



Sumedho, bows three times. The two old friends chat for a while, enquiring after each other's health, and Luang Por Liem asks about the various branch monasteries in England. They have known each other for almost 40 years. Practising together in the old days, travelling on tudong, and serving their teacher – theirs is a lifelong bond, bound up with much mutual warmth and respect. All over the monastery similar scenes are taking place:

monks who have spent time together in the past are now meeting again. Paying respects and catching up, like childhood friends.



After about half an hour there is a pause and Luang Por Liem, a little sheepishly, excuses himself. 'It will be getting dark soon, I still haven't put up my net.' There are smiles all round and the visitors again bow three times. Luang Por Liem disappears into the twilight of the forest.

By the evening of the first day, several hundred monks have arrived and the number of laypeople is over three thousand. There are free food distribution tents set up – over a hundred different stalls and marquees sponsored by individuals, branch monasteries, government offices and other groups. For the next week, almost round the clock there will be all kinds of food and drink available for anyone who wants it. Luang Por Kampan Thitadhammo mentioned this in the talk he gave on 15 January:

'It's as if the whole country is coming together here. This is the result of Luang Por's life. Just look at the food

tents. It's like a wholesome cycle of goodness. People come here to hear the Dhamma. Then they give food to others. Other people come to eat, but in doing so they get to listen to the Dhamma. Then they in turn want to give.'

Some locals, unable to sponsor a tent for the whole week, simply drive their pickup into the monastery with the back full of some kind of tasty snack. Parking it just inside the monastery gate, they hand out their offerings to passers-by. In not too long the food is gone and they drive off, happy to have been a part of the event and to have taken the family on such a fun outing.

The local hospitals provide first aid tents as well as traditional Thai massage and reflexology for the Sangha members. Last year there was free dental treatment and this year eye tests and glasses were offered in a marquee just opposite Luang Por's Chedi. Over the years the scope of the gathering has broadened – as well as the range of participants. Lay supporters from Abhayagiri monastery in California won the hearts of everyone when they prepared and served American snacks from a food tent they set up a few years ago. Professionals and teachers from Bangkok come and camp around the Chedi, as well as members of what the Thais call 'Hi So' (from the English 'high society') – slang for the aristocracy and well-heeled elite, who genuinely want to put down much of the superficiality and stress of modern life and reconnect with something more meaningful and peaceful. Some tents may be fancier than others, but everyone keeps the Eight Precepts and most stick diligently to the schedule – sharing together in the predawn chill of morning chanting, queuing for food and toilets and splashing down with a bucket of cold water to bathe. It is no small matter for some.

