

TRIBUTE TO THE LATE PHRA TERRY

“I am only a monk”¹

The late venerable *Suratano Bhikkhu*, as he was fonder of being called by this name than the honorifics of Luang Phor or Luang Ta Terry as he eschewed the strictures associated with hierarchical structures and the perceived aura of ecclesiastical titles. He regarded himself first and foremost as a simple *Bhikkhu*², or monk and was happy to be known as such. He strove to live his life obeying the monastic code³ and keeping the traditions of Buddha's Sangha⁴ to which he belonged.

This venerable monk passed on peacefully in his sleep, on Tuesday 7th August 2012⁵, in Hang Dong, Chiangmai. It was probably early that morning that he passed away as the night attendant has spoken to him at about 5 am when got up to go to the toilet. The late venerable sir had complained of some chest or breathing discomfort, but he settled back to sleep in the normal fashion recalled the attendant, who left his round of duty at about 7 am when another took over. Two attendants have been administering to his needs after he had a fall in the winter of 2009 when he broke his hip and was hospitalised for a protracted period of time.

Prior to that time the venerable sir became stricken with Parkinson's disease about 2006 and which saw his health declined dramatically from late 2007 onwards. Once Parkinson's took hold he became a shade of his former vibrant self requiring assistance to stand up, sit and walk - something which he had always disliked. The venerable sir was a fiercely independent person, preferring to help himself in just about everything. But his gait became unsteady and he had difficulty holding up his head and became a bit hunched. Initially he laughed off the afflictions, which he attributed to *kamma*; he said: “*Old kamma has caught up*”.

Yet for all his discomfort and obvious pain, Phra⁶ Terry was totally detached and benign. He appeared introspective either meditating or just quietly observing how his mortal coil was slowly being ravaged. There was no discernible anxiety, disappointment, frustration or anger; or, resignation either, but serene composure borne of knowledge of the Noble Truth of Suffering. In mundane language, it was the normal natural process of aging, contracting illnesses and dying and so he let *kamma* take its toll on his body without a hint of protest.

But his mental faculties remained sharp and lucid to the very end. When Parkinson's first appeared, he revealed that he was using meditation to control its deleterious effects; and there wasn't the uncontrolled “shakes” so typical of the illness. If one wasn't closely observing him, one would miss the occasional “shakes” which were so imperceptible. He could eat his food unaided and go about normally as well. It was only after his neck was rendered stiff and stooped that his mobility was impaired. Of course, things took a turn for the worse after he fell. *Kamma* has dealt another blow to his body. It was as he had described how even the Lord Buddha himself succumbed to sickness and decay. None is exempted from this cycle of birth and death until one has achieved Enlightenment and to Nibbāna. This is one clear and unequivocal message of his life. There are lots more as his disciples and devotees will recount their own individual memories of this beloved monk.

¹ Affectionately to us all his disciples, Phra Terry, the Venerable Suratano Bhikkhu or more formally, Luang Phor or Luang Ta (in Thai Holy Father), the former Terence Barnett Magness. On at this day 17th November, at Wat Kamet monks will chant and lay folks will make merit to mark the 100th day of his passing.

² An alms-collector, the Pali expression used to describe a Buddhist monk.

³ The Code consists of 227 rules or precepts, the breaking of the serious ones would mean expulsion from the Order of Monks.

⁴ Order of Monks in the Buddhist Tradition

⁵ On 15th- 17th November at Wat Kamet, monks will chant and lay folks will make merit to mark the 100th day of his passing. His cremation will be held on 20th December 2012 at Wat Dhadethong, Ekamai, Bangkok which will be preceded by monks chanting the Abhidhamma and his ashes will be interred as he has wished at Wat Kamet on 23rd December in the Stupa that he had built.

⁶ Reverend or Venerable Sir in Thai

When Phra Terry passed on, he was aged 83, no doubt a ripe old age. According to him the Buddha lived until only 80 and anything beyond 80 would be regarded as ripe and old. In my eyes, another great and virtuous person passes on but his legacy endures. His life was one that was steeped in the footsteps of his Masters, the Buddha, Luang Phor Wat Paknam⁷ and other teachers of yore. True to his vows as a monk, for once he has ordained, he did so for an entire life, an impeccable and exemplary life of virtue, learning and cultivation marked by kindness and compassion for all, not just for his disciples and devotees, but all sentient beings.

On one occasion when a small group of us visited him when he was still residing in his *kuti*⁸ at Wat Doi Sutep, and he had been away for a couple of weeks, on his return to the *kuti* he checked to see whether rats had eaten the sack of uncooked rice that he had left for them in the basement during his absence. The rodents did enjoy their repast quite obviously as the rice was gone! Then the monk instructed one of us to ensure that there were enough supplies for them as he was going away to reside at Wat⁹ Kamet for the *pansa*¹⁰. Not only were the rats taken care of, the ants were respected as well. An army of ants had invaded his chest of drawers where he kept copies of the *Vistas*, *Long View* and other books and when he was about to retrieve copies for us, he found a huge infestation; thousands of the creepy crawlies had taken refuge in the drawers and the books during the raining season. The entire chest of drawers had to be emptied out and the ants sent their way. But he reminded us not to harm the ants, but to merely shoo them away. “*Leave the drawers out in the open in the sun so that the ants can escape unharmed*” was his command. In this way an army of tiny invaders were freed. Were they spared because they were among his Dhamma books, one wonders.

If anecdotes of this nature reveal the quality and character of a person; there are legions to recall. There are so many that it is hard in a few pages to describe all his attributes and virtues and do him justice. A few will suffice.

When we were trying to write a little biographical sketch to accompany his books which he had given us permission to publish online, he had to be persuaded to let us write an introduction about him. His initial reaction was “*No need, I am just a monk, just mention the name of Suratano Bhikkhu will do. It is not about me but about the Dhamma, the Buddha’s Teachings*”. He finally relented and recounted some personal details for us to publish. Then, he would say with regard to the first draft introduction, “*No need to talk so much about me..... a short account will do.*” A two-pager was already too much, so we reduced it to a single page! He was so unlike other authors, who would want to have their works and perceived attributes extolled in excruciating detail, complete with pictures, and, if possible, accompanied by a symphony of accolades and couched in glowing terms. Not our beloved Phra Terry who conceived of himself as a monk first, and last, not more.

So on that Tuesday morning, the news of his passing struck me like a bolt of lightning. Suddenly I felt that sense of vacantness that a teacher and, if I dared call him friend, an extremely dear friend, who has guided and mentored me for more than two decades is gone. His passing wasn’t unexpected but that he should decide to leave a day before our appointed meeting was a puzzle. But such is life and death, uncertain as to their timing or quality but their inevitable occurrence is a certainty.

The Wednesday date was our postponed appointment; the earlier scheduled meeting set for the previous Sunday was vacated to allow him time to visit the stupa that he was building and nearing completion at Wat Kamet at Chomtung. The abbot of the Wat recounted the late monk’s baffling request for a small chamber to be built underneath the main Buddha image of the Stupa during this visit. While agreeing to do so, he didn’t quite realise the purpose. Could it be for the internment of Buddha images and other relics or another purpose? He

⁷ The Great Being who reinstated the concept of the *Dhammakaya* as taught by the Buddha. See Phra Terry’s biographical account *Life and Teachings of the Chao Khun* available gratis online at www.triple-gem.net

⁸ A small hut or cottage that a monk resides in

⁹ Temple or monastery in Thai

¹⁰ The yearly 3-month rains retreat that obliges monks to reside at one location except for short absences of not more than a week

was happy to oblige but when Phra Terry passed on two days later, the abbot said, “*I now know why!*” The abbot recounted this incidence to us as we gathered to pay formal respects to his body at Wat Kamet the afternoon of Wednesday 8th August marking the start of the official funeral wake.

I had not seen him for over two years but we had spoken over the phone. And, I was eagerly looking forward to seeing him again. Although he agreed to meet up with me, quite clearly I wasn’t expecting that it would be at the hospital mortuary where I was fortunate enough to accompany his nephew, grandnephew and two nieces to claim his body. I felt incredibly sad that I won’t be having those instructive and insightful conversations any more. Yet, I felt a sense of relief that my beloved teacher who suffered so much physically was now freed of time’s ugly and painful ravages. In the end, it was bitter sweet that the inevitable happened. When I looked at his face at that time, that evening at about 8 pm, I dare say that there was a hint of a faint smile as if to say, “*We do meet up again, don’t we?*” He was serene and calm and as if in peaceful slumber. In my heart, I uttered my silent good bye: “*Good bye, my beloved Sir, fare thee well*”. I should say that Phra Terry had a dry sense of humour as well.

As I sat in the hospital corridor waiting with his relatives to complete the paperwork, I began to recall what his life stood for; what and how he had taught me and so many others during his long and fruitful life. He taught me not just about the Sublime Dhamma, but also about being a good human being, for as he put it, “*it was basic*” to be moral. His passing calls into clear relief one’s own life and how one lives it. For it would be too late when one has passed on and then one realises that it was a life not lived “rightly” in accordance with the Dhamma.

The late bhikkhu has indeed taught me excellently through his own life’s work and his words – spoken and written. That mortal life is temporary and fraught with danger and that it could end without much warning; that all life in the mundane world is subject to birth, old age, sickness, decay, and ultimately death itself as explained by the First Noble Truth. The Buddha’s teachings of *anatta*¹¹ and *anicca* rang loud and clear. Then, the even more important question, where is he now? Where, would one be when one dies? The answers to these are in the Buddha Dhamma and they are recalled and recounted, explained and expounded in his written words concisely and succinctly..... I have studied his books and I should know. So often he had reminded me: “*Life is dangerous*”. And, that the bulwark against the dangers of negative *kamma* is the refuge of the Triple Gem and one’s own stock of *punna* and *parami*.

I quickly recall the late venerable sir’s lasting legacy – his written works, of some 20-odd published books, how over the last almost quarter of a century¹², I and many of his disciples and devotees, had the good fortune to contribute to their printing and publication, how in 2006 my partner and I embarked on converting his works into electronic form; the times we spent with him reviewing the works before publication online; how happy he was to be able to offer them *gratis* to all earnest seekers – it was a fulfilment of his unspoken wish to make available the wisdom of the Lord to earnest people from around the world. The late venerable sir chose the name of our website from a list we made up. For us at www.triple-gem.net, 2006 was a banner year for putting his works online and he was well pleased. The site went “live” on New Year’s Day of 2007 because it was an auspicious day, when people all over celebrated a new beginning. So every succeeding anniversary would also be equally auspicious and celebratory. How simple, how clever!

A couple of years later, we published in printed form *The Brood of Time - Echoes of a Distant Spring*, in which he hypothesises that Tolstoy was the rebirth entity of the English Bard. In arguing that thesis, he dissected the highlights of Tolstoy and Shakespeare’s personal lives with incredible insight, and explained how signal events in their respective lives could have been actuated by their common *kammic* thread. It was a fascinating book to

¹¹ Amorphous plurality – Phra Terry’s rendition often interpreted as “non-self; not self, egoless-ness” by others; see his works e.g. *Long View*, Appendix 1.

¹² His older friends and disciples participated in the cost of printing and publication from the early 60s.

edit. The manuscript lay in his drawer gathering dust for many years until Phra Pandit¹³ started proof reading part of it for him in 2005/06. Then, it was over to us at *triple-gem.net* to do the rest and bring it to publication. We proofread, edited, and designed the book's jacket, selected the printer and funded the entire cost of printing, its publication and distribution as well. It was a huge project for amateur publishers and we felt privileged to be so entrusted.

When we delivered the initial printed copies in bright colours to him in person, he was delighted. He was well pleased for it represented the successful conclusion of an effort which began some 20-odd years earlier. It was equally fascinating to realise how he could have written it in the first place without the aid of a world class library. We attributed that to his absolutely amazing power of recall, not just of these and other writers' works that made the book possible. If one reads his *Vistas*, *Altitude* or *Samma Dithhi*, one could see him quoting the ancient sages from Plato to Lao Tzu. During our discussions on *The Brood*, he was literally quoting Shakespeare and Tolstoy without the benefit of his reference texts. We had to scurry to ours; he merely said: "*No need, I can remember.*"

I recall many an incident when he discoursed on the *Dhamma* at the request of his disciples and they would quickly whip out their notebooks or tape recorders and studiously tried to take down all the pearls of wisdom to which he would chuckle and say: "*Better to store it in the memory than in those things. You can't take them with you when you die*". The embarrassed ones would stop copying and listen intently but with a concerned look, for they worry that as soon as the discourse ends, the memory would take flight. We common folks believe the Confucian expression: "The faintest ink is better than the most retentive memory" but not Phra Terry. It is a dilemma indeed for simple folks: to achieve perfect record keeping in external depositories or perfect insight within?

Yet, Phra Terry maintained meticulous accounts of all donations collected for the innumerable projects that he helped raised funds for. A distinction has been drawn by him so that simple folks can carry on the projects even after his death with the funds that he had collected. The power of his foresight can't be missed, for when he passed on, the very next day other monks and disciples were already concerned about the funds that he had collected. These funds were to build brand new temples to stupas, Buddha images to Dhamma Salas, pay for the amenities that the community needs, e.g. supply of school books or repair and maintain old temple walls and *kutis*... They realised that the meticulous accounts provided not just excellent bookkeeping records, but they enabled the late monk to scrupulously adhere to the donors' intent or wishes as to the funds' myriad applications, as well. So in this regard, Phra Terry demonstrated to us that there is a place for meticulous record-keeping, and that is, when one is so entrusted with money. This is particularly more so for a monk. Such was his foresight; for, his relatives and the members of the Sangha were duly impressed not just by the size of the donations accumulated by Phra Terry but by his proper accounts for the noble works.

With regard to the study of Dhamma, many a time we would bring to his attention a Dhamma book written by a well-known writer, and we would ask him for his opinion; his response would be concise. "*Yes, it is a well written book, but by a scholar. The author is not a meditator.*" We quickly learn that mundane erudition and an elegant pen are absolutely no substitute for penetrative insights gained from attaining to *Dhammakaya* status and from that lofty height through meditation to see and know what the Buddha taught. With this understanding we realised the importance of meditation which he constantly emphasised.

As his disciples and devotees, we all wish to make merits and so we try to snow him under with mundane goodies especially when we are concerned that he lived alone literally on the mountain top of Doi Sutep and would be without adequate food and necessaries. To many of us, he ate poorly either subsisting on a small quantity of rice or a packet of instant noodles, each day. Or, whenever available, the main meal of the day

¹³ Bhikkhu Pandit Cittasamvaro

could well be just a handful of potato chips! That he was surviving on such meagre fare made us more resolved to stock up his ladder to which we would hear his usual protest: “No, I have already so much of this and that, I can’t keep them all, I am only a monk”. The protest became a little shrill when devotees peppered him with food, electronic devices such as computers, cameras, cooking apparatus and so forth. He couldn’t possibly stock all these - 20 dozen bottles of multivitamins, 12 leg massagers, 50 towels, 100 electric ovens, 15 typewriters, or, as some would insist, bottles of hair shampoo and conditioners. Many a monk would gladly accept the latest version of the i-phone and i-pad because that’s the new-fangled thing and they could, arguably, stay connected with their devotees, relatives, friends and the like. After all, the late venerable Suratano Bhikkhu, has devotees and disciples by the hundreds, if not, thousands. In order not to disappoint us he would accept whatever was offered (including the hair shampoo and conditioner) and he would promptly ask that they be given to the novices of the Wat or other appropriate recipients. Or, as in the case of the shampoo and conditioner, to me for I still have my hair and happened to be present. In this way, we made merits through the practice of alms giving or *dana*.

Whenever he was invited to travel outside Bangkok or Chiangmai, again we hear this typical protest “I am a monk and why do I need to travel to see the world?” Then he would gently remind or chide us and quote Lao Tzu, the ancient Chinese philosophy who said:

*“Without a step out of doors
The whole world may be known”*

Indeed, **he was just a monk**, seemingly marooned, as it were, on the mountain top of Doi Sutep, outside Chiangmai for much of his later years, some 30-odd years; and yet, this monk knew everything. Could meditation be the key?

We were often astounded with his up-to-date information about the goings-on in the world, some incident that has occurred in Bhutan, the US or some obscure places like a village in India or China. How does he know without the benefit of the internet, the computer and books and magazines? Yes, the TV and radio are a great provider of news and information and he did watch or hear certain programs. May be he has heard them from other disciples who brought them to his notice, but he was certainly up-to-date. But, what about the information about Plato, Lao Tzu, Tolstoy, Shakespeare and Whitehead to name a few? At his *kuti* at Doi Sutep, he didn’t have a library, but only a handful of books that he had brought with him when he left Wat Paknam for Chiangmai some 30+ years ago. Yet, Phra Terry could quote their works as if he had just read them.

We lay no claim to being the closest disciples to the late Phra Terry or, the ones who has had the undoubted privilege and boon to know him for almost a quarter of a century. They are others that were his friends long before he renounced the world and don the robes and walk in the footsteps of the Great Being. That we knew something of him was due to his generosity, his kindness and compassion to permit us to visit him, pay respects to him and clarify *Dhamma* points that baffled us. Or, to seek guidance on how to deal with mundane problems and matters that afflicted us, but from the angle of the Law of Kamma which he knew a great deal more than us, in the fervent hope that with such wise guidance, we may create less negative *kamma* and so save ourselves from some strife, if at all possible.

As a monk, he taught us the Sublime Dhamma in ways that no other has done for us through his works and his words. For one thing, without Phra Terry, we personally would not have become a little more knowledgeable about the Eternal Dhamma; we would still be floundering in the dark. It would have been impossible, not knowing any Thai to learn about the *Dhammakaya* and realise what it entails, at least on an intellectual level. Without Phra Terry’s translations of the Great Being, the late Chao Khun of Wat Paknam, Luang Phor Sodh’s

Teaching into English, we would certainly be the poorer for it. The late Great Being expounded and taught at length about the *Dhammakaya* and how and why the *Dhammakaya* is central to one's quest for Enlightenment, Ultimate Release from all pain and suffering and the cycle of rebirth and, most importantly, critical to attaining to Nibbāna. And, as Phra Terry would emphasise, "*and to therein abide*" for all eternity. If it had not been for Phra Terry and Luang Phor Wat Paknam, we would go so far as to say that we may not be at all convinced that Buddhism is for us.

When discussing points of the Dhamma, sometimes a disciple would ask a point, and his response was almost certain to be: *Have you read the book?* referring primarily to *Vistas*. He would say: "*The answer is there, go read it. Buddha has explained it and it is laid out in the book.*" The constant excuse would be: "*Yes, I have read but I can't understand.*" Or, more likely, "*I have read, but not the whole book, it is soooo hard.*" Phra Terry would chuckle a little and then encourage the disciple to persevere. Then, he would proceed to explain or expound on the question or point asked. Over the years, we have heard the same points being raised over and over again, sometimes by the same people. What's clear is that people prefer to repose their faith in their teacher rather than take on the task of cultivating themselves. Aren't we all susceptible to this inclination? But in reminding us constantly to cultivate for oneself, the late Phra was only emphasising what the Buddha had taught:

"Self is the refuge of self."

So, Phra Terry's patient and constant reminder to them to read the book and practise the Dhamma, in particular to meditate, was to drive home the point that in Buddhism, Enlightenment may only be achieved by oneself, and through one's own efforts, literally superhuman and sustained efforts exercised over a prolonged period of time. It is a long and arduous journey but entirely worthwhile to embark on and to attain to. That without studying the Dhamma, which is basic to one's cultivation, the task would be even that much harder, but of course, all depends on the nature of one's own constitution, some are more inclined to study, practise and meditate; others, merely devotional, and practise by way of dana giving and living correctly through the careful and mindful observance of the five (5) precepts, the *Panca Sila* in their daily lives.

But for us, without understanding the true nature of the *Dhammakaya*, within us, we couldn't have even begun to comprehend the tapestry of the most refined and sublime Dhamma. Because when I first started to learn about the Dhamma I read about the life and times of the Buddha himself. The usual story told by many a writer and the synopses written about his Teaching essentially recounts a tale of an ancient crown prince who gave up his claim to the throne in favour of ascetism, and discovery of Enlightenment. The superficial accounts bear no resemblance to the Truth; and, Enlightenment was expressed as more of an intellectual or esoteric exercise than a lifelong cultivation of virtue and wisdom, *paramis* and *punna*, and most importantly the total and complete eradication of ignorance as the fundamental cause of our trials and tribulations, pain and suffering. So, as a teenager, I rejected the Buddha's teachings or rather, as I subsequently discovered the purported renditions of His teaching by uninformed or poorly informed writers. Those purported accounts put me off Buddhism for some 20 years of my life. I returned to Buddhism through a circuitous route - studying Taoism, Christianity and Hinduism and other religions assiduously on the way.

My journey back to Buddhism started with the *Vistas*. When I read it that late spring night some 20-odd years ago, I was staggered, shocked and extremely happy: Here was the invitation of the Great Being, the Buddha Himself, to come try and test out the His formula for Enlightenment. It was what I had been searching for all my life, that if one cultivates according to the Teachings of the Buddha, one would become enlightened.

At the time, the Lord was speaking to the unconverted, an ascetic known as Nigroda, a teacher of another school and who challenged the Lord on his Teachings. Unlike the snake oil salesperson, the Lord wasn't giving

his invitation to swell the ranks of his congregation or to wrench them from the bosoms of their loved ones, teachers or their cherished ways of life to Him, but to give them – provided they are prepared to work for it, the greatest gift of all, the Gift of Eternal Happiness in *Nibbāna*. Phra Terry quoted the Lord thus:

“It is for the rejection of suffering that I teach, living according to which teaching all corruption shall be put away and wholesome things brought to increase. By which even in this very life, by this own supernormal powers, a man may realise the knowledge and the wisdom of perfect insight, and therein abide”¹⁴

It was greatly re-assuring to me, a great comfort that the Teaching of the Buddha was alive and well and that an aspirant who earnestly seeks will find. Hope and opportunity are the twin well springs of life. And, for me, a seeker, there is hope and the opportunity to work out that hope to fruition. Here was also a teacher who could allow me to expand my horizon. Here was a teacher, who is more than a teacher, who was a friend and a comfort and joy on this arduous journey. Two weeks after reading the book, I had the first opportunity to meet Phra Terry in person and he was indeed, a joyous introduction to a friend and relationship that was to last until the very end.

Central to the Sublime Dhamma is the concept of the Dhammakaya which Luang Phor Wat Paknam rediscovered, and then tirelessly explained and expounded all his life. In this regard, Phra Terry, too never tires of reminding us of the importance of meditation and the 7th position at the centre of our being, the 18 kayas and all that that entail. Throughout his life, he repeatedly emphasized what LP Wat Paknam taught. It is best to quote from his books.

“This is THE Way to Enlightenment

It is with the Dhammakaya, not the normal eye, that the Triple Gem is realised. It is the way by which it is reached. It is the only genuine way by which the Triple Gem is reached. And this practice and this attainment is not beyond the ability and nature of human beings even in this period of time many are those who have attained to this Dhammakaya. Those who have so attained are filled with bliss of body and mind...”¹⁵

These words are from his book on the Life and Teaching of Luang Phor Wat Paknam who also emphasized the “stopping of the mind” thus-

“How to do this? You stop right in the centre of each sphere which appears, right into this void centre, centre in centre, stop still. This brings great power to the mind. This is the teaching of the Blessed One, and he who stops his mind lives according to the teaching of the Blessed One”¹⁶.

Then, Luang Phor Wat Paknam went on to say:

We must proceed deeper and deeper, void into void, on and on. We are looking for ourselves, remember? There is no end to delusion until that purity is reached which no Mara can disturb, having passed beyond. Therefore proceed from the crudest to the most refined of Dhammakaya forms, deeper and deeper, beyond counting. From base to base, nucleus, level, moment, part, seed, and offshoot. As long as there remain seeds of

¹⁴ Digha Nikaya (ii) v.56-7 and the quotation appear in the first paragraph of Chapter One, *Vistas*

¹⁵ Page 32, *The Life and Teachings of the Chao Khun Mongkol Thepmuni and the Dhammakaya*, triple-gem.net edition 2007

¹⁶ Page 32, *Ibid*

defilement, Mara can perturb the mind, As long as the end of these selves has not been reached one remains a slave, neither a master nor free..."

And, so we see the passing of a noble disciple and Bhikkhu of the Buddha who devoted his entire life to living it as a monk and teaching as one. He shall be remembered of most fondly for his qualities as an outstanding human being and as a teacher, and friend.

To the late Phra Terry, we pay our humblest and most grateful tribute to him as our most reverend head that showed us the way. He will always be in our hearts.

May he attain to *Nibbānic* Bliss! Sadhu!

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