



to the eating hall for the afternoon drink ... 'if there is one'. It's a slightly tongue-in-cheek reminder that we

stream in and out and pay respects – three bows – before heading off, perhaps to get some noodles at the

shouldn't take anything for granted. These days though, there is always something available. Tea, cocoa, freshly-squeezed sugarcane and orange juice; drinks containing aloe vera chunks and other afternoon-allowable 'medicinal' nibbles: sugarcane lumps, candied ginger and a kind of bitter-sour laxative fruit known as *samor*. The laypeople too have had their fill of afternoon Dhamma, and those keeping the Eight Precepts partake in similar fare.

Everyone is encouraged to take part in a group walking meditation circumambulation around the Chedi – the monument to Luang Por Chah where his crystallized bones, revered by many as holy relics, are kept. All too soon it is almost 6 p.m. and the bell is ringing for evening chanting. The relentlessness of the schedule is a reflection of Luang Por's training methods: keep everyone pushing against their own preferences and desires in order to go beyond them; surrender to the communal routine and allow the sense of self to dissolve into a group identity, and beyond that to experience the sense of being nothing other than nature arising and passing away; have constant reminders and teachings so that the Dhamma seeps into one's mind – and the transformation from being one who suffers through clinging, to one who is free through letting go, can take place.

The first hour of the evening session is silent meditation. The January air is crisp and cool and it is the mosquitoes' feeding time. The sala is full, and all around it and stretching into the forest are men and women wrapped in white, some young though most older, simply sitting, being aware of the in- and the out-breath. Inside the Chedi too people are meditating, finding warmth in the enclosed space and inspiration from being so physically close to Luang Por's remains. As they sit, groups of people, families, children,

the chanting begins, and the voice of the monk leading it drifts into the Chedi from a nearby loudspeaker. Many of the meditators stay motionless, but most slowly open their eyes, and shift their posture from cross-legged to kneeling in the traditional Thai way for chanting. By some kind of unvoiced mutual consent they agree that the monks' pitch is a little too high and settle for something a few tones lower – creating an eerie discord which echoes hauntingly around the inside of the chamber.

Outside it's noticeably colder. By the time the evening *Desana* starts around 8 p.m. the northern wind has picked up, adding to the talk the flavour of *khanti* – patient endurance. This was always one of Luang Por's favourite themes anyway, one reflects. The monks giving the week's evening talks are Luang Por Chah's most senior disciples. They know how to inject lightness and humour into their teachings; stories of Luang Por abound, as well as humorous anecdotes from their own lives. The language used is mainly central Thai, but those monks who are native to the north-east will often switch abruptly to the local Isan dialect – a language full of puns, wordplay and innuendo – much to the delight of the local crowd. Dhammapada verses, old sayings, and nearly-forgotten proverbs are given an airing, complete with the Ajahn's personal commentary. Isan is not a written language, and listening to these old monks one gets a sense of the power of an oral tradition. Even if none of Luang Por's teachings had been recorded we would still be able to enjoy them today, from the minds and through the voices of the disciples he touched. The Buddha's teachings were not written down for several centuries, yet they managed to survive in a similar way.

You are asleep the second your head hits the straw mattress. One day merges seamlessly into another – all too soon that monk in the bell tower is doing his thing and you find yourself heading back to the sala for morning chanting. Each day is a little easier though. The floor seems less hard. It's a bit warmer, too. The mind is

