



By 5 a.m. the monks are setting up the eating hall, sweeping, mopping, and putting out tissues, water and spittoons. Next they prepare their bowls and put on their robes for almsround. A senior monk has the microphone and is going through some of the points of etiquette for almsround: wearing one's robes properly, walking with eyes downcast, not swinging the arms and body about, keeping silent, and many other minor points of practice. Some newly-ordained monks and novices may still be learning all this. Others will have heard it year-in, year-out. Yet somehow it has a freshness every time and an immediate relevance. These minor training rules and the small points of monastic etiquette, collectively called *korwat* in Thai, were given huge importance by Luang Por Chah as the way to begin training the mind: by letting go of doing things one's own way and being mindful to do things the prescribed way. The Buddha laid down these principles over 2500 years ago, and Luang Por knew their value.

Wat Pah Pong has about a dozen alms routes that wind through the surrounding villages. But when a thousand or so bhikkhus are in need of some sustenance, it's the nearby town of Warin and the city of Ubon that provide much of the additionally-required calories. As dawn approaches, the monks head out of the monastery gates, each with an alms-bowl and some with two if they are attending a senior bhikkhu. Lining the road to the left, right and directly in front of the gate is a motley fleet of assorted vehicles: draughty buses and pickups and, for the lucky ones, warm minivans. The monks swarm aboard, and wait. At an unseen signal, suddenly engines rev and wheels roll, and the parade of vehicles heads for various markets and residential areas. When they arrive at their destination the monks form lines of up to fifty or more and walk along pre-designated routes. People of all ages line the way and make their offerings, doing their bit for the *ngan*. The food is simple but bountiful, and by the end of the almsround each monk may have emptied his full bowl up to a dozen or more times: sticky rice, boiled eggs, instant noodles, orange drinks, tinned fish, bananas, coconut sweets ... staples of the modern Isan (north-east Thai) diet woven into this hallowed Isan custom – offering food to the monks at dawn. No amount of economic crisis, it seems, can deprive people of this simple joy. And

no matter how often one has taken part in this act of giving and receiving it remains a little mysterious, and quite magical.

The buses and pickups return with the monks and countless baskets brimming with food. There are still two hours until the Sangha will eat, and as they walk past the food tents the novices and young monks glance enviously at laypeople nibbling away on breakfast snacks. The more senior monks keep their eyes down, having by now learned that watching someone else eat, while you are cold and hungry, makes neither you nor the other person feel any better.

Everyone gathers at 8 a.m. in the main sala for the daily taking of the Precepts. A *Desana* (Dhamma Talk) then follows, inevitably covering familiar ground: our debt of gratitude to Luang Por; the importance of *sila* (virtuous conduct) as the basis of happiness and the stepping stone to *samadhi* and *pañña* (concentration and wisdom); meditation and the need to see through the illusory nature of our thoughts and moods; to go beyond desire by establishing a peaceful mind and taste that special happiness the Buddhas praised and that Luang Por experienced for himself, doing everything he could for us to be able to do so as well.

'Careful not to take too much food; think of all the people still behind you ... A purse has been found with some money and keys. If you think it's yours come and claim it, but you have to say what colour it is and how much money is in there ... Remember not to store food in your mosquito nets. Ants will come for it – and you'll be tempted to eat after midday...'

After the meal, once the Sangha have washed and dried their bowls, Luang Por Liem gives a 15 minute exhortation, with speakers hooked up in both the monks' and nuns' eating halls, encouraging us all to reflect on our duties as samanās, recluses who have gone forth from the household life into homelessness: from cleaning toilets to realizing Nibbana and everything in between.

By 10.30 the sun is filtering through the tall trees and slowly warming up the forest – time for most people