chat.

After the meal, I approached Ajahn Sumedho. He invited me to his *kuti* at tea time. When I arrived, I offered him a foot massage, which

he happily accepted, and he asked how I was settling in. I explained that my meditation was going well and I had made friends with Samanera Anando, but I was having some challenges with the cold weather, the long dark nights and my own dark moods.

Ajahn Sumedho looked at me with kindness and keen interest. When I noticed this, I decided to mention the dream visions and experiences. He was quiet for a moment before he made some very interesting statements. He said that intensely difficult dark moods are not uncommon in the early years of training the mind – he had experienced them himself. He emphasised that focusing upon the awareness itself, which simply knows the mind state, is the best way to respond, trusting deeply in this ‘knowing-awareness’ and feeling confident that nothing could harm or destroy it. He stressed that awareness can take anything; moods will come and go, but we can use them to train the mind to rest in ‘mindful knowing’.

With regard to the visions, he said that some people experience these things and some people don’t. The fact that I sometimes saw visions was probably a sign of accumulated merit. His own intuitive sense was that they were nothing to be frightened of and could even be a sign that I was on the right track. As long as I was strict in keeping my precepts and diligent in my meditation, he was confident that everything would be okay.

It was a tremendous relief to me that Ajahn Sumedho did not feel that I was strange or crazy, and that he had shown an interest in me and true kindness. When I asked him if I could pop in from time to time to give him a foot massage and have a chat, he said that I could. It was extremely fortuitous that I was able to draw close to Ajahn Sumedho during this period.

The winter retreat continued, and I continued to put effort into my meditation practice and to patiently endure the dark moods when they arose. Sometimes I would ask Ajahn Sumedho if he would like to go

for a walk with me, and occasionally we would walk a loop trail in the fields around the monastery. He was sixty-one at the time and very fit for his age.

After a month or more, and a few more conversations getting to know one another, I was yet again lamenting my dark moods and expressing doubts as to whether I was a suitable candidate to be a fully ordained monk when Ajahn Sumedho said, ‘Samanera Achalo, compared to what I was getting up to at your age, you are a saint!’

I looked at him in disbelief. He explained that during his university days he had been quite wild.

‘You are a good-hearted and sweet person,’ he assured me. ‘Trust me, I can tell, and I know!’

He encouraged me to learn to embrace the monk’s training with interest, to see it as a blessing and a tool to cultivate the reflective mind.

When I wondered out loud whether I was too sensitive and not tough enough to be a monk, Ajahn Sumedho reassured me that he was confident that if I kept meditating and stuck with the training, my sensitivity, combined with my reflective abilities and acute powers of observation, would prove to be a strength, not a weakness. Although tough and disciplined himself, he was not as impressed with machismo as he was with genuine intelligence and reflective ability. It was so helpful for me to hear this from the most senior Western disciple of Ajahn Chah, a monk with over three decades of experience in the robes at that point.

As the weeks went on, we had many conversations about varied subjects – he told me stories of his days at university in Berkeley and in the Peace Corps, his marriage and divorce, his time in the navy during the Korean War, and other personal stories that it would not be

appropriate to repeat here. I became quite close to him and started calling him Luang Por (Venerable Father).

Luang Por revealed that he had been quite sensitive as a little boy and as a young man, despite appearing tough and put together on the outside. It was very kind of him to be so open and generous in revealing these things to me – it really helped me to tangibly see and understand that sensitivity was not an impediment to being a monk. This Luang Por before me, whose feet I was massaging, with the big deep voice and big broad shoulders – a monk of over thirty years, with several monasteries under his guidance – was a very sensitive man. Sensitive, yet also tough and capable.

On one occasion during this period, Ajahn Sumedho took a few monks and nuns on a trip to Christ Church Cathedral in Oxford. He spontaneously began reciting some of Shelley's poetry while we wandered through the cloisters. This image perfectly captures something for me: that it is possible to be tough yet sensitive, wise yet playful – both an artist and a warrior.

Because Luang Por Sumedho was around the same age as my father, I think my mind experienced him, both psychologically and archetypically, as being like a father in the best sense of the word. He was someone to talk to who was happy to listen and give valid, relevant and helpful advice based upon his own experience. He was someone who felt stable and strong in moments when I did not. And as the monk at the very head of the line – while I was one at the very end – he also imparted teachings and advice that helped me to understand what I would need to survive and thrive as a monk.

He told stories about living and training with his teacher Ajahn Chah – not just eulogised stories, but also stories of times when he had experienced him as annoying and frustrating to live with. Luang Por told stories about walking on *tudong* alone in India, with no lay steward or attendant. I was in awe of the faith, trust, and courage that must have

taken. He also related stories about establishing monasteries in England and training monks, nuns, and laypeople.

Ajahn Sumedho has a wealth of truly interesting information if you can find the right moment and know the right questions to ask. It was my good fortune that he appeared to enjoy my company and, being semi-retired already, was less burdened with administrative duties at that time.

But it wasn't just stories. Luang Por led by example in meditation practice as well. He would meditate in his *kuti* before leading the early morning chanting and meditation with the community, and he was always the first sitting in the hall. He constantly taught us that we should trust in mindful awareness, pointing out that the more we could come to trust and depend upon it, the more dependable this mindful awareness would become.

Ajahn Sumedho was very patient with my complaining about the weather and some of the grumpier monks and nuns. I did not enjoy the sarcastic tone that the English can demonstrate in their banter. He explained that he had learned to enjoy the grey skies and soft light over the years he had lived in England – they had become the tranquil backdrop to a peaceful mind. He also insisted that English people would become true and loyal friends over time if I gave them a chance.

Luang Por felt that England and Amaravati were his home. I think that having grown up in Seattle was one reason Ajahn Sumedho could tolerate the English weather. Our childhoods really do affect us a great deal. My childhood had conditioned me to consider only absurd amounts of sunshine to be sufficient – anything less was simply depressing.

As the winter slowly became milder and turned into spring, I was able to experience just how beautiful rural Hertfordshire could be on a sunny spring day. The soft verdant green of the grass, the cheerful yellow

daffodils, and the fragrant lilac blossoms that grew under the oak trees here and there were all simply delightful.

Samanera Anando had been a soldier and an aerobics instructor before becoming a novice, and one of his main objectives in going for walks was to stay lean and fit. He enjoyed my company enough to continue inviting me on walks, even though I greatly challenged his fitness focus. I was always wanting to lie down on the soft grass and stare up into the sky, marvelling at the lack of ants, spiders, and snakes! I also couldn't pass a single horse in a paddock or stable without stopping to stroke it, and I would moo at the cows to see how they responded.

During these walks, Samanera Anando and I would empathise with each other about the difficulties of the celibate life and tell each other horror stories about the worst moments in our past. Ajahn Sumedho had been right: the English could make very good friends.

Ajahn Viradhammo kindly excused Samanera Anando and me from morning work duties for a few weeks to sew a set of monk's robes during that time instead. A senior monk taught us how – sewing the monks' double-layered outer robe with all of the hidden seams was really hard!

In the Ajahn Chah tradition, it is part of the *bhikkhu* ordination preparations to sew one's own robes. Learning this skill early on means that monks can mend or sew a robe themselves if they ever need to, and it is another way to learn focus, patience, and follow-through, ensuring the task is completed.

Despite going ahead with these preparations, I was still doubting whether to take the next step to ordain as a monk, so I decided to perform a small experiment on myself. There was a bookshelf on the opposite wall of my bedroom that I would see whenever I entered. I placed the robe I had sewn on the shelf, and every time I returned to my room I asked myself, 'Do you want to be a fully ordained *bhikkhu*?'

I often felt forlorn and lacking in confidence about the matter, but whenever I entered the room, saw the robe and asked myself, ‘Do you want to be a monk?’ the answer was always a simple and unequivocal, ‘Yes.’ It wasn’t a confidently shouted ‘Yes!’, but it was a calm, resolved, and determined one.

This was very important for me to observe, and I learned something about the nature of doubt through conducting this experiment. Just because you might not feel confident about doing something and may still experience doubts does not mean that you are not deeply committed to trying. I was genuinely surprised by how resolved I was, and this helped me begin to feel more confident – if I truly wanted it, then I would find a way to do it.

Ajahn Sumedho was going to lead a ten day retreat for the laypeople at Amaravati’s retreat centre, and he kindly invited me both to join the retreat and to be his attendant during those ten days. With the brighter and warmer weather, as well as feeling more confident about the practice and less afraid of my own mind, I was keen to dive more intensely into meditation once again.

Luang Por led chanting, gave talks, and repeatedly dropped suggestions throughout the many meditation sessions to keep trusting in awareness. Some of my meditations became quite spacious. At other times there were many feelings in the heart area – some pleasant, but many painful – and it was difficult to get much sense of space around them at times.

This experience reminded me to put into practice some advice that Ajahn Paññāvaḍḍho, the most senior Western disciple of Ajahn Mahā Boowa, had given me the previous year. One of the younger Ajahns at Wat Nanachat had taken a few monks on a road trip to meet several respected teachers in Northeast Thailand. I was fortunate to be one of them, and I had the opportunity to ask Ajahn Paññāvaḍḍho a

question. He was seventy years old at the time and had already been a monk for around forty years.

I asked him how to practise with strong emotional states such as despair. He advised me to try and observe emotions as feelings in the heart area, observing those feelings simply as ‘feelings’ without getting stuck on or feeding into any stories. He encouraged me to pay particular attention to noticing how they constantly change: being mindful of the feeling, noticing its flux and flow, and observing how it changes and ceases.

He said he had gotten good results from practising in this way. He encouraged me by saying that if we learn to catch emotions early, before they become very large and strong, then they will have less sway over the mind.

About two-thirds into the retreat, something very interesting occurred in my meditation during one of the afternoon sessions. As I was observing very closely the changing of feelings in the chest and heart area while trying to hold a spacious quality of awareness around them, something started to happen in my feet and legs. It is difficult to describe, but I will try, and a brief preface may help.

As ordinary beings without profound spiritual insight into the deeper nature of reality, we are not initially aware of the way we identify with our body, senses, feelings, and thoughts as part of our sense of ‘self’. It is a deep habit we all have and it is subsequently our basic working assumption. Whether clinging and attachment arises because of this self-view, or whether the self-view arises due to clinging and attachment, is hard to say. The Buddha explains clearly that this view is conditioned, conventional reality – not ultimate reality – and when we deludedly grasp at it, we suffer.

On that afternoon, as I was observing feelings in the heart area very closely and being mindful of their constant change, the area around

my feet and legs suddenly felt different. The only way to describe it is that there was an absence of grasping at them as a 'self', they were simply something to be experienced and felt. They were there, but they were just form – just legs and feet – not a self.

As I continued meditating, this experience moved up the body through the buttocks and abdomen. Although I remained focused on observing feelings in the heart area, I was also aware that the lower part of the body felt open and spacious, while the upper part still felt somewhat contracted, until eventually the chest area also became open and empty. This led to a strange experience of feeling tension around the face and head, but emptiness below the chin. Following this, there was intense shaking for a few seconds, and then the grasping and tension disappeared out through the crown of the head.

There was awareness of a body and awareness of breath, but in that moment there was simply no identification with it; no commentary, no liking, and no disliking. The form of the body was present, and yet it felt empty. There was great coolness and peace – and no suffering whatsoever.

It is difficult to say how long this lasted, but I remember that I was not able to bow and get up at the end of the session along with everyone else. No one was there to be able to do that at that time!

The mind returned to its more usual mode of perception after a few more minutes. Perhaps the entire experience lasted about half an hour. It was around fifteen minutes after the start of afternoon tea when I walked in and joined Ajahn Sumedho. He was happy to hear about the experience.

Reflecting on the causes and conditions that supported this insight experience, I am mindful that I was in the company of a teacher whom I loved and respected, and I had been experiencing increased confidence in the practice and in my own abilities due to his

encouragement and positive reinforcement. I was practising in a suitable environment with good communal support. I had sincere enthusiasm and curiosity regarding the meditation practice, without too much expectation. And lastly, I had been making a lot of consistent effort in formal practice for many days leading up to this. By clearly seeing feelings as simply feelings and observing their changing nature diligently, I had not been feeding or nourishing self-view, which allowed it to fall away for a period of time.

After this experience, which was probably some kind of *vipassanā-ñāṇa* (insight knowledge), I was able to reflect upon the Buddha's teachings with a very different understanding of what he was pointing to. The body really is not a self, and when we don't grasp at it as one, there really is no suffering!

The experience faded and became a memory, but because it occurred on a deep level within a peaceful mind, it remained as a very clear and poignant memory. It increased my faith and confidence in the practice tremendously. I also understood once again that in order to gain the deeper benefits of the practice, we have to apply ourselves very intensively.

After having glimpsed the kind of insight that consistent, intensive meditation can produce, and feeling sufficiently encouraged by Ajahn Sumedho to feel confident about taking the next step in the training, I had to admit that I really missed Thailand. If I was going to continue on for a period of years as a monk, I would prefer to do so in the forests of Thailand. I even felt interested and willing to try another retreat in the jungle.

I discreetly wrote a letter to Ajahn Jayasaro, asking whether I would be welcome back at Wat Pah Nanachat. Tahn Ajahn wrote back saying that I was welcome, and that he would have me ordained along with several other novices before the rains retreat if I could return in time.

I had to inform Luang Por Sumedho and Ajahn Viradhammo of my intentions. I suspect Ajahn Sumedho may have felt somewhat disappointed that I was leaving so soon. Perhaps he felt a bit ripped off, having encouraged me so much, only for me to leave so unexpectedly. But when I look back on the time I spent at Amaravati, I believe Ajahn Sumedho succeeded perfectly in being a wise mentor and spiritual friend: he helped me to feel strong enough to follow in his footsteps and commit to training in the very places where he himself had trained.

Although I may not have benefited the community at Amaravati very much during that short period, I would contribute to other communities later. And in the following years, Ajahn Sumedho kindly invited me on several occasions to attend retreats he led when he came to Thailand. The sense of connection and gratitude remained.

The same kind South African Dhamma friends who had helped me to travel to England were happy to support me in returning to Thailand, especially as I was now committing more deeply to the training.

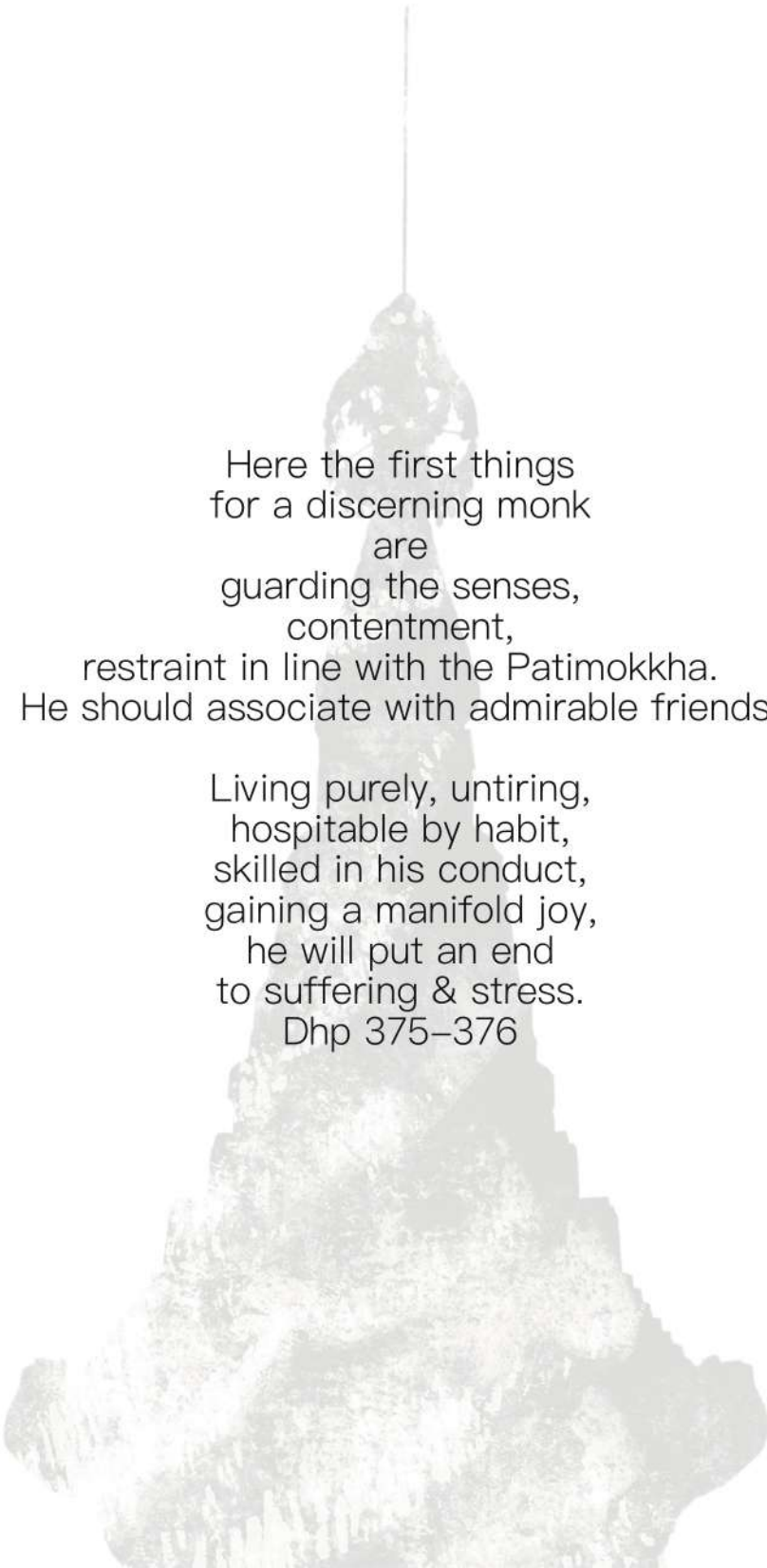




# Chapter 15

A Young Bhikkhu in Thailand  
(Age 25)





Here the first things  
for a discerning monk  
are  
guarding the senses,  
contentment,  
restraint in line with the Patimokkha.  
He should associate with admirable friends.

Living purely, untiring,  
hospitable by habit,  
skilled in his conduct,  
gaining a manifold joy,  
he will put an end  
to suffering & stress.  
Dhp 375–376

## *CHAPTER FIFTEEN*

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### *A Young Bhikkhu in Thailand (Age 25)*

I had felt odd while living in England – as though I was walking around in a postcard a lot of the time – and returning to Thailand after five months away simply felt natural and easy. Certainly, I benefited tremendously from my time there, but I have come to believe that there is something like a *kammic* family that we each have, those beings with whom we have been closely associated over many lifetimes. I loved Luang Por Sumedho like a father, but the community in England had not really felt like my *kammic* family.

The DNA of my physical body surely has roots in England, but I suspect that most of my recent past lives have been in Asia. I was, by then, very familiar with Wat Pah Nanachat, its rhythms and schedule, and with Ajahn Jayasaro as well, so returning to Wat Nanachat felt like coming home. It felt natural to slide back into the schedule again. The community received me quite graciously, particularly as I now had a clear and firm intention to take the next step in the training and request full ordination.

There was now a group of five novices scheduled to ordain before the rains retreat. We were quite an eclectic group: myself, a Russian, a Malaysian, a Frenchman, and a Thai. Like me, they were also in the process of sewing their robes. I had already sewn the most difficult, the outer robe, but still had to sew the upper and lower robes, so I joined my brothers.

There was an accepted standard, or assumption, that if one was requesting full ordination after the novice training period, one should have a clear five year minimum commitment in mind. Fortunately, no one ever really pressed me on this matter, because there is just no way that I could have committed to a full five years of living the celibate monk's life, complete with 3:00 am rises. Five years seems like an eternity to a twenty-five year old – at least it did to this twenty-five year old.

In my heart I had quietly but deeply committed to at least a full year as a *bhikkhu*, and was happy about that decision. That year would contain a rains retreat and one more jungle retreat, and that already seemed like a lot to commit to at the time. After that, I would see how things stood and recommit to another year if I felt I was up to it. The slow and steady approach was best.

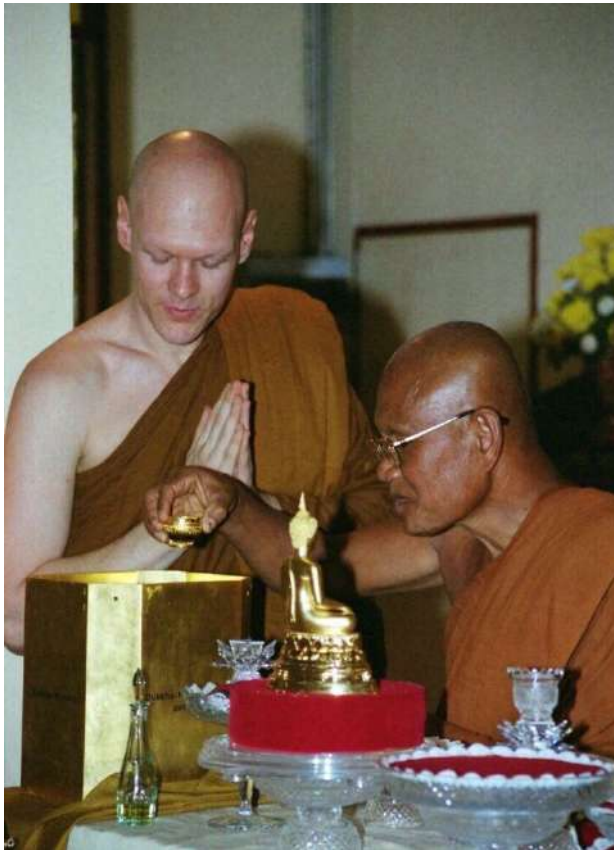
I had wondered and doubted quite a lot about the suitability or efficacy of training in Thai Forest monasteries before going to England. But it was through spending time in the monastery in England that I was able to see more clearly that my training in Thailand had been working, and that I simply needed to give it more time.

I had missed the early morning alms rounds in the soft, warm light of dawn, and the quiet periods alone in my *kuti* surrounded by forest each day. Having more clearly delineated silent and solitary periods of time during the day was helpful for seeing the mind, and provided the opportunity to make concerted and well-directed efforts in training it. The difficult part was being constantly truthful, humble and mature, and taking responsibility. That would be an ongoing process.

Luang Por Liem was the abbot at Wat Nong Pah Pong. He had become abbot after Luang Por Chah passed away – Luang Por Chah had personally asked him to lead the community at Nong Pah Pong, the monastery that he had established. Luang Por Liem was a wonderful, impeccable, but also inscrutable kind of a monk. He was somewhat

famous for his equanimity and aloofness. In those days he would hardly ever make eye contact, even when people were talking directly to him. He never seemed to smile, and it was not uncommon for him to simply not answer a question if he didn't feel moved to answer it.

Luang Por Liem had recently been made a preceptor, and he was to be our preceptor – or so we hoped. Some monks from Wat Nanachat had gone over to pay respects to Luang Por Liem, and, mentioning that there were five novices intending to ordain, had asked him for a suitable date. Luang Por Liem had not given an answer.



*With Luang Por Liem*

Some of the monks were hoping to invite relatives and friends to the ceremony, so not having a clear date was problematic for them. For myself, I was just trying to manage my anxiety and thought that having a set date would be helpful. In the meantime, we practised the chanting for the ceremony every morning and evening, aiming to be ready whenever the time came.

It is a traditional custom for monks to make the natural dye for their own robes. This entails making wood chips from the heartwood of a jackfruit tree. We took turns chopping away at logs to make the wood chips and boiling them in water for many hours, sometimes late into the evening. The dye water then had to be boiled down to a thicker, more concentrated form. This process took many days. Once the dye was ready, we washed and pounded our robes in it.

The jackfruit dye has a deliciously sweet fragrance, and different batches range in colour from mustard yellow to ochre-orange. Our batch of dye came out a distinctly cheerful yellow shade. With all of the chanting practice and dye-making, I hadn't been getting much time alone to meditate, and I wasn't feeling very cheerful. I felt exhausted and nervous at the same time.

The monk who served as Ajahn Jayasaro's secretary visited Wat Nong Pah Pong a couple more times, and finally on July 13th, Luang Por Liem announced that he would ordain the novices from Wat Pah Nanachat the next day at 4:00 am.

The other novices and I prepared some offerings for our preceptor from the storeroom, and we practised the chanting and choreography of the ceremony that evening. Venerable Siripannyo was our chanting mentor. He has a real gift with languages, so this was our good fortune. He worked hard to help us make sure our short vowels were short, our long vowels were long, and our aspirated consonants were correctly aspirated. So much so that at one point I lamented, 'Tahn Siripannyo *khab*, I feel that I have practised enough! What I really need

to do now is go meditate and then sleep!’ (*Khab* is used at the end of a sentence when speaking politely in Thai.)

Tahn Siripannyo responded, ‘But you haven’t quite got it right yet,’ to which I replied, ‘I need to get the feeling and the intentions right too!’

Of course we were both right in different ways. More collectedness and presence of mind would definitely help the chanting, and it was also true that I had not yet remembered everything perfectly.

We practised the chanting yet again at 3:00 am, and then the other candidates and I, along with Ajahn Jayasaro, Tahn Siripannyo and several other monks, departed for Wat Nong Pah Pong at 3:30 am.

We were like a battalion of sorts, with Ajahn Jayasaro as our commander. But instead of army fatigues and rifles, we each had our three robes, sitting cloth, shoulder bag, and alms bowl. We had been well trained for the ceremony with regards to knowing when to stand, when to enter the inner quorum, when to bow, and what to say when asked. There was a right way and a wrong way to say and do everything.

Entering the pitch-black forest at Wat Nong Pah Pong on foot before dawn, wearing our stiff but sweet-smelling robes in the silence of the night was surreal. This was it! I was really doing it! It was really happening! My legs were wobbly and I felt as if I had no stomach. Being completely surrounded by other monks and novices was vital that morning, for my own legs would not have been strong enough to walk on their own.

I felt a sense of symbiosis, as if we were flowing together into a deep and vast river. Looking back, another way I consider it is that I was being held in place by my brothers so that a surgical procedure could occur – a vital and necessary step for cutting the *kilesas* out of the heart.



*Bhikkhu ordination day*

The Buddha statue in the ordination hall at Wat Nong Pah Pong is a large image in the standing posture, holding up both hands in a gesture, or *mudra*, known as the double teaching *mudra*. He is pitch black in colour and about three metres tall, and on that particular dimly lit morning he seemed to me to be holding up both hands in what felt like an ominous gesture, as if to say, ‘Just stop! Don’t you dare! Don’t even think about it!’ I must admit that I did not find this particular image of our beloved Lord Buddha to be an encouraging presence on this occasion.

The time came to perform the ceremony. We were questioned according to the requirements, and I answered in a faint, breathy, slightly shaking voice. I accidentally answered one question incorrectly, saying yes when asked if I had leprosy! This made the gathered monks chuckle, but caused my face to turn beetroot red, and I quickly corrected myself. The Malaysian monk next to me, Tahn Mettiko, although considerably smaller than me, shot out his answers at great volume and with great

confidence. I wondered where he got such confidence from – I felt meek and terrified.

After the questioning, which had been performed by Ajahn Jayasaro and another Thai Ajahn, Ajahn Mahā Kamoong, we entered and sat in the midst of the gathered monks. Luang Por Liem checked our robes and handed us our alms bowls. The announcement was made three times in the Pāli language, and the community both rejoiced and consented with a resounding ‘Saadhuuu!’ And so, at 4:50 am on July 14<sup>th</sup>, 1996, we were pronounced fully ordained *bhikkhus*.

At one point, while standing in the hall waiting to be interrogated, I had wondered whether I should feel hurt or offended that I did not have a single family member or friend from my lay life present on what was possibly the most important day of my life. But then I thought to myself, ‘It is four in the morning in the middle of a forest in Ubon Ratchathani and you were given twelve hours’ notice prior to the ceremony – how could you possibly expect anyone to come?!’

Looking around, I accepted that Luang Por Liem and Ajahn Jayasaro were now like my fathers, and the other monks were my brothers. Having them present at the ceremony was all that I needed.

In many monasteries, ordination ceremonies are a big occasion and there is considerable celebration. But, true to form, with Luang Por Liem as the impeccably equanimous and aloof preceptor presiding over my ceremony, it was as minimalist as possible, with no fuss whatsoever. There was not even a single photograph taken. Looking back on this occasion, I actually feel a kind of pride that this was the perfect entrance into the renunciant, contemplative life.

Nearly three decades later, Luang Por Liem is still alive as I write these words, and he has developed a much more smiley and engaging countenance since that time. The alms bowl that he handed to

me during that ceremony roughly thirty years ago is the one I still use today.

At the beginning of the alms round back at Wat Nanachat, Ajahn Jayasaro said something very nice. He said, 'I'm not usually very moved by these ceremonies, but this time it really felt like something special.'

On a deeper, more fundamental level I felt truly relieved to have made it into the *bhikkhu* Sangha, but on another level I still felt some lingering depression. This was probably due, at least in part, to a couple of weeks of sleep deprivation and perhaps depleted adrenal glands from too much caffeine. I was astonished that I could be wearing metres and metres of sweetly-fragranced, cheerfully-coloured cloth and still feel depressed. Our emotional experience truly has many layers.

Writing these recollections now as a middle-aged man, I don't want to dwell too much on the challenges that I continued to experience in my daily monastic life at Wat Nanachat. As a grown man, I am well aware that most people's lives contain significant challenges and suffering, and we all have to endure uncomfortable things. Suffice it to say that, the monks, including myself, were sincere and practised well, living according to our rules of discipline.

Tahn Ajahn continued to give inspiring Dhamma talks, generously instructing and reminding us of relevant ways to consider and focus upon our practice of Dhamma. He was always present at the formal meetings, leading the practice. With only a fourteen year age difference, I didn't feel a father-son connection with Ajahn Jayasaro in the same manner that I had with Ajahn Pasanno and Ajahn Sumedho, so I did miss the warmth that arises from such a helpful projection or convention. But this meant it was necessary to learn to depend more upon myself and to further develop an inner refuge, which was also valuable.

At tea time Tahn Ajahn would sometimes read excerpts from the first draft of a biography that he was writing about the life of Ajahn

Chah. This helped us to feel that we knew Ajahn Chah a little better ourselves and to understand the context of living in a forest monastery more thoroughly. It felt like a real privilege to hear those words and to gain those glimpses into that wonderful monk's life. We were all aware that we were supported by and lived within the field of merit that he and his teachers had generated in Northeast Thailand.

Life as a monk still felt too difficult on many days, but I did notice some positive developments. In the previous year as a novice I may have had, on average, one good day per week, but in my first year as a *bhikkhu* there were, on average, a couple of good days every week. On those good days I felt light in body and mind, with a sense of inner calm, ease, contentment, and simple joy. Observing that the good days were slowly increasing gave rise to a sense that the training and discipline was working, even if it was taking longer than I might have hoped.

Even though by this stage I had had some genuine experience of a peaceful mind, as well as some spiritual insight, the fact that I still suffered felt somewhat embarrassing, as if I should know better. But one of the things that Ajahn Sumedho had explained to me was that just because we know how to practise doesn't mean the mind won't experience painful states. He saw those states as the results of old unskilful *kamm*s ripening in the mind and explained that we have to be patient with them, to use them as objects to be mindful of, and as a reminder not to make any more unskilful *kamma*.

Occasionally, when someone in the nearby village or a supporter of the monastery passed away, a funeral was held at Wat Pah Nanachat. These occurred in the traditional manner: the monks would chant for the deceased, people would view the corpse and place a flower on it, and then the body – placed upon a funeral pyre of many logs piled high – was burned right there in the middle of the monastery.

Although this probably sounds quite macabre, the monks could return to the pyre repeatedly to observe the cremation process. The coffin

would burn away, then the flesh, and then, for a period of time, a human skeleton was visible in the centre of the flames. The whole process took a few hours.

Witnessing this was a very helpful support to the young monks' meditation practice. It reminded us of the frailty and uncertainty of our opportunity to practise the Dhamma, having been born as humans, and helped us to develop insight into the true nature of the body. The monastery supporters whose bodies were being cremated were often meditators and frequently listened to Dhamma discourses themselves, and so would likely have viewed their burning body as one final offering to the forest monks to assist them in developing calm and insight.

The site upon which Wat Pah Nanachat was built had been a charnel ground for centuries. The old village ladies who joined the all-night meditation vigils each *Wan Phra* (lunar observance day) frequently saw ghosts. It was not uncommon for one of the monks to sense ghosts hanging out around his *kuti* – I saw several myself over the years. We all dedicated merit to them, wishing them an auspicious rebirth and eventual final liberation.

Wat Nanachat definitely had a heavy atmosphere at times. It was a unique combination of a number of factors. The forest itself was quite dark, and there weren't any expansive views or vantage points from which to gaze into empty space or enjoy a relaxing outlook. There were a large number of idealistic young monks who, while sincere, were at times grieving the lay life they had left behind. Combined with the chafing involved in the renunciation process, the schedule was intense as well. We *farang* monks were more critical and fault-finding than many of the Thai monks, who were often more cheerful and relaxed in their disposition. With many different character types living together, it was as if we were little rocks in a rock tumbler, slowly chipping off each other's sharp edges as we bumped up against one another in daily life.



*The community at Wat Pah Nanachat*

The intensity of the monastic training schedule, the dark environment of the forest and the presence of ghosts – and the particular vibration or resonance that all of these generated – created a unique and sometimes challenging environment at Wat Nanachat. On days when depression was present in the mind, or if it simply rained too many days in a row, life could be very gruelling. Occasionally, a strange fever would pass through the community that would knock you down for a couple of days. Food poisoning or diarrhoea was also another thing that you had to endure and practise with from time to time.

Looking back at the various challenges I faced, I do wonder how I managed to make it through. Many of my brothers fell away over the months and years. Strong faith was no doubt an important factor, as well as a dogged tenacity and resources of inner creativity.

I once asked Ajahn Jayasaro what young monks could do in order to feel invigorated, potent, or virile, because everything could feel very impotent, saggy, and limp at times. He simply looked at me as if I were a strange insect, without giving me a direct answer. I'm sure that his powerful faculties of faith, wisdom, and intellect, combined with the

wellbeing generated from over a decade and a half of practice, buoyed his mind consistently. But for the junior monks, we were struggling in the process of establishing those qualities.

In those days there were empty fields and more open space in the land behind the monastery. Sometimes I would jump over the wall and go for a jog. We didn't have running shoes, and flip flops did not work for running, so barefoot was the only option. Jogging barefoot on hard, uneven earthen paths in loose robes came with a certain amount of discomfort, but the feeling of escaping the confines of the monastery and experiencing some reckless abandon for a few moments was helpful to me as a twenty-five year old.

Although it was against our rules, sometimes I would also sing my heart out for half an hour or so, giving a free concert to the trees and the occasional squirrel or dog. I would have to confess this offence to a sympathetic brother afterwards, but it did help to let off steam on occasion. After a couple of years in robes, I didn't need to do this sort of thing anymore, as those 'outward flowing exuberances' could be more successfully channelled inwardly.

Over the course of three decades, Wat Nanachat has inevitably changed a great deal. The buildings are lighter, brighter and more spacious, and the forest has been thinned around the central buildings to let in more light and breeze. There is also now a four-lane highway just a few hundred metres from the front of the monastery, so it no longer feels like the enigmatic and haunted backwater that it once was.

When I look back at those times, I can clearly see that they were at least as wonderful as they were awful. But being able to come and go from the situation was also an important factor in surviving and benefiting from it. Although difficult, the intensity was a special opportunity: it was the crucible within which the ingredients of a sword could be melted and tempered, and that sword could be sharpened into the sword of wisdom.

There was a week or so in the middle of the rains retreat where the desire to disrobe was quite strong. But because I had made a vow to stick with it for at least a year, I endured the impulse and noticed how it calmed down and faded away. As I had experienced the year before, when the rains retreat was over I felt less pressure and less oppressed by the weather, and everything seemed okay again. Deciding to strike while the iron was hot, I extended my vow to include at least one more rains retreat.

After discussing some of my challenges with the environment at Wat Nanachat with Ajahn Jayasaro, he kindly allowed me to spend some time at a branch monastery called Wat Poo Jom Gom, situated near the Mekong River.

Here it was possible to enjoy lovely views, big open skies, and a much more open schedule. I stayed in several rocky overhangs, one of which had a wonderful view of the Mekong River and the forests of Laos on the other side. The sound of cow and buffalo bells could be heard in the far distance when the wind blew up from the valley below.

Lying on large, warm boulders, feeling the earth below, and considering one's bones as also being made of earth element was a relaxing and expansive meditation. Being aware of the empty expanse of sky above and noticing the space around thoughts and emotions was also a very lovely way to gain more space around one's experience. As the breeze brushed against my skin, I considered the in-breath and out-breath to be the same as this non-personal wind element.

Spending time at this remote branch monastery was a very good opportunity to experience what it is like to live outdoors, close to nature and with plentiful solo time. But after around five weeks I started to miss the feeling of having friends and communal support. When I heard that Ajahn Jayasaro would be leading a ten day meditation retreat over the New Year, I returned to Wat Nanachat in order to attend. The break had been refreshing, and returning felt good.



*With Ajahn Jayasaro*

My friend Tahn Punnyo had spent the rains retreat at a monastery in central Thailand with a monk called Ajahn Anan. He also returned to Wat Nanachat around the same time. I had missed him and it was good to see him again.

You might remember that Tahn Punnyo was the monk who suggested I might benefit from spending some time in England with Ajahn Sumedho, and I certainly did. He now suggested that, when the time came to spend some time in one of Ajahn Chah's branch monasteries in Thailand, Ajahn Anan's place might be a good fit. He felt he had benefited from his time there and explained that although Ajahn Anan had trained with Luang Por Chah at Wat Nong Pah Pong, he was originally from central Thailand and had been an accountant before becoming a monk.

Tahn Punnyo felt he might be more relatable than some of the other branch monastery abbots who had come from farming villages. I trusted Tahn Punnyo and made a mental note of it.

Next on the calendar, however, would be round two of the jungle retreat. Another monk who became a good friend, Tahn Sudanto from the United States, had also returned to Wat Nanachat around this time. He had been spending time with a renowned monk by the name of Ajahn Ganhah.

We junior monks used to eagerly gather information and compare notes about the great monks and monasteries of the present day Thai Forest Tradition. We kept track of who was purported to have deep *jhānic* meditation states, and to what level; who was believed to have attained to a stage of enlightenment, and what level; and who was believed to have psychic powers, and which ones – regardless of whether they were monks from the Mahā Nikāya or Dhammayut lineage, forest or city monks.

We probably had no business talking about these wonderful monks in this way, but they were the equivalent of truly great sports stars in the professional league of mental cultivation that we were playing in, and we needed some heroes to look up to.

Another thing that Tahn Punnyo mentioned was that, if we were passing through Bangkok, it would be good to go and pay respects to the much revered Emerald Buddha at the temple in the Royal Palace in the centre of the city. He explained that he had heard it was the best place to make aspirational prayers and to request support from celestial beings and Dhamma protectors. Hearing this definitely piqued my interest.

I was eager to return to the jungle to see how I would fare, having had more time to cultivate various disciplines in the twenty-two months since my first jungle retreat. Hearing of my interest to return, Tahn Sudanto suggested that we go to Samnaksong Dtao Dtam a month earlier than the rest of the group, which I agreed to. We asked permission from Ajahn Jayasaro – he gave us his blessing.

Tahn Sudanto had been living in Thailand longer than I had, so he knew how to make travelling arrangements. I mentioned to him that I would like to pay respects to the Emerald Buddha and see an autopsy in person, if possible.

I know this sounds like a strange combination – visiting a temple and a morgue – but many of the great meditation masters of our tradition developed deep, liberating insights through the cultivation of various meditations upon the nature of the body. The Buddha himself recommended that his disciples should spend time meditating in charnel grounds because first-hand contemplation of corpses aids in the development of insight.

Fortunately for me, Tahn Sudanto shared my interest and set about liaising for us to pass through Bangkok, spending a couple of days there before heading westward to Kanchanaburi. In a curious synchronicity, it just so happened that my twin brother, Troy, would be passing through Bangkok at the same time. It would be good to see him.

Once in Bangkok, I invited my brother to come with us to Wat Phra Kaew, the Temple of the Emerald Buddha. I had been contemplating what prayers to make there. Although I had been blessed to have very good teachers, I felt that my life as a monk was still somewhat difficult to endure. There were more and more good days, but still many very difficult ones.

I was grateful to Ajahn Sumedho, Ajahn Pasanno and Ajahn Jayasaro; all had imparted valuable knowledge and had been very kind and generous to me, but I was still rich with suffering. I couldn't help but wonder whether there might be a meditation master with extremely potent loving-kindness who might be able to assist in cheering this mind up a little, or help speed up the process of establishing a resilient quality of wellbeing.

Tahn Sudanto and I made our way to the front of the temple, knelt down on the red carpet, bowed, and with hands raised in *añjali* I made my prayer. I was not quite sure how these things worked, so in my mind I spoke to the Buddha and the *devas* who support Buddhism and Buddhist practitioners, hoping – or assuming – that they would somehow hear me.

My prayer was as follows: ‘Dear Buddha and *devas*. I am willing and open to the possibility of being a monk for the whole of this lifetime, however, I am going to need more help to be able to do so. If there is a master in this country who can help me, with whom I have an auspicious *kammic* connection, may I meet him!’

After our prayer, some chanting and meditation, we wandered around outside for a while and admired the sparkling temple buildings and *chedis*. Troy enjoyed taking some photographs. There is definitely a vibrant, sparkling quality in the air around some of these ancient temples in Bangkok, and a significant vibrational shift when you enter through the temple gates. It is not difficult to imagine the air being filled with happy beings in a parallel realm.

On the afternoon the following day, Tahn Sudanto, Troy and I made our way to the police department morgue. In the case of a suspicious death or a traffic accident, bodies are sent to the police morgue in Bangkok for forensic analysis. The bodies of prisoners are also sent there for investigation. We needed to fill out a form before we were allowed to enter and quietly observe the facility.

Wow – what a scene! I wasn’t quite ready for it, but there we were.

Walking into the morgue, the first thing that hit us was the smell. There may have been bodies that had been retrieved from a canal or discovered a few days after death. The bodies were pumped full of formaldehyde immediately after autopsy in order to slow decomposition,

and this, combined with the stench of bloating corpses, was unmistakably pungent and awful. Bangkok is hot, and at the time there was no air conditioning or refrigerated storage at the facility – this may have changed since then.

A combination of seeing and smelling the bodies gave rise to the impulse to throw up; the blood drains from your face and a cold sweat forms on your brow. We dabbed mentholated smelling oils on handkerchiefs and held them to our noses. I had to tell myself firmly, ‘Don’t pass out! And don’t throw up!’

Poor Troy. He had never engaged in any death contemplation – a daily recollection encouraged by the Buddha – and didn’t really have any spiritual worldview to help him process the scene before us. He was even more freaked out than the monks.

I have been to this facility several times since this first visit, so I can’t remember precisely which corpses I viewed on which occasion, but I do remember one in particular that stands out from that day. It was the corpse of a handsome young man. He had one deep gash on his forehead from where he had hit something falling off his motorbike. The object had pierced through his skull and into his brain. He had died very quickly, and other than this one clean gash, there was no blood on his clothes or any other injuries. It was very obvious that he had been very much alive just moments before the accident, and that he had not anticipated dying that day.

You may recall that I had been concerned that Troy liked to ride very big and very fast Italian motorcycles, so I called him over.

‘Hey Troy, look – this guy fell off his motorcycle and died instantly.’

Troy observed the scene for a few moments and then asked if he could wait outside. He looked as terrible as I imagine I did.

I felt that the pathologists at this morgue were as scary – if not more scary – than the actual corpses! I found the perfunctory manner in which they went about performing autopsy after autopsy, with no sense of delicacy, reverence, or respect for the dead, to be really grotesque. They must have seen so many horrible things that they had become desensitised and dull-eyed.

During an autopsy, the first thing the pathologist does is cut the scalp from ear to ear, pulling the skin forward over the face and backwards behind the head. They then cut around the entire skull with a saw, in those days one literally bought from a hardware store. Once the skull has been cut, it is levered and cracked open. The brain is removed and examined, and I have often seen it later placed between the ankles, resting on the feet of the body.

Next, the trunk of the body is opened up with one long incision made from the base of the neck all the way down to the groin. The gases released from the body at this time are extremely nauseating, literally smelling like a thousand farts released all at once – please excuse my crassness. The ribs, heart, and lungs are all removed in sequence. After examination, they are placed alongside the corpse on the stainless steel trolley. The stomach is opened and its contents investigated, before the liver and kidneys are removed.

Once all of the organs have been examined and samples taken, the pathologist places everything back into the emptied out trunk of the body – including the brain! – and stitches it up with thick cord. They then put cloth into the cranial cavity, replace the skull, pull the skin back over the head, and sew the skin back together again. The body is pumped full of formaldehyde via injection into one of the main arteries in the leg using a hand pump. Cotton wool is then stuffed up the nostrils and inside the mouth to stop foul-smelling liquids from seeping out.

At this police morgue in Bangkok there are usually several autopsies going on in tandem. Sometimes we saw a relative being

accompanied inside to identify a body. Their shock and sadness was heartbreaking to witness.

For the monks' purposes, these experiences were definitely very rich and compelling contemplations on death and the nature of the human body. They gave us a much clearer picture of how brains, hearts, lungs, livers, and kidneys look – and smell. The experience tended to significantly lower the amount of sexual craving for quite some time, and we were able to recollect the images we had seen in our meditative contemplations afterwards.

Tahn Sudanto and I shared merits and spread loving-kindness in case any disembodied consciousnesses were still hanging around the morgue. I had the sense that there were many.

We found Troy outside in a coffee shop, chatting with a young mother and her cute daughter. He said to me, 'Yeah, sorry. I could only take that scene for a few minutes, and then I just wanted to reconnect with life again.'

It is interesting to note that after that experience and without any further discussion on the matter, once Troy arrived home after that trip, he sold his Ducati motorcycle – and bought a sensible Japanese Subaru wagon instead.

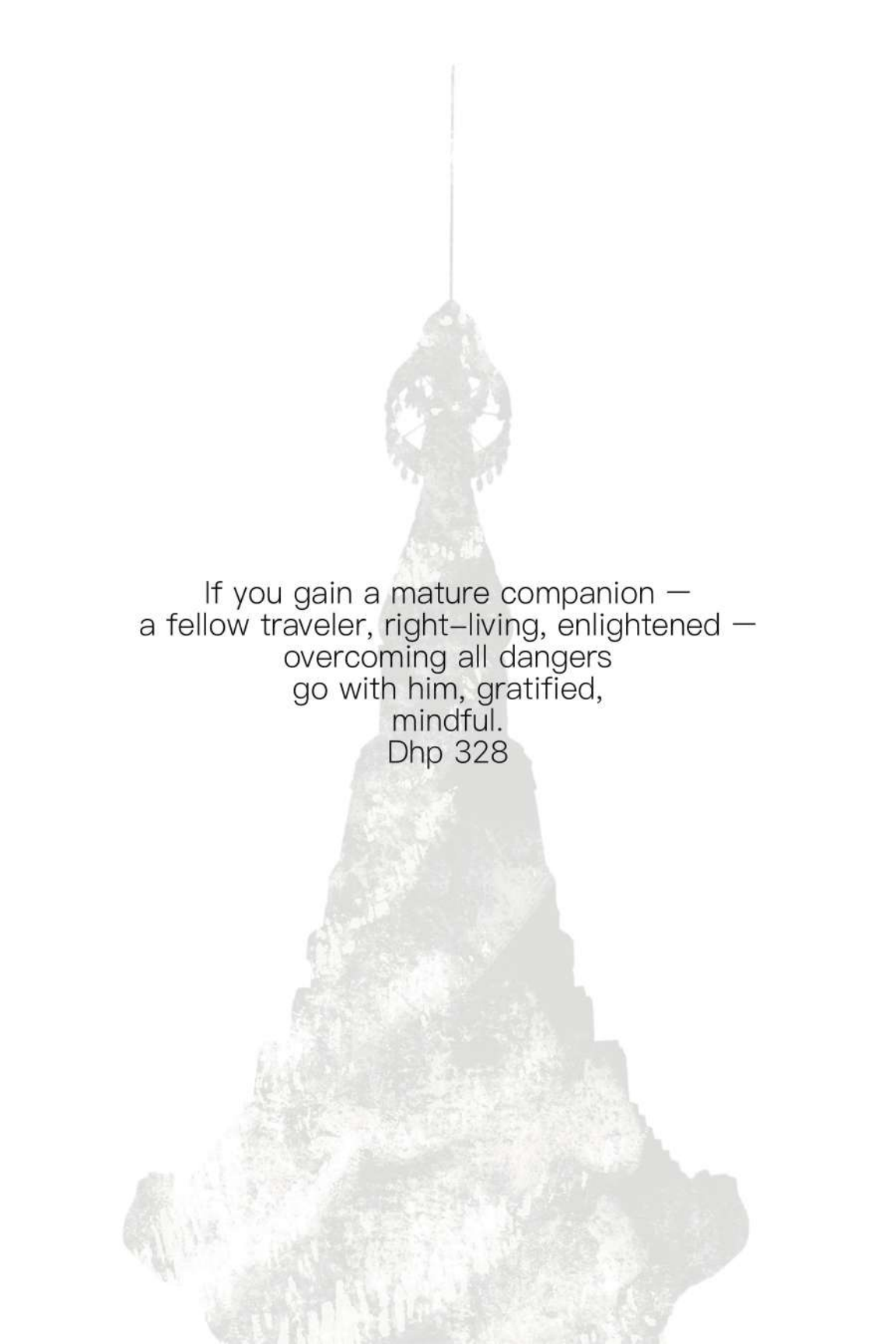




# Chapter 16

Meeting the Meditation Master  
(Age 25-26)





If you gain a mature companion —  
a fellow traveler, right-living, enlightened —  
overcoming all dangers  
go with him, gratified,  
mindful.  
Dhp 328

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

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### *Meeting the Meditation Master (Age 25-26)*

The ride from Kanchanaburi into the jungle retreat site took about five hours, the last two of which were extremely bumpy. It was rough, but it sure beat walking! When we arrived, there were already two Ajahns staying there doing their own quiet retreats: Ajahn Kalyano, the most senior Western disciple of Ajahn Anan, and Ajahn Chandako, a monk from Wat Nanachat who has since left the training. Ajahn Kalyano had encountered a tiger while doing walking meditation before our arrival.

There were a couple of very modest dwellings outside of the plateau retreat area. Tahn Sudanto decided to stay in a *kuti* on the outer ridge, and I decided to stay on a small covered platform in a valley about halfway up the hill. It was mid-February and the larger group from Wat Nanachat would be arriving in about a month's time.

To prepare for their arrival, on some days after the meal we began sweeping away the vast amounts of leaves, twigs, and branches that had covered the various paths over the past ten months. And on most days, Tahn Sudanto and I met together for evening chanting at what was called the outer *sala*. The temperature was surprisingly cold in the evenings and early mornings, particularly by the stream.

I was very hopeful – optimistic even – that my meditation would improve and deepen, but I soon met with a significant challenge. My mind had been made extra sensitive through restraint, spending more

time in solitude and meditating more intensely. This is usually the recipe for experiencing peace – but not this time.

For no discernible reason, a feeling of deep despair would arise in the heart area whenever I meditated. There were no particular thoughts associated with the feeling, which was baffling at the time, and I am not even sure that it was an emotion, to be honest. In trying to describe it, I would have to say that it was a very big, very heavy and very painful feeling in the mind. Despair was probably a secondary response to this painful experience.

I experimented with techniques I had used previously while practising with Ajahn Sumedho and on retreat at Poo Jom Gom. I tried making mindful awareness more spacious and broad, but whenever I did this – however vast I could make the space and the awareness – this pain simply filled up the space, all of it! And in terms of trying to see feelings as just feelings, it just felt like a very heavy and painful feeling.

I was trying to practise mindfulness of breathing, but the experience of the pain in the mind was much stronger than the sensation of the breath. This posed a significant challenge, because it was in being able to rest with the sensations of the breath that the mind usually experienced some peace.

I could distract myself from the experience for a while by practising walking meditation, reading something inspiring, chanting with Tahn Sudanto, or learning new chants and practising those I already knew on my own. I also distracted myself by being helpful in clearing and sweeping the paths. But whenever I came to sit in meditation again – which I did many times per day – the experience soon returned.

I tried to remain optimistic, hoping that it was only a temporary thing that would soon pass, but the longer I stayed in the jungle, the more intense the experience became.

What continued to perplex me was that I could not really decipher the cause of the experience. Was it a suppressed emotion arising in the heart? An emotional reaction to something around me? Or maybe an old *kamma* ripening in the heart, manifesting as painful feelings? It didn't feel like an emotion, however. It had no location in the body – it just arose and filled the mind whenever I sat in meditation. It was a new and unfamiliar experience.

I could deduce that it definitely was not the dull pain of depression, because there was a certain clarity in the awareness which knew the experience. It was exquisitely and excruciatingly painful, and the mind knew this acutely, without any dullness. However, there was no clarity about the source of all of this pain. It was certainly an experience of suffering, and I was now faced with the prospect of having to spend most of the next three months alone in a dark forest, trying to deal with this.

This ongoing experience gave rise to a lot of doubt for me. Was I going mad? Did I simply not have enough merit to continue as a monk? If this was just the ripening of *kamma*, what on earth had I done!? And how long was it going to last?

Fortunately, at this difficult juncture in my meditation practice, some good *kamma* ripened. Ajahn Anan, the abbot of the monastery where Tahn Punnyo had recently spent the rains retreat, arrived at Dtao Dtam along with five other monks late one afternoon. He turned up completely unannounced. He planned to spend five nights staying in the forest.

I don't think my readers will quite understand just how miraculous and unlikely an event this was. Samnaksong Dtao Dtam is very far away from his monastery – far away from everywhere, in fact – and as close to 'the middle of nowhere' as is possible in Thailand. Ajahn Anan had been visiting his branch monastery in Kanchanaburi province

and had spontaneously decided to come out to the jungle. It was the only time he ever visited there.

Today, at the time of writing, Ajahn Anan has become one of Thailand's 'big Ajahns' and is a beloved 'Luang Por' with a very large lay following, both in Thailand and abroad. He is seventy-one years old and has over sixty monks at his monastery, including many foreign monks, as well as many more staying at his branch monasteries, several of which are overseas. But on the day I first met him, he was just forty-three years old, about to turn forty-four. He had around twenty monks at his monastery. Although he was already somewhat famous among the monastic community – famous for his good practice – he was still relatively unknown outside those circles.

Tahn Sudanto and I paid respects to Ajahn Anan at the outer *sala*. He was travelling with a more senior monk, so I initially thought that the more senior monk was him – Tahn Ajahn still looked very young and unassuming. He announced that he would stay and practise in the forest with his Thai monks for the first three evenings, and then speak with the foreign monks on the two evenings after that.

The next day at afternoon tea, Tahn Dtui, one of Tahn Ajahn's junior Thai monks, came wandering over to the ridge to chat with Tahn Sudanto and me at the outer *sala*. He started saying the strangest things.

'Ajahn Anan says that Tahn Achalo has a white and red *citta* (mind), and that he really likes psychic powers! And Tahn Sudanto has a white and green *citta*.'

I wondered to myself, 'What is he talking about? How does he even know?'

But then I remembered... Tahn Ajahn Anan can read minds! It was a moment of excitement, followed by indignation.



*Paying respects to Tahn Ajahn Anan*

‘How dare he read my mind without asking my permission!’ I thought to myself.

Thinking further about this later in the evening, I was humbled in my contemplation. It isn’t actually ‘my’ mind, it’s just ‘a’ mind. And if someone has eyes for seeing it, they will be able to see it! The implications of this made me feel a bit paranoid and self-conscious, but I was also fascinated. It gave me hope as well. I thought, ‘If this monk can see my mind, then he has more information than I do and can see my situation from different angles and perspectives. Maybe he can help me with my current challenge.’

A very intense experience occurred while I was meditating the next evening. I was sitting, observing the breath as usual, when a panoramic space opened up in my mind and a scene appeared before me. The vision was rather terrifying and very lucid. I wasn’t just seeing or looking at the scene; it was so real that I felt I was actually in it.

I was sitting at the end of a dry riverbed full of tiny stones. There were no trees at all. Before me, along the riverbed, was a very long line of – what I suppose we would call them in English – Grim Reapers. The line stretched off into the distance as far as the eye could see. Every now and then, these skeletal figures in black hooded robes, each holding a staff, would all take a step forward in unison. The sound of crunching stones under their bony feet resounded all around – *crunch!* – and the first phantom-like entity at the head of the line would simply collapse into dust before me. It repeated again and again: another step, another resounding crunch, another collapsing dissipation.

This experience might have lasted for about a minute before normal perception returned, and I was once again aware of my breath and the gurgling sound of the stream off in the distance.

I thought to myself, ‘What was *that??*’ I had no idea whether it was a good thing or a bad thing that had just happened – it was definitely different!

I also couldn’t help thinking that seeing so much death before me was probably not a good thing. It kind of freaked me out. What did all of those Grim Reapers want?

The next morning, when I bathed and wiped Ajahn Anan’s feet after he walked up the steps to the *sala* for the meal, he looked me in the eye, smiling, and asked, ‘*Bhāvanā dee mai?*’ which means, ‘How is your practice (mental cultivation)? Is it going well?’

I really had no idea what to say. I could have said, ‘I feel so much pain that I wish for complete annihilation, and last night I saw death stretching out to the horizon as far as I could see!’ but this somehow didn’t seem like the right thing to say. Even if I had wanted to say that, I didn’t yet have the ability to say so in Thai.

After the meal, Ajahn Anan mentioned that he would be happy to meet with the foreign monks at tea time, so I was quite excited all day and also a little scared.

When we met Ajahn Anan late in the afternoon, he seemed so warm, friendly, and approachable. He was kind and interested – not at all intimidating. Since I knew that my questions were going to be somewhat weird and intense, I let Ajahn Chandako and Tahn Sudanto do most of the talking first. When my time finally came, it felt awkward revealing my experience to both Tahn Ajahn Anan and Ajahn Chandako, having to communicate via a translator, but I found the courage and did my best.

I told Tahn Ajahn about the recurrent experience of the pain in my meditations that just grew bigger and bigger, explaining how oppressive it felt and how confusing it was that there were no thoughts and no discernible emotion associated with it. I just did not know what it was. I also expressed my exasperation and confusion about why peace had become so elusive, despite increasing sincere efforts. It seemed that the more I practised, the worse it became and the more suffering I experienced. I also mentioned that I felt so terribly forlorn and hopeless at times that I wanted to kill myself, but that my belief in *kamma* and rebirth restrained me.

Ajahn Anan looked at me quite intensely for a few moments. Then he spoke very calmly. Ajahn Chandako translated what he said, sentence by sentence.

‘It is not uncommon for a sincere meditator’s sensitivity to develop faster than their equanimity in the beginning stages. What is happening in your mind is that it is becoming aware of the *dukkha* characteristic of conditions, the inherently painful and unsatisfactory nature of the body and mind. It is as though you are in a house that is on fire – but at this stage you are also burning with the house. There is nowhere to rest or escape to yet. This clear perception of *dukkha* is actually correct. The body and mind are very painful. The house really is

on fire. So there is nothing going wrong. The mind is beginning to see things more clearly.'

'I used to feel this way as a young monk myself. All you can really do at this stage is patiently endure it. For it is by patiently enduring with this experience in meditation that mindfulness will get stronger. As mindfulness increases, some *samādhi* will also develop. The day will come when you will see clearly that the house really is on fire, but there will also be something to lean on inside: a place of coolness. As mindfulness gets stronger, the mind that knows this *dukkha* characteristic will be able to separate from it.'

I asked, 'So I'm not crazy?'

Ajahn Anan smiled and said that I was not. I also asked if he thought I was trainable, to which he responded that he felt I was.

He also said, in a charming combination of English and Thai, 'You *me boon!* Achalo *me boon!*' ('You possess merit. You have an accumulation of good *kamma* made in the past.')

I loved Ajahn Anan so much at that moment and felt extremely relieved and grateful. He did not say that I was crazy, or hopeless, or a blemish on the face of humanity. He did not say that I needed psychiatric assessment and possibly medication. He did not say that my merits were too few to be a monk. He said that I was just fine, and that I should just keep going and things would get better.

When I look back on this occasion, I think that this was the precise moment when I developed 'Krubā Ajahn Love' and began to truly love Ajahn Anan as my teacher. (Yes, monks also love their teachers.) He had seen where I was 'at' with compassion and empathy. He assured me that I was doing okay and that where I was at that moment, although painful, was just fine.

At a time when I was losing hope, this really gave me hope for the future. Not only had he given me some skilful instructions, he had also given me a sense of perspective: he had experienced exactly what I had and had moved past it. It was as though a rubber life-saving ring had been thrown into the sea where I had been drowning. I had something to hold on to and I felt that I could breathe again.

I also asked Ajahn Anan if I would be welcome to come and live and train at his monastery, and he said that I would.

Later that evening and the next day when I was meditating, I was able to bear with the experience in my meditation with more confidence and trust, without adding the extra suffering of worry and doubt or responding with despair. This was already something of an improvement. I felt more confident about surviving the remaining ten weeks of this second jungle retreat.

On the last morning of Ajahn Anan's visit to Samnaksong Dtao Dtam, I was looking at him and wondering, 'I think this monk may be my teacher. I think his coming here may have been the response to my prayers at the Emerald Buddha temple. But I feel like I need more of a sign.'

The people who came to pick up Tahn Ajahn and his monks had bought a pizza. As a one *pansa* monk, I was the most junior of all the monks and was subsequently seated last in line at the meal. There were nine monks but only eight pieces of pizza; I did not get a slice. After all the food had been offered and Ajahn Anan had given the blessing, he placed his piece of pizza into his bowl lid, saying to the monk next to him, 'Send this down to Tahn Achalo.'

The bowl lid and piece of pizza were passed down the line. As I held Tahn Ajahn's bowl lid in my hand and looked at the pizza, I no longer had any doubt. I thought to myself, 'Ajahn Anan is my teacher!'

It was 1998, and Māgha Pūjā fell on February 11th that year. Māgha Pūjā is one of the three biggest Buddhist holy days of the year, commemorating the day that 1,250 *arahant* monks, all personally ordained by the Buddha, spontaneously came together to hear the Buddha give the *Ovādapāṭimokkha* teaching. The rest of the monks from Wat Nanachat were due to arrive in the forest a few days later. Before the larger group arrived, I decided that I would like to go into the middle of the retreat area, where the jungle was thickest and darkest, and practise all night there by myself as a special offering of practice (*paṭipatti-pūjā*).

Generally speaking, the more people there are in the forest, the less likely it is to encounter a tiger, as they can smell the presence of humans and tend to avoid the area. Ajahn Kalyano had recently encountered a Bengal tiger while doing walking meditation in the same area – I was hopeful that I might come face to face with one too.

I made my way into the forest just before sunset to set up my place under the tall trees and giant clumps of bamboo, taking only my robes, a mat, a meditation cushion, and a few candles. I swept a portion of the trail to use as a walking meditation path. I sat in meditation, chanted, did some walking meditation, sat again, and walked again. Sometimes I lit the candles, and at other times I blew them out, enjoying the way the moonlight streamed down through the trees.

I managed to practise consistently for eight hours, from 6:00 pm until about 2:00 am, but I just did not have the energy to continue for another four hours until sunrise. I had not seen or heard a tiger, and by this point I was too tired to feel afraid. So at last, I hunched over on my mat in a kind of forward-slumping foetal position and dozed off. I woke to the sound of birds and singing gibbons, and made my way down the hill for the meal. Although I had not encountered any tigers, I was pleased with my courage and sincere effort.

Once the group from Wat Nanachat arrived, I felt that the atmosphere in the forest changed – it just felt safer somehow. This time

around, I structured my time better and gave myself a consistent daily routine. Because sitting meditation was still difficult to endure, I read more than I usually would: the biographies of both Luang Por Mun and Master Hsu Yun, as well as *Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand* by Pabongka Rinpoche and *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* by Sogyal Rinpoche, if I remember correctly.

I enjoyed the ‘*samsāric* perspective’ and the constant references to Buddhist cosmology in these works. It is interesting to me that I was studying Theravāda, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna from my very first year as a monk – even whilst practising in the jungle! This has been a tendency throughout my entire *bhikkhu* life, literally beginning from that first year.

The ticks, the leeches, the storms, the amount of time spent alone, and the pain in the mind were still not easy to endure, but at least I had stopped praying that a tiger would come and eat me, and I was no longer fantasising about crossing the border into Myanmar in search of a landmine to step on – so there was some progress!

I discussed with Ajahn Jayasaro the possibility of going to stay with Tahn Ajahn Anan. He gave his blessing. Soon the weeks and months in the jungle passed, and it was time to go to Wat Marp Jan, Tahn Ajahn’s monastery in Rayong province.

Wat Marp Jan stretches up a hillside and is surrounded by thick rainforest. It was lighter and more vibrant than the forest monasteries on the plains in Northeast Thailand, and the monastery buildings were newer and more modern. There were around eighteen monks in residence when I arrived. Although there was one other foreign monk there, Ajahn Kalyano, he was studying for the *Abhidhamma* exams and largely kept to himself during the time that I was there. (He came first in the country when he sat the exam – even writing his answers in Thai!)

I performed the ceremony of taking dependence on Tahn Ajahn, formally acknowledging him as my teacher – a requirement for all junior

monks with less than five *pansas*. He told me to *dtang jai bhāvanā* – to apply myself wholeheartedly to meditation (mental cultivation) – and said that I could ask him for anything I needed.

It is hard to explain, but I felt something different in the air at Wat Marp Jan – it seemed to have a kind of a sparkle to it. Ajahn Anan was believed to have very strong *mettā* – loving-kindness meditation – and it was understood by his disciples that he spread *mettā* throughout the monastery several times per day.

This does not mean that there were no challenges. The language barrier made life quite awkward. Twenty-five years ago, the general level of English proficiency in Thailand was extremely low. When the monks did chores together, if one of the more senior monks would try to give me instructions it could be quite baffling and frustrating for both of us. Thais are quite playful by nature and tend to tease one another. Sometimes one of the monks would say something about me and the others would laugh, but I had no way of knowing whether the comment was playful, cruel, or rude, so I felt a bit paranoid and uncomfortable.

One benefit of not understanding the language was that I did not waste time in idle conversation or gossip, which meant I had a lot of time to meditate at my *kuti*. However, the extra energy in the mind from meditation, together with my heightened sensitivity, did not always mix well with those moments of self-consciousness and paranoia. It was something of a Catch-22: lacking the warmth of friendship, I meditated more, which led to increased hypersensitivity at times. But seeing Ajahn Anan at the mealtime and evening chanting, feeling his kindness and getting an intuitive sense of his inner freedom was what sustained me through my time at Wat Marp Jan.

Despite the language challenges, through sheer determination and persistence I deduced from conversations with his monk disciples that Tahn Ajahn was believed to be an *anāgāmī*, established in the third level of enlightenment, with no more greed or hatred affecting his mind.

He was also believed to possess the fourth *jhāna*, which gave him the ability to read minds, see beings in parallel realms (ghosts, *devas*, and so on) and recollect his own and others' past lives if he chose to. Close disciples believe that he progressed further along on the path of liberation in subsequent years, completing his work to become one of the *arahants*.

I had an experience early on in my stay at Wat Marp Jan that convinced me that Ajahn Anan could read minds at times. There was an unseasonal cold snap, with less humidity in the air, so everyone's skin was drier than usual. A kind student of Tahn Ajahn's had offered many small bottles of baby oil to use as moisturiser. Tahn Ajahn was walking around at afternoon tea, handing out these bottles of oil to the monks.

Ever since childhood, for some reason I have always disliked the feeling of certain greasy or slimy textures (for example, I much prefer shower gel to a bar of soap). As Ajahn Anan walked towards me, I had the thought, 'Oh, I don't like greasy baby oil.' Tahn Ajahn then stopped walking in my direction, but continued giving the oil to the other monks. I felt terrible at the time, being picky about a gift from my Ajahn.

This story might not seem entirely convincing to everyone, but what happened the next day definitely convinced me. Once again at afternoon tea, Tahn Ajahn called me over to his seat. He had a gift for me, and handed me – and only me – a bottle of moisturiser with vitamin E and aloe vera. Moisturiser – with no greasy feelings! He did not criticise me for being fussy; he simply gave me a gift he thought I would like and smiled with kindness.

As well as statues of Luang Por Mun and Luang Por Chah, there were two unfamiliar statues on the shrine in the meditation hall at Wat Marp Jan. I asked the monks who they were; they said they were Luang Por Thuat and Somdet To. When I asked Ajahn Anan about them, with the help of Ajahn Kalyano, he explained that they were two past lives of Maitreya Bodhisattva in Thailand. Luang Por Thuat lived around four

hundred years ago (1582-1682), and Somdet To about two hundred years ago (1788-1872). Rumour had it that Tahn Ajahn had the ability to somehow connect with and channel the loving-kindness of Maitreya and spread it to the monks and his followers. I thought this might explain the bright, sparkling energy I felt in the air at the monastery.

There were times when I was meditating before the meal or after evening chanting when I could feel that Ajahn Anan was sending out loving-kindness to me, and the mind would settle into deeper peace with more ease. I also noticed a very lovely quality of energy coming from him whenever he gave a Dhamma talk. Despite the fact that I only understood about ten percent of what he was saying, my mind would always become peaceful while meditating during his talks. It might seem like a strange thing to say, but I could sense his 'emptiness' whenever he gave a teaching. The words did not come from a place of grasping, contraction, or projection; they flowed from a space of cool, liberated emptiness, empty of greed, hatred, and ignorance.

In those days, Ajahn Anan was not really like a father figure to me. He was more like a cool older brother who also happened to be a superhero. He was my idol. Although he was eighteen years older than I was, he had a very youthful and vibrant energy about him and looked remarkably young. He was light on his feet and tended to move about quite briskly, no doubt highly energised by the various *samādhi* absorptions which he could abide in at will. When he told me an interesting story it was so inspiring to me; yet he could also be elusive and somewhat aloof. Many days could go by without him directly addressing me at all. He did, however, give me a lot of time to practise and encouraged me to meditate constantly. I could approach him if I had a problem or a question, and every day I would wait on my knees, ready to wipe his feet after alms round, just to have that lovely moment of connection.

With regard to the pain I had been experiencing in meditation in the jungle, it was still present, but the experience started to change after a

month or so at Wat Marp Jan as I continued to practise with it. When the mind became aware of the pain and endured it patiently, at a certain point the feeling tone would shift and a type of sadness arose alongside the pain. As I continued to meditate patiently with this new feeling, it also grew. The sadness would grow so heavy and so vast that it literally felt as if it was filling the entire sky.

At a certain point, the sense of ‘being a self enduring it’ would simply disappear; it just couldn’t hold it anymore. What remained was an exquisite, vast and spacious coolness, tinged with sadness. I was confused by this experience because alongside the immense sadness was also a feeling of peace. I wondered whether I was depressed. Or was this a previously repressed emotion arising?

The thing that confused me was that depression usually came with dullness and heaviness, and sadness was like falling inside oneself and retracting. But this was different: it was spacious, vast, and cool. There was clarity and peace, and the sadness itself felt kind of exquisite – excruciating and exquisite at the same time. When I consulted Tahn Ajahn Anan, he explained that I was experiencing a spiritual emotion called *sulot samved* in Thai or *saṃvega* in Pāli.

*Saṃvega* is a mature spiritual emotion that arises due to correctly seeing the nature of *saṃsāra*. It is a kind of wise sobriety. The peace that I was feeling was apparently one type of meditative rapture. He assured me that it was a positive development, something to be embraced rather than worried about.

In later years, when learning more chanting and studying more *suttas*, I repeatedly came across the word *nibbidā*, which means weariness, and *virāga*, meaning dispassion. Although these words may not sound particularly uplifting or inspiring, they are usually followed immediately by the word ‘released’. Just one example from the *suttas* in the Pāli Canon is the Fire Sermon in the Saṃyutta Nikāya (SN 35.28). When the one thousand ascetics were liberated, the *sutta* states:

*‘Disenchanted, he becomes dispassionate. Through dispassion, he is released. With release, there is the knowledge, “Released.” He discerns that “Birth is ended, the holy life fulfilled, the task done. There is nothing further for this world.”’*

These kinds of verses helped me to understand that weariness leading to dispassion is actually a very good thing, and plays a fundamentally important role in the process of purifying and liberating the mind. But we cannot expect this to feel pleasant. The pain that I had experienced while meditating in the jungle, and the intense sadness I had experienced in my earlier meditations at Wat Marp Jan, were a part of this process of seeing conditions more clearly and becoming disenchanted and weary of them. This is a necessary process, because it weakens our clinging to conditions and reorients the mind inwardly, where true peace can actually be experienced.

The afternoon work period could be a difficult part of the day for me. We had to sweep a lot of leaves from the roads, paths, and car park areas. It really used to annoy me that we had to sweep all of these areas until there was not a single leaf left on the paths. The problem was that as we swept, leaves were still falling from the trees. If we could just sweep up *most* of the leaves, then our work could be done much more quickly. But ensuring that *every single* leaf was swept away literally took twice as long.

One afternoon, while I was sweeping in the lower part of the monastery, I was angrily poking away at the leaves and thinking grumpy thoughts such as, ‘This is so stupid... We shouldn’t do it like this... This is such a waste of time... Blah blah blah...’ when suddenly, I felt a sense of lightness and joy in my heart, and even smiled involuntarily – a big smile from ear to ear. At that moment, out of the corner of my eye, I saw Ajahn Anan walking in the distance.

After the chores were finished the next afternoon, I went to see Tahn Ajahn and asked him about the experience. Specifically, I asked him whether he had done something while I was sweeping the day before. He responded that he had knocked that grumpy mind state out of my mind with the power of his loving-kindness. He wanted me to see that it was possible to sweep leaves without feeling so angry. He held up his right hand in a fist and struck it with the open palm of his left hand, knocking it out of the way.

This was a fascinating teaching, pointing to the fact that my mind state was not my own – it was just a mind state – and it didn't have to be held onto.

I asked Tahn Ajahn, 'Could you please do that every day?'

He laughed and said, 'No! You have to learn to be able to do this for yourself!'

Sometimes I would sit in meditation after afternoon tea, then go up early for the evening chanting to sit before it started, continue sitting in the hall after chanting was finished, and then sit once again before sleeping. I was so inspired by Tahn Ajahn and I really wanted to 'get *jhāna*', to experience and establish deep *samādhi*. Some evenings my mind would become quite peaceful, which made me hopeful, but at other times the following day I could suddenly fall into quite a dark mood, which confused me.

Once I was in a bad mood, I could be quite judgemental of some of the other monks who always came late to chanting and seemed to put in only a bare minimum of effort. These fault-finding moods were really quite painful. I am sure that the people around me did not enjoy them either.

One afternoon, when I was feeling particularly grumpy, I left afternoon tea early and dragged myself up the hill. As I reached the top, I

was surprised to find Tahn Ajahn standing completely alone in the middle of the road. It looked as though he had been waiting for me.

I fell to my knees, raised my hands in *añjali* and begged him, ‘Tahn Ajahn, when will it ever get better?!’

Now, of course, I was hoping that he would say something like, ‘Next week’ or ‘Next month there’s going to be a breakthrough – keep going, Achalo!’ because I was trying to get enlightened by the end of the week.

But Tahn Ajahn responded, ‘In five years it will be a little bit better, and in seven years it will be better still.’

I was exasperated! I felt my hope deflating like a balloon.

Then Tahn Ajahn continued, ‘You are trying too hard, Tahn Achalo. You are practising with too much wilfulness. You can get some peacefulness and good results when you push very hard, but then you get this reaction afterwards. It is as though there is a big bucket of clear water with silt settled at the bottom. Then you take a stick and hit the side of the bucket really hard, and this causes the silt at the bottom to rise up and colour the water. You need to have a more slow and steady approach. Just be consistent, but without trying too hard. Put in the effort without expecting results.’

Tahn Ajahn then told me that I should practise loving-kindness meditation towards myself, then towards him, and then towards my parents for five to ten minutes at the start of every meditation session. This would support me in the process, give more joy in the present moment, and lower the likelihood that these intense grumpy moods would arise in the mind.

Tahn Ajahn also explained that, according to his observations and experience, it can take approximately three years before a consistent

and resilient quality of wellbeing becomes established in the minds of young monks. The merits of keeping pure virtue and making consistent effort in meditation will eventually manifest as a base level of contentment and wellbeing, but this takes a few years. Until that time it is necessary to rely upon patient endurance, loving-kindness meditation, being helpful to the community, and sometimes having a skilful hobby – a skilful outlet for one’s time and energy when meditation isn’t going so well – can also be helpful.

The message was clear: you have to be in it for the long haul. It will definitely get better, but not as quickly as you hope.

Tahn Ajahn also spoke on this occasion about the need to actively contemplate the not-self nature of the body and mind hundreds of times... thousands of times... tens of thousands of times. We have to weaken self-grasping slowly but steadily, because it is not the ‘self’ that gets *samādhi* or gets enlightened.

It was the perfect teaching, delivered in the perfect manner and tone.

But I checked once again at the end of our conversation: ‘But it will get better, right?’ And Tahn Ajahn assured me that it would.

I bowed at his feet right there on the dusty road.

There were a few occasions during this period when I do believe that Ajahn Anan used his abilities to increase the level of collectedness and sensitivity in my mind, helping me to perceive beings in other realms. I am not making any claims to possess a divine eye or to have mastered anything. Please read those words again carefully: I believe that the meditation master with whom I was living used his powers to help me experience and perceive those things.



*With Tahn Ajahn Anan*

Once you have experienced such things for yourself, your confidence in this aspect of the Buddha's teachings becomes much stronger. My belief in past lives, future lives, the law of *kamma*, and of Buddhist cosmology became very strong. I would love to share more details of those experiences, but the Buddha did not encourage this, and neither did Ajahn Chah, so we must leave it there.


At the end of my second rains retreat as a *bhikkhu* at Wat Marp Jan, I had been a novice monk for a year and a half, and a *bhikkhu* for a year and a half. Despite the occasional bad day, my general level of faith and commitment, as well as the quality of my effort, were all quite good by this stage. I was becoming well established in the practice, and I had clearly seen the benefits of persevering with patience, no matter how difficult my life or the meditation seemed. Ajahn Anan's *mettā* and his inspiring qualities and abilities had definitely played a huge role in helping me establish myself in the monastic life.

At this time, I determined to be a monk for at least one more year. I had to gradually build up my determination, increasing my level of commitment stage by stage. After my third year as a *bhikkhu*, I determined to be a monk for two more years... after the fifth year, I determined five more years... and after ten years, I determined ten more years...





Afterword



Just as a silver smith  
step by  
step,  
bit by  
bit,  
moment to  
moment,  
blows away the impurities  
of molten silver —  
so the wise man, his own.  
Dhp 239

## *A F T E R W O R D*

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We have now arrived at approximately the halfway point of my current life, at the time of writing. By this stage I had begun to truly understand how to use meditation methods and how to contemplate skilfully and wisely, with determination, and had developed a little more patience.

These various practices led to glimpses, and then to longer experiences, of much more cool and spacious inner vistas, with less sense of being a 'self' who suffered. The peace and understanding that can arise as a result of committed meditation discipline really is wonderful.

This development was a tremendous relief to me and gave me great hope and confidence in the Buddha's path and training. I would even go so far as to say that I developed a quality of unshakeable, unwavering faith in the Buddha, his teaching and methods, and his well-practised disciples. This has been a tremendous support to me ever since.

I very much hope that these descriptions of how I discovered and learned to persevere in Buddhist practice in this lifetime offer some encouragement to you, wherever you are in your own practice.

I sincerely wish that you have every possible support and inspiration from outside sources, as well as unrelenting resources of dogged determination from within, on your journey towards complete liberation from every type of suffering.

May the 10,000 joys and 10,000 sorrows of your precious human life be like grist for the mill. May they act as teachers, helping you to cultivate and strengthen mindfulness and wisdom.

May your sincere prayers be answered. May your confusion be alleviated. May the path of practice be clear before you.

May you always encounter the true *Buddha-dhamma* and qualified, compassionate teachers.

*Nibbāna paccayo hotu!*

May it be a cause for *nibbāna!*

*Ajahn Achalo Bhikkhu*





## G L O S S A R Y

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**Ajahn** (Thai) – Teacher. A respectful title given to senior monks with ten or more *pansas* (rains retreats). It is sometimes used together with other titles, such as Tahn Ajahn (Venerable Teacher) or Phra Ajahn (Phra meaning ‘monk’), as the term Ajahn can also be used to address laypeople who are high school or university teachers.

***anāgāmi*** (Pāli) – Non-returner. A being who has attained the first three of the four stages of enlightenment. They have cut off five of the ten fetters, including greed and hatred, but have not yet fully uprooted delusion. They are known as non-returners because they will not be reborn again in this world as a human. They are destined to become fully enlightened either during this lifetime, at the time of their death, or after their next (and last) rebirth in one of the five highest heavenly realms (known as the Pure Abodes), which are only accessible to *anāgāmis*.

***añjali*** (Pāli), ***wai*** (Thai) – A hand gesture showing respect – with the hands placed together in front of the chest as if in prayer. It is commonly used as a greeting amongst Thai laypeople, by laypeople when speaking to a monk, or by monks when speaking to a more senior monk.

***arahant*** (Pāli) – A fully enlightened being. They have attained all four stages of enlightenment, cut all ten fetters, and uprooted and removed all greed, hatred, and delusion from their heart and mind. They will not be reborn again.

***bhakti*** (Sanskrit) – A Hindu practice of unconditional love or devotion for the divine, seen as the path to spiritual liberation.

**bhāvanā** (Pāli, Thai) – Mental cultivation; development or training of the mind. Sometimes used to refer to formal meditation practice in general (sitting and/or walking meditation), or to the development of qualities of the heart-mind such as loving-kindness.

**bhikkhu** (Pāli) – Monk. Literally ‘beggar’.

**bodhisattva** (Sanskrit), **bodhisatta** (Pāli) – In Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna Buddhism, the term *bodhisattva* is used to refer to any being who aspires to attain Buddhahood for the benefit of all beings. In the Theravāda Pāli Canon, the term *bodhisatta* is used exclusively in reference to Gautama Buddha in his previous lives or as a young man before his enlightenment.

**brahmavihārā** (Pāli) – A ‘divine abiding’ of the heart and mind. Literally ‘divine abode’. Four wholesome qualities which can be developed: loving-kindness (*mettā* in Pāli), compassion (*karuṇā*), empathetic joy (*muditā*), and equanimity (*upekkhā*). Development of these four qualities through meditation practice is said to lead to rebirth in some of the higher Brahma heavenly realms (with the *devas* of the Divinity’s Host, the *devas* of Streaming Radiance, the *devas* of Universal Beauty, and the *devas* of Abundant Fruit, respectively; AN 4.125). The Buddha said that in one of his previous lifetimes he practised *mettā* meditation for seven years; as a result, he was reborn in heavenly realms for seven aeons before being reborn again into the world (AN 7.62, Iti 22).

**Buddha** (Pāli) – Usually used in reference to Siddhartha Gautama Buddha, but it can also be used to refer to any of the historical or future Buddhas that have or will arise throughout the ages. Literally ‘The Awakened One’. Each of the Buddhas has or will rediscover the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path leading to awakening or enlightenment, the escape from the cycle of birth and death, and the end of all suffering.

**Buddha-dhamma** (Pāli) – The teachings of the Buddha.

**chedi** (Thai) – A large Buddhist monument or shrine – a place of worship – often bell-shaped and containing relics and other sacred objects. Also known as a stupa or pagoda.

**citta** (Pāli) – Mind, heart, or heart-mind (pronounced *chitta*). As the third object of mindfulness in the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, several states of the *citta* are described: with or without greed, with or without aversion, with or without delusion, constricted or scattered, enlarged or not enlarged, surpassed or unsurpassed, concentrated or not concentrated, and released or not released (MN 10, etc.).

**dāna** (Pāli) – Generosity. Giving can take many forms. The term is often used in reference to offering the four requisites to monastics (alms food, clothing, shelter, and medicine), but can also include the giving of money, one's time, knowledge, skills, etc.

**deva** (Pāli) – A heavenly or divine being. Spontaneously born into the heavenly realms (MN 12), *devas* are said to have achieved that rebirth due to their faith (*saddhā* in Pāli), ethical conduct (*sīla*), learning (*suta*), generosity (*cāga*) and/or wisdom (*paññā*) (AN 6.10, etc.). Some *devas* experience perfect happiness and exclusively pleasurable feelings, while others experience a mixture of pleasure and pain (AN 4.233). Because they have extremely long lifespans, most *devas* do not realise that they are mortal (AN 4.33, SN 6.4, etc.).

**Dhamma (or dhamma)** (Pāli) – When used with an uppercase D, it usually refers to ultimate truth, ultimate reality, or to the Buddha's teachings (about ultimate truth). When used with a lowercase d, it usually refers to a principle, characteristic, trait, nature, or inherent quality of conditioned phenomena.

**Dhammayut (or Dhammayuttika) Nikāya** (Thai) – One of two major branches of Theravāda Buddhism in Thailand. The smaller of the two orders, it is highly respected for its strict monastic discipline and is

historically well supported and favoured by the Thai government and monarchy.

***dukkha*** (Pāli) – Often translated as ‘suffering’, but the word also refers to the inherently unsatisfying nature of all conditions and conditioned phenomena (physical, mental, and emotional) due to their uncontrollable and impermanent nature, regardless of whether they cause large amounts of suffering or only the slightest hint of dissatisfaction. Even happy and pleasurable experiences are inherently *dukkha* because they arise according to conditions and cannot last forever.

***farang*** (Thai) – A common Thai word used to refer to people of Caucasian descent.

**Goenka-ji** – Satya Narayan Goenka (1924-2013) was an Indian-Burmese lay teacher of meditation. Emphasising *vipassanā* meditation techniques (such as body scanning to observe bodily sensations and investigation of the changing nature of body and mind), he established a worldwide network of meditation centres. To this day, his recorded teachings continue to be used to lead meditation retreats at these centres.

***jhāna* (or *jhānic*)** (Pāli) – Four meditative states described under the eighth factor of the Noble Eightfold Path, *sammā samādhi* (Right Concentration). They could be very briefly summarised as rapture, joy or happiness, contentment, and equanimity. The Buddha described the four *jhānas* as pleasure ‘to be associated with, to be developed, to be pursued’ and ‘not to be feared’, describing them as the pleasures of renunciation, seclusion, calm, and awakening (MN 66).

***kamma* (also *kammic*)** (Pāli), ***karma*** (Sanskrit) – Literally ‘action’, ‘deed’, ‘doing’, or ‘volitional action’. Referring to intentional action and its results, *kamma* is created in the present moment via thoughts, speech, and/or actions, and may ripen immediately or at a later time (in this, the next, or a later lifetime; AN 6.63). Accordingly, current conditions come into being as a result of past *kammās* ripening in the present moment.

Good or wholesome thoughts, speech, and actions ripen as good *kamma*, while bad or unwholesome thoughts, speech, and actions ripen as bad *kamma*. The Buddha taught that the workings of *kamma* are one of the four inconceivables (or four imponderables), explaining that speculation about *kamma* and how its results manifest is ‘not to be conjectured about’, as it would result in ‘madness and vexation to anyone who conjectured about them’ (AN 4.77).

***Kaṭhina*** (Pāli), ***Kathin*** (Thai) – A ceremony or festival held once a year after the completion of the rains retreat, during which the lay community offers cloth and other requisites to the monks. The *bhikkhu* Sangha decides which monk will receive the cloth, which must be dyed, cut, and sewn into a robe before dawn the next day. *Kaṭhina* is also the name of the wooden frame traditionally used to hold the pieces of cloth in place while the robe is sewn together.

***kilesa*** (Pāli), ***kleśa*** (Sanskrit) – Defilement, impurity, or unwholesome mental state. Often used as a blanket term for greed (*lobha* in Pāli), hatred or aversion (*dosa*), and delusion (*moha*). It can also refer to the sixteen *upakkilesās*: possessiveness and inordinate greed, ill will, anger, spitefulness, dismissiveness, antagonism, envy, selfishness, deceit, pretentiousness, stubbornness, competitiveness, conceit, arrogance, intoxication, and heedlessness (MN 7, etc.).

***kuti*** (Pāli, Thai) – A small, detached, simple hut or dwelling, typically only a single room, used as a residence for monks, nuns, or laypeople in a monastery.

**Luang Por** (Thai) – Venerable Father. A respectful and endearing way to address older, senior monks.

**Mae Chee** (Thai) – An ordained eight-precept (or sometimes ten-precept) nun in the Thai Forest Tradition.

**Māgha Pūjā** (Pāli) – One of the three most significant holy days in Theravāda Buddhism, and a nationwide public holiday in Thailand. Celebrated each year on the full moon of the third lunar month, on this day 1,250 *arahant* monks spontaneously gathered to hear a teaching from the Buddha. That teaching summarised the heart of the Buddha’s teachings: 1) to abstain from evil; 2) to cultivate the good; 3) to purify the mind. Sometimes referred to as Sangha Day.

**Mahā** (Pāli, Thai) – An academic title earned by monks who have completed high-level formal Buddhist studies, indicating that they have passed the exams for the third level (or higher) of Pāli studies. Literally ‘great’, ‘large’, ‘mighty’, or ‘noble’.

**Mahā Nikāya** (Thai) – One of the two major branches of Theravāda Buddhism in Thailand, and the larger of the two orders. Literally ‘great order’. Any monk not ordained within the other lineage (the Dhammayut or Dhammayuttika Nikāya) is considered to belong to this branch.

**Mahāyāna** (Sanskrit) – One of the three major branches of Buddhism (alongside Theravāda and Vajrayāna). Mahāyāna (literally ‘great vehicle’) emphasises the path of the *bodhisattva* as a means to save all beings from the suffering of *saṃsāra*.

**Maitreya Bodhisattva** (Sanskrit) – The next Buddha predicted to arise in the world in this aeon. Referred to as Metteyyo in Pāli in the Theravāda Pāli Canon.

**Māra** (Pāli) – A very powerful being in Buddhist cosmology whose name literally means ‘bringer of death’ and who is the embodiment of ‘that which kills’. While the Pāli Canon describes the Buddha as ‘the best’ of all beings, *Māra* is described as the most powerful, ‘foremost in sovereignty’ (AN 4.15). *Māra* and his assembly of helpers (known as *Māras*) attempt to harm, injure, threaten, tempt, harass, and distract the Buddha and his disciples, in service of their ultimate goal of keeping beings trapped in the cycle of *saṃsāra* (for example, SN 4.21-25). The

*suttas* also state that it is necessary to overcome *Māra* in order to go beyond birth and death (AN 4.13, Iti 46, etc.).

***mettā*** (Pāli) – Often translated as ‘loving-kindness’; a universal and impartial attitude of kindness, goodwill, and friendliness towards all beings, including oneself. Developing and cultivating *mettā* gives rise to eleven benefits: peaceful sleep; good dreams; waking up happy; being loved by humans and non-humans; protection by *devas*; freedom from harm by fire, poison, and weapons; ease in gaining *samādhi*; a clear, bright complexion; peacefulness at the time of death; and rebirth in a heavenly realm if one does not attain *nibbāna* in the current lifetime (AN 11.16).

***mudra*** (Sanskrit) – A symbolic or sacred hand gesture. The Buddha’s arms, hands, and fingers are depicted in specific *mudras* to evoke various qualities, such as protection, peace and serenity, fearlessness, and teaching. In yoga or certain spiritual practices, specific *mudras* can be used to direct energy flow in order to calm or energise the body and mind.

***nibbāna*** (Pāli) – Liberation or enlightenment. The goal of Buddhist practice: the end of all suffering and the final liberation from the cycle of birth and death in *saṃsāra*. Literally ‘extinguishment’, ‘quenching’, or ‘blowing out’.

***nibbidā*** (Pāli) – Weariness, disenchantment, disillusionment, disinterest, dispassion, dissatisfaction, or disgust.

***Ovādapāṭimokkha*** (Pāli) – The teaching of three core principles given by the Buddha to a spontaneously gathered assembly of 1,250 *arahant* monks. This occasion is now celebrated as Māgha Pūjā. This teaching succinctly summarises the heart of the Buddha’s teachings: 1) to abstain from evil; 2) to cultivate the good; 3) to purify the mind.

**pakhaw** (Thai), **anagārika** (Pāli) – Literally ‘white cloth’; a male Buddhist devotee who wears white and lives at a monastery. They may be an ordained postulant or a layman committed to practice. *Pakhows* undertake the eight-precept training and devote themselves to developing *samādhi and paññā*. They often assist the monks with tasks they cannot perform themselves due to their strict rules and precepts. Men who ordain under the eight precepts at Wat Pah Nanachat and other Western branch monasteries in the Ajahn Chah lineage are usually referred to as *anagārikas*.

**Pāli** (Pāli) – The Theravāda Buddhist scriptures were recorded in the Pāli language. The Buddha did not speak or teach in Pāli; it is not a spoken dialect but a literary language later chosen to record the teachings. Initially, the Buddha’s teachings were preserved orally until they were eventually written down on palm leaves during the Fourth Buddhist Council in 29 BCE.

**Pāli Canon** – The name given to the scriptures of Theravāda Buddhism, recorded in the Pāli language. It is divided into three major sections: 1) the Vinaya Piṭaka, which describes the rules and monastic discipline of the monks and nuns; 2) the Sutta Piṭaka, the teachings of the Buddha and his disciples; 3) the Abhidhamma Piṭaka, an in-depth analysis and further elaboration of the Buddha’s teachings, traditionally said to have been taught to the *devas*.

**paññā** (Pāli) – Wisdom, knowledge, understanding, insight; specifically with regard to understanding the three characteristics of conditioned phenomena (*anicca*, impermanence; *dukkha*, suffering and/or unsatisfactoriness; *anattā*, non-self) and the Four Noble Truths (*dukkha* and the cause of *dukkha*; the cessation of *dukkha* and the cause of the cessation of *dukkha*, which is the Noble Eightfold Path).

**pansa** (Thai), **vassa** (Pāli) – The three month monastic rains retreat observed by monks and nuns in Theravāda Buddhism. Additional rules are observed during this period, most notably limiting travel. This

ensures that monastics remain in one monastery for an extended period so that they can increase their efforts in meditation, study, and practice. Monastic seniority is determined by the number of rains retreats completed: an Ajahn (or Thera) has completed ten or more *pansas*, a Mahāthera has completed at least twenty *pansas*.

***Pāṭimokkha*** (Pāli) – The collection of 227 precepts (in the Theravāda *Bhikkhu Pāṭimokkha* for monks) or 311 precepts (the Theravāda *Bhikkhunī Pāṭimokkha* for nuns) of monastic discipline regarding communal harmony and conduct among monastics and in relation to lay supporters, as laid down by the Buddha as a support for liberation. Every fortnight, on the full moon and new moon *Wan Phra (uposatha)*, the *Pāṭimokkha* is recited in Pāli by one monk in the presence of all other monks residing at the monastery.

***paṭipatti-pūjā*** (Pāli) – A devotional offering of one’s efforts in developing *samādhi* and *paññā*. See *pūjā* for further elaboration.

***pūjā*** (Pāli) – Devotional offering, veneration, honour, worship. Flowers, candles, and incense (*āmisa-pūjā*, material offerings), as well as chanting or efforts in developing *samādhi* and *paññā* (*dhamma-pūjā* or *paṭipatti-pūjā*, practice of the Dhamma, considered superior to material offerings), may be offered as a *pūjā*. They can be offered to the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha, one’s own teacher, and/or on behalf of oneself or others (to share merit with one’s parents, deceased relatives, and so on).

***phap-phiap*** (Thai) – A polite and respectful sitting posture in Thailand and in Thai monasteries, with both legs tucked to one side and the feet pointing backwards.

***radprakod*** (Thai) – A belt or waistband used by monks to secure the lower robe.

**sala** (Thai) – A traditional covered, open-sided pavilion. They can be small (for example, roadside rest spots) or large (such as those found in resorts or temples).

**samādhi** (Pāli) – Concentration, stillness of mind, collectedness, non-distractedness, unification, or gathering of the mind. *Sammā samādhi* (Right Concentration) is the eighth factor of the Noble Eightfold Path. It has all seven other factors of the Noble Eightfold Path as its prerequisites (MN 117). *Sammā samādhi* leads to *sammā ñāṇaṃ* (Right Knowledge or Right Wisdom), which leads to *sammā vimutti* (Right Freedom or Right Liberation) (MN 117). The Buddha described *samādhi* as the pleasure of renunciation, seclusion, calm, and awakening (MN 66).

**samatha** (Pāli) – Calm, serenity, settledness, peace. The Buddha usually spoke about *samatha* and *vipassanā* (insight) in tandem, stating that both play a part in clear knowing and realisation of the Dhamma. The benefit of practising *samatha* is to develop the mind and abandon greed (AN 2.29).

**saṃsāra (or saṃsāric)** (Pāli, Sanskrit) – Literally ‘wandering on’, ‘transmigration’, ‘passing on from one state of existence to another’, ‘stream of existence’, or ‘cyclic existence’. Due to attachment to sensual pleasures, the desire for existence or non-existence, ignorance (not understanding the Four Noble Truths and dependent origination, *paṭiccasamuppāda*), and wrong views (perceiving impermanence as permanence, suffering as happiness, non-self as self, and the unattractive as attractive) beings continue to transmigrate through the round of *saṃsāra* – birth and death (DN 15, AN 4.49, SN 12.2, etc.). Beings are reborn according to their *kamma* in the hell realms, the animal realm, the ghost realm, the human realm, or the heavenly realms (AN 6.63, etc.).

**saṃvega** (Pāli), **sulot samved** (Thai) – Spiritual sadness, urgency, shock, and/or dismay arising from seeing the difficult predicament in which we and other beings find ourselves living in the world and, more broadly, in *saṃsāra*.

**Saṃyutta Nikāya** (Pāli) – The third collection of teachings found in the Sutta Piṭaka of the Pāli Canon. Literally ‘Connected Discourses’. The Saṃyutta Nikāya is divided into five parts and contains a total of fifty-six chapters. The suttas in each chapter are grouped according to a shared theme, hence they are the ‘Connected Discourses’.

**Sangha** (Pāli) – The Buddhist community of monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen. Sometimes the term is used more specifically to refer to the *ariya sangha*: those disciples of the Buddha (lay or ordained) who have attained to any of the stages of enlightenment.

**Sanghānussati** (Pāli) – Recollection of the qualities of the Sangha, especially the noble Sangha (any disciple of the Buddha who has achieved one of the stages of enlightenment): recollecting those who practise well, practise directly, practise insightfully and with integrity, who are worthy of gifts, hospitality, offerings, and respect – and who are a field of merit, giving rise to incomparable goodness in the world.

**sīla** (Pāli) – Moral or ethical conduct. The Buddha often spoke of *sīla* in terms of the five precepts: refraining from killing; refraining from taking what is not given; refraining from sexual misconduct; refraining from lying, divisive speech, harsh speech, and gossip; and refraining from intoxicating drink and drugs. Higher levels of *sīla* include the eight, ten, 227, and 311 precepts.

**sukha** (Pāli) – Happiness, pleasure, joy, ease.

**sutta** (Pāli), **sutra** (Sanskrit) – Discourse, sermon, scripture, or sacred text. Literally ‘thread’. The discourses given by the Buddha and his disciples, as recorded in the Theravāda Pāli Canon and various Mahāyāna texts.

**Sutta Piṭaka** (Pāli) – The second and largest of the three ‘baskets’ (or books) of the Pāli Canon. It contains the sermons and discourses taught by the Buddha and his disciples.

**Tahn** (Thai) – Venerable. A respectful title given to monks with fewer than ten *pansas* (rains retreats).

**Tahn Ajahn** (Thai) – Venerable Teacher. A respectful title given to senior monks with ten or more *pansas* (rains retreats).

**Theravāda** (Pāli) – One of the three major branches of Buddhism (alongside Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna). Theravāda (literally ‘school of the elders’) is considered the oldest surviving school of Buddhism and emphasises the path of the *arahant*, or individual liberation, according to the teachings preserved in the Pāli Canon, the earliest surviving collection of Buddhist scriptures.

**the Three Refuges, the Triple Gem** – The Buddha, the Dhamma (his teachings), and the Sangha (his well-practised community): they are three shelters, or three shining jewels, which can be relied upon for safety, protection, and guidance along the path to liberation.

**tudong** (Thai) – Derived from the Pāli word *dhutaṅga* (thirteen ascetic practices which the Buddha permitted monks to practise), but in Thai vernacular it refers to the practice of monks travelling on foot, wandering and living in remote forested areas for weeks or months at a time in order to intensify meditation practice in a more austere and fearful environment, away from distractions and material comforts.

**tuk-tuk** (Thai) – An open-air, three-wheeled motorised vehicle commonly used as transport by tourists and locals in Thai cities.

**Vajrayāna** (Sanskrit) – One of the three major branches of Buddhism (alongside Theravāda and Mahāyāna). Vajrayāna (literally ‘diamond vehicle’) is a branch of Mahāyāna Buddhism and therefore emphasises the path of the *bodhisattva* as a means to liberate all beings from the suffering of *saṃsāra*. More esoteric and guru-centric, it emphasises tantric practices such as mantras, *mudras*, and deity visualisation. Some

consider it to be a faster path to enlightenment than other Mahāyāna approaches.

**Vinaya Piṭaka** (Pāli) – The first of the three ‘baskets’ (or books) of the Pāli Canon. It contains the rules and monastic discipline for monks and nuns, including the origin stories and detailed explanations and analyses of each rule.

**vinò** (Italian) – Wine.

**vipassanā** (Pāli) – Insight, clear seeing, or discernment. Often used to refer to particular meditation techniques, such as non-judgemental observation of bodily sensations and mental states, or mental noting of sensations, actions, etc. The Buddha often spoke about *vipassanā* and *samatha* (calm) in tandem, stating that both play a part in clear knowing and realisation of the Dhamma. The benefit of practising *vipassanā* is to develop wisdom and abandon ignorance (AN 2.29).

**vipassanā-ñāṇa** (Pāli) – Sixteen *vipassanā-ñāṇas* (insight knowledges) are described by Buddhaghosa in the *Visuddhimagga* (*Path of Purification*). One of these insight knowledges, *bhaṅga-ñāṇa*, is described as ‘the dissolution of formations’, where only the vanishing or falling away of states is discernible.

**virāga** (Pāli) – Dispassion, detachment, the fading of desire.

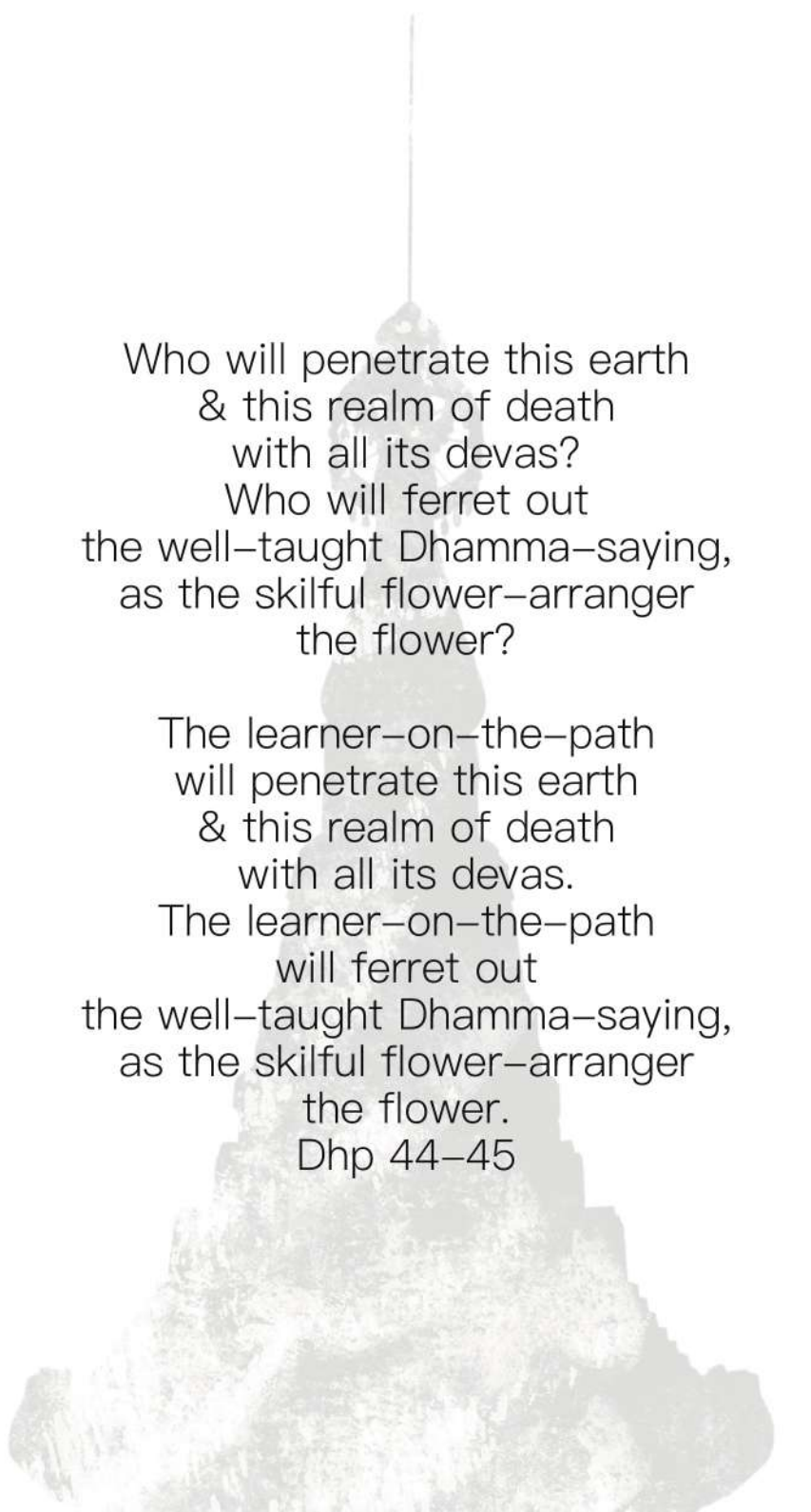
**Wan Phra** (Thai), **uposatha** (Pāli) – A lunar observance day which falls approximately once per week, according to the lunar calendar, on the full moon, new moon, and half moon days. Literally ‘monk day’ in Thai. The Buddha encouraged laypeople to keep the eight precepts for the day – comparing this to how the perfected ones (*arahants*) live – and stating that it is very fruitful and can lead to heavenly rebirth (AN 8.42). Traditionally, monastics and laypeople make additional effort in their meditation practice on this day, perhaps even spending the entire night

engaged in sitting and walking meditation without lying down or sleeping.

**wat** (Thai) – Monastery or temple.

**zafu** (Japanese) – Meditation cushion.

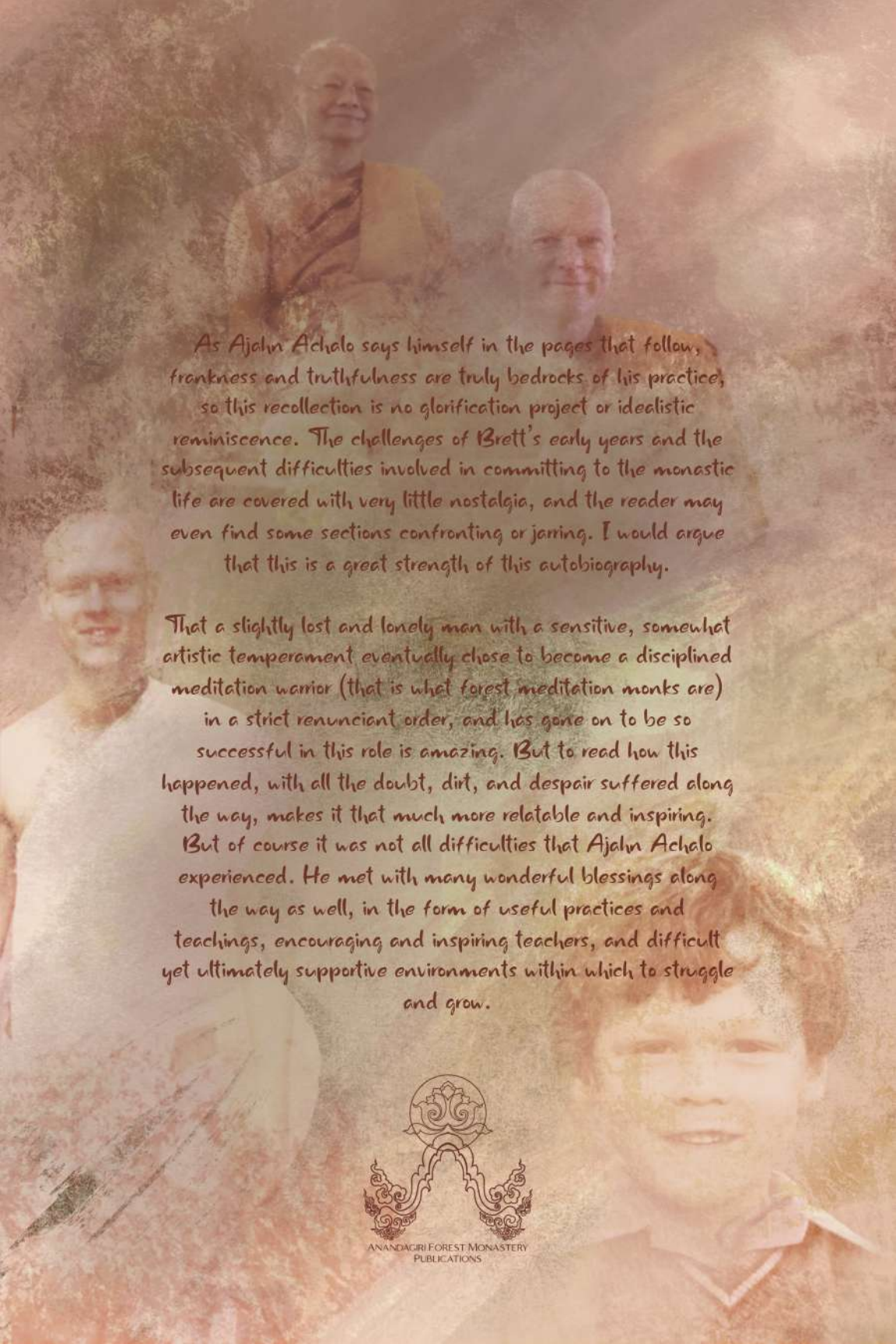




Who will penetrate this earth  
& this realm of death  
with all its devas?  
Who will ferret out  
the well-taught Dhamma-saying,  
as the skilful flower-arranger  
the flower?

The learner-on-the-path  
will penetrate this earth  
& this realm of death  
with all its devas.  
The learner-on-the-path  
will ferret out  
the well-taught Dhamma-saying,  
as the skilful flower-arranger  
the flower.  
Dhp 44-45





As Ajahn Achalo says himself in the pages that follow, frankness and truthfulness are truly bedrocks of his practice, so this recollection is no glorification project or idealistic reminiscence. The challenges of Brett's early years and the subsequent difficulties involved in committing to the monastic life are covered with very little nostalgia, and the reader may even find some sections confronting or jarring. I would argue that this is a great strength of this autobiography.

That a slightly lost and lonely man with a sensitive, somewhat artistic temperament eventually chose to become a disciplined meditation warrior (that is what forest meditation monks are) in a strict renunciant order, and has gone on to be so successful in this role is amazing. But to read how this happened, with all the doubt, dirt, and despair suffered along the way, makes it that much more relatable and inspiring. But of course it was not all difficulties that Ajahn Achalo experienced. He met with many wonderful blessings along the way as well, in the form of useful practices and teachings, encouraging and inspiring teachers, and difficult yet ultimately supportive environments within which to struggle and grow.

