

The Prelude to the Parami Tour Thailand



**A Personal Account
Zarine Katrak**

Prelude to the Parami Tour—Thailand

The ten perfections (Parami) were our constant companions and the Triple Gem took on an importance for me that I have never fully experienced before. This proved to be a journey of huge challenge and reward. The gratitude I feel to Luang Por Sudhiro, our travelling Parami Sangha and all the wider Sanghas who welcomed us is a warm reminder of the biggest adventure of my life.

The following is a personal account Thailand – The prelude 19.2.07

Jeremy and I began our journey at 3.00 am driving from mid-Wales to Manchester. All the fears, excitement, anticipation that had been taking turns to occupy my thoughts dissolved into the necessity of being awake to the practicalities of getting up and to Manchester Airport on time. This was the beginning of living fully in the present for the next three weeks. Meeting Elizabeth, John, Pascale, Pete and Ken for the first time seemed so fortuitous, because it was quite by chance that we had booked the same flight. This 'quite by chance' phenomenon was something I let go of (nekhamma) early on in our journey as we seemed to be so blessed with positive

opportunities to practice, chant and reflect in environments that were often a chaotic assault on the senses

Bangkok - 20.2.07

Landing in Bangkok and strolling in the beautiful gardens that formed part of the monumental contemporary soaring steel structures of the Airport, I felt a sense of physically expanding into the growing heat of the day. Luang Por had arranged for us to spend several days in north east Thailand staying at or visiting four of the Monasteries that he had studied at or had built. We had lost a night travelling from West to East and during our wait of several hours for the flight to Khon Kaen I think we all were attempting, with varying degrees of success, to connect with both kanthi and viriya. The breakthrough came for me when Pascale found a place that did massage and I spent an hour being revived.

I met Les, Jane and Bridget for the first time at Bangkok Airport and so we became ten. The number was not lost on us. It was here, I believe, that the group began to grow into a Sangha.



Bangkok Airport gardens, Jeremy, Ken and me



Luang Por Sudhiro, Pete, John, Ken, Jeremy, me, Jane, Pascale, Elizabeth, Bridget, Les

Arriving at Khon Kaen in the afternoon we were welcomed by Luang Por himself which was both unexpected and a blessing. He had told us that we would be met by the monastery truck so fantasies of the flat bed of a lorry surrounded by metal bars and wooden bench seats was quickly replaced by the actual comfort of an air-conditioned mini bus.

The temperature peaked at about 35 degrees. We first went to the Wat where Luang Por had studied and was ordained to pay respects to the Abbott Luang Por Sudhira who had recently died. He was lying in state in the main shrine room before his official funeral ceremony which would be presided over by the King of Thailand.

The traditional architecture and brightly painted figures were striking and the atmosphere of calm contemplation provided a refreshing quality after all our hours of travelling.

We chanted and practiced in the shrine room for the first time as a group.



Leaving the Wat we travelled to Luang Por's newly built monastery. It was striking in its simple unpainted masonry, white carvings that expressed both purity and complexity in the light of the setting sun.

Here we met Luang Por's Dhamma daughters Ann and Nitnoi who greeted us with friendship and refreshments in the Sala. Luang Por's creativity was visible in the design for the monastery as it was in the tranquillity of the seated Buddha. Later we were introduced to Luang Aa who would accompany us to India



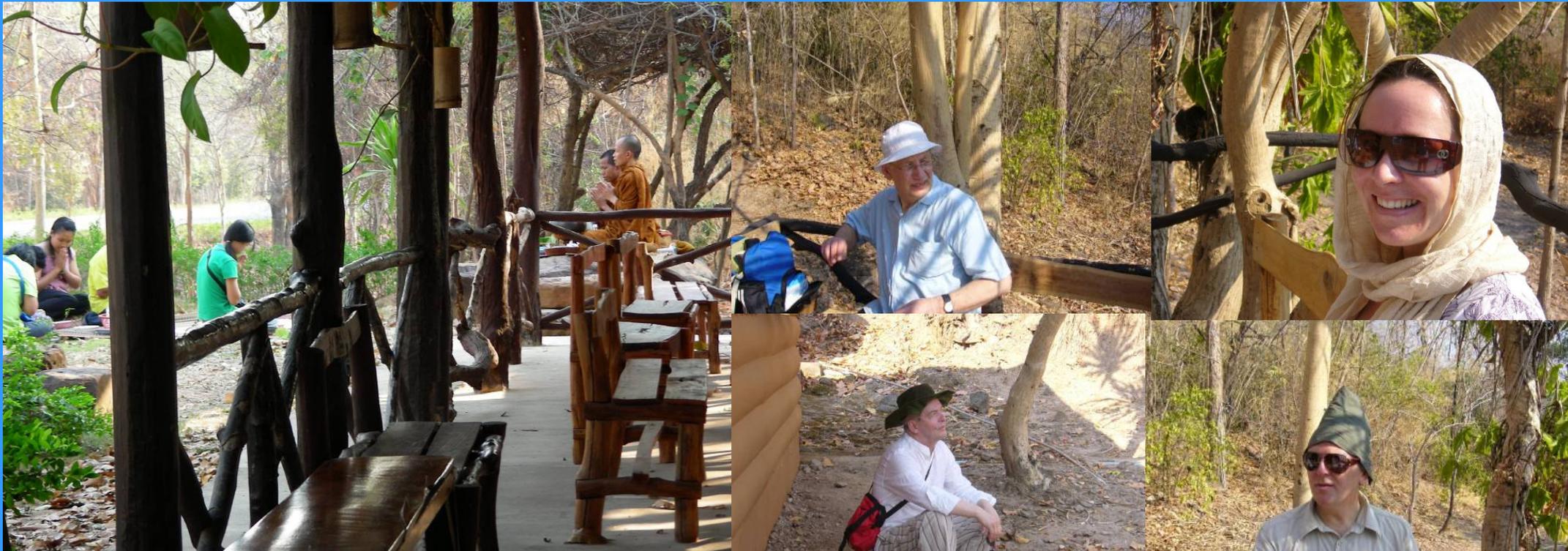


Later that evening we got back on the bus and arrived at the end of a tarmac road in a nature reserve/Dinosaur park. We enjoyed the hospitality of a small café. The food was wonderful mostly fish, vegetables, some seaweed, rice and plenty of bottled water which given the heat was both thoughtful and necessary.

After dinner Luang Por and Luang Aa led us in some chanting and a practice on the veranda of the bungalow (I think most of us kept falling during the practice as the missed night seemed to hold sway) and then welcome sleep for some under the stars and for others (like me) in a very comfortable bed.

The venerable monks put up their nets and slept outside in the woods.





Dinosaur Park 21.2.07

Morning and the pleasure of the intense heat, cold running water and the lively Thai music played by the Reserve Rangers got us up and out to give Dana to the monks (prepared by Nitnoi) and our breakfast. I felt as if I had been here for a long time and the experience of living in 'the now' was very apparent.

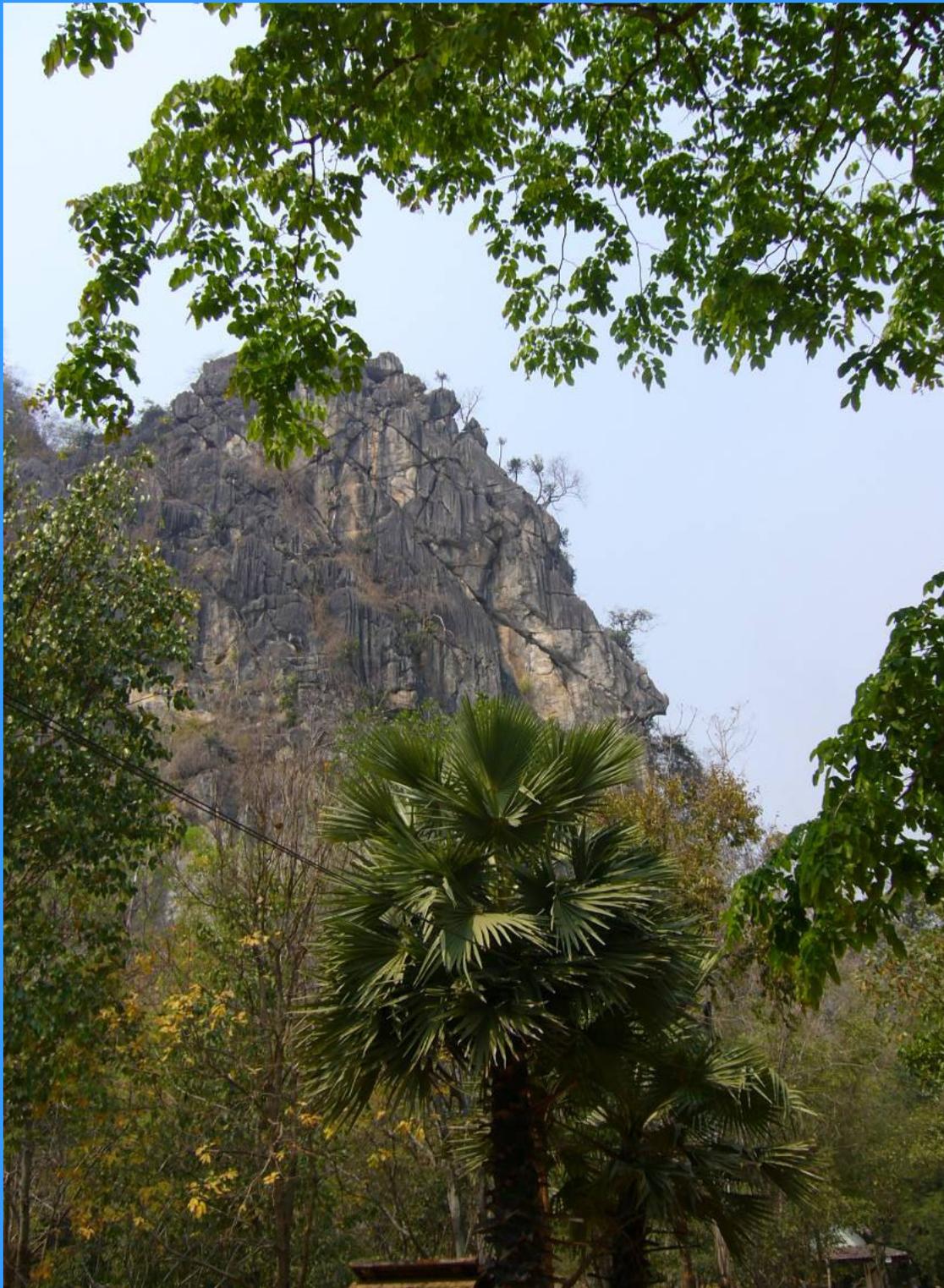
I noticed that the people here seem to love the monks and I enjoyed watching the ease and warmth with which they show them respect. We had time to find places in the woods to practice and even have a nap. .

Relaxation brought laughter and for me opportunities to begin to get to know others in the group. I felt a strong sense of Metta for myself, the venerable monks, our group, the people of the village and surprisingly this little corner of Thailand that

seemed to extend a supportive hand to strangers

Bags packed and back on the bus we travelled further into the mountains arriving at the monastery of the caves, another of Luang Por's projects (this venerable man in inexhaustible in his vision, drive and achievements which is a privilege to witness).





The mountains that rise vertically from the plain are spectacular and we were greeted with great warmth by lovely women of the area. Walking up the mountain the sight of so much bamboo and tamarind in the forest was beautiful. The monks arrived later by car and Luangpoh showed us the smaller caves behind the main shrine cave where he had spent a lot of time in meditation. I continued to be struck by his grace, wisdom, agility, light playful touch and vision; as before he had designed the Sala and Buddha rupa.

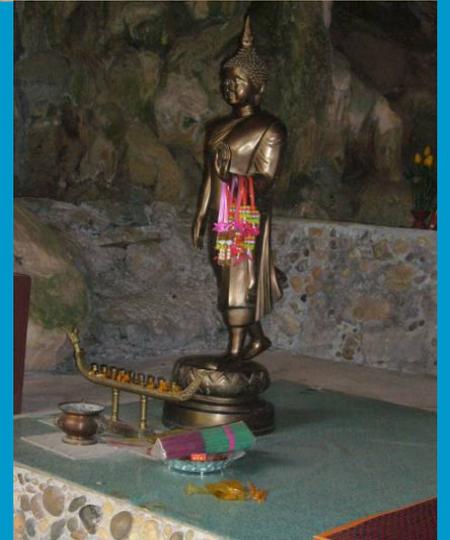


We ate dinner on the floor of the dining area which felt very companionable. It was cooked by Supa another of Luang Por's daughters. I enjoyed the extraordinary pleasure of many cooling showers, which for me brought up Sacca in simplicity and the generosity of others.





After Dinner we gathered in the cave shrine and Luangpor and Luang Aa gave talks about being a monk here, being scared of the dark, being mindful of animals in the wild, living with an awareness to survive and coexist in harmony with dangerous things. They talked of the need to develop mindfulness and the paramis particularly Khanti when living in the forest and the mountains. Everyone slept in either the shrine cave or deeper into the catacomb like caves behind it. I elected to sleep in the mouth of the cave shrine and could see the mountain rise up behind the Sala. The bats calling and the wind rushing as they flew in and out of the caves was a very comforting sound. I can no longer hear the small bats at home and was delighted to be able to hear the cave bats sounding. The geckos, dogs, cats, birds and wildlife added to the rhythm of this serene place. The swooping bats and night birds added an elemental quality to living fully in the present.





Wat of the Caves - 22.2.07

The morning brought us up and out to follow the monks on their alms round and offer Dana along with the people of the surrounding villages. Again I observed the everyday nature of Buddhist activity. There is a sense of family within the formal framework of respect that has a flow; it includes easy conversation and enjoyment in the company of the venerable monks.

On returning to the dining area we chanted and were part of the ceremony of offering food to the monks and eating together with them and the people who came from the villages. Luang Por talked about four things that were important in Buddhism: the people – which includes lay people and Monks, the place – where people can come together, the Dhamma – to learn and live it, and Buddhist activity. In simple terms he emphasised that India had the place (where the Buddha was born, gained enlightenment taught and died) and it was the place of the Dhamma, but Buddhist activity and people were negligible. I found this helpful as preparation for the extreme differences I knew we would meet.

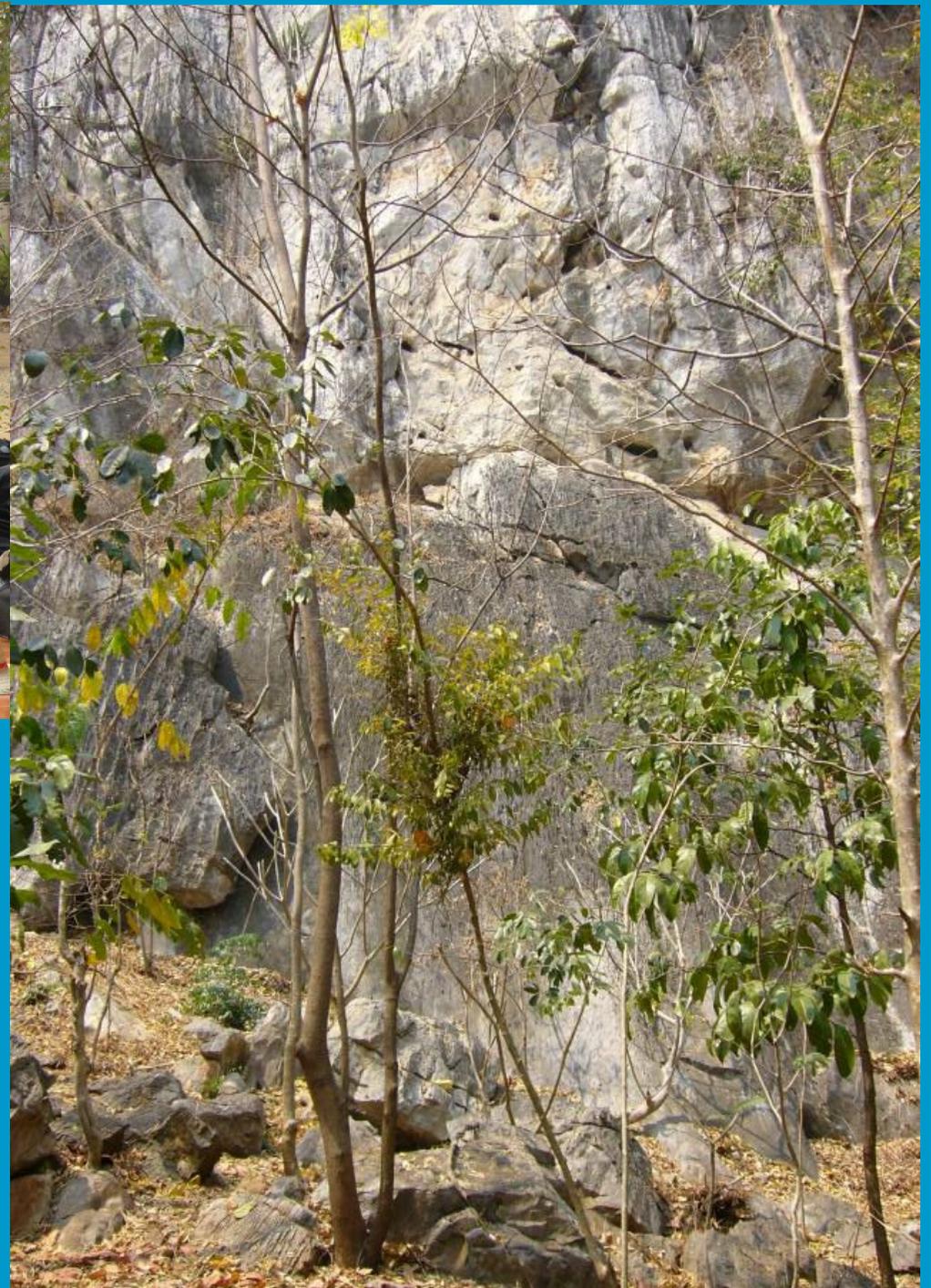




After breakfast Les, Jane, Elizabeth, John, Jeremy and I climbed the steps of the mountain, in search of other caves. Getting almost to the top we decided to turn back as we found none; it was hot, about 37 degrees. Jeremy and I went off on another path. There was a monk sweeping the path and kindly led us to a smaller cave shrine. He scooted up the mountain (this time without steps cut out for faint hearted pilgrim) and Jeremy manfully followed.

The fleeting thought of death on this mountain evaporated in its melodramatic tracks and I limped up breathless and sweaty to join in the laughter at my tardy arrival (possibly out of a sense of relief!)

The monk so kindly swept the floor and Jeremy and I practiced in this extraordinary space with a simple Buddha and cave paintings. After my practice I sensed that Jeremy would come back here for a few months. Going down required a lot of mindfulness. The view from the mountain of the forest, the sky, the heat of the sun and the satisfaction of finding a cave to practice in contributed to my great feeling of happiness.





Wat of the fallen Trees

We arrived at the bottom of the mountain and gathered together for a short journey around the mountain to another of Luang Por's mountain monasteries. Here we met another of his teachers and several other monks. We paid respects and listened to the Abbots views about India where the people do not follow the Dhamma. It was a useful reminder to prepare us for the move from a Buddhist culture.

The landscape was again different; groves of trees, a Sala being constructed of huge fallen trees that the monks and people from surrounding villages had brought to this spectacular place.

Supa and Nitnoi continued to accompany us preparing an amazing lunch that we ate in the simple monastery dining area. Then back to the minibus and to the Wat that would be our final resting place before Bangkok and India.



We arrived and witness a fierce fire burning stubble in the fields beside the monastery. We then meet the people from New Zealand who would join us on the pilgrimage, Samang and Mr. Don who originated from Thailand and Van-cam and Tam who originated from Laos.

We all shared dinner together and afterwards we joined the community in the Sala where there was chanting and a practice. The wind grew strong and an unusual rain shower appeared from nowhere. Then there was a ceremony where everyone tied a prayer band around our wrists so that in this way we could take them with us to India. It was such a lesson in joy in the joy of others.

After the practice Luang Por said that we had been visited by the Devas; the earth Deva was already present, the fire Deva raged for a while but kept its distance in the fields, the water Deva fell as rain and the air Deva inhabited the big gusts of wind that arose and disappeared again. This was an auspicious sign for our pilgrimage and we would keep them in mind on our journey.

When all was quiet Luang Por and our little Parami group sat for a time in the Sala and asked questions. "Bante, why did you invite us?" He turned it back to us and said that we knew why. I think it felt clear to me that Luang Por is a global visionary who wanted us to experience Buddhist activity, the Triple Gem in the everyday so that we adopt it as second nature and share it with others. I was able to thank him for inviting me because I he did not really know me like he did the others, but he said that he did know me and I went to sleep in my shared mosquito net tent, on the Sala floor, happy in the knowledge that "Bante knows me".



Luang Por's Wat - 23.2.07

On waking I realised that it was time for the alms round so finding Jeremy we headed off trying to catch up with everyone. We walked as the sun rose and enjoyed a supportive conversation but realised we had lost the others so headed back to the Wat. We were able to give Dana there, followed by chanting, a shared a community breakfast and the exchange of gifts.

Some people went shopping in the late morning and Ken, Elizabeth, Jeremy, John and I shared a mindful conversation on what we had observed and learnt up to now then rather spontaneously did several hours of sitting, walking and standing practice in the Sala before the others returned.

In the afternoon Bridget and I went to Luang Por's Kuti to make a donation and he, remembering it was Bridget's birthday gave her a present. We bowed and he blessed us and we somehow said "Sadhu Bante" in glorious unison and he seemed pleased and amused. He told us about his parents and showed us his mother's relics. He spoke about happiness and his childhood all of which felt like a gift.

At 6.00 we gathered in the Sala for a final blessing and then on the minibus to Khon Kaen a flight to Bangkok, three sleepless hours in a hotel and then the flight to Gaya and the official start of the pilgrimage.

Photographs: Zarine Katrak, Jeremy Bruce, Pascale, Bridget Aisbitt, Jane Allen

