

# HOW I FOUND COURAGE IN VBG

By John Ching 01-09-2008

I grew up in a very small town in the north of Malaysia. Like most from the Malaysian rural area, my passage of growing up was splashed by a generous dose of superstition, a world filled with devils, gods to be feared, ghosts and evil spirits. The cemetery was a place crawling with unspeakable inhabitants, funerals was generally to be avoided because it has ghosts that will possess you, figurines of numerous gods were to be respected to the degree of being feared – if you cross one of them you are dead, when one has a high fever it is often said be the work of an evil spirit and the words of a spirit medium could either make or break a sick person. Naturally occurring sleep paralysis was the result of being crushed by a ghost lying on top of the unfortunate person and the long list goes on and on. Cults were running around then as they do now, that promise one a place in heaven for a few quick bucks. These were the chains that shackled my mind as it does to millions of other. Come to think of it, although we had electricity, cars, schools, television and antibiotics, we were nothing more than a primitive jungle tribe that lived constantly in fear of the dark. I think a lot of people never leave this dark world even though they may later grow up, say get rich, buy big houses and drive luxury cars. Thereafter they could have a few million bucks in the bank account, but will at the slightest sneeze fall for the some charlatan spiritualists that will enslave their minds again and most likely cheat them of all their money. I don't know which is worse, to be cheated of all your money or to exist in a dark world paralysed by fear. Although the above is description of a small town in Malaysia, it could very well apply to downtown New York right now, except the superstition and debilitating beliefs may come through the medium of late night faith-healing TV and “meet JFK” interactive websites.

Although I already knew there was something wrong with such a baloney but I couldn't extract myself totally from something that has been an ingrained part of my childhood culture. I mean I have been using Reason to counter this demon-haunted world to a certain extent but I have never really purged them, they were still lurking around the back of my mind, ever ready to eat me up alive.

That is until I went for a short stay at the Vihara Buddha Gotama. I have already read Buddhism and known Bhante Hye for a while before this, but this would be my first time going to stay a few days at a forest monastery. Actually it wasn't much of a monastery at that time, around end of 1998. There were only 3 Kutis (dwelling huts) there, it was more like a jungle with 3 concrete huts in it.

It was my first time to Temoh and VBG at around Dec 1998. That would make it about 4 months old. There were no electricity from the power grid or car batteries like there were later. There were no tarred or cement roads. There was no fencing around the property, it was for all intents and purposes an undifferentiated part of the vast jungle. Certainly no Sala hall yet. There were no friendly dogs around either. One had to use a candle or an oil lamp in the Kutis at night for light. The Kutis at that time also didn't have latches that you could lock from the inside on the doors. They had lever locks, but those must have a key to operate them. And as you will see, I wasn't given any keys because I think the

setup was too new at that time and there were nothing in the Kutis to lock up against theft. Actually any local thief wouldn't know there were 3 Kutis sitting in that part of the jungle at that time. When I went for the visit, only Bhante Hye was there, so that makes only the 2 of us in that jungle with the 3 Kutis. I was all psyched up, ready to meditate hard and achieve enlightenment in that 4 days that I was there.

Apart from the compulsory meditation and chanting sessions early in the mornings and evenings, I was taken for a trek around the boundary of the property on the 1<sup>st</sup> day. Bhante informed me the length, width and height of the land plus some general history. It was mostly dirt tracks at that time, sometimes there were no tracks and as we walked through we made the track with our "parangs". After a while we reached the pond which sits at the edge of the property, it was a serene looking pond with lotus growing in it.

"Have you heard of the story of a young boy that drowned in a mining pool not too far from here (I think he said Ipoh)?" asked Bhante while looking at the pond. BTW, Bhante's stories are all real, like he has seen it first hand or at least he really heard about it from someone. The fact that he doesn't cook them up, only adds to their impact. "No," I said.

He told me that not too far away from where we were, there was a teenage boy that went for a swim at a disused mining pool near his house with some of his teenage friends. Mining pools in Malaysia are dangerous places as beneath the calm water surface, there are weeds that could entangle your hands and legs and drown you as you swim. This gave me goose bumps as I remembered that I too went into numerous mining pools to catch fish when I was young and once fell into strangling weeds up to my chest.

This boy drowned. His parents then conducted his funeral and gave him his last rites. A few days later at about 12 am midnight his ghost appeared at the gates of his parents' linked house crying miserably. The boy and his parents lived in a typical Malaysian linked house that sits somewhere in horizontal rows of houses built in a housing estate or "taman". Apparently the ghost of that boy first appeared at the end of the street and then slowly walked past different houses to get to his own in the middle somewhere. All and sundry could hear this ghost, not only his parents. This ghost appeared night after night starting from the end of the street crying as he walked (floated?) slowly past neighbours to the gates of his parents' house. Apparently the dogs in the neighbourhood would howl uncontrollably whenever the ghost appeared. One man's dog (must be the man who told the story) got so frightened that it would lie down and cover its eyes with its paws whenever the ghost appeared. His parents' got so traumatized and resorted to locking all the doors, windows and holing up in the house whenever this happens. Somehow the ghost only stood crying at the gates and didn't go into the house.

After a while the parents couldn't take it anymore and moved away. That night after his parents moved away, the ghost of the boy appeared again but when it discovered that its parents were gone, it went beserk and went into some of the neighbours' houses to strangle them (Bhante reckons that some people have good Kamma and some poor Kamma and the ghost could only terrorise the ones with poor Kamma). After a while the

people living there got together and hired a shaman to get rid of the ghost. He caught the ghost and banished it somewhere (Bhante thought that a more compassionate way could be to communicate and try to settle its grouses). So that was the end of their problem.

But it was the beginning of mine. That night after meditation (I only attempted to) at about 10 pm, Bhante told me to go back to my Kuti as it was time to sleep. I really didn't want to leave as he showed me the door after he armed me with a torch light for the pitch black darkness and an umbrella in case it rained. The 40 meters or so walk to my Kuti from his was in pitch black darkness and dead silence. I was hoping for the sound of some insects, at least that would have provided me with company, but even the insects had forsaken me. Back in my Kuti I lighted the candle and lay down on the thin mattress to sleep. As I lay there all alone looking at dancing shadows cast by the candle on the ceiling of the Kuti, I also noticed for the first time that the door didn't have any latch on it and so it couldn't be locked at all from the inside.

Then slowly and surely in the quiet of the night, that story about the drowned ghost boy came back to haunt me, assisted by my own demon-haunted past. I couldn't sleep, I couldn't close my eyes ( I want to know if it suddenly appeared before me), I sweated like a fish on that mattress and my heart was racing like a Formula 1 car. Since there wasn't even a lock on the door, all the ghost had to do was simply turn the handle to open the door to come into my Kuti whenever it wanted. What if the ghost somehow heard Bhante telling the story to me, got provoked and decide he wanted to pay me a little visit (Bhante did say that incident wasn't too far away). That was torturous indeed lying paralysed with fear in that unlockable Kuti. Give me the worst physical torture, rip out my fingernails, peel off my skin, rub salt into them but spare me the mental torture any day! I was insane with fear!

Then as my heart was racing to the point of cardiac arrest, I remembered that I had brought a little book on Pali Sutta chanting with me. You know the Pali chanting type. I jumped out of my bed like a headless chook, rummaged around in my bag by the candle light for that book and after an eternity found it. I figured that that is a holy book, with powerful holy words inside, words uttered by the Buddha himself, repeated by monks for 2550 odd years and I think it also said Paritta Protection on the cover. Yes! This is it. This is my saviour! My answer to all evil demons and ghosts! Now that I have this, let see them come get me. So I chanted a few Suttas befitting a loyal devotee of the Buddha under siege from the agents of evil. Thus feeling safe and protected I was finally able to close my eyes and slept like a baby.

Got up the next morning, feeling fresh, marveled at the beauty of the Malaysian jungle and decided to do a hundred push-ups beside my Kuti. That was really a hundred (100) push-ups. Then it was time to do some more heavy work after breakfast. You would always have to clear some bushes, undergrowth, chop down dead old trees, line water pipes or build a road or two in those days. Bhante gave me a small sickle and told me to clear a patch of undergrowth. He also had a sickle and was doing the same on another patch. After a couple of hours of swishing or so we came together for a drink of water at the designated rest spot. There, while in between sips of water from a bottle, with sweat

running down his face and while looking at his sickle, he asked me if I have heard the story about the woman that had her mouth slit in Penang somewhere. “No.” I said with trepidation.

There was a man who worked hard and diligently at a factory somewhere in Penang (Bhante’s stories are usually anonymous). Due to his diligence at work he was soon promoted to a position of that of a Supervisor in a division in that factory. But he stirred the jealousy of many of his undeserving colleagues who were also eyeing for that position. So one day jealousy got the better of someone and that someone got a black magician to put an evil spell on this new supervisor. Soon he became pale, weak, fell sick and became bed ridden. The doctors couldn’t find anything wrong about him as he lay wasting away in his house and neither could any spirit-mediums help him although they did diagnose him of being possessed by evil spirits.

It got to a point that his wife who was nursing him once saw a dark apparition in the form of a human being emerged slowly out of the feet of the man as he lay in bed, pretty much like smoke rising slowly from smolder. Another time this man was in the bathroom by himself and he didn’t come out for a long while. He didn’t open the door to come out even after they repeatedly called him from outside the bathroom. Finally someone got on a stool, peered over the door to see what’s happening. They saw the man squatting on the bathroom floor, but it wasn’t really that man that they saw, they saw an old man in his stead.

So the traumatized wife searched high and low for a cure for her husband but couldn’t find any. Finally she went to a famous Buddhist temple in Penang where Bhante was staying in and asked for help from a monk there (not Bhante). That monk was a good scholarly monk and not knowing what to do exactly in such a situation, advised her to chant the Pali Sutta over the man and gave this desperate wife a Pali chanting book for that purpose (I guess pretty much like my invincible little book).

That evening upon returning home the wife immediately got down to exorcising the man. She sat on the side of the ill man and started chanting the Pali Suttas. After 1 or 2 Suttas into the book she heard a faint laugh just behind her. It was a soft mocking kind of laugh. And this laugh repeated a few times as she continued chanting from that book. After a few moments she felt a light claw at the edge of her mouth, by a sharp object something like a sickle or a metal hook. Before she knew it, this unseen object yanked at her mouth and ripped it. The Pali Chant obviously didn’t work and the evil force first mocked her and then retaliated by slicing her mouth. The man eventually died as there was nothing anyone could do to save him. (At this moment of the story, I felt a lump in my throat and a rock in my stomach).

That 2<sup>nd</sup> day at VBG passed very slowly. My steps were heavy and shoulders stooped low. I dreaded the coming of the night like a struggling cow being led to the slaughter house. Right on cue after the meditation session at about 10 pm that night Bhante bade me good night and shut and locked the door of his Kuti tight after me (I think he had locks on his).

I went back to my Kuti (or slaughterhouse?) through the darkness again and I lay there in similar circumstances to the previous night. My new found weapon of unlimited power has proven to be rather limited after all. If a common 2-bit spirit could mock the holy book like that, what good would it do for me? The Pali chants are a dud!

Many times I had wanted to kick open the door of the Kuti and perhaps run off shrieking in the direction of Bhante's Kuti. Only the thought of immense shame the next morning held me back.

As I lay there dying with each passing minute, I found my next weapon. My eyes got fixed onto a small bundle of beige cloth in the corner of the Kuti. I knew instantly what it was and I jumped up and grabbed it in a flash. It was some old outer robe of a monk. It was quite old and I think may have been relegated to a rag or something. Nevertheless it was a true-blue monk's robe no matter how old. Now this is a piece of cloth has perhaps being worn for years by some pious monk and would surely have some magic infused into it by all the wearing, meditating and chanting. It could protect me. It could become a wall between me and the evil spirits. Forget the DIY Pali chanting, now this is the real professional stuff. I quickly covered myself with this new found Robe-of-Invincibility and like a drowning person who has found a rope to cling to, finally fell asleep.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> day was the same as previous, there were more meditation in the morning followed by breakfast and then more hard labour. In the evening we meditated again, followed by a Dhamma talk. When the formal Dhamma talk finished, we chit-chat about general things and suddenly our conversation drifted to the life of monks in Southern Thailand and suddenly Bhante asked me "Have you heard the story about the monk who got killed by ogres in a cave somewhere in Southeastern Thailand?" Oh no.. here we go again I thought to myself. With much fear in my eyes I said "no, venerable sir."

There was this monk who lived in a cave, on a small island off the coast of Southeast Thailand. Actually he went to live in the cave because he was looking for solitude but it was against the advise of the local villagers there. The villagers said the cave is home to a Yakkha (some sort of ogre) and it has caused the death of a few people that took shelter there. Bhante didn't tell me how this monk died, he only told me eventually the ogre killed him and therefore even being a monk or wearing the holy robes of a monk is not a guarantee against evil. I remember him saying that like everyone else it is the Kamma of that monk that matters, apart from his precepts. All this sounds fine and dandy but it was the part that the robes are just like any other old piece of cloth that got to me like a bee sting. Bhante has in another swift swoop of a story dismantled my protection strategy yet again. How is my rag of a robe in the Kuti going to protect me tonight when it couldn't even protect the real McCoy? If a monk could be killed by a silly ogre while wearing that beige holy cloth then what hope do I have?

There I was again on the 3<sup>rd</sup> night of my stay, trembling away in my Kuti defenseless against ghosts, demons and now ogres. I lay there in cold sweat again being tortured by ghosts and demons of my own making until I was frantic and desperate with fear. I was

like a pig that fell into a well and drowning. Bhante had told me horror stories and then knowingly or unknowingly dismantled my defenses against these horrors. The Pali Suttas were a dud and now the beige robe is a lemon.

As I lay there struggling and yet unable to help myself, I was suddenly hit by the million dollar questions. What am I running from? What is it that I am really afraid of? Am I afraid of ghosts and evil spirits or am I really afraid of dying? Aren't the ghosts and evil spirits just instruments to my death? In that case why am I afraid of dying? I mean everyone dies at one point or another. Why is it that I must not perish? Why am I so special that I must not die when everybody else dies? And in that case "who am I?"

While searching for that special part in me that makes me, me, I realized that there is none to be found. I am just another ordinary man like millions of others walking around. I am like a speck of dust in the whole universal. Whether I live or die, the universe will not skip a beat. All my belongings in this world do not define me either, they are not me. Perhaps I have attached myself too strongly to objects around me that inevitably make me afraid to lose them? I began to understand the 2 words that I have read so much of but never really understood even 1% of. Through a somehow perverted process I have understood the meaning of the words "no I" a little more. Once I have realised this, my fears then entered "a benevolent cycle" the opposite of a vicious-cycle if you like.

If I am nobody special then why must the ghosts and spirits choose to attack me? And even if one really chooses to kill me against all odds in this Kuti this very night, then there is nothing much I can do except to die in a composed and dignified manner. That is the only action within my power and nothing else. However since I have not died and is still alive at this moment, I will truly live and savour this present moment to its fullest. Why must I be so silly to worry about dying the next moment, if that very thought will rob me of living this present moment.

Nowadays, this valuable lesson that I have learnt from VBG stays with me all the time, at the back of my head. Whenever I get scared of losing anything at all, like my car, business, money, life or whatever it is that is so apparently invaluable, I will never fail to relive every moment in that Kuti 10 year ago.