

# Tales of Tudong

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## Introduction

In the midst of New Zealand's autumn Tan Mettiko and I left on 'tudong'. This means that we departed to spend time on walkabout: wandering, open to experiencing places and situations suitable for practicing the teachings of the Buddha. Without having a fixed idea of how that would manifest, emphasis was put on the clarity and sincerity of our intentions to purify our hearts.

The Buddha often spoke of the importance of physical seclusion (*kaya-viveka*) and simplicity as a foundation for liberation of the mind in *samadhi* (*citta-viveka*) and liberation from mental defilements (*upadhi-viveka*). On the entire South Island there are fewer than a million people. The space element is dominant. The remote mountains and lush rain forests are famed among nature lovers around the world. As forest monks, nature is our primary teacher, and in the depths of the woods, surrounded by peaks and streams, the feeling is very different from being in a busy, crowded environment.

From the time of the Buddha until the present, the contemplative Buddhist traditions have had a close relationship with nature. The Buddha was born in the forest, practiced in the forest, was enlightened under a tree and entered final Nibbana in the forest. Most of his life, even after his Awakening, was spent close to nature. This example has been the inspiration for the forest tradition in Asia, and when bringing the Dhamma to new countries it continues to be our guiding principle. Although the truths of nature exhibit themselves even in the midst of a loud, polluted and chaotic city, there are certainly benefits in retreating to the countryside. Intentionally moving away from environments that stimulate sensuality, aversion and ego-enhancement allows more space and clarity to see the big picture. If you have ever sat quietly alone by a stream in the mountains, you may remember the feeling of tranquility that easily arises.

The word 'tudong' is derived from the Pali word 'dhutanga', meaning ascetic practices. There are 13 ascetic practices that the Buddha allowed and encouraged for assisting monks and nuns in their Dhamma training. These practices include, for example, eating one meal a day, eating only from one's bowl, living in the forest and meditating in cemeteries. Monks who took on these practices often wandered in remote places, so these mobile meditators became known as 'dhutanga monks', or in Thai-Pali, 'tudong monks'. These days when forest monks and nuns go on a trek or a tramp, it is referred to as going tudong.

Tudong is meant to be something much more profound than mere traveling like a

tourist. The purpose is not to accumulate new and pleasant sensory experiences but to understand the truth of all experience. Sometimes the simplicity of living close to the elements means having to put up with some difficult situations, so tudong encourages the perfection of patience and endurance. Traveling outside one's comfort zone can bring up a range of reactions, and this is a valuable opportunity to learn more about oneself.

Tudong is best when there are no plans, no itinerary. This opens up innumerable possibilities. It allows for spontaneity. For many people however, having no future plans can feel insecure or threatening. Ultimately life's future is completely unknown anyway, even if we *do* have a head full of plans, so the practice of not planning forces us to face that reality. It encourages us to understand the possible fear around uncertainty. I find that when I can—for a period of time—set down the planning mind that tries to control the future, I am much more sensitive to intuition and willing to follow it. It means I have to trust: trust in the unknown, trust in my intentions, trust in the ability to handle whatever happens and, most importantly, trust in the Dhamma. In past tudongs this trust seemed to have been the generating force behind many, many wonderful, uncanny and nearly magical synchronicities, with situations turning out much better than anything I could have ever planned or predicted. This trust is my guardian tudong angel.

As Buddhism is transplanted to new soils, I often contemplate how we can bring the essence and spirit that has made it such a powerful tradition in Asia. The lifestyle of tudong—moving on without attachment, alert to all possibilities while maintaining a close relationship with nature—is one important aspect of the forest tradition that I wish to transmit to New Zealand.

## 1. The Waikaia

March 29, 2008

Sitting on big rocks by the river and framed by the graceful arching branches of old, fat trees, the world of busy administration was fading. Tan Mettiko and I had flown down to Dunedin with Sunil, were met by Richman and immediately headed for the Waikaia River.

This wild waterway and the ancient native Beech forest of its valley held a special meaning from last year's tudong. It was here that I found myself in the midst of a search and rescue operation for a missing kayaker. My Czech friend, Misa, and I were probably the last to see him and his Japanese friend before they put their paddles in the water. That afternoon Misa and I were the first to meet the Japanese man coming downstream—this time alone.

Shaken and unable to communicate well in English, the surviving kayaker stayed with us at Ralph and Gloria's cabin (called cribs in Southland). Their daughter Tarina was the friend of a friend of a friend who without the slightest hesitation had invited us to join their family on a weekend there. That Saturday morning Ralph was giving us a ride up the mountain in his true love, a 1950s Landrover, and that was the first and last time we saw Dennis alive. Tall, strong, ponytail... we gradually got to know him only later through others. It was late afternoon on the same day as Misa and I were bathing in the river when only half of the kayaking pair floated past. Within an hour search and rescue volunteers were arriving at the crib, organizing into teams and preparing to begin scouring the bush. By the still bright light of early evening, the lawn was filled with emergency vehicles, police cars and dozens of people dressed for the woods. The helicopter had already made the first of its many landings.

Due to our inability to pronounce the Japanese man's name correctly, the closest we could come was to call him 'Mark'. Tarina, with a natural warmth and compassion, soothed Mark and was the best at getting a clear story of what exactly happened. It was at one of the most inaccessible stretches of the river, bounded by cliffs of limestone and steep ravines, that Dennis entered white water and was not seen to emerge. The search party had to proceed with the hope that he was still alive, that somehow he had bobbed up out of sight from Mark, and was waiting, probably injured, on the banks or clinging to one of the huge boulders that make that part of the river so beautifully dangerous. Darkness soon ended their efforts, and they prepared Sunday morning's plan.

Because Ralph has been involved with search and rescue for decades and his crib was the most remote to still have electricity, it is designated as the headquarters for any rescue operation in the area. We went through Dennis' belongings looking for contacts. Misa searched the web. Dennis was no beginner. One of the pioneering generation of kayakers in the States, Dennis had written books on the subject and taught for years. What exactly went wrong? Was he alive? Mark's trauma and lack of English skills left much of it to mystery.

Sunday was full on. Around fifty locals volunteered their time to struggle through thick and steep areas of bush in the hope of finding a sign of some tourist they had never met. The helicopter landed and returned...over and over. No sightings. Only the paddle Mark left on a boulder to indicate where the Waikaia swallowed Dennis. A Japanese translator was brought in. The teams were getting tired. By dusk hope was going with the light. Police divers were called but hadn't yet arrived. Richman, Misa and I had to return to Dunedin.

Monday brought divers with grappling hooks and chainsaws, lowered by helicopter into the midst of boulders, froth, stuck trees and roaring white. We got a call. They found him. It wasn't good news. Held to the bottom by the force of the aerated water, he still sat in his boat. He hadn't drowned. Going over a rapids

his head had collided with a hidden log that broke his neck. They say that's better than drowning: quick, painless. Hard to know.

His best friend sobbed openly while speaking with me in the back room of the funeral parlor. Mike had flown over from upstate New York as soon as he heard. I was back there too. You see, when the police were able to contact Dennis' mother, they found out that he was a Buddhist. The local people wanted to respect his tradition and so asked me if I would perform the funeral service. I only wished I could have done more. Mike blamed himself.

"He wouldn't even have *been* in New Zealand if it wasn't for me. We were always a team, and I'd always looked out for him. And then I wasn't there." The story came out that they had been a team for decades. Kayaking for them was more of a spiritual communion with nature than the trendy sport it had become in recent times. Back in the days when they had to make their own kayaks, they had gotten out of rough spots but always had been there for each other. This year Mike had planned on coming to New Zealand with his wife, and Dennis had asked if he could come along. Dennis stayed on after Mike left to do a few more rivers and had hooked up with Mark a few weeks earlier at a kayaking school.

"We always scout the rapids ahead of time. I can't understand why he would have gone into them blindly." Through later conversations with Mark it was pieced together that Dennis had had another minor injury earlier in the day which might have led to exhaustion and loss of clear judgment. "Still, it shouldn't have happened. He was experienced." Mike's grieving was both for Dennis and himself. It would never be possible to replace a partner who had been through it all with you for twenty years.

I did the funeral service with the traditional Buddhist chanting and a talk. Many of the rescue volunteers and local police were there. This was a small town in the sticks of Southland. I was the first Buddhist monk they had ever met, and this was their first Buddhist service. They responded with warm appreciation. Of the whole crowd, only Mike had ever met Dennis. Mark was already on his way to Japan. Dennis' ashes sat in an urn on a table next to me—a reminder for us all.

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So there I was back on the rocks at Waikaia River. After a summer of drought she appeared calm with satiated appetite, just as beautiful and remote as I remembered her. More than a year had passed. It was important to me to return and offer what I could in memory of Dennis.

Tarina and her parents had again generously invited us to make use of their crib. Richman and Sunil planned to stay there while Tan Mettiko and I were keen to get into the depths of the forest. Leaving the car at Piano Flat campground, we forded the river with our packs. Walking upstream as far as where a harrowing

swing bridge stretched high over boulders and rapids, we both then found a place near the river to set up our traditional forest dwelling ‘glotes’, a large umbrella that holds up a cylinder of mosquito net. I found a flat spot between two large Beech trees on a high bank overlooking a particularly calm and deep section of the river. When I descended to the sandy beach shore and a long, fat trout floated up from the depths to say hello, I knew this was the spot. Tan Mettiko was a 20-minute walk upstream. The nearest town was a 45-minute walk and a 20-minute drive downstream. Though autumn was already well established, the weather was warm and sunny—sunny enough to contemplate bathing in the flowing tub. The clarity of the water was striking.

The mosquito/sandfly net that hangs from my glote is golden, and in the late afternoon it caught the sun and glowed amidst the fat, living pillars. From a distance it was a sight that filled me with joy. A symbol of itinerant simplicity, the early home of my Dhamma fathers, the glote evokes for me the essence of the Forest Tradition. How regrettably underused mine had been in recent years. Now sitting under its glow, looking down upon the Waikaia, it didn’t take long to recollect the priorities of my values: why I ordained as a monk and why I stick with it. Being abbot is no picnic. Building a monastery entails dukkha. Planting a forest is satisfying but time consuming. Organizing an organization can be complicated. Living in a community is never totally harmonious for long, and being an authority figure positions the abbot to be the lone focus of a wide range of projected issues. To suddenly be back on the forest floor, far from the office computer, enveloped by this golden net I had sewn 16 years before and surrounded by old wooden beings, joy arose easily. The birds hopped around my feet as I set up camp and bounced around my net as I sat in silence.

The River Waikaia  
The snare, the love, the intimacy  
Of nature unclothed  
Violence matched only by innocence  
The flow of unbound mind  
So close to home  
And the unseen log  
Waiting for the unseen log

## 2. All Conditioned Things are Uncertain

April Fools Day

Venerable Ajahn Chah was a monk in Thailand and has been the main inspiration for our Western Forest Sangha. During our tudong on the South Island, one of the reoccurring themes of this improvised symphony in motion was Ajahn Chah’s teaching of ‘mai neh’: no matter what it is, it’s uncertain, not a sure

thing, unreliable and changeable. It is 'not sure'. When something happens that we label as bad, it's not sure that it is actually a bad thing. It may turn out to be positive in the end. When something happens that we label as good, it's 'mai neh'. It may lead to something unpleasant down the line. In fact, any perception at all that we project from our own mind is unreliable in its reality. And when we think we know what is going to happen on tudong, it is definitely 'mai neh.'

The second day camped by the Waikaia River began with meditation from before the first light. A few hours later I was joined by Tan Mettiko for a cup of tea brewed on the methane-powered Trangia stove we borrowed from Ginny. The sister of a senior forest nun in our Sangha, Ginny had loaned us the packs, stove and sleeping bags we were using on our tudong. The tea softened the chill of the morning. Tan and I then walked 45 minutes with our almsbowls through the dew drenched bush to the campground called 'Piano Flat'. There we were met by Richman in his car. He drove us back to the crib to have the day's meal. After eating and washing up, we returned to the forest with Sunil.

We drove and walked up the mountain until the woods gave way to pasture, scattered large trees and long views. Last year I'd stayed here alone in a tent for five days, and it was the greatest feeling of solitude I had experienced since becoming a monk. As far as I could see or hear in all directions there was no sign of human activity. The hills stretched to the horizon. At that time no one needed to convince me of the power of physical seclusion. Its effect was self-evident: inclining the mind away from noise, towards silence; away from pettiness towards the big picture; and away from complication towards unity.

Last year's experience resurfaced as a wonderful memory, and as I showed Tan and Sunil where I had stayed, probably dwelling a bit too much in the joy of that positive memory, I took a long step down into deep grass. My foot landed on the edge of an unseen hole, twisted and gave way. I knew instantly that it was sprained. What now of our tudong? Mai neh. Our plans to wander for the next month were suddenly thrown into question.

Tan and Sunil each gave me a shoulder to hold until we reached the car. At the river I soaked the foot in the frigid water as long as I could take it. I assured Tan that I would be fine and encouraged him to return to his glote so that he could carry on with his meditation. There was no doubt in my mind that I was going to do the same. Although this meant fording the river on slippery rocks—tricky in the best of times—Sunil found me a good stick, and that provided enough stability. I could hobble and hop on my own, but Sunil accompanied me the entire way back to my glote just to make sure. As long as I have known the man, Sunil has been the most loyal and unconditionally helpful companion. Whether enthusiastically doing the heaviest work at Vimutti Monastery until dark on his days off or sticking with me until he knew I was safely in my glote, Sunil is one of the most selfless and reliable people I have met since coming to New Zealand.

For the remainder of the day and evening I focused on sitting meditation.

The beautiful weather was mai neh as well. The previous night's sky of a million stars gave way to clouds and rain. Though not endless, it did last off and on for the next two days. The important things stayed dry: our sleeping bags, most clothes and our humor. The morning after the sprain, Tan joined me again for our ritual cup of tea. Being the thoughtful and responsible junior monk that he is, he offered to take my bowl, fill it with food and bring it back to my glote. Certainly I was in no position to walk long distances, and that idea sounded preferable to fasting.

Although Tan Mettiko is junior in the number of years he has been a monk, he is five years older than I and has much experience with Buddhist studies and practice. As a layman he had already translated the Middle Length Teachings of the Buddha (*Majjhima Nikaya*, over a thousand pages of Pali suttas) into his native language of German and was teaching sutta classes in Nuremberg. Before that he had studied, and subsequently rejected, Tibetan Buddhism in Dharmasala.

Often it is especially difficult for middle-aged men to fit in comfortably and humbly at the tail end of the monastic order of seniority, however Tan Mettiko does it impressively. Even though he had all this experience under his belt, he also had a deep faith in the conventions of the monastic training as outlined in the Vinaya (the Buddhist Monastic Code) and as practiced in the Thai Forest Tradition. This meant that—whatever his age or background—he was now a junior monk living dependent on a senior monk for the first five years of his training. During that period the senior monk looks after the practical and spiritual welfare of the young monk, and the young monk attends on and is obliged to follow the direction of the senior monk. Most of the power of decision making is then given up to the senior monk. The junior monk can't, for example, just take off traveling whenever he wants. He needs to ask for and receive permission from his teacher and must then travel with another monk who has been around longer than five years. Even when it comes down to small decisions, such as what time to leave and which path to take, the senior monk's voice is the final word. The juniors walk behind, receive offerings last and must follow the direction (as long as it doesn't conflict with the Vinaya) of the seniors.

This traditional Sangha mentorship is a beautiful ancient system of mutual caring and respect, but for many westerners bred on independence, personal freedom and distrust of authority, it can be a lot to swallow. The bigger the ego, the more suffering there is in the process of letting it go. As a general rule the longer one is living immersed in the ways of the world, the more entrenched the ego and self-identity becomes, and the more difficult it is to simply be at ease having a well-defined place as a new monk at the end of the line. Reactions emerging from issues of self esteem and self-importance can arise strongly. The ability to flow with the monastic form, with an appreciation for the benefits of conventions, while

remaining internally self-assured, is usually a gradually mastered art of true humility.

Tan Mettiko was also no stranger to the woods. Having been a hiker, kayaker, rock climber and owner of an outdoors supplies shop, he was as at home in the wilderness as he was in the meditation hall. Taking our bowls through the drizzling rain, he tramped on with a certain ascetic enthusiasm that we shared. Upon his return, the bowlful of food was nicely churned up from the hike, discouraging any attachment or indulgence on my part. Besides, I only had a few minutes left before midday, so the focus was more on speed.

Contrasting with the sparkling beauty, warmth and uplifting quality of sunshine was the experience of cold rain. This time of year in New Zealand I had expected to regularly encounter rain, so there was no surprise. Besides, rain is nature too. How can I say that I love nature if I discriminate against cold rain? Admittedly, it is easier to poetically reflect on the melancholic grace of an autumn shower from behind the window of a heated building, but one of the points of *tudong* is to stretch our limitations. In a *glote* there is precious little separation from the elements. You feel the cold. There is no easy escape. “So this is what it feels like to be cold.” It’s a very basic practice, nothing fancy. You feel the dampness creeping in and see the puddles growing on the groundsheet. There is nowhere to run away from it. Wishing for sunshine is suffering, *dukkha*. It makes the situation worse. Acceptance of the present experience as part of nature brings peace.

Pleasant or unpleasant or somewhere muddled in between, the sensory experience of our *tudong* was out of our control. Our reaction, however... that was where we had a real opportunity to directly influence the quality of our experience. That was where we could turn a minor discomfort into a terrible problem or a laugh.

Beautiful, ugly, comfortable, uncomfortable, delicious or yucky—these are examples of the manifestations of *vedana*, the Pali term for the very basic and quick reactions we have to sense experience at any of the six sense doors (the traditional five senses plus the mind). The sense experience itself is quite simple: merely electromagnetic waves or particles, chemical reactions or mental energy that manifests as color, sound, smell, taste, physical sensations or thoughts. The *vedana* is then experienced as positive, negative or neutral, depending on basic human nature and conditioned preferences. Seeing an attractive young woman or man will usually give rise to the positive *vedana* that we call ‘beautiful’ or ‘cute’. Stubbing your toe or smelling a skunk will normally bring on a basic human reaction of unpleasant *vedana*. Other reactions are more dependent upon our cultural backgrounds and past experiences in life. Beauty is literally in the eye—or mind—of the beholder. Some smells immediately bring up a warm memory even before we think about it. At this basic level of sensory interaction with our environment we can try to maximize the odds of experiencing pleasant *vedana*,

but it is impossible to totally eliminate the experience of the unpleasant in our lives. In fact, the constant pressure to maintain a high level of pleasant experience can in itself become a tiring burden, while a life dedicated to it suffers from hollowness of meaning.

Another important step of the sensory experience is when we recognize the color, shape, sound or feeling and label it. A sight, for example, may be initially neutral until we recognize the shape as a friend. Then it suddenly turns positive. *Vedana* arising from these perceptions are highly personal. The sight of a furry opossum in New Zealand may bring up a heart warming reaction of 'cute' in one person or a gut-tightening hate in another. And then they can argue about it. At the level of sense contact and *vedana* life is still pretty simple. However, once our minds start projecting perceptions of like and dislike, good and bad, mine and yours, all hell breaks loose. A sight is no longer merely color and shape. We interpret it, judge it, desire or hate it. A thought is no longer merely a thought, but 'my' thought, a 'great' thought, a 'bunch of useless' thoughts, a 'judgmental' thought about how something *should* be different than the way it is, or even a 'bad' thought that feeds self-perceptions of unworthiness. This is where we can cause ourselves a huge amount of unnecessary suffering. This is where the tangled pile of knotted string called the unenlightened mind offers us the opportunity to patiently wind it up neatly. And this is where, through acceptance of how things actually are in the present, we can experience some measure of freedom and peace.

Those days by the Waikaia River were an inspiring way to kick off this year's tudong. On the day of our departure the ankle was still stimulating some unpleasant *vedana*, but no worries. It was strong enough for me to carry my gear down the path and across the river. The weather was once again warm and sunny.

### 3. Dunedin

From the river to the highway, everything changes but something doesn't. We were now in Dunedin, a 19<sup>th</sup> century attempt to recreate Edinburgh in the southern hemisphere. I was scheduled to give two public talks at the museum and the university. Coming here was an opportunity to visit some distant relatives who are a lot of fun. It was also planned that Tan Mettiko and I were to be joined by a Kiwi man who was interested in ordaining and enthusiastic to join our tudong. Richman drove us from Waikaia, and we stayed at his flat.

Tan Mettiko and I went on almsround each morning down one of the main streets called George, ending at the Octagon in the center of town. Even in cultures where the tradition of alms giving is not widely known, we considered it a

responsibility to uphold the tradition by walking mindfully with our bowls. Surprisingly, we received enough food to survive. In fact each day the amount grew. The morning after the talk at the museum the amount of food offered was so much that we then had loads we could give back to our host. The point of going almsround in a place where Buddhist monks are an unfamiliar sight—downtown Dunedin, for example—is not merely to receive food. Seeing us walking or standing, silently and composed, touches something in many people. At the Octagon a number of people came up to speak to us out of curiosity and appreciation.

These days many people do recognize us as Buddhist monks, and that usually brings up a positive perception in their minds: men dedicating their lives to peace in a world so full of violence. Whether people are Buddhist or not, seeing us often reminds them that there are other things in life besides material comfort, financial security, petty squabbles and the daily grind to stay afloat. Most people know this already, but seeing us can remind them. The things people value most in their lives—whether that be inner peace, loving their family or following their heart—can easily be forgotten as people just try to pay the rent. At the very least, many people gave us credit for willing to be different.

Our almsround is a rather meek showing of ourselves in public compared to the drum-banging song and dance of some Hindu groups or the 'in-your-face' approach of some Christian missionaries. We are not out there trying to make people into Buddhists. We're not out looking for money. We're just collecting enough food for one day's meal. It has become common among psychologists to view people in terms of Jungian archetypes, but an important archetype that is missing from that system is that of the spiritual renunciant. The robes, the bowl, the shaven head, the quiet manner...these often touch strangers in ways that even surprise them. Somehow, on a deep level, they recognize it and part of themselves can relate to it.

From Dunedin the plan had been to continue the tudong with the three of us leaving Monday morning after the weekend teachings. Traveling with a layman adds a different feel to the tudong. On one hand it increases the possibilities. A layman can carry money that people might offer on our behalf, allowing the flexibility to buy a bus ticket or to travel more remote routes. A layman can also buy and carry food. This would come in handy if we expected to eat everyday. It would also allow the possibility of heading off on long treks through national parks. In return for carrying the food, the monks would carry some of the layman's gear. The drawback of travelling with a layman is that the spiritual purposes for going tudong may not be as deeply ingrained in him as they are for the monks, and the tudong can take on a bit of a tourist flavor. Also for most people who are new to monastic lifestyle, the relative comfort and predictability of the monastery can already be a challenge. Tudong is a few notches higher on the scale of challenges to body, mental balance and heart.

Two days before we had imagined we'd leave, our lay friend gets cold feet. Panic, anxiety, anger and doubt all set in simultaneously. Even he wasn't completely sure what was going on. After a day of consideration, he decides he is definitely not going. Never mind all the gear he has bought for the trip and the month we had been discussing it. Fortunately, the only real plan we had for tudong was not to have any fixed plan. Whatever short term ideas we had been tossing around for Monday's route were now tossed into a Dunedin gust.

Sunday morning as we walked down the steep hills towards our George Street almsround, Tan Mettiko and I now had absolutely no idea in which direction we would go when we left Dunedin the next day. North, south or west were all equal possibilities. Dunedin being a coastal city, we had eliminated east. That narrowed it down a bit. We had no idea if we would be walking, riding, or hitching or how we would eat the next day. The feel of near total uncertainty was tangibly present. It felt spacious. There was a little part of my mind that just wanted to know, that was a bit uneasy with so much emptiness and so little form, but basically I trusted that whatever happened would be just fine.

After the meal I made a phone call north to a distant contact I'd never met ...no answer. I made a phone call west to a distant contact I'd never met ... enthusiastic response. A Thai friend of a person who comes to Vimutti would love to have us visit. Nan lives and works at Milford Sound on the other side of the island. She could even arrange a free bus ride for us from Queenstown (a six-hour drive). The only catch is we have to be in Queenstown that night to catch the bus at dawn the next day. We quickly looked into the public transportation situation. Definitely no buses or anything else leaving for Queenstown that night. Richman offered his car, but he himself was too busy to drive. To his credit, our lay friend came through when we needed him and volunteered to drive. The reality of uncertainty gave way to the illusion of a future plan. "I guess we're going to Milford Sound."

Straight from the Sunday evening talk we got on the road west. By the time we reached upscale and trendy Queenstown it was nearing midnight, and all we had was the number of a cabin in a holiday park that had been reserved for us by the owner of the local Thai restaurant. I knew Khun Ratana from the previous year's tudong, and she was also a friend of Nan's. The only thing was, we couldn't find the cabin, or even the right holiday park for that matter. We nearly walked into a cabin of the same number at a different park. That would have been just too weird for those folks...strange men in robes entering their room at midnight. In their half conscious state they might have interpreted it as a vision, a heavenly sign, a divine message beckoning from the dream realm. Anyways, the three of us did finally locate the right room in the right holiday park, and I prepared for a few hours of good sleep before our dawn departure. Mai neh again. Expectation leads to disappointment. I wasn't prepared for the amount of snoring and toilet traffic that was to occur in the next few hours. All too soon it was five a.m. and time to rise.

Groggy but propped up with caffeine, our mission was now to find the bus. We had the name of a company but didn't know from where it departed. Queenstown is not a huge place, but still there are a number of places buses leave from, and a number of buses that leave at dawn. As the first light appeared, our layman crisscrossed the town while trying to offer the day's bag lunch to the two monks trying to drink a bit of soymilk in a moving vehicle and hang onto their sanghatis as they popped in and out of the car searching for the right bus. Then we finally saw our bus ...and it drove off. We scrambled back into our car. "Follow that bus!" We trailed it through the twisted streets, but the bus driver was just too good for us and we lost him in the maze of guesthouses and cafes. Milford Sound...mai neh.

With no where else to go we stopped at the center of town. Our options seemed to have run out. We sat silently, dumb, at a loss.

Then a bus pulled up across the street and stopped. "Hey, that's it! Quick!"

And so it goes. When chasing the tour bus of the Dhamma, it just keeps driving further away. Stopping still, it comes to you by itself.

## 4. Milford Sight and Sound

The Kiwi bus driver wasn't too worried about being politically correct as he entertained us with his local humor and commentary. Milford Sound is renowned for its beauty, but the drive there itself was stunning. As we pulled into the wharf terminal I could see a Thai woman with a butch haircut waiting with anxious excitement. Although we had never met, somehow Nan was able to pick us out of the crowd. Call it woman's intuition. Nan worked for a company called 'Real Journeys', although on this journey the definition of real would turn out to be more a matter of perception than epistemological fact. She greeted us warmly and ushered us straight onto a ship for the midday cruise.

Milford Sound's scenery is difficult to describe without indulging in hyperbole. The grandeur and dramatic sheerness with which the mountains rise from the sea is already very impressive, but the particular aesthetic arrangement of the peaks and waterfalls in relationship to the bays makes Milford a true work of art. The sky was true blue.

That afternoon Nan brought us back to her place, green, barrack-like quarters reserved for the cruise ship's employees. She introduced us to her boyfriend who regularly made bad kamma by killing fish and hunting large, warm-blooded mammals similar to Nan. We explained our intentions for embarking on tudong, and they considered the best secret camping spots nearby. They took us for a

drive to inspect the options, and we settled for a quiet, secluded meadow by a white-water river surrounded by towering peaks. This would do for striving.

Nan and the man dropped us there and were off. Tan Mettiko and I then began the search for our spots to settle down. Since glotes are not self-supporting, we needed to find just the right extended branch to hang the umbrella, or the right trunks between which to tie a line. And since we don't cut down any plants, we needed to find a patch of earth that didn't have much underbrush. And since we like to sleep at night, we needed to find ground that was relatively level and free of large rocks and roots. And since we appreciate solitude, we wanted to be a few minutes walk from each other and out of sight. Finding a good glote site is a bit of an art. Contingencies notwithstanding, a half an hour later found us comfortably nesting and already into sitting and walking meditation.

The energy at that place was intensely invigorating: roaring and soaring. Rapids, cliffs, glaciers and snow topped peaks created a feng shui of concentrated fierceness. No humans had ever broken Fiordland's wild stallion spirit, and except for a thread of a highway, that spirit still flowed with an unbridled riotous freedom. The air was clear and the river water fit to drink.

The rain in Milford Sound is not measured in millimeters but meters. With an annual fall of six to eight, we expected to experience some precipitation. But the clear sky lasted, and when I'd wake up during the night the show of stars through the glote's net continued to inspire my mind right through the dark hours. My dreams were vivid and clear. Just after dawn Tan Mettiko popped by for our scheduled morning hot cuppa: plain tea or instant coffee. A few hours later we would meet again for almsround.

Before we'd left Nan's barracks the previous day, we'd discussed today's meal. The plan was that she'd prepare it, but since she would be at work, her boyfriend would offer it to us on almsround at 10 am. It was a 45-minute walk from our secluded meadow, and at the prescribed time we arrived and knocked on the door. No answer. "Maybe he's still sleeping." We gave him a few minutes and knocked again. Hmm. No answer. No sign of anyone home. There were two packed lunches sitting on the porch labeled 'Mark II'. We weren't sure if that was the name of a ship or a Thai spelling of 'two monks'. In any case, one could assume that the two neatly packed meals were intended for us, but having them right in front of us without anyone to offer them was more of a twisted cosmic tease than a reassurance. If we intended to follow the monastic discipline—and we always do—there was no hope of picking up those meals ourselves. We waited for another 20 minutes. No boyfriend.

Episodes like this are what separate the men from the monks. When eating only one meal a day, that opportunity for nutrition takes on a certain increased importance. You can't just make up for a missed meal later on that afternoon. At Milford there was no town as such to go on almsround, and since we were no

longer on daylight savings, time was running out. Some monks might have started to feel a little panic at this point—maybe a little frustration with our dependence on laypeople or anger directed at the imagined irresponsibility of Nan’s boyfriend. Attachment to food runs as deep as the fiords. At that point I can honestly admit I felt totally cool with the situation. Not a ripple. That was nice to see, because I’m not always totally cool with every situation. But on this occasion, no worries. No food, no problem. This was simply the latest manifestation of our *mai neh* mantra of life’s unpredictability. Just when you think you’ve got something you can rely on...*mai neh*. If Tan Mettiko was experiencing any mental states unbecoming of a forest monk, he wasn’t showing any outward signs of it. Good to have a partner who is cool too.

The only question was what to do. We decided to continue walking onwards towards the wharf rather than return to our *glotes*. Until 11:59 never give up hope. Trust is paramount. Nearing the wharf area we noticed a café, so we gave it a shot standing silently out front. The odds weren’t high that some tourist from Europe or the States was going to pay much attention to our empty bowls, but what the heck. Nothing ventured, nothing gained.

Just when we were starting to think that this café haunting was a waste of time, three young Asians approached slowly and shyly. “Excuse me, are you monks, like real monks?” It turns out that they are all Thai and can’t believe their eyes: two western monks on almsround in front of the Milford Sound café? *Highly unlikely*. When we began conversing with them in Thai about our *tudong*, any dream-like doubt vanished from their minds and was replaced with joyful excitement. It didn’t take them long to figure out how they could best help us at that moment. Into the café and before you knew it there were some sandwiches in our bowls. That was such a beautifully unexpected exchange for all of us that as we chanted a Pali blessing, gratitude just flowed. Time was getting on though ... 11:15 by now, so we continued on our way to the wharf.

Inside the terminal we again stood in silence. Nan was in between cruises and spotted us in a minute. Apologising for the situation, Nan would *not* be totally cool with her boyfriend the next time she saw him. He hadn’t returned home that night. She again ushered us aboard for our second cruise, and soon had a sizable meal in front of us. You look after the Dhamma and the Dhamma looks after you, eh mate. Just when it looks like you’re about to go hungry for the day, you end up sailing around Milford Sound with a little feast.

Nan knew everyone at Milford. She had been working there for 15 years, and her friendly mothering style had made her popular. She gathered the crew of the ‘Real Journeys’ ship to meet us. Because the population of Milford didn’t exceed 100, and life there could be a bit socially limited, it didn’t take us long to become minor celebrities—at least objects of fascination. There was another reason why this particular crew was happy we’d shown up on the scene. It seems their boat

was haunted. Yup, ghosts in the galleys. Fear was creeping into their hearts, and the crew wanted to know if we could do something about it. Nan told us the story.

It was the captain, you see. Or, he used to be the captain. Then he died. He wasn't very old, only 42, but a heavy drinker and a heart attack laid him out less than a year ago. Ever since, there have been some really weird things happening on the ship: lights suddenly going on or off, doors opening and closing by themselves, things moving around the kitchen, the sound of someone showering at his old place when no one was home, people feeling that there was someone nearby when there wasn't and especially, **the voice**. The new captain—close friends with the one who died—keeps hearing the voice of his dead friend in the bridge. He hears it clearly. It's not unfriendly, but it's a bit disconcerting when you're trying to steer a large ship.

"You're tudong monks, right?" Nan was confident we could kick some apparitional butt.

## 5. Venerable ghost busters?

"You're tudong monks, right?"

Nan was confident that the psychic power of wandering meditators would easily overwhelm the drunken poltergeist. Neither Tan Mettiko nor I consider ourselves experts in paranormal phenomena, but both of us had spent years living with meditation masters who seemed to have had first hand experience with such matters. With the majority of the Milford Sound cruise ship's crew now gathered around our table instead of being at their posts, we offered advice on how to deal with the mental residue of the dead captain.

"The first thing," I began, "is to develop some understanding of ghosts and empathize with their plight. Reacting with fear and aversion only makes the situation worse. It poisons our own minds, and if there is in fact an external being that you are dealing with, it can become increasingly agitated. There are many different types of beings classified under the term ghosts, but what you describe sounds relatively benign. Some people have very strong attachments, and when they die the force of that mental clinging can survive the death of the physical body. The attachment may be one of being materially possessive of something—a house, for example. It may be an attachment arising from love and worry for a family left behind, or it may be one of personal identification—such as strongly being identified as 'the ship's captain'.

"When the body dies, the strong attachment to something or someone as me or mine can hold the mental energy close to the object of attachment. The remaining consciousness can then continue on in very much the same way as

the former living person, except that they now only have a body of subtle energy. You can either refer to this state as not yet being reborn or being reborn as a ghost. Although these types of ghosts can get annoyed if strangers move into their house or grumpy if their grandchildren aren't behaving properly, generally they are harmless. In fact, if a person dies suddenly, without enough time to mentally prepare for death, the person may not even realize that he or she is dead. The ghost may then suffer from confusion and frustration with the inability to communicate with others. Often they just continue doing what they had been doing while alive. They tend to retain personalities similar to the person who died. For example, if the former person had a cheeky sense of humor, the ghost may decide to have a bit of fun with practical jokes. There is nothing really worthy of being afraid of, and it is important to relate to the ghost not with fear but with love and kindness."

"We are not ghost busters." Tan continued. Tan Mettiko's teacher in Thailand, Venerable Ajahn Tong Dang, is somewhat of an expert at dealing with unwanted spirits, and Tan had discussed the matter with him on numerous occasions.

"We are not trying to chase the ghost away with threats or trying to perform an exorcism. That won't solve the problem, because spirits that get stuck with places or people usually need something to be able to continue their journey. Or they want something from us to alleviate their suffering. If we don't give it to them and chase them away, they will come back. And things can get worse, because now they suffer even more. Ghosts deserve our compassion. They are trapped in an unwholesome mind state, mostly strong greed, like insatiable hunger. If we react to them with hatred, that's an unwholesome mind state, too, and our minds might even begin to resonate with the mind of the ghost, and the haunting phenomena could get worse. Sending someone away who is in need wouldn't be very nice of us, anyway, would it?"

"So instead we give something to them: we wish them well. We give them good vibrations. We share our merits, the results of good, kind actions we have performed in the past. We chant auspicious Buddhist texts for them. All of these are like food for them and can ease their pain. Once fed they might go away on their own, and if not, at least they won't bother us any more."

"The important thing," I concluded, "is to realize that if there is indeed a ghost, he's probably not much different than when you knew him as the captain. Rather than responding to him with fear and aversion, what he needs is to clearly understand that he has in fact died, that we all wish him the best and that it is okay to let go and continue on with the next stage of his Real Journey. If you like, there is an ancient ceremony we can perform that would likely assist this process of transformation, but we will need you to gather a few items for that."

"Just tell us what you need, Ajahn"

“OK, then. Please arrange a bowl, some pure water, a candle, a few metres of white string and a small branch from a native New Zealand tree. We’ll do the ceremony tomorrow aboard the ship.”

Back on dry land we passed through Nan’s place. Her second flatmate, Robert, was an outdoor enthusiast from Oz, a young, high energy bloke who had completed the entire Milford track in a day. He was keen to loan us his camera, and almost all of this year’s tudong photos came from this single day of shooting.

We had decided against taking a camera with us from Auckland, because it wasn’t quite in line with the spirit of tudong. There is no denying that it is enjoyable to be able to share the visual memories of a journey with others, or that there would have been some benefit in documenting an early phase of the forest tradition’s adaptation to a Western context. But we weren’t tourists. There is something about taking photos that encourages the desire to grasp and collect moments of life, to freeze certain parts of the flow. Somehow having enough space on a digital memory would have made it easier for me not to face the fact that my life was dissolving relentlessly.

The Dhamma of freedom is not about capturing. It’s about letting go. It’s not about accumulating experience like a materialist shopper. There would be many times on this tudong when the desire to hold onto a visual experience, store and relive it with others would arise strongly. There were some places that were so stunningly beautiful that I didn’t want to let them slip away—times when light and clouds and angle related in a magically fragile instant. There were experiences preciously unique, not likely to ever be repeated. It was at these moments that I was confronted fully with the sad reality of not being able to arrest the melting of time. Like the world’s last glaciers, my experiences could only be appreciated and let go of right there.

Not having a camera helped me to have more gratitude for the banal, the stuff of life too ordinary to merit capture and imprisonment. Who mourns the passing of the average? Like a homeless man without family or friends, most of life’s moments pass away with no tears, interest or care. And who photographs the journey’s bad and ugly? The camera can so amplify the temptation to remember only the happy, the spectacular and special that it can be easy to forget that the majority of a rose bush is not a flower. Leaves and thorns are teaching no less. Maybe more.

At camp, in the midst of the spectacular (peaks) and the annoying (sandflies), we carried on with the average: the observation, the calming and the contemplation.

Tan Mettiko: "These grand mountains ... here my mind inclines more towards contemplation, for example, on the nature of the body. How fragile the body feels, how insignificant, how transient, compared to these massive

manifestations of the elements, with earth and water dominant. And yet, these fiords were carved by glaciers only 12,000 years ago. That's nothing compared to the age of the earth, the duration of an aeon, the countless rebirths in samsara."

The following day we met Nan at the wharf for our third midday Milford cruise. She and the crew had gathered the requested ceremonial items. After the meal we began. There are series of chants in the language of Pali, many dating from the time of the Buddha, that can be called upon in such circumstances. As we chanted, a lit candle dripped into the bowl of pure water. The white string was wound around the bowl and a Buddha image, and then held by the monks. During such ceremonies it is important to keep one's mind focused and pure. At the conclusion of the chanting, we walked the entire length of each level of the ship, and with Tan Mettiko and I continuing to chant, I carried the bowl and used the tree branch to sprinkle water. In addition to cleaning many of the boats surfaces, most of the crew got a holy shower as well. Received with a mixture of appreciation and giggles, the ceremony was for all of us both meaningful and fun, encompassing the serious, the well-intentioned and the absurd. And this was not some special ghost behavior modification cruise, so the regular tourists aboard were giving us a few confused looks. No matter. With Nan trailing behind in uniform, it was clear the exotic blessers had official sanction, and the fiord gazers may have thought it was all just part of the package deal.

Since we had arrived, not a single drop of rain had fallen. I spent the remainder of the afternoon close to the water.

## 6. Kingdom Come

Like the one that got away, the most moving sights only seem to get lodged in the mental pixels. Late afternoon on the fiord, silent after the daytrippers' departure, I rested at water level. All was still. All was tinted gold with the setting sun: granite cliffs shining, Bowen Falls sparkling, lush forest clinging, and a blue sky bounded only by peaks. A moment of floating peace and joy.

We had declined an offer for another meal on the cruise ship in favor of almsround and spending the day quietly in our meadow. To our surprise, the next morning a few of the staff brought food to our campsite as an offering. The day and evening were dedicated to meditation. Often on this tudong pain in my legs and feet would keep me awake at night, but that evening the intense throbbing of a migraine engulfed the rest of my body as well. Being sick or in pain is no reason not to practice meditation, however. In fact, if you can get some objectivity on the situation, the truths of nature are shouting out the raw materials

of insight. Understanding one night's suffering, one can then extrapolate to comprehend the suffering of all.

Pain kept me awake searching for a solution. I worked on patiently accepting the pain as merely physical sensations, neither bad nor good in and of themselves. Still, I couldn't get beyond a subtle background desire for the painful sensations to change to pleasant or neutral ones. I then experimented with trying to love the pain, gently repeating, "I love pain." Though sounding weirdly masochistic, it actually worked to balance out the aversion and bring the heart to a place of ease and acceptance. This allowed some space to be able to view the unpleasant sensations as part of the flow of my natural surroundings—not unlike the cliff-carving pressure of the glaciers. I could then more easily experience compassion for myself as one being, out of all beings, who benefits from empathy but is sometimes forgotten. When the pain was merely that, the pleasure was also merely that, and their bonds began to loosen.

Pain is an unloved educator. It teaches us patience if we are willing to be taught. It teaches us empathy with others if we are willing to listen. It teaches us to be appreciative and grateful for times of health and comfort if we are open to it. Certainly it instructs humility in the face of our limitations. When pain is teaching, that doesn't mean something is wrong. There is no one in this world who escapes that lesson. Pain is the stuff of life, just as much as love and laughter, and there is nothing that can unify humanity so tenderly as the heartfelt sympathy that can arise from seeing the suffering of a fellow living being. We have not failed if we are in pain. We are human. We have only failed if we squander our lessons heedlessly with the distractions of a delinquent child or the blocked ears of a student who refuses to hear. But our teacher is persistent and dedicated. The lessons will keep coming...until we learn...or die.

No one escapes physical pain, but adding mental anguish is our choice. The place where freedom is possible is not in the slavery of striving for the comfort of the body but in cultivating the ability to be at peace with every roll of the dice. We will at times get what we don't want and not get what we want, but through understanding the relationship between desire, gratification and letting go, disappointment can be reduced and finally eliminated. Even in the most beautiful places there is still no escape from pain. Listening to the staff telling us the stories of their lives at Milford, brought it home clearly: even if you live in paradise, there is no truancy from life's instruction.

On the morning of the fifth day we sunned and packed our gear. Though a few clouds had formed the day before, by now the sky was again clear and blue. Going this long without any water falling from the sky was considered somewhat of a drought for Milford Sound. The storeman from the wharf came to pick us up in the company truck, and we were offered a special meal for our goodbye cruise. After the fourth time around the Fiord, it was noticeable how quickly even

the most spectacular becomes merely normal. We bid a grateful farewell to Nan and boarded the bus back to Queenstown.

The bus driver dropped us off at the Thai restaurant after dark. The driver was another of those small town, farming, friendly, outgoing, salt of the earth, South Island types. She made a special detour to Thai Siam just for us. I think it must be due to the low population density or lack of enemies that allows that most lovable and unsophisticated Southern Kiwi hospitality to shine forth. Almost archaic in its precious rarity, the Southland openheartedness has yet survived the modern world. They still seem to trust humanity. With no real international enemies (well, maybe the French, of course, what with the Rainbow Warrior, nuclear testing and all that. Still, no one is worried that they will invade. And maybe the Aussie rugby team, but everyone knows they cheat) and few domestic problems other than the falling price of sheep's wool and the tendency to over drink, most South Island Kiwis don't yet have enough fear and stress in their lives to stop being friendly. But Queenstown...well, Queenstown is different. It's affluent.

Khun Ratana at the Thai Siam offered us a cup of tea and arranged a place for us to stay the night. On almsround the following morning we weaved an improvised path through the center of town and were joined by a gobsmacked young Thai man navigating his own crossroads through life. He told us of his loneliness and alienation living in Queenstown. After a short outpouring of his heart there on the sidewalk, he joined our silent walk, trailing behind until we arrived at a small supermarket. He then bought and placed in our bowls a couple of sandwiches. His smile revealed that with this auspicious start to a new day, he was feeling better now.

As we remained standing there silently, a bearded, middle-aged Kiwi with a baseball cap approached. He asked if we were Buddhists. We explained that we were indeed Buddhist monks collecting alms.

"So you are begging!"

"Well, it's not exactly begging because we don't ask anyone for anything, or even hold a sign. If people are interested they can approach us."

"You're looking for money?"

"No, we don't accept money. If people try to offer money, we thank them for their generous intention, but tell them we can only accept food."

"Well, here in Queenstown we don't beg for our food, we work!"

I explained that we live by an ancient system of mutual generosity. All of our public talks, retreats, meditation workshops and books are offered free of charge. At our monastery we don't charge for accommodation or food. We have no money ourselves and live entirely upon donations. (Truth be told, at the monastery I probably work harder and longer hours than he does in Queenstown.)

"I like some of the Buddhist philosophy," he continued, "It's good, but Buddha was a man. Buddha was a man, and he's dead. But Jesus Christ is alive! That's a big difference to me. Buddha was a man, but Jesus Christ is the son of God. He didn't die. He rose from the dead and is alive today! He took our sins upon himself and offered the grace of God for free. And we only have to believe in him, believe in the Lord's grace, and we too will receive the gift of everlasting life together with Jesus Christ. It's much easier than Buddhism."

His sudden enthusiasm unveiled his religious stance. He tried for a short while to convince us that Jesus was the only way. We listened patiently, and when he was finished, I simply said, "Thank you." And he walked away.

Interreligious dialogue is something that I do find fascinating. All the major religions have something positive to offer, and on certain levels display great similarities. I enjoy sitting down with leaders of other faiths, hearing their perspectives and sharing our experiences. Such meetings lead to a joyful sense of mutual appreciation and respect. However, when confronted with the flavor of fundamentalism, that is a dialogue I find difficult to swallow. There is a certain closed-door energy that flows from people who are so insecure in their own beliefs that they are uncomfortable—sometimes violently so—with anyone else believing differently.

I suppose I could have told our Kiwi crusader that I had an undergraduate degree in comparative religion, and that I was not unfamiliar with the Bible and the teachings of popular Christianity. I could have explained that of all the religions I had studied, it was the teachings of the Buddha that touched my heart most deeply and seemed to me to be the most profound. I could have challenged him a bit by saying that I felt the stated Christian goal of everlasting heaven seemed shallow compared with the Buddha's explanation of enlightenment (*Nibbana or Nirvana*). Or I could have questioned the common sense behind the 'gift of grace' that supposedly condemns good people of other faiths to an eternity in hell, while promising that no matter how much evil you have committed in your life, simply believing in God before you die ensures your place in paradise. And it might have been interesting to see his reaction if I suggested that even if a Christian path did lead to heaven, it offered no lasting solution to the search for eternal freedom and happiness. But that would have likely extended our conversation without much prospect of benefit, so instead I just decided to say, "thank you."

I respected his right to believe whatever he wished, and I wasn't about to try to convince him otherwise. However, in my own experience it is not belief, per se, that determines one's future, but the motivations fueling one's thoughts, speech and actions. Religious beliefs hopefully lead to positive and harmonious motivations, but all too often lead to their opposites. In Buddhism, mere belief—no matter how strong—has little relevance compared with direct insight into the nature of reality. It is wisdom and kindness, not belief, that is the litmus test for a good heart.

I too have beliefs and believe that my beliefs are true—otherwise I wouldn't hold them. I believe the teachings of the Buddha are the only path to full enlightenment, but I also recognize that that is only a belief. Until I have direct first hand experience of that, my belief is merely a hypothesis that I am experimenting with. I try to withhold a foregone conclusion. I do believe that there was a man who lived 2,600 years ago called the Buddha who discovered the highest human potential, but I don't know that for sure. That belief is supported by having lived with Buddhist meditation masters in Thailand who impressed me as being living examples of that possibility. (I haven't yet encountered teachers in other religions that have inspired the same confidence.) That belief is also supported by a huge collection of historically reliable teachings dating from the time of the Buddha (the Pali *Suttas* and *Vinaya*), teachings that are consistent and to me make sense. The thing is, in Buddhism you are encouraged to challenge your own beliefs.

The Buddha never wanted anyone to blindly believe anything he taught. There was no set of beliefs that you were required to hold unquestioningly before you could start practicing the teachings yourself. Once, after a giving a public talk, the Buddha is said to have turned to his right hand disciple, Venerable Sariputta, and asked him if he believed what he had just said. The crowd must have gasped as Sariputta responded, "No, Blessed One." The Buddha then asked him to please explain why. Sariputta said that because he had not yet directly verified those teachings in his own experience, he could not yet say that he believed it. Only after he had tested them for himself could he conclude whether they were true or false. The Buddha was pleased and praised Sariputta as being a very wise person, an example for others to follow.

I wonder how many people of any tradition are willing to challenge their own beliefs. I wonder if the Kiwi crusader is open to the possibility that Jesus was simply an inspiring spiritual teacher with a small following? That he—like the Buddha—was also a man and not divine? That the idea that he took our sins upon himself might simply have been made up later by others or that Jesus never did rise from the dead. It takes a depth of character to truly look within and question, because what are the consequences if our beliefs are wrong? Too grave for most people to consider. Putting all one's eggs of eternal salvation or

damnation into one basket of a mere belief can understandably lead to fear if that belief is threatened or even questioned. And as we have seen around the world throughout history, religious intolerance based on fear is an explosive fuel for the fire of aggression. To Christianity's credit they are no longer burning people alive for daring to examine commonly held beliefs, and with our current multi-cultural globalised societies, flexible and open-minded attitudes are our greatest hope for harmony and peace.

We do need direction in life, and beliefs are part of that. A belief can be a powerful motivator, but how can we know if a belief is leading in a good direction? Firmly held beliefs have led people to violence or self harm just as often as they have led people to love and spiritual advancement. How can we know if a belief is true? People *believe* all sorts of things. The popularity of a belief is no guarantee of its correspondence with truth. Even ideas that seem reasonable can be wrong. People may believe something because that belief makes them feel good, or because it is written in a 'Holy Book', or because one's guru or pastor says it is so, but none of these are failsafe grounds for determining the truth of a belief.

People *believe* all kinds of nutty things, but to them those beliefs seem very real and not nutty at all. People have believed an entire history of scientific theories that were only later dispelled as inaccurate. At least scientists, in the quest for an increasingly accurate understanding of reality, are generally willing to discard outdated beliefs in the face of new evidence. Religions, however, can happily hold onto the most illogical beliefs with little or no substantiation, while justifying it all as 'the mystery'.

Almost all of what we believe we know as true is simply what other people have told us. Is it then just dumb luck if we happen to end up in a culture or family with a belief system that is more accurate than not? Some Christians are absolutely convinced that their particular Christian denomination's version of Jesus and God is the only true way. All others are wrong. Yet if these same people had happened to have been born in Pakistan, wouldn't they now instead be fundamentalist Muslims, equally convinced that their brand of Islam is the only true way?

Religions seem to be distinguished by both the grandiosity of their claims and the virtual absence of supporting evidence. If there was ever anything that warranted the healthy and open-minded attitude of Ajahn Chah's teaching of 'mai neh' ('don't know for sure') it would be statements concerning the nature of God and what happens after death. It is understandable to have faith in what one intuitively feels to be right, but to state with absolute certainty that one knows what is true in these matters seems to be simply unrealistic.

At least leaving a window of possibility open that one's beliefs may be wrong seems to be the only truly justified and honest position. When it comes right down to it, what *can* we be certain of except that at this moment we are experiencing sights, sounds, smells, flavors, sensations or mental activity? As soon as we even try to describe or interpret what it is that we are sensing, there are valid differences of opinion. In Buddhism, beliefs are meant to be informed by reflective thought, inner quietude and contemplative insight based on seeing directly for oneself.

I give our Kiwi crusader credit for being right about a couple of things: certainly for many people just believing in a God is easier than the responsibility of changing one's behavior to live a truly beneficial life. He was also correct in saying that the Buddha was a man and was subject to physical death. This is actually an important point. Precisely because the Buddha always insisted he was a human and not divine, he made it clear that the enlightenment he had discovered was possible for all of us—not through grace, guru, a magic wand or prayer, but through making the effort to put the teachings into practice in our own lives.

But maybe K.C. was not even right about the path of Jesus being easy. For a thinking person to have faith without adequate proof can be extremely difficult. Søren Kierkegaard felt that belief was in fact *the* most difficult challenge for a Christian, however, as he wrote, "the task must be made difficult, for only the difficult inspires the noble-hearted."

Tan Mettiko concurred with this summary of our encounter: "That believing should be easier than seeing for oneself, is something I just can't believe."

Shortly after Kiwi crusader left us standing silently, he returned.

"If you are looking for a free lunch, the Salvation Army serves a meal at a quarter past twelve."

"Cheers, mate."

## 7. Homeless, Sweet Homeless

"Where are you going next?"

"I don't know yet."

“How are you traveling?”

“Don’t know.”

“How long do plan on staying here?”

“I don’t know. Conditions arise and we act accordingly.”

I was becoming more and more comfortable with the space element. Wide open. Which direction home? Home was where my bowl was. Home was where I suppose ‘I am’. Home was wherever the shifting six sense perceptions created a delusion of self. But really, home was where my heart didn’t leap.

After almsround we had our meal on the floor of Queentown’s Thai Siam. Before we ate, I gave a Dhamma talk in Thai to the staff and their friends. Sometimes Thais learn more about Buddhism overseas than they do in Thailand. With all the many years of support, encouragement and inspiration I have received from Thai society, the least I can do is to express my gratitude through reminding Thais that their own traditions have something precious to offer. Instead of blindly trying to imitate the West, the Buddhist teachings that have for centuries infused their society with meaning hold the key to solving many of the psychological and social ills common to modern culture. Sadly, contemporary Thais all too often have lost the knowledge, appreciation and certainly the practice of the Dhamma. It has been mainly the forest monasteries that have been keeping Buddhism alive, and because of that, Thailand remains one of the best places in the world to get a monastic training.

Manut arrived. He invited us to Wanaka. Matter settled. We were going to Wanaka. Manut was the mid-30’s younger brother of Khun Ratana, the owner of the restaurant where we sat, and he looked after her Thai Siam in Wanaka. I knew Manut from the previous year when I’d unexpectedly materialized in front of his establishment while on almsround in the center of town. Without a flinch or hint of surprise, he had invited me in and prepared a meal. He didn’t say much, still doesn’t—just what’s necessary.

So we’re going to Wanaka. Tan Mettiko and I only had a bit of time to cherish before Manut was ready to leave. There we were in the adventure capital of the world, and it didn’t look like we were going to get the chance to have *either* a bungee jump *or* a canyon swing. Probably just as well. These robes are not well designed for cascading through space at high velocities in inverted positions, (hanging upside-down not being one of the four meditation postures), although the proprietors used to let you jump for free if you leapt naked.... We settled for a somewhat less adrenaline-pumping stroll along the lakeshore.

Manut had come to Queenstown to pick up his wife. She’d been traveling somewhere—can’t remember where, but it doesn’t matter. What mattered was

that they were a super sweet couple with a few kids, and this year Manut's dad was here visiting from Thailand. And *he* was into the Dhamma. Tan and I didn't know where we were going to spend the night, but while we were in Gore, Tarina had written down some directions to a campsite she liked just north of Wanaka. I pulled out the paper, and Manut was game.

We ended up at the Albert Town Recreational Reserve: some big pine trees, a field of grass and two portapotties. Dry and scrubby, at first glance it lost in comparison with lush and stunning Fiordland. Still, it was situated on Hawea River, and even though it was Saturday, there was hardly a person to be seen. Once Manut and spouse left, Tan and I went separate directions to practice the ancient art of glote-site-seeking. We both soon found spaces to our liking, I under the twisted arch of a golden willow branch, a few meters from the bank. The river was clear, clean and very full—flowing fast and rapid. Had I gotten in the midst of that current and survived a minute or two, it would have taken me in a big horseshoe route past Tan Mettiko's glote. He was now happily nestled amidst three trees with a field of green grass between him and the water's edge. With my net hung and my requisites arranged, the late afternoon sun now warmed my meditation. As that sun went down, the distant dry rounded hills began to exude a more subtle shade of stunning than I had initially perceived. Facing the river, I sat with my heart at ease.

Facing the river, I sat, as the half moon ahead created a wide fluid path of undulating light stretching from the further shore. I sat as the contorted limbs of the willow, silhouetted against the silver, cast a moving proliferation of shadows on the thin walls of my old net. As I lay down the burden of this body, the stars above beckoned clear. That was a cold, cold night, and fierce pains in my leg hindered any chances of a deep, sound sleep.

The golden sun awoke the golden willows that grew in the dark green grass of the background bank. The water was such a blue, such an unusually beautiful blue hue, and swirls of thick white mist rose everywhere from the shimmering torrent of flow—a river of rolling yellow sparkles and flashes under an empty blue sky. And a tiny golden glote on the near shore... The harsh chill of the previous night quickly faded in the magic of the morning, but without running from pain and getting lost in pleasure, the substance of the world's eternal fluctuations appeared no more than white mist.

At the appointed time arrived to pick us up for the meal. I requested we first go to look for and surprise Finley. Finley was an ex-monk living in Hawea, and I figured he could use an opportunity to make some merit. The good kamma that would come from offering a bit of food to some tudong monks would do him good. We drove all the way to the house that he, his wife and young daughter lived in last year, but there was no one home. In fact it was all so neat and clean, it didn't look like they lived there anymore. I knew they had a new piece of land nearby,

because I had done the land blessing ceremony the year before; but I didn't know how to get there by car.

Last year I had camped in the yard of this house, surrounded by trees, a short walk from crystal clear Lake Hawea. A half mile inland Finley had just purchased a small, flat, square plot of dry grass in the middle of a big, flat field of dry grass. There, he and family hoped to build a home. One evening a group of us went to bless the property. At the approximate center, Finley unloaded a vanload of rocks and a big stick or two. We proceeded to create a shrine. Finished off with a Buddha photo, a family photo, some feathers and meaningful knick knacks, it was a shrine that accorded with time and place. When it was completed, the two-year-old daughter, on her own, placed her doll there as an offering. After Finley gave a brief enunciation of his domestic hopes for the land, the paritta chanting began and the holy water was made. We then circumambulated the plot's perimeter in a rag tag single file parade of sanctity: one monk sprinkling holy water, three ex-monks chanting what they could remember of 'Jayanto' and their significant others trailing in scattered tow. The large, highly aggressive neighbor's dog only fazed us slightly.

This year, I'd hoped to give Finley a chance to make some good kamma, but try as we might, we couldn't find him. Although we called, we only got a recorded message. So be it. We returned to Wanaka to have the meal at the restaurant. There was a bit of a crowd gathered: workers, family, friends, some tourists—basically anyone in Wanaka who was Thai and up that early on a Sunday morning.

I gave another talk in Thai. My enthusiasm for tudong leaked out a bit as I spoke of the old forest masters, the way they lived and taught, and how we were trying to keep these valuable practices alive in a new context. I spoke of the purpose of tudong, our Dhamma adventures so far and the many benefits. I encouraged them to take responsibility for their lives and their culture through incorporating the teachings of the Buddha into their family and work situations. In the hearts of those listening the roots of the Dhamma were still alive. They just needed watering more often to keep them from drying up completely.

Manut's father was newly arrived from Roi Et. He had been a novice for seven years under Luang Pu Boon, a contemporary of Ajahn Chah. During the time he was a novice, he had spent time at Ajahn Chah's monastery in the early days, when Luang Por Jun, Luang Por Tian and Ajahn Sumedho were still resident. He still remembered the names of the local villages where the monks and novices went on almsround. The old school, the old generation from Northeast Thailand, has a different feel about it: quiet, uncomplicated, earthy, not overly cerebral. The life of tudong was not new or strange to the old villager. Manut, one generation removed, has strong faith but no first hand experience. After the meal, Manut's father and I had a good chat about his days in the monastery. It still held a

special place in his heart. He understood tudong and was moved at the site of glotes hung under western trees. As he put it, “If you don’t have peace and calm in your heart, how will you ever see the Dhamma?”

A Thai tourist couple from Bangkok inquired about our future plans.

“Where are you going next?”

“We don’t know yet.”

“How are you traveling?”

“Don’t know.”

“How long do plan on staying here?”

“We don’t know. Conditions arise and we act accordingly.”

## 8. Pilgrimage to Nowhere

*If a monk should wish: ‘May I abide in the liberation of mind and liberation through wisdom’...let him fulfill the precepts, be devoted to internal serenity of mind, not neglect jhāna, be possessed of insight and dwell in empty places.*

MN 6.19

There was ice on the pack at dawn. Hawea River flowed with a fury. The welcome sun burned off the thick mist and lit up the bare dry mountains in all directions. Scrubland reminiscent of Northeast Thailand was surprisingly conducive to meditation. Meditation was conducive to understanding oneself, and understanding oneself was conducive to freedom. Yellow and purple wildflowers awakened to the morning, and I felt like a samana again.

Samana is a Pali term for a renunciant, an alms mendicant, one who is living with aims and values not based on selfishness, a spiritual seeker living on the edge of mainstream society who is devoted to developing wisdom and understanding, a peaceful one.

*Peaceful in body, peaceful in speech,  
The monk, peaceful and well concentrated  
Who has rejected the world’s bait  
Is called ‘one at peace’.*

*Dhp 378*

Water, wind, willows and dust, my refuge was in the Dhamma. Dhamma is nature. Dhamma is living in harmony with nature. Dhamma is a teaching that helps me live in harmony with nature, and the teachings of the Buddha surround me on all sides.

Tan Mettiko and I didn't need to speak a whole lot during the time at Hawea River. We both knew what to do. We knew why we were there. We usually got together twice a day for tea, but sometimes no words were exchanged. No need to waste precious meditation time jabbering on for hours. We respected each other's commitment enough that we didn't need to make small talk for its own sake. As forest monks we try to be restrained in our speech, mindful of saying what is beneficial, and saying it at the right time. There are times to relax and joke—because life *is* funny—and there are times to relax and be silent. Especially when developing a continuity of meditation, it is important to keep the energy centered and focused. Speaking little helps.

*Better than a thousand meaningless statements  
Is one meaningful word  
Which, having been heard,  
Brings peace.*

*Dhp 100*

*The essence of well-spoken words is understanding.  
The essence of learning and understanding is samādhi.*

*Sn 329*

Samadhi means the inner peace that results from sustaining attention on something. It may be the breath, a visualisation, a wholesome emotion or the repetition of a word or phrase. The perfection of samadhi, a deep state of meditation called jhana, is the eighth step of the Noble Eightfold Path. Samādhi holds our gaze steady, so that we can see something clearly. It's like a hand holding a mirror still so that we can take a good look at ourselves.

*That one could perfect wisdom without perfecting samādhi--this is impossible.*

*AN 5.22*

The more refined the samādhi becomes, the more subtle and deep are the attachments that we discover--the craving and clinging that prevents us from experiencing an even more profound peace and happiness. Without developing meditation it is very difficult to see the motivations and assumptions that usually dictate how we live our lives, and without developing jhāna it may well be impossible to have insight into the most subtle attachments which block enlightenment. Through uncovering, then investigating and finally overcoming the

obstacles to peace of mind, we learn much about ourselves as samādhi becomes increasingly lofty.

*Eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind:  
When a monk has these doors well guarded  
Knowing moderation in eating  
Restraining his senses  
He experiences ease: ease in body, ease in mind.  
It 29*

One of the practices that the Buddha emphasized surprisingly often was moderation in eating. The old standard of the forest tradition was to have only one meal a day. In many newly established forest monasteries in the west they have chosen to have breakfast, as well a meal later before midday. On tudong, it was normal that we would have just one meal a day. There are a few substances that are allowable to have in the afternoon or evening. However, these are meant to be medicinal tonics to be taken if a monk or nun is feeling very tired, undernourished or sick. The key is moderation.

Moderation, of course, means different things to different people. Ajahn Chah recommended eating to the point where you could estimate that in five more mouthfuls you would be full (not totally stuffed); then stop and drink a glass of water. When most of the forest masters were engaged in periods of intensive meditation, they would tend to reduce their food intake to 50-75 % of normal or periodically fast. When the body is light, the mind can soar. Although I find the feeling of hunger unpleasant, I do notice that when I eat less, meditation is clearer, drowsiness is not a problem, and I sleep less. As a young monk (before age 40) in Thailand, I was often down to my 'fighting weight', which meant having a few ribs showing. People, however, can have a wide range of reactions to a reduction of food. With moderation in mind, the standard is 'what amount of food is best for meditation?'

*Whoever lives  
Focused on the unattractive aspects of the body,  
Senses guarded,  
Knowing moderation in eating,  
Faithful and diligent,  
Will not be overpowered by Mara,  
As a stone mountain is unmoved by the wind.  
Dhp 8*

How we relate to food is a good indication of how we relate to the entire realm of the senses. Because of this, the monks and nuns make eating into a meditation in itself. We eat in silence to be fully present. There is much to observe and learn

throughout the entire process, from before we take the food to cleaning up. What foods do we choose to eat? Why? How much? What level of craving is present? Before eating we reflect on the purpose: not for mere indulgence in pleasure but to nourish the body, to keep it healthy for practicing the Dhamma, like taking medicine. What food do we choose for the first bite? What are our hopes? What is the satisfaction?

The simple process of chewing one mouthful of food displays a lot when carefully observed from beginning to end. The initial sensations tend to be exciting, somewhat or fully gratifying. How many seconds does that last? Halfway through does it start to get boring? A boring mush? When we're only halfway through chewing one bite, are we already looking for the next bite? It takes a special effort to observe the boring mush until the final swallow. For most of us, the same cycle of seeking, gratification, boredom and seeking anew is a pattern that repeats itself in innumerable ways in other areas in our lives. It's an endless pattern of insatiable behavior. It is the essence of samsara, the cycle of birth and death. Being forced to constantly seek out new stimulation is like having a whip at your back. But we don't have to be a blind slave.

'Boredom' is in the eye (or mind) of the beholder, so if we can learn to appreciate the second half of the cycle, the boring mush transforms into contentment as balanced understanding grows. So the monks train themselves bite by bite. Being fully conscious of the entire cycle is a gut level experience that gives us wisdom to draw upon as we nibble and gnaw our way through the daily potluck of life.

Chewing one bite completely before looking for the next bite.... A very simple meditation technique. Simple, yes, but initially the habit of not being fully present from the middle to the end of the chewing cycle was so strong that I had to set my spoon down, put my hands in my lap or close my eyes. Eating in this way takes a while longer—a luxury we didn't always have in Thailand. In most monasteries you were expected to get your entire day's food down in 15-25 minutes. Other strategies we'd use to assist mindfulness of eating were to count the number of bites or to see the whole process as merely an exchange of elements. If attachment to eating was very strong however, the best remedy was to take a spoon and stir the food into a puree akin to roadkill or barf. See what that does to your mental state! This is called mindfulness of eating. It's particularly effective for testing the equanimity of your relatives at family gatherings.

*Like the path of the birds in the sky,  
It is hard to trace the path  
Of those who have destroyed their toxins  
Who are unattached to food,  
And whose field is the freedom of emptiness and signlessness.*

On tudong the amount of duties for a junior monk is somewhat reduced. Even so, Tan Mettiko would always set up my place for the meal, rinse and prepare my bowl and finish eating first so that he was ready to wash my bowl. The entire way of relating to our almsbowl is a meticulously choreographed art of prescribed movements and wholesome mental states. The bowl is revered for what it symbolizes. If we don't have a Buddha statue or shrine we bow to our bowl. There is a particular way to look after, wash and carry it. When drying it, one kneels with the attention focused on the bowl as if it were one's meditation object. At that moment it *is* one's meditation object.

In the times of the Buddha, Ajahn Mun and Ajahn Chah, a refined monastic etiquette was emphasized as an important aspect of the practice. At Wat Pah Nanachat, our training monastery in Thailand, abbots Ajahn Pasanno and Ajahn Jayasaro did an excellent job of maintaining these traditions.

The purpose of monastic etiquette is to cultivate a continuity of clear and focused awareness—a balanced, all-encompassing mindfulness that is integrated into every activity of daily life. Because our actions and mental states mirror each other, refining our behavior is one more way that we can train our minds. Cultivating clear awareness with every stretch of an arm, step of a leg or wag of the tongue is a stage of the gradual training known as 'mindfulness and clear comprehension'. This builds a solid foundation for deeper states of meditation.

*One who is vigilantly mindful with clear comprehension,  
Who has well developed concentration,  
Who finds joy in the success of others and is calm;  
By correctly contemplating all things with a unified heart,  
Will in due time, destroy the darkness of ignorance.  
Therefore be devoted to vigilance:  
An ardent, discerning and jhāna-realizing monk.*  
*It 47*

The energy on the banks of the Hawea was gentler than the intensity of Milford Sound. There was a joyful simplicity about being there, and joy is an important aspect of Buddhist practice. You sometimes hear that the purpose of meditation is not to attain blissful states of mind but to see things as they truly are. This can be easily misunderstood to mean that a Buddhist meditator should just be watching suffering the whole time. In actual fact, joyful states of mind play an indispensable role in the process of enlightenment. Rapture, tranquility and samadhi are three of the seven factors leading to enlightenment, so joy isn't just the end product. Without experiencing a more satisfying happiness, it is impossible to really let go of grasping and clinging. Because if we don't find

pleasure in meditation, we will inevitably seek pleasure in the world. Fortunately, a wonderful sense of inner well being is one aspect of samadhi, and samadhi is what leads to seeing things as they truly are. Without samadhi the mind is still too clouded or scattered to see anything as it truly is.

*For a person with right samādhi there is no need to arouse the wish, ‘May I see things as they truly are.’ It is a natural process, it is in accordance with nature, that someone with right samādhi will see things as they truly are.*

AN 10.3

*For a person lacking right samādhi, seeing things as they truly are is destroyed...the turning away from and fading away of passion is destroyed...and (the opportunity for) liberation is destroyed.*

AN 5.24

It is natural that the more pure the mind becomes, the more happiness arises. The belief (or unrecognized assumption) that by punishing ourselves we will become holy was rejected by the Buddha. Not allowing ourselves to be happy hinders rather than assists spiritual development. In outlining the Middle Way, the Buddha taught that by letting go of both self-punishment and self-indulgence a person experiences a refined and satisfying happiness.

In the stillness of samādhi one feels a blameless, unblemished happiness that arises from within. This makes the path of the Buddha one of joy and contentment. He praised jhāna as ‘a happy abiding here and now’ and ‘enlightenment here and now’. It is precisely the intensity of this unworldly bliss that is the carrot for enticing the heart away from attachment to the world.

*Monks, just as the Ganges River slants, slopes and inclines towards the ocean, so too a monk who develops and cultivates the four jhānas slants, slopes and inclines towards Nibbāna.*

SN 53.6

The word ‘vipassanā’ has come to be associated with particular meditation techniques or a style of Buddhist practice in the Theravada tradition. What the Buddha originally taught, however, was ‘samatha/ vipassanā’. Samatha is a virtual synonym for samadhi, also meaning the calm, serenity and deep peace that result from sustaining attention on one object, process or perception. Vipassanā refers to clear seeing or insight. When they are both present, a person’s heart and mind are in balance.

Samatha is unifying, unconditionally accepting and non-discriminating. It is still, bright, radiant, internally silent and blissful. Vipassanā on the other hand, arises from the discerning side of the mind. It dissects, investigates, compares,

contrasts and evaluates. It observes and analyzes the changing, unfulfilling and selfless nature of all conditioned physical and mental phenomena.

*For a person with right samādhi there is no need to arouse the wish, 'May I see things as they truly are.' It is a natural process, it is in accordance with nature, that someone with right samādhi will see things as they truly are.*

*AN 10.3*

While samatha generates energy, vipassanā puts it to work. These two were not originally intended to be different styles of Buddhist meditation with different goals, but merely two interrelated themes of one harmonious path of Dhamma practice. The combined result is wisdom: a deep perceptual change that aligns our understanding with the truths of nature. The Buddha taught a wide variety of meditation themes in response to the differing needs and inclinations of the individuals involved, but they all incorporated both serenity and insight. Together, both samatha and vipassanā work to liberate the mind.

Both samatha and vipassanā are based on developing continuous sharp mindfulness in the present moment, but mindfulness alone does not have the ability to enlighten. A moment of mindfulness is not a moment of enlightenment. Mindfulness needs to be focused and directed. Jhāna gives the mind tremendous strength, so that when we contemplate something we have the ability to penetrate to its essential nature. What we see sinks in. While samatha on its own does not have the ability to uproot ignorance, vipassanā on its own tends to merely skim the surface of reality without penetrating deeply. Together the benefits are unlimited.

*Intent on jhāna, firmly resolute,  
delighting in a forest grove, one should meditate at the foot of a tree:  
joyful...*

*In the discipline of living alone, in the service of hermits,  
It is the silence of solitude that is wisdom.*

*Sn 709,718*

All italicized quotes are from the Buddha's teachings in the Pali Canon.

For more detail on samatha and vipassana meditation, see [A Honed and Heavy Axe](http://www.vimutti.org.nz/teachings.php) by Ajahn Chandako <http://www.vimutti.org.nz/teachings.php>

For more detail on monastic etiquette in the Thai Forest Tradition, see [Monastic Etiquette](http://www.vimutti.org.nz/teachings.php) by Ajahn Chandako in the *Vinaya* section, <http://www.vimutti.org.nz/teachings.php>

## 9. Rainbow Bridge

The Thai tourist couple from Bangkok, the ones that had inquired about our future plans while speaking with us at the Thai Siam Restaurant, had figured out that they could offer us a pair of bus tickets. Coordinating with our friend and supporter Manut, they arranged transportation as far as Greymouth. The previous night Finley had intended to pick us up at Hawea River but couldn't find us. Tan and I waited until dark before we began walking along the highway. My ankle was still producing some unpleasant sensations, but it wasn't too long before we happened upon a travel lodge with a public phone. Manut came to our rescue without hesitation or question, and we spent that night in an empty room in his cook's apartment. The bus from Wanaka left early the next morning. Manut and his father arrived to pick us up as darkness was fading and the temperature stung.

"Do you know anyone in Greymouth?"

"No."

"Where are you going to stay?"

"Don't know."

"From Greymouth it is still a long way to the North Island. How are you going to travel?"

"Don't know."

While waiting at the bus stop for our transportation to arrive, Manut handed me a small, brown paper bag. The bag was light, surprisingly light, but true to form Manut was silent. So were we.

The bus was a small 16-seater and only half full. The scenery past Lake Hawea, over the Haast Pass and up the west coast was some of the most rugged and spectacular in the country: a Tang Dynasty brush scroll in motion.

Before too long a young and somewhat unruly English bloke persuasively asked the driver if she would play his CD over the bus' loudspeakers, preferably as loud as possible. To her credit, with only slight hesitation, she obliged. The crisp contemplative silence of the crisp early morning chill was unexpectedly and irrevocably transformed as we were suddenly plunged into a percolating hot tub of swirling multicolored electronic notes, bathed in the tender screaming riot emanating from Jimi Hendrix's guitar. From across the aisle Tan Mettiko and I glanced at each other out of the corners of our eyes. Eyebrows went up slightly. Faint smiles appeared on our lips: two serene pranksters, on the bus, in the golden morning of love, with Jimi screaming up the psychedelic wild west coast.

That full album would repeat itself four or five times before the owner finally disembarked at Fox Glacier.

Somewhere into 'Foxy Lady', Tan and I opened the small, light brown bag that contained our material sustenance for the day. We were genuinely grateful for any offering—no matter how meager—but we had to smile at how these two guys with so much faith and a restaurant to boot only came up with half a sandwich apiece. The life of mendicancy regularly offers humbling reminders of how our lives are dependant upon circumstances out of our control.

We arrived in Greymouth in the late afternoon. We had no money, no food and no contacts. We were a bit tired from the travel and aural sensory overload, but it was not yet time to rest. We as yet had no idea where we would stay, if we would eat the next day, or how we would continue traveling. Greymouth is hick: a small, coastal city, relatively free of the trappings we normally associate with culture. It was unlikely that the inhabitants had seen many western gentlemen dressed in our unique manner. How politely we would be received was an open question.

But we had a strategy. We had a tudong contingency survival plan.

First we found the local I-site, one of the ubiquitous and extremely helpful New Zealand information centers. There we got two free maps of Greymouth and inquired if there was a Thai restaurant in town. There was. Sweet. That was plan A. We were able to leave our packs at the I-site and walked to the restaurant. We found it, no problem, but it was closed—like *really* closed—with no indication of when it might open. The man at the shop next door said it was not just closed but closed down. Scratch Plan A.

It was getting close to dusk by now and dark clouds were massing on the horizon. We returned to the I-site (a loose translation of *vipassana*) and due to time constraints and mounting concern over the weather, we split up into order to enact Plans B and C. Tan Mettiko headed for the coast to search for some brush to bed down in, a beach shelter or a small patch of trees to hang our glotes and rain flies. I went to look for a church. As we divided our directions and attention, the rain was already steadily falling.

It wasn't that I had suddenly found Jesus Christ or lost faith in the Buddhadhamma—I've been born enough already for this lifetime—however, the tradition of hospitality that was common in Asian temples and European churches might have produced a distant echo in this remote Pacific island. All we needed was some floor space for a night. The Unitarians were a good bet, and having found their church on the map, that's where I was headed. On the way I passed the Anglican Trinity Church. Something told me I should give the Church of England a shot. I assumed the 'Trinity' referred to the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha, so that was reassuring.

“Hi. My name is Ajahn Chandako. I am a wandering Buddhist monk. My friend and I have just arrived in Greymouth for a night. We have no money and don’t know anyone in town. I was just wondering if there’s a possibility that you might have a dry place where we could spend the night. All we need is some floor space out of the rain,” I explained to the youngish Kiwi man who answered my knock on the door. I think I caught him by surprise. Pause. “Just a moment please.” That’s all we have are moments, so that was no problem.

A middle-aged woman then came to the door.

...with Halloween memories arising...

“Hi. My name is Ajahn Chandako. I am a wandering Buddhist monk. My friend and I have just arrived in Greymouth for a night. We have no money and don’t know anyone in town. I was just wondering if there’s a possibility that you might have a dry place where we could spend the night. All we need is some floor space out of the rain.” She invited me in without hesitation. That was Marge. Marge was cool. Marge was the vicar. An American woman from Portland, she led me to a small meeting room with a table and chairs.

“You are welcome to stay in this room. There is a meeting here tonight, but after that the room is free.” I expressed my gratitude and said the carpeted floor would suit us just fine. Worried about our comfort, however, she insisted that we bring some mattresses from another room. We did so and stacked the mattresses in the hallway for the time being. At that time she was in the middle of something and too busy to discuss much, but I told her if she was free some time later that evening, I would be interested to have a talk with her about her faith. She said she’d like that.

I returned to the I-site in the blowing rain. It was fortunate that Plan C had come through for us, because Plan B was a washout and there wasn’t any Plan D. Searching the coast, Tan Mettiko had found that the shoreline offered slim pickings: no good glote sites and certainly nothing that would shelter us from the storm. Furthermore, Tan had been somewhat terrorised by the teenage hot-rodders locally known as ‘boy-racers’, young men with short attention spans, too much time, fast cars and an attitude. Our bus driver had warned us about the boy-racers, but still Tan Mettiko was a bit surprised when he actually met one on a dirt road by the beech where the racers hang out and drag.

“Ajahn, I was wondering what the bus driver meant when she was talking about the ‘boy-racers’. Now I know. On my way to the beach I met one. He came power-sliding around the corner right towards me. I was preparing to jump. Later I met two middle-aged guys who offered me a ride back to town in their pickup. They had certainly grown out of being boy-racers, but they were thoroughly drunk. As for a place to stay, there were no solid trees along the shoreline. We

would have a pretty miserable time there even without the crazy people hanging around.”

But I greeted him with the Good News:

“I have found refuge in the house of the Lord.”

With still a couple of hours before the Anglican meeting room was free, we scoped out the possibilities for the next day’s almsround. Main street didn’t look promising, although Tan was pretty keen on a fish ‘n’ chips shop. We did locate a supermarket and a McDonalds. Not much happens in Greymouth after dusk, so for the remaining time we sat quietly in the lobby of the I-site cum local movie theater.

At the appointed time we arrived back at Anglican Trinity, found the room waiting for us, cleared the table and chairs, unpacked our requisites and arranged our sleeping places. We looked at maps and possible future routes. There were two people I knew on the east side of Golden Bay. John and Lyn were an American couple who had been in charge of building the dining hut at Vimutti a couple of years earlier. Enchanted by New Zealand, they then decided to uproot from Portland and move here. Whether we made it to Golden Bay or not depended on circumstances out of our control, but it represented an orienting goal-less goal.

There were two ways of getting to Golden Bay. There was the long, circuitous route of the well-traveled highway, and there was the direct path through the forest and mountains. The highway option, veering east from Westport, would almost certainly be more comfortable, safe and reliable. The direct route would take us through the small coastal town of Karamea and then through Kahurangi National Park. Traveling through the park would be on foot through the wilderness. With information gleaned from books at the I-site, we were now aware that the direct path would be a trail called the Heaphy Track. It was 82 kilometers long. The beginning of the track was 15 km from Karamea, and the end of the track was 28 km from the nearest tiny town of Collingwood. Without a vehicle, money, a healthy ankle or food, the direct route looked daunting and probably unrealistic.

I found some interesting reading in a stack of glossy magazines dedicated to making a case for the creationist theory that the earth is only a few thousand years old. The articles aimed at exposing the fixed and often narrow-minded views of the secular and scientific communities whose faith was in Darwinian and geological assumptions. The creationist authors wrote to dispel scientific theories based on evidence that was often intentionally misinterpreted to support a dogmatic atheist agenda. Interesting reading. Nice photos. Apparently 53 % of Americans believe that the world was created in six days approximately 6,000 years ago.

The Maori creationist theory goes something like this: Ranginui and Papatuanuku, Sky Father and the Earth Mother respectively, produced numerous offspring while they were physically cleaved together in a procreative embrace. The children soon become restless and dissatisfied with the cramped living conditions of being wedged in between their parents. They were forced to live in darkness since their parents blocked out all the rays of the sun. The youngsters then gathered to discuss, in order to get more room and light, whether they should separate their parents or simply kill them outright. They decided on the former, and with great difficulty the children then succeeded in pushing their parents apart, causing them great sorrow. So which creation theory is right?

I found a magic marker and began to draw a sign that read 'Karamea'.

Marge arrived about 9:30. She had had a full day ministering to the responsibilities of her congregation. I asked her how she had happened to end up as the vicar in Greymouth. She then related the series of events that had led to her arrival in New Zealand, and how when the previous Greymouth vicar recently decided to step down, he had invited her to fill his position. Marge actually hailed from a conservative Pentecostal background rather than Anglican, but she felt that this was where her work was at this time.

"Marge, in a nutshell," I asked, "could you help me understand the differences that define the dozens of major Christian denominations? Even though I majored in religion in college, my primary focus was on the East." Both Tan Mettiko and I had some background in Western theological issues, and this seemed to be a good opportunity to learn more.

Marge was only too happy to comply. Beginning with a basic definition of what it meant to be Christian, she then enthusiastically outlined the 2000 year old history in detail, focusing on how the various denominations came into being and what they stood for.

"The Anglican Church was the child of an impatient king and an intolerant pope. King Henry VIII wanted to divorce his wife so he could marry another woman, but Pope Clement VII wouldn't hear of it, so King Henry decided to break with Rome and start his own Church of England. It wasn't the ideal way to begin a denomination."

We asked her more questions about the core beliefs of Christianity. Even though the theology was at times entanglingly complicated, after listening to Marge it all apparently hinged on believing in the resurrection of Christ after his death. This was the event that proved that he indeed was (or was not) the son of God and not just another religious teacher. If Jesus was in fact only a human being, then the entire Christian life—in Marge's view—would be in vain. "That would mean that Christ hadn't really taken our sins upon himself, and that would mean we'd just be on our own."

Marge held her beliefs with a passion that Tan and I respected. Her beliefs and our approach to a spiritual life couldn't have been further apart on the spectrum, and yet all three of us were having a great time in this discussion. I detected sincerity in her. If people hold beliefs, live them with integrity and are motivated to live in a way that benefits others, then I find it easy to respect them. It is the self-righteous hypocrisy or motivation to harm others that gives fundamentalism of any faith a bad name.

Our conversation with Marge was both intellectually engaging and related to meaningful issues in our lives, and it wasn't until 11:30 that it began winding down. Although we had all had a long day, the rare opportunity to have a true interfaith discussion was refreshingly energizing. With feelings of friendship, mutual appreciation and gratitude we wished each other a pleasant night's sleep.

That night the weather intensified to a severe storm. Heavy rains pounded the town and howling winds shook the church. I thanked the good Lord we weren't under a glote on the beach.

I didn't say *which* Lord.

(For a fascinating historical account of the life of Jesus see the book, [The Original Jesus, The Buddhist Sources of Christianity](#) by German theologians [Elmar R. Gruber](#) and [Holger Kersten](#))

## 10. "Come the rapture, can I have your car?" –US bumper sticker

The vicar invited us for a cup of morning coffee. Our unexpected abiding in the Anglican Trinity Church brought an important question to the surface. How, in our increasingly congested, multicultural and resource strained world, can people of different faiths live in harmony? Although religious belief systems are intended to have a civilizing and wholesome effect on society, they in have also been the source of much bloodshed, division and hatred. Considering the tenacity with which many people hold mutually exclusive beliefs, what chance have we then got for interfaith peace?

I'd say that sharing a cup of coffee was a darn good way to start.

Even though Tan and I had a very different approach to spirituality than Marge, it didn't seem to be an obstacle. We enjoyed each other's company and found that as representatives of our traditions we actually had much in common. Even though she must have thought we were on the highway to hell, she seemed to respect that our lifestyle was closer to the way Jesus lived than that of most

Christians. We continued our discussion from the previous night. Although in many in social situations avoiding talking about religion is the polite and skillful option, it can also be more akin to repression than to real harmony. Educating ourselves about other traditions and empathizing with how their followers view life seems more respectful, more effective for developing a real relationship. This approach is becoming increasingly urgent as cultural and geographical isolation disappear.

When it comes to religions or different sects getting along, we face some realistic challenges. With the Bible and the Koran, for example, we have two conflicting best-selling publications attributed to the same author, both with their own enthusiastic readership and both asserting superiority. Even views on interpretations of the same book have led to serious disharmony.

Considering the conflicts surrounding Islam, it is tempting to either blindly condemn all Muslims or else say that the conflicts are due to a few extremists who distort the peaceful message of the Koran for their own political ends. Though on opposite poles of the political correctness spectrum, both responses may be a way of avoiding the hard work of actually trying to understand Islam. Although the Bible displays a few flare ups of intolerance in the Old Testament, they pale by contrast to the relative conflagration of aggression we find within Islamic scripture. The Koran's encouragement to despise, convert or kill non-Muslims is surprisingly explicit. We are not talking about veiled spiritual metaphors here. So long as Muslims consider the Koran to be the literal word of God and consider it a moral duty to keep Islam moving towards world conquest, this will pose a continuing challenge to world peace.\*

While Hinduism is less motivated towards expansion, conversion or conquest, its scriptures also lend themselves to fundamentalist interpretations that justify the religious violence we've seen in India. If you throw atheistic belief systems such as Communism into the mix, the notion of a tolerant world community can seem but a twinkling, distant star. Although Buddhism has been a virtual lighthouse of non-violence and acceptance of others, we can't expect that everyone on the planet is going to take up meditation on universal loving-kindness. It will take more than a mere idealistic hope to bring the world's major belief-based traditions together in a spirit of true mutual appreciation and love.

The Buddha considered all beliefs not leading to the reduction of greed, anger or self-centeredness as pernicious. However, we can say that different beliefs present a spectrum of danger, ranging from, say, a strong motivation to kill infidels to simply not quite being on the right track to the liberation of consciousness. If we temporarily put aside the debate of whether a belief is true or not, let's just look at the predictable results of holding it. If I believe that the Devil is actively encouraging everyone who believes something different than I do, and that it is my duty to eradicate the devil's work, then I will likely be prone

to conflict and aggression. If I believe that people of a different faith or denomination have been rejected by God, then it could be easy for me to be callous and condescending towards them. If I believe that God is love and that every human being and animal in the world is God incarnate, then it is likely that my heart will tend towards love, non-violence, respect and harmony. Our views and beliefs create our reality to a large degree.

And then there's the belief in the rapture—Armageddon, apocalypse, mutual annihilation, the Biblical view that the end of the world as we know it will come through a massive destruction—the sooner the better, of course—because that will proceed a return of Jesus and paradise on earth, while the few true believers will be spirited to heaven. Surveys indicate that a very large percentage of Americans are dead certain or think that it is probable that the rapture will come within the next 50 years. (No wonder sustainability is catching on so slowly.) A belief in imminent mass destruction can be dangerously self-fulfilling.

Now, I fully admit that the Buddha taught 'the rapture' as well. It is a core part of the Buddhist way of looking at the future. Here's a typical example: when a person leads an honest, responsible and kind life, this naturally gives rise to a feeling of well being. When that person then calms and settles his or her mind through meditation, this pleasant feeling is amplified to a great sense of inner joy (Pali: *piti*), which we translate as 'rapture'.

And don't let those liberal Buddhists tell you that the rapture is not essential to Buddhist doctrine. Because it is. Rapture is one of the seven factors of enlightenment and can't be by-passed on the path to Nibbana. More shocking than that, Buddhists also believe that 'the rapture' leads to the end of the world as we know it! Yes, siree. Rapture leads to happiness, which leads to the deep mental peace of samadhi, which leads to seeing things as they truly are in accordance with nature, which leads to liberation of the heart/mind, which leads to the cessation of the world: the world of our delusion is crushed quicker than you can say 'four horsemen of the apocalypse', and at death the constituents of the body and mind (the five *khandas*) disperse once and for all. No more clinging, no more rebirth. This is the end of the world in the Buddha's eyes, and he called it the highest happiness.

So at least we have some common interfaith ground to build on.

Why is it that you've never heard of a Buddhist holy war? It is simply too difficult to twist the Dhamma in that direction. In the Buddhist worldview there is absolutely no way to rationalize killing others as a wholesome act, as a justifiable means to a 'good' end.\*\* Buddhism also isn't concerned about the number of converts. What's important is the development of peace and wisdom in the world. Whether people call themselves Buddhist or not is of little importance. Instead of encouraging an allegiance to a set of beliefs, the Dhamma is first and foremost a

systematic training of human consciousness, a path of mental development with the goal of enlightenment and social harmony. With its empirical approach and emphasis on visible verification, the Buddhist way of life seems to have a reasonable foundation in cause and effect. Even if your enthusiasm for the Dhamma does lead you to becoming a Buddhist extremist, it's improbable that you would display even enough aggression to squish a spider.

Whenever there are people projecting greed, hatred and delusion from their hearts, we can expect there to be suffering. It is hard enough to dissolve the self-defeating reactions of anger, fear and selfishness to achieve harmony on a personal level. Seeing true harmony on a global level requires a big and beautiful stretch of the imagination—and this may in fact be the only place it will ever exist—but visualizing global harmony is a good place to start.

We will always have a diversity of views and beliefs, more or less accurate depending on our depth of wisdom, but it is the level of attachment to those beliefs that will determine whether we can live together as a harmonious community. Clinging tightly to beliefs leads to stress and conflict. Letting go of that clinging while still honoring our beliefs leads to peace and acceptance.

It may also be the case that it is simply not realistic to expect that religious violence and intolerance will ever come to an end. If so, then we would be better off focusing on making peace with that possibility. At least we can refrain from adding fuel to the fire.

In whatever minuscule way my life might affect the world situation, I would hope that my positive personal connections and individual ties of friendship with people different from myself would send out a few ripples of tolerance. If enough of us do this, we might just mitigate the political and religious momentum towards violence.

However nourishing theological reflection might be for the (non-) soul, it still does not have the ability to adequately address the primary issue of 'emptiness' or 'the void'. I'm talking stomach here. Tan and I had stomachs, and there no guarantee of food. Emptiness for us was not some airy fairy theoretical concept but something that we were experiencing on a moment-to-moment basis.

There were two supermarkets in town.

"Tan, you want Fresh Choice or New World?"

He chose the 'Choice'. I got the 'World'. The weather was still blowing a right storm out there, as we stepped into the elements of uncertainty and strode in opposite directions. My robe billowed with the gusts and the borrowed umbrella barely served to keep much of the cloth dry. After 20 minutes I arrived at New World Supermarket.

It was a fair bet that Greymouth had never before experienced Buddhist monks on almsround. Rather than walking mindfully in single file through town with our eyes downcast and risk being mistaken for outpatients, we deemed it a potentially more lucrative strategy to stand still at significant spots. I positioned myself just outside New World's main door, highly visible but unobtrusive. I took the lid off my bowl, so people didn't assume I was there to play bongos. I stood calmly and still, looking ahead, so that I could see people's faces but not with the type of eye contact that might make them feel uncomfortable. I was silent. Without having been approached, I was not allowed to ask for anything, to explain what I doing or even to have a "starving monk will chant for food" sign.

I am pretty used to standing out in public and even walking on almsround in western countries, but standing in front of New World, reliant on strangers, an outsider doing something very peculiar, was one notch higher on the scale of homeless self-effacement. It was a good opportunity for watching my mind. Why had I made the conscious decision to separate myself so drastically from the mainstream of society? I was confident that I wasn't doing anything harmful. I didn't mind terribly if people thought I was weird. I tried not to hope for anything, preparing myself for the possibility that nothing would be given. I gave myself two hours, and after that if no food had been offered, I would return to the church.

People went in and came out. Kids stared while mothers tried not to.

After ten minutes—but a long ten minutes—a woman came out of the store, saw me, paused and began to put a handful of coins into my bowl. At this point we are allowed to speak.

"Thank you very much for your generosity, but we are not allowed to accept money. We can only accept offerings of food."

She said, "oh" and went back into the store. A few minutes later she reappeared, this time with a plastic bag full of food which she placed in my bowl. Cool. She then asked a few questions, and I explained the gist of who I was and what I was doing. When I mentioned Thailand, she said that she had a friend in town who was Thai and told me her name.

After another few minutes, a man also tried to put some change into my bowl. Same routine. He also then went back into the store, soon to emerge with a big bag of apples. This was becoming fun. Soon another person offered more food, and after being there only 20 minutes, I had more than enough food for one monk for one day. I was amazed—just a random 20 minutes on a cold, rainy morning in a podunk town that had never before seen me or others like me, and I get enough food for an entire meal. And yet somehow I wasn't amazed in the least. How often on tudong had the magic happened? Trust in the old adage kept growing: 'If you look after the Dhamma, the Dhamma looks after you.' The touching encounters with those three people had nothing to do with me. They

were possible only because I was following in the footsteps of the Buddha's own humble habit of collecting his food on the streets.

Back at Anglican Trinity I arranged our places for the meal, setting out the food and water. There was as yet no sign of Tan Mettiko. I would wait for his return before eating, because all of our food was shared 50/50. In the event that he didn't get anything, I had enough for a modest meal for two. I assumed he would be given something, so at New World I didn't want to be greedy and stay longer than necessary.

After 45 minutes, Tan emerged out of the grey mouth of the storm with a big smile of enthusiasm. Fresh Choice was a bit slow, but he did receive a loaf of bread, some fruit and ears of raw corn. The fish 'n chips shop was a heart breaking dead loss for Tan, but the golden arches offered a possibility for redemption.

"As I stood outside McDonalds, a guy came up to me and wanted to know if I was collecting donations. I told him I would not accept monetary donations but if I was to get some food, fine! He looked at me, then at the fast food joint and said, 'Food? Here? Well, good luck, mate,' as if he meant there was no real food in there to be had."

After standing patiently for a while, not even a Happy Meal was offered. Zilcho. Micky D's just didn't have the spiritual aptitude to appreciate the loss of karmic opportunity they suffered by not offering Tan his Egg McMuffin.

What we had, however, was plenty. There is no food more satisfying than almsfood, because we are not merely ingesting material sustenance for the body but also the nourishment of people's generosity, faith and moral support. After the meal I found a local phonebook and was able to track down the alms giver's Thai friend. She was excited to hear that two western Thai speaking monks were in town and wanted to help us out in whatever way she could. She was working at that time, but she was able to arrange for a friend of hers to give us lift to the next town of Westport.

Bowls washed, packs packed and room cleaned, we found Marge to say our goodbyes and express our gratitude.

"Thanks for not trying to convert us, Marge."

"I figured you were you were big boys. *But Jesus is the Way.*"

We offered her our remaining almsfood.

If peace in this world is to have a glimmer of hope, then it will be born of friendly and gracious encounters between individuals who profess different belief

systems. When I remember Marge and the Anglican Church, I think of hospitality, kindness and a sincere person dedicated to helping others. I will always be grateful for being out of the storm on that night. And hopefully when the perception of Buddhist monks arises in Marge's mind, she will recall a couple of warmhearted, polite and respectful human beings, two smiling mendicants on an itinerant path of peace.

Our ride to Westport had arrived, and the driver was impressively equanimous with the idea of giving a lift to two unknown men wearing skirts. He was a commercial fisherman, getting long in the tooth, every bit as rugged as the coast he hailed from. As his van snaked its way along the wave-pounded cliffs, hidden coves, and jagged rock and sand gardens that no Japanese landscaper could match, the clouds lifted and the rain came to an end. As we neared Cape Foulwind, we came to our fork in the road. The option of the long, easy and well-traveled path branched off to our right. We let it slip by in silence.

Our driver soon let us off in downtown Westport, all one street of it.

“Where are you headed?”

“Golden Bay”

We walked to the outskirts of town, set down our packs and pulled out the sign I had made at the church: ‘Karamea’, the northernmost town on the west coast reachable by vehicle. We stood composed, with no thumbs sticking out. After a short time a car stopped, and the driver offered us a ride to Hector. We didn't know where the heck Hector was, but it didn't matter, because we weren't going to turn down a ride.

The driver was a woman with long dread locks that formed a sizable Medusa-like mass around her head and shoulders. She and her girlfriend had been in Westport taking a course on learning how to drive excavators and back hoes. Both of them had a look in their eyes that we suspected had been influenced by recreational drugs. I asked how it came to be that she lived in this remote corner of the South Island.

“I like the west coast because, like, people are more real.”

“What do mean by ‘real’”

She didn't realize she had just invited an ontological discussion. With spacey jazz music in the background, we talked about nature, the universe and meditation, but due to certain limitations on clear thinking, the philosophical interlocution never got beyond the vague imprecision of stoned out feelings. That was a fun ride, and by 3:00 pm they dropped us off in Hector. We looked around. No wonder we had never heard of Hector—just some non-descript houses and

rundown buildings around a mining operation. We waited with our sign. And we waited. And waited. And we took turns waiting. The rain and hours came and went. Our sign got soggy. Traffic was light. "Are we ever going to get out of this place?"

It wasn't the most inviting town to be marooned in. The locals didn't seem extraordinarily exuberant to have us there. There was no obvious place to spend the night, not even an Anglican church in the god forsaken place, and no market for an almsround. As dusk was approaching, We set a time limit. "If by 6:00 pm we don't get a ride, let's call it quits and use the remaining daylight to find some bush along the coast or set up camp on the rubble underneath the highway bridge." I got out my watch. As 6:00 neared it didn't look good. The odd car whizzed by without concern. 5:59. We could see the distant twists and turns of the approaching highway. "OK, these are the last three cars."

As the first one neared, I verbally advertised with a smile: "Friendly monks and an opportunity to make good kamma!" It zoomed past.

As the second one neared, with the same smile: "Free meditation instruction and mystic blessings!" It zoomed past.

As the third one neared, OK, this is it. This is the last car. I tried a different tact. Still smiling:

"Psychotic baby killers and child eaters!"

And it worked. The car stopped. *Dang*, I should have tried that one earlier.

Our saviors were a young English couple with a VW van. Jules and Karina said they didn't think twice when they saw us monks. Of course they were going to give us a ride. The two of them were a joy: intelligent, kind, adventurous. They were bloomin' devas as far as Tan and I were concerned. They weren't planning on going all the way to Karamea, however, but were in the process of looking for a cheap campsite with a shower.

We drove as the darkness fell. Tan entertained Jules and Karina with stories. They kept searching for a reasonably priced campsite but couldn't find one, so they kept driving. A full moon rose in the now clear sky, silhouetting the giant fronds of tree ferns arched along the way. In the end they drove all the way to Karamea.

While still on the outskirts of town, however, Jules chanced a side road that advertised a campsite at its end. On the way in we passed a farm with a hayshed, and I took note. The campgrounds were too pricey for them, but on the way back, as we neared the hayshed, I asked them if they would please let us off there.

“You’re going to sleep in the hayshed?”

It was a stunningly beautiful night as Tan and I quietly—so as not to alert the farmer—entered the three-sided, corrugated iron hayshed. We arranged a few bales, spread our groundsheets, and climbed into our sleeping bags. Other than the interrupting stares of curious cows, that was one of the best night’s sleep we had the entire tudong.

(For more information on the Rapture, see the following websites.

[http://www.lifecoach4vip.com/trp80r-](http://www.lifecoach4vip.com/trp80r-rapture.html)

[rapture.htmlhttp://www.commondreams.org/views05/0207-20.htm](http://www.commondreams.org/views05/0207-20.htm) )

\*On the bright side, the intolerance used to be worse. What is now Afghanistan, Pakistan and India were once lands filled with tens of thousands of centers of learning, art and enlightenment in the form of Buddhist monasteries. From the 9<sup>th</sup> -12<sup>th</sup> centuries these all went by way of the sword as the unrelenting Islamic holy war spread from Persia. Nalanda, a Buddhist Monastery and University, with a resident population of over 10,000 monks, was the largest and most prestigious center of higher education in Asia. When the Muslim armies reached Northern India, Nalanda was attacked and set ablaze. The huge collection of texts in the nine-story library took months to burn. The defenseless Sangha were slaughtered en masse in one of the most tragic massacres in history.

\*\* In some rare or extreme circumstances a Buddhist might be willing to take on the bad kamma of killing in order to save the lives of others. But killing is never considered good kamma.

## 11. Lotus on the Highway

*As a sweet smelling lotus, pleasing to the heart,*

*May grow in a heap of rubbish, discarded along the highway,*

*So a disciple of the fully awakened one,*

*Shines with wisdom among the rubbish heap....*

*The Buddha*

*Dhp 58,59*

The fading mist of the first light revealed the two quiet journeymen. Nested in piled bales of hay and wrapped in the brown cloth of their aspirations, their cross-legged postures of upright silence reflected the stillness of the day's golden birth. It was not necessary to ring a bell to end the meditation. Without a word they stirred, shifted and made preparations for tea. This was a ritual every bit as well-worn and comfortable as the patched and faded cotton weave of an old forest robe dyed with the heartwood of a Jackfruit tree.

The day offered near infinite possibilities.

Golden Bay was ostensibly our goal. On a tudong with no fixed plans, Golden Bay was the goal-less goal. Neither of us, however, had ever seen it directly. We didn't know for sure that it existed. It seemed reasonable that it did. Others had spoken of seeing it themselves, praised its unique, serene beauty and described it as great happiness. The maps that had proven reliable in the past indicated that it lay to the north. Golden Bay was the kind of place that people travel for long distances in order to see. There was a certain fascination, a mystique and a promise that once you were there, everything would be alright. It was a shoreline beyond the problems of the world, and there human suffering came to an end. It was a symbol. It was an archetype. And in that sense it neither existed nor non-existed, but it manifested as a conceptual reality of hope and human potential where the fruits of a hundred thousand obstacles overcome along the way could be savoured in the quiet victory of sober release. G Bay was a direction in which we could orient the compass of our wholesome intentions within the dizzying landscape of incomprehensible kammic possibilities. And our path was leading irreversibly in that direction.

We might take the long way. We might have to back track to Westport and follow the hard paved road of predictably neat white lines, the easy and roundabout route of highways, fossil-fuel vehicles and good-natured tourists—the only sensible way. Or we might take the wilderness route. That decision was beyond our control. We were absolutely open. Even if we never reached Golden Bay in our lifetime, we were willing to accept that. But our motivations were clear.

We packed. We respectfully returned each bale of hay to its original position. We left no trace. We began to walk and our stomachs were empty.

Three kilometers passed: kilometers of farm fields, cows, a guesthouse and the odd person. The kids behind the windows of the school bus offered us their enthusiastic faces and waves of curious appreciation. It was a beautiful morning.

We were the first customers of the day at the Karamea I-site information center. We read the relevant pamphlets, found the descriptions of the possible trails ahead and committed to memory the details of important topographical maps, at least as thoroughly as our middle-aged brains allowed. The direct route to Golden Bay was the Heaphy Track. Traversing Kahurangi National Park at the

northwest corner of the South Island, the Heaphy was 82 kilometres long and required four to six days to complete. Furthermore, it was 15 km from Karamea to the trailhead and 28 km from the end of the trail to the nearest tiny town of Collingwood.

As monks we could carry no food. Our monastic discipline, the Vinaya, clearly prohibited storing food overnight. Whatever food was offered to us in the morning had to be renounced by midday. The Heaphy track was devoid of towns, private homes, places to buy supplies or even the slightest aroma of a café to provide a focus for an almsround. For monks to even entertain the thought of that route as a possible option would normally be considered outside the scope of reasonable consideration.

The warm-hearted local staff at the I-site answered our questions graciously. They allowed us to stow our bags behind their counter, freeing us to walk unburdened on what was most likely the first almsround of Karamean history. There were no New Worlds to discover or Fresh Choices to choose from in Karamea. There were no Thai restaurants, meditation centers or discernable Asian communities. It was a small, slow, weather beaten, one-story sprawl of a relaxed township at the end of the road. The few funky tourist cafes were sleepily unresponsive. We knew the likelihood of getting anything to eat that day rated from slim to unpredictable, but we had known that all along, and that thought didn't bother us greatly.

With measured pace we walked the town's few streets and eventually arrived at the playing field of the Karamea Domain. On one side was a small campground, and the only vehicle in that campground was the van that had the day before saved our soles from Hector hell. In a moment we found Jules and Karina, and they invited us into the campground's homey common room. One of the two proprietors, a vibrant elderly woman, discovered us straight away.

"My Tai Chi teacher was a Buddhist monk!" Pippi exclaimed with the type of excited enthusiasm of someone who was about to show you some large-hearted kindness and care. Jules and Karina quickly clued in to the meaning of almsround and thoughtfully offered us coffee and toast. Pippi alerted her partner Joe, who after all these years in New Zealand had never lost his Scottish accent. Joe offered us the much needed use of the communal showers. Although our toiletries were back at the I-site, we were able to find some dishwashing liquid to squirt on our bodies and an old tea towel to dry them.

They offered more toast and we didn't refuse. Jules and Karina inquired of our plans. We said we didn't have any fixed plans. We asked them of theirs. They said they were thinking to drive to the trailhead of the Heaphy track to do a day hike. Tan Mettiko and I looked at each other.

"When are you leaving?"

“We’d like to get going soon, as it’s already late in the morning. You can join us if you want.”

Mettiko and I looked at each other again.

“I guess we’re doing the Heaphy track.”

That decided it.

When we explained that our intention was to not merely do a day trip, but to hike the entire trail, J & K were keen to take us to the trailhead and join us for the first leg of the tramp. When we explained that our intention was to hike the entire trail without taking any food, Pippi and Joe had a look of dubious concern. They gave us more toast. Mettiko and I weren’t naïve about what we were getting into. We knew that hikers would be carrying just enough food for their own needs, so it didn’t seem fair to expect or even hope that anyone would feed us along the way. We agreed that we would not go on almsround while on the trail, not sit by any of public huts with our obviously empty bowls in our laps, not stand holding ‘starving monks will chant for food’ signs and not even hint to other hikers that we were short of physical nourishment.

We had a reasonable assessment of our capabilities and limitations. My sprained ankle had still not healed, but I knew if I stepped mindfully and placed my weight properly it would hold up. Our footwear only offered modest support. Tevas with neoprene scuba booties were the lightweight compromise that had served us well in a wide variety of tudong situations. Although we didn’t have the burden of food, we had the added extra weight of our unusual low tech monastic paraphernalia: large steel bowls, heavy wooden and bamboo glotes and outer robes of dense and weighty cotton. We were keenly aware of the challenges ahead, but we were also realistic about our strengths and inner fortitude. Truth is, we were looking forward to testing ourselves.

Neither of us had any real doubt that we would eventually make it to the far side of the track. The big question was how long it would take and the ratio of pleasure to pain that would be experienced in the process. And this *was* a big unknown. And for us this was what tudong was all about. This fear of an unknown, uncontrolled future and the accompanying projections of insecurity are the self-imposed jails created within a mind bound by the world. But seeing through the cinder blocks of worry and dissolving the bars of limiting thought constructions were major reasons why we were monks.

Committed and incarcerated by the confines of our seen, unrecognized or unacknowledged fears, we may never know true freedom. We can easily justify not stepping out from the safe ground of the familiar and the socially accepted into the wide forest of potential growth. We can easily rationalize playing it safe and not taking risks. Fear can stop us from following our hearts. Fear can lead to

wheel-spinning stagnation as years pass until our inspiration to follow our dreams has been replaced by a heart full of regrets. In the process we can miss out on the best life has to offer and end up forsaking altogether the further shores of Golden Bay.

If we were going to face our fears, there was only one time to do it.

Pippi and Joe's well placed concern manifested in encouraging us to eat whatever food we found in the communal refrigerator as our last foreseeable supper. What remained in the refrigerator consisted of white bread, peanut butter, lettuce, a tomato, margarine and a small cube of cheese. As the J & K van was ready to roll, we quickly and gratefully took up the offer and hastily prepared a few very weird sandwiches. Pippi made us promise to email her from the far side of the track, if we survived.

On our way to the trailhead we picked up our packs, and as it was nearing midday we ate our peanut butter, lettuce and tomato sandwiches in the back of the van. With a couple of apples tossed to us by Jules, our fast food happy meal was sufficient to satisfy half our appetite.

The trailhead was a well kept park of windswept Pohutakawa trees. By the Kohaihai shelter, an unknown hiker who had completed the trail in the opposite direction had kindly left behind a good walking stick. I asked the stick if it wouldn't mind accompanying me on a reverse journey, and it agreed. How many times this particular stick had been carried back and forth the length of the trail was another imponderable.

We plunged into the lush native bush of Ponga trees, Karaka and ubiquitous ferns. The wide, well maintained trails encouraged enjoyable Dharma dialogue fueled by Jules and Karina's thoughtful questions. After a good couple of hours, crossing the Kohaihai river and stopping at an occasional bluff lookout providing extensive views of the coast ahead, we arrived at long, broad beaches of inviting white sand. This promised to be a perfect place to reflect contemplatively by the waves as J & K had their picnic before turning back. In certain scenic New Zealand locations however, it is prudent to reflect contemplatively at a rather rapid clip and remember that all promises are subject to fleeting conditions. After a 90 second grace period the airborne divisions of the tiny sandfly moved in for their aerial strike.

At the I-site in Karamea, among the many dozens of pamphlets on various subjects, we found one lamenting the environmental demise of the endangered West Coast Sandfly. Admittedly, I was halfway through reading it before I caught on that it was actually a craftily written, tongue in cheek, rogue pamphlet that had been snuck in among the bonafide literature. Alarmed that surveys of sandfly numbers indicated a drop in their population to approximately 10 billion, the witty authors offer information on sandfly natural history, sandfly spotting, recognizing

the markings of sub-species, proper medical treatment should you get bit and what we can all do to ensure that this sociable and friendly New Zealand icon with such a strong affinity for people will be around for future generations to enjoy.

Tan Mettiko and I decided that contemplative reflection could happen just as effectively in a mobile posture. With great appreciation for their help and kindness, we bid farewell to Jules and Karina and continued up the coast.

We passed through magical forests of Nikau Palms, New Zealand's only native palm tree. The forest to the side of the trail was a bursting green mat of thickly woven subtropical lushness. Large glossy leaves, intertwining vines and damp conditions revealed an environment bursting with life. We drank water and sat at Katipo Creek shelter. As we continued, the coast became increasingly rocky and wave pummeled. Gentle stretches of sand gave way to the hard and jagged edges of a coastline that regularly endured a pounding from cold waves and winds that had gained momentum from some distant origin.

At a particularly beautiful cove of craggy rocks and swirling currents we came upon a bronze plaque placed in memory of a group of young hikers who had been swept out to sea decades before. Visualising the range of emotions that those youthful travelers must have felt—from the initial excited playfulness and natural joy of their entry into the water, to the refreshing coolness of the surf, to the terror of being dragged and pushed out of their control and to the final moments of a life cut so unexpectedly short—was a teaching that encapsulated so much of what our existence has to offer. We chanted a short blessing. Continuing north with the beautifully vibrant and pulsating fecundity of ungoverned growth to our right; with the equally stunning, bare starkness of rock and water's veiled threat of death to our left; we walked a silent narrow path of balance between the two.

By late afternoon we were nearing our 20<sup>th</sup> kilometer on foot. The fuel garnered from our PBLT half meal was wearing thin and no energy was wasted on speech. The sky looked threatening, and it began to rain here and there. We had been told that camping was free and allowed if one was 500 metres from the trail, but as we searched, we found little opportunity to enter sideways through the dense thickets of bush.

At dusk, with heavy dark clouds overhead, we emerged from the rain forest at the mouth of the Heaphy River. There was an official Department of Conservation hut with bunks, wooden stove and sink, but as we had no money for a hut pass, we had no right to make use of the hut. However, we did find a small wooden structure nearby with covered benches. There were no people to be seen except for an occasional silhouette walking the distant sandy banks. The benches were plenty wide for sleeping, so we strung our lines through the beams and boards

for hanging our glotes and drying our wet clothes. Within our mosquito nets we made our beds and neatly arranged our gear. It was finally time for tea.

We then walked to where the Heaphy River met the Tasman Sea. In another of nature's battles of conflicting forces, the fresh water of pure mind was determined to flow out to the freedom of expansion, while the salty waves of defilement did their damndest to force it back into the hills. Dark storm clouds were approaching from the west. Fierce winds cut through our robes and fueled ever-larger waves, but the movement of the pure water refused to be discouraged or to stop.

Following us back to the covered bench, darkness then encompassed us completely.

We were sore and tired but pleased to be where we were. We both had been on tudong in the past with monks or novices, sometimes half our age, who would complain and worry and winge at every encounter with discomfort. For a long time I had appreciated Tan Mettiko's fortitude in maintaining equanimity and acceptance--or at least silence--in the face of hardship, and it seemed to be the right time to express my appreciation.

"We have been on tudong for many weeks now, experiencing a variety of conditions. Thank you for never complaining. I appreciate that."

"Thank you for your example in upholding the forest tudong tradition. I appreciate that."

Mutual appreciation established and confirmed, we meditated in the windy darkness until the time was right for sleep.

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