



NOTES FROM A THAI FOREST PILGRIMAGE

A Buddhist Travelogue

Grace Talice Lee

For you

Glossary

Ajahn: “Teacher,” a term of respect for monks who have spent at least ten years in robes.

Arahant: one who has gone beyond suffering and attained full enlightenment (and sometimes also psychic powers). There’s no hard evidence on the matter—it’s not like an owl delivers a certificate when you hit each stage of awakening—but the named monks in this writing are reputedly either arahants or near-arahants.

Dāna: the practice of giving freely; also the thing that is given freely, such as money or time.

Kuti: a modest living quarters on monastery grounds, usually for monastics.

Luang Por: “Venerable Father,” a term of respect for senior monks. In this writing, monks are addressed in the way my teachers spoke of them.

Introduction

In 2023, my partner Kyle and I were invited to join our monastic teachers to meet *their* monastic teachers, on a two-week pilgrimage to the enlightened masters of the Thai forest. At the time, my only intention was to receive each present moment of the experience—never to publish about it. Until long after coming home, during a slow day at work (heehee), when these words came pouring out of me, and all the memories and talks and notes clicked easily into place as this narrative.

Please know that, as with any memoir, these are fragmented memories. Paraphrased talks. Abbreviated notes, focusing only on my own perspective and no one else's. The documentation is imperfect, as we all are.

Deep bows of gratitude to Ayya Santussika and Ayya Cittananda for so lovingly curating the journey for all twenty of us laypeople, and to all the master teachers, monks, maechees, and monastery volunteers who welcomed us and so generously passed on their wisdom. My life is forever changed.

NOTES FROM A THAI FOREST PILGRIMAGE

A Buddhist Travelogue

Grace Talice Lee

Day 1

Our group flies from San Francisco to Taipei to Bangkok, then piles into vans for a bone-rattling drive to the edge of Khao Yai National Park, to the monastery Wat Pah Subtawee Dhammaram, where the ponds are studded with lotuses and the Buddha statues stand ten feet tall at minimum. I jump out the van, put on a mosquito netted hat, feel very silly about it, and never wear it again. We shuffle into kutis according to gender and collapse onto barely-padded sleeping mats, finally, after more than 24 hours' journey. My roommates love to chat. I do not. The earplugs aren't working.

I'm thrilled to be here and completely overwhelmed by the newness of the place.

Day 2

The resident arahant Luang Por Gunha comes out to greet us. He has plump cheeks, a round belly, a perpetual smile, and small frameless glasses, so the comparison is drawn more than once between him and a Thai and beardless Santa Claus. But for whatever reason, as soon as I clap eyes on him, I start trembling in my seat. I listen in awe as he speaks (with the help of a translator) about how all delusion comes from the misguided belief that the self is abiding, separate, and invulnerable—as opposed to the Truth that all of life is marked by impermanence, uncontrollability, and suffering. Which makes me realize that no matter what material goods I accumulate or what personal or professional goals I achieve—even if I get every worldly thing I’ve ever wanted—none of it will make me as happy as abandoning this belief.

Luang Por goes on to talk about how it’s important to be happy at work because our jobs take up most of our waking hours. How there’s no need to correct anyone other than ourselves. How there’s no need to visit the holy sites in India

because if we practice well, the Buddha is already within us. How all religions are the same. How it's important to get at least 6-8 hours of sleep per night.

The session ends and we descend the stairs from Luang Por's kuti. My legs tremble with every step. I say to Kyle, "This whole trip is already worth it. All the months of planning, the money we spent, the time we're taking. Just one talk, and it's all worth it."

Day 3

The morning bell rings, as it always does, at 3am. It doesn't wake me up, however, because I've been staring at the ceiling for hours.

The whole monastery gathers in the shrine room by 3:30am. A monastery dog tries to slip inside, and a volunteer chases her out. She lurks a while, then curls up just outside the door and goes to sleep.

Chanting is led in both Pali and Thai, then everyone meditates until 5am. Most of the monks sit perfectly straight. One or two droop sleepily toward the floor.

Then chores: folding sheets, peeling garlic, chopping pumpkins, sweeping the grounds. Everyone at the monastery is expected to eat only one meal at mid-day, but one morning, a kitchen volunteer plops a box of bananas into my arms and assigns me a special task. "Give these to your friends," she says. "Luang Por says you foreigners probably aren't used to skipping breakfast yet."

Coffee break at 5:45am. Then we leave for almsround. We purchase offerings from street vendors: platters of curries, bags of fruit, crates of bottled drinks, bouquets of lilies, and bowls of rice. The monks come out in a single line. They pause after every few steps, give a blessing, accept the gifts, and tilt their bowls to accept a tiny scoop of rice from each layperson. The air sparkles from the morning dew, the rising sun, and the joy of giving freely.

At 7:00am, we gather at Luang Por Gunha's kuti to hear his morning Dhamma talk. Today he says, "Monkhood is a brand name. You can all be monks. Right view, right understanding, right practice—monkhood is in your heart." He punctuates his commentary with an occasional, "Do you understand? Do you agree?" and concludes the session by receiving dāna offerings and giving blessings through various methods: handing out candies and custard apples, performing a ceremony of pouring water from a multi-gallon kettle into an ornate silver bowl, and tapping us all on the head with a long wooden pole.

At 9:00am we file into the shrine room for another Dhamma talk from a senior monk. It's in Thai, though, so my eyes close and my mind ~~calms~~ races in meditation.

Mealtime at 10:00am. My favorite food is the papaya, dripping with flavor that can't be found in the grocery stores back home.

A bit of downtime, during which Kyle and I like to stroll around the ponds. A friend takes a picture of us by the pretty water, so Kyle puts an arm around my shoulders. I shriek and everyone startles, thinking I'd been stung by some tropical insect. "No!" I say, convulsing into giggles. "We can't touch at the monastery!"

At 1:00pm our group convenes at our teachers' kuti to connect and give reflections. My teacher shares, for example, that Luang Por Gunha's go-to reply for hyper-intellectual questions can be fairly translated as, "Who gives a crap?" This is also a good time to solve logistical problems like, "My laundry's been hanging outside for two days and it's still not dry because of this ridiculous humidity. Can we please use the monastery dryers?"

Then more chores. A local couple teaches me and Kyle how to use a Thai broom, to thrust its ultra-long handle and super stiff bristles in swift arcs across the walkway, *shwa! shwa! shwa!* "You got it," the husband says to me. Then he points at Kyle. "The other one, so-so."

A bit more downtime, then we head to 4:00pm tea at Luang Por Gunha's kuti. Most days, we just sit around and snack on allowables like chocolate bars, ginger candies, Indian gooseberries, and avocado smoothies. But on our second full day at Wat Subtawee, Luang Por invites all us foreigners upstairs to get better acquainted. I'm eager to rush ahead and claim a good spot, but I have to wash our cups first,

ugh, and end up as the very last person in the room, crammed in the back with all the Thai ladies.

Luang Por asks where we're from, how long we traveled, and if anyone has any questions. Several hands fly up, including mine, but he changes his mind, "Let's just have small talk for now." Our hands go down. But the Thai woman beside me grabs my elbow and holds it aloft. "Ask! Ask!" she hisses. I shake my head, mortified, and clamp my wrists under my armpits. The woman scurries to Luang Por's translator and mutters in her ear. The translator nods, waits for the next lull in conversation, then announces, "Someone wanted to ask a question?" and everyone turns as one to stare.

I'm intimidated, so my gaze fixes onto the floor. I babble a run-on question that can be summed up as, "How can we practice remembering the truth that there's no abiding and separate self, when it's so easy to forget because we're not enlightened yet?"

He replies right away, "The practice is the same."

And it hits me. Hard.

There's no shortcut out of suffering. No magic bullet, no secret trick. Whether someone is an arahant or not, a Buddhist or not, a human or not—there it is in the Four Noble Truths: suffering exists; it has a cause; it has an end; it has a way out, that is the Noble Eightfold Path.

And on any other day, everyone would then proceed to the shrine room for 6:00pm evening chanting, and then go to bed around 8:00pm. But on this particular day at Wat Subtawee, Luang Por Gunha sends our group from his kuti directly onto a several-mile hike through the Khao Yai forest, wading muddy trails past herds of wild bulls, tickling the touch-me-not plants and watching the leaves close, until night descends firmly and a monk shouts at us to hurry up or else the feral dogs will come and eat us all for dinner.

Day 4

During his morning audience, Luang Por talks so fast, he's almost rapping. "Someone asked yesterday, 'How can we be happy when we have a sense of separate self?' But it's exactly this 'separate self' that creates craving, difficult feeling, unhappiness. It's this 'separate self' that creates division, fighting, mental illness. And it's *not* having this 'separate self' that gives us *ultimate* happiness.

"Happy or unhappy—these are mental formations, so know them as such. Know the difference between ordinary happiness and a much higher happiness. The kind of happiness that causes clinging, versus the kind of happiness that helps you loosen your grasp."

So much insight at such a rapid fire pace that I end up not absorbing anything at all, as if all those pearls of wisdom were tossed right over my head. I'm frustrated, vexed. But as I settle into morning meditation, I see the aggravation at the forefront of my mind like a bright orange traffic cone. *Here is my suffering—thus, here is a chance to practice.*

So I hold that frustration so gently and bit by bit, it stills in my mind. Loses its heat, its friction, and softens into realization: if moods are mental formations, then I can practice neither clinging on nor pushing them away. Whether they're easeful or difficult, glad or mad or sad. And anytime I feel the prick or stab of suffering—here it is. A chance to practice.

I share these reflections with Kyle as they tidy up their kuti. They smile. "I'm so proud of you."

I glow in response. Then I ponder awhile and ask, "Was it me that Luang Por was talking about, maybe? The 'someone' who asked him that question?"

"Oh my gosh." Kyle rolls their eyes and laughs. "Of *course* that was you!"

Day 5

The first thing Luang Por says today is, “Is anyone having trouble sleeping?”

I’ve been lying awake every night with fireworks shooting out my eyes from the extreme inspiration of this place, so my hand goes up without thinking.

Luang Por twinkles and gives me extra blessing-taps on the head. “How long have you had trouble sleeping?”

“Since coming here,” I say.

He responds, and the translator chuckles as she conveys his meaning. “It’s a good thing you can’t sleep.”

Many audience members laugh. I titter nervously.

Luang Por asks, “Are you eating only one meal a day?”

“Yes,” I say. “Just one.”

“Maybe you should eat more if the hunger is keeping you up at night. Are you hungry?”

I shake my head no.

“Then it’s good for you to eat one meal only,” says Luang Por. “You’re a little overweight, so it’ll help you get in good shape. Most Buddhist practitioners keep in good shape.”

Nearly everyone’s chortling now, except Kyle, who’s offended, and me, because suddenly I’m not in Thailand anymore, I’m seven years old, playing Telephone at a slumber party, and the girls who I thought were my friends are whispering in each other’s ears that “Grace is fat.”

Such a frank comment about appearance is commonplace in many Asian cultures—including that of my extended family in Taiwan—and is intended as a sort of free community healthcare, where everyone’s guarding each other’s fitness through a constant stream of commentary, with little regard for whether it helps or hurts. And in this situation at Wat Subtawee, as much as I try to brush it off, there’s a curdling sensation between my ribs that tells me I’m definitely hurt.

But in retrospect, I’m so glad for this experience because it teaches me that arahants, though they may be perfected, are not actually perfect—even with his incredible reputation for telepathy, Luang Por Gunha still says things sometimes

that don't land quite right, that create harm, that I have to resolve a few months later with a trauma therapist and a heap of soggy tissues.

Which means if arahants are imperfect, then I can certainly be imperfect too. If I can have so much love and gratitude for Luang Por Gunha, mistakes and all, then I can absolutely give the same regard to myself, mistakes and all. I don't have to withhold self-affection until I've corrected all my foibles and shortcomings, because that's impossible, that's never going to happen, even enlightened masters can't fulfill that standard. I can accept myself—and everyone else, every sentient being—right here and now, exactly as we are. Not despite our flaws, but because of them.

When Luang Por finishes speaking and the blessed candies have been passed out, we reconvene in the shrine room to meditate through the Thai talk. And maybe because my mind is so freshly churned up from public embarrassment, when I close my eyes I can observe my own suffering as clearly, coolly, and objectively as I can look down and see the tip of my nose. I investigate all my recent encounters with anguish, one at a time. The way my skin feels like it's crawling with ants whenever we dawdle before leaving the house. The way I suddenly want to topple a bookcase whenever people ramble on without making a point. The way I obsess about bearing and birthing a child and sob into Kyle's shoulder every time my period comes, as I have for the past two years of trying and failing to conceive.

And I realize that each of these experiences share the same flavor of suffering. The same lesson I have yet to learn, the same obstacle blocking my path. But what flavor is it, exactly? What lesson?

Here it is. A chance to practice.

I let the memories fall away and focus on the sensation of that suffering. And—a minute or hour later—the answer reveals itself in my mind. Tentative at first, and then clicking into place.

I tell it to Kyle as we eat lunch together, crouching behind a slab bench for a scrap of privacy in the open cafeteria. “I think the main theme of my suffering can be summed up in one word,” I say, “and it took a while to figure out, but I think I know what it is. I think it’s Impatience.”

Kyle’s spine shoots up straight. Their eyes light up like twin spotlights, their mouth drops into a capital O, and their face flushes the color of a maraschino cherry.

I laugh. “I guess you agree then.”

“No comment! No comment!” Kyle guffaws. “Am I neutral? I’m coming off as neutral, right? No comment!”

We almost choke on our rice from giggling so hard.

And when we've recovered, Kyle leans in as close as they dare. "I know we're having an amazing time on this trip and all, but can I tell you a secret? As happy as I am to be here with these monks, I'm a million times happier to be with you, anywhere. A *million* times happier."

And now we're both crying from gladness. All I want is to reach out and hold them tight.

"Me too, Kyle. I'm the happiest with you too."

Day 6

Three people ask if I slept better last night. The truth is, not really, but a friend in the group has graciously swapped kutis with me, so now I only have one roommate who's quiet instead of three who are (very sweet and) much more chatty, and finally I'm able to decompress in the calm.

The morning is so mellow, and my heart is so full of love and inspiration, that on the walk back from almsround I say to Kyle, "You know, when we first got to Wat Subtawee, I felt like this place was quenching a thirst that I didn't even know was there. But now that thirst is more than satisfied. I've drunk my fill, and it'll be enough to nourish me for the rest of this life."

I'm content to hang in the background for the rest of our stay. So instead of showing up early like usual to the session with Luang Por Gunha, Kyle and I slow our steps so that everyone else can get there first and claim the seats in the front. But when we get there, all those chairs are still vacant, and in an effort to get the audience settled as soon

as possible, the monastery volunteers happen to usher me and Kyle toward the very front and center of the crowd—literally a hop and a skip away from the arahant.

Luang Por comes out, and the part of today's talk that moves me is the emphasis that "people can't just be smart. They must also be good." He says it again and again, "People must be smart and good. Smart and good."

I have to be smarter. I lecture myself. I have to be more good.

The session winds toward its finish, and soon it's time to collect dāna—usually conducted by Thai volunteers who zoom through the aisles, catching donations in baskets with honeybee efficiency. But today—after a brief reminder that we don't need to give a lot of money, that the important thing is to focus on our practice—Luang Por points his stick right in my face and tells me to help collect the offerings.

I'm stunned; a woman shoves a basket into my hands; she hurries me through the audience like a border collie herding a sheep. It's a weekend morning so the crowd is twice denser than usual; everyone is throwing money at me; soon the cash donations stack so high I have to clamp them down to save them from scattering to the floor.

When every offering has been received, I'm told to kneel at the front with two monastery volunteers. We're handed the silver basin for a blessings ritual, and we lift the vessel

together as we bow our heads low. A senior monk chants for the ultimate victory of enlightenment, as Luang Por Gunha pours a steady stream of water from an ultra-sized kettle into the metal bowl. None of us foreigners understand the symbology behind this act, but it is beautiful anyway.

I go back to my seat and—after inviting us to dedicate merit to our ancestors—Luang Por repeats the ritual. And when I close my eyes and touch my palms together, suddenly, vividly, I see my late grandmother, bowing and awakening alongside me. And I'm filled with the knowing that wherever she is, wherever she's going—she is well.

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhassa.
Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhassa.
Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhassa.

And then it's the end of the talk. But Luang Por drops one last bomb before making his exit. "People can't just be smart," he says. "They must be smart and good. The person I chose to collect dāna today is smart and good."

Huh?

What?

Did he really just say—?

The translator gives me a huge grin and a big thumbs-up.

I erupt into tears.

She drops her mic and scurries to comfort me, thinking I'd misheard. "Don't cry! You are smart and good! What? Oh, these are happy tears? Okay, good, good! Smart and good!"

I'm shocked.

Aghast.

Mind-blown.

But also bewildered. I don't understand how I could deserve such praise from Luang Por.

I confess this later to Kyle, who claims to understand perfectly well. "He said it because it's true! Gosh, I tell you the same thing all the time!" They're exasperated at first—but then they soften. It's takes all their restraint not to grab me in a hug. "Sometimes you can be so hard on yourself, Grace. Maybe he knew that you needed to hear it."

When I hear this, my chest aches. It's my heart, I think, breaking open.

Day 7

I wake up full of resolve to work with Impatience, because now that I see its heat in my mind, I realize I've been a frog in a boil for my whole adult life and I'm ready to jump out of the pot.

But how?

Even here at Wat Subtawee with its idyllic atmosphere, as we walk from chanting to chores to almsround, I find myself darting through hordes of slow walkers like a puppy in agility training. I chide myself to *Just be more patient!*—which works about as well as leashing that puppy with an overcooked noodle.

So I sit with this suffering—this heat in my mind, this speed in my body—and it registers that although there are some things that take me a lot of time (like learning map directions, for example, which slide off my brain like fried eggs from a new pan), I tend to be much faster than average at many other things. I can often pick up new hobbies on

the first try, like turning wooden bowls on a lathe, and Kyle must occasionally grab my sleeve during our evening walks because I stroll with the leisure of Sonic the Hedgehog.

Hm. That's just the way it is, isn't it? Life flows in different paces. Sometimes fast, sometimes slow. And what's slow now, may become fast. What's fast now, may also—hopefully, with a lot more practice—learn to slow down.

And already, just this tiny kernel of awareness, this small stake of intention, begins to cool my temper and steady my feet. It's like tossing a bone at that puppy, so it can gnaw on some gristle instead of nipping at my ankles.

I'm pretty proud of myself for starting to crack the code on Impatience. Just in time to enter Luang Por's kuti, and for him to reveal another challenge.

Among the many jewels he speaks in today's talk, the part that sings to me is this: "If you truly understand that there's no separate and abiding self, you would be at ease even when surrounded by one hundred million people."

One hundred million people?! I shudder at the mere suggestion! I'm such an introvert that even at silent meditation retreats where people don't speak or make eye contact for a week, I bolt to the dorms or the high hills at every break in the schedule because I'm so sick of being around other bodies. I endure social events by lurking in the dustiest corner

Notes From a Thai Forest Pilgrimage

and placing Kyle directly in front of me, a human shield between me and everyone else. And I celebrate canceled plans by shimmying and yodeling around the living room as Kyle shakes their head in bemusement. All of which to say: I don't find much ease in crowds, let alone crowds of 100,000,000.

So, here it is.

Another chance to practice.

Day 8

Our last morning at Wat Subtawee. “When it’s time to stay, stay,” says Luang Por Gunha as he bids us farewell. “When it’s time to go, go.”

At the end of the session, he invites everyone to participate in the water-pouring ritual together. The silver bowl is held aloft by three volunteers in the very front, and the few people in the second row then touch those volunteers upon their upper backs. Then the third row joins with the second row; and the fourth with the third; and so on, until every member of the audience is connected.

A senior monk leads the chanting—may you win victory blessings!—and Luang Por tips the kettle, slowly filling the basin. I kneel with my hands in prayer, with my fingertips resting on my teacher’s shoulder. I glance back and see that (in the lone instance where contact between genders seems accepted) Kyle is bowing behind me, holding onto my shoulder. My eyes wet with tears. I close them, and an image blazes into mind. A vision of the ritual water, glowing

white with potent blessings, trickling from the pot to the basin, then to and through the first row of the audience, then to and through the second, and to and through the third. To and through my teacher. To and through me. To and through Kyle. And onward, like the sprawling roots of a strong and ancient tree.

Everything, everywhere, is joy.

“You all look so happy!” say the monastery volunteers as they send us off. With gender lines drawn firmly back into place, the Thai femmes give goodbye hugs to the foreigner femmes, and same with the monks and the mascs. The translator delivers her parting instruction. “Visit again. You and you, everybody. You don’t need a group next time, you can come by yourself. Please visit again.”

One of the head cooks gifts our group a basket of lilies, then points to the biggest of all the many Buddha statues and tells us to place the flowers there as an offering. “Make a wish,” she says. “It will come true.”

And when everyone’s finished paying our homages and making our wishes, when the vans have pulled up to the kutis and the luggage is loading into the trunks, the passengers are buckling into their seats, I turn to Kyle and whisper, “What did you wish for?”

Grace Talice Lee

They say, so tenderly, “What do you think?” And now I can’t stop crying, because—obviously—we’d made the same wish.

A happy healthy baby. The one thing we both want most in the world.

Day 9

For the second week of the pilgrimage, our group plans to travel around the country, hop between hotels, and visit the home monasteries of four more senior monks, all of them with reputations as actual or almost arahants. Starting with Ajahn Sopha, who—at least for our audience today—serves as a stark contrast from Luang Por Gunha: wearing a stern frown instead of a smile, and speaking in gruff reprimands instead of encouragements and jokes.

People ask questions to Ajahn Sopha, and he chides us again and again to understand that impermanence, uncontrollability, and suffering is inherent to all sentient life—and to reach this understanding through inward reflection and personal discovery. “Agh,” he says, at least in my memory. “You all need to meditate more. If you’d meditated before coming to see me, you wouldn’t have any questions at all.”

It’s hard for me to absorb much else because I’m still so high from Wat Subtawee, my brain is floating somewhere amidst

the treetops. My gaze bounces around, unable to focus, and eventually filters between the wooden planks of Ajahn's dais. Behind the back wall is a team of monks who bustle about their daily chores. They pause their sweeping to peek through the cracks, to gawk at us mishmash of foreigners.

After paying respects to Ajahn Sopha (and sheepishly heeding his admonishments by meditating awhile as a group) we pack into the vans again and, at the halfway mark between the monastery and the faraway hotel, take a rest stop at a roadside cafe. There are two dozen of us and only one unconfident barista, so it takes two hours to mix everyone's drinks. Two hours of blenders grinding, espresso machines gurgling, and a cacophony of chatter, all the noise bouncing and multiplying off the windows and tile floors.

In the middle of it all—because we're no longer at a monastery and can make contact again with each other—I lean my head onto Kyle's shoulder. Peace blooms in my heart the instant we touch.

It takes only a moment to drift sweetly into sleep.

Day 10

I continue my practice with Impatience. Luckily there are many opportunities to practice in a caravan of three passenger vans and two dozen travelers with varying degrees of punctuality. When we meet, we must send out a search party for friends who are lost or oversleeping. When we eat, we must enact a full-on mock trial to decide on the restaurant, and even after we've ordered the meal—between the massive group and the mom-and-pop kitchens—it can take over an hour for the dishes to arrive. We're famished. We're bickering. It's so hot outside.

Through it all, I observe my desire to rush. And I notice that rushing doesn't help anyone get their food faster. The curry noodles will get here when the curry noodles get here. Rueing its delay would only cause my own suffering, if not also the suffering of others. Besides, ultimately, it doesn't matter at all if the dish arrives now or in two hours. I'm not going to starve. I'm so fortunate in that way—and also fortunate for the opportunity arrive at these learnings, which instantly cause lunch to become a more pleasant experience.

Even the fiasco of settling the collective bill is less painful.
And then we pack into the vans again.

This afternoon we visit Wat Marp Jan for an interview with Ajahn Anan, who comes off to me as neither jolly nor harsh, but courteous and matter-of-fact. Anyone who wishes to ask him a question gets the chance to do so, and about ten of us shuffle forth on our knees, one at a time, to seek clarity on our issues. Out of all the queries, there's one in particular that shakes me to the core. It occurs when a friend asks something like, "How literally should we interpret the answers of arahants when they tell us what to do?"

From what I recall, Ajahn replies, "If a teacher says something that the student likes, the student is happy. If the teacher says something the student *dislikes*, the student is *unhappy*. This is conventional reality. But when one understands the Dhamma, they see absolute reality. And they know there is not really a teacher, not really a student, and no reason to be happy or unhappy."

I've heard Dhamma riddles like this before, of course. But now, some part of me is really starting to get it.

Day 11

We tour a museum with four floors and two courtyards filled with Buddhist paintings, sculptures, and figurines, and all the while I get to know Impatience. Today I reflect that going fast doesn't necessarily mean better, and going slow can sometimes be best. Like at Wat Subtawee, when I was dead last to go upstairs at Luang Por Gunha's kuti—which resulted in my sitting next to a Thai woman, who was hellbent on my question getting asked, which inspired a week's worth of dazzling talks, which deepened my understanding of Dhamma in the same way a puddle is deepened when it's struck by a meteor.

And as I peruse the museum's many bodhisattva statues, I notice a certain sensation when I'm neither rushing ahead nor lagging behind, but playing right in the pocket of the universe. I'm not in my head. Not outside the body. But firmly grounded into my arms and my legs. Just a little heavy there. In a way that feels good.

I can return to this sensation anytime and find its relief. For small inconveniences like traveling, sure, but also for life-changing matters—like trying to conceive. The biggest source of my frustration.

Day 12

I lose a battle with Impatience.

Two people at our lunch table argue over minutiae in the check. In a more level state of mind, I would've revealed in the chance to practice, or even offered to cover the tiny expense myself. But in this moment, I just couldn't handle it. I snap. I'm sullen and fuming. My eyeballs turn black in their sockets.

Someone asks me a question about whether I ordered a drink for the meal. Kyle steps in, thankfully, and saves an innocent bystander from losing their head. "Grace is a little overwhelmed," says Kyle, throwing some extra cash into the pile. "Probably better if we give them some space for now!"

Gratitude surges through my veins. And from that act of love alone, I already feel ten times better. Soon I am calm. And then I am happy. Good moods restored, we squeeze again into the vans. Onward, to tour a wax museum of renowned arahants.

Recently added to our group is a nun from Wat Subtawee. She's adept at translating the wall plaques and she's as generous as she is tall, so Kyle and I trail behind her like a couple of ducklings as she relays the stories behind the wax depictions. My favorites are all about arahants in deep meditation. One who was spotted by the Thai Air Force, levitating miles above the monastery. One who stood deep in the forest, as tigers circled around and pressed their tracks into the mud. One who sat in a cave as a flash flood came and went, who later roused to see a fresh water line, marked far overhead upon the earthen wall.

Then off to Wat Yansangwararam for an audience with Ajahn Suchart. My favorite exchange in this interview comes from a question about how we should practice for a good death. Ajahn replies that there are two levels of approach: that of mindfulness and that of wisdom. The first is a temporary measure of keeping the mind calm and quiet, without fear. The second is a permanent fix of thoroughly understanding the body's impermanence. "If you want to live in peace and die in peace, then you have to accept the dissolution of the body."

But it's not the questions and answers that stun me that day. It's how Ajahn conducts himself—his response to the environment. Or rather, his non-response. His countenance, placid and unflappable, whether he's gifting a stuffed bear to an ecstatic little girl, or delivering hard truths to the astonishment of his audience, or allowing a group photo

Notes From a Thai Forest Pilgrimage

to be taken without even turning for the camera (let alone smiling for it). He's equanimity in human form. Present in mind and body but also, in some spectacular way, utterly untouchable. A refuge unto himself.

I decide to try it out for myself, next time I'm overwhelmed in a crowd.

Day 13

One last monastery on the trip itinerary: Wat Pah Cittabhavana. The group waits outside the meditation hall for an interview with Ajahn Piak. We loiter in small clusters around a stairway and a few picnic tables, almost everyone engaged in conversation—the two dozen voices exclaiming and chortling, combining and echoing off the slick walls and asphalt, snowballing into the dull roar of a grade school playground. My temples throb. My ears burn. My vision starts darkening with storm clouds. Until I remember the master teacher from yesterday, Ajahn Suchart—his equanimity, his unflappable calm.

Here it is. A chance to practice.

“I need a moment,” I mutter to Kyle. Then I slip away. Sit off to the side and close my eyes. Release my fears of missing out, coming off as rude, or just plain looking odd. If Ajahn Suchart can do it, I can do it too. I can hear the sound of silence, even in a noisy crowd.

I can.

I do.

I'm refreshed.

Just in time to file into the meditation room, to see Ajahn Piak shuffle into the back doors, and to raise my hand and ask him a question, despite having just made breakthrough on finding its answer. I say, "How can we practice when we're tired or stressed?"

Curiously, Ajahn Piak doesn't respond directly to the query. Instead he interrogates me about my life and my meditation.

"What do you do for work?" he says through the translator.

"What do you think of, during your work?"

"During meditation, do you reach the point of rapture?"

"Do you cry from that rapture?"

"Do you see visions of yourself? Do you see your body?"

"When you see that vision, how big is your body?"

"Big!" I say. "Big like a mountain! Big, big mountain!"

“Mm,” says Ajahn Piak. “You are doing the right thing.”

And I’m a little tickled by the validation but a lot confounded by this exchange. Until after the interview wraps up—after Ajahn gives a Dhamma talk in Thai, and the translator repeats it in English, and we take a group photo and sit awhile in meditation. After we tour the monastery grounds and admire the fountain where divine beings like to frolic in the waters. After the vans pull up and we get ready to sardine into the seats again. My teacher comes up and suggests that Ajahn Piak was conducting some energy work during our dialogue, and that those few moments alone might have been than worth this whole trip for me.

I tell my teacher that there have already been so many of those moments. This trip has already been “worth it,” a hundred times over. And for the honor and privilege of joining this pilgrimage, there’s nothing I could ever say to express the full depth of my gratitude.

Day 14

A free day in Bangkok. Some of our group is adamant about souvenir shopping. Others decide to get Thai massages. Kyle wants to join the tour of the Reclining Buddha, then the Grand Palace. There doesn't seem to be anything better to do, so I tag along.

Our first stop: the famed statue of the Buddha lying on his right side, as tall as a four-story building and a whole city block long. It's hard for me to muster excitement though, because I've seen it twice before (once when I was six, with family, and the second time in my early twenties). So I focus on "Ajahn Suchart-ing," as a friend has started calling it. Letting myself flow with the crowd without getting swept up in it. Ducking out of conversations before becoming agitated. Standing off to the side and casting my eyes at the sidewalk, enjoying the rhythm of my full-body breaths.

As we trek from one site to another, a friend approaches and tries to chat about what dish I ate for lunch and whether or not I enjoyed it. Nonverbal cues aren't working, so I say

with all the kindness I can muster, “I’m really overwhelmed right now, so this isn’t the best time for me to chat.” She understands and receives this well, and hopes I feel better soon. She finds someone else to talk with. I am so incredibly proud of myself.

Then we arrive at the Grand Palace and wander its labyrinth of golden spires, marble floors, and glass mosaics. We stand in line to see its most renowned landmark—the Emerald Buddha, a two-foot-tall figure made of green jasper actually, not emerald, depicting the Buddha in a meditative posture. As we draw closer to the room in which it’s housed, a friend shares about a common tradition for this place. “A famous teacher in England says to make a wish and a vow when you visit this statue. There’s extra weight to it here.”

Finally we find seats before the not-emerald likeness. I press my bare feet into the stone floor, finding solace in its coolness. My head bows. My palms meet. And my heart is racing. Because I’m praying with everything I’ve got. Please, please, *please*. Let me and Kyle conceive a baby.

And then I make a promise. To practice, always, at my very very best.

Day 15

The pilgrimage has now come to its end.

Kyle and I have an earlier flight than everyone else, so we pack our bags, call a taxi, and stop by our teachers' room to say goodbye. I try and fail again to adequately express my gratitude for this experience. I learn that there are some things words could never capture. I trust that my teachers know my heart well enough, that they can intuit the sheer thankfulness there.

They chant a blessing for me and Kyle—*sabba-Saṅhānubhāvena sadā sotthī bhavantu te*—for the entire duration of which, I weep with pure joy.

Back at home

Kyle and I try again to conceive, then enter the two-week limbo of not knowing whether or not it worked.

Amidst the uncertainty, I spend a lot of time in reflection, investigating why our failed attempts have brought me again and again to the point of devastation. So many tears. So much suffering. But now, instead of shoving it down or pushing it away, I sit with it as a willing student. Allow its truths to reveal themselves. And soon I recognize all the ways I'd been conditioned to desire parenthood, to equate it with self-worth. The way I grew up hearing "*when* you have kids," never "*if*." The way that women who "had it all" always had two or more children, while childless adults were gossiped about as weirdos or deviants or objects of pity. The way that, in the incessant messaging of both social and traditional media, not only is parenting commonly mythologized as the best and highest and purest form of affection, but people who never take on that role are sometimes dismissed as incapable of fully understanding or experiencing the feeling of love.

These delusions lose their power the second I see them. None of them are fair or true. Parenthood can be a choice, made with careful thought and intention. Childless adults can (duh) be whole unto themselves. And whether or not we ever have a baby, Kyle and I already live a beautiful life of joy, discovery, and love. Whatever happens from here, it's going to be great.

A few days later I end up getting my period, and I do feel a pang of disappointment. But strangely, for the first time, no pinch of Impatience.

There's some timing at play. I just need to trust it.

One week later

A bomb drops in Kyle's career. It blows up all our plans for the immediate future. Extreme stress. Anxiety. We have to take some pressure off ourselves, so we decide to skip our try at conception this month. Yeah, that's definitely a good idea.

I really need to step away for a second, so I hop in the car and go to a yoga class. I park and then enter the studio doors, kick off my shoes and roll out my mat, stretch my body and breathe through every movement: downward dog, cat cow, thread the needle, forward bend. Then right in the middle of pyramid pose, I sense an emergence in my belly. Not a baby, but a breakthrough.

I—

I don't—

I don't want it anymore.

I don't want to have a baby.

A lightning clap epiphany. Because as it is, life is already difficult. Even after it gets easier, it will inevitably get harder again. And I wish for our lives to become more and more easeful, spacious, quiet, and free. A child—and all the time, energy, and money that a child requires from conception through adulthood, and in some cases long after that—would crush my quiet dream like an adorable wrecking ball.

Besides, to make a life is to make a life of suffering. Even if Kyle and I were perfect parents and our hypothetical child were blessed with optimal health, they would still have to navigate aging, sickness, and death. Sure, there are immense joys in life that might outweigh its many cons, but I love this existence only because I've swum through oceans of suffering to reach the hard-won shores of relief—and I still have many more oceans ahead of me. I have no desire to bring someone into the world and force them through those same arduous swims, those same near-drownings.

Many people benefit from having kids, and I'm so happy for them. I ask why they enjoy being parents and the most compelling answer is, "When I had a baby, I learned to love selflessly." And I think, I know this love already. With Kyle. This love dwells in every cell of my being. It's everywhere around me. It's the air that I breathe.

At the end of the yoga class, the instructor cues us in and out of the pose named for corpses. And when I stand, I rise into a new life. Everything the same. And different.

Fresh hope. Possibility. But when I return to our home and hang our keys on its hook, I'm too scared to talk about my epiphany. Too big of news—especially on this day, already dizzy with change and worry.

But Kyle, of course, can sense that something's on my mind. I sense also that they won't drop their questioning until I do share. So out pours all my yoga thoughts—and, turns out, Kyle's been pondering all the same things.

“Wouldn't it be—well not funny, but kind of funny,” I say, “if after all the times I cried because I wasn't pregnant, we decided not to have a kid after all?”

“It wouldn't be funny,” says Kyle. “It'd make perfect sense.”

The year since

After many more discussions about it, Kyle and I decide that we're already a complete family.

(Well, us and our dog.)

Looking back on the conception process, even though it was thoroughly shitty along the way, I'm so grateful now for the many lessons it taught us. We learned how to make decisions truly together, to take one step at a time as an equal and honored partnership. How to celebrate each other's boundaries around intimacy. How to hold each other with exquisite care. To share our hearts so wholly and vulnerably. To put our love first and foremost. Always.

Kyle's my greatest inspiration in this life. From them, I'm able to accept feedback that I would violently reject from anyone else. *With* them, I find the necessary safety to bring even my darkest demons to forgiveness and light. And *for* them, my heart has softened and sweetened from metal shards to candy floss. To the benefit of not just my partner,

but everyone in my life. So we keep practicing together—at our very very best.

These days, I'm still not interested in joining noisy crowds, but when the finish line of a half-marathon lands right in front of our local grocery store, I also don't mind wading through the sweaty hordes. When an acquaintance rambles forever without making a point, I listen with half a mind on my lengthening breaths and I find the next window for leaving politely. When Kyle takes extra time before we have to leave the house together, I remember all the instances when they've showered me with patience and I relish the opportunity to return that kind favor. Most of the time, anyway. As always, I am human. I am imperfect.

Occasionally I still hear the hum of Impatience, but it's become muted enough so I don't think it's the main theme of my suffering anymore. My biggest challenge has shifted since to something else. Which means, ah, how wonderful.

Another chance to practice.

About the author

Grace sees every single person as a teacher, but the people who most deeply impacted their practice are Kyle Harter, Ayya Santussika, Ayya Cittananda, Luang Por Gunha, and Ajahn Sumedho.

All respectful thoughts, questions, and conversations are welcome by emailing hello@gracetalicelee.com.

More titles

Find this and other books by searching
the full name “Grace Talice Lee” on Amazon:

Deathless Monkey

Love of Three Lifetimes

Selly's Plan