



Every year more schoolchildren come in large groups. All wearing white – girls camping in one area, boys in another – they have all the playful energy of teenagers everywhere. But a genuine sense of respect and decorum is also there, as if they know that although it's not as much fun as a usual school trip, somehow it's important, and it's only a few days after all.



It's 2.45 a.m. Way too early. But from the high bell tower to the north of the eating hall, the repetitive striking shatters the stillness. It's time for morning chanting. You do have a choice though: you could try to find an excuse to stay bundled up in a heap of robes on the cosy bed of straw. You're still a bit weak from that diarrhea a few days ago ... your throat seems to hurt a bit – wouldn't want to get sick on day two ... with so many monks no one else would really notice if you weren't there ... but it's useless. Only the previous day, in a talk to the Sangha Ajahn Anek had reminded everyone that in Luang Por's time everyone was at morning chanting, and not all wrapped up in brown shawls and blankets either. Then you had to sit with your right shoulder exposed, patiently enduring the cold weather and practising *anapanasati* (mindfulness of breathing). You imagine Luang Por Chah's presence standing next to where you are lying curled, looking down stony-faced: 'Eugh! Is this how you

practice?' Spitting out some red betel-nut juice he turns around and disappears into the void. You don't really have a choice.

By 3.05 the sala is mostly full with monks sitting, as is the eating hall. With the exception of one monk known for his eccentricity who has crafted himself a Mexican-style poncho, almost no bhikkhus



are wrapped in blankets as they were the previous morning. Ajahn Anek's words have had the desired effect and the new generation of monks seems keen to show their fighting spirit.

The laypeople, who somehow seem to have more enthusiasm for morning chanting than do the monks, have gathered en masse, and the women – *mae awks* as they are known in the local dialect – fill the sala and flow back out along a wide concrete road. At 3.15 the old grandfather clock chimes and one of the senior monks rings a bell: '*Gra-ahp*' he says over the microphone: Thai for 'It's time to bow and chant'. '*Yo so-oh Bhagava ...*' The monk with the microphone tries to push the pace and raise the pitch, but the massed ranks of *mae awks* have the strength of numbers and the chanting stays slow and low. Some find the whole thing tedious; others are filled with devotion and inspiration. For 45 minutes these ancient Pali words and their modern Thai translation are recited line by line, to a slightly sing-song melody that is written only in the hearts of those who know it and who learned it themselves by listening and following along from the time they first came to the monastery.

From 4 until 4.45 there is a period of meditation. Fighting the cold and fatigue, for many it's nothing but a struggle not to wrap up, fall asleep, or both. Others seem to have found an equanimity of body and mind. Seated on the hard granite floor, they embody the peace and wisdom of the Buddhas; still and silent, aware and knowing. Breath going in, breath going out.

