



Being born in a village such as I described, when I reached the age of about eight years old I first of all learnt to read Lao (in those days they used to call the Lao alphabet “Thai Noi”) by studying at night time with my maternal grandfather. During the daytime I went to look after the cows and water buffalos. The books that I studied were the poem Pou Sone Lane [“A Grandfather Teaches his Grandson”] and the book Champa Si Ton [“The Four Frangipani Trees”]. When I was studying with my grandfather he also told me many old stories, and throughout the stories of Chao Anou and Chao Rasavong he would say “in former times, we were vassals of Chao Anou of Vientiane, but the Siamese took Vientiane and we became their vassals.”

He would then relate the story of when Chao Rasavong fought with the Siamese and fled to the forest to learn mantras from a hermit (according to the book Thao Lao Kham or “The Golden Prince”) and it was from my grandfather that I learnt the motto “Lord Rasavong! In the territory of Vientiane, Rasavong is the ruler; Oh young women, don’t think that Vientiane is in darkness; in the end it will rise again, just as the final gourd is the largest!” From reading palmleaf manuscripts and various poems such as Phra Muni [“The Venerable Sage”] and being able to recite them from memory, I became the leader of the children’s and adults’ group recitations during the Rocket Festival. At one such festival in the district of Aht Samaht, there was a district education official called Thao Nou who came to like Sao Yuak (the beautiful young woman of the village) and wrote a message [in verse] to her, but no one could read it. Sao Yuak’s mother asked me to read it out to her and to write down her [i.e. the mother’s] reply to Teacher Nou. From that time on, I came to like poetical writings and memorized verses from many books and practiced writing traditional songs for the children, as well as having a mental image of Vientiane and an interest in the story of Chao Rasavong. Besides this, I listened to various stories which my mother told to me, such as Phra Lak Phra Ram , Sinxay, and Sieosavath. My mother was the one who told me these stories because she went to listen to sermons [in the temple] every day during the rainy season retreat and when night fell she would retell these stories to her children. In that way, I memorized many stories and I always liked to recount them to other people.

After studying for a short time I could read, because the method was to learn to read straight away, but I was unable to write. Later on I went to live in the temple as a sangali or temple boy (this is more correctly sanghakari which translates as a servant of the sangha or someone who works for the monastic community). During this time of study and serving the monks, I learnt Tham script together with traditional methods of calculation (using Sanskrit formulas). Later on I also learnt Thai language from an uncle (the younger brother of my mother) who was a monk who taught in that temple and who gave private lessons, since there was not yet any school. When I reached the age of eleven, I became a novice and studied Khom script and various

books of chants up to the end of the initial stage of study, so that by that age I could read well enough in Lao, Tham, Khom, and Thai scripts, and could write passably in Tham and Thai. But after only one year as a novice I disrobed due to a serious illness and when I recovered I helped my parents with rice farming and looking after the water buffalos, while for the time being my parents had my older brother ordain as a novice in my place. During the period that I was 11-12 years old (B.E. 2460), the Thai government established schools in various districts and passed a law that children must go to school. Anyone who had at least two children of school age must send one of them to school, or the father would face prosecution. As a result, it was agreed that in my family I would be the one to go to school, which was in Bane Hang Wa, about 12 kilometers from the village where I lived. When I went to school I had to take rice to cook to feed myself because the school was far away, and at night I slept in the temple where the school was built, travelling home on Saturdays and leaving early on Monday mornings. After two years of study I had reached Level Three of primary education, but had not yet taken the examination. In the year that I was 15 years old (B.E. 2463) my father passed away after catching cholera in Khorat where he had gone to sell pigs and buy rice. Following his death, the family had my elder brother who was still a novice disrobe to help with the rice farming and I became a novice again in his place according to the family custom. In the year B.E. 2463 the government established a school in Bane Thong Meun close to my village, so I was able to continue my education and pass the Level Three examination. During this period as a novice, I was resentful because the teacher (that is my mother's younger brother who had become a monk and was the teacher there) cared more about Novice Thon (my aunt's son) since he was two years older and strong. He could saw and plane wood nicely, whereas I could saw but I was not strong, and so when the teacher brought the saws to share out to make small round tables, tobacco boxes or other things, I would always get those left over after the others had chosen all the good ones. Even when he had a robe or anything else, he would always give it to Novice Thon first and I would get whatever was left, which made me think about running away from that temple and continuing my studies in town. Then I passed the Level Three examination that year, whereas Novice Thon failed, and so I went to study in Roi Et town and entered Level Four of primary education when I was 16 years old. I entered the first year of secondary education at the age of 17 and also studied at night for the Buddhist examinations. These Buddhist courses started just that year, with Phra Ajahn Maha Thorngin as the teacher, who recommended that studying in the Buddhist system would be quicker, since after passing the third maha level it was possible to go straight to Law School and take the examinations to become a judge. In those days only Maha Sote, who was from a farming village nearby, had disrobed and passed the Law School examinations to become a judge with a monthly salary of 160 baht and be honoured with the civil service title of Rong Ammaht Ek and the royal title of Luang. This made me very satisfied to study in the Buddhist system and I passed the examinations that same year without studying with or depending upon anyone, even though the exam papers were sent from Bangkok and were returned there to be marked. When I was going to take these examinations, my teacher changed my age to 19 years old, since it was not allowed below that age. This was because anyone who passed the third level of Buddhist examinations was exempted from military conscription, and for this reason many people enrolled for these courses. From that time on I left the secular school and at the age of 17 went on to study the second level Buddhist Studies and Pali Grammar in the town of Ubon, since at that time Roi Et Province was still only a monthon. [This came about] in 1922, when the ecclesiastical head of the district, Chao Khun Sasanadilok, who lived in Ubon, came to stay at Wat Beung temple while on a tour of

inspection, where I was called on to serve him and be his clerk to note down various lists for him. In that way he came to like me and I

[re]ordained as a novice in the Thammayut sect and asked to go to stay with him at Wat Sithong temple in Ubon. I then took the second level of Buddhist studies, which had just received permission to be established that year, together with higherlevel Pali grammar, receiving the best marks in both examinations. When I was studying in Ubon, the monk who was the supervisor harassed and persecuted those who were studying in the same level, ever on the look out to slander or accuse them, and when he saw that the teacher liked me he was always looking for ways to incite trouble.

In February of B.E. 2467 (1924) my teacher Chao Khun Sasanadilok took me with him as his secretary when he went again to inspect the Roi Et monthon civil service, and when he returned to Ubon after completing the work I asked to go for Bangkok to continue my studies, since there was nowhere to study further in Ubon, and he gave his permission. So I stayed on in Roi Et town waiting to go to Bangkok together with the companions of Ajahn Maha Kham who had been visiting home in Khon Kaen and would return to Bangkok in May. But in the month of April, an important monk named Somdet Phra Maha Viravongs, who at that time had the ecclesiastical position of Phra Thepmuni, came up from Bangkok and when I saw him pass through Roi Et I asked to return to Ubon, because he liked me and saw that I could study well. He said that if I stayed with him in Ubon for one more year, he would send me to stay in Wat Boworniwet Wiharn, the most important temple [in Bangkok]. The monks and novices who lived in that temple received a monthly salary of 10 baht. I went back to Ubon and after less than a month living with him I couldn't stand it any more and made up my mind to go to Bangkok for sure, so I took leave of my teacher Chao Khun Sasanadilok, who made papers for me to go to stay in Wat Sapathum temple (Wat Pathumwanaram), but I did not take leave of the important monk (Phra Thepmuni) because I was afraid that he would not let me go.

I traveled from Ubon alone for three days, calling in to say goodbye to my mother for one night and then going on to Roi Et town, but too late to join Maha Kham's group which had already left for Bangkok, so I asked to go with a convoy of buffalocarts belonging to some soldiers who were moving down to Bangkok. At the time, I had 12 baht that my mother had given me together with two pieces of silk cloth worth six baht each. My mother told me that if I ran out of money I should sell the cloths, but instead I gave them to the Thai soldier who I was depending on, because he paid the 6.80 baht train fare from Nakhorn Ratchasima to Bangkok and I lived and ate with him for the whole 12 days, so I was left only with the original 12 baht.

When I arrived in Bangkok, I went to stay at Wat Pathumwanaram, or Wat Sapathum, and began to study for the highest level of Buddhist studies, coming first in the examination out of a total of 390 people in Bangkok, of whom only 90 passed in B.E. 2468 (1925). In the following year I passed the thirdlevel maha examination and took the full ordination as a monk. At the end of the same year, the Law Schools (in those days they were called Political Science Schools) changed the entrance system for new students. Previously, anyone who was a thirdlevel maha could go to study, but from the year B.E. 2470, the sixth level was required. I made an effort to study further and I was able to pass one level each year, so that by the year B.E. 2471 (1928) I had passed level five. With that I was determined to disrobe and go to law school, which had previously taken people who had passed the maha level, but when I went to enroll they said that

I also needed to have level six of secondary education and that I needed a reference from a highranking civil servant, because at that time there was still an absolute monarchy. Lay people needed to have passed level eight of secondary education. Given this situation, I lost my determination to study further and at the same time, after reading a Lao newspaper from Vientiane which some monks from Meuang Khong had brought to read, I had the idea that what I really wanted was to go to see Vientiane. Together with this, I read a book called Prapgabot Ai Anou Viangchan or “The Suppression of the Rebellion of Ai Anou of Vientiane” published by Phra Nakhorn Sawannaworaphinich, the Supreme Councillor of the 7th King of the present dynasty of Siam, which was distributed at a royal kathina robeoffering ceremony. In this book, they called King Anou “Ai” Anou and his wife Queen Khamporng was called “Ee” Khamporng . When I finished reading this story, I felt extremely hurt and angry, and the idea of national liberation arose very strongly. From that time on, I urged my fellow monastics who had passed the maha level to form a group in order to liberate Laos, even though we had no power or knowledge of politics, only anger and resentment. During this period, I traveled extensively to take part in debates (a style of sermon with questions) as a way of finding likeminded companions and also taught Pali as the opportunity arose. But these ideas gradually lost their attraction when Chao Khun Upali, the senior monk of the Lao from Northeast Thailand, explained that he had the same thoughts, but there was no way to achieve them. From the time I became a novice to when I was a monk, I wrote books of different kinds of poetry, mostly folk stories, the important ones being the Life of the Buddha, and the Vessantara Jataka of which many thousand copies were printed for sale and for free distribution.