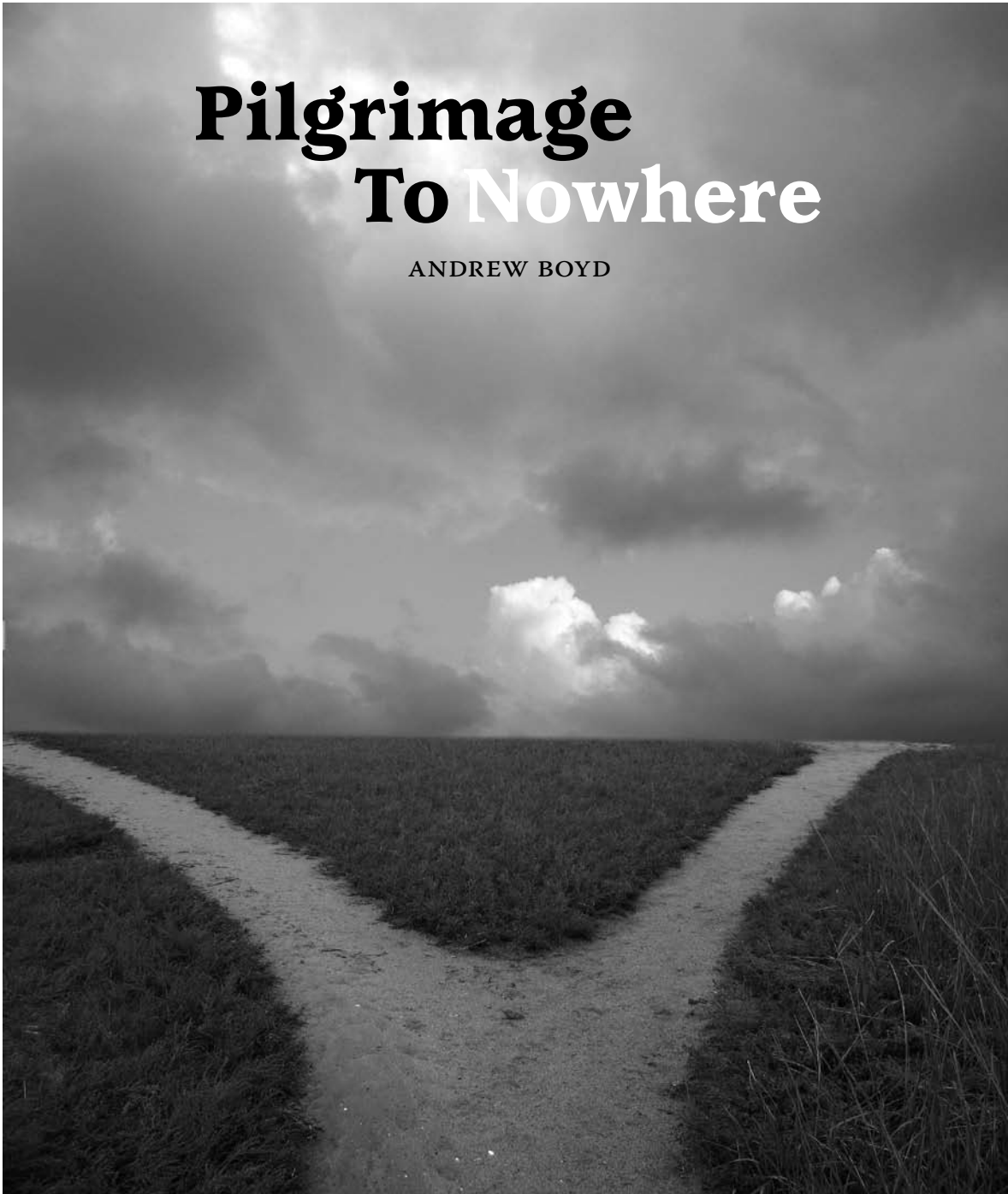


Pilgrimage To Nowhere

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If spiritual seekers coming to Thailand were treated like their sex-tourist brethren, a contingent of saffron-robed monks would accost you at the Bangkok airport, getting up in your face with a laminated menu of spiritual offer-

“Pilgrimage to Nowhere” is an excerpt from Andrew Boyd’s as-yet-unpublished book of the same name about his spiritual (and not-so-spiritual) misadventures traveling around the world.

— Ed.

ings and shouting, “Intensive Vipassana meditation! Twenty-one-day monastery stay! All-you-can-eat vegetarian meals! Hurt your knees! No sex! Donations only!”

This was not the scene that confronted me on my arrival, but I did pick up a booklet from the International Buddhist Meditation Center in Bangkok, listing more than one hundred different temple stays, classes, and meditation retreats. At the boutique end of the spectrum was Wat Khao Tham, a Buddhist island retreat run by an expatriate Aussie American couple, complete with nearby spa, yoga workouts, and continental

breakfasts. At the more austere end was the forest monastery of Wat Suan Mokkh, home temple of the late Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, a monk revered for his antimaterialism and rejection of worldly pleasures.

Bewildered by all the options, I got in touch with Joe Cummings, a friend of a friend and author of Lonely Planet's Thailand and Laos guidebooks. He recommended Doi Suthep monastery, which had a program for international students and a lineage tied to meditation master Ajaan Tong Sirimangalo.

"Of course, it's been a few years since I've been there," Joe added. "Things change." I've noticed that he and his Lonely Planet cohorts slip this disclaimer into every guidebook.

I contacted the monastery via e-mail. A message came back from one Phra Sam. *Phra* is Thai for "monk"; *Sam* is Canadian for "Sam." He sent me an application form, which asked about my goals. Goals? *Annihilate my ego, such as it is*, I wanted to say (with the proviso that I could do this during an abbreviated ten-day stay and still make my next flight). Instead I wrote, "To make compassion the source of my actions." I'm not sure what I meant by this, but it got me in.

It was late in the afternoon when I arrived at Doi Suthep. Saffron prayer flags fluttered in the breeze, slapping against the parking-lot lampposts. A few Thai families and several pairs of young European tourists were making their way up the final 108 steps to the hilltop temple and its four-hundred-year-old monastery. Some older and more-out-of-shape tourists were waiting for the elevator that had been installed the previous year. Pushcarts selling Buddhist paraphernalia were doing a brisk business. At the foot of the steps, a woman and her twin daughters were begging.

For the drive up from Chiang Mai, the nearest city, I'd split a taxi with two young German women, one of whom was blond, cute, and sufficiently charmed with me to have more or less invited me back to the guesthouse where she'd be staying that night — the same night that I, in a cruel twist of fate, would be putting on the white robes of an apprentice monk and swearing an oath of celibacy.

The two German tourists and I ascended the stairs together. They carried only water bottles and tiny shoulder bags; I had a full pack on. I could have taken the elevator, but it had occurred to me to make of these steps an impromptu minipilgrimage. I would squeeze the pilgrim's narrative into these 108 stairs — 108 being, according to Buddhist metaphysics, the number of difficulties to be overcome in the quest for enlightenment.

Over the previous four weeks I'd tramped around Asia, visiting five countries. Now I was going to sit in one place for ten days and travel inward. Why? It was an experiment. I'd come to Doi Suthep to see if I had the stuff that monks are made of.

When asked my religion on a form, I'd check the box "Other." If there was a blank line, I might write in, "atheist with a vivid imagination," "lapsed secular humanist," or simply, "disorganized." But like any half-literate member of the counterculture, I was theoretically part Buddhist. In my salad days I'd hitchhiked around the western United States, reading the

Beats, *The Tao of Physics*, and *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. I'd parsed my acid experiences in the language of Jungian archetypes as well as Buddhist notions of maya, karma, and samsara. Decades later I'd still turn out in the rain in Central Park to hear the Dalai Lama speak, and friends and I might exclaim, in the face of a perplexing yet paradoxically perfect moment, "That's so Zen!" But outside of a weekend stay at a meditation center here and there, I had never committed myself to a spiritual practice, instead pursuing a life of social activism and Abbie Hoffman-style political pranking.

And so I'd come to Doi Suthep to see what would happen if I sat in silence day after day after day. Would I freak out? Would I go out of my head with boredom? Or would I burn away some of my vanity and walk out of this spiritual boot camp slightly more realized, slightly more adult?

As I neared the top of the stairs, my shoulders were hurting, and my calves were sore. As befits a pilgrim, I wore the sweat as a mark of virtue, and the pain felt almost purifying. Cresting the last stair — in effect, reaching the 108th and final stage of enlightenment — I arrived at a ticket window. The German women had to pay, while I, the apprentice-monk-to-be, got in free. My companions passed into the main monastery complex; I walked around the side toward the monks' quarters. It was a separation of worlds: idle chatter and lovely blond temptress in one direction, silence and sublimated sexual desire in the other.

I was greeted by a bald, white-robed nun. Like a stern housekeeper she sized me up but betrayed no judgment. "Phra Sam was expecting you earlier," she said with a thick German accent. "He is not here now. Come." She led me down a concrete staircase, past a half-built dormitory — rebar poking up into the sky — and into a courtyard with scattered concrete benches and monks' robes hanging on a clothesline, saffron yellow against the blue sky. A scruffy black dog crossed our path, and I stopped to scratch it behind the ears. *Am I doing this mindfully enough?* I wondered. *Can anyone tell?*

She led me to a poorly lit meditation room and gave me a thin mat and several wool blankets with which to make a bed in the corner. The last meal of the day had already been eaten at 11 A.M. The next meal would be at 6:30 the following morning. All apprentices were expected to rise at 4 A.M. After breakfast, Phra Sam would conduct a vow-taking ceremony and give me my white apprentice robes. Until then I was to wear my whitest and loosest-fitting clothing.

After I'd settled in, I went upstairs to a large meditation hall. The walls were white plaster, the window frames red and peeling, the wood floor stained an uneven blond. At one end was a Buddha shrine; at the other, a bank of fluorescent lights. I pulled a cushion under my butt, crossed my legs, cupped one hand inside the other just below my navel, and tried to quiet my mind. My thoughts, however, were anything but quiet. I'd been jamming sights and sounds and smells into every sensory orifice for four weeks, and I had "monkey mind": little gibbering creatures clambering all over the furniture inside my head. I couldn't help but wonder whether I'd made a huge mistake. What was this place that I'd come to, with its flickering fluo-

rescent lights, clumsily carved Buddha statue, and damp-wool smell? And why was I taking ten days out of my grand Asian adventure to be frustrated by the everyday workings of my own thick head? Was I just another Western spiritual tourist, an experience junkie who had to try it all, a lost soul in search of some ill-defined notion of self — or no-self?

That night I had a dream: I was walking with the cute German tourist, who was pushing a stroller, “practicing” for when she had a kid. She was trying to get pregnant, she said, and I listened politely as she described her fucking schedule and fertility cycle. Instead of a baby in the carriage, there was a little Buddha.

When you join a Buddhist monastery — even as a Western apprentice monk who’s just passing through — you take vows not to engage in sexual activity of any kind, not to steal, not to indulge in self-adornment or useless speech, and not to kill. There’s an elaborate induction ceremony, which Phra Sam took me through that first morning. I had to repeat back a number of long, incomprehensible Thai and Pali sentences and prostrate myself to idols and personages I wasn’t sure I believed in. My knees and ankles locked up as I bowed down to the plaster Buddha statuette. Then I scanned the fine print of the English translation of my vows, to see what I was getting myself into. I noticed that “no sexual activity” meant I couldn’t talk to any of the nuns; “no stealing” meant I couldn’t borrow anyone else’s shampoo without asking; and “no killing” meant I couldn’t even murder mosquitoes.

After the vow taking, I removed my two rings and the stud from my left ear. Phra Sam handed me a neatly folded pair of white drawstring pants and two front-buttoning white shirts: the “robes” that would mark me as an apprentice monk.

“Are you clear on the practice?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said. “Well, no. Not completely.”

He demonstrated how to do the walking meditation: slow, even footfalls, each step broken into three distinct parts. I followed his example, feeling silly. It seemed like a pantomime of walking.

“Vipassana is insight meditation, the original teaching of the elders,” said Sam, as he sat down in a meditation posture, indicating I should do the same. “All suffering is the result of ignorance and attachment. We overcome this through the practice of mindfulness. When you meditate, thoughts and feelings will arise. Try to neither indulge them nor suppress them.”

“The middle way.”

“Yes, in Vipassana we follow always the middle way.”

I’d heard that Phra Sam had been in a punk band in Canada. Bald, wiry, and pale, he still looked the part, only instead of combat boots and black leather, he wore flip-flops and the saffron robe of an ordained monk; and instead of a snarl, his lips were fixed in a slight smile. A sign of wisdom? Or a tic picked up at monk finishing school? I hoped it was the former.

“Focus on the rising and falling of the abdomen,” he instructed. “Be mindful at all times. Always be *noticing* . . . *noticing*. When you’re eating, be *chewing* . . . *chewing*. When brushing

your teeth, be *brushing* . . . *brushing*.”

“Should I actually be saying, *Noticing* . . . *noticing*, in my mind?” I asked.

Phra Sam’s smile faded. “Just BE *noticing* . . . *noticing*.”

If you’ve never done it before, meditation is full of surprises. What should be the easiest thing in the world — sitting and breathing — is, in fact, excruciatingly difficult. My back grew sore, my knees cramped up, and my stomach trapped pockets of tension like gas bubbles. All the while my attention slipped into some ugly corner of my mind. A nasty radio interview from seven months earlier kept hijacking my thoughts. I’d been ambushed by a right-wing talk-show host and his call-in cronies. Though I believed I had put the experience behind me, each time I assumed the sitting posture and began to breathe, *fwoosh*, there it was: the same shame and anger I’d felt that day. I found myself spinning out revenge fantasies and rehearsing alternate comebacks that would have redeemed my dignity. Most disturbing was *noticing* . . . *noticing* my mind doing this. By whose orders had it developed these thoughts? By its own whims, it seemed. Who was “I,” then? (And what did “I” and my mind have in common?) Cliché stoner talk, for sure; fodder for late-night college bull sessions. But, observed up close and personal for ten hours a day, it was unsettling.

An apprentice monk’s life is bound by routine and the walls of the monastery itself. We’d wake at 4 A.M. in darkness and silence. There was no Internet, no phone, no radio, no TV, no movies, and no venturing off the grounds. The main temple — where relics were housed, rituals held, pilgrimages made, and favors granted — occupied the summit of the hill. With its stunning views, golden stupa, and carved roof gables, it drew the tourists. Just below the summit, spread along and down the hillside, were the monks’ quarters and meditation halls. Visitors might not notice our accommodations at all, yet it was impossible for us not to be aware of their presence. We’d know they were on-site as soon as we heard the clanging bells: a set of ancient bronze bells, oxidized by the elements, were displayed alongside one of the monastery buildings, and a plaque informed visitors that they could ring the bells if they wished. The random and cacophonous clanging, like human-powered wind chimes, enveloped our daily meditations. The bells would start with the arrival of the first tourists at 9 A.M. and wouldn’t fall completely silent until the temple was closed to visitors at 6 P.M.

It was hard not to view the tourists with a certain condescension. They were just passing through, while we were here day after day. And we were *working*, even if our job description was “Do nothing.” What were they doing besides taking pictures and banging on bells?

Of course, this was high hypocrisy on my part. Had I not behaved just like them in a string of temples from Tokyo to Bangkok: admiring the architecture, peeking into hidden nooks and crannies, and observing the monks at work and leisure? Here at Doi Suthep it was *I* who was in the fishbowl. I was the freak in the religious theme park, an exotic *farang* — foreigner — in his white robes. After a month of being a tourist, I’d finally

put down anchor, only to become part of a tourist attraction.

One evening, after the tourists had left and the bells had gone quiet, I ascended to the temple and walked along its checkered marble patio. It was a glorious night: the stars above, the lights of Chiang Mai below, the rhythmic chanting of the monks filling the air. *Liking . . . liking*, I thought to myself, trying to notice my enjoyment without actually enjoying it. I fell into a conversation with three Thai monks who were in residence at Doi Suthep. Here were true-to-life Buddhist monks, draped in saffron, committed to the spiritual path, seasoned by years of meditation. I asked them how they had come here and how meditation had changed their lives.

"Vipassana," said one, "saved me from drink and migraines." The second said, "Vipassana can make you rich. It can make you a better person, and more serious about work and family." The third remained behind after the other two had strolled off. He was younger than the others and had come to Doi Suthep as a boy. In broken English, he asked if I could help him get to the U.S.

Though mealtimes were supposed to be silent, they were social occasions of a sort. At breakfast my first morning, a female apprentice with a ponytail handed me a plate and smiled. At the next meal, I helped her get a few slippery slices of mango into her bowl. "Thanks," she said quietly. Given the isolation in which we spent most of our days, these felt like significant conversations. A few meals later Daniel, a skinny young man who seemed always to be smiling, took it upon himself to welcome me. Daniel had been in Thailand for five months and was to be ordained in a week or so. He said he'd been practicing meditation for years back home in Wisconsin, yet he looked barely out of his teens.

One of the ten precepts we had all vowed to uphold was to refrain from taking meals after noon. Our 11 A.M. lunch was therefore our last meal of the day. One morning at 11:50 I found myself sitting in the sunlit courtyard, looking at the remaining food on my plate the way a sailor might look at land before setting sail on a long ocean voyage. One bench over sat Silent Tim, a dour-looking monk who never spoke a word. Hannes, a new arrival from Austria, was sitting on the grass not far away. Desert that day included a fruit I'd never seen before. Its white and pink flesh was flecked with tiny black seeds, and it melted in my mouth with a taste and texture somewhere between watermelon and mango.

"Do you know what this is?" I asked Hannes.

"Dragon fruit," he whispered back.

Hannes was in his early thirties and handsome, with the air of someone bemused by the universe: not quite sure what it was all about, but not overly concerned about it either. I liked him immediately.

"What does dragon fruit look like before it's cut up?"

"Like one of those spiked medieval clubs," he answered.

"Ironical, yah?"

"Ah, glasshoppah," I whispered back, "irony of nature is gateway to wisdom."

He placed his hands together and bowed. "We must all be like dee suddh dlagon fluit."

"Any questions about the practice?" Phra Sam asked at my daily reporting session.

"May I meditate in the garden?" I asked.

"Yes."

"If I wear socks, must they also be white?"

"That won't be necessary."

"Why do you have us focus on just the rising and falling of the abdomen and not the full path of the breath?"

"Because that's how we do it here."

OK, *fine*. "When meditating, how do I relax while also exerting a focused effort?"

"Ah, that *is* the question." Phra Sam seemed pleased. This was more what he had in mind. "It takes mindfulness, patience, and time," he said. "Now, I have a question for you: When you're walking, are the left and right foot separate, or one?"

Finally, the Vipassana equivalent of a Zen koan. I said nothing, just bowed my head in the wisest way I knew how and let my silence speak for itself.

Phra Sam arched his eyebrows. "Separate or one?" he asked again.

Mu, I wanted to say, a Japanese word that means neither yes nor no. I waited for him to hit me with a big stick. "Well, both, I guess. Sort of."

"One ends in the mind before the other begins, yes?"

"Uh, ok." I had no idea what he was driving at, and he didn't seem particularly happy with me either.

"So, separate or one?"

"Um, I'm not trying to be difficult, but . . ."

"Fine," he said. "Do twenty minutes: twenty minutes walking, twenty minutes sitting." The reporting session was over, the recruit dismissed.

As I headed back to the upper meditation hall, a mournful temple dog stared out from a shaded doorstep. I noticed how ragged the garden was: its pond thick with algae; the elephant sculpture weathered, the cracks in its concrete head filled with mortar. I felt homeless. *What is this place?* I thought. *What am I doing here?* A throng of saffron-clad child monks, their classes over for the day, were playing ping-pong. An elderly nun was sweeping the concrete pathways, wielding two short-handled brooms, one in each hand, as if they were swords.

Hot chocolate was the one luxury we were permitted. You made it yourself with a combination of boiling water, mysterious bulk chocolate powder, powdered milk, copious amounts of sugar, and — if you wanted to be spiritually correct — no ants. You had to blow the ants (nonviolently, of course) off each of the tins before opening them. As I assembled my drink at the close of lunch, I had to blow three times for each tin, harder each time, saying, *Blowing . . . blowing*, to myself. I noticed Smiling Daniel, empty mug in hand, looking at my strenuous efforts and smiling even more than usual.

"These ants have extremely good traction," I whispered. He nodded. He was a lanky, yet somehow graceful, twenty-year-old with angelic good looks. His viking mop of blond hair had been shaved off the day before, leaving a stubbly pate, as well

as a gash where our cook's razor had gone awry.

"How's the practice going?" he asked. He made it sound like the next reality TV show: *The Practice* — five monks in an inner-city Zen center; their lives, their loves, their quest for self-annihilation.

"Oh, up and down," I said. "This morning some good progress, but earlier today and yesterday I was pretty upset. You create all this empty space, and all kinds of stuff comes up to fill it."

"That shows you're really practicing, if stuff is coming up."

I told him I was also having trouble with a lot of Buddhist metaphysics. The whole rebirth thing, for one, didn't seem consistent. Hadn't the Buddha broken with the earlier Vedic philosophy around the notion of a permanent soul? So what was there to be reborn? In Buddhism, as I understood it, self and soul were illusions, like everything else.

"There's no personality that gets reborn," Smiling Daniel said. "But there's a see-er, a place from which to gaze. That does get reborn."

"That's pretty deep for a twenty-year-old with no hair."

Smiling Daniel smiled.

"When I try to bring any of this up with Phra Sam, I get nowhere," I said.

"Yeah, he doesn't know anything."

I was unsure how to respond. I agreed, or thought I did, but was surprised to hear it so baldly stated. "But at least he's a decent teacher," I said.

"Actually, no, he's terrible. He teaches beginners and those with ten years' experience the same way. You know the book he's got?" I remembered a little notebook he always had at his side during reporting sessions. It reminded me of a grading book. "That's the regime. He just insists on that. You can't teach that way. I was reporting to him the other day, telling him about an insight I'd had about the nature of thought behind the thinking, and it wasn't in the book, so he couldn't handle it. He cut me off: 'When you're thinking, just be *thinking* . . . *thinking*. Do thirty minutes walking, thirty minutes sitting. Now go practice.'"

"He did that to me too."

"He has a temper. He's insecure. He knows all the terms and all the stories, but it's as if he hasn't meditated."

"Well," I said, "it seems I'm not crazy, after all. I can't tell you how I've been ping-ponging back and forth in my head for days: *Am I totally arrogant? Is he a fraud? Am I the only one who's feeling this way?*"

"Kind of helps that none of us apprentices can talk to each other, huh?" As if we were a comic duo, we both turned from side to side, pretending to look out for the monastery secret police.

Smiling Daniel said he was just going through the motions to get his ordination. He was a week away from completing his full twenty-one-day course, after which he hoped to be accepted into the *sangha*, the great community of monks. He would leave Doi Suthep and wander from monastery to monastery in his saffron robes. He could ride buses for free, and people would put food in his begging bowl.

"So, listen," I said, "now that I've got you here — a knowledgeable person I can actually talk to and all — when you're doing walking meditation, are your feet one or separate?"

"One *and* separate."

"Right! That's exactly what I've been thinking."

"You should talk to Roger about all this."

"Roger?"

"Yeah. Big bald guy. You've seen him getting lunch with us sometimes."

"Oh, yeah, him." I remembered him from the food line the day before: a big-chested, bullet-headed man in his early fifties. He'd ladled his rice and vegetable curry with slow, controlled movements, his eyes grinning. "What's his story?"

"He's the resident philosopher dude. He runs the information center: does drop-in meditation demos and teaches Buddhist-philosophy courses."

"He's not a monk?"

"No. 'I have enough precepts of my own,' he told me. 'I don't need theirs too.'"

"He sounds like the man to see."

"He's cool, but the real man to see is Ajaan Tong." Smiling Daniel explained that Ajaan Tong — the teacher of all the teachers and the true master of the monastery — resided at Chom Tong, another monastery several miles south.

I thanked Smiling Daniel, who dipped his head to me, and we went our separate ways. Things at Doi Suthep were becoming clearer and murkier in equal measure. With each revelation, it seemed, a new intrigue was added. The next day I would go see this philosopher, Roger, and maybe later in the week, if I could, Ajaan Tong. Until then I was more or less on my own.

Ever since I'd arrived at Doi Suthep, I'd been bowing down to something or someone: to the monks in charge during ceremonies, to the Buddha during prostrations, to Phra Sam at every reporting session. I didn't bow out of respect; it was more like pretending to be nice to the boss. I'm a rebel, a skeptic, a freethinker. As a matter of principle I try not to submit to anyone I don't respect or admire — especially people who expect it of me just because of the robes they wear or their position in some hierarchy. Revolutions have been fought and lives sacrificed for my right *not* to do that. And every time I had to do it at Doi Suthep, it left a bad taste. My growing doubts about Phra Sam only made the taste worse.

I was feeling adrift and teacherless. I didn't know the abbot. I didn't trust Sam. I had gone looking for Roger the philosopher that morning but hadn't found him. Ajaan Tong was just a name spoken with reverence — deserved or misplaced, I couldn't say. Doi Suthep, the institution, was still a mystery to me. And I was at odds with Buddhism on some crucial philosophical matters, which Sam was doing nothing to help me sort out. My vows were shaky; my practice was fraught with doubts.

According to my meditation guide, doubt was one of the seven great obstacles to self-realization, and it would often manifest as "doubting the correctness of our own practice" and



“wondering about the competence of our meditation teacher and whether he or she really understands us.” I was, it seemed, a textbook doubter.

That afternoon, in the empty meditation room, Smiling Daniel, Hannes, and I pulled three cushions over to the wall and whispered out of the sides of our mouths as we pretended to meditate. This cracked us up. It was all so junior high. Smiling Daniel consulted his watch: “I think Phra Sam will be busy chanting for the next half-hour.” Then, sotto voce, he expounded upon the benefits of meditation. He told us how, while still in high school, he had meditated while looking into a candle for four straight hours and then gone to his writing class and written a book.

“A whole book?” Hannes said.

He’d also taught himself Spanish just sitting in his room. And he’d taught himself to play and compose music — and promptly written two symphonies.

“Um, how does this work exactly?” I asked.

“Whole domains of knowledge just come to me,” Smiling Daniel explained. Either he was the nicest, sweetest sociopathic liar I’d ever met, or he was a Buddha incarnate. “I can just see

them. Like a whole body of knowledge was revealed to me a few days ago in only twenty minutes of deep meditation.”

“Really?” said Hannes. “Like what?”

“Like all of human thought.”

“You’re sure it was *all* of human thought?” I asked.

“I tried to tell Phra Sam at reporting, but he didn’t want to hear it.”

I was beginning to develop a little more sympathy for Phra Sam.

Smiling Daniel continued on with his stories: About his theories of natural genius and the stages of enlightenment. About the mystic Osho, who dictated a book a day to his followers. About some unknown lower-caste man in India who went to the forest after his entire family was killed and without any training taught himself to meditate and became enlightened. “It just shows you how —”

“Shhh,” whispered Hannes. “I think someone’s at the door.”

Someone was at the door, and, like schoolkids caught smoking behind the gym, we tried to look innocent: *Don’t laugh. Is it Phra Sam? Fix your robe! Shhh!*

When Silent Tim stepped into the room — as grim-faced and focused as ever — we looked guilty: faces flushed, lips quivering on the edge of laughter. *Not laughing . . . not laughing*, I faux-meditated. Whether Brother Tim was on to us or not, he paid us no mind and proceeded with his walking practice as if there were nothing odd about three of his fellow students sitting shoulder to shoulder along a stretch of wall. In the end, the joke was on us. Silent Tim's dedication was uncompromised. I, on the other hand, felt shame as I struggled to contain my laughter: the shame of squandering one's good fortune.

I stood up and walked to another meditation hall, back to sore knees and silence and emptiness.

The next day I returned to the monastery's information center to look for Roger. The center offered booklets outlining Vipassana practice and a display about the history and basic tenets of Buddhism. Behind a desk sat a monk I hadn't seen before.

"Is Roger here?" I asked. Just then I heard a muffled flushing sound, and Roger's bullet head and broad shoulders emerged from a bathroom. He had on typical Thai casual wear — short-sleeved shirt, khaki linen pants, and sandals — and wore an air of both serenity and diffidence. He threw up a hand in greeting.

"Have a few minutes?" I asked.

"Sure. What do you got?"

"Questions," I said, pulling the list I'd prepared from my waistband.

"You brought a *list*?"

"Well . . ." I began.

"First things first," he said, motioning me to an empty seat. Once I was settled in, he wanted to know why I'd chosen to practice Vipassana, and why here at Doi Suthep.

"Actually, I've been wondering that myself." And I launched into a capsule version of my checkered spiritual past: the eclectic influences; my suspicion of organized religion. As best I could, I described some harrowing early mystical experiences. "It was as if I had died," I told him.

"You did die," he said with a smile.

Roger, it turned out, had been a Chicago stockbroker before he'd left that world to pursue serious study of the dharma. He'd been ordained as a monk decades before and had traveled throughout Asia. Eventually he'd abandoned his monk's robes and landed at Doi Suthep, becoming philosopher-in-residence. As he addressed my grab bag of philosophical questions, he had a habit of enumerating his answers with his fingers, using his right thumb to count them off on his left hand, beginning with the pinkie. Given how chock-full of numbered lists Buddhism is — the four noble truths, the eightfold path, the five hindrances, the ten armies of Mara — I could see how he'd developed this habit.

I wanted to know why, if sitting was where the real work happened, Vipassana placed so much focus on walking meditation.

"Walking is the mind observing the lower body. Prostra-

tion is the mind observing the upper body. Sitting is the mind observing itself. So it is important to give sitting and walking equal time."

"That makes just enough sense for me to roll with. I don't know why Sam couldn't have thrown me a few bones like that. I can't seem to get anywhere with him on the more philosophical side of things."

"You won't."

"I won't?"

"No, and that's OK. You need to learn what the teacher has to teach," he said. Roger had a way of bringing his points home in these guru-like nuggets: seemingly wise, slightly mischievous, just a touch of mockery.

"OK," I said, "but just help me with this one question that Sam keeps asking me. I never know —"

"Whether the left foot and right foot are one or separate?"

"Yes! It's driving me crazy. I keep wanting to say —"

Roger put up his hand, stopping me midsentence. "What," he asked, "is the sound of one hand clapping?"

"Uh . . ."

He waited.

"I am, of course, familiar with the question," I said.

His eyes said, *Go on*.

"But I've never been asked it in a serious situation before."

We were both silent. Finally Roger said, "Who cares?"

It was my turn to smile.

Iwent back to see Roger again the following day, and he was no less intriguing. Roger was full of Doi Suthep stories. It was hard to tell where history left off and legend began, or which legends Roger himself believed. The most fanciful story he told me involved a Doi Suthep monk who had been arrested in Bangkok after having run afoul of corrupt officials.

"He refused to testify," Roger said. "'You will stay here in your cell until you do,' the police told him. The monk said, 'No, I'll sleep in Chiang Mai tonight.' They laughed at him. But he did."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Bilocation. He transported himself back to Chiang Mai."

"I don't believe that."

"You don't have to. I've been with monks who can do it."

In spite of his every-once-in-a-while flashes of insanity, Roger seemed to be just the teacher I was looking for. Our conversations were relaxed but challenging and unpredictable; it was like a fireside chat with a wise and kooky uncle who also happened to be a professor of the occult.

"Just observe your abdomen," he might say, "since that's where you're holding tension." From this concrete advice, we might go a few rounds on body-mind dualism. "Do the eyes see?" he might ask. "Does the body know? Are not all feelings simply passing mental states?" I'd counter with the notion of "embodied mind" that I'd picked up in a cognitive-science seminar. "There is no you," he would say. "You are not driving the chariot. In fact, there is no chariot."

"I don't know whether there's a chariot or not, but I think I had a 'no driver' experience when I was at Burning Man two years ago."

"Burning what?"

"The big cyber-Woodstock festival in the Nevada desert. I was with my girlfriend at the time. We were biking in and out of a dust storm, and we were very stoned — like, tripping stoned. Anyway, we were talking, and it seemed that the words I was saying were not being authored by me; they were just happening. And all the social conventions and body language and everything — it was all just happening through me, unauthored and unowned; not predetermined so much as programmed. I was a language machine. It was scary. I felt soulless, almost inhuman. I guess that was the fear of ego death. But I told myself not to freak out, to go with it, to let the machine be. And it was freeing. Uncanny, but freeing."

"Thoughts without a thinker. Not so different from Vipassana, eh?" Roger said.

"I guess."

I'd come halfway around the world to receive the wisdom of the East only to find myself swapping drug stories with a balding Chicago stockbroker.

"You're like Myron," I told him.

"Myron?"

"Yeah: Everybody's waiting on line to speak to the great guru in his remote mountain temple. They've brought their most pressing questions: 'Great guru, what is the meaning of life?' 'Great guru, what is the sound of one hand clapping?' 'Great guru, what is the taste of freedom?' There's a middle-aged woman in line who seems a little out of place, but she waits her turn, and finally, after days and days, she has her audience. 'What is your question, child?' the guru says. 'Myron,' she says in a thick Jewish accent, 'when are you coming home?'"

Roger chuckled. "You don't know the half of it."

With the exception of what were becoming regular afternoon visits with Roger, the days continued on much as before. I was walking and sitting in forty-minute intervals, yet still my mind drifted. Some of my anxieties seemed to have faded, but other problems, including a boost in sexual craving, had taken their place. I was still holding tension in my abdomen and still trying to wish it away during sitting meditation. Roger was helping me think through my issues, but the sort of numinous insight I longed for remained as elusive as ever.

One morning I woke with a hard-on. It wasn't the first time this had happened at Doi Suthep, but there was a particular urgency to it that morning. A pretty apprentice nun from England had arrived the day before, and that night she'd been in my dreams, along with Cate Blanchett and three Thai prostitutes. In more than a week at Doi Suthep, I hadn't jerked off nor hardly touched myself, but in the shower that morning I couldn't help but wrap my fingers around my cock. I just stood there like that for a while, debating my options. I wanted to maintain at least some semblance of the precepts I'd committed myself to, but I also wanted release. I wanted

hard physical pleasure. I began stroking myself. I stopped. I willed myself to let go.

"Does the Buddha ever get a hard-on?" I asked Roger that afternoon.

"No," Roger said, smiling. "At the highest levels of enlightenment, sexual desire is completely extinguished." He paused. "But it's the strongest of the hindrances, definitely the hardest of them all to get over."

"How do the monks here do it?"

"Some do specific exercises to shut down the sexual urge, like imagining a woman's body as filth — composed of bones and veins and intestines."

"I don't suppose that helps the nuns' campaign for full ordination."

"More than a few monks end up hating women. It's the only way they can stay the course."

"It doesn't seem very Buddhist."

Roger gestured as if to say, *It is what it is*.

"What about you?" I asked.

"I have the opposite problem."

Roger, it turned out, was married. He'd met his wife at a temple in Nepal, and they had two kids, ages ten and thirteen. He'd left them all back in Chicago and hadn't seen them in months. Meanwhile, he had two girlfriends here in Thailand.

"So you're not celibate?"

"The Buddha didn't think of celibacy as a goal in its own right — more like good training for dealing with your sexual life. I've done that training."

"And now you're enjoying that life?"

Roger smiled.

"But you could give it all up for enlightenment?" I asked.

"I haven't — but I could."

Roger sounded like an alcoholic who believes he can give up drinking anytime he wants.

"So celibacy is a means, not an end?" I asked.

"At the higher stages of enlightenment, celibacy is moot. For the rest of us, yes, celibacy is just a means."

"But it's clearly still frowned upon for a monk to break his vows."

"I'm not a monk, am I?"

True enough. Nor did he seem to be much of a husband and father. I asked him about this.

"In Thai culture," Roger explained, "it's understood that there's a 'minor wife' and a 'major wife.'" He described how, on his days off from Doi Suthep, he'd tool around Chiang Mai with *both* his "minor wives" on the back of his motorcycle. "Here in Thailand, women are still women, and men still men. Asian women in general don't compete to be like men the way your white Western women do." He said "your," as if he were talking about some distant culture to which he no longer had ties.

"There's something I like about that competition," I said, feeling a need to hold up the banner of feminism in what was looking more and more like a wilderness of patriarchy and girlfriends for hire.

"That's because it's all you know," he said.

"But what about your kids back in Chicago? Don't they

miss you? Don't you miss them?"

"Does the frog care which tadpole is his?"

I looked at Roger closely. Bald and hulking, he reminded me of Marlon Brando in *Apocalypse Now* — a Colonel Kurtz for the Birkenstock set. He'd come too far up the river, spent too much time in the spiritual and sexual playgrounds of the East. He'd been seduced by too many Tibetan yogis and mysterious Ajaan Tong; too many perfect, dark-eyed twenty-three-year-olds, gentle souled and ready to please. Was I, then, his Martin Sheen, come upriver past pleasure gardens of sexual commerce on one bank and communities of celibate, saffron-clad monks on the other until these opposite banks met in the form of a mad, head-shaven, fifty-five-year-old former stockbroker who made up his own rules from a philosopher's chair?

The next morning, upon waking, I found myself again aroused. This time, however, I was able to keep my hands at my sides in the shower and simply be *noticing* . . . *noticing* my desire. It subsided some, and I proceeded to the upper meditation hall and did my prostrations. (The mind observing the upper self.) I did my forty long minutes of walking. (The mind observing the lower self.) And then I sat. (The mind observing itself.) At first it appeared to be another unremarkable session, with the usual mix of boredom, doubt, fantasy, knee pain, and small signs of progress. But then something happened. Without my wishing it to, my tummy relaxed. I found myself simply observing my abdomen and my thoughts and the small sounds around me. The ugly radio interview came up, as did women, and also my grandiose speculations about the nature of the universe. The full theater of my mind was on parade, just as it had been all week, yet something was different. I was at a subtle remove, a detached observer.

"The monkey mind is wily," Roger had said. "Our meditating mind is simple." His words, trite and tautological when I'd first heard them, now rang true. I hadn't extinguished any unwanted thoughts. The full tempest and trivia of my mind, and the aches and pains and longings of my body, were still there — only now I was watching it all unfold without being pulled along. I wasn't trying to drive, nor was I wishing any of it away. I had stepped back somehow into a place of no desire, no judgment. Paradoxically, this place of emptiness was filled with a feeling not unlike kindness: a kindness toward myself; a simple recognition of my own tragic, inescapable humanness. And I realized that this kindness was the basis for all other kindnesses; that one's own happiness was not a form of self-indulgence, but rather a precondition for doing good work in the world.

I sat there feeling flush as the dawn sky blossomed from black to violet to blue. A fly settled on my left big toe. Phra Sam was sitting in posture beside the Buddha altar, as still as night. I could hear one of the temple dogs halfheartedly chasing something along the courtyard wall.

Something shifted inside me that morning, and the world, or at least the microworld of Doi Suthep, seemed to shift along with it. At breakfast I saw dour Silent Tim break into a big

smile, as if tickled by some private thought. He put his hand to his face and began to laugh, rocking back and forth in his chair, all in perfect silence.

Even Sam was touched with a certain grace. At reporting he seemed encouraged by my progress, and we shared a few laughs. Come to him with the right expectations, I saw, and he could be quite likable. In his own way, he cared for his students. He was even disappointed that I couldn't stay for the whole twenty-one-day course. How much had Sam been a blank screen upon which I'd projected my own resentments, fears, and longings? Was this what the Buddhists meant by "illusion"? Had I imagined for him a solid self, a fixed character, out of what was really an amorphous flow of passing mental states — *my* mental states?

On my way to see Roger that afternoon I noticed an older monk and three student monks sweeping away leaves that had fallen around the great bronze bells. One of the broom handles knocked against a bell, and the sound was haunting, like a God-child learning to play the xylophone.

"You've had fruition," said Roger after I'd described that morning's sitting and the quality of mind that had followed. "It shows how important practice is for you, how ready you are."

I wanted to talk more about it, but he said, "You're thinking too much; you're still *liking* your thinking too much."

"But —"

"Here," he said, and he took out a worn, pocket-sized, hard-bound volume of *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* and handed it to me. "Page 67," he said. "Read it. And take your time."

*For in and out, above, about, below,
'Tis nothing but a Magic Shadow show
Play'd in a Box whose Candle is the Sun
Round where Phantom Figures come and go.*

*And if the Wine you drink, the Lip you press,
End in the Nothing all Things end in — Yes —
Then fancy while Thou art, Thou art but what
Thou shalt be — Nothing — Thou shalt not be less.*

"It's not Vipassana," he said, "but it might as well be. Now go practice."

That moment of fruition marked the high point of my stay at Doi Suthep. In the few days remaining before my scheduled departure, my attention began to inch out the door ahead of me. I flirted blatantly with the pretty English nun and became even sloppier about my vows, sleeping in one morning until 5:30 A.M. ("We're not running a resort here," Phra Sam said to me during reporting.) In spite of my faltering discipline and the fact that I was only halfway through the course, Sam had agreed to take me with him on his next visit to Chom Tong monastery to meet the mysterious Ajaan Tong. When the day came, I packed my bags and made a 2,500-baht (sixty-dollar) donation to Doi Suthep in thanks for all that I had received during my stay.

Our audience with Ajaan Tong was set for the next morning.

After waiting at Chom Tong for nearly an hour, we were beckoned into an anteroom. I was nervous. I imagined the master would be able to see right through me. Would he approve or disapprove? I felt like a greenhorn Mafia recruit being brought before the Don. With the velvet painting in the anteroom and the vases of plastic ivy, even the decor was *Goodfellas*. Finally we were brought inside. We bowed. We sat. There were a few moments of uncertain silence. If I was in the presence of greatness, I couldn't tell. Ajaan Tong was old, and liver spots dot-

ted his bald head. He did not look like a man who was going to levitate or bilocate to the other side of the room. Mostly he just seemed tired.

Sam introduced me and translated for Ajaan Tong, who wanted to know if, as a special favor to him, I would complete my full course. I said I would consider it, but this was a lie. I had no intention of going back to Doi Suthep for another ten days. We bowed and left. I realized later that my fly had been open the whole time. ■