



THE HUSH
AT THE
END OF THE
WORLD

A
Pilgrimage
to the
Arctic
Wilderness

Amaro Bhikkhu

The main thing to remember
about the purpose of this journey
is the silence –
it's about going into the silence.

Luang Por Sumedho



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The world is round;
your destination is unmissable.
Welcome aboard.

*Inscription beside the door of the SAS plane,
between Copenhagen and Bergen.*

PREFACE

by Richard Smith

Memory is a tricky business.

As Kurosawa's film 'Rashomon' showed so effectively, people can have quite different recollections of exactly the same event.

What brought this to mind is the conflict between my memory and the entries in my journal as to how, in May of 2003, three senior Buddhist monks from the Thai forest tradition of Ajahn Chah came to travel into the Arctic wilderness, 800 or so miles from the North Pole.

On the one hand, my memory around the events that were the genesis of the journey is clear. On the other hand, the entries in my journal – written at the end of each day but not revisited in a decade – say "Wait a minute. That's not exactly how it happened."

For example, my memory was quite clear that the idea for the journey into the Arctic arose while having tea with Luang Por Sumedho and Ajahn Amaro in a specific place, on a specific afternoon. However, my journal says, "Not so." The differences between these and other small details were sharp and vivid reminders that the past is all-too-easily misremembered.

Where there is agreement between memory and journal is that the idea for the journey began during a ten-day meditation retreat taught by Luang Por Sumedho and Ajahn Amaro at Spirit Rock in northern California in April of 2001.

One evening during the retreat, Luang Por Sumedho talked about a powerful vision he had experienced while meditating. It was of sitting, quite alone, in a white, freezing void; a colourless, featureless wilderness where the howling of unseen wolves broke the otherwise all-encompassing silence. But, in spite of the harshness of the environment, Luang Por Sumedho's feeling was one of complete and utter peace.

This nimitta arose not long after Luang Por Sumedho had left the forest monasteries of north-east Thailand and was living

in England, in London, in the cramped and noisy Hampstead Vihara. It was a very powerful insight as to how 'perfect' external conditions are not necessary for the mind of non-attachment (cittaviveka) to arise.

As Ajahn Amaro put it in his book 'Inner Listening': "Being newly arrived in a foreign and distinctly non-Buddhist country, and being in a small house in a big and noisy city, he found a strong urge to retreat and get away, back to his beloved forests in Thailand and away from all these crowds of 'pesky, pestering' people. But a vividly clear insight eventually dawned that, rather than seeking the physical seclusion of kāyaviveka, he needed to develop the inner seclusion of cittaviveka... This insight proved so central to his understanding of how best to work in this new environment that, when they did eventually move out of London, having been given a forest in West Sussex, he named the new monastery 'Cittaviveka.'"

On the last day of the Spirit Rock retreat, while taking my leave of Luang Por Sumedho and Ajahn Amaro, the topic of Luang Por's vision arose again, with Ajahn Amaro mentioning that he had experienced something similar – not while meditating but in a dream. Again, it was the feeling of being in a cold, white, featureless void, although not in the harsh conditions of Luang Por Sumedho's nimitta.

Someone, perhaps me, said that it sounded like the Arctic and a voice that I faintly recognized as my own said, "Perhaps we could go?"

On this point, my journal and my memory agree: both Luang Por Sumedho and Ajahn Amaro found the idea of a journey into the Arctic wilderness to be of more than passing interest. As my journal entry for that day notes, "I think both Luang Por and Ajahn Amaro would like to go."

Over the course of the next two years, the journey slowly took shape. An extremely patient and very helpful travel agent was eventually found. (Unsurprisingly, most travel agents have no experience of organizing a journey into the Arctic wilderness for a small group of monastic and lay meditators.)

Svalbard, the base camp for the first successful expedition to the North Pole and for most North Pole expeditions since, was chosen as our destination – not least because we could make the journey partly by ship; not least because there was a hotel at Longyearbyen, the largest settlement on Svalbard; not least because there was a guiding service in Longyearbyen that could accommodate our slightly unusual group; not least because there was some assurance that the daily meal offering could be found without too much difficulty (or anxiety on my part).

As plans coalesced, our group of three expanded to six. Ajahn Nyanarato, a much-loved senior monk at Amaravati, joined on the monastic side. Two old friends, Sandra Berman and Martin Piszczalski, both long-term practitioners from Ann Arbor, Michigan, joined on the lay side. Numerous, lengthy and detailed e-mail communications went back and forth on the amount, kind and sizing of the clothing and footwear that would be necessary. Flights, cabins, hotel rooms and guiding services were booked and confirmed.

Some two years after the idea for the journey emerged, we were – at long last – ready.

As we were waiting to take-off at Heathrow airport on the first leg of our journey, a red fox appeared and trotted on the grass alongside the runway as our plane began to move and gather speed.

"An auspicious start," said Luang Por Sumedho. And indeed it was.





BEFORE THE BEGINNING

[Early May ~ Amaravati]

By yesterday afternoon all of the party for the northern adventure had gathered at Amaravati. All barring Sandra Berman, sadly, whose 95 year-old mother was ailing and very close to the end, causing Sandra to stay with her as long as possible and aim to be joining us in Bergen. Richard brought with him a multitude of cold weather accoutrements, mostly for Luang Por and Ajahn Nyanarato; most of my gear has come on loan from the Abhayagiri Canadians, including the parka owned by Ajahn Pasanno's late father – it is more than 20 years old but is still in prime condition, even the wolf-tail lining the hood is still full and bushy.

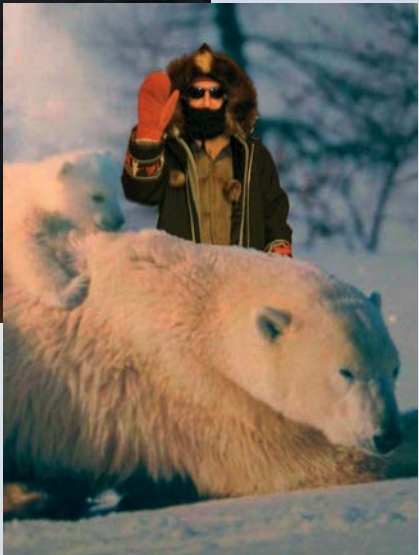
Somehow the prospect of the journey still inhabits the surreal realms of the possible – despite all of the equipment





and the fast-approaching launch-date of the escapade. The glorious spring sunshine of a rich May day in southern England, with bluebells carpetting the woodlands and dressing the hedge-banks in their delicate veils of violet-evening hue, pushes the concept of the arctic wilderness far into another realm. Equally, having spent the middle part of the day in the company of Radhika and Vish Kidao in Berkhamsted, drinking in their fond hospitality as well as their abundant Indian cuisine, exploring endless avenues of spiritual life from Wei Wu Wei and Ramesh Balsekar to the ancient stupas of India – the vast white wastelands and harsh winds of Svalbard, let alone the steep and foam-lashed fjords of the North Atlantic, might as well be on Mars.





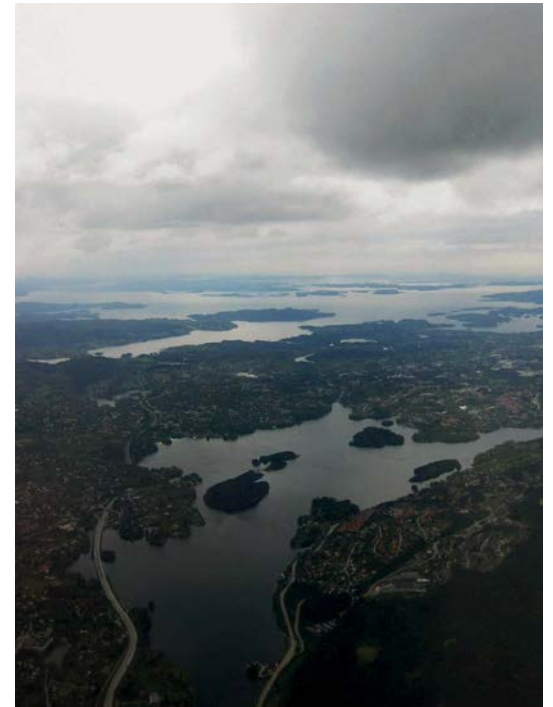
Tomorrow the journey proper begins: is it into the maw of the north, the abode of winter death and the threat of Viking rampage? Or into the eternal light – the never-setting sun of Dhamma-dīpa? Maybe the two elements always interplay and the journey will carry us into the source of both.





SETTING FORTH

[May 14th ~ Bergen & Polariys]



The long slow dawn began many hours ago, if indeed the dusk ever ended. It is 4 a.m. and the Polariys, our floating stately home for these few days, glides in effortless lines under the constantly dripping leaden skies and between an unending array of islets, headlands and stream-stripped crags. The group of us who have gathered on the ship parted company at 10:30 last night, just after the long-lingering blood-orange sun had finally submerged itself from view. The remains of the night passed slowly – perhaps because of the endless light, perhaps the gentle thrumming of the ship (despite there being scarcely a rocking motion of any kind) or perhaps because the energy of our adventure had simply rendered the realm of sleep superfluous. We slide. The drip-etched windows of the prow break up the sparkles from ruby beacons flashing on the promontories and turning points of the craggy land around us; occasional house-lights in clustered settlements form gentle glows and hints of warmth in layered curtains of grey and dim dark green. A slender road-bridge arcs above us as the channel cuts through a minute strait, a green beacon only yards away to starboard, perched on a finger of stone. The motion ceases and the ship nudges its way toward another local port – Måløy.



Just over a day ago we had all gathered at the cloister gate of Amaravati. It was 6:15 a.m. and a bright sun-dog – auspicious five-coloured cloud – was shining at the lower edge of a cloud-bank to the left of its early-rising master.

As the rest of the travellers and well-wishers appeared the “dog” faded, and, after the obligatory farewells and team photo, we loaded the van with the bulging burritos of our arctic gear and hit the road. Sandra, the sixth member of the crew, had been late to join us, having had to be in close attendance to her mother in San Diego. Like my own, she had recently had some serious illness and, until a few days ago, had been close to the brink. Somehow she had rallied well and, coming off her I.V. had allowed Sandra’s heart to be at ease with making the trip as planned.



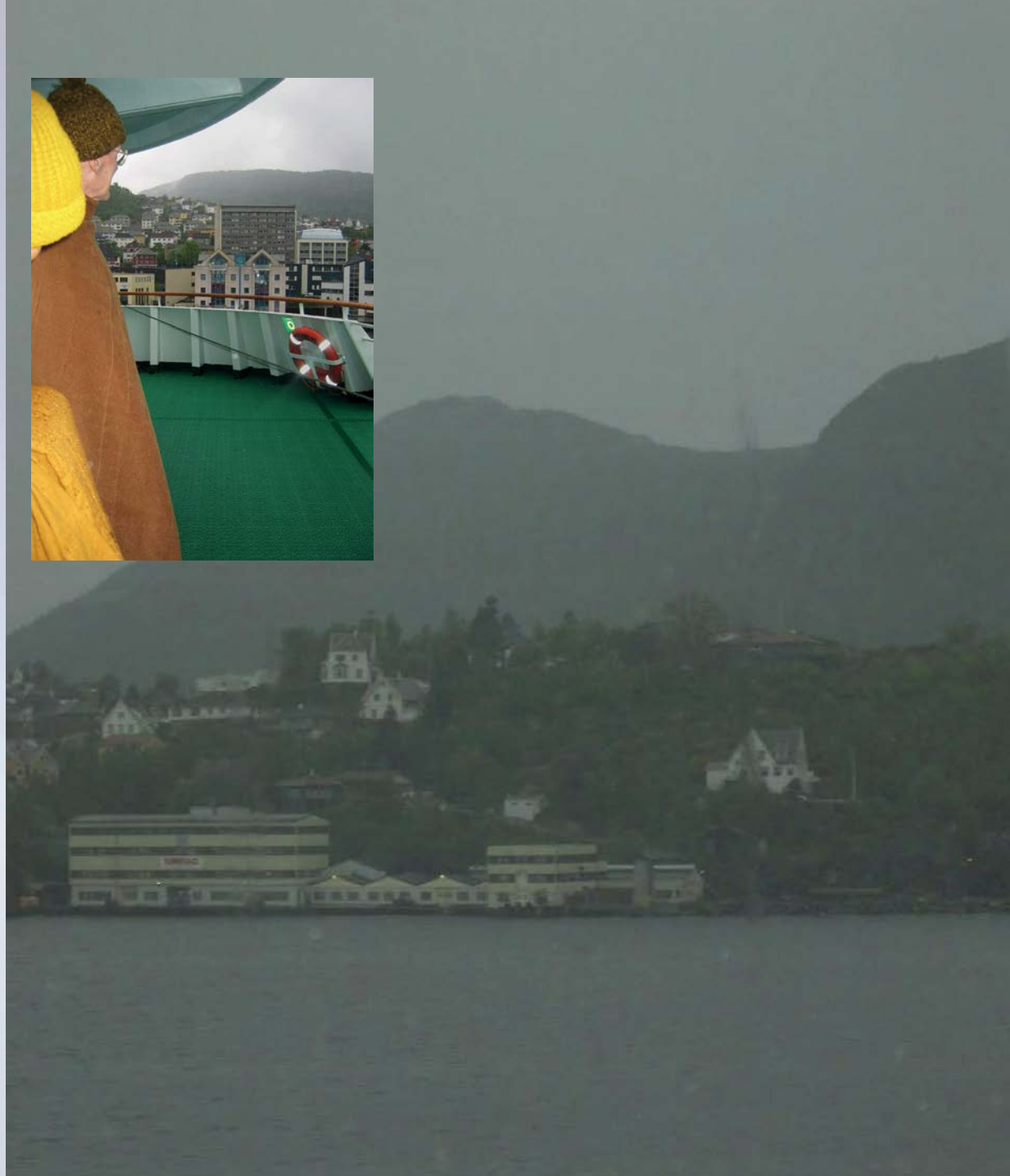
The first hop brought us to Copenhagen; we transferred there to a sturdy prop plane to make the last leg to Bergen. Beside the door at the top of the gangway, neatly painted on the hull, were the words, “The world is round, your destination is unmissable, welcome on board” – wonderfully observant, philosophical, and strangely comforting. The Norwegian coast comes into view below and around us, as we descend through the all-encompassing cloud:

for a moment we view from above the contours and character of this coast of 10,000 islands and rocky digits – snow-capped peaks form a grey-white saw's edge to the south and west.

Bergen seems to be blessed with helpful taxi drivers – when the chauffeur of the van bringing us from the airport to the town finally overcame his shyness to ask if we were Buddhists, he said, “You are the first Buddhists I have ever met,” and switched off his meter and proceeded to give us an impromptu guided tour of the ancient town.

Once our bags were dropped at the dock we returned to the old part of town and wandered through wooden-decked and cobbled lanes, and beneath the precious ramshackle of the Bryggen buildings. All the uprights and right-angles had long since been bent out of true by the forces of wind and water, movements of the earth and fire, so it all hung together in a chaotic jig-saw puzzle of overhangs, angles and rooflines.

Sauntering, lingering until the launch-time called us back – gently the prosperity and cosmopolitania, bestowed by the flow of North Sea oil, conveyed the character of this revived country to us. Norway is now (reputedly) the sixth most prosperous nation on earth and this is easy to





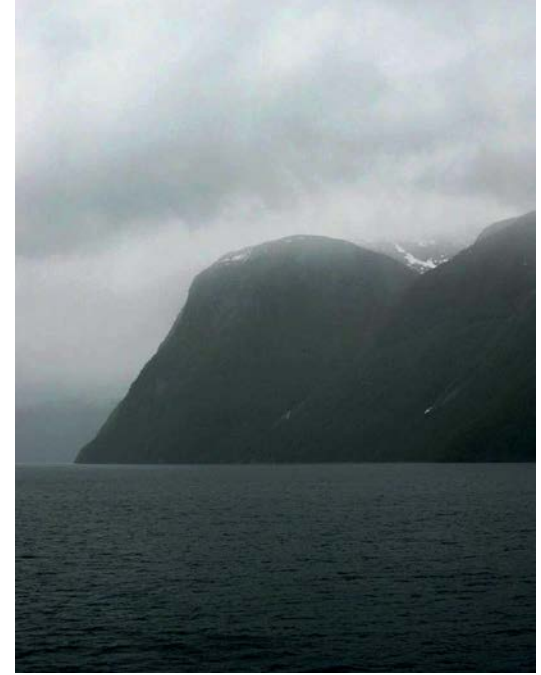
believe. It even wears its new-found wealth with an air of comfortable sophistication – if you pointed out to them that naming a supermarket “Norsea Foods” was likely to have an off-putting effect on visiting English speakers, you felt that the comment would merely be brushed aside as the kind of bathroom humour to be expected of vulgar foreigners.

By the time Luang Por, Ajahn Nyanarato and I had explored a few of the palatial lounges and the upper decks the ship was ready to depart and, as Richard and Sandra appeared from a doorway to join us on the top deck below the funnel, the blast of the whistle-horn rang out (at 8:00 p.m. on the button) and the anchors were weighed.









LIGHT AND FALLING WATER

[May 15th ~ Polarlys]

The day took us through endless straits between headlands, islands, rocky knolls crowned with a single spare bush or a stoic huddle of trees. The first stop, at 8:45 a.m., was Ålesund – a grey mass of folds and tones filled the sky and poured steadily into the land and sea below. Bracketed by a tall hill at the north end of the port and a honey-coloured onion-domed church at the south, the town, a cluster of vari-coloured wooden houses, sat comfortably in between. We disembarked out of the cocoon of the ship long enough to be blasted by the billowing sheets of rain, snap a picture and then retreat from the wet and the grey again – the image of Refuge becomes very clear in such an environment.

From Ålesund we cut inland down a collection of looming fjords, the ship (some 350' long and with an 80' beam) twisting and turning like a London taxi, following the knowledge through a maze of tiny forking streets. The shores drew closer, the slopes steeper as the vessel ploughed unerringly on – the ship's on-board guide made regular



announcements, such as: “Attention please! We are now entering the 18km long Strandafjord; on your left, about 1800m up on the shelf is the farm of ancient local inhabitants...” The wonderfully clipped Norwegian accent and flat delivery told us (with the same emotional tone and lilt) that Farmer A had grown 100 kg. of apricots whereas Ms. B. had been decapitated for having two illegitimate children “... and her head was put on a stake, to be an example to others...” – such gems embroidered the background of the whole morning.

Streams cascaded down on either side and snowy ridges crept closer and closer to the water’s edge. By midday we had docked at Geiranger, many miles into the interior of the country and had disgorged the majority of the passengers for a day tour of the local country. We almost had the dining room to ourselves and lingered for hours over postprandial coffees and Dhamma dialogues.

The return from Geiranger was uncommented upon and, before we knew it, the hours had folded themselves away and we had retraced our path to Ålesund. All the way along, the sight of small-holdings and humble houses tucked at the feet of cliffs, wedged into the corners or on benches above the fjord, resonated the power of human resolve and grit in the face of grim and fearsome forces: “And here she had 14 children and took each one for baptising in the boat to Geiranger...” “There are 42 turns in the path up from



the fjord to the farm..." – life on the very edge: what strength we are capable of when we put our hearts to the task.

We gathered up in the top, sheltered panorama lounge as the hours turned towards evening. The light dims so slowly – Luang Por left at 9:15 when it was still broad day, the rest of us lingered together a little longer, "under the heaventree of stars hung with humid nightblue fruit" that winked and sparkled with gathering strength across the ceiling of the lounge, as the clashing grey of the skies, the looming land and the rippling steel of the North Sea all slowly disappeared into each other.

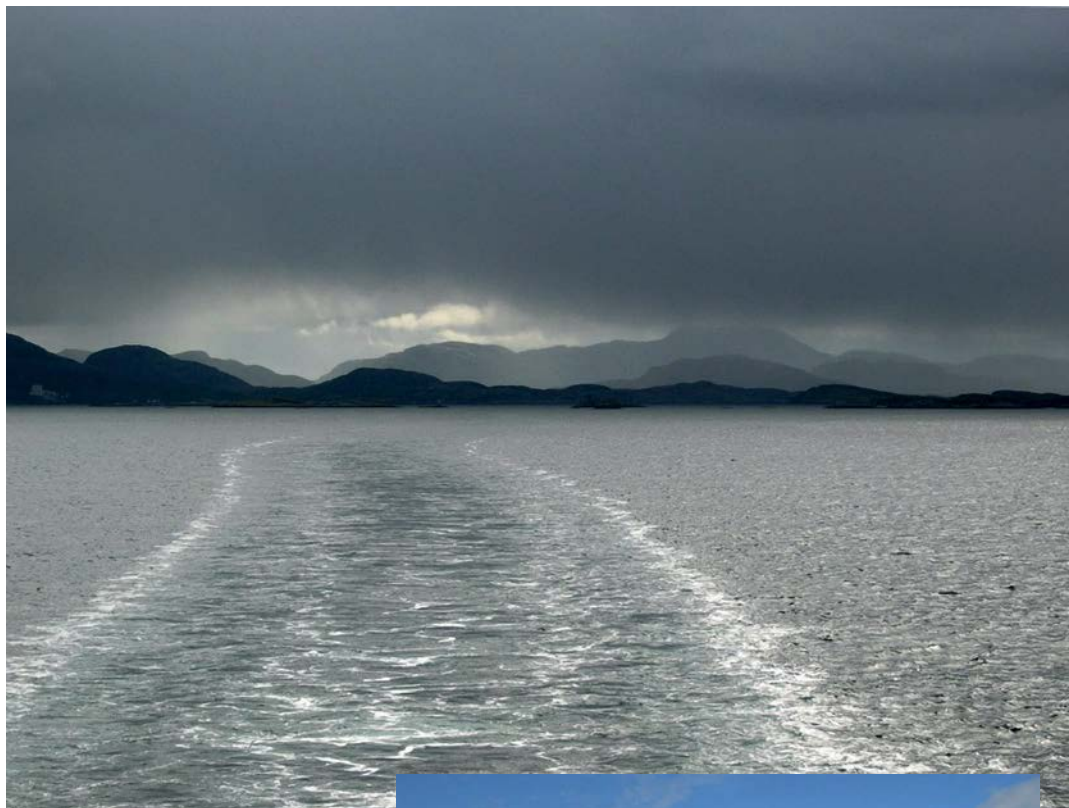
Now on deck, ripped into by the teeth of the vicious wind – needles of rain piercing the few patches of face unprotected by hood and balaclava; round a corner, a soft lulling breeze, a few drips from the deck above; another corner and the tumbling airs pull and



tug my poncho this way and that – each deck and nook of the boat has its unique micro-climate.

The rare sorties out into the reaches of the North Sea unfenced by island barriers stir the water's surface and the gliding palace once more becomes a floating chamber held up only by the grace of the sea, pitching and gently rolling us like a great hand rubbing the fur of a cat's belly. Now this way, now that, we purr at the tender massage from below. Soon though, the stroking ends and we resume the ice-smooth glide, ever ahead.

The would-be epic character of our journey to the wild north is muted somewhat by the cardigan-and-slipper/rotarian character of our fellow way-farers; it is hard to get the into-the-frozen-wastelands mood well established when the abiding perception is that of a weekend in Cheltenham or at a spa in Baden Baden.



[May 16th ~ Polarlys]

It is a clear bright morning. The air is as still as in a vast closed hall – clouds hang on the mountain peaks without moving an inch as we glide past; the sea is an undulating mirror.

Yesterday's long breakfast under threatening skies brought in a few squalls but all rain had cleared by the time we docked at Trondheim. We even cheered in surprise at the appearance of a flash or two of blue in between the threads the horizon-wide carpet of mottled greys.

The city is a former capital of Norway (in the middle ages) and bears the grave of St. Olav, known as the "Eternal King of Norway" and patron saint of





the country. We journeyed into town and made our way to the old cathedral, spending an hour or so in the tall dark embrace of its chamber. The rose window at the rear was rich in flaming electric blues and blood-ruby reds, Sandra (who had never been in a European cathedral before) remarked that it seemed as though that mandala should be the spiritual centerpiece of the place, rather than the smallish dim crucifix and the slain Christ down at the opposite end. It was a peaceful but gloomy chamber – well suited to the lowering sombre character of the weather we had seen and matching the dark, dour mood of Bergman films and the endless night of winter. We wondered what it must take to be a stonemason in Trondheim, what callouses and pachydermal layers that would add to your hands. Slender pillars rose into the shadows of the dark timber and stone ceiling, where rings of hanging lights attempted to alleviate the dimness, like threads of effort and intention reaching into the living darkness of the rock and coaxing a sanctuary and shrine forth from it.



As we sat in the shelter of a café in the upper reaches of a shopping mall, crafted out of the shells of old brick warehouse structures, the sky cleared more and more and, by the time the ship was underway again, bright sun sparkled the waters for the first time.

The greens of the meadows shone as we passed by; in the new leaves of the tiny patches of woodland, light rose with a vigour we had assumed we would not see – the previous days having hung so leaden



and heavy. The bright yellows, rusty reds and navy blues of local houses, clinging as they do to the shoreline of the land, glowed also with a surprising brightness. More folks were out on the decks, snapping pictures, enjoying the air and the endless parade of the dazzling view.

It being the full moon day of May we celebrated Visakha Puja, commemorating the birth, enlightenment and final passing away of the Buddha. For this we had rented a conference room and at 7:00 p.m. Richard and Sandra set it up with a small shrine, having brought all the accoutrements along particularly for this occasion. Luang Por, Ajahn Nyanarato and I had our "uposatha for bhikkhus" – probably the first on a ship off the coast of Norway, although Buddhist pilgrims (Fa Hien, Hsuan Tsang and the like) must have often needed to carry out the Observance like this when on board ship between



India, China, and the South-East Asian islands.

We were joined by our three lay companions at 7:30, did the evening puja and a large collection of parittas: to celebrate Vaisakh, our collective endeavour, and to dedicate the recitation to the ailing mothers of myself and Sandra. After the chanting we meditated for an hour, gently rocked by the ship as it was carried by mother ocean, also serenaded by golden oldies emanating from the bar beyond the thick brass-studded doors: Petula Clark, Manfred Mann, the Kinks and numerous other anthems of the Boomers.

Luang Por was persuaded to offer some Dhamma reflections and spoke of the inspiration for this journey – “The only purpose is to enter into the infinite, the silence and space: ordinary measures do not apply here – in-finite/im-





measurable..." – dusk at midnight in the mythical Land of Grey and Pink.

Seas of glass and soft colour: a most mysterious and wonder-filled Visakha Puja – never dark, therefore no dawn, an all-night sitting without the night.

The barren rocky shoulders of the shoreline and inland mountains that we can see, resonate the entry into simplicity and utter openness.

Luang Por's formal offering was drawn to a close during one of his pauses, by the intervention of our ubiquitous announcer reminding us of the opportunity to make some "namecard of your nationality" for the National Day procession on the 18th in Tromsø. At that point Luang Por's flow changed character somewhat and melded into a Dhamma dialogue between us all.

The main point that it all revolved around (no pun intended) was his insight into "The point which excludes and the

point which includes" and how the former could not possibly constitute Sammā-samādhi.



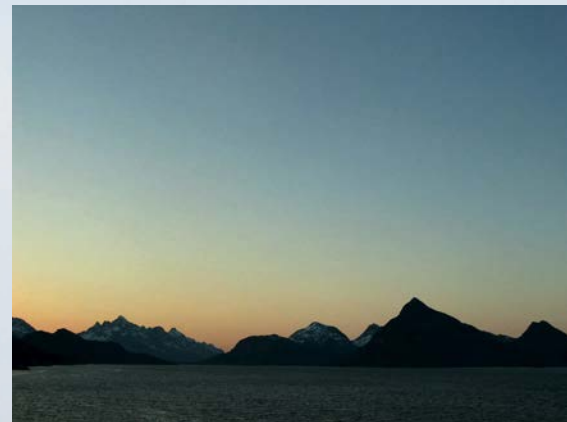
Another of the main areas of our dialogue, and that which chiefly symbolized our current journey to the north, was that of merging with the infinite. As the realm of fertility and diversity is left behind we are surrounded by banks of bare stone, barren mountains clad more and more by ice and snow rather than sheltering forests and their winged and scurrying creatures. Silence, space, emptiness, simplicity – the harshness of the deep north with its attendant awesome peace, like the effortless sheltered glide that our ship effects so serenely through this land of rock and frost – these are the qualities of the pure heart.

For Sandra and I it also brought to mind the journey that our mothers are

currently making – from the familiar confines of the human world, via the harshness of ageing and sickness, into the great unknown. With Right View it has that effortlessness and peace; without it, it's another story.

As if to underscore this principle, as the discussion reaches a natural pause, we climb up from the floor, settle ourselves in chairs by the windows and watch together our last sunset for the next ten days. Visakha Puja at the Arctic Circle: the entry into the infinite and the immeasurable does not just mean extra distances, longer than our current ruler, it means that “distances” and other familiar forms of measure no longer apply here: if there is no night, when is dawn? If no dawn, when is it OK to breakfast? Midnight? What about “not being separated from our robes at dawn”?...? Familiar and reliable means of judgment do not pertain in this zone. “The Tathagata is profound, deep, immeasurable, not capable of being reckoned in any way.” “Upasiva, one who has reached the End has no criterion by which they can be measured – that by which they could be talked of is no more... When all modes of being, all phenomena are removed, then all means of description have gone too.”

An all-night sitting with no night – we sat and gazed, drank in the rippling realm of grey, dove-blue and pink as the hours passed. Moving in a mythic landscape: water but not water, night but not night, meditating but not meditating, going somewhere but being still.



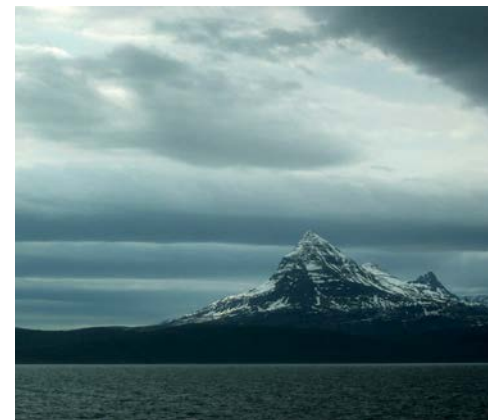


[May 17th ~ Polarlys]

After laying down the body for the rest of the so-called night, I woke before six to bright day, a cloudless sky and immediately wanted to start snapping pictures. All morning the ship had scarcely rocked and the air had rested still as a blanket on a sleeping child. Now out of Ørnes and well on our way to Bodø some clouds have begun to deck more and more of the sky. Snow wraps the great majority of peaks on the eastern shore and deeper inland the slopes seem bare of trees. Here and there the flatter stretches of mountain lie under dense, bright and gently curving snow fields. It was at 7:20:38 that we crossed the Arctic Circle (at 66.5°N) this morning and were welcomed officially into North Norway – pictures galore recorded the grand event.

After an earlier lunch than usual we pulled into Bodø and took the opportunity for a walk around the town to stretch the legs. The town had been completely flattened by German bombing, in the space of two hours, during the Second World War, so the character of the place was very different from Bergen and Trondheim, whose ancient quarters still held an aura of wizened settledness. Bodø had a brasher face, and that rough and new hewn persona peculiar to towns of concrete and steel.

It is a small place and, after strolling the length of a couple of the central streets, we looped back down along one comprising the main shopping precinct. As we passed





through the now-familiar, glassed-in shopping mall area – here aptly dubbed “The Glass House” – a youngish cropped-haired man approached us: “Excuse me, are you Buddhists? Where are you from?” “I was born in England but our main monastery is in Thailand.” “Do you know Wat Pah Nanachat?” “This monk is the one who founded it – Ajahn Sumedho.”

The amazed fellow’s face was a picture of open-mouthed wonder – he had been there, at Wat Pah Nanachat, only a few weeks before. He was just returning to Tromsø, from his ninth trip to Thailand, and was traveling on the Polarlys along with us.

“When you travel by train or plane through Norway, you leave your soul behind you; when you travel by the coastal streamer, your soul goes with you.” Norwegian proverb (via Stig in Bodø).

The remainder of the day unfolded, continually bright: we sat chatting and exchanging news and views at the Hobbit Café with our new friend Stig; the skies went from clearish to cloudless as the boat and hours progressed; the light was still strong on the racks of drying cod at the mouth of Svolvær harbour, far into the evening.

The whole population on board abandoned the idea of an early night on account of the promise of a passage through the 100 metre-wide Trollfjord under bright skies at 11:30 p.m., coupled



with the legal drinking on the eve of the public holiday (no spirits on National Day).

We inched into this narrowest of channels beneath the rosy-edged canopy of evening, the great ship glid the length of the yawning trough, its northern wall reaching 1000m above us, its southern slightly less. Sliding to a graceful halt at the butt end of the fjord, our trusty bark rotated neatly on its own axis, with only a few yards to spare at either end, re-directed itself north-eastwards and slid effortlessly out of the abyss once again.

After sharing "Trollfjord tea" along with everybody else we, having had the front-centre seats claimed for us by Luang Por while the rest of the world was at supper, sat on, delighting in the lights upon the water, and in each other's company, until the panorama hall was empty but for us and one or two others, and we pulled into Stokmarknes at 1:00 a.m. It was still plenty bright enough for an old fellow to be sat in his chair, reading a newspaper by the light coming through the window – time seems more and more of an arbitrary concept as the journey and the so-called days progress.

[May 18th ~ Polarlys & Tromsø]

The remainder of the events of Norwegian National Day (celebrating independence from Sweden, in 1905) unfurled like a handful of colourful ribbons in the wind,



like the strings of pennants that the crew had been tying early that morning from the prow of the ship to above the bridge and all along to the stern. The wind ripped and tugged at them then left them to gently drift this way and that like the mind's moods shifting and changing in the breezes of circumstance.

There had been a little cloud earlier, allowing the sun to break through onto the vast stretches of open water in bright islands of light, sending their glittering

pathways out to each watching eye, as if in personal greeting to every one of us.

We pulled into Harstad at around 6:45 a.m., and were greeted by the music of a marching band, waiting for us on the quay. The unfolding of the day continued with the Captain's speech and the national anthem at breakfast and then, around 10:45, Luang Por and myself and most of our fellow passengers crowded onto the Panorama deck lounge for the Arctic Circle ceremony.



Just as crossing the Equator on a ship has long involved a ritual of passage, requesting the blessing of King Neptune, a matching rite also happened here. His Oceanic Majesty appeared, preceded by the blasts of a small foghorn, in bulky sea-weed coloured robes, awesome-grim white face mask and bearing an impressively threatening trident. He and the Captain took centre stage, behind a low table equipped with two ice buckets and ladles and then (with the three best guessers of the exact crossing time going first) all those who wished for a certificate of Arctic crossing – or who just wanted to request His Fierce and Watery Majesty’s permission to wander in his realm – came forward for the “communion with the cod and halibut and other fishes” ceremony.

Just like the attendees at a retreat, or at a wedding blessing, coming forward one by one for sacred threads to be tied on their wrists, the passengers stepped up and the ritual masters (H.M. and the Captain) took ladle in hand, the supplicant knelt before them and icy water was poured down their necks. A great number of our fellow voyagers stepped up for this and cameras flashed like the sun sparkling on the water. Luang Por and I declined the option as did all our lay companions, but our friend Stig was the very last of all those calling for permission to enter the realm of Neptune.

By the time we reached Finnsnes the marching band theme had expanded and a parade of the townspeople with banners hooters and streamers filled the street leading to the dock. A double line of high-school students – all clad in their red dungarees with decals and dangling strapped uniforms – formed either side of the gang-plank to welcome passengers off and to invite them to join the parade around town. Martin and Sandra joined the throng, she enjoying her first parade with great delight, only to remember that the schedule said departure of ship 10:30, her watch said 10:28, so she and Martin raced back to discover the ship happily still settled at the dock. She had noticed that half the other passengers were still cheerfully carrying on in the parade but only when they had returned did they discover that departure was 10:45 – hi ho.

The pattern was redoubled when we reached Tromsø: the quay was thick with well-wishers and townspeople who, as soon as the doors were open, streamed up the gangplank – decked in national costume like a 1000 Snow Whites, Gretels and Hansels, carrying balloons. As they rose to the head of the stairs, only to see Ajahn Nyanarato and I in the lobby, we saw the



progression of 1) distracted excitement 2) a startled puzzledness as each noticed us, wondered what we were, and calculated whether we were in costume or not for the day, and 3) cracking broad smiles. We enjoyed each other's presence in the chance encounter and delighted in the strange beauty of our respective outfits.

Hundreds and hundreds poured onto the boat, young and old alike, and then simply poured off again. By the time an hour had passed the six of us had managed to gather in the lobby with our bulky bags of arctic gear and there was lull enough to allow us to disembark. Our hotel was within a few hundred yards of the dock and, before we knew it, we had arrived and settled in our rooms, although the sound of moving water outside my window, coupled

with a few days of sleep deprivation, kept hinting to my body that we were still at sea. A gentle, almost comforting swaying sensation was sent up from my knees from time to time as I potted around the room and organized my things.

Once we had stowed all our bags and made ourselves at home we re-convened and took off for a wander around the town. The carnival atmosphere was still permeating the streets, although there was more of an after-the-party feel to it by then: Hansels and Gretels still thronged the streets (some on mobile phones, some eating candy floss) along with their Gothic counterparts in deep eye-shadow and blacks, and a sprinkling of hard-looking, short-haired men in leather jackets and dark glasses – the Russian immigrant

contingent? – or maybe the husbands of the 1,000 Snow Whites, who were NOT going to dress up in white socks and buttoned knee-britches for any goddamn holiday.

We made our way to the newly opened Thai restaurant – kitted out with interior design of corrugated tin roofs, kerosene lanterns and other insignia of rural Esan life, we even drank cups of matoum (bael-fruit tea) for the long while that we sat there. The rest of the meander brought a random local up to Ajahn Nyanarato, asking if the monk could give him some wisdom, took us past a small Shiva lingam statue and also by the Little Buddha Restaurant, where well-lubricated, open-mouthed diners gawked in surprise as Luang Por and the rest of us tramped by in robes, like those of the restaurant's logo.





THE ISLAND

[May 19th ~ Tromsø & Svalbard]

There was even less of anything resembling night, as the light shifted tones on the placid waters of the sound and dressed the ultramodern church on the farther shore in different pale and golden hues. The flight was due to take off in late morning and, in these remote climes there was little time needed to make the drive to the airport, and no long waits necessitated by security checks, in fact there were no checks at all – a striking contrast from conditions in the airports of the more central areas and powers.

The sky was a cloudless azure from edge to edge over Tromsø and for the first three-quarters of the flight. The meeting of clear blue above and the slightest haze below gave the impression of sailing through a vast Rothko painting, of more summery colours than is his custom but with the identical combination of vastness and gentle shift from one tone into another. Suddenly we over-arched a curving sweep of cloud and the bank was seamless below us for the rest of the flight to Svalbard.

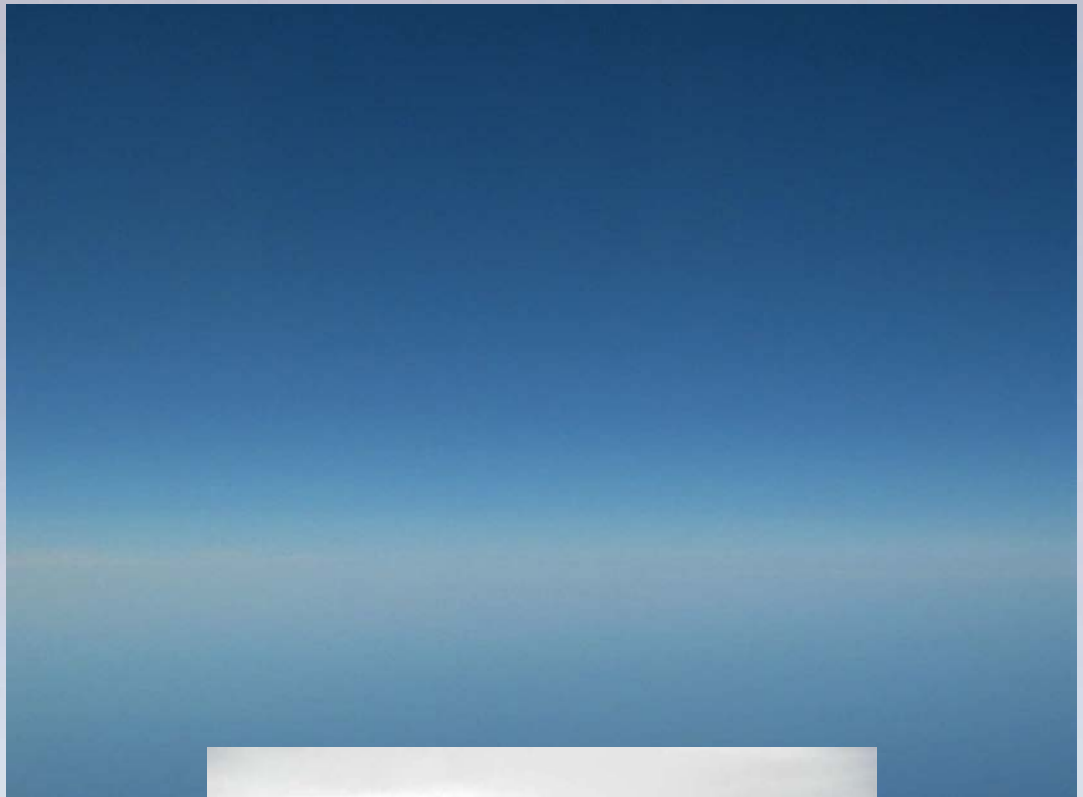


Grey on white on grey on slate on grey – the tones of Svalbard greeted us as we descended through the cover and entered the realm below us. The remains of abandoned coal-mining operations and the sombre coloured box-like houses of Longyearbyen, again only a mile or two from the airport, gave this area of human habitation on the island an aura of post-industrial wasteland.

However, having deliberately come to the end of the world, and the cooling of the senses that attends that, and to a land with no trees, almost no soil, and at present (with the sun obscured by this cloud) no way of telling whether it is day or night, it all seems to fit into the mood of Luang Por's vision – of being alone in a freezing twilit arctic wasteland, yet utterly at peace – the strange merging of death and Deathlessness.

As we took our bags down to our rooms in the Polar Hotel I noticed a few Asian faces among the hotel staff. Ajahn Nyanarato had earlier remarked that, at first, he had thought that he was the only Asian in the area but had spotted one more as we made our way here. I pointed out the presence of these others to him and, as we stood there chatting on the subject, we suddenly realized they were speaking Thai.

Within a short while they had introduced themselves ("Noo ma jahk Petchabuhn, kaa!") and we found out that there were now about 40 Thais in





Longyearbyen. As the days progressed, more and more of them popped up and came to say hello to us – despite the presence of a Thai monastery in Oslo for the last seven years, no monks from Thailand had yet visited Svalbard. They each recounted the swift spreading of the rumours: “There are 3 monks here and they speak Thai but they are not Thai... Where do they come from?” Within 24 hours (actually within the first few minutes) it soon seemed the most normal thing in the world to be standing on the street of the world’s most northerly town and chatting in Thai to women from Petchabuhn, Gampaeng Saen and Nakorn Panom.

This might not seem so strange, however, it should be borne in mind that the population of Svalbard comprises only 1000 humans; plus, of course, its 5000 polar bears and equally large numbers of reindeer.

Up until a little while ago there had only been a couple of Thai women here, married to Norwegian men, but in the last five years they had begun to persuade their sisters, cousins, etc., etc., to come and take up the quiet life and lucrative pay of this frozen land. This has been possible since wages are extremely high in Norway but those who live on Svalbard pay only 10-15% of normal tax-rate. Also, by a strange twist of historical happenstance, as Thailand was a signatory of the Treaty of Svalbard, in 1922, that gave Norway sovereignty over these islands, all Thais have the right to a work permit here.



One of the group whom we met last night has a thriving Thai massage salon in the little shopping district of the town. Our local guides Rupert (from Germany) and Pär (from Sweden) also told us that a graduate student from Oslo is even doing a social-anthropological thesis on the establishment of the Thai community on Svalbard – I have a feeling that we are about to become part of part of a Ph.D. dissertation.







REINDALEN

[May 20th ~ Svalbard]

“I am completely open, because I know nothing! – in a few days, once I know the place, then I can have opinions.”

Luang Por Sumedho, on arrival in Svalbard

To Høgsnyta in Reindalen

After breakfast (gargantuan as per usual) we met again with the Svalbard Wildlife Service team who are looking after our stay – Constance, Rupert and Pär. They had taken in the brief



we had conveyed to them the previous evening – requesting to go to places that offered space, silence and stillness – and spent a while describing the route they had planned for us that day. It would still take them a little while to get all the snow-mobiles prepared so we went off for a wander around the town for an hour or so. Outside the hotel we ran into Somai and another local Thai woman, and chatted for quite a while, also being introduced to her sister who had been on the island for 17 years – the longest standing Thai there.

It was soon time to wander back (although things move at a very unhurried pace here) and climb into the van with Rupert and Pär. We only needed to take the road for a mile or two, to the valley head where we would transfer to snow-mobiles and the sleds they pulled behind them. The bikes looked very business-like and, similarly, the sleds were a simple but well-designed arrangement of quarter inch ply with reindeer skins to make seats and act as blankets and sitting cloths. With the two snow-mobiles revving and three of us in each sled, we were ready to go.

Soon the sensation of being whisked along through the shallow snow, behind the muscular roaring of the snowmobiles, became a familiar and beloved presence. It was quite cozy at first and surprisingly smooth a ride, considering that the sleds had no springs and the ground was hummocked and grassy here and there.

We swung southwards through what



was to become our customary route out of Longyearbyen, down Todalen to the cluster of four huts used by trappers of former times, and by a group of Norwegians spying on the German outpost at Longyearbyen during World War II; currently it's rented by week-enders and subject to occasional polar bear raids – if they can't get through the door or the

window, they'll just go through the wall, as testified by a stretch of black polythene being used to patch the most recent access point of visitation.

The pathway rose and fell, wove left and right as we gradually crossed over into Gangdalen. The air was as still as within a vast silent theatre whenever we stopped



the bikes for a breather and a leg-stretch. As we reached the end of Gangdalen it spilled us onto the vast blue-white plain of Reindalen – beneath the snow, an infinitely complex network of rivers and streams wove their way to the bay of Kaldbukta and Van Mijenfjord.

Rupert led the way up the side of the valley onto a shoulder of land on Høgsnyta where we could see for miles across the icy white, table-smooth plain to the pale blue mountains forming the far wall of the dale. It had been overcast since we arrived on Svalbard but for the first time we saw some sun breaking through onto the southern slopes of the distant range. They seemed to be lit from inside, glowing bright amid the hazy atmosphere of the day.

We hoiked out the reindeer skins that we had been sitting on in the sledges and spread them over the snow, to sit on while we ate our lunch of sandwiches. We then strolled about until, without prior planning, we each found a favourable spot to sit in, where we remained for the next two hours or so – sitting in meditation and contemplating the vast open white silence of the arctic wild. The only sounds were the occasional chirp of a snow-bunting, the honk of a passing goose and the roaring silence of the mind – still, no wind.

At some unprearranged moment – probably conditioned by increasing chill, still limbs and a by-now risen breeze, we re-assembled and after some tea, set off in the sleds again. Our path took us back through Semmeldalen to Colesdalen, another vast open plain, speckled by reindeer grazing on the mosses and parties of geese gathering in the newly-unfrozen pools that the warming of the spring has now revealed.

Bearing right again we turned up Bødalen and rumbled our way, beneath the peaks of Finnesaksla and Westbytoppane and found ourselves appearing in the little valley of the four huts once again.

From there we retraced our route back to the base-



camp of our van; by now the wind was well up and a few of us were getting quite chilled. Rupert had climbed into one of the spare insulated jumpsuits and Martin needed the other to ease the iciness in his chest. It had been so balmy that morning -2°C . at the hotel by the shore – that I had not even bothered with a pullover on top of the 2 thermal vests I had on, and I had brushed aside the thought of more than one pair of longjohns. That that amount of clothing was definitely not enough in the wind-blown open sleds at 20 m.p.h. or in the open spaces sitting still on cold rocks for two or three hours. At the end of the run I found that I kept saying: “I don’t feel cold in any particular place but I can’t stop shivering.”

On our return to the hotel we found another Thai woman, Namngoe Andressen, waiting to greet us and introduce herself. She was the one with the traditional Thai massage salon in the little shopping mall in town and had been here in Svalbard for ten years

or more. She chatted brightly at great length, both because she was delighted to have some bhikkhus here on her island but also since she has come to love this place so much herself. At first her husband had said, “If you won’t come with me to Svalbard, we separate!” Now she said she wouldn’t leave and return to Thailand even if her husband wanted to. The plainness and barrenness of a complete lack of trees and arable land, and also lack of distractive things to do here, had forced her not to be so scattered and confused and had helped turn her attention to Dhamma practice. Thus she had come to love that very harshness and simplicity – the very reasons why Luang Por has felt drawn here for so long. The purity and starkness of the landscape turns the attention inward.



VI



FINNESAKSLA

[May 21st ~ Svalbard]

To Finnesaksla, between Bødalen and Colesdalen/Fardalen

The second day of journeying out into the back country was much more overcast than the one before and, by the time we reached the valley of the four huts, a light snow had begun to fall. The fading definition this brought rendered ridges and folds in the land invisible at times and the silence ever more dense and palpable. Sandra flopped down onto her back, spread-eagled, and let the snowflakes decorate her as she lay.

This day we swung to the right at the huts, up Bødalen and up onto the slopes of Finnesaksla. By the time we stopped it was almost a complete whiteout, but again, as with the previous day, the air was perfectly still. As I had been up late, to witness the midnight sun, I was weary after the big bag of hot food that Pär and Rupert had kindly provided for us. After I had found a good spot at the edge of the slope, with a nice flat sloping rock







(approximately 15°) behind me I lay back and let the snow play its silent music on my face.

As we had all been a bit chilly the day before, we were bundled up to the eyes this day (I with an extra three pullovers and a down waistcoat and three pairs of longjohns) and I was thus warm as toast

as I lay there. My mind drifted in and out of sleep for a while as the different sizes of flake landed in a 1,000 different locations on the few square inches of exposed skin.

After a while the sleepiness had passed and I sat there on my reindeer skin for another couple of hours. On the way down off the mountain Pär took the slope

a little more hesitantly than Rupert, with the result that the sled and trailer jack-knifed across the incline. As if in slow motion the whole three-part contraption (snowmobile/trailer/sledge) crunched into an S-shaped tangle. It took us a while to unravel it all and release stuck catches, bent bars and get the assembly up and running again.





No sooner had we got ourselves moving once more, now with Sandra sitting in the pillion (but facing Richard and I for some reason) than we made a turn to traverse the slope left to right and over we went again, this time with Sandra getting part of her leg caught under some pieces of the bike and trailer. Again, it was like a slow-motion motor-bike crash, and onto a bed of eiderdown, the whole event seemed vaguely surreal. As it turned out Sandra was not badly hurt, the main casualty being Pär's pride and some of the metalwork of the trailer.

We solved the puzzle by abandoning the use of the second trailer and loading it up on the other one, to take it home. By this time we were all a bit strained again and glad to get back to town for hot chocolate at the café. We were all ready for a bath





and bed by 8:30 but, as we entered the hotel, we were greeted again by Namngoe and now with her friend Sunantha. Us three monks plus Richard joined them and, before we knew it, another couple of hours had flown by. Of course, it's hard to talk about the passing of time since

(particularly with an overcast sky) 10:30 at night could as easily be 9:00 a.m. or 2 p.m. or 2 a.m. – however, we were really ready to retire by the time the two of them had paid their farewells. They had also bought offerings of calendars, grapes and seal-skin key-rings along with their armloads of

news, Dharma-chit-chat and good wishes, so it was hard not to be welcoming and open-hearted toward their sincerity and kindness.



VIII



LYNNDALEN AND THE FOX

[May 21st ~ Svalbard]

To the slopes of Alteret in Colesdalen, near the bay of Colesbukta

Our last day in the wilderness led us, once again, via Tødalen, Bødalen and into the great open expanse of Colesdalen. Even just a day after we were last here, the melting snow had revealed that, far from being just a flat basin of land, like Reindalen the valley floor was actually an intricate filigree of streams and rivers, marshes and bog. Our trusty drivers curved this way and that across the plain to find a way through that was not too slushy or an outright stretch of moss or open water. Finally we were stymied in our effort to get to the sea shore by a rapidly appearing river that now barred our way. Two other solo riders were there at the time also, and they made it across simply by racing at it at top speed and jumping the water – with all of us in sleds, plus trailers etc., we could not follow their lead and so, wisdom and ingenuity prevailing, Rupert led us up the valley wall, to the mouth of Synndalen instead.





We each found our spots again, I choosing to climb a steep incline of very coarse rock to get up to a bench that looked as though it gave views over the whole of Isfjord, to the delicate ice-blue mountains and glaciers of the far shore, 30 km. away.

Most of the others were on the south side of the gully so Rupert came up and sat nearby with his rifle. As the afternoon progressed patches of sun on the far

mountain flicked on and off as breaks in the cloud-cover opened and closed. Below us, on the floor of the Colesdale valley, the river that had barred our access became more and more apparent – its nose advancing towards us visibly with the passing hours.

As we were so near the coast we also had the company of a nesting colony of little auks. Their cry is somewhat like cackling laughter – Rupert told us that



one of his mates, on listening to a colony of several hundred thousand for many days, said that it was like the auks had one really good old corny joke that they liked above all others and that, as they retold it over and over to each other, the waves of appreciative laughter were ever-refreshed and rippled endlessly through the group. You could believe it; although, once it was familiar, the thunder of inner silence could dominate it too.

Late in the afternoon, just after I had taken a picture or two of the lichens, moss, and rock before me I closed my eyes and soon heard a yelping bark – “That’s not a bird...” I thought. I opened my eyes and slowly turned to my left, to see the dainty white figure of... “A cat?!? No, it’s an arctic fox heading my way along the rocky shelf.” To my amazement it kept stepping closer and closer, stopping now and then to sniff and look around. Closer and closer, until it stood within ten to fifteen feet of me. I clicked pictures of it as it went by, its inquisitive and gentle expressions caught in the pixels of the magic box. Its body was about the size of a large tom-cat but with longer legs and a magnificent bushy tail.

It had dark patches around the eyes, while the whole of the rest of its coat was a pure refulgent, fulsome white.

What a beautiful crossing of paths: it simply came by, probably on its familiar hunting route, saw an unremarkable object, which probably smelt a bit strange, skirted round it and trotted off down the steep slope ahead of me. It was as if, there in its visitation, was a welcome from the arctic spirits themselves – for the rest of the afternoon I sat with a stupid grin forming and dissolving across my face like the bright snow patches shining over from the mountains of Isfjord, across the wide waters of the bay.

Pär pulled us out of two threatened jack-knives, to applause from us, his passengers, and we retreated home for the last time to Longyearbyen – stopping only for a last photo-op by the valley of the four cabins where we were passed by a huge flotilla of ski-mobiles, a group of business people finishing a conference with a bike-trip across the island to Barentsberg – the Russian settlement. Weary once again we headed to our rooms for the night.





WIFI



PETCHABUHN

[May 22nd ~ Svalbard]

Early the next morning we headed out to do a little gift shopping and then were picked up by Somai and a taxi to take us to the meal offering at the house of her sister.

About a dozen women and one young man (the only male Thai on the island) had gathered there and were plainly delighted to have the “phra” come to visit. They laid on a great feast, which they made sure that Richard and Sandra fully partook of as well. It had been some years since a few of them had last seen the ochre robe so it was a poignant mixture of emotions for them. There was also, needless to say, the jostle of good-humoured ribbing as they forgot or mishandled this or that element of protocol. They had also just had the King of Thailand’s elder sister, Princess Kalyani, visiting last winter so this little cluster of village girls (some of whom could not even read Thai) had now had the surprising joy and honour of these great beings from their national pantheon coming into their midst.



Rupert and Pär joined us at the café for our final evening cocoa in Svalbard. It had been a unique and wonderful time for all of us. When we commented to Rupert, "We were just saying how impressed we all were with your knowledge of ecology and wildlife here," he responded immediately, "That's just tourist chit-chat, that's not knowledge."

He and Pär then told us that we had ruined them, because they had developed such a taste for sitting quietly in the lonely places. "Jah, I brought a book along with me one time but then I thought, 'Why do I want this?'" so I just put it away. So now it's going to be very difficult for the other groups that we take out, who always want to rush on to the next thing."

When they asked us, finally, "What made you want to do this?" We told them the story of Luang Por's vision of the Arctic, when he was newly arrived in London in the late 70s, and how he'd wanted to come here ever since.

Luang Por said, with great sincerity, "You have made my dream come true"; and Rupert, arch arctic tough guy, shed a tear.







BACK TO THE SHIP

[May 23rd ~ Svalbard & Tromsø]

Rupert and Constance came to collect us at the hotel and took us the few miles out of town to the airport. We were touched that they both made the effort to come (Pär was busy with a kayaking trip) and also that they stayed with us until we were through security and on to the plane.

Whilst we were in the check-in area, I got into quite a dither as I had packed my passport away in my giant holdall not thinking that I'd need to use it – we were staying within the borders of Norway, after all. Nevertheless, it was needed for ID and I couldn't find it anywhere – neither in the body of the bag nor in any of the numerous pockets. Mysteriously it finally manifested in a pocket that I had already searched through twice...

I had also lost my hat in Tromsø and been uncharacteristically absent-minded in a dozen ways recently. My intuition was that, within the current of the powerful perceptions of the



Arctic, there were also many feelings of grave concern and grief for the impending loss of my mother, suffering from untreatable pancreatic cancer. She had insisted that I not miss this trip – she would have been 100 times as unhappy if I had not gone on it “just to stay with her” – but her presence, the love we had between us and knowing of her illness divided my attention much of the time. That division broke through vividly at such moments as this.

We had assumed that we would have a few quiet hours in Tromsø between the plane landing at 5:00 and the ship docking at 11:30: maybe sitting in a café, pottering around town or visiting the 24-hour botanical gardens or some such. We had forgotten that Stig was still around and that he had offered to look after us during the stopover. Not only had he organized a van-hire for us, he also had his brother-in-law collect our luggage and clear that out of the way so that we were not all squashed into the vehicle under piles of gear.

He whisked us away, through an extraordinary complex of tunnels, under Tromsø and the fjord, wherein there were numerous roundabouts (we traversed at least three) and interconnections with other underground roads. It went on and on – bearing now this way, now that – so that it felt as though we had been conducted into the Underworld or the antechamber of universes, and I would hardly have been surprised to have emerged into the light of London, Rio, or on the moon.





Our road carried us away from the city and around the bays and valleys of the region. There were so many bends in the road, and we came upon water in so many different directions and the sky was so leaden above us, that it was impossible to know which way was north or south or whence we had come to get there. Eventually Stig brought us to a patch of weekend and summer houses, all brightly clad in the bold reds, navy blues, and honey coloured tones so customary for Norwegian homes. We had tea in a hotel lounge while raucous laughter, cheering, clapping and singing filtered through the smoky air from other quarters of the building.

As we strolled around after, we came upon various scattered groups of folk and found that they were mostly the administrative staff from the University of Tromsø out for their first ever weekend in the country together. Some of them had even rented a Sami tipi – which bore a striking resemblance to the Lakota style one at Amaravati – and let us explore inside it while they grilled their steaks outside on a barbeque by the water.

The whole area is an infinitely complex pattern of islets, bays and inlets with their own tiny, ten yard-long golden beaches and rocky outcrops, often topped with spongy moss and short coastal plants.

As soon as we emerged from the airport at Tromsø we had been struck not only by the presence of trees again (there are none



on Svalbard) but also how all were now bursting into leaf, along with a profusion of wild flowers along the verges and banks beside us. Here too, by the sea-shore tiny plantlets were pushing forth their new growth for the spring and rejoicing in their freedom from snow-cover at last.

We took a long route back to town, around the north coast of the island, past where the German battleship Tirpitz had been run aground and destroyed during the war. All that marked the place where that ferocious destruction had occurred

was a small slab of concrete topped with a five foot high dark pillar. It is hard to bear in mind how these regions of magical beauty have also been host to the merciless, marauding Norsemen of the 9th – 12th centuries and the horrendous sea battles of World War II.

Stig took us into town and wove an intricate path this way and that to give the best photo ops to catch our ship as it drew into the harbour. Like a manic taxi driver guided by the hands of angels he led us to spot after spot – unfortunately the urgency

of getting on to the next one rendered most of the pix askew, blurry or mis-framed. It was a joy nonetheless to feel his keenness to give us the treat of the vision of our vessel drawing close to receive us.

Once on board we were all ready to call it quits and the day passed by with most of us lying low and catching up on some rest. Ajahn Nyanarato stayed up to view our first sunset since Visakha Puja (it was at 11:45 p.m.) over the open water, crossing south-eastwards out of Svolvær, on the largest of the Lofoten Islands.





ENDLESS SUNSET

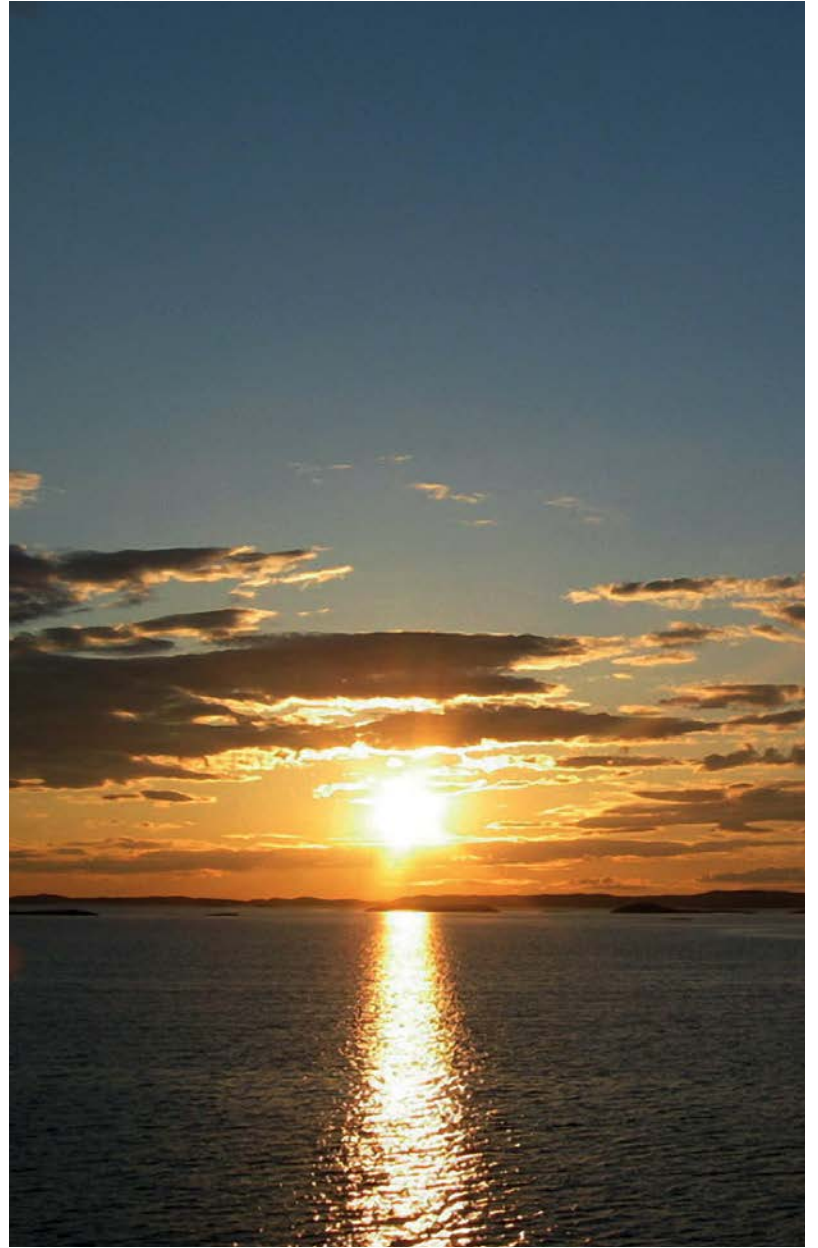
[May 23rd ~ Polarlys]

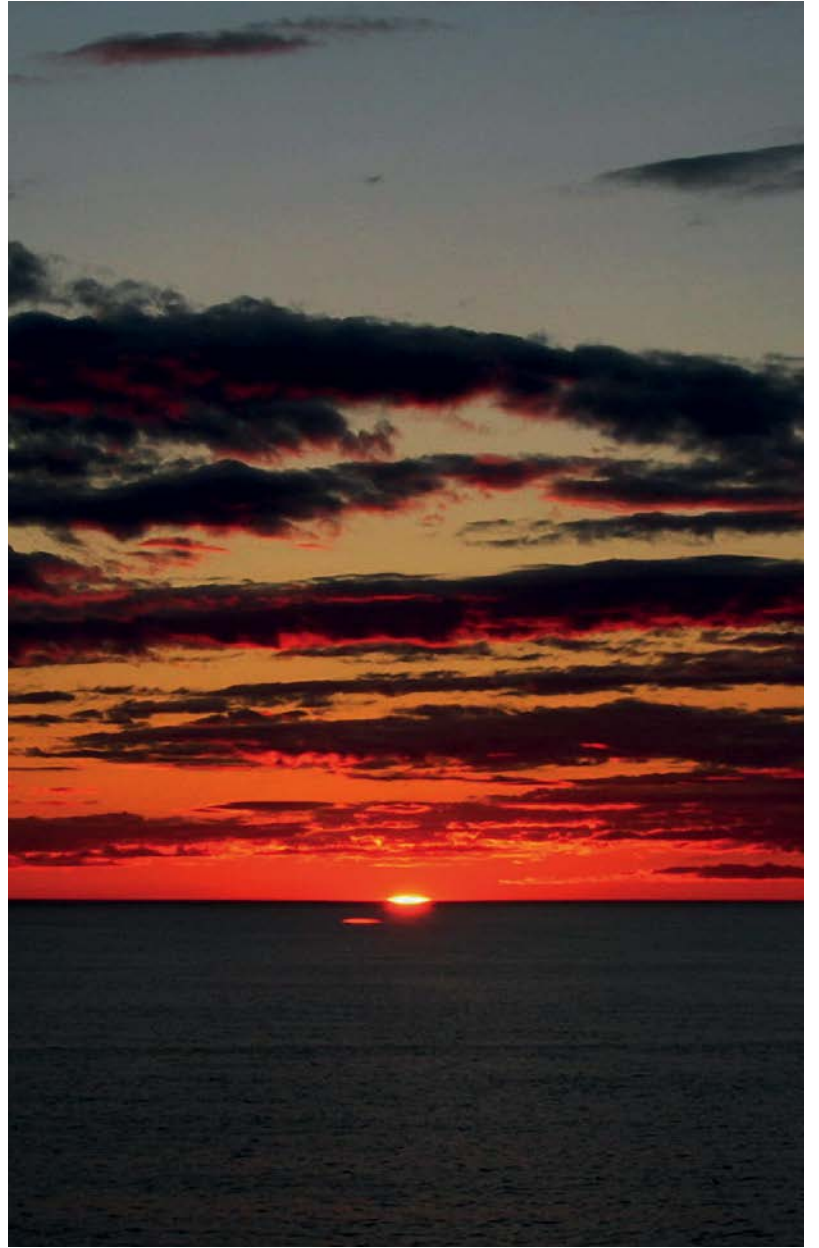
Now it is morning again and, after grey skies in Tromsø, like yesterday it is bright above and sparkling on the water. There is a mellow mood amongst us six – a feeling of re-entering that other world and a drainedness, after the peak of our Svalbard days. When we crossed the Arctic Circle after breakfast today there was no impulse amongst us to do more than look out of the windows above the stern, at the globe set on a small islet to our starboard side. The Journey has evolved from: the naming of the quest; the going forth; the reaching of the goal and initiation; now we are on the phase of the return – going home to rocky Ithaca, changed and changing in many ways.

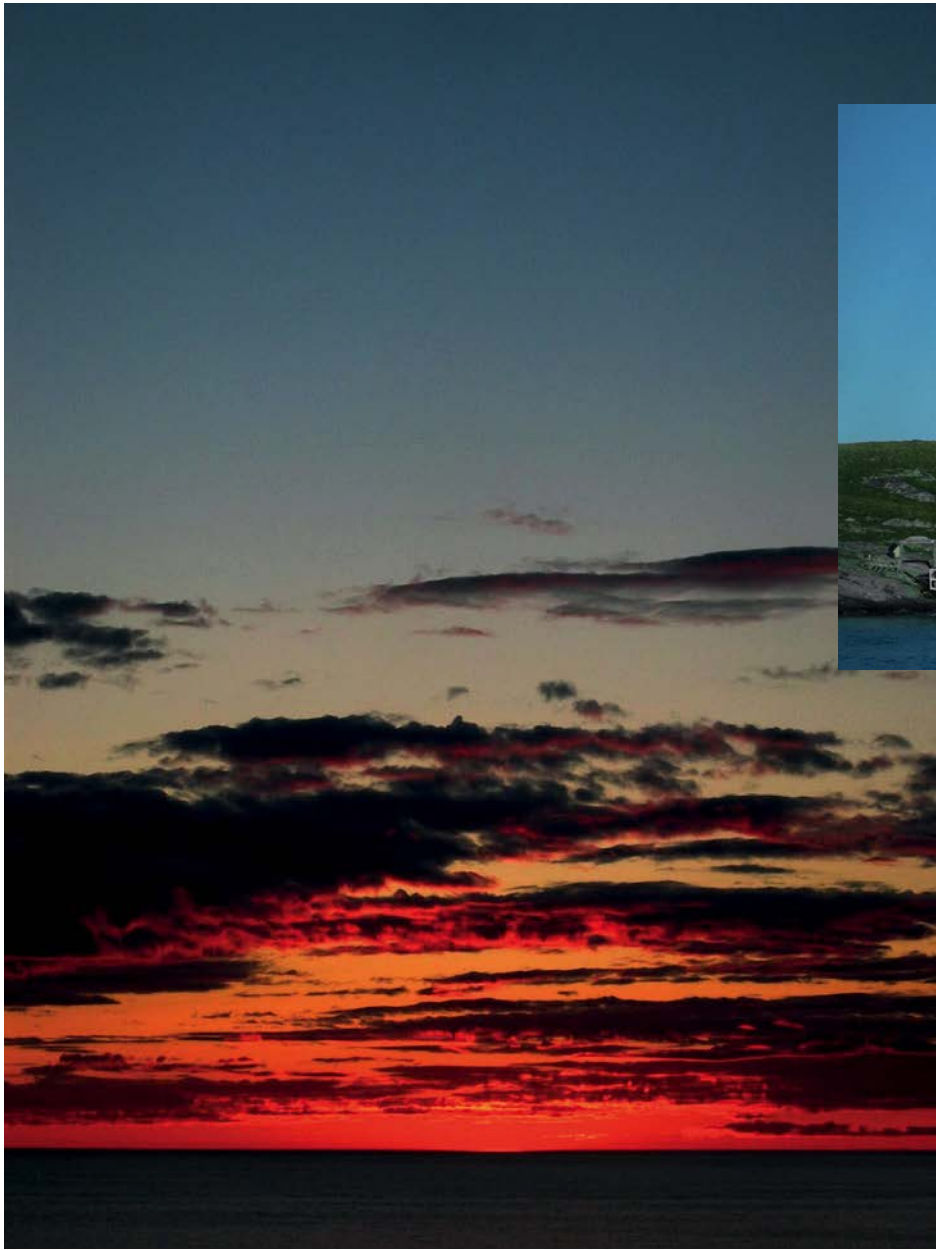
















XI



THE CLAMOUR OF SPRING

Progress south: more and more signs of spring and new life – forests, flowers, rich grasses abound on all sides lit by the gold north sun. Even on deck folks are taking to the chairs and chaise-longues, a sight even the brightest days did not bring as we headed north.









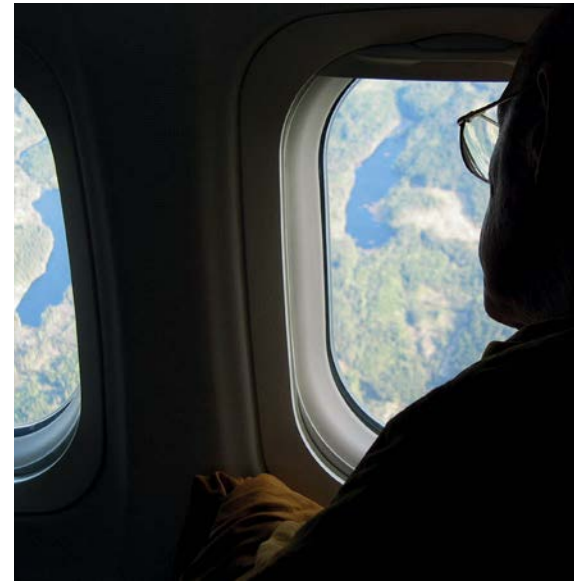








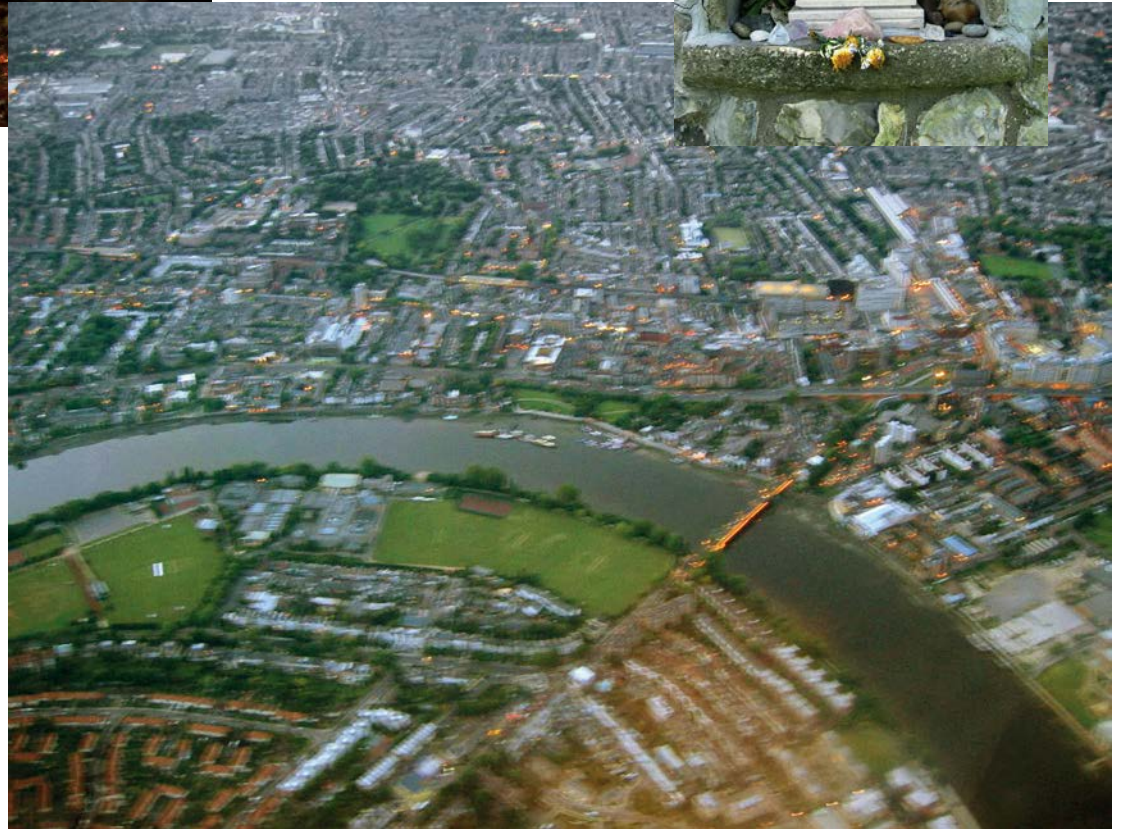
XIII



RETURN TO THE DEATHLESS REALM

Re-entry into the world of life and things:
return from the barren margins,
the timeless,
the great silence –
miraculous
how
it all comes with us.

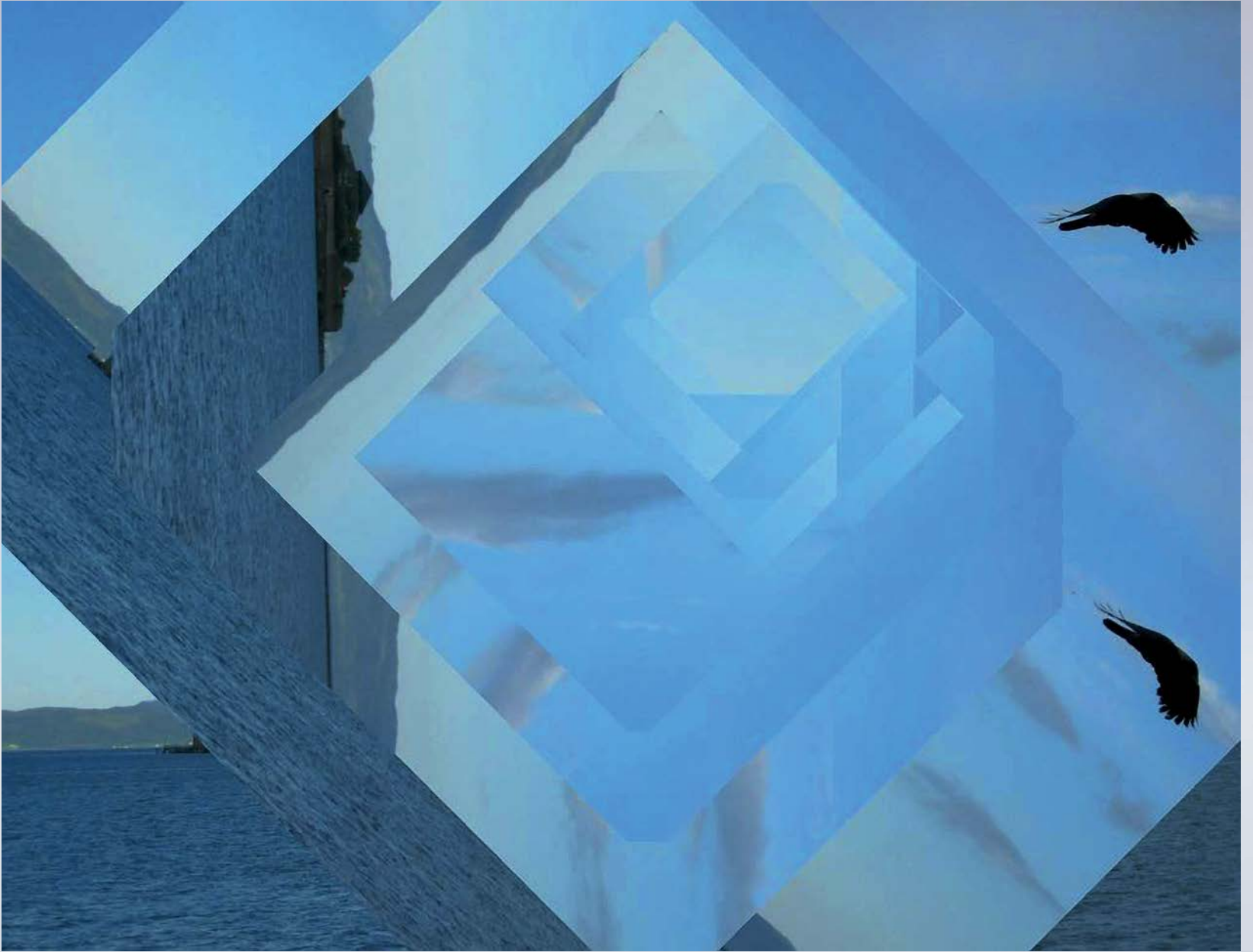












GLOSSARY AND NOTES

Ajahn (Thai) – (Pali: *ācariya*) lit. ‘teacher’ an honorific used for senior monastics as well as university professors.

Bhikkhu – Buddhist monk; lit. ‘one who sees the danger in *samsāra*’ or ‘one who lives on alms’.

Buritto (Spanish) – lit. ‘little donkey’; is a type of Mexican food consisting of a wheat-flour tortilla wrapped into a thick cylindrical shape to completely enclose a filling.

Cittaviveka – inner or mental seclusion; non-attachment to the sense world and mental activity.

Dhamma (Pali) /Dharma (Skt.) – the truth of the way things are; the teachings of the Buddha that reveal that truth and elucidate the means of realizing it as a direct experience.

Dhamma-dīpa – the light of Dhamma, meaning the illuminating power of Truth.

Esan (Thai) – the North-east region Thailand, bordering on Laos and Cambodia.

“If no dawn, when is it OK to breakfast?” – this refers to the monastic rule that food can only be consumed between dawn and noon each day.

Kāyaviveka – physical seclusion; withdrawal from the world.

Lakota – the Lakota are an indigenous people of the Great Plains of North America. They are part of a confederation of seven related Sioux tribes.

Luang Por – ‘Venerable Father’ or ‘Respected Father’; a friendly and reverential term of address used for elderly monks.

Mandala (Skt.) – lit. ‘circle’; a symbolic and symmetrically

patterned circle, having spiritual and ritual significance in both Buddhism and Vedanta.

Matoum (Thai) – bael fruit (*Aegle marmelos*), also known as Bengal quince and *bilva* in Pali.

Nimitta – mark, sign or image; often used to refer to visions arising in meditation.

“Noo ma jahk Petchabuhn, kaa!” (Thai) – “I (lit. ‘This little person’) come from Petchabuhn, Sir!”

“Not being separated from our robes at dawn” – this refers to the rule that Buddhist monastics should always keep their robes with them overnight. This rule has the effect that each monastic should have their robes within arm’s reach at the time of the ending of the night and the beginning of the new day.

Phra (Thai) – from the Pali *vara*, lit. ‘superb, excellent, surpassing’; it is used both as a generic term for Buddhist monks as well as an honorific, meaning the equivalent of ‘Venerable’.

Right View – (Pali *Sammā-ditthi*) is the understanding, and contemplation of experience through the lens of the Four Noble Truths. These Four are: the universality of unsatisfactoriness, the nature of its origin, the fact of its cessation, and the path leading to that cessation.

Rocky Ithaca – a frequently occurring epithet for the native island of Odysseus, in Homer’s epic poem, *The Odyssey*. The central theme of the tale is the hero’s unrelenting determination to return home despite all obstacles.

Sami – the Sami are an indigenous people inhabiting the Arctic area of far northern Sweden, Norway, Finland and the Kola Peninsula of Russia.

Sammā-samādhi – lit. ‘Right’ or ‘Perfect Concentration’; one-pointedness of mind and mental stability; the state of concentrated calm resulting from meditation practice that is also perfectly in tune with reality.

Shiva lingam – a columnar or oval-shaped stone, being a representation of the Vedic deity Shiva, used for worship in temples.

Stupa – (Skt. *stūpa*, Pali *thūpa*) lit. ‘a heap’; is a domed or pagoda-like structure, usually containing relics of the Buddha or respected Elders. They are used as a place of devotion and meditation. Also called *cetiya* (Pali, lit. ‘memorial’) or *dagoba* (Sinhala).

Tathāgata – ‘Perfect One’; lit. ‘One who has “thus gone” or “thus come”’; an epithet of the Buddha.

“The Tathāgata is profound, deep, immeasurable....” – this passage is from the *Aggi-Vacchagotta Sutta*, ‘The Discourse to Vacchagotta About Fire,’ to be found at Majjhima Nikāya 72.20.

“Upasiva, one who has reached the End...” – this passage is from the *Upasiva Sutta*, to be found at Sutta Nipāta verses 1074-76.

Uposatha – ‘Observance Day’, the Buddhist traditional ‘holy days’ held on every full and new moon; also the recitation of the Monastic Rule that is obligatory on those days.

Visākha Pūjā – the full moon day of May, being the occasion of the Buddha’s birth, enlightenment and final passing away. It is the biggest annual festival in the Southern Buddhist world

Wat Pah Nanachat – the International Forest Monastery; established by Ajahn Chah for his Western students in 1975 and located in Ubon Province, North-east Thailand. Ajahn Sumedho was its founding abbot.

