

A Journey to Thailand

Andy's Last Journey

by

Wilson Young

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17th February 2001

This journal is exactly one year late in the writing. On this day, February 17th 2000, Andy Young, a 32 year old photojournalist set out from his home in Nottingham in order to make a rather special journey to North East Thailand. Many thousands of young people like Andy flock to Thailand each year, but very few penetrate to the neglected region known as Isarn, and certainly none for the purpose for which he was going.

The use of the word 'was' implies that it never happened. Unfortunately this is so – it never happened. The journey from England to Thailand is about 6000 miles. Andy had completed just 30 of these miles in his car on the way to his parent's in Stockport prior to his departure, when his car was involved in an accident. Andy was killed outright, and his sister Sarah who was with him was badly injured. He was due to fly to Bangkok the next day.

So why *was* Andy going, and *what* made his journey so different?

12 years ago, a Buddhist monk Prah Maha Laow Panyasiri (known to us as Ajahn, the Thai word for 'teacher') came from Thailand to live in England. He came from Isarn as an orphan, and was brought up as a monk in Wat (Temple) Mahathat in the heart of Bangkok. Ajahn's first home in England was at Wat Buddhapadipa in Wimbledon, and he is now Abbott of The Buddhavihara Temple in Birmingham.

Shortly after his move to England, Maha Laow, along with an English businessman, (who has since moved to Thailand and ordained as a monk) set up a charity, The Anglo Thai Foundation, to raise money to help poor and orphaned children in Isarn with their education. Each year members of the Foundation travel with Ajahn to Thailand to visit the schools and distribute grants.

Andy was to have accompanied them, with a view to writing an article (this article) about the Foundation. Andy was not a Buddhist, but as Ajahn remarked 'he had the Buddha nature within him'.

When he heard of the accident, Ajahn postponed his flight, and came to see us (us being Andy's Mum and Dad, Jean & Wilson) at the hospital. He and the other monks from Birmingham chanted for Andy, and for Sarah, who was badly broken, and due to undergo several months of hospitalisation and surgery. The three of us vowed, there and then, that we would, some day, make Andy's journey for him, and write his article.

So it's now twelve months on, Sarah is almost mended, and we are about to set off. Little did we realise at the time just *how* successful our journey would be, nor what would be the outcome.

Appropriately, we have today held a memorial ceremony to mark Andy's first anniversary. The monks came from Birmingham, as did many of our friends and family, so the function also served as a send off party.

Some practical points. The whole party comprised of ourselves, 9 other Foundation members, Ajahn and, joining us in Thailand, several lay supporters and an assortment of monks. 'We' could refer to anything from myself to the whole party: we were not all joined at the hip. 'We drove' means we were transported in minibuses by local drivers, particularly in Bangkok anything else would be verging on suicidal. All conversations took place through interpreters, as, especially in the remote parts of Isarn, very few people have ever seen a 'farang' (foreigner) before, and English speaking is a rarity. Any mention of money has been converted from local currency (60 Baht = £1) for convenience.

Sunday 18th February

It is fitting that my journey should begin at a Temple: Wat Buddhapadipa in Wimbledon. Ajahn was already there when I arrived, having deposited Jean & Sarah at Heathrow. He had a veritable mountain of luggage (toys, books, clothes etc for the children – his personal luggage for three weeks consisted of one small attaché case), but his typical Thai reaction to my consternation about getting it all to the airport was 'It will be OK I think' Especially where monks are concerned, this is usually true, and in this case a fleet of cars would turn up in the morning.

I slept in the shrine hall – ever time I woke I could see the comforting outline of the Buddha silhouetted against the window. My companion David slept in the library to escape my snoring!

Venerable Silananda came to the airport to see us off, with the kind thoughtfulness that is characteristic of all the monks. We went in procession along the M4, and met up with the rest of the party at Heathrow.

There is little to say about any long haul flight, except here to say that the Thai warmth and hospitality we were to experience throughout our stay was already showing in the cabin crew. We were met at Bangkok at 6.30 in the morning by who else but a monk from Wolverhampton! Maha Samboon's home Temple is in Bangkok, and he just happened to be paying a visit. We loaded our suitcases and Ajahn's mountain of boxes into an assortment of trucks and minibuses, and set off into the notorious Bangkok traffic, heading for Maha Samboon's Temple (oh for the tranquillity of the M4) and thence to our hotel for a few hours sleep.

So much has been written about Bangkok by a myriad of travel writers, and the real purpose of this journal is to describe what is yet to come, so I will confine myself to aspects of the city which the average tourist either never sees, or doesn't recognise.

Millions flock each year to Wat Phra Kaeo and Wat Po to see the Emerald Buddha and the great Reclining Buddha. We went, with our monk, to pay the same respect to these as we do to the Buddha in our own shrine hall, or to my own small Buddha at home. One of the common western misconceptions is that the Buddha statues are icons of worship. We do not worship the Buddha – all that *any* Buddha image, great or small, does is to act as a reminder that the Buddha was a great teacher, whose teaching has lasted 2500 years, and that we all have the quality *within ourselves* to reach enlightenment. It is for this that we pay respect. Nevertheless there is an awesome quality about paying respect and doing a meditation practice in such a setting.

We had an audience with His Holiness Somdet Phra Nyanasamvara, the Supreme Patriarch of Thailand. He is a very old monk but with the eyes of a young man, and in spite of his grand title, he is just a (very revered) monk who lives in an ordinary, rather untidy, Wat. He wears plain saffron robes, and sits on the floor like any other

monk. The Supreme Patriarch is a supreme example of the Buddhist philosophy that material possessions are an encumbrance in the search for happiness, in total contrast to western attitudes.

Ajahn explained to him the purpose of our mission, and I presented him with a copy of the CD of the Buddhavihara monks chanting, and explained Andy's connection (the production of the CD was the last job that Andy did before he died).

He thanked us, wished us well, gave a Dhamma talk (sermon) in fluent Pali, the language of the Buddha's time, and blessed us. Normally blessing is done with a bamboo switch dipped in a bowl of water and flicked across the room. The Patriarch's version was a switch connected to a hosepipe with a trigger, but then he does bless a lot of people every day!

On another occasion we met with Phra Rajpariyatkosol the head monk of section 24 in Wat Mahathat. He is our monk's teacher, and is another very wise, very old man. Because of his infirmity he is allowed to sit in a chair, and walks only with the aid of a zimmer frame and oxygen. His body may be frail, but his eyes too are young and clear.

I presented him with a plaque of the Buddha I had made in my pottery class at home-inscribed 'To my Teacher's Teacher'. He seemed very touched, and proudly had his photograph taken.

Afterwards we offered lunch to the section monks, other monks from the Wat, and to visiting monks who were to travel with us. Often the names of Thai monks are difficult for westerners, so it is easier to refer to them by where they are currently living. Hence we had Ajahn Berlin and Ajahn Amsterdam (we even know an Ajahn Texas)

The monks sit on the floor to receive food, and finish eating by noon, when they begin a fast which lasts until the following daybreak when they go out on *bindabaht*, or alms round. This act gives rise to another of the western Buddhist misconceptions, that of 'begging'. A monk on alms round, or at any other time, is *not* begging, as he asks for nothing, and will only accept what is freely given. In fact it is the lay people who make offerings to the monks who feel gratitude, as by doing so they gain merit, which will assist in the next life as a few more steps forward towards enlightenment.

We spent a few days pottering around Bangkok preparing for our journey. The easiest way to potter (or to move at all with any speed) in this mad city is by river bus. The express river buses ply up and down the River of Kings, criss-crossing from pier to pier, weaving in and out between the traffic going along the river. At each stop, amongst the hoards scrambling on and off are invariably large numbers of monks going about their daily business. They always stand at the back, creating a vivid splash of saffron which can be seen from afar. On one occasion, a particularly large splash resolved into a contingent of novices, perhaps on a school outing, accompanied by a number of stern looking monk teachers. Novice monks they may be, but teenage schoolboys are the same the world over and need a stern eye kept on them. One time I saw a school turning out and the unsupervised novices were tripping each other up and throwing stones at each other, just like my pupils when I used to be a teacher in England.

Saturday 24th February

The night sleeper from Bangkok. Sounds like a good title for an old Bogart adventure movie. Bangkok station is a nightmare of heat and noise. Ajahn appeared, and seemed to commandeer all and sundry to load countless boxes and baskets on to the train. The boxes we had brought from England had been sent ahead with some of the party by minibus: this was what he had acquired while in Bangkok.

The sleeper compartments were, to use an estate agent's expression, compact, but adequate once all the luggage had been stowed and the bunks organised. The train left exactly on time at 9.00 p.m., and in the absence of anything better to do once the lights of Bangkok had been left behind, we retired for a reasonable night – the train chugging along at a sedate average of 35mph. Dawn came with breakfast and our first sight of Isarn, looking out of the back carriage at a single track stretching dead straight to the horizon in a flat landscape.

We pulled in to Si Sa Ket station, on time to the minute, at 6.24 am. At that time of day I could not work out why it had to be 6.24, rather than, say, 6.30: 'Thai Time' had become our by-word for 'very approximately' but evidently not where the railway timetable is concerned. The, by now expected, convoy was waiting for us, and we were taken to Ban Nong Rang village, about ½ hour drive out of town.

The village had organised a festival day: partly because of our arrival, partly to celebrate the 40th birthday of one of our party, but mainly as a fund raising day for the village Temple.

Particularly in rural Thailand, the Temple is the focus of social and communal, as well as spiritual village life: supporting the local monks is seen as very important, as they serve roles as teachers, doctors, social workers, counsellors and arbitrators of disputes, and so great ceremony was made of the day. The Temple grounds seemed to be overrun with small children and chickens, all equally excited.

The centre of activity was the sala – a large open sided structure on stilts – rather like a village hall in England, in which the villagers had gathered to listen to the monks chanting. This proved rather unnecessary – they could probably have been heard back in the town as the village had hired a public address system with speakers that wouldn't have looked out of place at a rock festival. All was well, if a little noisy, until another group of (rival) monks started in competition with an equally loud amplification system.

Our Ajahn was obviously in his element, he really was back home, as it was in this village that he was born and spent his early childhood, just like the children there today. He introduced us to one monk, a particularly auspicious chanter imported especially for the occasion who hopes to spend 'wassa', the monsoon rains retreat during which the monks do not travel, in Birmingham. Sitting in a remote village in Thailand discussing with a monk the idea of coming to Birmingham to escape the monsoon season seemed unreal, but in the usual Thai monk fashion I have no doubt that it will happen, he will turn up in Birmingham in June.

Fund raising Thai style consists of making 'money trees'. In the village money trees are constructed, a bit like artificial Christmas trees, out of split bamboo, with paper money attached. Much handling of change came into play, as five 20 baht notes look a lot better than one 100 baht note. All notes were carefully positioned, with the King's portrait the right way up, and the Anglo-Thai Foundation tree, conspicuous by the presence of several £10 notes was presented to the village Abbott with due pomp and ceremony.

We received his blessing and retired to take 'Temple showers' a trough of cold water and a tin bowl, extremely welcome and refreshing in the searing heat of the day. We then left the villages to their celebrations to drive to Ubon to do some shopping at, of all places, Tesco, carefully preserving till receipts to claim loyalty points back home!

We returned to the village at nightfall where the proceedings were drawing to a close with the villagers carrying one of the monks shoulder high on a chair around the Viharn, or shrine hall, to the accompaniment of much raucous noise – so much for the idea of Buddhist tranquillity- and after observing for a little while we retired to our hotel (*the* hotel – Si Sa Ket is barely on the map, let alone the tourist map) at the end of a long tiring but exciting day.

The next morning was spent in preparation for the grant presentations. The quaint nature of the Thai banking system necessitated carrying large sums of money and the children's pass books from one bank to another to make deposits. The standard Anglo-Thai foundation grant is, at the current rate of exchange, about £45 per year. This is awarded to those children who, in their teachers are the *most* deserving, both financially and academically (in a region which is economically poor compared to the rest of Thailand) and begins at primary school. Primary education is free but compulsory: however the Foundation grants help those children to attend school who otherwise might have poor attendance in order to help with family income and village work. At present the Foundation helps about 300 children, but I got the impression that this is the tip of a huge iceberg of equally deserving causes.

As we moved about the town on our business it was evident that 'farangs' of any description were an unusual sight. Very few westerners, tourist or business, come here, so we stuck out like sore thumbs. It was equally obvious that the local people knew *who* we were, and *why* we were in Si Sa Ket – the Foundation was big news on local radio, so it was easy to equate a farang with the Foundation, and everywhere we went we were met with the gracious 'wei' – the palmed hands, bowed head and the greeting of 'sawasdee'. Our return greeting (I confess that my Thai vocabulary doesn't extend very far past this 'hello') gave rise to beaming smiles or, in the case of young shop girls, fits of giggles.

Tuesday 27th February

Presentation day. As it is the Foundation's 10th anniversary, a grand day has been organised for the whole of Si Sa Ket province at the local Town Hall. Pupils were being transported from all over the province, some from as many as 100 km away, along the Cambodian border, in anything from a genuine school bus to a pick-up truck.

As the children began to arrive, and the hall filled with a buzz of excitement, the first impression was one of smart uniformity, school outfits being identical across the whole of Thailand. Bearing in mind that those present were, by definition, the poorest of a deprived region, they were all neatly turned out – the provision of a school uniform is evidently felt to be important – the girls in a blue & white sailor type blouse and skirt, the boys in khaki, not unlike my old Scout uniform.

Speeches of welcome were made, and then the pupils were called out onto the stage to receive their grants, along with a parcel containing Foundation exercise books, pencils & ruler, sweets etc. and a toy from the vast pile of boxes we had brought from England. I was touched to see a girl on the next table to me, proudly clutching a large cuddly black and yellow bee that I recognised as having been donated by Genevieve our granddaughter, Andy's daughter.

More speeches – to my horror I was called upon to speak, but years of experience of impromptu school assemblies came to my aid, and I talked about Andy, and the reason for our presence. Lunch followed, and then we were all called onto the stage to be showered with gifts, some addressed to individual sponsors, some just given in general. We received sarongs, cushions, ornaments, and bag upon bag of rice, dried chillies, garlic and shallots. The generosity of the poor, in giving so freely, was very moving: a gift of rice in Thailand is said to be particularly auspicious, as what is being given is the precious gift of the time it has taken to produce it, a marked contrast to the Western attitude of solving gift problems with a credit card. We were then treated to an exhibition of traditional Thai dancing executed in a most professional manner by pupils from some of the secondary schools the Foundation supports

Grants are made initially to primary pupils, but many have now graduated to secondary school, and their funding continues. It is very hard to make the decision to fund *just* children of primary age, only to cut off their lifeline when they most need it.

The day ended with thanks and farewells all round from pupils and teachers alike, who are acutely aware of the difference in the quality of life that the Foundation provides for so many children in the province.

Wednesday 28th February

There is an old Buddhist proverb, which translates as ‘You never know what is coming, the next breath or the next life’. Not only is this a good maxim to live by, it is also true that you never know what the day is going to bring. Today was scheduled as

a photoshoot at several schools in order to illustrate the work of the Foundation; it had a rather different outcome.

I set off with Suraphee, the Thai/English Secretary of the Foundation to visit the village school of Tumbol Takone about ¾ hour drive from Si Sa Ket.

The drive took us through the typical Isarn landscape – mile after mile of rice paddy fields, most of which had a solitary water buffalo mooching about in search of fodder. The province is almost exclusively agricultural, and poor at that. It doesn't have the rainfall of other regions in Thailand to support the lush crops of pineapples, all manner of fruit trees, coconut, timber etc which supports a more prosperous economy elsewhere. There is little government support, and almost no mechanisation in the agriculture: in Isarn, if a job has to be done, its done by hand, it was almost like stepping back into another century.

Baantae-chaba, the village school, has 125 pupils of primary school age. As we opened the minibus door, we were deafened by the noise of the local electricity generator? An army of chainsaw operators? At first I couldn't make it out, but then I realised the noise was coming from a single tree across the other side of the football pitch where a teacher was bellowing at the top of his voice to conduct a nature study lesson about, well, I never found out what they were called. The teacher caught one to show me, a huge bee like, but apparently harmless insect: after that we just referred to them as 'big buzzy things'.

But of course we had come to see the children. It was then that I met Suphara, chosen by her teacher as being typical of a Foundation pupil.

Suphara is 10. She is an orphan, her father died before she was born and her stepfather, being Chinese saw no point in supporting a girl. Her mother disappeared into Bangkok seeking work, leaving Suphara in the care of her Grandmother, who had died just two weeks before we arrived, so she is now in the care of her step-grandfather.

She is top of her class at school, and despite her primitive background has an ambition to be a doctor – and her teacher thinks she has the potential ability. I reflect on our own monk in Birmingham, who came from an almost identical background and is now nearing completion of his PhD.

Suphara's problem is that, although secondary education is free in Thailand, it is not compulsory. Her foundation grant is sufficient while at primary school, but the chances are that, being an orphan with nobody to support her, in a couple of years time she too would follow her mother to Bangkok to be swallowed up by, depending on her luck and morals, the construction industry or sex industry. There are in Thailand a number of regional secondary boarding schools funded by the Royal Family to cater especially for children like Suphara. The Foundation hopes to be able to gain a place for her, but to go there to she would have to be financially self sufficient, in that she would need a mere £250 a year to enable her to complete her school education.

Put on a spot, standing in the village hearing this story, any westerner who, like I have, has often in the past spent more than that amount on Christmas presents for Sarah and Andy would think the same as I did. I decided there and then that *we* would support Suphara through her secondary education. I had set out in the morning to take some photographs, and here I was, a few hours later with an honorary granddaughter!

I took photographs of Suphara, who was beginning to look somewhat bewildered by the turn of events which had been explained to her, and also of her classmates and the rest of the school, and then we were invited to her house in the village. She skipped happily across the fields as we plodded wearily behind in the afternoon heat. We caught up with her and met grandfather, still very sad at the death of his wife. He was a dignified, handsome man, who promptly went to his tree to cut down coconuts to offer us. As I had missed lunch in my haste to capture photographs of the children playing during their break, never was so simple an offering so gratefully received.

I had decided by this time that we should give Suphara a present, and a bicycle seemed appropriate: I suspect she must have thought I was rather mad when I attempted to measure her height using my camera neck strap as a makeshift tape measure.

We left the village in the late afternoon, and drove to the nearest bike shop – across the road from the hotel $\frac{3}{4}$ hour drive away (I thought of applying what we were doing to the context of an English geographical setting, and gave up, it was too crazy). Jean & Sarah, who had planned a day of rest, were somewhat dumbstruck at being dragged out to buy a bike, but they were thrilled at my news, and so we rushed across the road to the shop. A suitably sized sturdy bicycle was chosen, which came complete with

basket for school books and a magnificent pump, which looked capable of dealing with tractor tyres, all for the magnificent sum of £22.

Then it was back to the village, another $\frac{3}{4}$ hour journey. By the time we turned off the main highway it was growing dark: the lanes were lit by the glow of occasional fires where farmers were burning stubble prior to planting another rice crop, and we had to watch out for water buffalo as they wandered home from the fields, making cows on an English country lane look positively hurried.

We stopped off at the school to deliver the food gifts we had been given the previous day: it was impractical for us to bring them home and it would make a welcome addition to the 10p per pupil per day which is allocated for school meals. The big buzzy things were still hard at it – the solitary young teacher who lives on the premises said that she hardly notices them.

And so to Suphara's house. She was out. The village, like most, has a large communal sky dish to which a few of the larger houses are connected, and she was at a friend's house watching TV. Messengers were sent, she arrived back home and we presented her with her new bicycle. She seemed to be trying to remain impassive, but her eyes were shining as she rode up and down the path in front of the house. Very soon we had an audience as the whole village gathered around in the darkness. One small boy reached out to touch the pump which Suphara had put on the table but it was quickly taken off him and secreted away to the safety of the house.

We talked. We asked Suraphee to explain carefully to Suphara and her grandfather just what we were intending to do. It is difficult to tell whether she fully comprehended, almost impossible to put myself into the mind of a 10 year old in her position, faced with such a monumental change in her prospects. One of my first tasks on our return must be to write (via Ajahn) to both Suphara and her teacher to ensure that she knows that she need not worry about her future security at school.

Sadly it was time to leave. Jean, Sarah & I stood on the edge of the darkness and had a team hug. We have done this many times over the last year, to unite us when times were bad, but we little realised that one day we would be doing so in such strange surroundings, and with such a sense of satisfaction. Mission *more* than accomplished. Nothing will ever replace the loss of our son and brother, but one good thing has resulted from Andy's death: a small life has been saved from potential ruin, and he would have been proud of us for that.

Suphara wished us a safe and happy journey, and we drove off up the lane with the entire village turned out to wave us off. I know that we will be back there before too long. We had another $\frac{3}{4}$ hour drive back to Si Sa Ket. I had eaten only a coconut since breakfast. We were all tired, hot, dirty and hungry – but well satisfied with the day's events.

The following day we had a 3 hour drive to Buriram for another presentation. After the events of yesterday it felt almost like an anticlimax, but we had to remember that for the children in Buriram, it was their big day. Once we got there it was not difficult to raise our efforts. The school was large, covering all ages from kindergarten through to secondary. Only a small proportion of the pupils, about 50 in number, were to receive Foundation grants, but the whole school was in a state of excited bedlam. As we passed each classroom, hordes of small children came to the door to greet us, and their teachers were equally eager to come out to talk to us.

The format of the presentation was similar to that of Tuesday's, except that this time I escaped a speech, and we were all given personal gifts of sarongs, which were tied round our waists with great ceremony. I will treasure mine, and wear it with pride on Temple festival days in Birmingham, as a memento of a wonderful week.

We set off from Buriram in the afternoon to drive to the coast for a relaxing weekend at the seaside. 24 hours later (with an overnight stop) we bade farewell to our monks and boarded the ferry to Ko Samet island, and Andy's journey was over.

After a few days rest, the main party returned to England while Jean and I travelled up to Chiang Mai, where I sit, wearing my sarong, writing the first draft of my son's article.

I know that if we could transport everybody to that village outside Si Sa Ket, the work of the Foundation in raising funds would be easy: people would be queuing up at the door to offer sponsorship. I know that Andy would have been able to convey to readers of his article some of the feelings that we experienced that night. I hope that I have managed to do the same, so that some at least will feel moved to support the work of the Foundation. Suphara's story is not unique; she is (a fortunate) one of many.

River View Lodge

Chiang Mai

Thailand

6th – 14th March 2001

Postscript

Nearly twelve months have passed, and we *have* been back. Jean is now a Trustee of the Foundation, and she and I have just returned from the annual grant-giving trip. Sarah was unable to come with us: she has finished her PhD at Nottingham and now has a lecturers post there. I think she was a little sad that she was staying behind, particularly as we would be away on the anniversary of the accident, but after all she has been through, being unable to join us because of pressures of work was a good enough reason.

Some of the inner workings of the Foundation have become clearer to us. I now realise that last year we were passengers, and rather brain dead ones at that, still reeling from our loss. Added to this, our party this year was much smaller and so a greater burden of work fell upon us.

I now know how the gift parcels, or party bags as we called them, come into being. Jean & I volunteered to accompany Suraphee on a trip into Bangkok's Chinatown, a huge and bewildering maze of narrow streets and narrower alleyways crammed with market stalls of every description into which I am sure many western visitors could disappear without trace: Suraphee however seemed to have total control over our whereabouts. It was here that we purchased, after much hard bargaining, small gifts plus pens, pencils, rulers etc. for each of our 300 pupils – small gifts they may have been, but multiplied by 300 it came to a sizeable amount of shopping. We returned to our hotel by tuk-tuk, the motorcycle/rickshaw indigenous to much of south-east Asia. I was crammed into one with most of the shopping, Jean and Suraphee in another. The drivers seemed to feel it a point of honour to be first back to the hotel, consequently when we arrived I felt I was suffering from a combination of motion sickness and vibration white finger – there could be a market for tuk-tuk rides in a UK theme park!

Also while in Bangkok we were highly honoured to be guests at the funeral ceremony of a 95 year old monk from Wat Mahathat who had been instrumental in starting the programme of missionary monks to the west: on reflection of the process of cause and effect, it was because of this monk that Ajahn came to England, and so his actions in his lifetime caused me to be present at his funeral. I was privileged, in my role as

Secretary of our Temple in Birmingham, to be asked to light the candles and incense at the beginning of the ceremony.

The visit to Isarn aroused strange feeling. I have been to many tourist attractions around the world, and re-visited some. However nothing has compared to my feelings on arrival in Si Sa Ket and the surrounding villages: I have been here before, and probably in many cases no other Westerner has been since I was last here - I *knew* these people, and they knew me.

As for Suphara, we were pleased to see that her circumstances have changed for the better. Step-grandfather has gone away, and Suphara's aunt (who we met last year, having come on a temporary stay after her mother's death) has now moved, with her husband, back to the village on a permanent basis, and is looking after the family home. While still poor, they do not seem to be as destitute as last year and they now have some cows: when we arrived Suphara was out in the field bringing them home for the night, but she came running excitedly when she saw us arrive.

More importantly there is now a stable family home for Suphara, and the feeling now is that she would be happier attending the local secondary school from next year, so that she can live at home with her aunt, uncle and cousin. Although not as expensive as attending a Royal boarding school, this would still be an unaffordable drain on the family resources, so we shall continue to support her.

18th February 2004

It's three years to the day since we first embarked on our Thai adventures, and we are about to set off again. Because of the timing of the Anglo-Thai grant giving over recent years, it has inevitably been tied in with Andy's anniversary, and this year our departure once more coincides exactly.

Yesterday, just as we did three years ago, we had a little ceremony to mark 17th February. We have planted a tree in the Road peace section of the National Memorial Arboretum and we paid a visit, just Jean, Sarah and myself, to see how much it has grown.

This time we fly with Emirates Airline from Manchester. It is much closer to home, and Thai Airways don't fly out of Manchester. Several of the cabin staff are Thai however, and were very helpful: at the end of the flight they were thrilled when I presented them with the last of my good luck amulets. I bought a bagful from the market near Wat Mahathat on my last trip, and I need to replenish my supply as I give them to friends, and people who have been kind to me.

We fly with a degree of trepidation, and a computer. The trepidation is because this year we are the sole English representatives of the Foundation. Jean is now Secretary, and although the practicalities of the Grant Giving are organised by Ajahns Surapong, Warapon and Sanong, Jean is acutely conscious that all the Thai people will regard her as the voice of the ATF from England. More of the computer later on...

We arrive in Bangkok, and are met by Khun Wannee, a Thai lady who we first met at our audience with the Supreme Patriarch on our first visit. She has since become a Trustee, and a close friend – we regard her as a second daughter. She has visited us in the UK, and now we are to stay with her during our time in Bangkok. Her sister Tan and partner Thai (don't get confused, this is his nickname) come with their pick-up truck, as we have a mountain of luggage: in addition to our personal luggage for four weeks we have a bag full of pens, pencils & sharpeners for the children (kindly donated by our local Lafarge cement works) sundry other gifts, a laptop computer for administration, and the above mentioned personal computer, All thanks to the Emirates Manchester office who gave us a generous additional luggage allowance.

I don't know if it's because I am getting used to the place, or whether it is Wannee's influence – she seems to have a knack of 'fixing' everything instantly – but Bangkok seems a much less stressful experience than on previous visits. Neither the heat nor the traffic feels as oppressive.

This is supposed to be our post-flight rest, prior to the Grant giving week, but we find plenty to do.

We went to Wat Mahathat to pay respect to Ajahn Laow, who flew out the day before. He is pleased to greet us, as always, in his natural environment, but we are saddened to hear that his Master, Phra Rajpariyatkosol, is seriously ill in hospital. He is old, and was very frail the last time we saw him two years ago. Buddhist monks are particularly philosophical about the impermanence of life, but it is still sad to see them go the way of all mortal flesh. He actually came back to Section 24 just before we left, so we were able to say hello to him, but I suspect it was also goodbye.

No ATF trip to Bangkok is complete without a visit to Chinatown. We had to buy pens and pencils to complement those we brought with us, and I took the opportunity to buy a 'best quality' fake Rolex (yes, even the fakes come in degrees of quality) to replace my, by now rather battered, Swiss Army fake bought in Honk Kong some years ago.

Sunday 22nd February

We took a plane up to the North East. Not as romantic sounding as the Night Sleeper of our first trip, but about the same price, and so much easier: 50 minutes as opposed to 9 hours. We flew into Ubon – Jean, myself, Wannee and Tan, where we were met by our driver Pongsak, who greeted us like long-lost friends.

The drive from Ubon to Si Sa Ket is about 1½ hours. The advantage of flying is that we arrived feeling fresh, and were able to take in a couple of sightseeing visits.

Not far out of Ubon is Wat Nong Pa Pong the home of Venerable Ajahn Chah: famous in the west for having introduced many Westerners to Buddhism. When I first began meditation, my teacher taught me to chant the 'It Ipi So' the Veneration of the Triple Gem of Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha. I could hardly have visualized then, that one day I would sit inside a chedi containing Ajahn Chah's relics chanting the 'It Ipi So', much to the delight of a Thai couple who were doing the same.

I was surprised to see from the visitor's book how few Europeans have been there: in the light of his fame in the west, it is probably a reflection of the isolation of the northeast from the usual tourist route.

Nearby is the International Monastery, founded by Ajahn Chah, and where novitiates from the west still come to learn meditation. We spent some time wandering around the peaceful grounds reading some of Luang Por Chah's sayings that are nailed to trees as reminders to residents of the long journey on which they have embarked.

The drive from Ubon, through the typical Isarn landscape that I have come to know so well, passed without incident, and soon we were pulling into Si Sa Ket. We have found a new hotel near to the railway station, and so only a few yards from our first sight of the town three years ago. It is clean and comfortable, and they made us very welcome.

Monday is business day. We have negotiated with the hotel for the use of an empty shop unit that is soon transformed into a temporary office, complete with computers and printers. Ajahn Surapong turns up with mountains of paperwork and some 300 bankbooks. Ajahn Laow also appears, and I suspect there to have been much speculation from the obviously curious passers by as to the nature of the sudden appearance of an office staffed by Thais, farangs and a monk. Doubtless, knowing the way gossip spreads around these places, word soon spread that the Anglo-Thai Foundation was back in town.

Jean and Surapong went to the bank in their role as Trustees to withdraw funds for the grants. Wannee is a high powered city financial executive in Bangkok, and she has thought long and hard, but even she could find no way to proceed other than drawing out many thousands of pounds in a brown paper bag, re-distributing it according to the childrens' individual banks, and then touring the town visiting them. It was at this point that our two companions proved invaluable: particularly Wannee with her knowledge of English, finance and computing, who made everything seem relatively easy.

Meanwhile the rest of us tied together bundles of stationery for the children. We have the exercise books printed here in Thailand, where they love ornate fonts and bright

colours. It was really odd to see our home address (now the ATF registered address) leap out of the cover page, and gratifying to think that so many Thai children have a copy of it, even if they may not know what it means.

I must take some back home to give to our village school (since starting this journal three years ago, we have moved to the rural Staffordshire Moorlands). When Ajahn Laow paid a visit to the school some time ago, one little girl asked him ‘is your village like ours?’ Little do they know just *how* different. I must enlighten them soon.

Tuesday was down on the timetable as a ‘rest day’! I’m not sure what we did, but suffice to say it wasn’t a rest day – we got to bed at 2.00 am. There is a lot of work involved in processing 300 grants, and it seems to be a good rule of thumb when in Thailand to estimate the time needed for any job, and then increase it by at least 50%. Three years ago we were passengers. The more closely we get involved, the more we see just how much work *is* involved.

I’m getting to know Si Sa Ket and the surrounding districts quite well. This year the Grant Giving is split into five sessions at either schools or District Education Offices. As we travel round, place names on road signs which once were simply words laboriously copied into the database, now become real towns, and, up to a point, I know where I am. For instance I could now find my own way unassisted to Ajahn Laow’s village where it all started: go north from Si Sa Ket, when you arrive at Phayu turn right up the lane at the first junction by the Temple flag and follow the lane for about 5-6 Km.

We went to the village in the minibus to pay our respects to Ajahn and found the village quiet – unlike previous visits when there always seemed to be a festival of some description going on. I’m not sure if this was co-incidence, or whether we were the reason for the festival, but this time there were no crowds, no noise, just the normal everyday goings on of a typical, rather sleepy Thai village, and it was good to savour the true village atmosphere.

I went into the Shrine Hall and did a short meditation practice, and reflected that Ajahn would have done exactly the same, in the same place, all those years ago when he first became a monk

Wednesday

There are pros and cons to district based grant giving, as opposed to the centralised ones we have experienced so far. It is, of course, much more time consuming, and entails many hours of travelling over several days. Having moved from town to country in the UK I have come to realise that in rural life, travelling from A to B anywhere takes time: it's just that here A and B are much further apart. (In Bangkok A and B might be very close together, but it still takes an age to get there because of the traffic) On the plus side we do get to see at first hand the districts in which our children live, and each event is much smaller which enables us to mix with, and get to know better, the children and staff at the various schools.

We went to Phayuh in the morning and Muangchantara in the afternoon. The Grant Givings followed the same format as before: this time Jean made the speech on behalf of the ATF, with Wannee as translator. Her opening words 'Sawasdeeka' (almost Jean's – and my own - one and only bit of Thai) were greeted with much acclaim. Maybe it's because I understood or maybe I'm biased, but her speech seemed far more succinct and to the point than those of some of the education establishment. Nothing changes the world over: as both a pupil and teacher I have often been bored to death by interminable speeches from Directors of Education at speech day. Exhorting pupils to greater efforts probably is part of their job description, but some of them take it too much to heart.

I was in charge of taking pupil photographs; with much help from Wannee and Tan we evolved a system so slick that I felt we could almost set up business in the UK, where it is big business. In Isarn it is so unusual (unknown more likely) for kids to have a school photograph that I really must devise a way of getting copies to them that doesn't cause Ajahn Surapong too much work. I was working away when I heard Jean, who was presenting grants, call over to me that 'Suphara is here' and sure enough she turned up for her photograph – in Girl Guide uniform.

We talked to her afterwards and discovered that we wouldn't be able to visit her village as planned, as she was at Guide camp all week. Apparently it was National Scout Camp Week and, particularly as an ex-Scout myself, I was most impressed by the large numbers, both children and teachers, who were in the Scout Movement. Suphara's uniform was second hand, her family is obviously still not well off by a

long way, but we were please to see that she looks well and healthy; a far cry from the little waif we first met three years ago, and she is proof that the ATF grants *do* work in improving the living standard of those we help. We noticed in general that the appearance of ‘our’ children was markedly better than that of their contemporaries who have a similar background; except that one of our criteria for being awarded a grant is that a child should be in *particular* need. Some of this is due to the great importance that the children and their families attach to grant giving day – it is a red-letter day in their lives and so they obviously make a great effort with their appearance for it – but I am equally sure that some of their well-being is due to the extra support they get from us.

The Director of Education at Phayu told us over lunch about the local OTOP scheme. OTOP (**O**ne **T**ambon **O**ne **P**roduct) is a government-authorised initiative whereby a profit sharing co-operative in a particular tambon (village) makes and sells a particular product. If the quality merits it, the tambon gets a government seal of approval and the right to use the OTOP logo in its advertising.

The village here produces turned mango wood articles of superb quality, and after the Muangchantara grant giving we visited their simple open air factory where, using the most primitive machine tools, they produce a wide range of goods for customers including Galleries Lafayette in Paris and Harrods of London. To this exalted clientele they can now add the Anglo-Thai Foundation, as we placed an order there and then. As I write this they are on the way back by sea to the UK where we will sell them on the fund raising stalls we have at various events around the country. The pleasing thing is that the profit we make on the sales will go back to Isarn in the form of grants, as will the cost price we paid to the tambon for the goods: and it is highly likely that some of the factory workers will have children who receive ATF grants.

Thursday

We went to Cambodia, as you do. Grant givings were at Khukan in the morning and Kantaralak in the afternoon, and followed the same pattern as yesterday. One of the great hits everywhere we went was Jean’s photograph album of specially chosen photographs of our home and family. Each time she produced it Jean was immediately surrounded by a scrum of eager children (and sometimes teachers) who were particularly fascinated by a picture of Jean taken in a blizzard at home only a few

weeks before we left. Indeed we learned by email that while we were sweltering in the tropical heat, people back home were snowbound on more than one occasion.

The small town of Kantaralak is 40 miles south of Si Sa Ket, and almost as close as you can get to the Cambodian border, and just a little further south is the 11th Century Khymer temple complex of Khao Phra Viharn, said to be 100 years older than Angkor Wat. Although actually in Cambodia, it is only accessible from Thailand, along the route we took. Because of the uncertain and often dangerous political situation in the area, the temple has only been accessible for the last twelve years, and then not always, and so it is relatively unspoiled: but it does have its complement of gift stalls. And guides.....

As we stepped off the minibus, still in Thailand, we were accosted by what I thought were the usual small children selling postcards, seen at any tourist attraction round the world. We crossed the border with minimum fuss, small fee, no visa, and the children followed us – and kept following. They were Cambodian, and they were our guides. They spoke perfect English (and Thai, German, French, Spanish, Japanese etc) were very polite and extremely knowledgeable. The Viharn is built in a number of ascending stages, each one reached by a steep flight of stone steps: unspoiled implies unrestored, and so many of the steps were worn, loose or missing, and it was at point like these that our guides took us carefully by the hand and lead the way with genuine concern for our safety.

Occasionally the steps were so worn that we were lead up a path by-passing them, but with a stern injunction to ‘Keep to the path.’ When I enquired why this was so necessary, my small boy simply replied ‘land mines’, a chilling reminder of the recent bloody history of this region.

In spite of the fact that it was early evening, it was still *very* hot, and the going was *very* rough and steep. Jean and Tan decided to call it a day, and while Wannee and I went on to the top temple, with its stunning view of the Cambodian plain spread out hundreds of feet below, they waited below, along with the ten year old girl who was Jean’s guide. Her parents lived in Phnom Penh, hundreds of miles to the south. She lived with her fifteen year old sister under one of the gift stalls, and was quite envious, in a cheerful sort of way, of the children in Thailand ‘because they go to school and get a meal at school’ These are the underprivileged children, the nearest of whom live a mere 25 miles away, who our charity was formed to help. Poverty and need are

indeed relative. Jean bought her a can of Fanta, which she had never tasted before. I think of kids like her whenever I read or hear about ‘deprived’ children in the West, and the way in which they grouse about their lot in life. These Cambodian children, like our own Thai children are quite happy, and appreciative of whatever comes their way: an example of Buddhist culture from which we could learn a lot.

Eventually we got back down to the entrance, and the gift stalls. Of course we bought things – silver handbags to bring home to sell, and of course we bought the postcards. We paid well over the odds for them, but the children gave good value for money, and so everybody was happy. And so back to Thailand, as Cambodia (or at least this bit of it) was closing for the night.

Friday.

This morning we moved on to Buriram: we met up with Ajahn Laow’s party at *Jokey’s Breakfast Bar*, where we had taken to eating breakfast, their ‘American breakfast’ - two fried eggs, ham, hot-dog sausage and raw tomato - being by far the most superior version in the whole of Esarn. You would be surprised how awful a preparation it is possible to make out of these simple ingredients, but our very beautiful cook/waitress (was she Jokey?) made us a real feast.

With all of us together, it was a bit of a squash in the minibus: Ajahn pronounced us ‘to be like tuna fish’. Several hours later I realised he meant that we were packed in like sardines. En route we passed through Surin Province, into which we are thinking of expanding out activities next year, it would make geographical sense, and apparently the needs are just as great.

In Buriram we were due to meet up with Margaret and Walter Steinman, an Anglo/Swiss couple who have been sponsoring a girl for several years since Margaret met Ajahn Laow in Switzerland. They were on holiday in Thailand, had asked if it would be possible to come to see their pupil, and had come up from Bangkok by public bus to do so.

We booked into our hotel, changed from travelling scruffs into smart grant giving apparel (again), and set off for Lumplymas, the addition of Margaret and Walter being balanced out because the monks had gone on ahead. This is the third time we have been to this particular school, and I am beginning to feel at home. I like it here. The children are friendly and inquisitive, the teachers and the Abbot greet us like long lost friends. As I remarked in my first description of this school, our visit causes mayhem,

but now the teachers know us well enough to admit that they just give up on grant giving day, as the whole school is in such a high state of excitement.

We went through the, by now familiar routine of issuing passbooks, photographs, speeches, gift exchange, and the 2004 grant giving was at an end. Jean heaved a sigh of relief.

We had promised Margaret and Walter we would go and see Somsri at home. She lives quite a distance from Lumplymas School, so she and several others from her school who get ATF grants had travelled to the grant giving with one of their teachers in a pick up truck. Somsri came back with us in the minibus: she was somewhat overwhelmed, but by the end of the journey she had begun to relax and was chattering to Tan. We arrived at school at around the same time as her colleagues, and spent some time talking, exchanging addresses and taking photographs. Her teachers, like all those we meet, are full of thanks for what we do. The teachers work hard, and, like teachers anywhere in the world, have the well being of their pupils uppermost in their minds: and they know that the Foundation plays no small part in their success.

We arrived at Somsri's village unexpectedly and the appearance of the minibus on the road produced a flurry of activity, so by the time we got to her house, the area in front had been swept, mats laid out for us to sit on and the whole of the extended family gathered round. Somsri was dispatched to get drinks, and water to wash our hands, and Margaret and Walter in particular were thrilled to sit and talk to ordinary Esarn folk, to whom we must have appeared like true farangs, the like of which they have probably never met before.

All too soon we had to go, it seems a long way to travel for such a short visit, and it's a strange feeling, sitting in a village that is a twelve-hour flight away from home, having a brief meeting with people whose life we are affecting so profoundly – no matter how often we do it, I think I will always have this slightly surreal feeling, knowing that we have close contact with these people so far from home.

As we left, the mats were rolled up and given to us: such generosity from those who have so little. They would have felt slighted had we refused, so we are taking them home, and will act as a starting point for the lectures we give on the work of the ATF.

And so back to Bangkok, with a bit of en-route sightseeing at Prasat Phanom Rung, another spectacular Khmer temple not far from Buriram town.

Our work wasn't over, as we had brought back a massive stack of school reports and letters from the children that will need translating, as we try very hard to keep sponsors up-to-date with their children's progress. We also had the expenses accounts to do, database to update, a trip down to Wat Mahathat to check the goods which had arrived from the tambon in Phayu...and a bit of leisure time in the form of a long-tail-boat trip. The boats go from Tha Phrachan (Elephant Pier) in the heart of the city – one of the biggest and most densely populated cities on earth. Yet less than half an hour later, driving up the numerous ever-narrowing canals, we could have been in the depths of the countryside. As a canal boating enthusiast in the UK, I have travelled by narrowboat through many an urban situation, and have often noticed how isolated a canal can be from its immediate environment, but I never thought such isolation could be found so neat to the centre of Bangkok.

And what about the computer? The Foundation intended investigating the 'export' of used computers from the UK for use in some of our schools, and the computer we took out was by way of a sample. By coincidence there was an article in the Bangkok Post on the same subject – the Ministry of Education is looking at just such a scheme. Wannee has a friend who is highly placed in the Ministry, and she obtained us an appointment with Dr. Panya, the Director of Schools Education, who is in charge of this project, and he was most interested to meet us. We agreed that we would research the feasibility of collecting second-hand computers in the UK, and he would coordinate affairs in Bangkok, with a view to setting up at least one computer centre in a school in Sisaket, to which other pupils could be bussed for lessons. Perhaps the distressingly wasteful sight of skip-loads of scrapped computers, often seen outside UK office blocks will benefit some of our children before too long.

The computer itself went to a temple outside Bangkok where another ex-school friend of Wannee's is now a monk: he runs a meditation school and also teaches the local village children computer skills.

We left Bangkok for a well-deserved rest in Patong on Phuket Island, where I now sit, just as I did three years ago, by a hotel pool, writing the longhand version of this diary.

Many visitors who come to Thailand for holiday come here. The town is overrun with farangs, *all* the local people speak English, you can get any Western food you desire (and I have to admit, after three weeks of rice, rice and more rice, I did desire!) the surrounding countryside is beautiful, the excursions are enchanting, the hotel is comfortable...etc. But it's not Thailand. Not the Thailand I have come to know and love, and to which I will return.

This journal is finished, I will write no more: Suphara will do more than survive, and I hope that some day she may read this. All the children we continue to support will also survive, and I will return to the Land of Smiles, the land of the rice paddy and water buffalo. And every time I go, I will take Andy's memory with me. It is because of him that I have come to know Esarn – I still miss him, but I am grateful for this part of his legacy. Thank you Andy.

Hotel Neptuna
Patong Beach
Phuket
Thailand
March 2004

The Anglo Thai Foundation relies entirely on contributions for the continuation of its work. We thank all our sponsors and contributors for their help, without which we could not help these children escape the poverty trap of subsistence farming.

*For further information about the Anglo Thai Foundation, and the Buddhavihara Temple, and how you can help to sponsor children like Suphara; visit the Temple website at www.watthaiuk.com or the ATF website at www.anglo-thai.org You can email the author at wilson@anglo-thai.org or write to the Foundation at **Donnithorne Chase, Leek Road, Waterhouses, Staffordshire ST10 3HS***