

# **The Life of Bhikkhus**

## **Bhikkhu Khantipálo**

The two careers—the town Bhikkhu—waking—alms round—what Bhikkhus eat—morning chanting—classes—invitations to the houses of laypeople—the forenoon meal—education of Bhikkhus—act of the Sangha—work suitable for Bhikkhus—evening chanting—learning in the evening—scholastic tendencies in the different Buddhist countries—the forest Bhikkhu—solitude—an Arahant in recent times—Vinaya practice—13 Austere practices—meditation—the forest Bhikkhu's day—the sálá—alms round—the meal and reflections—the latrine—meditation-walk—work during the day—receiving guests—sweeping—cleaning—water-carrying—a bath—drinks—evening meeting—service to Teachers—walking meditation—possessions of a Bhikkhu—living alone—“in no long time.”

The accounts of Bhikkhu life in this chapter are based on experiences in Thailand where there are a good number of differences, though unimportant, even between nearby viháras or those in the same group. So there are sure to be some ways in which those accounts differ from the lives of Bhikkhus in Sri Lanka and Burma. But again the variations are not likely to be of major importance.

Here only two kinds of Bhikkhu life are described, that of the Bhikkhu who undertakes the work of books and another whose work

is meditation. These are the two 'careers' approved of by commentarial tradition but one should not understand that they are completely separate. It sometimes happens that a study Bhikkhu decides that he has learnt enough and goes off to practice, while practice Bhikkhus have sometimes to abandon their quest and come to the towns for study. Although this separation is to be regretted and certainly was not the Buddhas intention, it is a fact in Buddhist countries. Some Buddhist authors of the present have also noted how inappropriate is this rigid differentiation[1] but change can come only with change in the pattern of education in the Sangha.

Even a century ago, the difference between these two sorts of Bhikkhu was not so great. In those days travel in Buddhist countries was by foot or in a boat while very few Bhikkhus, except those who were aged and greatly respected, will have travelled in palanquins. Bhikkhus were not permitted by the Buddha to use horses or elephants for travel. So if a study Bhikkhu from the town wished to travel he had to go by foot and carry with him his own bowl and robes and a few other things. At that time his life closely resembled the forest Bhikkhus who have always travelled in this way. The study Bhikkhu could then get to know the life of forest Bhikkhus from his own experience. Also, cities then were not the sprawling monsters of today. A town Bhikkhu's vihāra would be within ten

minutes walk of the city wall and the rice fields or fruit plantations beyond. He might be able to see the country quite easily from his *kūpi*. Things are different nowadays with town *vihāras* surrounded by houses, shops and factories, while to get out of the city one must take a bus ride for half an hour at least. So the gap between the two sorts of *Bhikkhu* life has widened now.

It is generally accepted that a town-dweller (*gāma<sup>v</sup>āsi*) means a *Bhikkhu* concerned with book work (*ganthadhura*) but this is not always so and there have always been a few town-dwelling *Bhikkhus* who are occupied with meditation, or who manage in spite of their responsibilities to progress far in this direction.

The Buddha foresaw that not all *Bhikkhus* would be capable of living the hard forest life, so he did not allow the five points raised by his cousin the treacherous *Bhikkhu* Devadatta, one of which was that all *Bhikkhus* should live all the time in the forest, never in towns and villages. But those places obviously do not offer the best places for meditation, they are not so quiet, they have too many people and all sorts of disturbances may be expected there. So the towns became the places for book-study since this requires a less rigorous life-style and less concentration, while the preservation of books is easy there. *Bhikkhus* who lived in the forest though sometimes attracted to study, have usually been inspired by their teachers and by the quiet

of their surroundings to meditate.

First then, the life of a Bhikkhu in the town.[2] Many more variations are possible in his life since much more happens (outside) than with the meditator, where the principal happenings are interior ones.

In the morning, say about five o'clock, the Bhikkhu wakes up. After refreshing himself with a wash and attending to the body's needs, he may sit for some time in meditation, or if an examination draws near, open his books and study. Some Bhikkhus occupy this time with some chanting since in every kuṇi there is a small shrine with a Buddha-image or picture. Apart from this the total furniture in many kuṇis consists only of a desk, chair and some bookcases. Some small sitting rugs with cushions behind them allow comfortable relaxation and entertainment of other Bhikkhus. Many vihāras do not have a bell for rising or any assembly in the early morning. It thus depends on the energy of the individual Bhikkhu when he gets up and what he does thereafter.

But when it is fully light, perhaps six or half-past, then there is something that must be done—if he wants any breakfast! He puts on his robes over both shoulders as should be done by Bhikkhus when they leave the vihāra, and takes his bowl in his hands. His head is uncovered and he walks barefoot as he goes out “among the houses“

to see what generous supporters will offer him[3] .

When he leaves the vihára gate, he does not hurry nor gaze about at the houses and shops. To help his inward calm, he may be reciting a passage from one of the Suttas he is learning by heart. but in any case, the good Bhikkhu gives the impression of being mindful and serene. It is early morning, a time when there is not much traffic and the town is still rather quiet. The Bhikkhu going for his Pióđapáta (food lumps dropped into the bowl) shows an example of inner peace, which the Dhamma has given him. The only times he raises his eyes are to look out for traffic and other possible dangers and to mark where laypeople are giving food.

It is the custom now in Thailand for a Bhikkhu to walk silently until he sees a house or shop where food is being given, or until he is requested to stop by a layperson that wants “to place in the bowl.” This is different from the Buddha-time when the Bhikkhu stopped briefly outside each house and if nothing was forthcoming moved on. Pióđapáta is still practised in this way in Sri Lanka. The important thing is that he should do nothing to compel laypeople to give him alms. He may only ask for special foods if he is ill and then it is only proper really to ask laypeople that have invited him to say if he needs something. Normally, he asks for nothing at all but just receives whatever people are happy to offer him. And they offer him

the best food they can, at least it will be a portion of the food that they have prepared for themselves and sometimes finer foods than they eat usually. The Bhikkhu honours them by passing by their houses and giving them a chance to make good kamma, or merit, by giving generously.

The Bhikkhu though does not always have to go out on Pióḍapáta in the morning. Quite often, a Bhikkhu has supporters who bring food to him to the monastery, so that it is not necessary for him to find food by wandering to receive it. This is particularly true of senior Bhikkhus, such as abbots, but many still go for Pióḍapáta. But Bhikkhus look upon this as a duty, as something, which should be done. It was the practice of the Buddha and all the Bhikkhus in his days, and it has a value far exceeding the collection of food.

It is, of course, good exercise for the body, and it promotes in the mind many good qualities such as contentment, humility and gratitude. Moreover it is a way of helping other people, for there is the expression in Thai, “to go out to protect beings,” which the Bhikkhu does by giving them the chance to place food in his bowl and so support his life for another day.

The whole act of placing in the bowl is done in silence. Silently, the Bhikkhu stops. The layperson silently raises his hands to his

forehead in the gesture of reverence. Making no sound the Bhikkhu takes the cover off his bowl and just as quietly the layperson, whether woman or man, or a group of people, puts the food gently in the bowl. When finished the householder again raises hands to the forehead in the gesture of *añjali* and the Bhikkhu by this knows that the act of giving is finished and quietly closes his bowl and mindfully walks away, usually without a word being spoken. Bhikkhus do not thank the lay donors, some of whom indeed would feel upset if they received thanks. They may sometimes receive a brief blessing like “Sukhi hotu”—May you be happy, or “Áyu vanno sukham balam”, “Long life and beauty, happiness and strength,” but truly their thanks is in the good kamma that they have made by being generous and supporting one who leads the Holy Life leading to Enlightenment. Some donors would feel like thanking the Bhikkhus for their good example of Dhamma well practised.

A Bhikkhu's Pióḍapáta in town takes him past the houses of both the rich and poor and he collects from all whatever they wish to offer, neither greedy for choice morsels nor scorning poor offerings. Also, he must accept whatever is offered, even if he is a vegetarian and people offer meat or fish, he accepts their offering with gratitude and loving kindness. He can always make merit himself by giving away what he does not want! That leads on to a small diversion, for

people always assume that Buddhists are vegetarians when this is not usually the case. A few are through their own choice but this is not because they are upholding some tenet of Buddhism. The Buddha did not want his teaching to become a 'food religion'—as many religions tend to become in course of time. He gave importance to what came out of the mouth—the words spoken, but not to what was put into it. As he was a Bhikkhu, he ate whatever people gave and taught other Bhikkhus to do the same. This is good for contentment. Laypeople of course can choose their food as they have money, but the Buddha said nothing about what they should or should not eat. When they did not kill living beings themselves and so made no evil karmas by killing, they could please themselves with what they ate and what they gave to Bhikkhus.

The food is kept separate in the almsbowl by the use of banana leaf wrappings and, these days, by plastic bags and small containers. In this way, curries, sweets, fruit and rice are not all mixed up and only the latter two are usually unwrapped. This differs from the Buddha's days when everything was placed in the bowl unwrapped and so became a mixture which could be rather repulsive and certainly would be only a medicine for curing hunger.

His alms round takes him half an hour, or a bit longer, so that by seven o'clock he should have returned to the vihāra with a bowl

half full at least. It is rare for a Bhikkhu to get nothing or not enough to eat. If this happens there is usually some arrangement for providing extra food cooked by lay people in the vihára, so he does not have to go hungry. And it is a good Bhikkhu practice when returning from the alms round, especially when one has plenty, to stop another Bhikkhu and give some of the contents of one's bowl to him. Special delicacies are often reserved by Bhikkhus to be given to their Teachers, the senior Bhikkhus in the vihára. Often he will eat in a group with other Bhikkhus and share his food with them.

When he has got back to his kuṇi, perhaps he has a lay pupil or a Sámaóera who will take his bowl respectfully and arrange its contents in small dishes, leaving the rice in the bowl. He may eat from his bowl leaving in it just enough rice for himself and then put in whatever he wishes to eat with it, or more likely he will eat from a plate. As the town Bhikkhu has two meals a day, he does not make his breakfast too heavy, although it is truly for him *break fast*. He, like all Bhikkhus, has not eaten since before midday on the previous day. The evening is the time when the body should be kept light—for meditation or studies are obstructed by an evening meal. Also, as his food is supplied by others out of the generosity of their hearts, he cannot call upon them for evening food as well. Besides, renunciation of sense-pleasures is part of his training and in many

parts of the world the big meal of the day is in the evening, so he renounces this so that he may have a mind that is bright in the evening.

His breakfast finished, he may chant a short verse or two rejoicing with the merits of the donors, being glad at the good kamma they have made and extending his loving-kindness to them. Such verses as these may be chanted:

“From all diseases freed,

from all grief escaped,

overcome all enmity

and liberated may you be.

May all distress be averted,

may all diseases be destroyed,

may no dangers be for you

may you be happy, living long.

One of respectful nature who

ever the elders honours,

four qualities for him increase:

long life and beauty, happiness and strength.“

Then, having washed his mouth it will be about time for the bell to strike summoning the Bhikkhus to morning chanting. Bhikkhus and Sámáóeras make their way to the main temple and upon entering prostrate three times, to the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha, in the direction of the Buddha-image. The most senior Bhikkhu first lights the candles, or lamps and then the incense. Flowers are already arranged there.[4] Then after paying respects to the Triple Gem he leads the Bhikkhus to chant:-

*Namo tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammá sambuddhassa*

repeated three times. Those words of praise to the Buddha are found in the Suttas and so have now been chanted in his honour for more than twenty-five centuries. *Namo* means homage, honour or reverence and *tassa* is 'to that.' *Bhagavato* is usually rendered exalted or Blessed One but really means something like: The Lord who knows how to teach the Dhamma appropriate to different beings out of compassion for them. This word *Bhagavá* therefore celebrates the Great Compassion of the Buddha. *Arahato*—the Arahant, one who is free from defilement, therefore stands for the Buddha's complete Purity. *Sammá*—perfect, *sambuddhassa*—to the Buddha

(enlightened) by himself; he is perfectly enlightened by his own efforts and his enlightenment or *bodhi* was not granted him by any other power or person. This stands for the quality of the Buddha's Wisdom, which is unique among the Teachers of this world.

After this the various recollections are chanted. Here are some of them in English translation.

### ***Recollection of the Buddha***

“Indeed the Exalted One is thus: the accomplished destroyer of defilements, a Buddha perfected by himself, complete in clear knowledge and compassionate conduct, supremely good in presence and in destiny, knower of the worlds, incomparable Master of men to be tamed, the Teacher of devas and men, the Awakened and Awakener, the Lord by skilful means apportioning Dhamma.”[\[5\]](#)

### ***Recollection of the Dhamma***

“The Dhamma of the Exalted One is perfectly expounded, to be seen here and now, not delayed in time, inviting one to come and see, leading inwards, to be known by each wise man for himself.”

### ***Recollection of the Sangha***

“The Sangha of the Exalted One's disciples who have practised well, who have practised straightly, who have practised rightly, who have practised dutifully,—that is to say, the four pairs of men, the eight

types of persons—that is the Sangha of the Exalted One’s disciples, worthy of gifts, worthy of hospitality, worthy of offerings, who should be respected, the incomparable field of merit for the world.”[6]

***Recollection at the time of using the requisites***

“Reflecting carefully I use this robe only to ward off cold, to ward off heat, to ward off the touch of gadflies, mosquitoes, wind, sun and reptiles, only for the purpose of covering the sexual organs.”

“Reflecting carefully I use this alms food: not for pleasure, not for indulgence, not for personal charm, not for beautification but only for maintaining this body so that it endures, for keeping it unharmed, for supporting the Holy Life; so that former feelings (of hunger) are removed and new feelings (from overeating) do not arise; then there will be for me a lack of bodily obstacles, and living comfortably.

“Reflecting carefully I use this lodging: only to ward off cold, to ward off heat, to ward off the touch of gadflies, mosquitoes, wind, sun and reptiles, only for the purpose of removing the dangers from weather and for living in seclusion.”

“Reflecting carefully I use these requisites for illness—medicines and utensils: only to ward off painful feelings that have

arisen, for the maximum freedom from disease.“

### ***Five Subjects for Frequent Recollection***

1. I am of the nature to decay; I have not got beyond decay.
2. I am of the nature to be diseased; I have not got beyond disease.
3. I am of the nature to die; I have not got beyond death.
4. All that is mine, dear and delightful, will change and vanish.
5. I am the owner of my kamma; the heir to my kamma; born of my kamma; related to my kamma; abide supported by my kamma. Whatever kamma I shall do, whether good or evil, of that I shall be the heir.“[7]

These are some of the recollections, which are chanted at this time; the selection varies from one vihára to another. A section from some famous work expounding the Dhamma or Vinaya may also be read by one of the Bhikkhus while the rest listen, their hands held reverently at the level of the heart. At the end, the novices may recite their Ten Precepts.[8]

What happens after this Morning Chanting depends on the status, of the Bhikkhu. The youngest (in Rains) together with the Sámaóeras, will go to Dhamma or Pali classes for about one and a half hours from nine until half past ten. More senior Bhikkhus will

be their teachers. The most senior Bhikkhus, such as the abbot and other leading Theras, may also teach but usually special subjects and not regularly. Their time is very full with invitations and appointments. Many people come to see them and they are invited frequently to go to people's houses and to other viháras, sometimes far distant.

Regarding invitations to peoples' houses, some Bhikkhus will have been absent from Morning Chanting as they had invitations for breakfast. Usually this means that they would not have gone for Pióðapáta. If the house is far away, the owner will send a car or cars for them but if near the Bhikkhus walk there. Before they enter the house water is poured over their feet, which are then wiped, often done by the layman inviting them. Inside a number of cushions have been set out against a wall and a clean white cloth is sometimes spread over them. The most senior Bhikkhu sits (preferably with his right side, the side showing respect) nearest the Buddha image in front of which candles, incense and flowers are arranged.

When the Bhikkhus are seated, the family pays its respects to them with the triple prostration and the layman lights the candles and incense. Then they request the Three Refuges and the Five Precepts from the most senior Bhikkhu. This is followed by the chanting of auspicious discourses, passages and stanzas that are selected

according to the occasion. Upon the conclusion of the chanting the laypeople prostrate again and then serve the Bhikkhus with breakfast. This may be in their bowls or on plates and sometimes laypeople provide more food for the Bhikkhus to take back to their viháras for the forenoon meal. In some houses gifts of necessities are given to the Bhikkhus who, before they go, chant the verses of rejoicing in the donors' merits. A short talk on Dhamma may also be given. The Bhikkhus then return to the vihára. What has been said here applies equally to an invitation to the forenoon meal.

But we shall suppose that the Bhikkhu whose day we are following has no such invitation and so returns after his classes feeling hot and in need of a wash or shower. In towns, modern viháras have showers but the traditional bathroom has large pitchers or tanks of water out of which water is scooped and splashed over oneself. The lower robe is kept on and gets washed in the process. Then another dry one is put on over it and the wet one lowered to the floor.

Refreshed from his bath the Bhikkhu goes to wherever the food is served. In part this may be the leftovers from his Pióđapáta, but there may not be much of this if he has young pupils! Then in some viháras arrangements are made to supply food cooked in the market to the Bhikkhus, a fund supported by laypeople paying for this. In

other places and this is the case with many Bhikkhus, a lay-supporter will send a tiffin-carrier full of food for the Bhikkhus' second meal. It is called the forenoon meal as it must be finished before midday after which Bhikkhus do not eat. Apart from this there is nothing special to say about this meal. Sometimes laypeople take food to the vihára and invite a number of the Bhikkhus there, or even all of them. This is often done on birthdays or other special celebrations.

In hot countries and hot seasons it is advisable to take a rest at this time, so from noon until about one o'clock the vihára is rather quiet. Then the time comes for more classes between one and two for three or four hours in the afternoon. Each vihára organises its own programme of instruction though some textbooks may be common to all.

The variations of a Bhikkhu's schedule, which can take place in the afternoon, are more numerous than in the morning. He can, for example, go to one of the Bhikkhu colleges for higher education if his studies are advanced enough. There he learns not only Buddhist subjects but also some other worldly knowledge which may be useful to him. Here there is a difference of opinion between those who want Bhikkhus to learn only Pali language, the Dhamma and Vinaya with such related subjects as the life of the Buddha and Buddhist history and those who think that modern education is

important for the Bhikkhu. The arguments for both sides run like this. Traditionalists say that the Buddha condemned worldly talk (literally animal-talk) and worldly knowledge while he praised those who were deeply learned, in the Three Baskets for example. Their argument is that Bhikkhus should not burden their minds with much worldly knowledge because it will only lead them to worldliness and bad conduct. A Bhikkhu has no need, they say, of any of the subjects between algebra and zoology. He will be well equipped if he knows his Discipline well, and the Discourses thoroughly. If in addition he has studied the Commentaries and the Abhidhamma, it will be enough for his own development, also for helping others. Bhikkhus who get their heads stuffed full of worldly subjects which do not show the way to renunciation, neglect both Dhamma and Vinaya and so are easily tempted by worldly pleasures to disrobe. Then their supporters who have kept them supplied with requisites for years are disappointed and become disillusioned with Bhikkhus generally so that the Saddhamma is corroded in this way.

Not true,[9] say the modernists. Bhikkhus these days should have adequate knowledge of the world. They should learn psychology, philosophy, also the basic sciences. And they need as well knowledge of modern languages, which will help them to, spread the Buddhadhamma. Bhikkhus who know only Pali and

Sanskrit and the Buddhist literatures in them will be as fossilised as dinosaurs in the present time. What relevance will they have to a modern man coping with so many new problems and how can he talk to them for they will hardly talk the same language.

As often in such disputes, both sides are right—and in some ways too extreme. The traditionalists are certainly right when they press for a curriculum of Buddhist languages and studies. It is unfortunately correct to say that worldly subjects lead to an increase of worldliness. And the behaviour of bhikkhus may suffer because of this and some do disrobe more quickly if they are not supported by the strength of Dhamma-Vinaya. It is going too far, however to argue against modern language studies.

Modernists are surely correct when they argue that modern languages, psychology and philosophy are proper for the Bhikkhu to study, for these subjects do have some bearing both on communication with others and with Dhamma. But if they assert that it is necessary for Bhikkhus to have the same kind of general secondary schooling (or university education) as lay people then they go too far also. A Bhikkhu does not need many of the things taught in schools—they will not help him nor can he use them to teach Dhamma. They are just distractions wasting energy and time which might have gone into his proper studies. He has the time to

specialise in a way, which laypeople can rarely do: he can become master of the Buddha-word. With that unique knowledge of Dhamma he is in a better position to help himself, and others, than one with only a smattering of this and that. Certainly Dhamma is relevant now, so the Bhikkhu learned in it is not a 'dinosaur.' Much will depend on how he learns the Dhamma, whether in a practical way or in some stylised and antiquated fashion. So the debate goes on ...

Bhikkhus may also have invitations to a formal act of the Sangha, at this time, perhaps an Acceptance ceremony, or to the fortnightly recitation of the Bhikkhus 227 fundamental rules, the code called Pátimokkha[10] . Other matters arise more rarely, such as the consecration of a new boundary (sìma). The afternoon may also be the time when donors come and a chanting ceremony is arranged for them. In some viháras (in Thailand) where there are crematoria, a Bhikkhu may be invited to chant or give a sermon in the presence of the family of the deceased to whom the merits are dedicated. Visits by leading Theras (senior Bhikkhus) may also provide variety from the usual classes.

When classes end, it will be that good time of the day which is called 'the cool.' It is not evening or twilight, which is very brief in the tropics, but the sun, is low and a cooling breeze blows. It is time

for another bath and probably a cold drink. These days in the towns there are all sorts of cold bottled drinks, which if they are fruit juices, or simulate fruit juices, are allowable for Bhikkhus in the afternoon and evening. They can only take fruit juices, which are strained and clear of fruit particles, otherwise it would be equivalent to eating fruit! Also, various infusions may be drunk at this time—any kind of tea, or coffee but this must contain no milk, which is counted as a food.

There is no objection to these mild stimulants. Bhikkhus, of course, may not have any kind of alcoholic beverage as this would run counter to the aim of the Holy Life which is to clear the mind of all defilements.

Some free time may follow this but young Bhikkhus and Sámaóeras have the duty to look after their teachers, the Theras. So there may be cleaning, robe washing and darning to do besides their own chores.

A note on work may not be out of place here. A Bhikkhu really should be one with few duties if he is to succeed in the Holy Life. This does not mean he should be lazy or neglect to serve his Teachers and help his fellow-Bhikkhus. But it does mean that he should not undertake work, which will burden him unnecessarily. The Buddha when laying down the Vinaya has ruled out certain

occupations so that Bhikkhus cannot engage in farming or gardening (as monks of other religions do) nor in mercantile activities. The Buddha often showed how the Brahmins, originally the priests of Vedic religion, had changed their ways and he did not intend Bhikkhus to deteriorate in the same way. Here is an extract from a discourse in verses about the way Brahmins had been transformed.

“Whoever among men lives minding cows, Váseṭṭha,  
you must know as farmer, not as brahmin.

Whoever among men lives by many crafts, Váseṭṭha,  
you must know as craftsman, not as brahmin.

Whoever among men lives by a trade, Váseṭṭha,  
you must know as tradesman, not as brahmin.

Whoever among men lives by serving others,  
Váseṭṭha,  
you must know as servant, not as brahmin.

Whoever among men lives taking things, Váseṭṭha,  
you must know as robber, not as brahmin.

Whoever among men lives by archery, Váseppha,  
you must know as warrior, not as brahmin.

Whoever among men lives as a priest, Váseppha,  
you must know as ritualist, not as brahmin.

Whoever among men owns town and country,  
Váseppha,  
you must know as rájah, not as brahmin.

(Suttanipáta 612-619)

Bhikkhus should only undertake those kinds of work, which they can manage easily, provided they are permissible. The Buddha sometimes found Bhikkhus at work repairing kuṭis and viháras. But commended bhikkhus who repaired their own kuṭis and today one wonders what the Buddha would have said to Bhikkhus who were artists, or totally engaged in social service may be surmised when we consider that such works are not directly connected with Dhamma-Vinaya, learning or practice.

In the early evening, the time varying in the individual viháras, the bell will be rung again for the evening chanting. The period of 45 minutes or an hour will not differ greatly from that in the morning as

regards the content of the chanting though some of the longer discourses of the Buddha may be recited at this time. While chanting, the mind should be fixed upon the meaning of what is being said, so that distraction is avoided. For the town Bhikkhus who practise little or no meditation, this chanting can concentrate and purify the mind to some extent. Especially, if one knows the meaning of the Pali well, with a concentrated mind, deep faith is stimulated and rapture pervades one's body. The range of chants in the evening time is very wide. From among them here is a set of four traditional verses, possibly originally from Sri Lanka, which are extremely beautiful in Pali, in praise of the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha.

Seated serene at the Sacred Bodhi's root  
having conquered Mara and his serried hosts,  
attained to Sambodhi, with Wisdom that is Infinite,  
Highest in the universe, that Buddha I revere.  
Eight-factored Noble Path for people everywhere,  
for those seeking Freedom, the Way that is straight,  
this Dhamma fine and subtle making for peace,

leading out of *dukkha*, that Dhamma I revere.

Right worthy of gifts is the Sangha purified,  
with pacified senses, all mental stains removed,  
one quality alone with which all powers won:  
gone beyond desire, that Sangha I revere.

Thus indeed the Highest which is the Triple Gem  
should be venerated as revered by me,  
and then by the power of this vast amount of merit,  
very beneficial, may danger be destroyed.

The closing chant will be a set of verses dedicating the good karmmas made by the Bhikkhus for the good and happiness of all living beings. They 'share' in this good kamma by rejoicing with the doers of those actions, and thus make good kamma themselves. Here is a translation of a Pali composition of Prince Mongkut (later to become King Ráma IV) when he was Lord Abbot of Wat Bovoranives Vihára in Bangkok:

Wherever there are devas who dwell in this vihára,

the stupa, the temple, the Bodhi-tree enclosure,  
may they be honoured by this gift of Dhamma  
and may they bring safety to all in this vihāra.

Senior Bhikkhus, new ones and those of middle  
standing,

attendants and great donors, all the lay people,  
villages and countries, towns and principalities,  
all living beings—may they be happy!

Those born from a womb, beings egg-begotten,  
born out of moisture, or spontaneously arising,  
may they rely on the excellent Dhamma  
outguiding beyond and destroying all *dukkha*.

May True Dhamma long stand fast, and the people  
upholding Dhamma.

In concord may the Sangha live for benefits and  
happiness.

May True Dhamma guard me well and all the

Dhamma practitioners.

And may we all attain to growth in Dhamma declared  
by the Noble Ones.

When this has finished, then, may follow a few moments of silence. After this, there is no timetable and each Bhikkhu spends his time as he likes. Some will have clerical work to do, especially typing documents for the vihára's administration or the texts of books to be published. Others may spend some time with visitors, perhaps relatives who have come to visit and sit out on the Bhikkhu's veranda. Bhikkhus who take up the 'work of books' have examinations to pass, so some will be poring over their texts while some in traditional fashion will be learning Suttas by heart. A few may be learning or retaining in their minds by repetition, the Pátimokkha (the 227 Fundamental Rules), which cannot be read out of a book at each fortnightly meeting but must be recited from memory. Such a Bhikkhu has to recite part of his text every day and his mindfulness must be strong, otherwise forgetfulness will show in his mistakes while chanting. There are still some Bhikkhus who learn whole sections of the Suttas by heart, sometimes all the suttas and most rarely all of the Three Baskets. This is a prodigious feat of

memory, which perpetuates the most ancient traditions of the Buddha's days. There are still some Bhikkhus in Burma who have accomplished this task. Evening is a time too when a Bhikkhu can visit his Bhikkhu friends in that vihára and discuss matters with them.

Before sleep some Bhikkhus may spend a short time in meditation, chanting, or both, in front of their own shrines. The mind should be clear and calm before lying down mindfully. One cannot say that Bhikkhus 'go to bed' because often they have no bed and in a tropical country, almost no bedding. A mat on the floor is sufficient in the hot weather with a hard pillow and most likely a mosquito-net. Keeping the lower robe on, a Bhikkhu lies down mindful on his right side, in the posture seen in recumbent Buddha-images and draws his upper robe over himself. In colder weather a thin mattress may be used and a blanket or quilt. As he goes to sleep he has in mind rising mindfully in the morning and not submitting to sloth.

This is one ordinary day in the life of a study-Bhikkhu, but if all the possible variations were described this chapter would never come to an end! This tradition of study is followed by the majority of Bhikkhus, though the degrees of proficiency they reach obviously will vary. Some pass only the preliminary examinations as do many of the Bhikkhus in the village viháras while some become great

scholars, producing original works on Vinaya or Dhamma, either in Pali or in their own languages. In each Buddhist country there is a great range of literature interesting to lay people and written in the vernacular, the Buddhist novels published in Thailand being an example of such books.

But the scholastic traditions in the three main Theraváda countries are not quite the same. A Thai story has it that an embassy was sent from Ayudhya, capital of Siam, to the King of Sri Lanka requesting a copy of the Three Baskets. That king honoured the Three Baskets by dispatching them each in a separate ship. These became separated on their voyage so that the Vinaya-Piṭaka landed in the Mon country (now lower Burma), the Sutta-Piṭaka reached Siam safely, while the Abhidhamma-Piṭaka landed on the shores of Burma. This is meant to account for Mon Bhikkhus' strictness in Vinaya, the interest in Suttas in Thailand and the love of Abhidhamma in Burma. It has also been said, however, that Vinaya is stressed in Thailand, Suttas studied widely in Sri Lanka while certainly the Abhidhamma is most prized in Burma. But like all such generalisations it should not be understood that the remaining parts of the Three Baskets are neglected in any Buddhist country.

Forest Bhikkhu life[11] differs from the above account in many ways. One thing that stands out is that forest practice is less

gregarious, and a Bhikkhu has more time for his own practice. Indeed, the Buddha praised solitude for those who want to practise Dhamma. Physical solitude is quite easily achieved. Then, one should have besides solitude of mind—the completely one-pointed mind able to go deep into meditation, which is not so easy. Finally one should be without any 'assets'—belongings, possessions, even this mind and body should not belong or should not be grasped as 'myself.' This solitariness from assets is equivalent to the enlightened state, to being an Arahant, and this requires great renunciation efforts if it is to be attained.

So the forest Bhikkhu's life when well-lived requires great effort and determination. But it is rare to find a Buddhist who without the support of a meditation Master can go to the forest and live a life of striving by himself. Most forest Bhikkhus, especially while they are still developing their meditation practice, stay with a Teacher who can guide them.

In Thailand the foremost exponent in modern times of the forest Bhikkhu life was the Venerable Phra Acharn Mun (Bhuridatta Maháthera).[12] He was one of the rare Bhikkhus who without much guidance steadfastly practised the Dhamma in the seclusion of caves and forests full of wild animals until he reached Arahantship. Out of compassion for people embroiled in sufferings, he taught

great numbers of Bhikkhus, Sámaóeras, nuns and lay devotees. Many who heard his inspiring and eloquent discourses realised great benefits, either while they were sitting there or later through the Dhamma that they were encouraged to practise.

Phra Acharn Mun Bhuridatta Maháthera died in Buddhist Era 2492 (1949) and among the ashes at his cremation were found the crystalline 'relics' (sarìrika-dhátu) which confirmed the fact that he was indeed an Arahant. His life with its descriptions of how he practised, what he attained and the Dhamma he taught, as recorded by his disciple, the Venerable Phra Acharn Mahá Boowa Nánasampanno, should be read by all Buddhists as an encouragement to practise and attain as much as possible in this life.

A number of his disciples are still alive and are now Teachers themselves. What follows here is a description of the life of a Bhikkhu in one of the forest viháras established by them. There are three important aspects of practice in these forest viháras: keeping strictly to the Vinaya, undertaking some of the thirteen austere practices allowed by the Buddha and the actual mindfulness and meditation. A few words on each of those are necessary to appreciate the forest Bhikkhu's life.

Something has already been said about the Vinaya as laid down in books. In practice it is the way of restraining all one's actions of

body and speech so that no evil is done. It is the 'leading out' (vinaya) of troubles and sufferings, which are the results of evil kammās. Even in small matters, there is the right and the wrong way of doing them and this 'right' and 'wrong' are based on Vinaya and mindfulness. For instance, a Bhikkhu puts something down on the floor making a lot of noise. The Teacher will reprove him for that because, according to Vinaya all possessions, indeed, all things that a Bhikkhu handles, should be carefully preserved and not damaged through negligence. Regarded from the viewpoint of mindfulness his action shows that he was unmindful and so not practising Dhamma. The way of doing everything is important and should agree with the Vinaya tradition. A Bhikkhu who thought he knew a better way to do things but one, which conflicted with Vinaya, would be thought conceited. If he went against the Teacher's instructions again and again, he might be told to leave the vihára or would just be ignored by the Teacher and other Bhikkhus until he either left of his own accord or changed his ways.

The Vinaya is a reasonable code and its rules all have their reasons and although in general this is to restrain body and speech actions, since these actions are born in the mind, it aids the restraint of greed, aversion and delusion, the three roots of evil from which all defilements spring. The Vinaya alone cannot root out these

sources of evil but must be backed up by mindfulness and meditation and strengthened by the austere practices. The reasonableness of the Vinaya rules may not always be apparent but then we must remember that they were framed by the Perfectly Enlightened One whose understanding was rather greater than our own! However to give an example of rules which can be easily comprehended are some of the regulations about food. Not only is a Bhikkhu forbidden to dig the ground and to cut or break living plants—and thus he is kept out of agriculture, but also he is unable to buy his own food (as strictly he has no money), or to cook his own meals. Buying one's own food and cooking it gives greed a chance—what one likes and does not like. But when it is obtained by the alms bowl, or through the offerings of laypeople that have come to the vihāra, greed has much less chance while restraint becomes easier. Careful practice of the Vinaya is therefore the basis of the forest Bhikkhu's life.

The forest tradition is also where the austere practices are used. We have read already that the Buddha disapproved of both the extremes of sensual indulgence and of bodily mortification, while he taught a Middle Way. Of course, this middle should not be understood as a compromise but as ways and means transcending extremes. The austere practices described below may seem extreme to some people but then they were not intended for all Buddhists, not

even for all Bhikkhus. They were never made compulsory by the Buddha but were aids to individual training to be used by those Bhikkhus who found them helpful.

The aim in the Dhamma is to be free from desires. To attain this goal the multitude of desires, both wholesome and unwholesome, have to be sorted out and the former strengthened while the latter are weakened. Wholesome desires are wishes and intentions to be generous, keep the Precepts, practise meditation and so on. The unwholesome desires (for the bhikkhu) are greed manifesting in desire for sensual pleasures and these can be curbed by the thirteen austere practices. They are concerned with various limitations upon (1) a bhikkhu's robes, (2) his almsfood, (3) his dwelling-place, (4) his posture. They are described here in brief.[13]

A bhikkhu who undertakes the *refuse-rag-wearer's practice* makes up his robes from cloth that he finds thrown away. This he washes, dyes and cuts up and sews together as his robes. Such a bhikkhu refuses to accept ready-made robes presented by householders, also clean white cloth given by them. This practice is now rare since it has the disadvantage of making a bhikkhu conspicuously different in his patchwork robes. All the austere practices should be undertaken without announcing them to others!

The *triple-robe-wearer's practice* is more common among forest bhikkhus and really essential in the wandering life. If a bhikkhu is wandering on foot, he will be wearing two of his robes while his double thick cloak is folded in his bowl. He will not wish to carry any more robes! Apart from this, the Buddha allowed bhikkhus to have a set of three robes: the inner sarong-like robe, the upper robe to cover the body coming down over the inner robe and the outer cloak of two layers of cloth for use when really cold. Besides these three robes it would be usual to have a bathing cloth, which is permissible according to Vinaya.

In the *alms-food-eater's practice* a bhikkhu eats only what is given in this way. What people place in his bowl, that he later eats. He does not send laypeople out to buy more food, or to cook this or that themselves but is content with the daily offering in his almsbowl, whether little of it or much. This is commonly observed by forest bhikkhus.

The *house-to-house-seeker's practice* involves going to every house in the direction one walks. No houses should be missed, perhaps because they give only poor food or one gets the feeling of

being unwelcome, or they are dirty—to each house the bhikkhu with this practice goes and stands silently for a short time before passing on. This is possible still to practise in Sri Lanka (or even in India) but would now be unusual in Thailand.

If a bhikkhu eats only once in the morning it is called the *one-sessioner's practice*. He does not, like the town bhikkhu, have a second meal at eleven but eats after returning from his pióḍapáta at about eight or nine o'clock. This meal is then sufficient for a whole day. Commonly practised by forest bhikkhus.

Bhikkhus in the towns commonly have plates and dishes but one who cultivates fewness of wishes places all his food—rice, curries, sweets and fruits, into his bowl and eats only from that. This is therefore called the *bowl-food-eater's practice*. Again, it is very common among bhikkhus in the forest.

Sometimes when a bhikkhu has already begun to eat, laypeople come late with food they wish to offer. But if a bhikkhu is practising the *later-food-refuser's practice* he does not accept their offering—explaining courteously why he does not do so. When people come from far away to make the offering which has involved them in hard

work, then the bhikkhu must decide whether it is not better to lay aside his practice for that day so as not to disappoint those people. This is quite commonly practised specially by individual bhikkhus or at special times such as the Rains-residence.

The *forest dweller's practice* is clear—a bhikkhu who undertakes it lives in a kuti in the forest, not in a village or town. But 'forest' here according to the explanations in "The Path of Purification" rather means anywhere outside a village which should be "500 bow lengths" away, a distance of about half a mile. All forest bhikkhus practise this.

The *tree-root-dweller's practice* is more severe for it means that one gives up living inside a building and lives on a mat at the foot of a shady tree or perhaps upon a little raised bamboo platform. This means that one is not secure from rain, nor from various troublesome creatures like ants, or even snakes. As a bhikkhu must have a roof over his head and four walls round him during the three months of the Rains-residence this practice cannot be undertaken then.

Even more sever is the *open-air-dweller's practice*. Undertaking this a bhikkhu renounces even the shelter of trees and

lives without any kind of roof and only his robes as protection, a hard thing to do under the tropical sky. This practice also is not for the Rains.

A practice which is now not possible as it was in the Buddha's days is the *charnel-ground-dweller's practice*. In those days bodies were often not cremated or buried but simply taken to an outlying stretch of forest and then left there. Bodies in various stages of decomposition and dismemberment would be found there and could be made very good meditation subjects. "The Path of Purification" (Ch. VI) lists the bloated, the livid, the festering, the cut up, the gnawed, the scattered, the hacked and scattered, the bleeding, the worm-infested and the skeleton—as different types of corpses found there. Another list is found in the Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness. But in Buddhist culture nowadays corpses are never left to decay but always cremated. The cremation area, a stretch of forest near a village can still be eerie enough and good for both overcoming fear and contemplating impermanence in the shape of the heaps of charcoal and charred bone splinters.[14] This is still widely practised.

The *any-bed-user's practice* is specially suitable for promoting

contentment. The bhikkhu who undertakes it is content with whatever kuti he is allotted, he does not ask for this or that place. This is another common practice.

Last in the list of thirteen comes the *sitter's practice*, undertaken by the words "I refuse lying down" or "I undertake the sitter's practice." Here a bhikkhu practises meditation and general mindfulness in only three of the four postures, walking, standing and sitting, but not lying down. He sleeps sitting, a practice which limits sleep and cuts down on slothfulness. Widely used by bhikkhus who are striving hard.

If a bhikkhu is staying by himself in a cave or at the root of a tree, the practices that he undertakes will be of his own choice, but if he is living in a forest vihāra where there is a meditation master then he will follow the practices generally observed there. All of these practices make for a simplification of life, for being unburdened from possessions and the care that must go into looking after them. The bhikkhu with these austere practices has therefore established himself in the way that leads to non-attachment to material things and the cares they bring while having energy to devote to meditation.

This brings us to glance at the third support for bhikkhus in forest vihāras: the practice of meditation. As this is a vast subject it can only be briefly described asking readers to consult the special books on the subject,[15] or better still, a meditation master. The ordinary mind that we have is 'wild' or untamed. It skips about from one sense object to another interlarding all the sensory data with memories, reflections, ideas, fantasies, hopes and fears. Mind, in fact, is not one 'thing' but a stream of mental processes only some of which we are aware of and we only use a small part of the great potential of the mind. This untamed mind besides being scattered is also weakened through the presence of constituent factors which are called defilements. The greedy mind, the lustful mind, the angry mind, the anxious mind, the conceited mind, the slothful mind, the distracted mind, the confused or depressed mind—these are commonly occurring mental states ruled by defilements. The presence of defilements in the mind means, inevitably, the experience of dukkha—what is unsatisfactory or suffering. So the untamed mind is the source of suffering for oneself and causes suffering to others.

The first requisite for meditation, the purification of the mind, is therefore effort. The effort needed here is to remove the

unwholesome states and cultivate wholesome states of mind. We shall see how effort is made by the forest bhikkhu in his life.

With effort strongly present, awareness or mindfulness grows. The slack and lazy-minded person is also dull and aware of little that goes on in the mind. Now mindfulness is the most important single factor in meditation, and if it is not increased and developed, meditation cannot be expected to succeed. So the Buddha has taught the four Foundations of Mindfulness: the body, feelings, mental states and mental factors. Under each of these headings there are exercises listed which sharpen mindfulness.[16] When a person is mindful of, for instance, bodily-positions, pleasant, painful and neutral feelings, states of mind with or without specific defilements, and the subtle mental factors which arise and pass away unnoticed by most people, such alertness is the basis for deep and strong meditation.

Until mindfulness is well-established, meditation is more or less a struggle and the meditator finds it very difficult to maintain concentration over long periods of time. But, once mindfulness is made even and continuous, then, distractions and other unwholesome mental factors which disturb concentration can no

longer arise. If they do so, then mindfulness is quick to spot the disturbance and use some wholesome Dhamma to cure that trouble.

There are two types of meditation in Buddhist tradition: calm and insight. The meditation on calm or tranquility can be achieved by the use of many different objects—which should be in some way connected with one's own mind-and-body, but generally not exterior to them. Thus mindful breathing, or the concentration upon loving-kindness in one's heart, or upon coloured light, are examples of one-pointedness of mind. In this type of meditation the mind is continuously aware of only the meditation object and this leads to the experience of bliss and peace. This can be developed so strongly that the meditator is no longer aware of any sensual contact—nothing affects him by way of eye, ear, nose, tongue or touch, but his mind is brilliantly aware, calm and full of joy and rapture. Such inward states of peace are called *jhána* and the meditator who reaches them really meditates, he is no longer 'trying to meditate.'

But with these states alone Enlightenment cannot be attained for they correspond to a realm of subtle existence and the meditator who dies in one of the *jhána*-states just continues to exist, or is 'reborn,' in that state with a subtle body instead of a gross human

one. These heavenly states, called the Brahma-worlds, can be enjoyed as the results of making good karmas—that is of having attained the jhānas and practised them, but like all conditioned things, must pass away eventually. Even though the life span is very long in those heavens, it also comes to an end. Just as a rich man who lives on his capital, making no more wealth for himself, in the end exhausts his money, so with the beings in any of the heavenly planes. They must then be reborn in accordance with previous karmas, perhaps as men again. All that effort to attain the jhānas has then to be made all over again. It has not got them out of the wheel of birth and death.

On the basis of strong calm the second kind of meditation can be developed—and this is unique to the Buddha's Teachings. This is called insight (vipassaná) which grows into wisdom (paññá) and it is this wisdom which cuts off the basis for future birth and death and opens the gate to Enlightenment. Insight into what? Insight into the three characteristics of all living beings: impermanence, unsatisfactoriness (suffering) and non-self.[17] Though we sometimes know about our own impermanence this undoubted fact is not always clearly present in our minds. As we do not comprehend it all the time, so we grasp at people, possessions,

places and experiences as permanent—including our own minds and bodies. So we are deluded and upset when our delusion is made clear to us by impermanence—the loss of loved ones, the breaking or loss of possessions, and so on. And most of all we fear impermanence manifesting in this body.

Whatever is impermanent, that is also unsatisfactory. No reliance can be placed upon impermanent events; they offer no security. Yet we live in a world of impermanent events which are happenings perceived by way of the five senses and sorted by the mind. Not only the objects 'out there' are impermanent but more important, the processes of perception are changing all the time. But we live attached to impermanent things trying to pretend that they are permanent so we experience dukkha, the unsatisfactoriness of the continually passing show.

Now whatever is impermanent and unsatisfactory, that cannot be *myself*. Self or soul is taken to be something permanent. However nothing like this can be found among impermanent and conditioned things. The sense of ownership which we have over this mind and body is therefore useless and deluded. All that is body, feeling, perception, mental formations and consciousness—the sum-

total of myself, should be seen with insight-wisdom as not-self. When this has been accomplished there is no identification with these transitory component parts and, instead, "The mind gone to the Unconditioned, to craving's destruction it has come." (See Chapter I). Nibbána has been attained, Arahantship realized and the miseries of the wheel of birth and death forever extinguished. This is how meditation, in brief, leads to the final attainment which is the goal of the forest bhikkhu.

The day to day life of these bhikkhus is undisturbed by many exterior events but there will be differences depending on whether a bhikkhu stays in a forest vihára under the guidance of a Teacher, or whether he is wandering in the forest or staying by himself for some time in a cave or other quiet place. As new bhikkhus and sámánas must stay with a Teacher who will usually be the abbot of a forest vihára, this mode of life will be described first.

When a new day dawns a forest bhikkhu will just have finished his meditation in his own hut or kuti. It is about six o'clock, a little before or after depending on season, and he gathers his things to take them to the hall or sálá. He will have his three robes, the lower one secured with the waistband he has on, the upper one either carried

over his shoulder or gathered round him like a shawl according to how cool it is. The outer robe he carries folded up probably in his bowl, in which there will also be a sitting-cloth, wiping-cloth and a clean handkerchief. In the hand not engaged with his bowl he has a water-kettle and a mug. On reaching the sálá he removes his sandals and carefully places them where others will not step on them and goes up the steps to find his place among the bhikkhus. When he has put his bowl down he prostrates thrice to the Buddha image. He must then arrange his sitting-cloth on the floor and his other things neatly in the place to which he is entitled by the order of seniority. The Abbot and Teacher is usually most senior in Rains and he has the first seat, raised up by a thin cushion on the floor and another cushion for resting the back. After him the bhikkhus are seated in order of seniority. If new bhikkhus arrive then they are courteously asked about the number of their Rains so that they can be seated appropriately. But before all the arrangements can be made for the meal the sálá has to be swept, then each bhikkhu lays out his own sitting-cloth and bowl in his right place. The bowls and so on of senior bhikkhus including the Teacher are brought to the sálá by junior bhikkhus, or by sámaneras and everything is carefully prepared for them before they arrive.

When all this has been finished it is still too early to go to the village. But there is no chatting or wasting time, for the sálá is vigorously polished and dusted till the wooden floor shines. The forest Teachers lay emphasis upon physical vigour, plus mindfulness, as an aid to mental vigour. The defilements cannot be shaken off by one who is lazy and slothful; only the vigorous person has the chance to do that. But though things are done vigorously, there is no noise. Bhikkhus speak softly, do their work quietly where possible and leave it neat and tidy. All this is the good result of mindfulness.

The time for going to the village arrives and the bhikkhus and sámaneras put on their robes and then carefully pick up their bowls in their slings, the strap of which goes on the right shoulder under the robe. Young bhikkhus will also take the bowls of the Teacher and other theras so that they may walk unburdened by them as far as the village.

Walking to the village a mile or two miles away is in silence. The early morning is silent apart from birds and the bells on the necks of the water-buffalo. It is a very good time to practise walking-meditation. Bhikkhus walk as fast as they like—in the cold weather this keeps the blood circulating in the feet but the fast

walkers must wait for everyone else just outside the village. Often the Teacher is one of the last to arrive—which gives him a chance to observe the conduct of his bhikkhus walking to the village. When he comes up to the waiting bhikkhus, the bhikkhu with his bowl gives it to him respectfully and all the bhikkhus follow him in a long line, in order of seniority.

Now their walk is steady, their eyes fixed a plough's length in front as they go round the village streets. Groups of laypeople, both men and women, have gathered outside their houses with baskets in their hands. These baskets are full of the glutinous rice which is the staple of N.E. Thailand and Laos. With their hands they each place a lump of this in the bowls as the bhikkhus pass before them. Occasionally someone will offer bananas as well but usually only the rice is put in the bowl. Some vihāras have energetic small boys, destined to become sāmaneras, who collect the curries, vegetables and fruit from the laypeople and put them in tiffin-carriers. In other places some of the laypeople take these things to the vihāra and eat there themselves after the bhikkhus have finished.

Slowly the bowls fill and after going round the village to accept all the offering which people wish to make, the bhikkhus leave. Just

as they reach the village outskirts the young bhikkhus and sámaneras run forward and offer to take the bowls of the Teacher and other senior bhikkhus. So the young vigorous bhikkhus have two rather heavy bowls to carry back to the vihára but they set off at a good pace.

On arriving at the sálá each bhikkhu washes his feet before entering and dries them. Lay people or sámaneras will do this for all the senior bhikkhus at least. Before the bhikkhus are seated, they prostrate three times. As the more senior bhikkhus return, they will find that everything is ready to begin serving the food. Their bowls have been removed from their slings and placed neatly on their bowlstands. If they have been touched by sámaneras or laypeople then the latter have to offer them back to a bhikkhu. Bhikkhus cannot accept food that has not been offered into their bowls while they are holding them. For the same reason the curries and so on, have to be offered in their various containers.

When all the bhikkhus are seated the Teacher begins to put into his bowl whatever he wants to eat with the rice, surplus rice having been removed already. Each container he passes on to the next senior bhikkhu—and so all eventually reach even the newest

sámanera. Where amounts of some things are insufficient for all, the Teacher may send them down to be shared among the sámaneras, or when the ladling of food into the bowls has ceased he may get up and go to see whether the sámaneras have enough or not. Individual bhikkhus also collect tidbits for some of the sámaneras who have been diligent and respectful and send them down the line. Thus everyone has enough.

The aim is to put into one's bowl just the right amount for eating but this is not possible when many laypeople arrive to make merit on the same day or on Buddhist festivals. They offer so many things that even taking a little from each the bowl begins to fill. It is inevitable that food will be left over on these days but it is not wasted for hungry villagers relish it. (Some lay people even suppose that it has special power having been in the bhikkhus' bowls!)

Before beginning to eat and when the last sámanera has finished with the last dish, the Teacher begins to chant the verses of 'Rejoicing-with' in which the bhikkhus join in some viháras. This is quite brief and usually followed by some minutes of silent contemplation.

What do the bhikkhus reflect on at this time? One text they may bring to mind is, "Reflecting carefully I use this almsfood..." Another subject they can bring to mind is the loathsomeness of food (which will have been easier to see when the almsfood was spooned into one's bowl in the Buddha's days, all mixed together, but is more difficult now, specially when choice things are prepared)! The Buddha advised bhikkhus to have moderation in eating and to control greed by reflecting on loathsomeness. A chapter in "The Path of Purification" elaborates on this theme.

The Buddha himself compared almsfood to one's son's flesh. He told the story of a couple who were travelling across a desert with their only son, a child of tender age. Part way across their food ran out and they considered slaying their own son in order to survive but he died of exhaustion first. Then they cut up his body and dried the flesh and, sustained on this diet, crossed the desert. The Buddha asked the bhikkhus, 'Will they eat this with greed and craving or will it be only just enough to sustain them?' The bhikkhus replied that they would eat moderately and not with greed. Thus, the Buddha said, should almsfood be eaten.[18]

The food is eaten with the right hand from the bowl and while

this is going on there is no talking, unless the Teacher has something to say to the laypeople. Mostly there is silent concentration on the reasons for eating food. Each bhikkhu eats as much as he feels is necessary "so that former feelings of hunger are destroyed and new feelings from overeating do not arise." As soon as each bhikkhu is satisfied, he washes his hand in his bowl lid and then tips the water into the spittoon. Then he rises and takes out his bowl and spittoon for washing. Also he takes the bowls of bhikkhus senior to him and their spittoons. When they have been carefully washed and then dried in the sálá, they are set in the sun's heat for a few moments to dry off any remaining moisture. A bhikkhu must not be negligent and let his bowl rust. The requisites of the theras are returned to their kutis and arranged properly after which the bhikkhu takes his own things back.

Perhaps at this time he has to visit the latrine. If the vihára has been built a long time, it is likely to have enamelled squatting-type latrines over a pit dug by the sámaneras and laymen with the bhikkhus helping. The inside is spotlessly clean, another area where the Vinaya regulations are carefully applied. A leading Meditation Master in N.E. Thailand has said that one may know a good vihára by two facts: Are the novices (sámaneras) respectful? Are the

latrines clean? The first of these points means that if the sámaneras, the youngest and least trained element in the vihára, are respectful, then everyone else will be so and the vihára harmonious. As to the latrines, they are used by everyone but do not belong to anyone. People who are not mindful do not clean up after themselves or they do not see to it that supplies of things are renewed there. But where everything is in good order in such a place, the rest of the vihára is likely to be well run and peaceful. A small walled and roofed latrine contains a large water-jar with a top on it to prevent mosquitoes laying eggs there and a scoop for washing oneself when one has finished. Soap and a candle and matches will also be found. In some places there is paper but most viháras still have the narrow strips of smooth bamboo used with the water for cleansing.

More primitive arrangements are simple pits in the forest with some wood over the top. The contemplation on the changes wrought on that delicious food can be continued by regarding the filth below seething with maggots.

The bhikkhu after his meal will probably pace up and down on his meditation walk for half an hour or so. The Buddha mentioned that this path has five benefits: "It hardens one for travelling; it is

good for striving; it is healthy; (its use) tends to good digestion after one has eaten and drunk; the concentration won upon a meditation-path lasts a long time" (Numerical Collection, Book of the Fives, Discourse 29. Adapted from Hare's rendering in Gradual Sayings III).

His meditation-path is some way from his kuti and preferably surrounded by shady trees, so that it can also be used during the day though mostly used at night. When he has dispelled any sleepiness from the meal, he sits down under his kuti or nearby to make various articles used by bhikkhus. He may make toothpick-brushes out of a log of bitter-tasting wood. This is bashed on one end with a stone so that the fibres curl down. When plenty of fibre has been exposed, silvers are cut off the log and smoothed, one end to a fine point, the other being the fibrous 'brush.' Bundles of these are presented to one's Teacher, to visiting theras and to bhikkhu-friends. Some bhikkhus are skilled at making the large umbrellas that forest bhikkhus carry and from which a mosquito net is hung so that a bhikkhu has a secure 'tent' to meditate in. Another thing which is made skilfully from bamboo growing in the vihára is the bamboo broom used everyday for cleaning the grounds. After an hour or two of these small works a bhikkhu may rest during the heat of the day.

Occasionally bhikkhus have some heavy work to do, a new sála or kuti to erect, fencing or gateposts to see to, or individual bhikkhus seeing rust in their bowl decide to oxidize them afresh. This involves stripping the old oxidized layer and collecting plenty of firewood, an old but clean oil drum, and one or two friends to help. The bowl is placed upside down on sandy ground supported by stones with the drum fitting over it and made airtight. Then the bamboo or wood is heaped up around and lit, five fires being made in this way in the course of the day. When the evening comes and the last fire has burnt low, the embers are removed and the drum very carefully taken off. And there, if he is lucky, is a beautiful silver-grey surface inside and outside the bowl—which should prevent rust for another five years with careful handling.

Another all-day job which comes up from time to time is making robes. A number of forest bhikkhus are skilled at sewing, these days, using a machine, although one can still find bhikkhus who can handsew a set of robes, usually for presentation to some revered Teacher. An upper robe, cutting the material in strips, marking the seams and cross-pieces and sewing together, takes about one day to make. An outer robe which is double-thick and more

difficult to make can take nearly two days. It is usual to cut robes from bolts of white cloth (given by lay supporters), so afterwards they have to be dyed the yellow-brown obtained from boiling up jak-wood.

Every week or two, depending on the season, there is a washing day when fires are lighted, jak-wood chips boiled up and all bhikkhus bring their robes for washing and redyeing. Teachers and senior bhikkhus of course are served by the younger members of the Sangha. This is also a job needing all the morning and some of the afternoon.

Then every month, on the day before Full Moon, it is time to shave the head. Bhikkhus generally shave each other. The one who is shaving taking care not to cause any cuts with his open razor, a thing rather disgraceful if it happens since it indicates a lack of mindfulness and skill, while the one being shaved reflects perhaps upon impermanence—the falling of his hair. Solitary bhikkhus shave themselves with the same 'cut-throat' type of razor and show their skill and perfect mindfulness by their perfectly shaved heads. One slip of mindfulness means one cut!

A rest during the midday would be normal for those bhikkhus who try not to sleep at night—which is the best time for meditation. They rest from about ten o'clock when the sálá has been cleaned until about three in the afternoon. This is a quiet time in the vihára and few bhikkhus can be seen then. There will be one or two sámaneras staying under the sálá in order to receive any guests who may happen to come at this time.

Receiving a guest in the proper way is an important part of bhikkhu training. If he is a senior bhikkhu his reception will cause a stir, even though it is during the quiet time. Sámaneras will go to receive his bowl and shoulder bag. Someone will pour water over his feet from the pot at the entrance of the sálá and they will then be dried. Meanwhile up in the sálá, bhikkhus and sámaneras, some alerted by the sound of an approaching vehicle, have hurried about and set out an appropriate sitting-place with at least a bottle of water, a glass and a spittoon. Sometimes other drinks are offered together with betel and arecanuts for chewing. When the thera has reached his seat, he pays respect to the Buddha image and the pictures of enlightened Teachers before he sits down. His upper robe is taken by sámaneras to spread out and dry, while in hot weather he will be fanned. The abbot of that vihára will hasten there and pay his

respects to the visitor if the latter is senior to him and all other bhikkhus do likewise. Even if the guests are a party of people from a local village they are invited into the sálá where mats are spread and water set out to drink.

The first noise which marks the end of the midday period is a gentle but insistent one: the swish of the long bamboo brooms over the sandy paths. When a senior bhikkhu begins to sweep, the sound is heard by his neighbour in a kuti perhaps fifty yards away so that he begins sweeping—and so it spreads all over the vihára. Bhikkhus first sweep their own kutis, a job done every day.

All the paths and open spaces too have to be swept each day. This is partly so that the vihára is neat and clean but also because dead leaves on the ground can harbour dangerous insects and reptiles which the forest bhikkhu, with bare feet, does not want to tread upon. Sweeping is also fine exercise for the body and a good time to exert the mind with one's meditation subject. The Parivára, the fifth book of the Vinaya, gives five advantages of brooms: "one calms one's own mind; one calms the minds of others; the devas are glad; one accumulates kamma that is conducive to what is pleasant; at the breaking up of the body after dying one arises in a good bourn, a

heaven world." In a further five benefits, the first three are the same, and then "The Teacher's instruction is carried out; people coming after fall into the way of (right) views." [19] Brooms are much esteemed! The whole vihāra, round about each kuti, the winding paths and the open space about the sálá may take an hour to sweep.

As sweeping raises dust, the open-sided sálá has to be cleaned before the next piece of work. This is to fill all the water pots in the various latrines and those smaller ones outside each kuti. (The latter are used when a bhikkhu will enter his kuti which he cannot do with dirty feet, or for washing his face, etc.). The water comes from a well and is raised by a number of manually operated devices. Teachers generally do not approve of machines being used for this, partly because they are noisy, partly because bhikkhus lose some chance for good exercise. The water is carried round the vihāra in large tins suspended from a bamboo pole borne on the shoulders of two bhikkhus. When all the pots are full it is time for a bath.

The Teacher usually has his own bathroom but all the other bhikkhus bathe round the well-head from buckets of water which they tip over themselves, soap and then more water. The bathing cloth is used at this time in accordance with the Buddha's

instructions that bhikkhus should not be naked in a public place.

Cool and refreshed the bhikkhus may then go to the fire-sálá, a small open building with a room for storing tea, coffee, cocoa and sugar—and any other things that bhikkhus can take as medicine after midday. Such things as myrobalan, an astringent plum-like fruit, pickled in brine with chili (a purgative!), garlic, salt and various dried stems or roots which can be used for different complaints. But this hot drink may not be available every night. If bhikkhus have had to work during the morning and early afternoon then the Teacher will allow some refreshment. On other days there is nothing except plentiful supplies of rain water from the tanks round the sálá. This is true for every day of the year in the more remote viháras. Those near to 'progress' may have the benefits of bottled drinks as well but they have also to put up with a lot of visitors!

Even when bhikkhus gather, as at this time, conversation is limited to necessary subjects which are discussed both quietly and briefly. Teachers discourage much talking which tends to turn to worldly things. Absolute silence, or vows to remain silent cannot be made, the Buddha having criticized some bhikkhus who did so, comparing them to horses, cows and sheep! Soft, gentle speech

which is to the point is commended.

Brief evening has come. Some viháras have a regular evening meeting at which all the bhikkhus and sámaneras led by the Teacher do the Evening Chanting with laypeople joining in if any are present. At other places the Teacher does not like to have meetings so often and they may be held on each Holyday (the four phases of the Moon), or even only on the two Uposatha-days (the Full and New Moon days). In some viháras there is no chanting and the bhikkhus gather and sit in silence until the Teacher arrives when they pay their respects to him and he beings his discourse.

However that discourse begins, it is not usually based, like a town-bhikkhu's sermon, on a quotation from the Buddha-word. Usually the Teacher takes up some incident of that day, or recently, and makes that the basis for his talk. Perhaps he has seen someone breaking a Vinaya-rule, or he knows the mind of another bhikkhu which is going on the wrong path of practice, thinking the wrong sort of thoughts. If laypeople are present, the Dhamma talk may be addressed to them—all about events in the local village, or how to live at peace with others, encouraging them to make merit as the basis of happiness, or explaining sets of Dhammas which they will

find useful in everyday life. In any case, there is complete silence on the part of the bhikkhus and the laity. No one even coughs or moves any part of the body while the discourse is going on. Everyone listens intently. This intent listening to the Dhamma can be the foundation of Enlightenment when the Dhamma spoken is exactly suited to the minds attuned to it.

When the discourse has ended—and sometimes it may go on for hours, all pay respects to the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha, after which all the bhikkhus and sámaneras honour the Teacher with three prostrations. Sitting mats, bottles of water and glasses are quietly put away and the candles extinguished on the shrine. All disperse silently to their kutis.

The night is the time for samana-dhamma. 'Samana' is 'one who makes himself peaceful in mind, speech and body', hence a bhikkhu or nun, while Dhamma is what should be practised to bring this about. But, before a bhikkhu goes to meditate, he may have something to do for his Teachers. It is common at this time, especially if the Teacher is old, to massage his legs and back. This gives bhikkhus a good chance to ask personal questions about meditation or other ways of conduct. And the Teacher in answering

may refer to other Teachers, perhaps to the venerable Tun Acharn Mun Bhuridatta Thera, or to other great Teachers and their lives. A small group of bhikkhus and sámaneras kneel around their Teacher and listen to his words, sometimes late into the night...

Returning to the kuti invigorated by the Teacher's words, a bhikkhu does not yet feel like sleeping, but just to ward off sloth he may decide to do walking-meditation. If there is no moon, he lights some small candles and places them on tree-stumps or rocks at either end of his walk so that he will not tread on a snake or any other creature. For when the wind blows, he has made himself a small collapsible cloth lantern in which candles can be fixed.

Before beginning his walk he places his hands together reverently and recollects the Triple Gem and then begins steadily pacing back and forth, at each end checking that the mind is fixed on the meditation subject. His walking can go on for hours, indeed some bhikkhus prefer this to sitting meditation, but usually after an hour or two a bhikkhu will change to the sitting posture in his kuti or outside on its verandah.

Night is the time when it is good to meditate. In the tropics it is

cooler, it is also much quieter then. But the greatest advantage at this time is that the defilements become manifest more clearly. Slothfulness is an obvious example, specially at one or two in the morning! Also desires of various kinds raise their heads and can be recognized with mindfulness. Fears, too, come on with the night: darkness, snakes, tigers or just the unknown. The forest bhikkhu trains himself to face them and so become fearless. At night he is out of sight even of fellow-bhikkhus. He is the doer of heroic deeds, the true hero who conquers himself.

"Though one conquers on the battlefield  
a thousand times a thousand men,  
yet should one conquer just oneself  
one is indeed the greatest conqueror."

(Dhammapada, verse 103).

Now if we go on to consider the forest bhikkhu life outside a vihára, it is much simpler by comparison with the account above. A bhikkhu has only eight possessions or requisites, whether he lives in town or forest: three robes (lower, upper and outer cloak), a waistband, a bowl, a water-strainer, a razor, and needle and thread as

the eighth. There will be few other things that a wandering bhikkhu wishes to carry. These days, he will have besides them: a shoulder-bag (for handkerchief, small medicines, penknife etc.), a water bottle in a sling and a *klot*—umbrella-mosquito net also in a sling. Already he has quite a load! In the days of the Buddha (and in other Buddhist countries apart from Thailand) the *klot* and shoulder bag are not used, though a forest bhikkhu can have a very hard time trying to meditate while surrounded by swarms of hungry mosquitoes!

So fewness of possessions marks the wandering bhikkhu. Few possessions means few troubles. While the bhikkhu in a forest vihāra has to clean his own kuti and sweep all the vihāra grounds each day, the lone bhikkhu in forest or cave has no such duties. This does not mean that he can be lazy: on the contrary, he must be more alert, more aware, more mindful, since he has so much more time to himself. For this reason, only experienced bhikkhus of more than five Rains go off by themselves for long periods. Newer bhikkhus stay with a Teacher until their practice is strong enough to live in the wilds.

To live content in a cave or on a little platform in the forest, or among some rocks, is the mark of a bhikkhu whose mind has turned away from worldly comfort. He finds happiness from his practice

and from possession of very few things. A meal once a day is plenty and sometimes if his meditation is going well he does not bother with that. Some water to drink; his robes to keep off heat or cold; a *klot* to shelter in and the simple medicines which trees and plants offer to cure at least minor sickness—with these he lives as though in an abundance of riches.

Loneliness is something he enjoys for it helps him to develop onepointedness of mind and finally to attain that security from the defilements which the mind reaches at the moments of seeing the Path and knowing Nibbána. But his aloneness is not that of the misanthrope, for part of his practice is developing mettá or loving-kindness so vast that it embraces all the worlds and planes of existence.

But to attain this goal of Enlightenment requires, at least, very great efforts in this life. Helpful too for its accomplishment will be a stock of good kammás made in past lives. It is true that there are some people who have only to hear a few words to set them on the path to Enlightenment but they have always been few. Others require only a single discourse to inspire them and gain the Noble Paths and Fruits but they are rare too.

Most of us, if we are to get anywhere, must have repeated instruction after which we must practise hard for many years before

attainment comes. Finally, there are those for whom "words are the highest"—meaning that because of blockages from past bad karmas they cannot attain anything in this life however hard they may try.

There is a phrase in the Páli Canon often repeated in the stock passage which describes the enlightenment of a bhikkhu: "in no long time" he attained Arahantship. (See for instance the Discourse about Rapphapála in the Appendix). The Commentary says that this "No long time" spent in the wilds was in Rapphapála's case, twelve years. Most people these days when so many things are 'quick' or even 'instant' would certainly call this a long time. They might be prepared to do a seven day course, or one lasting a fortnight, even a month, but the number who would spend a year or longer at systematic and careful application of Dhamma and Vinaya, are few indeed. Short periods of practice are useful for those who have no time for more extended efforts, but they can never replace the single-minded devotion and renunciation exemplified by the forest bhikkhu.

His way of life now is not very different from that of bhikkhus in the Buddha-time among whom there were so many Arahants. It is not surprising, therefore, that some who have made the Dhamma their very own by penetrating its truth in their own hearts, are still to be found among forest bhikkhus today.

## Notes

- [1] See *The Heritage of the Bhikkhu*, Walpola Rahula, p. 29f.
- [2] For another account, see *Buddhism* by Richard A. Gard, published by George Braziller Inc., New York.
- [3] For a fuller account see *The Blessings of Pióđapáta* Wheel No. 73.
- [4] For an explanation of the significance of these offerings, see *Lay Buddhist Practice* Wheel No. 206-207. BPS Kandy.
- [5] For stories illustrating these qualities see Ch. XII *The Splendour of Enlightenment*. Mahámakut Press, Bangkok.
- [6] For these three reflections explained in detail, see *Path of Purification*. Ch. VII pp. 206-240.
- [7] For more on Buddhist chanting, see *Lay Buddhist Practice* Wheel 206-207 and *Pali Chanting with Translations*.
- [8] See Appendix II.
- [9] For a modernist view see *The Heritage of the Bhikkhu* by Walpola Rahula., p. 95f.
- [10] See *The Pátimokkha*, Mahámakut Press.
- [11] See also the account in *With Robes and Bowl*, Wheel 83 /84
- [12] A full and inspiring account of his life is in *Phra Acharn Mun: Meditation Master*, Mahámakut Press, Phra Sumeru Road, Bangkok, for free distribution.

[13] For a full description see *The Path of Purification*, Ch. II—The Ascetic Practices. Also outlined in *With Robes and Bowl*, Wheel 83/84.

[14] See "A Walk in the Woods" in *Impermanence*, Wheel 186-187.

[15] See *The Path of Purification*, Chapters III-IX (B.P.S.), *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation* Nyanaponika Thera, Rider and Co. London. *Contemplation of the Body*, Somdet Pra Nyanasamvara, Mahamakut Press, Bangkok.

[16] See *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation* and *The Way of Mindfulness*, Soma Thera, B.P.S. Kandy. The latter has a full translation of the Buddha's discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness with Commentary.

[17] For full explanation, see *The Three Basic Facts of Existence*, B.P.S. Kandy

[18] See *The Four Nutriments of Life*, Wheel No. 105/106.

[19] trans. *The Book of Discipline* VI p. 207, I.B. Horner, P.T.S.

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From

Chapter VI

**BANNER OF THE ARAHANTS**

# Bhikkhu Khantipálo

Buddhist Monks and Nuns from the Buddha's time till now

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