

"Victory breeds hatred, for
the conquered is unhappy."

Buddhist Maxim

"When buffalos fight,
it's the grass that suffers."

Lao Proverb

four a.m. - dress for prayer
light the candles

kneel and bow
bless your bowl
accepting barefoot humble
alms from all

MY STAY IN A LAO WAT

Long before morning spreads her long thin fingers over the eastern horizon, saffron robes are donned, candles lit and Buddhist monks kneel together to chant a prayer. Baths and morning cleaning follow till the monstrous drum is beat. With the dull thuds of the drum still lingering on the morning, the robes are twisted on afresh and their occupants shuffle out to the temple gates where novices wait to offer the black alms bowls. At six-thirty the procession begins - steady, silent, along appointed rounds - with the orange robes parted and the bowl uncapped to receive rice and bananas offered by the old and the faithful preparing for a better future existence.

Although not so familiar as the story of Jesus, most of you are probably acquainted with the basic story of the life of Buddha. Like Jesus, Gotama was immaculately conceived and his birth about 563 BC in India was attended by signs indicating that he was no ordinary man. As a young man he was wealthy, strong and handsome and excelled at sports including archery which was highly developed in India at that time. It had been predicted that he would be either a great spiritual leader or a mighty ruler of nations. Favoring the latter course, his father raised him in luxury, attending his every care and sheltering him from the miseries of real existence. One day venturing forth from the castle he saw four devas disguised as a sick person, an old man, a dead body and an ascetic carrying a begging bowl - thus showing the instability of life and the direction of escape from causation and continual becoming.

Although married and the father of a newborn son, Gotama reflected on these things and denounced the market place to go and

live in the forest and search for his salvation. He studied under Hindu aescetics and practiced the greatest extremes of self denial himself until on a ration of one grain of rice a day, he swooned and it was revealed to him in a dream that this was not the way. He then turned to the middle path between the extremes of asceticism and indulgence and at the age of 35 took his seat beneath the great Nigrodha tree facing East where he remained until he had attained the supreme enlightenment. At first he feared that no one would understand what he had learned, but being of a compassionate nature, he became an itinerant teacher preaching his great truth to the world of men - many of whom became his followers until today they number nearly 1/5 of the population of the world.

Three major branches of Buddhism developed. They are the Hinayana, Mahayana and mystical as perpetuated in the worship of the Dalai Lama of Tibet. The Hinayana branch is best retained in Ceylon and spread into SE Asia including Burma, Thailand, Cambodia and Laos. It stresses individual salvation and is criticized by some parts of the Mahayana branch, which traveled north into China and Japan and down into Viet Nam, as being beyond the capacities of the ordinary man. Oddly enough, as practiced in Laos today, the rules of the order of brethren (monks) are much less stringent in the Hinayana version.

Laos and the Lao people are a people that have fallen from former heights, as they see it, mostly because of their temperament which encourages coexistence and forgiveness and doesn't look towards vast empires and protracted struggles. The Lao people have been divided and reduced to a mere two milliaon in present day Laos. According to their historians they once occupied the greater part of Asia and the Southern Chinese, Thai, Cambodians and some people in parts of Viet Nam, Tibet, Burma and even India and Pakistan all show common origins. The Lao were gradually pushed south out of China

and in the early part of the 14th century Laos consisted largely of small feudal states each one roughly the size of a county in the State of Washington headed by a major village or "city" Faa Ngum, a prince expelled from one of these city states went south to study in Cambodia which was more developed than it's neighbors at that time having received a wealth of knowledge from exchanges with India. Prince Faa Ngum, upon completion of his studies, gathered an army and moved north to conquer and unite the city states of Laos. This done, he realized the need for a stabilizing force in his new nation and established Buddhism as the state religion which it still is today although by its very nature it permits the worship of other religions side by side or simultaneously with it and retains a strong undercurrent of the even more ancient animism and spirit worship which preceded it.

Last November I participated in a slice of this history by wearing the saffron robes and carrying a black alms bowl. Having done so, I wish to share some of my experiences. Naturally this writing can have no more worth than it merits through the senses and assessments of its author. It is in some ways the writing of a two year old who has no more facts than an alert two year old can be expected to have. It is not about Buddhism or Buddhist philosophy as such, but it is my impressions of the particular brand of Buddhism adhered to by the Lao people and especially the people of Khong Sedone as it is practiced, believed and effects their lives.

The orange robes are strange to most westerners and many misconceptions about the nature of their wearers have arisen. If I may I would like to refute a few of the more pronounced of these.

I have hear Buddhism oriticized as being completely negativistic and removed from the life of the people - as being an abstract conception of the world we live in with no applicability to our

daily lives. This is hardly the case. Buddhism enters every major facet of the lives of the people. As a philosophical system, it prescribes a moral code of conduct - the five major tenets of which are prohibition of killing, stealing, lying, adultery and taking intoxicants. As a religion it enters into every major facet of personal life from birth through baptism, marriage, daily worship, sickness, house building, the cycle of the rice seasons and finally death. It is the religion of the people - practiced in varying degrees of completeness by the faithful followers of Buddha.

Another misconception is that monks are lazy fellows leeching off society - that they are well kept beggars. This is so far from the case as to seem preposterous to anyone who knows anything at all about the society. Far from begging, a monk performs a sacred duty in humbly making his rounds and accepting offerings from the even more humble Buddhist faithful. It's like Sunday collection every morning of the year. As to being lazy, in addition to following a regular course of secular and religious studies and working on the ever slowly growing Wat buildings, the monks are called to participate in all the activities of daily living mentioned above and in all ceremonies and festivals held throughout the year.

The accusation that they are a league of homosexuals is a statement made in simple ignorance. It may be true that while living solely amongst males in relatively confined conditions that instances of homosexuality crop up, but my experience would indicate this to be very rare. The generally more permissive attitudes toward sex which prevail here in the East probably tend to make homosexuality less common than in our own culture. The Lao are so realistic about the nature and needs of man that a novice who can't be expected to have fully developed the necessary self control to fully and comfortably cope with the task that has been given him will be given a "vacation" from the Wat. Many novices leave the

Wat for a week or two each year and visit their families and friends wearing the clothes of the layman.

Buddhism, like any religion worth the name, deals with the significant events of life. It gives us comfort in times of trial and sustains and directs our actions and prayers in times of joy. Religion is invoked to handle those situations that seem somehow above and beyond the limited capacities of man. Following the birth of a child, the Lao mother sleeps over or near a bed of coals for fifteen days, drinking hot liquids and taking her rice plain without spices. During this time, the friends and neighbors come and drink liquor, play cards, sing songs, sit around and talk or otherwise rejoice in the blessed event. It's every night for fifteen nights and at the end of that time a small boon is held where the parents and child are blessed.

There is even a kind of baptism ceremony and when my little sister, Thutsani, had her first child, it was seen as significant that this child who was born on "van sihn", the Buddhist sabbath, was very fussy on succeeding "vansihns" until after he had his baptismal ceremony.

Buddhish is the preserver of knowledge and the arts. In traditional Laos it was at the Wat from the monk as teacher that village children received whatever formal education they were able to acquire. The novices of today come to the Wat and are entrusted to a "teacher" whom they serve from the age of ten for so long as they may choose. Some of the best are bright and eager and can advance to the highest ranks of the order. My best English student, a lowly village lad, was chosen to participate in a course of studies in Thailand which will ultimately culminate in a University degree.

While the actual wedding ceremony is as full of fun, vulgarity and fertility symbols as it is religious participation, the couple is blessed by the monks the evening before and are bathed in sanctified water on the morning of the ceremony. In addition the

bridegroom often enters the Wat for a period of time preceding his wedding date to cleanse himself, remove the traces of past sins and prepare himself for his future life.

The couple or family moving into a new house call upon the monks to bless and sanctify their dwelling and invite all their friends and neighbors to a lavish celebration which may well cost as much as the house itself. Illness, fears, luck and spirits inextricably linked with the animistic past of an ancient people have all become part of the proper role of the monks. Most of the practitioners of traditional Lao "medicine" and phi-propitiation are either monks or former monks. The old monk may keep a whole collection of herbs, roots, horns, bones and charms to fight illness or he may be called on to visit a house where a man's peace of mind has been disturbed by a hovering shadow in the evening that is considered to be a phi or spirit.

And death which is a transition from this to very likely a much better and more favorable existence is a time of rejoicing. Although always hard to accept by those closest loved ones who are left behind, death is a time of rejoicing and is celebrated by the biggest festival that can be afforded. Accordingly, the death and cremation of a monk is even that much bigger and all the monks are called on to participate on these occasions.

So it is with Buddhism as with Christianity, Islam, sacrificial spirit worship or any other religion. In its practical aspects the religion simply upholds and supports all the major significant events in the life of a man and cumulatively mankind. How many wars have been fought in the name of the "good" as represented by a supreme being in direct comparison to sacrifices, offerings, prayers directed to combat the "evil" disease of a sick man?

Taken in this context the role of the minister, priest or monk in terms of society also comes out about the same. He serves simply as the agent of the religion, faith or belief - keeping its forms alive, maintaining both by example and by instruction the elements of tradition and morality encompassed by this aspect of the cultural heritage. He maintains the "Christian" presence amongst the flock - again both by word and deed.

Likewise the embodiment of the religion in the people and its various manifestations shows a peculiar aura of universality. There is the penchant for buildings. The construction of the community house of worship and the evidence of smaller altars and religious symbols in the home and the wealth of contribution to language, legendry and literature.

Quite naturally education is inextricably tied to that which is considered most precious. In times of prosperity the Wat prospers and offers many educational opportunities and in time of decadence and superstition it is the monastery and the order which keeps the spark of knowledge and learning alive. As it was in the decline of the Roman empire so was it with the defeat and decline of Laos in 1827.

The role of the priest as comforter has slightly different adaptive forms in the Lao society from those in America, but the function is still recognizable. America is full of committees and organization and AID societies and even a salvation army. In Laos the functions are served with much less conscious application of the machinery. The monk goes to visit and comfort the layman who has fallen ill. No separate orphanage is needed since the orphan finds his way to the Wat and whether donning the novice's robes in the service of an older monk or not will be given food and shelter from the more than ample contributions provided for the monk's daily living. The lonely can find a listening comforting ear at the temple which has "time" for their troubles. The bereaved are comforted and the rejoicing and work attending funeral preparations are shared by

the community oftentimes taking place in the spacious Wat buildings and grounds. Even the crippled or insane can find a place not merely of acceptance, but even of respect within the cultural religious structure.

Whether as a result of the religious or a cultural predecessor to it, there is a trait of the Lao people which I like to term a high degree of recognition of variable humanality. Persons are seen as individuals and are judged accordingly rather than against some absolute norm. As stated in religious terms each individual is at a particular stage of the wheel of life which is seen to include many lives. There is perhaps some room for criticism of this mode of perception since one views oneself and ones children in the same fashion as outsiders which leads to a great deal of awareness, but not to much effort towards self change or conscious training and molding of children. Children are viewed as having been born with a distinct character and parents anxiously watch for signs which will reveal the nature of that character. The individual viewing himself will admit to an evil heart and argumentative ways, but will seemingly make no effort to change. Upon reflection, however, I'm forced to admit that except for the candid and open appraisals things aren't too different with Americans. I guess we've all met the loud mouth who admits to being a loud mouth, but insists are being as helpless as a flag in the breeze and never changes.

Buddhism is a part of Laos. It is the state religion, but as yet has shown no real persecution of other religions. One of its major strengths is its ability to live alongside differing doctrines without feeling threatened. It has a very definite place in politics since the Lao are the ruling race in a multi-racial setting and to be Lao is to be Buddhist. The constitution states that the King must be a devout practicing Buddhist. In spite of its dominant

place though, Buddhism doesn't fail to receive its share of cultural self-criticism which is perhaps a healthy sign. As in Japan amongst the younger generation there are those who feel that Buddhism is hampering the country's development and holding up progress. After all, how can a nation develop economically in the face of traditional non-desiring? Is not the aspect of non-desiring diametrically opposed to the present life "goods" - not just automobiles and toys, but even better diet, health and education - as demonstrated in the west? More important and more widespread than these criticisms however is the thought that rather than Buddhism being at fault, it is the failure of the people to maintain the old order, the middle way and the word of the law that is perniciously destroying the people and the nation. They regretfully talk about having seen novices riding bicycles or a Wat somewhere in the south where they don't shave their eyebrows. They speak of the laxity of the brethren with regard to the rules and the deficiencies of their knowledge - the degenerate state of the order in general. If Laos has become a real viable entity in the world family of nations, it will be this second category of criticism and the measures invoked to meet the pending crisis that will prove the more far reaching. Already efforts are being taken to upgrade educational standards and I think I detect some stirrings of renewed pride in the Wat.

The self view of the monks themselves is interesting at this point. Most important is that the Lao monk is a Lao first and a Buddhist second. The religion was introduced as a stabilizing and educating force in a young, newly conquered, newly united nation composed of the people of the Lao race and the land they occupied. The Lao accepted and adopted the religion in such a way that it becomes not just a matter of belief and personal choice, but rather a cultural element helping to maintain and preserve the race,

the traditions and the standards and forms of behavior and moral conduct. The monk makes personal sacrifices, shoulders great responsibility, is accorded high esteem and fulfills his role as preserver of the race.

Far from the criticisms of inhibiting progress, the monks that I know consider themselves to be active elements in a pattern of community development. The Wats contain many skilled craftsmen. The monks are educators practicing improved methods of cleanliness and sanitation and at the same time preserving some of the ancient crafts no longer practiced in everyday village life. Many are seriously dedicated, take a great deal of pride in how well they execute their role and are very perfectionistic in their own studies, demands on students and memorization of Pali. At the same time, they consider themselves at one with the present political governmental structure and are apolitical in outlook. They look on the political involvement and immolations of monks in South Viet Nam with incredulous non-understanding.

My own criticisms of the order are that there is too little thought and analysis. That too much is taken for granted and not critically examined. That they use a dead language - Pali - with a very deficient knowledge of it which results in endless memorizing and repetition without accurate knowledge or understanding. There is a distinct deficiency in breath of education provided for the monks. A few, reaching higher levels in the order, have studied some amazing things including algebra, Greek and Latin, but even here there is little synthesis or analysis of what is studied and how it fits into the life of the world. Finally comes a criticism that may be based primarily in my own cultural background and thereby invalidated to some extent as applied to the Lao. That is that the monks don't always act as the impartial receivers of alms. They do sometimes ask for things and in view of the respect accorded them by the society

asking is tantamount to demanding and receiving. This seems to be taking too much for granted and not exhibiting the proper humility and observance of the Buddhist tenets whereby a monk is beyond the cares of everyday life and lives like the "birds of the field and the lilies of the valley" - neither asking nor wanting for anything.

But enough of the analysis and oriticism. Let me try to refrain from such lengthy digressions in the future and stick to a straight narrative account of the experiences which prompted the analysis in order that each of you can share in those experiences and draw your own conclusions.

While teaching English at the Wat, I had often mentioned that I thought I'd like to be a monk for a while, but never seemed to find the opportunity. As time went on my students became convinced that I'd never do it. When finally I did announce that I was ready to become a monk there was a good deal of incredulity. Even Maha Soan, my adopted Lao father, had to ask me several times to be sure that I wasn't just talking through my hat. But once convinced the preparations began in earnest. I made arrangements with IVS to take my vacation and Maha checked out an auspicious day for the occasion. My plan was to spend the first week of my three week vacation in preparation - further language study, memorizing Pali and getting acquainted with the ritual process. As it turned out, I found that I didn't really manage to get started on my vacation that first week and spent at least half my time solving crises that came up in the old work situation.

However I did manage to get over to the Wat with my tape recorder a couple of times to record some Pali. The Chaokhanna Khoueng, provincial Buddhist governor, was the first to record for me. He sat cross legged in front of the microphone, cleared

his throat and started to chant. I had asked for the most important phrases and sayings that I would need to know and particularly those which would be useful to me in lay settings when participating in future Lao ceremonies. I almost got scared out right from the start as I watch the tape reels spinning around and listened with a new particularized interest to that seemingly endless chant that remained not only totally and utterly incomprehensible, but without even word or phrasal distinctions and seemed positively beyond imitation in its peculiar guttural and nasal qualities.

It wasn't long before Atchan Mai showed up on the porch where we were recording. Upon hearing that I was going to "buat" (become a monk), a place had been prepared for me and it was decided that Atchan Mai would be my teacher and guide in the ways of Buddha. He was chosen because he knew more English than any of the other monks and because of his comparatively high stature as one of the "prayers" in the Wat. The governor finished his chanting and apologized for his cold. He hadn't been able to find his book and indicated that he might have made some mistakes. Atchan Mai assured him that he had done very well and all correctly. After some more conversation Atchan Mai ushered me and the tape recorder away from the Governor's room and over to where I would be staying in his room at the Pali school. He immediately explained that the Governor's recording was very badly mistaken and that I shouldn't listen to it - that he had accusative and dative case endings mixed up and other mistakes. Quite frankly, I hadn't noticed and it had all sounded pretty impressive to me in spite of the older monk's cold, but I didn't argue and started the wheels spinning again so Atchan Mai could record. When he had finished

he wanted to hear it and then he wanted to listen again. He was well pleased with the effect and assured me that it was not only correct, but very clear, precise and easy to follow and that if I just listened to it enough times I would soon have it mastered.

I did take it home and I did listen to it - for hours, but I still couldn't make heads or tails of it. A nice, pleasant, rich, enchanting sound, but I couldn't distinguish and repeat two syllables of it. I had sort of known all this at the time of recording and had asked for a book, but Atchan Mai had been so insistent that these beautiful words would begin to get hold of me that I had decided to give it a try. Ah - the frustration of it. Finally Sangwon took pity on me and wrote it out long hand in Lao so I could start memorizing. Guess I'll never be able to pick up music by ear.

While I was holed up in my room cursing my folly and sweating over those strange Pali syllables in anticipation and horror of the rapidly approaching ordination ceremony, my family was taking care of the other preparations. Since donning the saffron robes is primarily a matter of merit making and cleansing oneself of old sins in order to improve both this life and future lives, it wouldn't be fitting to simply don the robes and enter the Wat. Rather one must announce this action to the world and celebrate, not just to announce the event, but to give others an opportunity to share in the merit making.

There are certain accoutrements which are considered to the life of a monk. Included among these are the robes, sandals and alms bowl, an umbrella, shoulder pouch and cloth fan, and walking cane, bed, blanket, pillow and sitting mat. All these items whenever presented to the Wat are very decoratively and attractively

arranged on the bed and the whole bed is presented. It was formerly the case that during an ordination the applicant for monkhood sat on the bed and was carried by his friends for presentation to the high priest. In the present vehicular age this is not usually adhered to. In my own case, a number of girls came over and spent the entire day decorating my bed with flowers and paper ornaments as well as helping to prepare the evening boon meal. Maha enlisted all the USAID and IVS staff in making and delivering invitations and in running hither and yon to borrow more bowls, mats, silverware and the like. I hadn't advertised the event very widely beforehand even amongst my friends, but they all rushed around at the last minute to buy a pig for the meal or to help in one way or another.

Some of the monks had gone to Pakse with me earlier to assist with purchasing my robes and supplies. The Chao Muong had written and signed the letter stating that I was a good upright moral citizen, not in abeyance of the law and not making this move against the wishes of family or friends. The girls had done the decorating and fixed the meal. Everything was ready except for my Pali and there wasn't much that anyone else could do for me on that score.

On the evening before my ordination, five monks were invited to Maha's house where all the preparations were taking place. They admired the bed briefly, were saluted by the decorators on the porch and by the old women who had come to hear the preaching. They filed on inside the house where one corner of the room had been prepared for them. There were Lao mattresses covered with clean sheets arranged in an "L" shape in the corner. In front of each of the five places intended for the monks was a dish with cigarettes

and matches, an attractive little parcel of rolled leaves containing flowers, candles and a 200 kip (40¢) offering, and a glass and small tea pot full of iced tea.

The monks all took their places and the people that had come to hear the preaching - mostly older women - came, bowed three times and sat with hands clasped in prayer attitude as the monks began their chant. After the standard chants and readings, I was asked to a position directly in front of the monks in order to receive their blessing. A string was run in a circle through the hands of each monk, around me and through the hands of the innermost ring of listeners. More chanting was accompanied by the hissing of dripping bees wax from a burning taper being periodically dunked in an alms bowl of water. (The next morning I bathed with this water before going to the Wat). Finally the old monk blessed me and sprinkled me with water, the people did their obeisances and the ceremony was over. The people and monks chatted easily while listening to the blare of the portable loud speaker system amplifying Lao music from my tape recorder. After a sufficient interval, the monks took the offerings of money and cigarettes and were driven back to the Wat.

The people who remained finished decorating the bed and helped prepare the meal. More people started arriving about seven. Many brought small offerings of money which they placed in the monk's satchel on the bed before joining in the card games, singing and merry making that preceded the meal. I broke away from my Pali paper to eat about nine o'clock and finally excused myself about eleven when the merry making was getting into full swing to go home to bed.

I woke up to start shaving in the early yawning dawning. I had forgotten to borrow a set of hair clippers as I had intended and it took me a full hour and a half to scalp myself with a safety razor. Nhu finally came and gave me the finishing touches before I went back to Maha's house where I bathed, dressed in a traditional Lao sarong and ate breakfast,

After a liesurely breakfast my friends and some older friends of the family all assembled for my presentation to the Wat. The bed was put in the back of the truck, pictures were taken, I was seated in front, the loud speakers were mounted on the hood, everybody piled into the other vehicles and the whole procession - with loud speakers blaring - crawled down the mainstreet of town to the Wat.

The monks had been waiting expectantly and were quickly assembled for the presentation. I was driven three times around the building housing the main Buddha image with the entire procession following, carrying the bed and shouting "saathu" at intervals while the monks chanted inside. The procession came to a halt on the steps outside the building and made the ritual presentation using the ancient Pali chants. The people asked that one of their number be admitted to the order and the head priest after inquiring as to his character and preparedness agreed to accept and instruct him.

I entered the chamber accompanied by two monks who would be responsible for my actions and instruction while I was a monk. I carried my robes and knelt before the high priest. He blessed the robes and I was taken into a corner to change clothes. Numerous people had given me advice on different points of the proceedings earlier in the week and a couple of the novices had

told me to wear underwear so as to avoid embarrassment while changing clothes during the ceremony. I did, but it caused rather than preventing embarrassment since I didn't realize that I was supposed to take them off. The next part of the ritual consisted of going from a kneeling to a standing position, meanwhile drawing the hands up over the body symbolizing that all worldly vestments had been shed and left behind. Fortunately someone asked if I had worn underwear and I hurried back to the corner and left my shorts with the other clothes before proceeding.

The whole ordination ceremony was quite a trial for me. The fact that Atchan Mai insisted on speaking English didn't help matters any. Several times I had to turn to someone else and ask for the instructions in Lao because I couldn't understand what Atchan Mai had said. They were just trying to be helpful of course, but at this point I find it much easier to understand correct Lao than incorrect English spoken by a Lao.

As you may well expect the whole ordination ceremony was fairly elaborate. It took about an hour and a half. A substantial part of it was conducted with me sitting in an oriental flat footed squat with my elbows resting on my knees and my hands together in front of my face. Or at least that was the position that I was supposed to assume. I found it quite impossible and they let me get by with a rough approximation that was sheer shin-splitting torture. I was concentrating so hard on the pain and attempting to keep my off balance hulk upright that I couldn't remember more than a couple of syllables of Pali at a time to be able to repeat them after Atchan Mai. Fortunately they didn't embarrass me by asking me to recite any of the items that I had been memorizing since I'd forgotten them completely by the time I got to the Wat. Instead I repeated everything after Atchan Mai. He was very particular and anything I didn't get just exactly right

had to be repeated again. My experience with learning Lao and studying before hand helped greatly here. They assured me afterwards that I had gotten through the ceremony with more ease than some of the Lao did.

After the presentation of my "cleansed" self to the great Monk - a self relieved of all worldly cares and possessions - I was blessed and in turn each of my "things" were presented for blessing. This consisted of a formula chant invariably repeated three times that would translate something like this: "This is my alms bowl (saffron robe, cloth fan, etc.) It is mine." Then I swore to the commandments - individually to the first ten (prohibition of killing, adultery, stealing, lying, taking intoxicants, adorning the body, eating after noon, receiving money for services, singing and running around, and trying to subsume ones proper station) and collectively to the remaining two hundred or so, The other monks assembled had chants and ritual parts to perform during each phase of the ceremony. After swearing to uphold the commandments, I went out and gave my blessing to the people who had brought me, went back inside, took my place amongst the other monks and did my best to remember some of the noises in the closing chant.

I was now monk with the pleasant sounding title of "maun" indicating that I was new to the order. The ceremony and chants completed, we came out of the building and into the sunlight flooding the Wat grounds. Family, friends and well wishers all showed their respects to this pale awkward wearer of the robes, called for poses for group pictures and gradually drifted off to perform their mid-morning and noon chores. I was at one and the same time both relieved at having finished the ordination ceremony and in a state of mild shock. I grasped the rolled rib of the robe tightly with my left hand trying to keep it tight over my shoulder and down behind my elbow, but to little avail. I found myself constantly employed in minor adjustments

that seemed to have little permanent effect. (Training in the ephemeral nature of things perhaps.) The slipping robe did little for my sense of security.

After a short time, my Atchan took me in tow and we retired across the grounds, past the dormitories, over the little foot bridge and up to our room in the Pali school. The bed and accoutrements had preceded us and were neatly arranged in one corner of the large upstairs room. My Atchan's bed was in the far corner and a table-altar with a glass cased gilt Buddha almost overpowered by a long accumulating garden of artificial flowers and other fancy decorations stood in between. Other furnishings included two desks with straight back chairs and their cumulative clutter of neatly stacked books and papers, a glass doored cabinet, a couple of small spradle-leg tables to one side of the door and a pile of boxes indicating previous contents ranging from soap powder to artillery shells on the other.

My bed looked a little out of place still sporting, its now slightly ruffled and sagging finery. I sat on it and received an ominous squeak of protest from one leg. A quick investigation convinced me that my bed was more beautiful than practical and I announced my intention to remain on the floor. Atchan Mai who had been most concerned about my comfort was slightly mortified at this. He wanted to know if we couldn't fix the bed post, but I thought it just too cheaply made and ~~didn't~~ didn't want to risk breaking it down completely. After I insisted that I slept very comfortably on the floor and that the mosquitoes weren't bad that time of year, he acquiesced and helped me lay out a mat and floor cushion beside my bed.

Lunch was served shortly. A novice and one of the small boys who regularly hang around the Wat set up with sitting pads on either side of the round tray-like Lao table and plates, silverware, rice basket, napkins, water glasses and spittons were all conveniently and attractively arranged. We, Atchan Mai and myself, sat facing each other in the most polite of the several seating positions with the legs back and off to one side. The novice ritually offered us the food and drink and was dismissed. Grace was said in Pali. I stumped through the awkward phrases after my master and then we ate. The food was very good and there was plenty of it as was the case at every meal I attended while in the Wat. I wasn't very hungry though and after picking over it for a while sat and waited for Atchan to finish.

He did so, presently, commenting that he nearly always had a good appetite. Upon finishing the novice was called to clear away the dishes and I repaired to my mat. Atchan Mai came over, sat down and talked. He was obviously very pleased and excited by the whole development. He was being given a chance to instruct a non-Lao in his Lao religion and in turn would have an opportunity to work on his English. There was so much to learn and teach and do and so little time. Where does one start? But recognizing that I was tired, he said it was alright to sleep after lunch and left me to my weary self. He himself rested for a time and then went out very considerately closing the door behind him.

I lay in the strangeness of it all - damp and sweaty in my new orange robes, but wastoo exhausted to give much shape to my thoughts and slept until evening. When finally I stirred from my slumbers and rubbed my bald head, the novice popped in and invited me to take a bath. He handed me my soap and towel and a dipper and showed me to the large water jar downstairs. After a bath in typical Lao style

with the cold water sloshed over my head, I felt better and sat talking upstairs as the sun set red beyond the mountain.

A general sourry took place about six o'clock. Candles were lit and mats spread out in front of the small altar. The other monks and novices living at the Pali school donned their robes and helped me into mine. It was three days before I learned to dress by myself and even after two weeks I still had my problems with it. Of the three styles of dress, one for prayers, one for within the Wat and one for venturing forth beyond the Wat grounds, I found dressing for prayers the most difficult even though this style incorporates the use of a chest level tie-cloth holding everything together. It worked fine when somebody else did it for me, but it always turned out pretty ragged looking when I tried it on my own.

With all the preparations made, the old head monk came over and led the prayers. The evening prayer time was the most important. It, like all the group prayers, consists of a series of chants in the ancient Pali tongue and all the monks in the Wat or at least everyone from a particular dormitory building gather together for from one to three hours of ritualized chanting, sitting, bowing, daubing of burning wax tapers into ceremonial water and symbolically pouring the water into plates or bowls from whence it is eventually used to water the potted plants.

Being new, my participation was limited mostly to assuming the proper attitudes, listening or occasionally mumbling and pouring water. They were considerate of the fact that I wasn't used to these processes and kept the prayers relatively short in order to spare me. Even so, although I had been sitting cross legged for several years and had employed most of the other positions many times during Lao festivals in the preceding two years, by the third day

I was so stiff and sore that I could hardly believe it. Much much worse than any Marine Corps PT session I ever went through. At one point while sitting back on my heels and gritting my teeth with pain I found myself thinking: "What in the hell am I doing here? I was supposed to have been raised a Christian or some such thing."

As with all things physical, the pains eventually passed away or at least reached a bearable stage. On this first evening when the main prayers were finished the other monks and novices returned to their rooms to study while the old high priest led me in dedicating, blessing and marking my robes and other goods. A common lead pencil was used to mark three dots reminiscent of the triple gem on each item of clothing at traditionally designated spots. As this was done I was led through three repetitions of each of the respective chants for that item. (i.e. This is my alms bowl. It is mine.) This same procedure was carried out on each of three successive nights as indeed is done for any item brought in and dedicated to the Wat.

Following these proceedings the old monk left and Atchan Mai began his duties as my instructor. He dug out books for me to study and assigned passages of Pali (written in Lao script) to be memorized. He repeated some of the passages with me myriad times and was pleased with my progress. He talked about the Life of the Buddha, and about Buddhist commandments and about Buddhism and the Lao until the wee hours of the morning when he led me in individual prayers before retiring.

Morning was already red before I awoke. Atchan Mai took me through morning prayers which are conducted by the small groups in each of the rooms where they live and then indicating a sense of

urgency since we had slept in (Four a.m. is normal rising time.) instructed me to perform my toilet duties, take a bath and get dressed.

Having done so, I was told to report to the main gate of the Wat along with all the other full monks. Once assembled, the novices handed us our alms bowls which we took, slipping the straps up over our right shoulders for ease in carrying and allowing the robes to fall back again covering the bowls like so many pregnant bellies. In my case it proved not so simple as it looked. Always frantically clutching at the rolled rib with my left hand to keep my robe tight, I never seemed to have hands enough to do anything else and even so my robe always felt as though it were slipping away from me and needed adjustment even when it didn't.

After some help with the bowl and robe, I took my position in line and we marched barefoot and single file down by the river, around the Chao Khoueng's house and back up through the center of town with the last of the line splitting off to cover the lower street by the paddy fields. A second group of monks left from the Wat going west towards the army camp so that the whole town was covered. We walked slowly and perhaps even sedately, stopping in front of each individual or occasionally waiting for someone who was a little late, opening our robes to expose the bowls which were uncapped to receive a small wad of sticky rice or maybe a banana in each bowl, covering the bowls again and passing on to the next waiting alms giver.

This was the round of the monks as taught by Buddha following a long social-religious tradition in India. It varies slightly in different parts of Laos and at different Wats - usually in degree

of discipline. Our Wat tended to be fairly lax. The monks at the end of the procession sometimes chattered or laughed a bit. Atchan Mai talked to certain devout laymen concerning help with particular Wat affairs - urging them to come and to bring the other people.

I both feared and enjoyed the morning procession. I had a frightful case of crotch rot and walking was both awkward and painful. On the other hand it was interesting to see who came out to give alms and the reactions of my friends as they put rice in my bowl. And the cackle of old ladies saying that I made such a good monk - so white and muscular- and should remain a monk forever was ego satisfying as well as embarrassing.

Once back at the Wat entrance, the novices received our now filled bowls and I accompanied Atchan Mai back to the room for breakfast. As for lunch on the previous day, the novices made all the arrangements and offered us our service and food. Each novice was assigned to a monk and was expected to wait on him. I found this a little hard to accept and simply neglected to call my "boy" to give me my soap and towel every time I wanted to take a bath even though I had been instructed to do so.

Following breakfast, I went back to the main Wat grounds to see the old high priest. He was a little old man in his early sixties showing a little rheumatism and stiffness whenever he had to sit for too long in one position. Often times after prayers he would have some of the novices rub out the kinks in his legs. His head sloped down from its shorn top, across the eye brows capping quick black eyes, spread over a broad slightly pock marked nose and culminated in a soft, musing, ruminating kind of voice. It's perhaps a measure of his humility that it wasn't until I myself became a monk that I realized the respect and station that he was accorded in the eyes

of the community and the other monks. He slept in the old dilapidated building where I used to teach my English classes. Occasionally after a class in those days, he used to come out and admire my plump healthy body and urge me to take a Lao wife. This always seemed to amuse my students and I was inclined to label him as being either queer or slightly off his rocker or both, but not so. I spent a number of hours listening to this old monk and gathering stories about him from several sources and his story perhaps exemplifies those best qualities of the Lao character.

He was an ordinary village Lao, devout Buddhist layman and paddy farmer until some eighteen years ago when disaster seemed to descend upon him. In the short space of several months all his immediate family and even part of his extended family died from one cause or another leaving him quite alone and grieved. Thereupon he took his vows, entered the Wat and in time was given the grant priest title. I'm not sure he ever learned to read and write although it seems probable that he did, but his was not a scholarly or political title. He learned the necessary chants for all occasions, but his is not the deep throated thunder which young novices aspire to as they mature and enter the ranks of the priest-hood. Rather, it is the dry modulated rasping of autumn leaves in gentle breeze deriving its power from the sincerity of promise as opposed to the threat and bellow of storm. The old robes worn easily and comfortably with a rag for a cap when going forth to work in the sun - never vainly as with a younger monk. He quietly leads the round of alms gathering. He is called on for every conceivable social occasion - funeral, festival, wedding, christening. He visits and comforts the sick. He prepares medicines

from herbs and roots and chants. He assists in driving off bothersome spirits and preparing special charms.

His is a simple homespun philosophy. One gets along with his fellow man by being quiet, friendly, undemanding, a good listener and a capable talker. Life is a matter of the motion of days and the countercurrent of events populating those days. Living the good life is a matter of avoiding extremes, of non-passion and non-desiring, of the many virtues of love, honesty and compassion and of following the way of the Buddha to acquire and store up merit towards future existences. He listens to all sides of a case and then reasoning from the sun of experience in his long life he draws his own conclusions and gives his best advice.

On this particular morning he had called me to invite me to go along to have lunch with some of the good Buddhist people at a paddy field where they were harvesting some dough stage rice and preparing a feast. Being anxious to involve myself in as much of the life of the Wat as possible I eagerly accepted. It wasn't long before the little British car owned by the old forest service man came to pick us up and five monks piled in. Out of the Wat, down the road, past the army camp and new hospital chattering like any happy group going on a picnic and finally stopping in a field off the road aways, we climbed out, adjusted our umbrellas against the hot sun and trudged off single file down the paddy dikes.

I had adjusted my robe very carefully before leaving the Wat and it was still reasonably secure with the end of the rold grasped tightly in my left hand along with the umbrella. Since we were going out of the Wat, both shoulders were covered and my right arm was inside the robe. When we came to a fish trap fence spanning a short gap in the dike, I watched the old monk work his way by and then started after him. It wasn't till I did so that I realized that I didn't have the use of my right arm for either support or

or balance and as a result slipped off the dike and into the paddy. Managing to scramble out before getting my robe very wet, I washed my feet and legs. Someone retrieved my sandals and after a good laugh and a demonstration on how to free my right hand for use in the future, we proceeded on to the paddy house where the people were waiting.

Except for the morning alms collection, this was my first time out amongst the people with whom I had lived and worked for the past two years, but with the difference that now I was shaven and shorn and wearing the time honored orange robes even if not too skillfully. My reception was gratifying and coming from most any other culture might even have been termed astounding. It's hard to believe that most Christian sects could or would accept a non-native infidel into their midst as a ranking member of the clergy so completely and unreservedly with no questions asked simply on the basis of appearance and form. Even granting that the Lao knew and trusted me this complete acceptance is difficult to believe.

This particular paddy house was larger than usual. It had a fenced enclosure, some trees and an old termite mound with a couple papaya trees growing on it. The walls and floor of the house itself were made of bamboo boards and the thatching job was recent and still fragrant. The porch ran the full length of the eastern side of the house and was slightly lower than the main floor. We monks climbed up to the places which had been prepared for us inside. The women, children and young folk were behind the house preparing the meal, laughing, talking and enjoying themselves. A number of the men sat on the porch. After taking our places these latter all bowed three times and then scurried about making sure that we all had tea, drinking glassed, cigarettes and other simple luxuries as are customary.

They were interested in me and my stay in the Wat. They assured me that I made a very good monk - looked just like one - and should remain in the robes forever. Wanted to know how long I was going to be a monk and how it felt to be monk. This latter question has been among the most frequent of queries received since leaving the Wat which indicates to me that the Lao look on time in the Wat - in the robes - and particularly short breaks from the household life as being very definite religious experiences. They speak of the attraction of the "good" "clean" way of life and of the "fragrance" of the robes and a reluctance to part with them to again assume the cares and manners of the household.

We chatted and rested and passed the morning very pleasantly. More monks and novices came until there were nearly twenty. The younger ones of these were seen spending most of their time lying on the mats and watching the goings-ons behind the house through cracks in the wall. Eventually dinner was served and if it is true that "As you give so shall ye receive", this group of farmers must indeed have received a bountiful harvest.

After dinner the harvest chants and a short sermon were delivered. Sick children were brought to be blessed and the long line of orange robes made its way back through the variant shades of green and yellowing rice and returned to the Wat for naps or study before late afternoon work on the grounds and garden and the evening prayers.

That was largely the history of my stay in the Wat. It varied only in detail. The schedule was amorphous and subject to change much as one finds in a university atmosphere. Up at 4:00, prayers, toilet and bath, alms round and breakfast, study or work or going out on invitation or chatting with other monks or mixtures thereof, lunch, rest, study, work, bath, evening prayers, study, observing celebrations at the main temple, teaching English, bull sessions

with fellow monks and novices, individual prayers and sleep.

I went along on visits to comfort and heal the sick. I participated in the Boon Kathine festival. I went to a house boon and a pre-wedding ceremony. I read a history of Laos in Lao as well as a tract on the life of Buddha and another on the Lao system of government. I slept in whenever my teacher did even though I often woke up before him. I planted flowers in the temple yard and rough hacked a log into a square post to be used in a new Wat building. In addition I learned a good deal about myself.

As with my observations on Lao Buddhism the things I learned about myself are perhaps best illustrated by descriptions of the revealing incidents. I was interested for instance in how I would react to the commandments. If you remember the list of commandments, none of them appear too difficult. The Lao were most concerned about whether or not I could get along readily without supper, but I had already made sufficient experiments with dieting and eating patterns to know that I could cope with any slight discomfort which might result from missing supper. The mandate not taking any life though I had never experimented with. Before entering the Wat I had considered it in terms of mosquitoes and the stories of the Buddha brushing the little pests off his arms and thus having considered it, I was able to make it through two weeks without swatting a mosquito. Fortunately there aren't too terribly many mosquitoes at that time of year or I might not have made it. As it was, I engaged in the exercise as a test of self control and not in a spirit of love and compassion for mosquitoes - a form of life. After leaving the robes I found myself slapping and killing mosquitoes with a fanatical vengeance.

As regards the other animals and insects I hadn't expected any trouble since they don't generally cause any direct bodily irritation, but I hadn't reckoned on long ingrained habits. Ants in the tropics are overwhelmingly numerous. The use of ants to metaphorically demonstrate the countless expanses of time as is often done in Eastern religions becomes very reasonable once you have visited a tropical or semi-tropical area and seen the ants - everywhere. At any rate I have gotten in the habit of just idly squashing ants that get too close while I am sitting around in Lao houses. And in the Wat it was much to my chagrin that I suddenly realized during an evening conversation with some of my fellow monks that I had been idly and methodically even if unthinkingly squashing every ant that came within easy reach of my thumb.

I also found that every time I was happy with which me is a fairly frequent occurrence that my heart and soul bubbled over into little bursts of song. I think that no singing would perhaps be the hardest of all the rules to follow. With the Lao being such lovers of music I have often wondered how they manage to avoid active participation for so long while wearing the robes. The abstinence doesn't seem to retard their development any though. A young man leaving the Wat seems to know all the words of all the popular songs and can sing and dance as though these activities had never been interrupted.

The most startling revelation though came from my reactions to my instructor. Atchan Mai is considered a good monk. He was born a cripple in a village across the river from Khong Sedone which is now in PL controlled territory and he entered the Wat as a novice at an early age. He was intelligent and went far in his studies narrowly missing a chance to study in India. The fact of his crippled leg undoubtedly had some significant influence on his choice

of a way of life. He couldn't have been outstanding as a farmer because of his defect, but it didn't detract from his status as a monk and perhaps even gave him the impetus to surpass his fellows. Being a monk insured a place of status for this cripple that couldn't be guaranteed anywhere else in the society and having achieved a place of status there is little chance that he would ever discard his robes.

He is ambitious and energetic and a Buddhist Monk which is to some extent a contradiction in terms. These qualities turn him into a person who is respected, but not necessarily liked. His personality is not that of a typical Lao villager and I didn't find it very compatible with my own. I found him hypocritical and less loving and compassionate than one somehow expects of a religious figure. His students complained that he was too demanding and expected all of them to be able to memorize as readily as he. He himself had developed an amazing ability in rote memorization and even his native Lao tongue seemed to have taken on a chanted memorized effect.

My first point of disagreement with him came from his insistence on speaking in English as opposed to Lao. From the standpoint of wanting to practice, this was natural enough, but there were times when communication was sacrificed a little too much to suit me in situations where the Lao would have eliminated confusion.

The different ways he treated different people also bothered me. While speaking with the laymen and women he was always friendly, courteous and jovial with lots of smiles, but in the Wat the novices avoided his lashing tongue and caustic reproaches and talked about his crippled leg behind his back. One very young novice left the

Wat largely on account of him. On the other hand he treated me with kid gloves and never got cross with me. For my part, I was careful not to aggravate him and followed all his instructions very carefully as a new monk or novice is supposed to do with respect to his spiritual leader. But I didn't always like that I had to obey.

On one occasion a former student of mine, a monk, came down from Savannakhet where he was studying English to attend his sister's wedding and he invited me to go with him to visit his family in the evening. Somewhat to my surprise when I asked Atchan Mai for permission to go, he refused. I was prepared to obey, but under such unreasonable circumstance not without knowing why he had refused permission. Finally it came out that since I had been entrusted to Atchan Mai's care that he didn't want me to go anywhere without him even though in the presence of another monk because I might screw up in some way and that would cast a reflection on him and he was very concerned about his reputation.

The fact that he didn't trust me to avoid serious mistakes as revealed by this incident rankled quite strongly. The same type of thing was repeated on two other occasions, but fortunately in each of these instances Atchan Mai was overruled when one of the higher monks extended personal invitations to me to go along with them. They weren't in the least worried that I would damage their reputations. I was so irritated by not being allowed to go visiting with my former student and friend from Savannakhet that I wasn't able to memorize any more Pali during all the rest of my stay in the Wat which I am sure was a direct psychological reaction to what I considered an unjust authority. I had memorized several items previous to that incident with only small inputs of study time. I wonder how many times teachers

or parents must damage learning ability by setting off some such spark of subconscious rebellion. Knowing that the teacher considers your learning important you destroy the teacher by refusing to learn and in turn perhaps destroy yourself by being convinced that indeed your learning is blocked and you can't learn.

While I was in the Wat one of the fellows who had been a novice and monk for seven or eight years went down town, purchased his civilian clothes and went out into the world. As is customary in such cases, he came back to the Wat to sleep and the account of his reactions is perhaps indicative of the self image of the Lao monks. Atchan Mai was very quiet, strong looking, inclined to a certain moodiness and foreboding, but well liked by his fellows. He left the Wat without any real feeling for what he was going to do. He was a fairly decent craftsman and had made a large number of chairs and tables for the Wat, but when I suggested he pursue this skill in some USAID training program he wasn't interested because there was no guaranteed job and salary offer involved. He was twenty-four and didn't want to be a soldier, but didn't know how he could avoid it if he didn't have a job.

Having performed the leaving ceremonies he shed his robes and dressed up in his new duds - cutting quite a handsome figure. Even though it had only been three weeks since he last shaved his head, he went and got a haircut and he was impressed by the matter of fact way in which the barber sat him down and trimmed around his ears without a hint of laughter or noticing anything unusual. He was most impressed by how ordinary everybody treated him and by the reduction in distance between him and others that had taken place. He got on a bus and people stepped on him and pushed and shoved and climbed over him. He walked down town and people brushed against him and didn't give way when he approached. Back at the Wat in the evening he said: "I wanted to put the robes on when I walked back up through town just so people would back off -

keep their distance and show the proper respect and fear." He made the adjustment back down to the ranks though and has taken a wife to help him plant the fields this rainy season.

After two weeks rich in experience, learning and personal discovery, I too shed the robes and resumed my worldly duties. I went to the old high priest and to the governor and paying due respects to both asked permission to go back to the world. Permission was granted and they came to my room in the evening and performed another memorable and beautiful ritual in the candlelight in front of the gilt Buddha with the chants and string, flowers, burning wax tapers and ritual waters in the black alms bowl. Having determined five a.m. to be a propitious time for leaving, they carried the alms bowl of sacred water over to the main temple, asked me not to forget them and the things I had learned and urged me to come back and visit them often. I slept a fitful sleep and then in the early morning half-light went to ask the Buddha's blessing as I took leave. I shed the orange robes, took a very chilly morning bath in the water that had been prepared by the ceremonies of the previous evening and dressed in the shirt and trousers that I had shed two weeks previous.

Admittedly there was a sense of relief and regained freedom as I left the Wat and headed back to my house, but I could never have anticipated the degree to which those two weeks helped to establish me in the Lao society. I received praise, gifts, congratulations, questions and invitations of a sort I had never received before. I was permitted to hear full discussions on matters of religion, spirits and animism such as had never been carried on in my presence before. I was questioned as to how it had felt

and gained a new title of respect. Often as not I am still introduced as the American who has been a monk. A couple of illustrations of how the Lao view this American that has been a monk and their religion should be sufficient to close this paper.

Shortly after leaving the Wat I was asked what religion I belonged to and if I was a Buddhist who believed in the teachings of Buddha. I replied that I was a kind of religious eclectic - picking and choosing - that I did believe in some of the basic concepts of Buddhism, but didn't care for all the forms used in the present worship practices. I chose the use of Pali as an example saying that while the chants had a particular place that all the preaching should be done in Lao so as to be understood and significant and that the level of scholarship and understanding of the monks was sadly deficient - that while a monk could recite the commandments as memorized, as likely as not he didn't even know which one was which. The rejoinder came back that the Pali was all translated and that there were people who understood it and I objected that it didn't go nearly far enough and the conversation stopped. In all cases the religion is traditional and historical and not a proper subject of criticism and debate. The oriental mind in general fails to attack things in the analytical style of the west and criticism is as apt to be simply alienating as it is constructive. And finally in a recent visit to an old friend from Khong Sedone now living at Paksong, my having been in the Wat came up and one of the guests asked me friend (not me notice) what religion I belonged to. My friend who had never discussed this subject with me answered that I was while in Laos a practicing Buddhist - that although I still held a certain partiality for my former religion and would practice it at home in America while in Laos I was a good Buddhist. I could do worse than to hope that he is right.

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