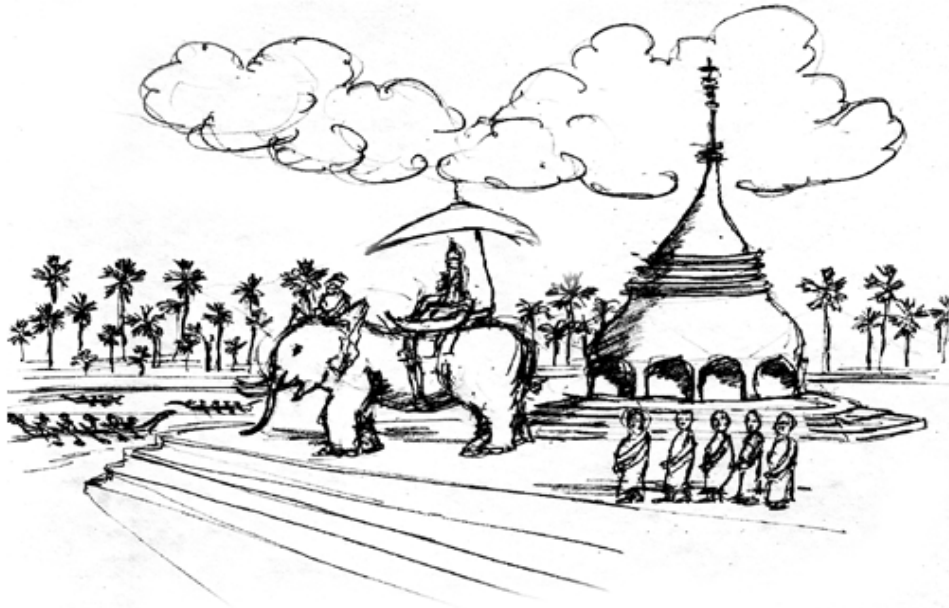


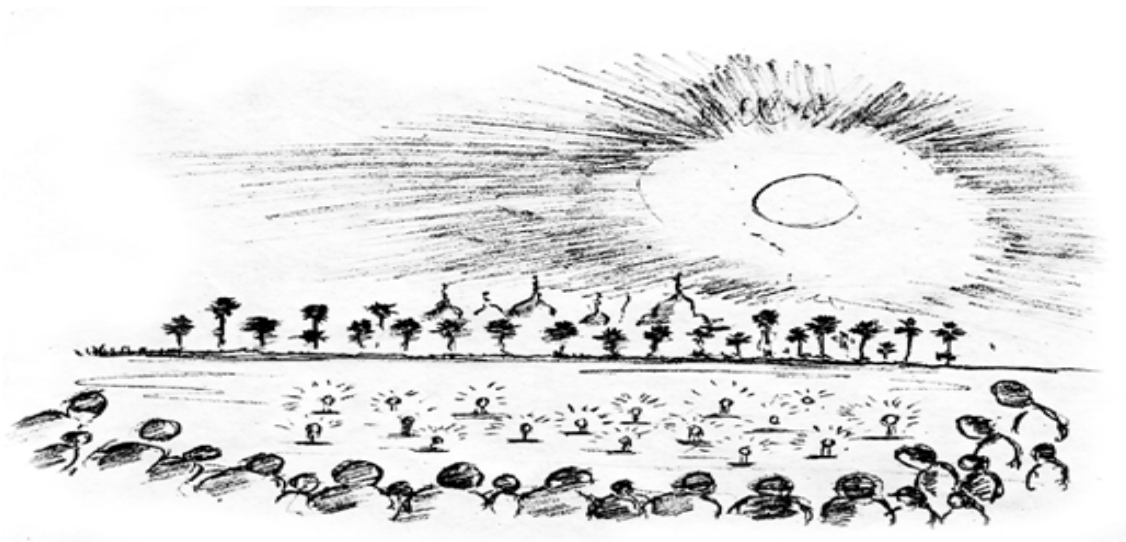
Pilgrim, Poet, Prophet, Prince

by Anthony Aikman



This was a rich land of rivers, forests and rice-fields, where princes rode ceremonially on white elephants and priests wore saffron robes. A land of golden pagodas rising above palm trees, bound by mountains on two sides, a mighty river on the east and to the south the ocean. Here the people spoke with one language and there was no ethnic distinction between them.

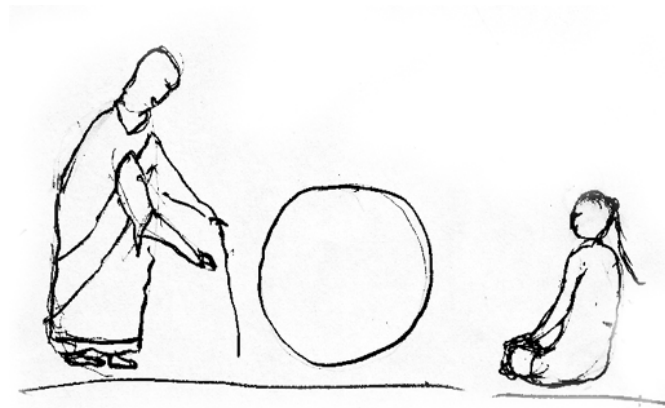
Several great rivers flowed through this green land and beside one the present prince chose to build his capital. A patient and intelligent ruler who unified the nation, his first priority was to establish a sacred centre. Later would follow culture and commerce.



After the first official salute the prince made to celebrate the founding of his new city, the assembled priests and the people standing in joyful tribute in their thousands filled the land and the sky with a great cry like an echo born beyond the limits of the world – as if this nation were one voice around their prince in full triumph of his reign; - a sound of homage like a great muffled gong booming over vast distances beyond touch and beyond time.

During the seventh year of the reign of this noble monarch after he had defeated and driven back the invaders from the mountains of the West and from across the great river to the East, Somchai was born. And because Somchai was the seventh son born in the seventh year of the present reign his parents who were poor but honest and hardworking folk gave him, on his seventh birthday to the temple to serve the monks.

The priests and monks played a vital role in the well-being of the nation. They interceded for the people, interpreted astrological signs and prayed for the safe journey of souls both after death and before birth. For the wheel of life is like the passage of moon and sun across the heavens – sometimes visible, sometimes out of sight, yet nonetheless there. But if death and rebirth were akin to sunset and sunrise, there was one great difference for the sun knew its course and always reappeared in the same place but the soul, after death, was blind and needed the intercessions of the monks and the prayers of loved ones to guide its journey in the most auspicious way possible back to a favourable new dawn.



Somchai at age seven knew none of these things. Days were playthings to be used up with joy and laughter wherever possible, certainly not sadness or misery. After he moved to the temple his day began early. He slept on a mat in the room of an elderly monk and at four o'clock, long before even the first cockerel had laid claim to the first crow, the old monk roused him and set off to the temple nearby. During the

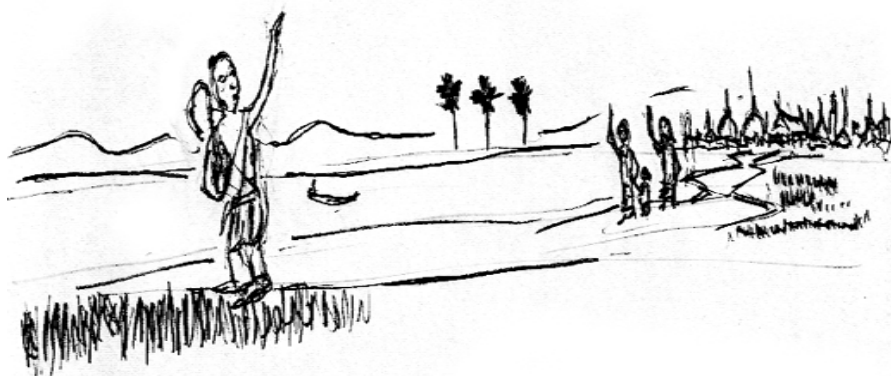
chanting Somchai invariably dozed, to awaken again as the monks, young and old, lined up to go on their rounds seeking gifts of food from shopkeepers and householders and giving a blessing in return. Some days the early mornings were cold and rainy, other times fine, but regardless of the weather they walked in a dignified and unhurried manner with their food bowls wrapped beneath the folds of their saffron robes. The purpose – as Somchai frequently had to be reminded – was not to get as much food as possible but to help whoever wished to make an offering, rich or poor, to gain merit by the simple act of giving. Often more food was collected than the monks needed – but the poor and the homeless were always welcome to come and share it. Somchai, barely waist-high to his kindly mentor, carried a bag to receive offerings the old monk could not be encumbered with. They walked barefoot, but this was natural to the boy, and once they returned he was rewarded with his share of the rich and varied dishes, - for everyone gave only the best they could prepare or afford.

Because Somchai was a temple boy and not a monk he was allowed to play, just as any other boys – duties permitting. In the late afternoon he swam in the river and early in the evening, quite tired out by the long day, he gratefully curled upon his mat and fell quickly asleep.

Just as the pattern of life followed the motion of the sun and stars, so it was with the annual pageants that celebrated time honoured events. Each had their prescribed place in the calendar, each one was anticipated and joyfully fulfilled. At rice planting the Prince ploughed a single furrow behind a white ox with gilded horns, at the height of the dry season there was a water festival, and when the rivers flowed fast came the boat races – sixty or more paddlers to each sleek craft representing towns and villages all over the country. Finally with the full moon that followed the end of the rains everyone paid respect to the rivers, making small floats decorated with flowers and candles, so that as the moon rose in the night sky thousands of dimpled flickering lights seemed to convey the wishes of the nation as they drifted away on the currents.

Years passed, Somchai grew into a young man with a keen and questioning mind. Unlike most of his friends he could not simply accept – he needed to discover for himself. Once he read, “if you tell me the sand on the shore is soft I must put my foot in it to find out.”

The monks at the temple encouraged him to take on the rule of life as prescribed by their founder, and to become one of them but Somchai was less sure. ‘First I will set out on a pilgrimage,’ he declared; ‘It may help me to decide.’ The monks shook their heads in dismay. ‘A pilgrimage must have a purpose,’ they insisted. ‘An aimless journey in the hope it may turn up something is sure to fail.’ And in the privacy of his room Somchai’s old mentor cautioned him. ‘The journey you have in mind is like a ship without a rudder – tossed on the whim of wind and wave.’ He added, ‘Our life is like a globe – our end becomes our beginning. We do not explore to discover – there is nothing new to discover – but to re-discover.’ ‘Rediscover?’ Somchai queried. ‘Everything,’ smiled the old man, ‘for me, it would be to rediscover simplicity, compassion, forgiveness and to know them once again as if for the first time.’ ‘You have counselled me more than you realise,’ thanked Somchai kneeling in love and gratitude before the old monk to receive his blessing. The old man hesitated, ‘I am not sure my blessing will be any use at all. How can I bless a journey without end? Yet it hurts me to withhold my blessing for you have served me cheerfully and faithfully for many years and I love you as I would my own son. I can only hope and pray for your well-being and the fulfilment of your wishes – whatever they may be.’



So Somchai left the temple and after an affectionate and respectful farewell to his parents he left the city, setting out on the highway that followed the river upstream through the green ricefields until, finally looking back, the familiar landmarks he had known all his life vanished from view.

For an instant he was troubled and even considered going back. Ahead lay only the unfamiliar and the unknown. Then he consoled himself with the thought, 'It is no different to a book – when you start you do not know the outcome, but you keep turning the pages.'

So Somchai turned the pages of his new life day by day without hurry or urgency watching over the rice-fields the white sails of the river boats gliding like swans asleep, keeping him company.



One day as he sat resting in the shade of a tree watching the tranquil unchanging scene the thought grew in him that everything he could see around him and would pass by came from somewhere – but where did somewhere come from? Then he laughed, thinking how the old monk would react to such a suggestion, for it did not surely follow a circular path but a straight one. 'Good,' he decided at last, 'Now I have a purpose for my journey – even if it is straight – to find out where everywhere comes from.' And the sheer ludicrous nature of his quest cheered him greatly.

'Where are you going?' was the common greeting. Only now Somchai could reply, 'Nowhere.' Predictably this caused puzzlement, sometimes consternation. 'You must be going somewhere,' they insisted. 'Everyone is going somewhere. You must be seeking something?' 'No,' Somchai corrected politely. 'I am seeking no thing and going no where to find it.'

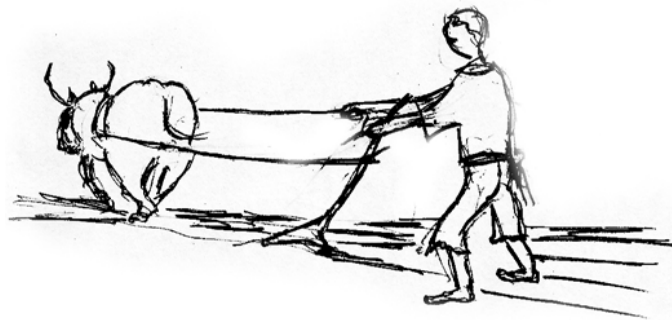
'But how can you seek nothing?' they agreed, shaking their heads at such misplaced thinking in an otherwise bright-looking young man. But Somchai merely smiled cheerfully and did not try to argue, for gradually he realised that he took delight in seeking nothing when everyone else was so busy seeking something and although it may seem obvious, Somchai began to appreciate that the less he wanted the more he had, and with this discovery he realised he was happy because carried to its conclusion – if he wanted nothing, he possessed everything!

Later when Somchai thought back on what he had announced it seemed to herald a great adventure – this decision to set out on a quest for no thing. After all many were those who searched for something, anything even, but to seek the no thing beyond every thing – the very grandeur and the scope of his enterprise enthralled him to his heart's core.

Somchai lived now in two worlds – the substantial world of earth and sky – the emerald green rice fields spreading like sea to the horizon with the river running through, the vast span of sky overhead, the villages he came to, the people he talked with; for Somchai was very easy-going and enjoyed a joke and friendly gossip as much as anyone.

His very cheerfulness served as a passport and gained him entry to any dwelling – high or low. Perhaps because of his upbringing Somchai knew no difference between rich and poor, between the pompous pundits who paraded their grand ideas, and the ordinary folk who were just content to get on with the practical purpose of making a living. But Somchai also dwelled in another realm, one that gradually became just as real and substantial as the one his feet trod each day. This was not a spirit world – for Somchai regarded such things as diversions and was wary of superstition lest it should claim dominion over him. Rather it was a non-world, in essence the negation of substance but also its neighbour.

Each morning after bidding goodbye to whoever had offered him hospitality – although sometimes his thanks might be to a tree whose leafy canopy had sheltered him from rain, as to a rich merchant who had sought to impress him with his generosity – Somchai continued on his journey. Through the spreading rice-fields flowed the life-giving river along whose bank ran the highway Somchai followed more or less. Sometimes a grand procession passed, ornate parasols protecting the good and the mighty from the branding sun. More often creaking ox carts passed going to market, or sometimes a convoy of marching soldiers. But what impressed him most was that everyone was going somewhere and he only heading nowhere. Somchai had begun a dialogue with himself to better understand his purpose. As he walked he put questions to himself – but they invariably produced more questions. Sometimes the questions besieged him in quickfire succession and he had no answers to stop them in their tracks.



For instance, how do you make the first decision when there is no context to decide anything – how, for example, he asked himself, does a composer notch that first note on an empty score sheet, or an artist lay that first brushstroke on a blank canvas? He sat under a noontide tree watching a farmer plough a furrow behind his oxen and thought – imagine

ploughing the entire country with the tip of a single finger. Is movement endless, he wondered, without start or finish, unless interrupted? Out in the field the farmer paused in his stride. Overhead birds were flying. A boy – the farmer's son perhaps – stood pelting at them with a catapult. 'Go on,' Somchai urged the birds. 'Keep flying.' And he realised even the birds had somewhere to go, a schedule to keep – logged deep in their instinct.

So Somchai decided to stop. If he was going nowhere it seemed the obvious thing to do. He also decided to cease living off the goodwill of others and make his own contribution. ‘Surely,’ he counselled himself, ‘If I do not intend to gain anything – why should it conflict with my quest for nothing?’ So Somchai helped the rice farmer when he had stopped. He lived in a little stilt hut next to a stream. A tall clump of bamboo provided shade. At midday a woman paddled her little boat along the stream cooking simple meals over an open clay stove. Half buried beneath an immense straw hat, she stir-fried vegetables and noodles for Somchai as he squatted expectantly on the bank. In the evening, his work finished, Somchai swam in the stream, strummed his home-made guitar and sang with the giggling children who always gathered on the verandah of his hut, and watched the moon and stars rise overhead.

He would have made a fishing net – like his neighbour’s – to lower into the stream but he enjoyed so much feeding little bits of sticky rice to the swarms of small fish darting about his fingers – that it seemed unfair to eat them later. He did not miss eating fish – there were plenty of delicious fruits following one another in a rotation of ripening.

In the cool misty dawn Somchai washed and ate his simple meal before setting out into the fields where the white herons flocked like temple birds sanctifying the land. He followed the measured tread of the oxen, feeling the wet earth between his toes, steeped in some ageless ritual enacted between man and earth. This was his birthright and a sacred duty to tend the land as a steward for those who would come after him. In this manner he respected and honoured the cycle of inheritance. But there came a day when idly watching the river Somchai suddenly wondered if he could learn from it, for the river too was on a one-way journey and never returned to its source.

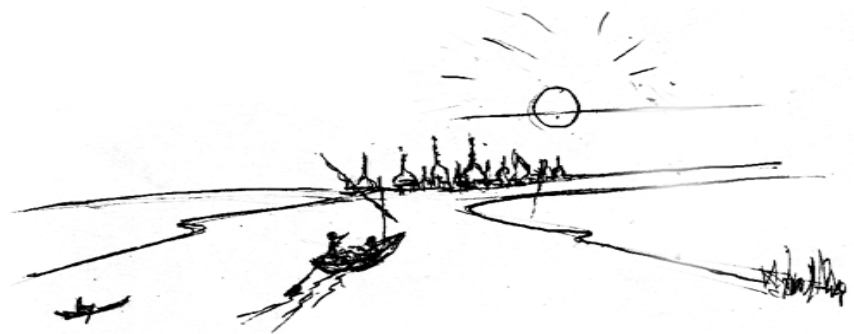
Somchai bid a fond farewell to his friend the farmer and to the little stilt hut by the stream where he had been happy, and to the children who came to crowd around him when he boarded a bulky sampan that was going down-river laden with clay pots to sell. In charge was a short bald-headed boatman who loved to joke – sometimes laughing so much he forgot his course and only narrowly missed collision with other boats or ran aground on the reedy banks.



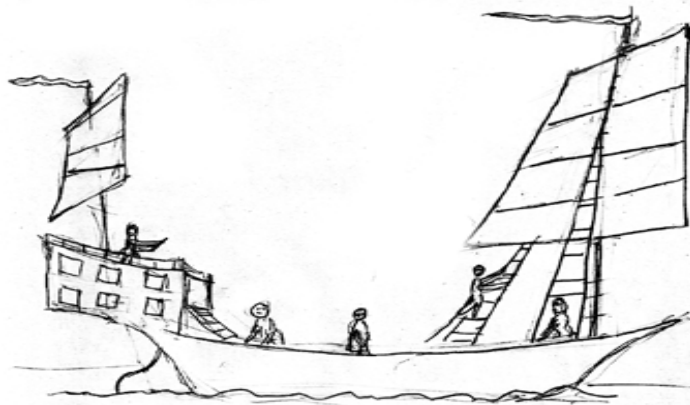
‘The river is my life,’ he told Somchai, ‘my drink’ (dipping a scoop over the side), ‘my food’ (tugging on the fishing lines playing out astern), ‘my business’ (tapping the rows of clay pots untidily heaped in straw), ‘And,’ he confided, ‘the river is my friend, my counsel.’

‘But what have you learned from it?’ asked Somchai good-naturedly. ‘Learn from it?!’ exclaimed the boatman, ‘Why, everything. For it is my guide and my guardian. It hurries me on my way when I would stop and chatter. Its lapping lulls me to sleep and its tapping wakes me in the morning.’ ‘It certainly seems a most practical help,’ remarked Somchai, rather disconcerted – for he had been hoping for more abstract lore. ‘And where will it take me?’ ‘To the sea, I suppose, if you persist. I’ve never been there myself. But they tell me the water stretches beyond the horizon.’ He chuckled, ‘And if you’re not careful you may fall over the edge. But why should I go there?’ he queried, ‘Who would buy my pots – the fish?’ And he roared at his own joke, adding ‘Lobster pots, perhaps!’ breaking into fresh gusts of laughter.

As they glided downriver Somchai sensed its mystery, for it revealed nothing of itself – neither where it had come from nor where it was going. It allowed unhindered boats to ply on its surface, children to frolic in its shallows, farmers to divert it to irrigate their fields – but it was quite untamed. Its purpose remained a secret unto itself. Along its banks the reapers harvested the ripening fields of rice, fishermen tossed in their circular nets, barges moved slowly with their loads of timber, sand, salt and spices – all moving downstream to the great city of the king, with its unquenchable appetite for merchandise – but they saw only what the river let them see – their own reflection. ‘Soon,’ thought Somchai, ‘I will reach the city.’ For the old boatman had been busy plucking out his chin hairs to make himself respectable for the taverns and houses of pleasure he had promised to treat himself to. ‘And what will you do?’ he asked Somchai, ‘Are you still set on going to the open sea or will you return up river with me – it’ll be fine sailing, I promise you, the boat unburdened, the wind spilling the sail and the river unwinding like magic ahead.’



When the familiar pagodas fretted the skyline ahead, the proud towers and majestic palaces rising out of their own reflections as from the stroke of an enchanter’s wand, Somchai was torn by doubt. He should return home, and visit the temple. Only what would he reply when they asked him of his quest? For he had nothing to tell them and when he departed again they would be doubly saddened. Better, he decided to just keep going and not cause upset to anyone. So when the newly spruced-up old boatman moored his laden sampan, Somchai continued his journey on another boat setting out to trade down the coast. His mood was less joyful – for he wondered for the first time if the journey was a mistake, if staying put was more rewarding than moving on. Perhaps the river was playing with him, tempting him, holding him in its grasp, swaying his mind with its moods, casting its currents to embrace him.



The ship he chose was crowded with young men, all eager to make a fortune on their voyage. They all lived in a big airy cabin above the stern and drank rough liquor and sang rude songs. But there was no malice in them and they treated Somchai kindly enough – as if he was a bit dim-witted not to share their lust for life.

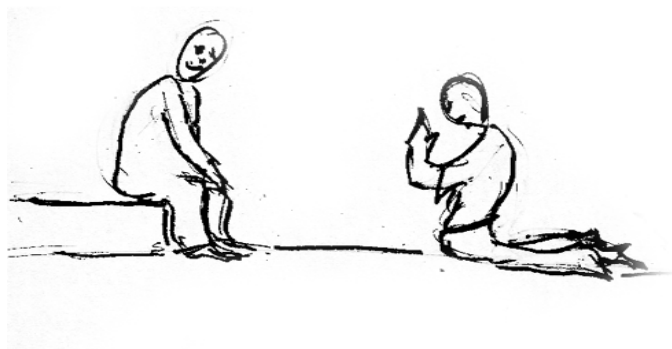


Gradually the river widened into an estuary. They passed a final pagoda set on a solitary hill and then before them opened the ocean – vast and shimmering as far as the eye could see. At once the sailors burst into new rounds of song – sea shanties they sang to hoist the sails and winch the ropes and spars. Although the helmsman seemed to know where he was heading, Somchai, cooped in his sea-bound

citadel – tossed here and there by every caprice of wind and wave, was less certain. Unlike the land, upon the sea's surface man left no trace of his passage, his domain stopped on the shore. The sea was a law unto itself but it held no mystery. Instead might, majesty and terror reigned supreme. Once during a gale when waves lashed the deck Somchai knew in an instant they could all drown and just a few bubbles would mark their passing. So, he considered, if I am frightened by the immensity of the ocean, how could I ever face the infinity of the Universe? He felt overawed. Because they sailed by the sun and moon and the stars, and Somchai viewing their stately passage across the heavens was reassured by the constancy of their coming and going, he wondered if the old monk was not correct after all to be convinced of the inevitable cycle of life.



Nothing is like the sea, he decided; too immense and terrible to contemplate. I will give up my journey and return home and look after my parents, and marry and have a family and pay homage to my friend, the old monk. I will become a merchant or the secretary to a prince. I will abandon as 'vanity of youth' my stupid and selfish quest for no thing and return to dwell somewhere and do something. Anything, he concluded in exasperation, exhausted by day after day moving on the endless ocean.



When Somchai returned up-river to the City of Prince Rama and after he had been joyfully reunited with his parents he went to the temple to pay his respects to the elderly monk. The old man regarded him with affection. Somchai made up no excuses, he knelt and confessed his failure to one who had been his friend and mentor for so long. 'You are right. A journey with no goal is pointless. I have learned nothing.' 'Ah,' said the priest with a wry grin, 'Even if you have learned nothing, that is something.'

'Now,' Somchai continued, 'I want to be like everyone else. I want to have ambitions and make money.' The old monk nodded, 'Only don't make too much – just enough.' 'Then is there something wrong in being rich?' 'I don't know,' admitted the monk simply, 'It rather depends on what being rich means. Only try to be as generous as you are able – and then a little more generous.'



So Somchai went away and set about having ambitions and making money. He was amazed how easy it was. He didn't have to work. All he had to do was buy something from someone who wanted to sell, and sell – at a small profit – to anyone who wished to buy. After he learned to calculate with an abacus he added to his merchandising skills the business of lending money and gaining interest. Very soon Somchai found himself a rich man, respected by fellow merchants for his business acumen and appreciated by traders, lenders and borrowers for his honesty. Somchai bought some land and built his parents a fine house with a view of the river. Somchai dressed in fine but simple garments. In accordance with convention he no longer walked but was conveyed here and there about the city. Frequently he was invited to dine in the houses of rich merchants and men of fortune and sometimes his advice was sought by the nobility – who too often, squandered their wealth in splendid living, gambling and entertaining.

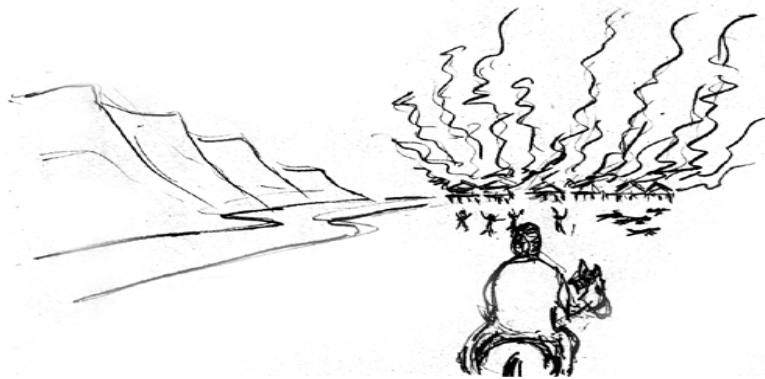


In due course word of Somchai's abilities and character reached the prince and Somchai was summoned to the Royal Palace. He approached the Presence with head bowed and prostrated himself. There is a way of sitting before a prince that is similar to kneeling near a high priest – half prostrate with both feet to one side. Because he was accustomed to this

Somchai felt at ease and the Prince was no haughty monarch, but frequently visited the small villages of his kingdom to learn the problems of his people first-hand, and in so doing gained their respect and affection.

'Somchai,' the prince announced, 'I wish you to enter my service as an adviser, an observer.' Somchai bowed politely in assent. The prince continued, 'I shall send you to visit parts of our country and to report back only to me. But as you will represent me remember that I am in your mouth and in your speaking. I am in your mind and in your thinking. I am in your heart and in your understanding. I am in your eyes and in your looking. Then you will not dishonour me. And although I am your prince when you travel remember I walk beside you. I do not walk in front because you may not follow. I do not walk behind because you may not lead. But beside you; we will walk together through this nation to heal wounds, to amend enmity, to honour justice, to discourage intrigue, to prevent plunder, to let wisdom prevail over war.'

So it was with high hopes that Somchai set off according to the prince's direction and with his seal of assent.



First the prince sent Somchai to the western border where the neighbouring country were raiding – pillaging and destroying. Somchai witnessed great suffering among those people who had lost their homes and their land – whose daughters had been raped and sons butchered. He was greatly surprised however by the apparent indifference of the prince's captains who seemed on closer terms with the officers of the enemy than with their own countrymen whose hardship did not appear to concern them. Officers on each side even went out hunting together before or after battle.