

Applied Dharma and “A Comfortable Pair of Shoes”

Harnessing an inquisitive mind, Laurie Maund as a youngster was unaware that when he picked up a book about Buddhism, its contents would strike a chord within his soul that would resonate throughout the world.

“I had to follow this chord,” he says. And tune into its vibration he has.

Living in Thailand for nearly 40 years, Maund has continually felt so supported by Thai culture regarding his spiritual journey that he has dedicated much of his life’s work to saying thank you via the Sangha Metta Project.

Sangha Metta – meaning, ‘loving community’ – is an awareness-raising effort designed for mobilizing communities amongst Buddhist cultures toward thoroughly addressing major social issues, such as those related to HIV/AIDS, by first empowering these communities’ most respected leaders: the monks.

Referring to the Buddha as an “enlightened social worker who went out and helped people,” Maund has used the former Prince’s Dharma teachings on how to properly conduct human life as the mortar for building the Sangha Metta Project that, although its idea and objectives are primarily focused on Thailand, has been introduced to Vietnam, Cambodia, Burma, Laos, Mongolia, Bhutan, Nepal, India and Sri Lanka.

Maund has created workshops based on this philosophy’s Four Noble Truths, which address the nature of suffering, its causes, cessation and how to accomplish this ending of suffering.

Monks embarking on the Sangha Metta training program first research and determine the individual and community impacts related to the HIV virus. They then analyse the causes of why people contract this disease, which Maund says is often rooted in first getting into risk situations as a consequence of globalization.

They then use “applied Dharma” in their respective communities by inspiring and mobilizing other area leaders, social groups, development offices, hospitals and schools to join hands in addressing and eliminating the HIV virus’ impacts.

“Sangha Metta is not (directly) about working with HIV,” said Maund. “It’s about using the Dharma. We are trying to improve people’s quality of life and help them live free from suffering, anxiety and stress.

“This is about showing people how to take what they already have and apply it to prevent the impacts of issues.” And he has witnessed profound transformations throughout the communities served.

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Although he jokingly referred to himself as a Buddhist missionary, Maund began preparing himself for his calling by leaving his home country of Australia “on a journey to develop understanding and find truth.”

Thailand, unlike many other countries in the region at the time of his 1970s arrival, offered him the opportunity to live as a Buddhist monk. And he has remained forever grateful for this wind beneath his wings.

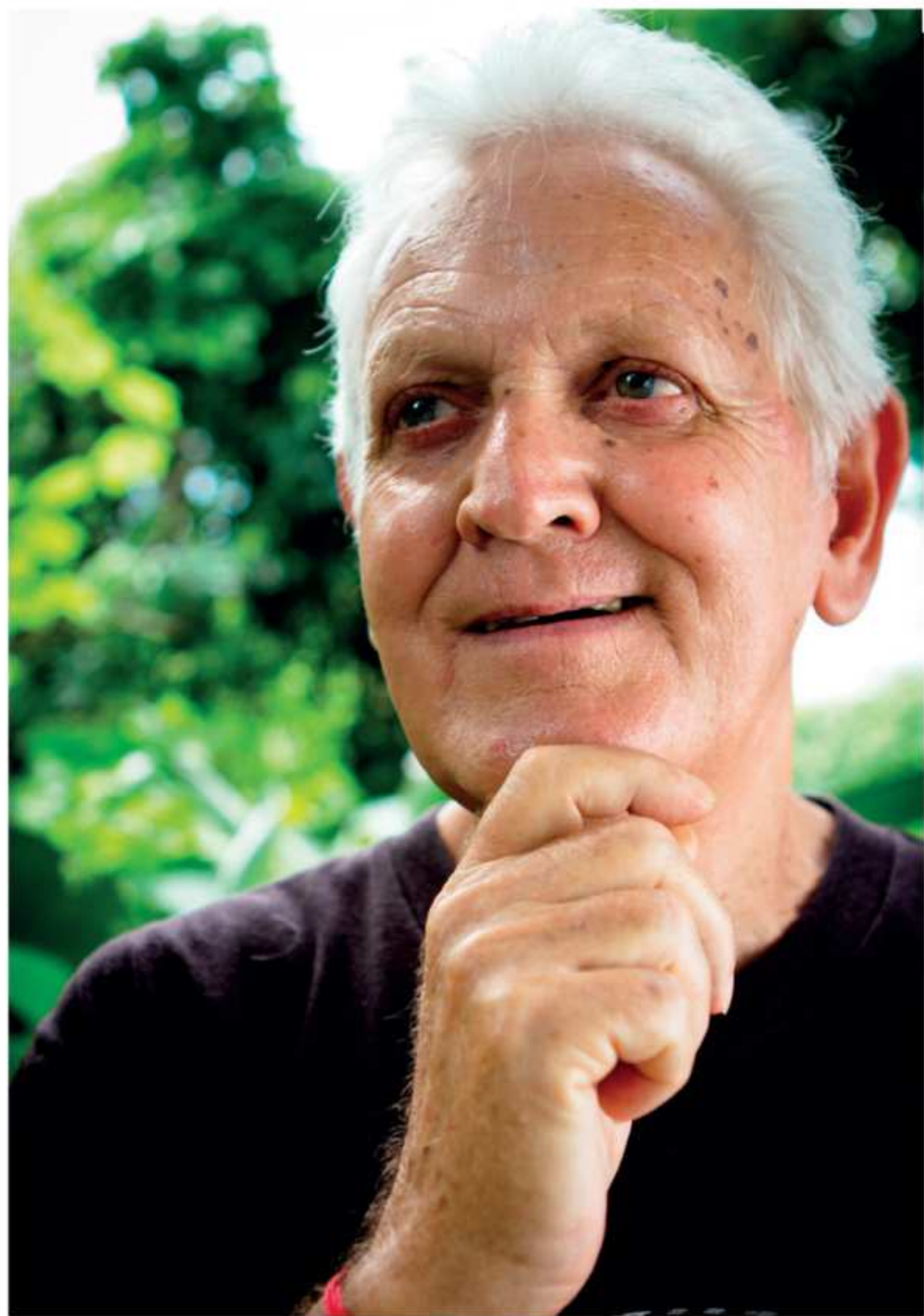
However, after serving for a couple years, he says that he felt ‘bound’ by cultural components related to the Dharma in Thailand, disrobed and further sought the Buddhist’s path in India, where he formally studied Buddhism for four years.

Nearly penniless, he later arrived in Bangkok where he taught Buddhism at a university and also worked as a certified United Nations translator of the Thai language.

This was during a time when Thailand was promoting Thai culture worldwide. Maund was appointed to Thailand’s National Identity Board and the National Cultural Commission, ultimately finding a niche translating books and arts-related materials applicable to Thai culture.

Ten years had passed before he capitalized on an opportunity to assist Chiang Mai University (CMU) in developing its Thai translating program, where he worked for six years. This was in 1987, in the midst of Thailand’s modernization in accordance with the Western economic model.

The content of his translation work was transitioning into being more about Thailand’s economic development and later about its consequences, such as those related to environmental destruction, socio-economic disparity and disease.



Now approaching the mid-1990s, and with over 100,000 new HIV/AIDS cases being reported annually in Thailand, Maund began being more socially involved at a time when large, world health organizations “had their idea of how Thailand should respond to the AIDS crisis.”

Offended by witnessing others trampling on Thai culture, he established the Sangha Metta Project in 1996, which eventually led to him receiving invitations to provide input into regional HIV/AIDS-related conferences. And the Sangha Metta Project further became a model for applying the Dharma to people’s lives, especially while they are in a crisis situation.

“We scaled this from a national to a community level using the most respected people in the community, the monks, as resource persons, and the temple as the center of the community as a way to reach out to people.

“The Sangha is in you,” he added. “And once we develop right understanding, nothing is a problem.”

So, why has Maund dedicated his life to Thailand and its Buddhist ideals?

On a national level, he appreciates how Thai people have preserved Buddhist traditions, live life with dignity and “are open to other people with regard to sharing what they have.” And he feels blessed and honored in being part of this.

“I wanted to help the Thais preserve the most beautiful thing that they have in Buddhism: the Dharma. The time I spent as a Buddhist monk is without a doubt the most meaningful period of my life, and this (project) is my way of saying thank you.”

And locally, “everything that Chiang Mai is made of fits me. It’s my size, like a nice, comfortable pair of shoes.”