

# TUNNEL VISION In Thailand

By Asia Nichols

IT WAS ONLY DAY ONE OF OUR MEDITATION RETREAT AT WAT UMONG, ONE OF THE OLDEST BUDDHIST TEMPLES in Chiang Mai, Thailand, in the foothills of the mountains of Doi Suthep. Legend has it, the ancient maze-like tunnels on the temple grounds were built to keep a deranged monk from wandering off into the forest. To me at that moment, wandering off didn't seem like such a bad idea.

Twenty-four hours before our planned three-day retreat, I'd felt the first symptoms: a strange tingling in my throat, followed by severe chills. I took ibuprofen, hoping the drug would do its magic, but when it didn't work, I refused to back out. So the next day, there I was squirming in the meditation room, in a tug-o-war between concentration and congestion. Blood rushed to my ankles, sweat oozed down my back, and the room was way too quiet. Of the seven other meditators, all draped in white, some stood in corners with their eyes shut, bodies unflinching. The rest circled a gigantic Buddha in the room's center at a glacial, ghostlike pace.

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a tree, it turns orange, same color as his robe; the color reminds him that all things are impermanent. But as I sat there, I grew tired of pondering impermanence and decided that in two hours, with or without my husband, I'd be permanently on my way back to the hotel.

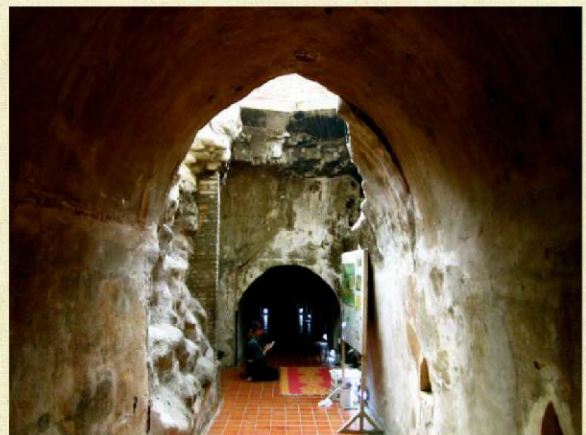
As foolproof as my exit strategy seemed, I forgot one crucial element—I was in the middle of a forest. Finding a tuk-tuk driver out there after dark would be next to impossible. I was trapped, like that monk in the maze. And by 7 p.m., I was back in the same room for *dhamma* discussion—the truth taught by the Buddha—as a monk rambled on about the power of distractions. Indeed, I was very distracted. My mind had roamed back to my former studio apartment in California...my big comfortable bed, my fluffy pillow, my hot-water shower that could've cleared up my sinuses in no time. But this other-life fantasy came to an abrupt end with the monk's next words.

“When we are sick,” he said, “it does not have to be a bad thing. It is how we look at it. It's easy to meditate when your body is strong, but when we are weak, both the body and mind lose focus. A sick body can make your mind more aware. It makes you slow down. See more, like that.”

The monk never looked at me, but maybe he sensed my ill spirit. In any case, his words made me see that I'd been handling my symptoms all wrong. Not for a second did I use my illness as a reminder to slow down, but rather I used every bit of energy I had to resist. There I was, at a Buddhist temple in a forest in northern Thailand, still holding onto my old ideas of what it means to find peace. It makes no difference how far we roam in the world, how many spiritual places we visit or how many monks we meet, it's about finding one thing in our lives—even in the most unfavorable conditions—that reminds us to stop and be present. And within that present moment, just waiting to be discovered, lies peace.

I didn't leave the temple that night, and over the next three days I woke up at 4 a.m. to come for morning chant, eat silent meals with monks and *mae jis*—Thai women who devote themselves to spiritual practice—and meditate for 30 hours. During break time in the afternoons, I explored the lush grounds and found my way to the old tunnels, the one thing that kept a distracted 14th-century monk from wandering off into the forest.

I felt an unforgiving cough stirring in my throat. I covered it with a grunt, but the phlegm stayed put, waiting for another chance to escape. Discreetly, I signaled my husband and mouthed, “I-am-ready-to-go.” He replied with a blank stare, too busy observing his own thoughts to receive mine. Feeling too weak to repeat myself, I sighed and stared out the window at the auburn leaves rustling on the trees. My mind wandered to a conversation I'd had at a Buddhist monk forum weeks prior. When asked why most monks wear saffron-colored robes, a young monk was first to respond. He said when a leaf dies and falls from



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