

# WINGSPAN

Your Complimentary Copy

Thailand

## I OF THE TIGER

Japanese Things

**The Geisha's Hairdresser**

Fiction

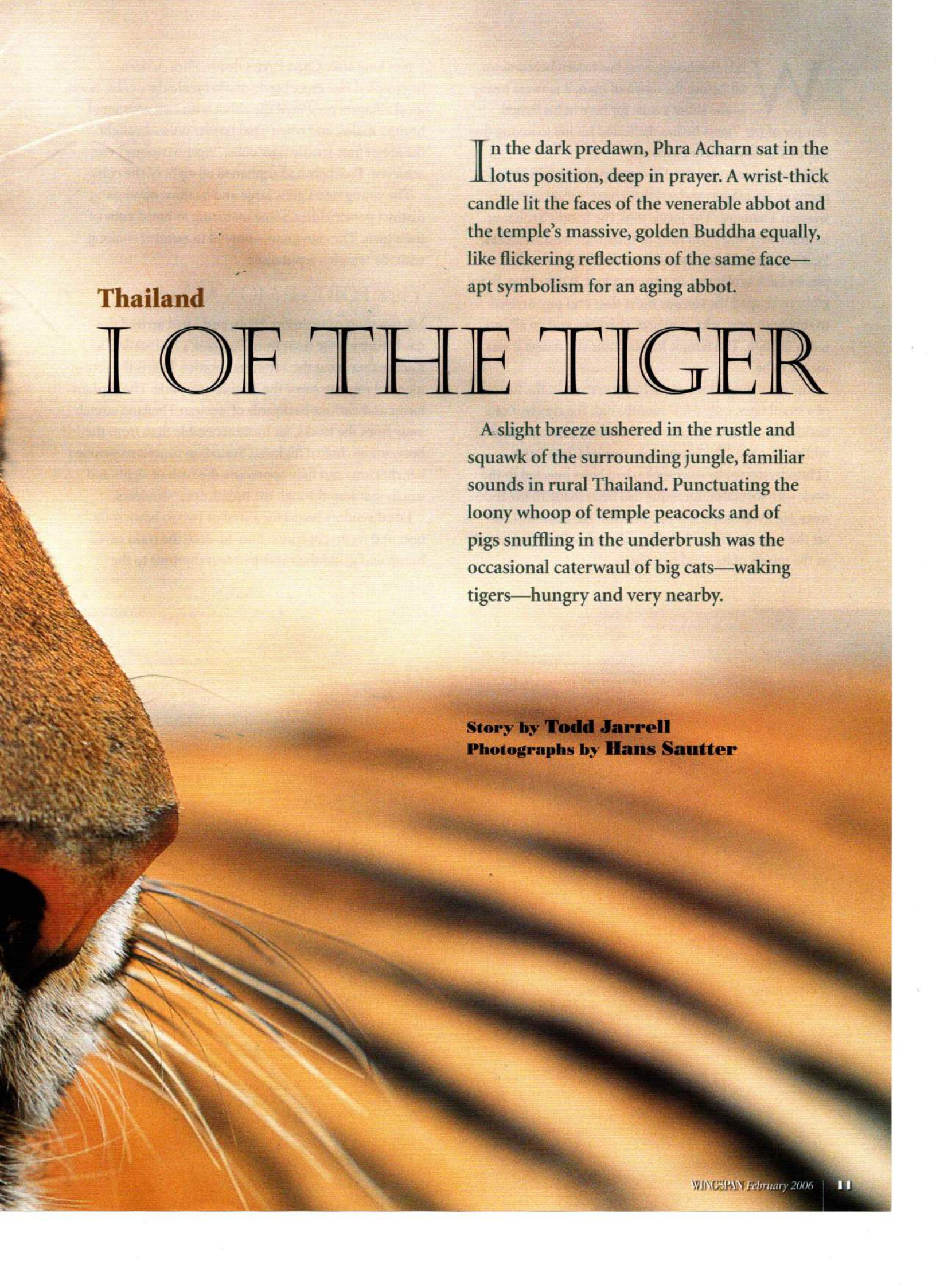
**Changing Seasons**

Good Times Fly

**ANA**

A STAR ALLIANCE MEMBER





In the dark predawn, Phra Acharn sat in the lotus position, deep in prayer. A wrist-thick candle lit the faces of the venerable abbot and the temple's massive, golden Buddha equally, like flickering reflections of the same face—apt symbolism for an aging abbot.

**Thailand**

# I OF THE TIGER

A slight breeze ushered in the rustle and squawk of the surrounding jungle, familiar sounds in rural Thailand. Punctuating the loony whoop of temple peacocks and of pigs snuffling in the underbrush was the occasional caterwaul of big cats—waking tigers—hungry and very nearby.

**Story by Todd Jarrell**  
**Photographs by Hans Sautter**

While this hoarse roar has frozen hearts since far before the dawn of man, it is sweet music to the abbot's ears, for here in his famed Temple of the Tigers he has dedicated his life to saving this top-of-the-food-chain predator.

The abbot founded the 175-acre monastery in 1994 to promote Buddhism and wildlife conservation in rural, western Thailand. The locals took the temple's mission to heart, arriving from time to time with wild creatures. First an injured bird, then a lame deer and soon after a pig, its back broken by an auto accident. Before long, furry gibbons draped the trees as more deer and pigs arrived to mix with peacocks, donkeys, chickens and an albino water buffalo. The temple had become the refuge it was meant to be.

The most auspicious guest by far arrived in the form of a small tiger, only a few months old, the survivor of a taxidermist's diabolic efforts to stuff the poor creature while still alive. The young cub, named Chao Payu (Thunderstorm) by the monks, had been injected in the neck with formalin; incisions had been made in his abdomen. He lived only a few months, but the beautiful cub set the course of Phra Acharn's life and defined the temple in the minds of its rural neighbors.

Not long after Chao Payu's death, Phra Acharn intercepted two more black-market male tiger cubs. Soon, local villagers presented the abbot with two additional healthy males, and when Thai border police brought the abbot four female tiger cubs, "tiger harmony" was achieved. Poachers had orphaned all eight of the cubs.

The young tigers grew large and healthy, developing distinct personalities, some maturing to breed cubs of their own. The clan grew—now 14 in number—along with the temple's reputation.

## THE FOREST MONASTERY

My traveling companion, Hans, and I had arrived the day before via the train from Bangkok's Noi Station to Kachanaburi near the Myanmar border. This is the recommended route to savor the Thai countryside. The verdant farms and curious backyards of western Thailand stretch away from the tracks, far more accessible than from the busy, smog-choked highway. Seated on timeworn wooden benches, one can fully appreciate the rush of sights and smells that leap through the broad, open windows.

Local vendors board for a stop or two to hawk soda, beer and fresh-cut fruits. End-to-end, the train cars bump and grind their independent rhythms to the



clattering track; the connectors shudder and moan as the train takes on the swaying momentum of a cross-country conga line.

Wat Pa Luangta Bua Yannasampanno Forest Monastery is the temple's proper name, and shortly after disembarking the train we hired motorbikes to go there, passing the nearby bridge over the River Kwai, made famous in the Hollywood classic of the same name. Our invitation was to reside within the temple grounds and, in respect for our pious hosts, we agreed to wear totally white clothing—affordable silk shirts and tie-pants purchased in the cheap shops of Bangkok's touristy Khaosan Road.

## A TRAIL OF GRAIN

Preechar, the temple's ebullient gatekeeper, greeted us with humble manners and twinkling eyes, holding the key not only to the wrought-iron rolling grate of the monastery grounds but to an abundance of worldly philosophies and interests. He would be taking the next day off, he said, to produce a short allegorical film about a peeping Tom who meets a violent end.

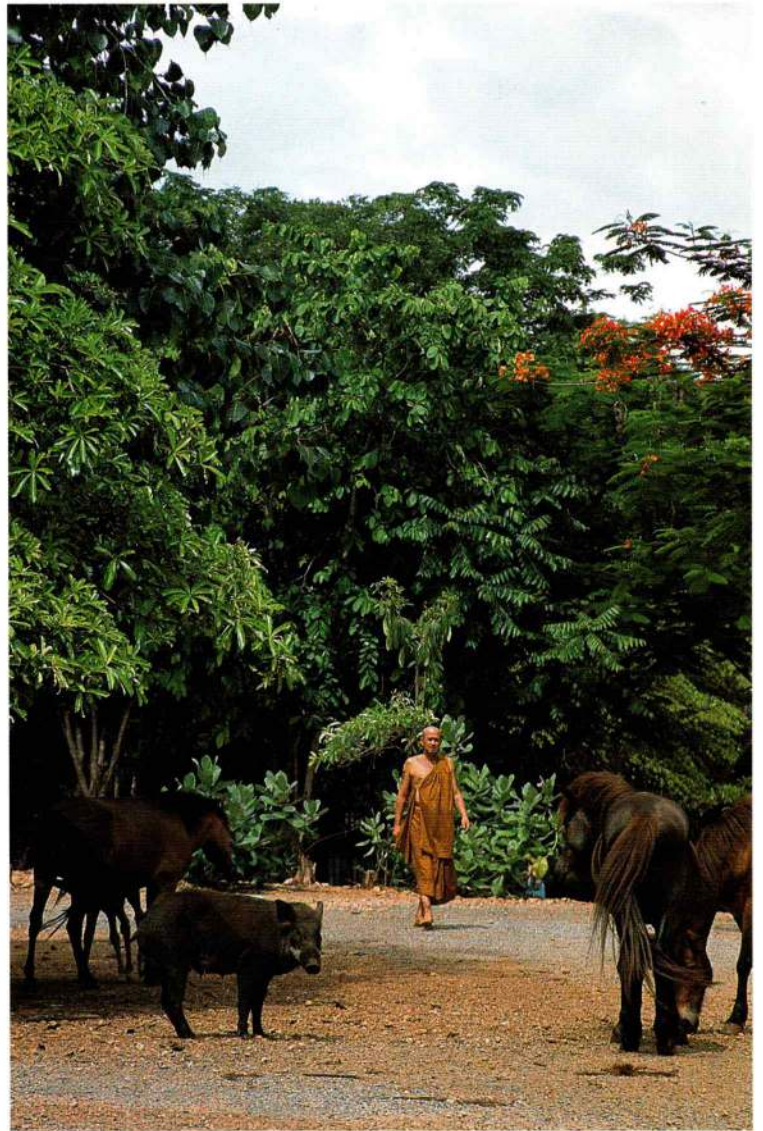
We arrived in time for the feeding of the temple's teeming collection of herbivores. A young helper hefted a bulging jute sack onto his back, sliced one corner with a knife and dashed down the road spilling a trail of yellow grain, shattering the evening's tranquillity.

Instantly a squall of shoving, grunting creatures were in pursuit, peacocks and roosters flapping above the churning hooves as small pigs squirted out of the edges of the herd, chased by their elders and squealing. Bemused by the melee, the monks wandered back to their duties on the grounds—all except Abbot Phra Acharn, who remained seated nearby in a small teak pagoda.

A small man, deeply tanned, the abbot holds the patient comportment for which Buddhist monks are famous. He is quiet and observant, but just beneath the surface bubbles an amusement at the curious workings of a peculiar world.

Abbot Phra Acharn Phusit (Chan) came to be a monk late in life, a consequence of a life-threatening illness prompting a personal search for elusive clues regarding the arc of life and thereafter. Central to the Buddhist belief is the concept of reincarnation, and the unlikely fact that so many tigers have found their way to his monastery is no mistake, he assures me—their presence is deeply personal.

"I believe it is karma [that] the tigers found me. Yes, because I believe in reincarnation," he says, his smiling brown eyes broadened by thick spectacles. "The tigers are



**"I believe it is karma that the tigers found me. Yes, because I believe in reincarnation," he says, his smiling brown eyes broadened by thick spectacles.**



my father, my mother, my friend, my enemy. Of all tigers in the world there are only a few thousand and these come here for me to rescue. So, I believe my tigers to be my family [from] before.”

The abbot’s tiger sanctuary dreams are as large as life, and the stakes could not be higher.

The world’s tiger populations are diminishing quickly (see sidebar) as the bounds of wild habitats decrease. This, paired with the black market’s demands for products derived from tiger bones and organs, has placed a pressure on the species from which there may be no reprieve.

Here in Saiyok Province, where tigers once thrived, less than 20 remain, says Phra Acharn. Three—three, he emphasizes, holding up two fingers and a thumb—tiger species have become extinct just in his lifetime. Gone. Forever.

## TIGER ISLAND

It was on the path above the temple to our tiny guesthouse that we saw the abbot’s dream in the architectural sense. Atop the hill on the opposite side of a wide moat was Tiger Island, the abbot’s master plan. On this 12-acre island the tigers will live separated from humans by water and from one another by tall, jungle-draped walls.

The army had begun the dig, dynamiting and excavating and publicly taking the abbot’s mission on as their own. But money ran out, official interests waned and the deep moat now stands dry and unfinished, filled only with the abbot’s desires.

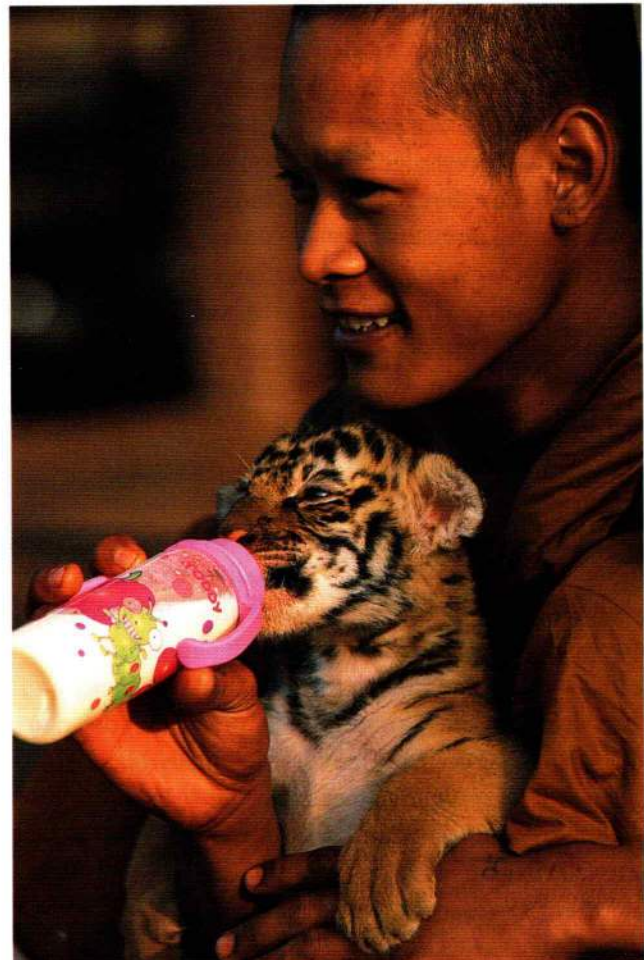
The path continued on over ground the color of chili powder and brick dust—stingy soil supporting meager clutches of plant life. Intended for the use of monks in seclusion, the guesthouse stood at the verge of the jungle. Without electricity, it was a single, spartan room furnished with a small shrine, a teak platform on which to sleep, and a bucket-flush toilet separate from the main room.

Atop the hut, up a narrow, outside staircase was another small pagoda, and it was there in the cooling evening air that we elected to sleep. The sun melted into the deep mountain jungles over Myanmar as we unrolled our sleeping mats. The golden day ebbed away, leaving the stars to glisten like tiny shells on an expanse of blackened sand.

The night air was unexpectedly bug-free, for Thailand. The constellations in their ancient pinpoint patterns wheeled slowly above as, every hour or two, I would wake to the sound of footsteps in the dry leaves below, those of a tawny forest deer patiently waiting to befriend us.

I rose at one point to descend the stairs. Hans stirred, “Watch for snakes.”

**Breakfast arrived with visitors from a nearby village, the families of which—in true rural Thai fashion—share responsibility for feeding the human residents of the temple.**



"I'll just be using the toilet inside," I said.

"That's what I mean," he said, sounding bored. "Cobras go to the water. Water's in the toilet... So take a flashlight."

Depending on your diet, it is the rare toilet visit that in any way is infused with a sense of adventure. But it was with some giddiness that I entered the dark, closet-sized space, wearing a headlamp, shadows dancing on walls I was quite willing to climb should I find myself sharing the facilities with a thirsty cobra.

## SEEKING INWARD

It was hours later that I found the old abbot meditating, deeply in peace as the world rustled all around. Phra Acharn had risen earlier than the other monks—this place is his life and much more. As the sun rolled out in the east like a cooling coin fresh from the smelter's furnace, the remaining half-dozen monks arrived for morning prayers.

Seated along one edge of the raised temple floor, the monks took up the chant sleepily, building in intensity, rhythmic and monotone, not attempting the lofty, celestial tones of some religions, not calling out but seeking inward. It was earthy, intestinal even, and mesmerizing to my Western ears. The teenaged temple boys who help with daily chores listened quietly, turning their young attentions only when a tiger yawned a sleepy, morning roar from the cages beyond the trees.

Prayers complete, breakfast arrived with visitors from a nearby village, the families of which—in true rural Thai fashion—share responsibility for feeding the human residents of the temple. The villagers presented a weighty array of twist-tied plastic baggies, each plump-full of edible wonders from which the abbot had first choice, then the monks in descending order of seniority down to novices, temple boys, the families and finally, ourselves.

It was at this point that two of the temple boys arrived with the newest additions to the tiger family. The cubs stumped in on bowed, immature legs with oversized feet, swaddled in stripes as unique as fingerprints. Fuzzy round ears crowned eager faces; still developing, their lead-gray eyes brimmed with tiger confidence and an amicable curiosity.

This was not the cubs' first breakfast gig, and they worked the crowd like champs, pawing an ankle here, biting off a button there, tugging shirttails, gnawing sunglasses and being consummately adorable. Quiet conversations were punctuated with mock-combat growls and gasps of pain as baby tiger teeth tested the flesh of dotting admirers.



**One boy, new to the temple, failed to notice that the disintegrating chew toys three-year-old Famai had been diligently working over all afternoon were his only pair of shoes...**



## RESPECT THEIR BOUNDARIES

The sun rose, lifting the temperature as the monks shouldered out of their ocher cloaks, carefully creasing the garments with the focus of a color guard folding a funeral flag. Loosening his own robe, Phra Acharn exposed a tattoo, a stylized sun radiating around his naval.

The boys and monks tackled the temple chores: sweeping the grounds, feeding tigers, and cleaning cages. After midday the first of the tourists filtered through Preechar's gate, come to walk amongst the legendary cats in Tiger Canyon, the temple's designated spot for viewing.

Wholly separate from the Tiger Island moat, the canyon floor is accessed via a sloping, dusty path. The cautionary sign at the top reads,

*"Please remember these tigers are not tame.  
Nobody can predict their behavior.  
Please respect their boundaries."*

## SPIRITUAL MERIT

Buddhism was born over 2500 years ago through the teachings of Siddharta Gautama, the historical Indian prince who became the Buddha. While there are several types, well over 90 percent of the Thai population adhere to Theravada Buddhism, which has flourished under the Thai monarchy.

Nearly every Thai male becomes a monk at some point in his life, and in many respects, a man is not considered mature until he has spent time in a monastery. Some families refuse their daughter's marriage to a man who has never been a monk.

Monks may enter a "forest" temple for meditation or seek a more urban setting to study—some monasteries are considered alternatives to public schools. Monks follow strict monastic rules, far from material attachment, allowed only a bowl for eating, a water filter to avoid eating small insects, and saffron-colored robes.

Once ordained, a monk can leave at any time, remaining only a brief time to earn a type of spiritual merit for their parents known as *tham bun*. In 2002 Thailand marked a new era in Thai Buddhism, hosting its first-ever ordination ceremony for a woman.



Posted also was a minimum of rules, which by their very nature underscored the previous warning:

*No children in the canyon.*

*Do not wear red clothes.*

*Do not crouch or sit on the ground.*

*Do not run and do not turn your back on a tiger.*

Travelers queued up behind a red rope line, some sporting daring holiday haircuts or wearing far too few clothes to be respectful in a monastery. Each was led by the hand to have a word with Phra Acharn and have a photo taken with the tigers. The temple boys orchestrated the shots using a Polaroid camera. The cost is 50 baht per shot; the profit after film cost is only 18 baht (¥52).

Torn between the real need for the funds that the photo sessions bring and having his tigers out in the heat of day, Phra Acharn takes a break from watering down the dust to stroke his beloved creatures. "Tigers working very hard

today," he says, softly.

I ask the abbot if he finds this troubling—trying to save tigers for the wild but ending up taming them in the process.

"Yes, yes," he says, solemnly "Ying, yang," indicating the positive/negative balance of the cosmos.

For their part, these amazing beasts mostly lazed the afternoon away—Saifa (Lightning), Darika (Starlet), Hernfa (Skywards), Famai (New Sky), Phayu (Storm) and the rest—snoozing on the knife's edge of extinction. The boys kept the cats interested by offering toys or milk tablets. One boy, new to the temple, failed to notice that the disintegrating chew toys three-year-old Famai had been diligently working over all afternoon were his only pair of shoes, slipped to the tiger by the other boys. Paying one's dues, it seems, is a global concept.

But the boys also get bored and the preferred antidote is a sort of "prey play." Regardless of the posted sign they turn their backs, walking away from the cats as if unaware of the cats' presence. The animals react immediately with a spooky, rapt attention, dropping to a crouch, tail twitching, overcome by something dwelling deep within.

## TAIL THWACK, KNEE SLAP

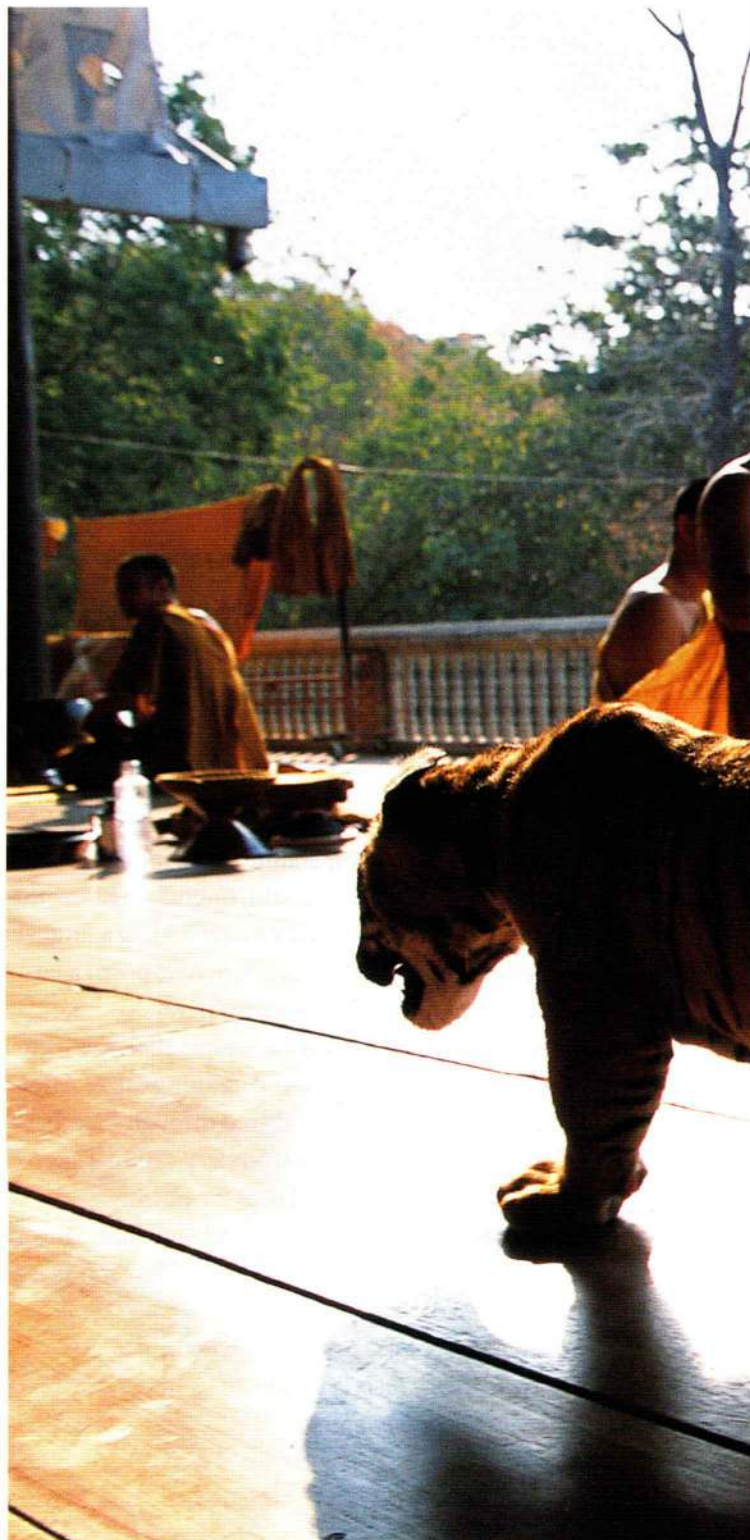
At one point Saifa, one of the breeding males, makes for the red rope barrier, jangling nerves in the tourist queue, but just as the line begins to falter Saifa is shoved back by one of the boys. Saifa looks away indignantly as the tip of his tail glides up from behind to give the caretaker a dismissive thwack on the side of the head.

The possible dangers are obvious. But the view taken here seems to be that amongst the monks and the roaming mob of herbivores, the tigers have succumbed to something resembling Buddhist pacifist sensibilities, though members of the staff do get nipped now and again. In any case, it's arguable that this relationship the Buddhists have with the tigers is healthier than the legendary relationship that Christians had with lions.

The close of a lightly profitable afternoon saw Phra Acharn and Saifa leading the monk and tiger procession back to the cages. At 180 kilos, the cat's spine comes up well past his beltline. I fell in beside Phra Acharn with Saifa between, offering up bits of small talk when suddenly Saifa's dark tail tip was in my face and I had, that instant, the sensation of strolling into a garden sprinkler. I froze. The cat sidled on. The abbot doubled over, laughing. My white silk pants were soaked, plastered to my legs from the waist to ankle.

"Tiger pee on you! Ha ha ha! No one will believe you!

**...the tigers have succumbed to something resembling Buddhist pacifist sensibilities, though members of the staff do get nipped now and again.**







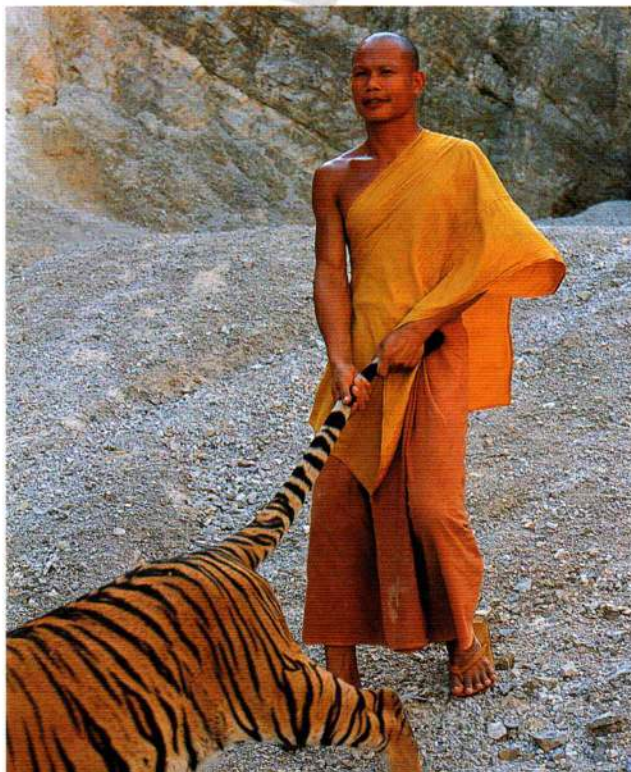
## PRESSURES ON ALL THINGS WILD

One of the world's best-known mammals, the tiger is a symbol of beauty, fierceness and, more recently, of the acute need for conservation. Three of the world's eight tiger species—the Javan, Bali and Caspian—have gone extinct in just the last 70 years, and the remaining five are endangered. Sadly, more tigers now live in captivity than the five to seven thousand that remain in the wild.

Tiger populations suffer from a developing world's pressure on wild habitat and the subsequent depletion of natural prey. Feared and revered, mankind's relationship with the tiger is complex, due in part to the big cat's reputation as a man-eater. As many as 40 deaths a year are attributable to tigers each year in India, but 500 times that number die from snakebite.

Still hunted for sport, its fur and for the dogged tooth and claw souvenir market, tigers suffer most severely from poachers using vicious leg-hold traps to supply the soulless trade in animal body parts for traditional Chinese medicines. One tiger's parts may fetch as much as \$100,000 on this black market. No part goes unused, and the "cures" are shocking: tail bones to ward off evil; a rub of oil mixed with tiger brain to cure laziness and acne; "ghost fevers" cured by sitting on tiger skin; whiskers worn as charms against bullets.

The best hope for tigers lies in the increase and, importantly, the linkage of existing wild habitats. Known as "landscape conservation," this model—used successfully in India—protects the habitat and improves the gene pool of both the tigers and their natural prey. As long as human populations increase, so will the pressures on all things wild. Perhaps we should consider what a diminished world it will be without lions and tigers and bears. Oh my.



Ha ha ha!" To the abbot, this was a knee-slapper, and if there is one thing that one mustn't do in Thailand—especially as a *farang* (foreigner)—it is to lose one's face by losing one's cool. And what was to be done anyway, chase down the tiger and yell at his monk? I laughed, the abbot howled, and even the tiger seemed quite pleased.

## MONEY HAS NO SOUL

That evening we left the grounds for an early supper; the monks eat but once a day, the morning meal, which they had shared with us. In a roadside restaurant we happened upon Dr. Som Chai, the veterinarian in nominal care of the tigers' health. If Phra Acharn serves as the temple's heart and soul, then Som Chai, with his neatly pressed shirts and thick shock of salt-and-pepper hair, is the brain of the outfit, launching any number of fundraising efforts.

Over fiery hot noodles Som Chai described his constant worry for the temple, for the tigers, their specific food and medicines and the need to finish Tiger Island. He has heard, he said, the expression that money is the root of all evil, a concept he found difficult.

"Money," he said, "has no soul. Is not good. Is not bad. But people have soul and they use the money for good, [or] for bad."

Som Chai talked of people having so much and sharing so little and pointed to his unfinished dinner as example.

"When I am eating, I get full. When I have enough, I stop. So why [are] people different with money? When you have enough, stop eating! Share and make your money do good!"

He paused, studying the tabletop, and then added matter-of-factly, "Don't think this is the project for just me and Phra Acharn. This is the project of human beings—[people] should do this for all living things."

Returning that evening the sun set over the black mountains like a reflecting, blood red retina—the unblinking eye of the tiger. I thought of all the difficulties these tigers present to this gentle monk, and of the impossibility of his denying their entwined fate. The last question I asked of him regarded the future of animals in the wild. His answer was almost dismissively simple...

"I hope all can stay in peace together, because we people are the big animal now. But we are all of the same blood... Anything else?"

To Phra Acharn, the work of the temple and worry of the tigers pale in comparison to a karmic mission based on a simple truth—that we are all in this together. ■

Star Alliance member airlines including ANA are promoting a "Visit Thailand Campaign." For details see P.49.