

# Silent world

## John Keeble retreats into peace in Thailand

Pictured: a quiet moment soon after dawn at one of the Suan Mokkh ponds



**My mind was at peace, a minor miracle in itself, as I looked down on mountains and rocky terrain, deserts and deep dark canyons where a careless foot could be swallowed.**

Slowly, a cloud of mauve light formed on the left, covering the desert landscape and then, quite suddenly, an intense violet eruption appeared on the right, alive and electric, white in places...

I walked on, watching my bare feet, watching the wild contours and the colours which settled down, eventually, to the calmer clouds of mauve staying just ahead of each foot as I mindfully stepped through the silent world of the old monastery hall on my walking meditation.

As I became aware again of the real details of my surroundings, I knew there was one other person there, a young man sitting cross-legged,

straight-backed, deep in the shadows of a recess and his *anapanasati* meditation.

Earlier – and later – there was no three-dimensional landscape there, no lights beyond the rainy season dusk seeping through the concrete windows... the floor was shiny smooth, only some underlying patterns from the way it was made; and the hall was light enough to see but no more. It was silent, apart from the subdued roar of the monsoon storm.

Some experiences amaze, some stun, some fascinate... and, every once in a very long time, leave you knowing and unknowing, seeing and unseeing as you struggle to come to terms with changes they bring about in yourself.

This experience, for me, was the 10-day silent meditation retreat at the International Dhamma Hermitage at Suan Mokkh, one of

the most famous meditation temples in Thailand, in the south where the border of Burma is closest to the Gulf of Thailand.

It is easy to focus on the tough living conditions of the retreat – and I will, to some extent – but the deep and, hopefully, lasting effect is on the mind as the monks, nuns and lay people explain about meditation and life. Every participant seemed to have heard a different voice, had a different experience, personal to each as we slogged our way through 17-hour days as a silent community sometimes practising alone, sometimes moving together like we were possessed by aliens in an old sci-fi movie.

Suan Mokkh is an enormous monastery, with a 'public' part – a reception, areas of remembrance for Buddhadasa Bhikkhu and his work there, a Spiritual Theatre, and other buildings associated



## “I opted for sweeping the sand in Meditation Hall 5” (*shown above*)

with a *wat* (temple complex), an area for nuns and a free accommodation building for travellers who need it or who will or have attended the retreat.

At one time, Suan Mokkh was unbroken over hundreds of acres including a small sacred mountain and beyond that into the quiet coconut groves ... it still has that area but today a major road bisects it.

The 90 or so men and women taking part in the retreat were aged from 16 to over 60 and arrived from countries as diverse as Australia and Germany, Israel and Canada, China and Switzerland.

On the last day of the month, we were ferried the kilometre or two from the public area to the very private, and usually very quiet, international hermitage. Secluded next to that area, there is a three-month retreat centre for Thai

women who will return to their communities to teach the *Dhamma* (the teachings of Buddha) and meditation.

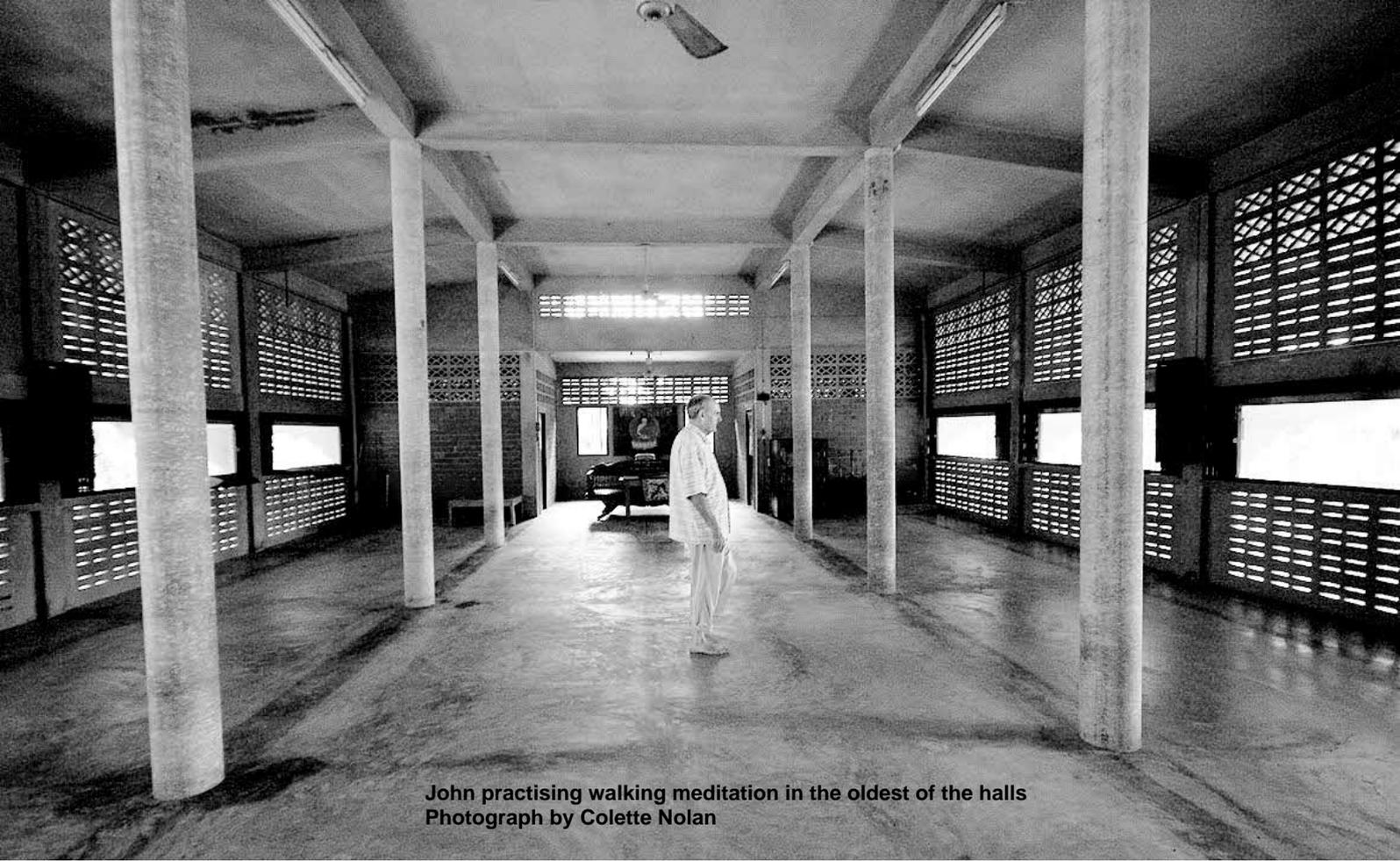
The gate, never locked, closed symbolically as we were interviewed; we signed vows not to kill anything, not to speak, to eat only after dawn and before afternoon, not to even think about sex, not to read or write except for retreat material, and not to rest on luxurious beds or chairs. We gave our valuables into safe keeping and handed over our mobile phones. Each of us signed up for daily chores... I opted for sweeping the sand, with five others, in Meditation Hall 5, an open-sided *sala* big enough to hold maybe 200 and our meeting place. No one wanted to clean the lavatories.

We were allocated concrete ‘cells’ with concrete beds in separate male and female quadrangles, known there as dorms, and shown to

them. *Mandis* were outside in the quadrangles for ‘showering’; and electricity was available only long enough to get up at 4am and go to bed at 9.15pm for those who struggled on that late...

Day 1: There was a bell ringing, clear and beautiful in the blackness of my mosquito-net entombed world ... don’t ask for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for us and it is 4am... I grappled with the moment, not knowing which would win – tiredness or the desire to escape the monk’s life of sleeping on a thin coconut mat on a sheet of hardboard on a slab of concrete with a block of barely shaped wood for a pillow. I felt like a blancmange that had gone splat on a hard surface with hard bits sticking painfully and inconveniently out at odd angles.

I wimped off the bed, adjusted to the night, switched on the light... must be in Med Hall 5 by 4.30...



John practising walking meditation in the oldest of the halls  
Photograph by Colette Nolan

## “I switched all my efforts to walking meditation”

“best if you don’t wear shoes, helps with your Mindfulness ... don’t worry about wildlife, the snakes are gentle (we hardly ever see a cobra), scorpions and millipedes can cause pain that will make a fisherman cry but they are never fatal, the spiders are big but harmless ...” OK, if you say so.

Yesterday’s people and today’s silent apparitions floated through the darkness for maybe half a kilometre to Med Hall 5 and sat, in a deep embracing silence, for our first morning reading and meditation before going to the daily yoga. Ah, yoga. It looked like just over an hour on the schedule but it felt like two days (it was a long time ago, but as I struggled to keep up I couldn’t help thinking it had been a mistake to have my spine redesigned by a tonne of falling wood and concrete).

Then, mindfully (a key word in our training), we returned to Med Hall

5 for a *Dhamma* talk and more sitting meditation before, finally, at 8am, it was time for breakfast of rice soup with vegetables and raw leaves of various delicious kinds plus tea.

The day, like most of the others, took its course: After breakfast, our chores. By then it was pleasantly warm (that’s a euphemism for feeling hot, sweaty, unshaven and wearing yesterday’s clothes), but a cold *mandi* shower and shave awaited us. Then: **10.00** *Dhamma* talk; **11.00** Walking meditation; **11.45** Sitting meditation; **12.30** Lunch (last meal of the day: vegetarian curry, rice, maybe noodles or vegetables, and a dessert or fresh fruit) and hot spring; **14.30** Meditation instruction and sitting meditation; **15.30** Walking meditation; **16.15** Sitting meditation; **17.00** Chanting & Loving Kindness meditation; **18.00** Tea (mug of...) and hot spring for some, but the second

cold *mandi* shower for me; **19.30** Sitting meditation; **20.00** Group walking meditation round the ponds under a night sky of crescent moon and stars bright with no ground light pollution; **20.30** Sitting meditation; and **21.15** Bedtime. In there, during the breaks, was some rest time: most slept but for me it was a tranquil time sitting in the shade by the ponds.

Within a few days, I realised that *anapanasati* (the breathing technique taught by the Buddha) was not for me and I switched all my efforts to walking meditation. At first, I thought walking meditation would be easy: it just needs concentration, right? Yes, right... first, the mind is very rebellious. Then, when you cosh it into some kind of co-operation, it gets very sly... it knows all your weaknesses, all your little mental rat runs, and it does anything to tempt you from concentration on

A moment's rest in the Spirituality Theatre



## “Within ten steps, it had escaped”

just walking. At one stage, it escaped and within 10 steps, it had planned a business ... on another, it conjured up a metre-high bottle of Singha beer right in front of me and, the depth of slyness, used that to tempt me into laughing at the joke countless times afterwards.

But, by Day 7, I was getting there. Then the monsoon returned with a vengeance. And the biting ants were intent on revenge for just one little moment's loss of mindfulness... so I moved to the oldest meditation hall, where almost immediately I experienced deeper concentration and saw three-dimensional images and colours as I meditated.

The storms got worse, the rain so fierce it was forcing itself through my umbrella. Previously dry areas were deep with water and the mud squelched pleasantly between the toes.

The retreat's meanings got deeper too, and what seemed shallow at first now opened like a lotus flower and we began to see some of the links with life that, in respect of dukkha, have hardly changed in two and a half thousand years.

On Day 11, after the usual 4am rise, the retreat finished with a final address by the abbot, Tan Ajarn Poh. There were fewer people than when it started. Some had left, for whatever reasons, but most of us were there to hear Abbot Poh.

Back at the dorm, as we packed, cleaned up and got ready to say hello to a luxurious bed somewhere, someone was softly whistling *I'm Leaving on a Jet Plane*.

But I was wondering what it had all been about. Not because there was so little but quite the opposite. There was so much that I wanted to keep and use when I got back to

what I was no longer sure was the real world. ■

Web: [www.suanmokkh-idh.org](http://www.suanmokkh-idh.org)

Location: a taxi ride from Surat Thani airport north of the city

Cost: 2000 baht when registering. Cash

Dates: Last day of each month through to the end of the 10th of the next. No email etc booking; you have to go there but can stay overnight free and you leave on the 11th

Food: All vegetarian, almost all vegan, popular with everyone

Take: Loose clothes (fisherman pants, T-shirts), toiletries, towel, flashlight, mosquito repellent

Alternative or additional Seven day retreat on Ko Samui on the 21st of the month. Registration is the day before. Same people organise it. But there is far less guidance so you need to know why you are going and what to do.

Web: [www.dipabhavan.org](http://www.dipabhavan.org)