

Vipassana Teaching Retreats in Luang Prabang

The Sangha of Luang Prabang held two teaching retreats for several hundred young monks and novices in December 2004 (twelfth lunar month, waxing moon of the Lao Year 2547) and at the same period in the following year 2005 (first lunar month, waxing and waning moon of the Lao Year 2548) in a forest monastery near Santi Stupa, on the outskirts of the city. These retreats are remarkable and special for several reasons. They brought the teaching of Vipassana techniques to a large group of young people who had no previous experience with meditation. After many years in which meditation had been in abeyance in Laos, they represented a courageous attempt to reintroduce this central religious practice in systematic Buddhist teaching, strengthening in this way Lao Buddhism in a complex situation of social, economic, and cultural change. And they revived a vital quality of Theravada Buddhism in a city that for centuries had been one of its major centers in Southeast Asia. The extraordinary chance to witness this process, and to document it in a steady, long-term community effort, offered to a Western artist through the generosity and the insight of the teaching monks, only added to its singularity.

Four hundred two young monks and novices participated in the first retreat, and 553 in the second. Most participants came from the monasteries of the city of Luang Prabang, or surrounding villages. Some came from monasteries in other northern provinces of Laos. The teaching monks—about a dozen—mostly came from Vientiane, the Lao capital.

For some years, Luang Prabang has been a center of Buddhist teaching in Laos, as it was in the past. About one thousand young people study in three monastic schools there, where the teaching is free. The students live as novices or monks in the monasteries, where they fulfill certain ritual and religious obligations toward the laypeople, who in turn feed and maintain them through alms and other offerings. Conditions of life and of teaching are certainly complicated, and there is amazingly little security regarding the continuity of this system of exchange. But there is no doubt an overall feeling of revival and regeneration, of appreciation and community that is difficult to find in other places. The young monks and novices often come from remote villages (and sometimes even from different ethnic groups), and for them this is the only way to study, and to have a chance for a life different from that of their parents. It is this small elite of gifted young people who participated in the two retreats organized by the Sangha and the Buddhist schools with the help of senior monks, teachers, and a group of laypeople who took care of food, water, and other “necessities of life,” as prescribed by the Buddha: no monastery, no congregation of monks can survive where there are no laypeople to sustain them.

Lao Buddhism knows own forms of Samatha (a concentrated meditation leading to calm and serenity of mind) and Vipassana (a meditation cultivating mental awareness and development of insight). Samatha has always been a widespread technique, while Vipassana was restricted to some monastic centers that formed around a learned monk who sometimes would create a tradition and have followers. The renaissance of Buddhism in Laos seen in the last few years made it possible for the monks of Luang Prabang to boldly attempt to reintroduce Vipassana, seen as a major tool and condition to teach the Dhamma. Because most of the young monks and the novices had no previous meditation experience, basic concepts and notions of meditation, movements, corporeal attitudes, and behaviors, as well as ritual chanting linked to meditation, had to be taught from scratch. All of the young participants were confronted with the complex spiritual concepts, with the ideas and meanings that form Vipassana meditation, for the first time in their life.

The Sattipattana Sutta, the canonical text that outlines the practice and the meaning of Vipassana, prescribes four fundamental exercises that lead to concentration and awareness: sitting, standing, lying down, and walking. The movements accompanying these exercises, and those leading from one exercise to the other, are meticulously prescribed (and may differ in the various meditation traditions). The young monks and novices participating in the Luang Prabang retreats had to learn these exercises, and put them to practice. For the walking exercise, several groups were formed at different times of the day, which circulated around the forest, led by a teacher, moving slowly and steadily, sometimes crossing the path of another group, then standing still, breathing like one single body, heads inclined, bare feet in the dust. Late in the night, after the final sitting meditation that took place inside the stupa, all participants practiced walking meditation by turning around the stupa, in an endless chain of silent movement, like a majestic watercourse of concentration, awareness, and calm. The soft night carried this seemingly endless movement, hushed even the most distant noise. At one point, sitting quietly under the trees at some distance from the stupa, I suddenly had a feeling of hearing an ever-swelling sound—their feet, when touching the grass, made a very subtle, almost imperceptible noise, and suddenly, in my concentration, this faint noise became almost unbearably strong, a thunderous, roaring reverberation. I was dazed and afraid, realized the disproportion of my perception, breathed calmly in and out, and finally managed to realize the fading away of the noise. It was a moment in which I myself experienced a small portion of the sensations that had become part of the life of the young people I had been accompanying

in their bold exercise.

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