

# On Parole from the Pious Prison – Stories of my unexpected month as a monk in Thailand

by

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12 April 2010 – 11 May 2010

I decided I really wanted to escape from the Songkran week at Chiang Mai this year. It is the Thai new year, on April 13. It has degenerated into a water fight which lasts for 10 days, and every time you go out there are dozens of people with water guns, buckets of water, and hose pipes waiting in ambush. It gets really old being soaked all the time, and is no fun if you are over 16 years of age or have an emotional maturity greater than a chimpanzee. Motorbike riders wear plastic ponchos, which are very sweaty in the hot sun, as it is the hottest time of the year. Even so, there are many accidents and it is a dangerous time on the roads. One of my friends came off his bicycle turning a corner when water was thrown at him this year, and he was cut quite badly when he fell on the road. On top of all that, the shops and restaurants are closed all week, as sensible Thais escape from the city. So, this year I decided to leave Chiang Mai instead of hiding out at home as I have done in previous years.

## Heading for the Wat

I had a foolproof plan. I was going to spend the week at Wat Taam Tong, 85km south of Chiang Mai. Muay, my girlfriend, wanted to be ordained a nun for 12 days, and I said I would spend a week as a lay person, dressed in white. The monks at the wat just have a traditional ceremony with water being sprinkled (politely) over the hands. The origin of the ceremony is gratitude for the blessing of water at the time of the end of the hot season, with the rains starting in April, and continuing until October or so. We have been going to the wat for a year or two, and generally I just stay overnight. I usually give the abbot a massage, as he does not have anyone to work on him and he is in his 70s. Muay's daughters, Cue and Faa, had been spending the school holidays there for the second year, and would be staying until May.



I said that I would have my head shaved, and be a lay person, dressed in white. The abbot had been suggesting I shaved my head for over a year, and as it was my 55<sup>th</sup> birthday on April 13, it seemed like a good way to mark the event. I had not cut my hair for 16 years, so I knew it would be a big change. I was also looking forward to meditating at the wat, as I had been working every day for 6 months on our

Healing Center. We had a crazy last week, with up to 10 builders doing tiling, making the concrete road to the gate of the land, and finishing the car parking building. I was working on the kitchen cabinets, and had curtains and the granite counter tops delivered. One night I got back home at 2am, because the back porch was being tiled by someone who was also working somewhere else during the day!



It was a great relief to lock the front door of the Healing Center and head out of the city on April 12. Now I could just relax and just do some meditation for a week.



The first day, Muay was ordained as a nun in a very simple and fast ceremony done by the head nun. Then she had her head shaved. I told a monk, called Somkiat, who spoke good English, that the abbot had said I could have my head shaved that day, and he took me to the monk's area in the forest, where the nuns are not allowed. It felt strange having no hair, but there are no mirrors at the wat. So I did not have



much of a shock at the time, except when I spotted a bald shadow following me around for some reason or other (maybe it was a ghost??). Except for the insistent bald ghost lurking in the shadows, so far so good.

I found I was feeling really sick and low energy for the first few days. I was sleeping in the main sala (meditation hall), and on each previous occasion I did not feel good there. The wat is renowned as a place where the three worlds meet – heaven, earth, and (right where I was sleeping) hell. There is a big cave in hill opposite the monk's area, full of golden Buddhas. The name Taam Tong means golden cave. The cave has a more pleasant energy, so it has more angels than demons, unlike the main sala.

As you may be aware, Thai Buddhism really consists of the ancient animistic beliefs still held onto strongly by the Thais, with a fairly thin veneer of Buddhist teaching layered over it. Ghosts and spirits are respected and feared, and some of the monks and nuns are psychics. The nuns seems to act as spirit mediums more than the men.

### [“For the Snark was a Boojum, you see”](#)

Lewis Carroll, *The Hunting of the Snark* (last line)

Note: Lewis Carroll wrote this poem walking on the beach. He wrote it backwards, so this was the first line he composed. The Snark was hunted with railway shares (the dot com boom-bust of his time) as well as a chasuble spoon, a christening spoon of pagan origins, maybe related to Oestrus, the Easter goddess of fertility. When the hunting party set sail, they had 42 trunks to load on their boat, the number which is the answer to life, the universe and everything in *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Universe*. By coincidence, or not, the Thai word for a spirit which speaks through a medium is a Boo, and the Boo has tremendous influence over actions taken by Thais in getting married, getting a job, and other major life decisions.

As I had had a vivid dream about a Buddhist nun in California ten years previously telling me about a past life that night. I had forgotten about her a long time ago. I told Muay about the dream. She went off to the cave to consult the nun who channels the Roshi (a yogi spirit). This Roshi was a Boo, in this case said to be looking after my best interests, and maybe on my side as I had been a yogi for 30 years (I hoped!)

This was when things got bizarre. Muay came back and said I should come and speak to the abbot. He said that I had bad karma from this previous life, and I needed to be ordained a monk to release it. This is in direct conflict with the Buddha's teaching, which is that karma is only released by following the eight-fold path (right thoughts, right action, right speech etc). The Buddha said there were no short cuts to clearing karma, which is my thinking too.

Conveniently ignoring this, the abbot said I could clear this karma only if I acted right now (no “see you later” excuses) and became a monk before leaving the wat. Otherwise, if I left without doing this, I would soon be in hospital for colon surgery, and would spend the rest of my life on my back. He said that a couple had refused to stay at the wat when he told them to, because they wanted to get back to their business. They were in two accidents on the way home, ending up being in hospital a week, and their car was totaled.

A few days after I arrived at the wat, a nun from a local wat was in a hurry to go back to her wat. She was a student of the abbot. The abbot told her to take the time to visit the cave before she left, but she was too concerned about taking care of the visitors to her wat, so she left directly. On the way back, her car was in an accident, and she broke both ankles. The abbot went to see her in hospital that night.

Like many people, I do not respond too well to threats, and I was in half a mind to say no to the invitation. Even though my life has been very monk-like for many years, I am not interested in living in any form of institution. I like to have my own rules, not someone else's. I had a real sense of being manipulated, even if for my own good. I knew my reaction was ego based, but it still felt strong. The abbot had been asking me to spend a month or three at the wat every time I visited, so now it seemed he had some extra leverage over me from the Roshi Boo spirit. Uh oh... I could feel the prison door closing behind me. Now I was screwed. I had effected an escape from Songkran, but in the wrong direction – I had escaped *into* prison. This was clearly a tactical error of some kind!

However, I tried to let go of all the reactive thoughts and feelings, and see the bigger picture. I had said to people there was no way I could be a monk, as they have to eat once a day before midday; this was decided by the Buddha for social convenience, as the monks could beg for food in the morning before the people went to work in the fields. I follow the older yoga practice, based on the flow of energy, which says that after 6pm is the best time to digest food. I never feel hungry in the morning, and I have been doing this practice for over 7 years. So that meant I could not eat for nine days. However, it would be good to do a liquid fast, and nine days should be possible. The other positive was experiencing life as a Thai monk, maybe that was what the whole thing was about.

So I said I would do it, and was told I should just wait a little time. I expected the ceremony to be about as simple as Muay's.

A few days later I was told this week was not convenient. I would have to wait until April 19.

Then I was told that day did not work, it would have to be April 24. In the meantime. Muay was assigned to teaching me the Pali mantras I would need to learn for the ceremony. As I was writing page after page of this in phonetic English, and reciting it, I know I had a big challenge ahead! Muay then told me that it cost 8,000 baht (about \$250, quite a large sum for Thais) for the ceremony. The abbot said I needed to wait for some other men who wanted to be ordained, but if I could recite the Pali perfectly I could do it then (not a chance!) Muay explained that I could pay about 5,000 baht, and the others would be able to afford maybe 500 baht, so I was helping them become monks. So I paid up, but this meant I was nearly out of cash, and there was no ATM at the wat. Maybe they should install one to get bigger donations under duress from the Boo?

## Time for Boot Camp!!!

When the other monks-in-waiting showed up, I was told Pali boot camp had started. We were waylaid by the abbot at weird times. Once at 6pm, for chanting practice over and over until 9pm, when I was able to go and finally make my dinner in the kitchen. Then the next morning he caught us at 6am, after the morning chant (which is from 4am until 6am). Then at 2pm, etc. The monk who was whipping us into linguistic shape was the one who had shaved my hair. I was the only non-Thai, so I had to follow as well as I could. The teaching monk must have asked me three or four times if I could read Thai, hoping for a better response than my consistent denial. No such luck, although they did tell me that a [Hmong](#) monk had been ordained there, and he was illiterate, so I did not feel too bad. The Thais learn by rote in school, and learn some Pali chants then, so they were able to recite much more readily than I could.

There is a section in the service when you are asked by the ordaining monk a series of questions, to which you answer yes (“ah ma paan dtee”) or no (“na ti paan dtee”). There are 5 “no” and then 8 “yes” responses. An ex-monk who was kindly helping me learn the Pali, said the questions were such things as “are you human?” so I thought it was a good idea to get my yes and no responses correct. For some reason it is frowned upon to be ordained as a monk if you are not human.

There were 8 of us in the boot camp, but only 6 of us made it to the ordination. Somkiat told me later that young men like to be ordained so they can tell prospective girlfriends, as it is good luck to be married to an ex-monk. I think a few of the younger ones flunked for this reason (insufficiently pure motivation), unless they were not human after all.

There was a paper to sign before doing the ordination. Muay filled it in for me. The form wanted to know the day of the week I was born on, what work I did, and an identifying mark. Muay wrote down my left knee scar for the identifying mark, but that turned out not to be convenient for the ceremony. The next day I was asked for a mark above the waist. When we could not find one, the ordaining monk grabbed my elbow and spotted a freckle, so that was used instead. I had to sign the form stating that I would obey the abbot and follow his decisions. Noting the use of efficient breach if necessary (you just default on the contract), I signed anyway. But now I was no longer a free person! I was mostly bound by social convention, but I knew there was little room for self-expression at the wat, it was a regimented life.

## Finally - the Ordination!



We had a fancy white jacket to wear at the start of the service. Much time was spent thanking parents and such like, and then we got into the back of a pickup truck. We were taken to a neighboring wat, where the abbot was a Pali expert. Using our birth dates and birth day (mine is Wednesday) and a calculator, the head monk and his assistants came up with our Pali names. Mine is Raati Nang Pah Roh. I know that nang means sit in Thai, so maybe it means “Rat who sits on a pastry roll”, but then again maybe not. Looking up an online Pali dictionary suggested Ratti was dark demon or hidden or the waning of the night. Pah seems to mean up or forward. Roh indicates even more forward. So I could be a “lurking demon who pushes his nose too far forward”, or maybe I should just stick with sanskrit instead from my yoga practice.

I managed to get all my yes and no answers in the right order, but another of us messed up royally. Could it be he was not human after all? His Thai name Mon Kong means auspicious, but that could have been a cover to fool people.

We were dressed as monks in the full view of the people outside the sala, but shielded by 3 or 4 monks each. Luckily Somkiat helped me and explained a little.



After the service was over, we had to walk barefoot past the crowd of the local people with our begging bowls. There were about 100 of the villagers, many of them old and obviously poor. I went first as I was the oldest. This was the most profound part of the experience. It required a suspension of my usual values to receive some money from someone obvious poor. I knew that it was “baa raa mee” or merit to give to a monk. The donations ranged from 1 or 2 baht to 20 baht. The only thing I had to offer in return was a look in each person's eyes

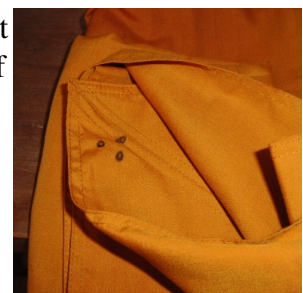
and a sincere “kop khun krap” or thank you. It did feel like there was a real exchange of energy between us. One little girl gave me candy. She must have liked me, as she gave me a second one too. I smiled at her.

Then we had to line up in front of all the donors, and recite the blessing of thanks. I had tried to learn it, but got nowhere, as it was so long, about twenty lines in my notebook. I do remember the last two words were “pah lang”, maybe because my brain was happy the thing was over. So I mumbled my way through it, relying on the other's greater Pali skills, but overall we were rather pathetic!

Finally we were loaded back into the pick up truck, this time in saffron robes instead of the white clothes on the way in. Luckily Muay had managed to find my white clothes and underwear which were passed to the back as we changed. I thought we were done, but no – there was a whole other service back at the wat. I had to hand over my hard earned alms to Muay, apparently that is good luck for her, so I did not make anything on the begging deal at all. Finally we were released. That night I was wondering if I could sort out how to robe myself for the 4am chant, when I was summoned to the chapel at 9pm for 90 minutes of clothing instruction.

### Learning to Dress and Behave Politely as a Monk

During this session, I was taught some important lessons, and we did the only bit of magic ritual we were exposed to as novice monks. This is called registering of the robes. With a pen, we had to draw three circles in a triangle, the order of drawing the circles being clockwise, while a special mantram was recited. This was for the “baat” or begging bowl, the underskirt, the main robe or “jermoo”, and the outer cloak. This process makes the clothes personal to the monk; and



change of robes requires a new registration.

Somkiat translated, and informed me of the major rules, four of which would get you fired instantly. They were:

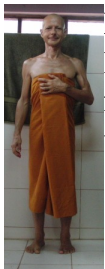
1. Killing someone, although this would be tedious to do, as the only knives were in the kitchen, where monks are not allowed; that would leave bare hands as the only option, unless you had some nail scissors, like on a plane.
2. Having sex with someone, but with the most rigorous segregation of sexes known to mankind, that did not seem like much of a possibility; monks are not allowed to touch a woman or be touched by one, if they do there is a major cleansing process of prayers and ritual, and if a nun or woman offers anything (like a glass of water) the monk has to accept it by using a yellow silk cloth, held in both hands, with the item being placed on the cloth. The monk and woman may not touch the object at the same time, in case some sexual energy sneaks its way through the object (you just never know!). Even talking to a woman is frowned on, and the nuns generally kneel down when a monk passes, and stay a healthy 2 or 3 meters away.
3. Stealing something, although for some whacky reason you get a free pass if you rip off something worth less than one baht. This makes toilet paper a likely target for criminal activity, one sheet at a time.
4. Claiming to have magical powers. This was my favorite, as it was made very clear that it was perfectly fine to actually have the magical powers, like bi-locating or disappearing, you just were not allowed to boast about it. This restriction must have been an old PR exercise to counteract all the stories of monks flying around and irritating the common people

It was explained at least three times that monks must pee crouching down, like a girl. Even though this made sense given the long underskirt, I wonder if this part makes it particularly attractive to cross-dressers.

As for the rest of the operating instructions of being a monk, there are a trifling 227 rules to follow. The Buddha only wanted a few rules, but as time passed by his disciples got more creative in how to be way out of line in their conduct, so more and more rules were added. No TV is more recent. The Buddha definitely did not women at the Sangka (monastery), but his cousin kept on insisting, and one day she showed up with her friends and refused to leave (you know how that goes!) I guess the women arriving really boasted the rule count.

Most monks do not know many of the rules of course. One which is instant *FAIL* for Thais is that you are not allowed to show your teeth if you smile, which the Thais love to do all the time. Naturally, jumping, running, (most likely skipping), talking while you are walking and doing anything without the abbot's permission are on the rule list.

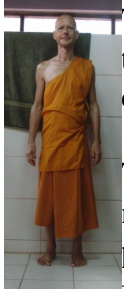
After a review of the rules and regulations we were taught how to dress. This was really tricky. The skirt I could deal with, as I like sarongs, and I wore a longhi all the time I was in Burma.



However, the folding involved holding the cloth out in front, with the right side 40 cm longer than the left. Then making two folds to the left, and then with both ends fan folding a width of twenty cm. Later it became apparent why all the cloth had been folded up in front. The bottom of the skirt had to be half way down the calf - no mini skirts at



the wat thank you girls! Then there was a special belt, like an army webbing belt with long tassels. The tassels had to be knotted tight around at the waist, and the upper cloth folded over. The best boy scout knots are needed to prevent disasters. I was told to do the knot with a double twist in both directions, and sure enough I never had a tragic and embarrassing skirt falling incident. However, it was definitely restricting to wear.



The undershirt is really easy, it has no right arm to it, and you just put it on and tie the ties at the side. Mine even had a couple of pockets, one with a zipper. I do not think this was the design 2500 years ago! Where did the Buddha keep his small change?

The next part was the main robe. Wearing it was a major piece of cloth engineering. It measures 2m high by 3m wide. It has to be fan folded 15cm wide, and the folds have to run in perfect line one behind the other, each 2m long. The carefully folded cloth is held up and folded in two, so that the longer part is in line with the skirt bottom. Four widths of cloth are pulled out straight at shoulder height, and wrapped round the right side of the body from the back to the left shoulder. The left front part of the cloth, still fan folded, its lifted onto the left shoulder. If this sounds complicated, it is because it is!



It took me a week to get good at dressing, and I used the cunning *minimum dressing* strategy to optimize robing activity. I got dressed twice a day. Once to go to the morning chant at 4am, and once in the afternoon to go out and walk and meditate in different places. As soon as I got back to my room, I would take the robes off, and do the folding processes so that I was ready to dress at a moment's (ok, five minute's) notice.

However, I knew that deep down I was a bad monk, because of my toe rings. I had wondered if anyone would notice them during the ordination, and sure enough, I was asked three separate times to remove them. My excuse was that they were therapeutic because they stimulate marma points (acupuncture points used in ayurveda) and help balance the energy system. I said therefore they were the same as glasses, so I should be permitted to wear them. A second, more convincing, argument was that I could not take them off as they were too small to remove after 15 years of wearing them. After being told that others seeing them would not think of them as therapeutic, merely decorative, the issue was dropped. Mostly because I was doing a private retreat and few people saw me anyway. Score one point for Guy the rebel monk!



## My 5 Star Prison Cell

The abbot was aware of all my weird daily practices, like Chi Gong and Yoga. I was able to do this as a lay person where I wanted. I had found a good place was the Japanese Sala, which was a Quan Yin Zen hall with a



marble tiled floor and a very peaceful energy, quite different to the Thai salas at the wat. Of course the Thai builder's had done all in their power to make the workmanship shoddy – cheap and broken aluminum sliding doors, missing marble from the stairs, and wiring running on top of the concrete. Their masterstroke was in damaging one of the roof ventilation fans, so that it made a horrendous noise any time the wind came up. The sala was built in 2004, and was still surrounded by building debris and filled with supplies of paint, so altogether the builders had put their trademark of



sloppy building on an otherwise beautiful Zen structure. I can imagine the Japanese architect pulling his hair out (if he had any). One key thing to remember about Thai building is that maintenance is for the birds. You quickly build it with the cheapest materials you can get away with, and hope the owner does not notice all the problems until after you have been paid, and then it is “adiós amigos” time! So after six years no one had bothered to un-dent or even just oil the pinfully noisy roof ventilation fan of the hall.

However, once I was ordained all that was over. I had to be ultra-polite, which included not doing any practice in public view. So the abbot very kindly let me stay in his previous house, which was one room upstairs for sleeping, and a bathroom downstairs, both about 2.5m by 5m. I liked the teak floor and wooden shutters of the upstairs room, although I spent so much time in there doing yoga, studying my Thai dictionary, and sleeping, it was good to get out. I did



my Chi Gong downstairs, as the ceiling was higher. The bathroom had a luxurious toilet, half of a Western toilet, with no tank for flushing. There was a traditional concrete tank of water in the bathroom, and you use a plastic bowl to scoop water out of it for showering, flushing down the toilet, cleaning the floor and washing clothes. Sporting the usual Thai excellence in workmanship, the tiled floor sloped a little to help drain off the water, *but in the*



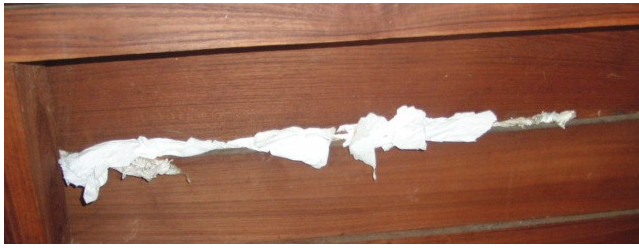
*wrong direction!* Yes, they put the drain in at the highest edge of the floor, so the floor remained flooded when washing it. I came up with the solution of using the toilet brush to sweep the water uphill towards the drain. Another piece of quality workmanship was the tap for filling the water tank, which had come loose. Instead of using PVC pipe glue to fix it (a one minute job), it was tied on with a piece of string.



Because of the dry weather, there was no running water to the house for over a week, so I used to fill



the tank up from the garden hose outside, once I figured out where the holding tanks were.



The upstairs room even had a.c., which I do not like, but at least I could use the fan it had. Previously a wealthy visitor stayed there, but they were in poor health, and did not like the heat, so they donated an a.c. unit. In keeping with the Best



Thai Building Practices codes, as well as in consultation with the renowned THATP (Thai Institute for Industrial Applications of Toilet Paper), the gaps in the teak wood walls were sealed with high quality toilet paper, as you can see in these photos. Most excellent work indeed.

This was the best cell in the wat, and everyone was impressed when they knew where I was staying, but in even the cheapest Guest House this would not have made it to one star. Anyway, that is all part of the monk lifestyle – no soft luxury allowed!



Everyone staying at the wat sleeps on the floor. Normally they have a single blanket, which is fine for Thais. They are like cats, and can sleep for inordinate lengths of time anywhere. Concrete floor with people yelling everywhere? No problem, completely out of it in a few seconds. I was allowed a second blanket, and Muay later got me a thin quilt. That helped me sleep, but it was definitely not comfortable!

### Food? Not so Fast

Which should read “Food??? Not So!!! Fast!” Once I knew I was to stay at the pious prison for a term of nine days, without being able to eat, I thought about how to sustain myself with liquids. I knew that I would not feel hungry because of doing all the Chi Gong and Yoga, as well as the other meditations. However, I was not there to lose weight, so I wanted a good vegan liquid calorie source. Before the ordination I was allowed out of the grounds, so I used to walk to the nearest village, about 40 minutes by foot. Luckily I found that the small shops there had coconut cream, so I bought most of their stock. I had a total of 7 liters, which would cover three quarter-liter packs a day. However, I found I could only tolerate half a liter a day, the time I drank 3 boxes was a mini-disaster for my colon the following morning! I also was able to buy soy milk from the office at the wat. I borrowed some red chili dipping sauce from the kitchen. I also found one shop which had a small bottle of mushroom soy sauce. I invented a soup made of hot water from my kettle, soy sauce and/or chili sauce and coconut cream. It was rather good, I grew to appreciate it. I also had a small stock of nuts (which I classified as herbs, you are allowed to consume herbs or medicines after 12pm), and some psyllium, which is good for filling your stomach on a liquid fast. Muay got me some orange and grape juice. So I was all set.



My other source of calories was the 5pm drink which is made every day. One selection is made with

milk. The monks have a separate watering hole from the Hoi Polloi (that's Greek for common people, dude). The monks have to sit while drinking, while the lay people can do whatever they want. I noticed that the monks only got the milk drink the first day, so I wandered over to the commoner's area, and helped myself to the fruit juice there. I even drank it standing up, as I did not know the rule (#157 of 227) yet. Magically the next day there was a fruit juice option at the monk's hole. I noticed that the monks preferred it anyway, it was normally completely gone by 6pm, while the milk drink was hardly touched. This meant I needed to time my visit to the watering hole early.

After nine days of this diet, I was really ready for some vegetables and fruit. I had asked earlier if smoothies were allowed, but was told no.

### The Sixth Hindrance

The Pali Buddhist canon, or authentic written teachings of the Buddha, mentions five hindrances to a student's spiritual growth. They are laziness, ill-will, lack of confidence, restlessness, and sensual desire. With consummate skill, another, very Thai, hindrance was abundantly present at the wat, mainly to make up for the lack of opportunity for sensual desire I expect.

The sixth hindrance is noise. I was in the middle of a building site (literally), but it also was a part-time circus. The abbot was the ringmaster, and the monks were the captive animals. There two active building projects going on everyday, one very close to my cell. Every morning the builders started making noise at 8am and after finished well past 5pm. Sometimes they stopped for lunch, but not always. They were building a new house for the head nun. With poetic justice, the new house was right next to her current house. On their best days, they had two electric planers and a big circular saw running at the same time, making a cacophony which Stockhausen would have been pleased with in one of his atonal symphonic works. As I mentioned above, the beautiful Japanese building had large circular roof fans, which had not been looked after. When a breeze was blowing the sound ranged from grating to overwhelming. Unfortunately, the Thais love noise, the more the merrier. Clubs often pump the beat at 150dB or more, and everyone who has a big sound system, which must be the majority of the population, turns it up full blast at any opportunity. This is called FUN, except by me and a rare few other lovers of peace and quiet.

The second major source of irritating noise was the abbot's personal PA system. This was regularly turned on during the day, so that he could intermingle barked orders with the telling of jokes to cheer up the troops. The monk's chanting before eating (literally singing for their supper) was broadcast twice a morning, as well as the lengthy homily preceding their lunch. I noticed there was a bigger penalty for the monks eating a second meal in the morning, as they had to listen to more stuff. I think the reason was to make them so bored they no longer felt hungry, to get them down to the regulation one meal a day. Just to complete the use of the PA system, it was also a karaoke system, *de rigueur* in Thailand, and some lucky post-lunchtimes, from 12:30pm until 1:30pm, the abbot would play music from the 50's which sounded like it derived from big band jazz of a previous era mixed with supermarket music. When that was over, the builders were well underway with their banging, accompanied by much shouting and uncouth laughter.

All this noise is even more impressive when you consider that the wat is nearly two hours walk from the nearest main road.

Another more subtle, but just as invasive, source of noise was from the nuns living in the neighboring house. I thought they were a few feet away, but in fact their house was about 15 meters away. When they had free time, they would turn on the instant chatter, and not stop until they had some duty to perform. As it was in Thai I could just ignore the content most of the time. It was the kind of gossip which has zero value, and it served as intellectual sewage, causing permanent brain damage to anyone listening to it, like a TV soap opera.

Another circus aspect of staying near the center of the wat was that all the visitors park there, and then proceed to shout and laugh just like they were about to watch a show at the zoo. Children yelling and being yelled at were constant favorites with the visitors.

The sixth hindrance was therefore carefully cultivated, and spilled over into fantasies of ill-will as well as copious restlessness in yours truly. I did know it was all for my own “good”, to improve my ability to meditate under adverse conditions. Unfortunately I was the only one who even noticed. Drilling and hammering during lengthy sermons was perceived as some form of encouragement by the monk who was preaching, an oblique form of applause.

### Pretend and Extend

I was counting down the days until the end of my nine day confinement – “ok, that is Wednesday done, I do not have another Wednesday to do ever again” et cetera. After I knew my coconut cream limit was 500ml a day there was no further opportunity for improvisation with food, and with the daily noise routine being similar, I knew which irritation to expect at which time of the day.

Finally on the ninth day, Muay and went to arrange for our disrobing ceremony the next morning. I thought I was generous staying after the ninth day was complete. I also felt I had benefited sufficiently from all the meditation, and it was time to resume my life on the outside.

The abbot had other thoughts. The Boo had been bugging him, because he said that I had not changed sufficiently in my heart, so I was sentenced to a further week of solitary confinement. I remonstrated that I had undertaken 9 days and 9 days only, and delivered the same. I was also not willing to continue a diet with no fruit or vegetables. I was contemplating walking out, which would have been very ill-mannered of course, when the abbot told Muay she could make a smoothy for me every night. At this point I decided to go against my ego preference a second time, as I saw the benefit of some of my life as a monk. In particular, the 4am morning chant, the extra time for Yoga and Chi Gong, and the solitary time. I decided that if I spent more time in the afternoon away from my cell, I would have more peace away from the noise. I also was interested in how 18 days without solid food would affect me, that was longer than I had fasted before.

So, in spite of my ego jumping up and down, the additional confinement was undertaken. A new countdown started, for two weeks and two days of being a monk. It was a major improvement to be allowed a smoothy. I decided I needed to build up more strength as I had had little exercise the first none days. I therefore got Muay to ask the abbot if I could take a daily walk for two hours outside the grounds. This request was turned down, with the suggestion that I walk back and forth through the grounds. Definitely no further than the front gates!

Some simple math told me to walk five loops, from the gate at the front of the property to the end of the

pathway at the back. This turned out to be 10km, and take two hours. It did make me feel even more like a caged animal, walking back and forth in the zoo. At least I felt better having more exercise, and it kept me away from the noise during that time. I made sure to end my walk in time for a visit to the monk's watering hole before the juice was all gone.

### Escape from Colditz

As the last day approached, I had serious doubts that the seven day extension to my stay would be honored. I had had enough of the “bait and switch” routine and my dieting experiment was very much complete. I decided it was time to force the issue by breaking out of the pious prison, and so my unoccupied mind turned to plans of escape.

There was a BBC series called [Colditz](#) made in 1972 – 1974. I remember watching it at the time. It was about British officers being held in Colditz castle in Germany during World War Two. It was generally quite wacky, with the escape officer making up cunning plans to escape. Most of them involved using a stolen nail file to dig a three hundred meter tunnel over a period of a year. The dirt would be carried out in the prisoner's pockets to the toilet. Then either a German guard would spot a trail of dirt from a leaking pocket the day before the escape was planned, or the tunnel would end up coming out in the German officer's mess instead of outside the castle walls.

My plan was to wait until all the monks were lined up being bored by the daily sermon before lunch. I would wear my white clothes, and walk nonchalantly out of the gate, changing into my shorts and top when I was further down the road, so that I would not look like an escaped inmate from the wat. Then I would catch the bus back to freedom!

Unlike the British officers, I made it all the way back home, and felt pleased with my escape. After all, I had done the 2 weeks and 2 days, but I had no interest in being pressured into more time in confinement. I remembered Somkiat telling me that the Boo had extended his sentence from one month to four months. Not for me thank you!

I called Muay later that afternoon to let her know, so that she did not make a smoothy for me. I told her I had no confidence that the abbot would stand by his promise of release the following morning.

A few hours later. Muay turned up at home in the wat's car with a white-clad driver. She said that I had to return to be properly processed in disrobing, using the right ceremony, or it would be a *bad thing*. After we spoke to another of the nuns to ensure that I would not be tricked, and that the number two monk would be able to perform the ceremony, I was driven back.

It was just like a Colditz episode where the escapee makes it all the way to the Swiss border, successfully has his forged documents inspected, and then starts walking to the Swiss customs post. Just then, one of the German guards spots his mismatching shoes tied up with old string, and shouts out “HALT!”

### Release on Parole

It did feel rather surreal to be back in the cell for a final night, but I made myself believe my escape was just a figment of my imagination.

I had had some durian in my smoothy at home, so I had vivid dreams that final night. When the 4am bell went, I got dressed as usual, and made it to the sala in time for the chanting.

Back in my cell, I did my Chi Gong and was ready to go to the abbot at 9am. It felt just like going to the headmaster's office at boarding school. I was not sure quite what to expect. I had been studiously polite (except my escape attempt the previous day!) and had avoided talking to the headmaster/abbot for the previous two weeks, keeping my head down and out of trouble.

As it turned out, he was in a chirpy mood; I think he knew full well that I would just walk out if he tried and more “pretend and extend” tricks on me. The disrobing ceremony was a lot simpler than the ordination ceremony, the opposite of marriage and divorce!

Ten minutes later I was out, a free man again. Being a fasting monk was an experience, but one I am glad is now safely in the past tense.