

## The Rains Retreat

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An old coined phrase. The jungles of Thailand are now but a single shadow of their former self. Even so, this shadow seems to have concentrated the essence. Once shadows abounded throughout the tropics. As we shall see.

Years ago, while studying in one of the great jungle monasteries, I met an old German monk. This stooped and ancient religious, with crude and dark blue Thai tattoos – tattoos of stupas - all across his back and neck - was learned in speech. Yet he was as common as the coconut curry. Sharp of eye but disinterested as a well-fed monkey. He was pure-of-heart as only one can be who has spent a life Treading the Way. And as I had never studied a European language, he always spoke with me in English. His English was completely fluent, though often it was odd, it was beautiful as a long forgotten precious gem and his southern German Bavarian accent always held one's attention.

He had been in Thailand some twenty years when we met. Throughout the course of our relationship, he told me story after story after story of his life - as a wandering monk. In this one village where he wandered through for alms, there was an exorcist who held the spirits which he had evicted. But the exorcist did not let those spirits go. He kept the spirits in several empty whiskey bottles. And when he became angry, he would begin to open the bottles one-by-one letting the spirits slip out until those who believed in his power convinced the others, who did not believe in his powers, to stop harassing him. And that worked!

At another monastery, of all the villages around it, only one village had quite a substantial population. Now, when the monks in this monastery filed out onto the dirt paths of that village - searching for alms - those village people most often refused to render even a morsel of food, not the tiniest bit. Hence, in perpetual hunger, those monks were barely living, closer to dying, that was a real ascetic practice! Ah, people are like people throughout the world.

The only times I would see this old monk was when he came to spend the pansa - the three-month rains retreat - at the monastery where I was living. Then monks from all over Thailand would rapidly rush to this monastery in order to be with the old monk, the Master of this jungle community. Several times a week I would push through the vines, bush and brambles to visit with the old monk. He would have a thermos of hot water on hand, and he would make coffee, which we consumed as we casually discovered and spoke of the topics of the day. Pleasant was he and so informative.

The last time we met, he told me of another odd experience that once completely enveloped him. It reflected on the curiosity of the jungle on a rainy, a somber, a gray-like day. Under a canopy of the near virgin trees, no sky could be seen; light was barely visible. Like ebony. It was so darkly overcast. There was a fine cool mist of rain falling, constantly descending. But the trees seemed alive with the deep and prolonged humming of the hidden cicadas.

The old monk said, "In the *Vestern* part of Thailand rests a wat. But whether *gut* or not, I leave to you. This monastery's locale is in a valley whose magnificence is possibly unequaled in the entire kingdom. It is inhabited by three, no, four of my nation's German monks. The abbot was a real Berliner! He had resided there then more than twenty years. As in *der* other Western-controlled monasteries in Thailand, Thai monks come often by and spend the pansa. It is such a novelty to them to spend the three months in a Western community that earnestly practices meditation.

"Now, in Wat Buddha Dhamma, for the last several pansas, the Thai monks came to stay. But they would go *vertzig*, crazy. Frequently, this is something that happens. People just go crazy. Why so *vertzig*? It is because *der* valley in which the monastery lies, according to every Thai, it is haunted. No! Thai monks will not go down into that valley alone. Not at night. They have deep respect for the Western monks, thinking that those monks must have some special magic. . .if they can live with the ghosts. So when

some Thais do go into that valley, they just go lunatic. Then the German monks have to push and pull to get them to the hospital.

“Four years ago, it happened that there was a – what you say – a guy, a Thai man, who made it almost two weeks until he, too, had to be brought to the hospital. This was when I was not there. He was exhibiting very *veird* behavior, so they got him to the hospital and shot him full of valium. He would never, never go back into that valley. Now the next year, after I had just come back from Sri Lanka, we had a Thai man from Bangkok. He was, well, he wanted to ordain in the provinces as it’s cheaper and it was only for one pansa. He followed our schedule. In the beginning, he was quite all right. But when suddenly he saw a ghost - or something - he wouldn’t eat any more. He wouldn’t sleep anymore. He just would chain smoke - all day and most all night. And tell stories. Stories that he ‘knows as much as the Buddha, but...one shouldn’t tell anybody.’ He’d say all *dis* sort of thing. So we thought, okay. Now we’ve got to do something. But what if we just *schtuk* him on an air-con bus to Bangkok? *Nein*. That’s no good. So what *ve* did was to send a telegram to his mother. We did so - to try - to bear with this fellow. But he insisted he wanted to sleep inside the valley. So we thought that was... okay. We’ll just let him do what he wants. We don’t make him excited. But then the abbot, Thitadhammo, insisted, ‘You’d better take this knife upstairs. You should know it just might be necessary.’

“And indeed, it nearly was! Around about midnight that night, while I was asleep, I was *voken* up by somebody breaking through the bush and brush and brambles behind my kuti. With a sense of panic, I knew that something bad was now happening. I shook myself from the sleep. I rushed up and over to close the door. I had been sleeping on the floor just beneath my room’s double glass window. As I swung the door shut, I heard a screeching yell. Then something flew, whizzing in, crashing through the *closed* window. Glass shattered all over, scratching me on my face and arms and on the back of my hands. But just a little. However if I hadn’t stood up to close the door, the shattered window’s glass would have cut me into mincemeat. No, I mean pieces. Those pieces of glass shards were as big...and they fell, dropping right down where I lay - just half a

second before. In a kind of restrained shock...I...I...thought that that was quite something!

“Then I groped around and saw what had crashed through the window and did the damage. It was a big piece of ragged wood. So I picked it up and with both hands, I just threw it out the window again. And hoped, well - maybe – that large piece of wood hit him...but I guess it didn't. Now then I thought, ‘This guy is really *veruck*’. I wasn't sure why he did throw that big piece of wood that broke my room's big window. Has he some hatred for me? Did he see a ghost in the valley? Why did he do this? Anyway, I was actually quite in shock. Now I looked and I saw I had this knife in my hand. And I thought, ‘If he gets a ladder, and there certainly were enough ladders...and plenty more knives, around the wat ... if he gets a ladder and maybe a knife then comes in here, what shall I do?’ I was quite surprised to find that I was preparing to chop off his head. Right? And this frightened me even more than the thought of him coming up...‘Okay, you can't do that. That's a bit too much.’

“Then decided to sneak on top of the roof. Now this was a flat-roofed concrete kuti – by tradition they are constructed of wood and all with peaked roofs. From the upper-story window, my broken window, you could take a metal ladder and quietly hook it up on the edge of the roof, then climb out the window and climb up the ladder onto the roof. There was no ladder in the wat tall enough to get up to the roof from the ground. I would be safe. This was all happening on a new-moon night. *Alles* was pitch black. More by feel, I climbed up onto the roof and with blanket and pillow lay down, staying there for the rest of the night. But not alone for my company was a chilly drizzle of rain and the swarming dozens of mosquitoes. But also with this monk down there, who was prowling up and down, chain-smoking and mumbling. Mumbling. Walking and mumbling and smoking - to himself - all the time. It was quite far out! Finally, at about 5 o'clock in the morning, that crazy one must've found a good place where down he could lay. He Did. He rolled up and went to sleep. After morning alms, I went to Thitadhammo and said, ‘you must bring your Thai friend to the hospital. If you do not, I will chain him to a tree. You just can't let him run around like this.’ Though this monk

hated it, we finally arrived with him at the *krunkenhaus*, the hospital. There they kept him shot up on valium for a week. Finally, his mother arrived.

In this wat, quite a few of the corpses are cremated. Bones are buried – though not too deep - in different places. This adds to the monastery's renown. But there might be other things as well. I mean from what the other German monks have informed to me, well, they've told me some weird stories about ghosts in this place. You know? Steps climbing up and down staircases. Doors that are locked yet opening and closing, opening and closing. Things like that. Then more that is strange...strange sensations...like just feeling some...a...presence, a feeling touched or some such thing...strange energies rushing through your body. That, I finally experienced myself. Yes, those other things I just mentioned, well, there was always the presence of doubt. However, this experience of energies rushing through my body really gave me the creeps. And in the end, I was very happy to leave that place after the pansa because I was just so terribly frightened all of the time.

First of all, I was still in shock from having my big window smashed by that mad, that crazy monk. The thing is, it's all bushy and brushy jungle in the wat, right? You have monkeys and all sorts of animals, and the raining. Almost always, raining. So you would get those awfully *veird* noises. It would just pull me right out of sleep. Sometimes with me thinking, 'Oh! Who's coming? What's that?' It sounded like footsteps around your kuti. Really, it was so strange, strange in the rainy seasons. But that wasn't the bad part. No. The bad part started when this sort of energy rushed into my body and began racing up and down my spine. This energy. This weird energy. This rushing energy.

Several days after putting this guy into the hospital, I was just sitting and relaxing in my kuti, very calm and pleasant, having - good meditation. Suddenly, something went into my abdomen. Right here! And through my stomach right over to my spine. Then it just began shooting up and down, up and down my spine. What was it? I thought I would die any second! It was so horrible, so blood curdling. I thought...I thought my bone marrow would turn to ice! It was night and I had one candle burning. It, and the candle,

lasted for quite a while as I sat there with it. Oh, I thought I would drop unconscious at any moment. Then, the up and down stopped. But I was so exhausted at that point, I just fell into a dozing. And I slept. I don't know for how long. When suddenly it again shocked me. It yanked me out of sleep. It grabbed open my eyes. And the same thing happened over and over again. You see? Two or three times in the night. Every night! And this went on for those two whole weeks.

I just...I told the other monks and they said in true Germanic form, '*Ach, ach!*' Never mind. That happened to me when first I was here'. He carried it for six months! 'Don't worry. It is nothing special...' But it was, well, it was just too much. Sometimes I had a friend come and sleep with me in my kuti. Then it would not happen. Otherwise, it seemed to occur daily! For as soon it became dusk, then a deep, a black fear would descend upon me. You see I had to start back to my kuti knowing as soon as I got there, it would come on me – get inside me - just within minutes. Finally, this led me to very intense reflections upon death. *Eintz!* It was the first time I really believed that I could actually die. I tried chanting, burning candles, lighting the incense. I was performing all the general tricks; nothing worked. My meditation was filled with terrible awe. . . . fearsome. I could not really just, you know, observe it with equanimity. I was bedraggled, wiped out with fear. It was just too much. I mean, I could handle it all – all of it - as long as the thing wasn't on me...in me ... right? But once it was on me, within me, I would be permeated with horror.

“As I said, this went on for the two weeks. I then one night decided, okay...maybe... whatever it is... mean...I didn't believe in ghosts...But it must be something. Okay? So, 'Assume it is a ghost and...try to get...contact with it.' Throughout this period - all this time - it was pouring that rain all day, all night. And weird noises and the wind and all this...just...really...the special effects were going on all the time. Only the weird music was missing! I decided then. Okay...I'll just sit down and when this thing comes, I will simply ask it what it wants. It came ... And I sort of just barely opened my mind. Yes! It was here. I perceived that... this something wanted warmth, not fire, not flame, just warm. Just some inside warmth of a human being. Not love nor burn, mind you, just

warmth. Because it was cold outside, right? It was cold and rainy. And probably if you have to run around in those caves and the jungles, shaking your chains or something, it's probably cold and lonely! So it comes in and makes contact with a human. Oh, so then I said, 'Okay...take as much warmth from my body...as you need. And...how about if I light some incense and burn some candles?' I could not see it shake its head...but it agreed.

“Then I lit up the incense and started candles burning - which was of no avail before. And I gave all the positive energy I could, what do you say, muster. And it worked. But it never spoke to me. Spoke not a word. I had our communicating in feelings, intuitions, some thought. That's what I did, I gave it the warmth of positive energy, a candle, the incense. And it never came back. I saw that the other past nights I was so frightened, it couldn't get any warmth from me! Then the shock from that crazy monk sort of opened me up for it to enter. So happy it was to enter. Inside where I had warmth. The fear, the fear kept me off balance, but once I was able to let go of that fear, either it couldn't make contact anymore with me or it just got what it needed. My warmth. Apparently, if you lite the incense and burn the candles, do all of this while you are afraid, it's just to no avail. But once you are open and really positively say, 'Okay...take whatever you want.' “Then that's it. I mean, I've got no clue what this is all about, right? I'm still very suspicious of ghosts or whatever. But I mean, it was just...a very weird incident in my life. That's why I never go back to that wat for the rain's retreat”.