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First published in Thai in the National Geographic Thai Edition,
November 2012

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Ajahn Martin teaching in Wat Pa Baan Taad
(Photo included in the article)

(Front page title) The Will of the Forest Monks
From Luangphu Mun to Luangta Maha Bua
A Liberation for Oneself or the World

CARRY ON THE WILL OF THE FOREST MONKS

Over a decade ago I used to taste the life in the robe as a novice. Starting with a mere summer course noviceship I enjoyed continuing this life for several years more. Until grownup and I could not resist worldly life I then disrobed to travel in the mundane world: changing from the yellow robes to Levy's jeans, roaming the cyber forest and living under Facebook tree. A return to the wat/monastery is like traveling back home again.

At the beginning of rainy season in mid-June, on the 3rd waxing moon day of the 7th lunar month, I started out from Bangkok heading for Ubon Ratcha Dhani province following a story that I've heard.

It said that once there were 3 monks dressed like Zen Buddhist from Japan, traveling from afar to spend the Lent at the wat/monastery. They came with doubts and made questions: 'why practice; practice for what; why practice is a must; what to get after practice?'

Luangpho/Rev. Father the Abbot replied to his foreign visitors in cool heart: 'why eating rice(food); eating rice for what; why eating rice is a must; what to get after eating rice?'

The three foreign monks were all impressed and said that they had tried to find such a short full-meaning reply like this for a long time; mostly they were either too long or too complicated.

The Abbot sat in silence and then asked: 'Is there any other question?' They then asked again: "who's the one who doesn't know?"

The Abbot replied: "The one who doesn't know is a fool."

The visitor asked: "Who's the fool?"

The Abbot answered: "The fool is the one who doesn't know."

Sometime later after a Dhamma Desna, a British attending the meeting asked: "Where to go after death?"

By coincidence there was a lit candle in front. The Abbot waved the light off and asked: "Where the light goes after being turned off?"

The farang asked more: "Is the next life real? If so, please let me see."

The Abbot asked back as usual: “Is tomorrow real? If so, please let me see.”

They were all quiet for a while, then the three visiting monks and a British layman kneeled to prostrate in respect to Ven. Phra Bhodidhamma Thera (Luangpho Chah Subhaddo), the abbot of Wat Nong Pa Phong, Warin Chamrab district of Ubon Ratcha Dhani province, and a disciple of Luangphu Man Bhuridatto—the great master of forest tradition/*aranyavasi* in Northeast Thailand.

I arrived at Wat Nong Pa Phong in the afternoon. I got off from the car and walked along a small road into the monastery. Though all the trees looked fresh and lively, the soil underneath my feet was soaked wet and muddy, probably in result of heavy rain the previous night. Each step was difficult for me to go forward, making me doubt about the way of life in this monastery.

“You wouldn’t know even if I explain. It’s just like a bird wanting to know about fish in the water. No matter of the fish telling the truth how they live in the water, there’s no way for the birds to understand as long as they are not the fish.” This is the answer of Luangpho Chah.

The Buddhist Sangha is in two sections: The Ganthadhura and the Vipassanadhura. The first are those who study Academic Dhamma/Pariyattidhamma—the Buddha’s Teachings, in order to put into practice or to teach others. They live mostly in town or village or city for the convenience in study. They are also called Khamavasi—village monks.

The Vipassanadhura monks are those put the Buddha’s Teaching into Practice, specifying in mind training through meditation, in order to gain wisdom on going the Noble Path to Liberation. They need to find a quiet, secluded place far away from worldly disturbance so called Sappaya/favorable, to appropriate the contemplation. By these reasons, the monks of this sect are likely to head for the hills and forests and therefore called Aranyavasi/forest monks; or Phra Thudong/traveling monks.

It’s worth to notice that all those seeking for Liberation in the old day(especially the eastern religions like Brahminism, Buddhism and Hinduism of all schools) generally left home to the forest, as if they believed that they had to go to a quiet place in order to find the tranquility of the mind. Mountains and forests are therefore roamed by those Liberation seekers to clean up their mind.

Even the Lord Buddha himself lived in connection with forests throughout his life time. He was born in the forest of Lumbinivan (border between the kingdoms of his father’s Kapilavasdu and his mother’s Devadaha). He was enlightened under the Assattha Bhodi Tree in the forest by the river Neranjara in the vicinity of Savatthi. He gave the First Desna/sermon at the forest Isipattana-Marukhadayavan in Baranasi/Benares. Finally he went into Parinibbana in the royal garden of Salavanodayan in Kusinara. Throughout many decades that he roamed the world to teach all able beings, there were those in faith who built monasteries in the forests :

e.g. Jetavana, Veluvana, Ambavan, Catthivana, Jivakaambavan, Madakutichimarukadaya van, Anthavan and Nandavan, etc. The word 'van' or 'vana' means 'forest'.

In Buddhakala/Buddha's Day, the Lord Buddha told the bhikkhu sangha to go out living under trees; in caves and caverns; or deserted buildings to practice in Samadhi Bhavana. One of the Buddha's Words reads: "Those bhikkhus who go to the quiet place, having calm mind, well-enlightened in Dhamma, will cherish the joy no common being has ever tasted."

Vijak Phanit 'the young yogi', an expert in Contemporary Buddhism from Naropa Institution, USA, noted that 'forest' here is a symbol of no-entry space, not decorated by any thoughts, hopes or any social rules. For the goal of Buddhism is the liberation of the mind, free from all spiritual attachment. Forest is a symbol of an ideal physical area that favors the mind training for a release and liberation from world attachment. The forest is free from any influence of knowledge, rules and regulations. In conclusion, a forest is the land of unlimited freedom. To the religious historian, the Dhamma/Vinaya itself does not reflect the rules, behaviors and Buddhist philosophy, but the significance in the forest renunciant paradigm, which is the way of life (of the bhikkhus) that the Samana Gautama Buddha had initiated and lived throughout his lifetime.

Ven. Phra Phrom Khunaphon (Prayut Payutto) viewed in his book 'What's the Problem of the Bhikkhus and the Forest', that since the bhikkhus live in the forest they understand the forest and can see deeply into the subtle value according to the law of nature, or the Law of Ithappajjayata, which is the most perfect environmental system of the nature. As they spend their lives in relation to the forest and develop themselves within its environment the monks consequently help teaching people to understand the value of the forest: including conservation in the form of cultural forests, community forests, public forests and forest monasteries, etc. It also means for the conservation of forests, wild animals, trees and shrubs, and Buddhist forest tradition for monks on continuing the Buddhist religion.

In the midst of quietness, as if completely cut off from the outside world, I walked along the muddy road towards Wat Nong Pa Phong. Big shady trees swayed in the wind seemingly to greet the visitors. This smell of damp earth in the air seemed typical to be the 'classic' atmosphere of a forest monastery.

In general this Wat was not different from any other forest monastery in dividing into 2 parts. Lay people area is in the outer part whereas the Sanghavas or monks quarters are in the back. I walked deep into the Sanghavas where there are small individual Kutis/huts, built simply for monks.

The idea of building construction for forest monks did not allow too much comfort and facilities that make the monks feel so comfortable—in monks word '*tidsuk*' (attached to comfort)—that they don't want to go out facing difficulties and hardship in Thudong/meditation travel—, which is one of the most important mission of the forest monks. Here I could find in a monk's Kuti only an umbrella, mat,

atthabarikhan & necessities for monk, blanket, robes, candles, lamp and some books. There's no need to think about cell phones, computers and other valuable stuffs!

I spent the first night very well at Wat Nong Pa Phong, though quite not easy lying down on the hard wooden floor of the *kuti*. The cool weather and weariness from the journey put me to sleep easily, before waken up at three o'clock in the morning by the bell ring 'Kaeng-kaeng-kaeng'—a sign for bhikkhus to get up, wash their faces, put on robes and get ready for morning chanting at the Sala.

'Samanasanna' and a recall of my past novice-hood came back with the rain shower and the sound of morning chanting. Then followed the routine of arranging place for eating and sweeping the ground before going out for alms-round.

In spite of flood and mud, the morning routine for forest monks just went on. That morning I followed the monks for alms-round in the nearby village, where the young and the old all lining up waiting for food offering in front of their houses. After the sound of blessing-- Ayu Vanno Sukham Balam, the monks walked away.

Going on almsround is a bhikkhu's routine marked by the Lord Buddha for the 'simple living' with 'no occupation', allowing themselves for full time practice. The word 'bhikkhu' means not only 'one who sees the danger of Samsara/cycle of births and deaths', but also 'a beggar'. Luangpho Chah taught on Pindapata that: *'set up your heart into presence. Don't look at anyone's face but only his or her spoon. And set up 'Buddho' in your heart all the time'. This is the way of Prodsat-helping people. If you don't have enough care, beware that you might contrarily be 'Satprod-being helped by people. Or if you're so hurried on Pindapata for fear that the food might not be left, it is called Pai- Laa- Sat—hunting people .We must bring with us on Pindapata the Sati/awareness and the worthiness of respect and faith.'*

Back from almsround was the time of eating for once in a day following the Sekhiyadham, i.e. no matter how much food a bhikkhu received he would take to eat for only enough; not to eat in full because it would cause drowsiness and unable to practice. Not only caring for the amount of food, a monk must be careful about the flavor of food—not to get stuck in it. He would try to avoid delicious food for fear of 'Tidsuk'.

The forest monks have many techniques to avoid themselves from 'Tidsuk' in eating: such as mixing all kinds of food together; and even pouring water in the bowl to dilute the taste and flavor of the food. Finally before starting to eat they were to look into the food in their bowls and chanted the consideration of food.

In the afternoon the weather began to get warm and the air became still as if the trees and the winds were taking rest. I began to feel drowsy because of less sleep, so I started to walk roaming the area in the monastery. Along the way I found 'talking tree' giving Desna: 'Eat less. Talk less. Sleep less, but practice at most.' in a signpost

on the tree. I walked on passing many Kutis into a clearing space but full of fallen leaves. I looked for a broom and began to sweep.

“No need to hurry on sweeping. Just take your time and do it slowly. Surely the ground will be cleaned after sweeping, but what about the heart? It would be useless if the ground is clean while the heart is still dirty”, A monk behind me noted. He probably saw me swiftly sweep the ground. I smiled and started again with mindfulness focusing at the broom. I slowly swept for so long a time until I felt calm.

Although this was just a short instruction, it's one of the longest sentence I could hear from a forest monk here. For all through several days of my stay at the wat I had had small chance to talk with the monks and novices. Many of them were like the Big Buddha Image in the chapel, i.e. no talk or talk less. At most they just smiled. I noticed that many forest monks here were young men who took their ordination seriously. Some had a will to spend the rest of their lives in the robes. A 'Seeker' here wished to follow the Buddha's footprint. Bhikkhu Wutthichai Cittavaro, a new monk in his first Vassa/rain compared himself with Ven. Yasa in the day of the Buddha.

It is just like what the Buddha said: 'Only Dukkha that gives you the light of Dhamma.' The young monk told me that 'The physical pain of Dukkha is not so severe. It's the spiritual pain of Dukkha that made me ordain. I used to have all worldly properties and status: house and car and myself an architect. But I still felt not full, not peaceful. I want peacefulness.'

Because he had longed for the taste of peacefulness, hearing sound of leaves swaying in the wind, which he could not find in the mundane world, Bhikkhu Wutthichai totally believed in the Buddha's Words: 'Natthi Santi Param Sukham'— No happiness can equal peacefulness.' This was the main reason that made him change his way of life.

For many other young men (like me), this Path seemed to be too lonely and too difficult to focus on our minds. Bhikkhu Wutthichai said, "If you cannot befriend with yourself, it would be difficult to be firm on this Path. Our Masters/Khruba-Ajahns had all risked their lives for the End of births and deaths and we are willing to follow their footprints."

Bhikkhu Wutthichai was not yet qualified for Thudong/meditation travel as he was just a new monk. It took 5 Vassa/rains--years in the robe, to be free from the state of Muttaka—in teacher's control, before a forest monk can leave the Wat/monastery and take meditation travel/Thudong, by then he would be deemed as reliable and capable for keeping himself well under the Dhamma/Vinaya.

The time for Thudong generally started after the Lent. During the Buddhist Lent it's about the time the forest monks took seriously contemplation on meditation and training their minds. After the Lent, these 'Dhamma Warriors' then started out their meditation travel into the hills and forests. For some monks, during the Lent it's

Pariyatti—study/academic training and the Thudong after the Lent is the time for Patipatti—practice.

The Principles of Thudong 13—(See the Note) are the rules for traveling forest monks. However, they need not to practice all the 13 principles and some just practice one or two. But they must take it strictly. There's an example in the day of the Buddha that he praised Ven. Maha Kassapa Thera (Chairman of the First Council of the Tipitaka), as Etadakkha—magna-cum-laude in the 3 Thudong principles: i.e. wearing only Pamsukula robes (robes made of thrown-away clothes); taking Pindapata (eating only food offered to his bowl); and living only in the forest.

Ven. Phra Rajwutthachan(Luangphu Dool Atulo) of Wat Burapharam, Surin province said about Luangphu Mun Bhuridatto—'the Dhamma Commander 'of Kammatthana Forest Monks, and his own teacher, that:" I have never seen anyone keep the Thudong as strictly as he. He wore only handmade Pamsukula robes and never used a ready-made one offered. He dwelled in the forest for the rest of his life. He ate only food from Pindapata (food offered into his bowl); even when he was severely sick he sat holding bowl in his lap to receive alms offerings. He didn't care for the merit of Vassa /Lent thus he did not accept the Kathina. He did not care for any building construction and never told any disciple to do so."

The seriousness in practice and the way of practice of Luangphu Mun has originated the Forest Tradition of the bhikkhus in Thailand. Several monk disciples of his are well-known as giving their lives to the Buddha Sassana/religion. They annihilated their Kilesas/defilements with the Sila/precepts, Samadhi/concentration and Panna/wisdom. And they believe that the pure Sila they keep is the best shield for any harm and danger while traveling among the beasts and difficult environment nature.

Talking about the strictness in Dhamma/Vinaya, Ven. Phra Bodhidhamma Thera (Luangpho Chah Subhaddo) of several years experience in severe practice told about once as a young monk on Thudong he could get only a fermented fish offered in his alms bowl. As he was not sure whether it's well cooked (The Vinaya forbids bhikkhus from eating raw meat), he took it out and ate mere rice. After that he went to stay with a Luangta/old monk in a forest monastery in the vicinity of Muang district of Nakhon Phanom province. There a layman brought some fermented rice for offering. All the monks and novices accepted and ate it all but Bhikkhu Chah who just received and left it there. The old monk saw him and asked why he did not eat it. Bhikkhu Chah replied that he did not eat the fermented sweet rice because its smell and flavor were like wine. He continued that he would die rather than violate the Vinaya/Rules and Regulations set up by the Buddha. He was not afraid to lose his life rather than losing the Vinaya.

Sulax Sivalax the Siamese Intellectual opined that, 'Of all forest monks, Phra Ajahn Chah Subhaddo is the most interesting figure, because more than a monk of Supatipanno/good practice, he also has a good sense of humor, whereas the biographies of other monks seem to be over-praised.'

Tonight the wind was strong without rain, in spite of dark sky, I stepped bare feet into the Jongkrom (meditation Walkway), touching the cold and damp of the earth, as if traveling into a lonely jungle—with only the sound of night flies shrieking and my own heart beating along the rhythm of meditation steps. As for me, the forest brought peace to my heart. The silence made clear—that I was returning from my body to my mind...

I went back to Bangkok that evening to feel different at home. I left the forest to go to the city. There it was all busy and contradicting with people walking to and fro, and I asked myself if I still lived in the same world. I sat in a pink taxi and as I saw a ring of amulets at the front window of the car I realized that we still lived in the same world.

The influence of forest helped cooling my heart easily to peacefulness. But it's so difficult here in the city. I wondered how Dhamma could prevail in a big city. Suddenly I recalled the word from a monk namely Khunasampanno. He told me that Dhamma prevailed everywhere: walking ahead there's Dhamma; walking back there's also Dhamma; turning on the internet there's Dhamma—all Dhamma. It's up to our own eyes to see Dhamma and start out on 'doing' it.

The taxi stopped in front my house. It seemed I could hear a voice from afar: "Welcome to the way of the World. Here in this world there's also Dhamma."

Note: DHUTANGA 13—Ascetic Practices

1. Pamsukulikanga: wearing only Pamsukula robes (made from thrown-away Clothes).
2. Tecivarikanga: triple- robe- wearer's practice.
3. Pindapatikanga: eating only food offered into one's alms bowl.
4. Sapadanacarikanga: house-to-house seeker's practice.
5. Ekasanikanga: eating at only one sitting place
6. Pattapindikanga: eating from one alms bowl.
7. Khalupacchabhattikanga: later food refuser's practice.
8. Arannakanga: forest dwelling practice.
9. Abbokasikanga: open-air-dweller's practice.
10. Rukkamulikanga: under-tree dweller's practice.

- II. Sosanikanga: graveyard dweller's practice.
- 12. Yathasanthatikanga: arranged-bed-only user's practice.
- 13. Nesajjikanga: no-lying-position practice.
