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Mae Fah Luang Foundation

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SUBHEADLINE: A new CD-ROM Triptych explores the life and meaning of the Lord Buddha

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If you were to take a civilisation's most intimate, precious and sacred reservoir of knowledge and guidance, and put the most advanced, ultra-modern and refined technology in the service of it, you would end up with something like this: a CD-ROM Triptych on the life of the Lord Buddha.

Produced by the Mae Fah Luang Foundation, and conceived and created by Titus Leber, the end result is a jewel, both in terms of content and presentation. Packaged in a lacquered gold case featuring a splendid Buddha setting in motion the Wheel of Law, the three-CD-ROM package will be officially released this coming Sunday. The set will be sold for \$500 (20,000 baht in Thailand), and will initially be produced in a limited series of 2,543 copies in the English language.

A Thai version is on the way, as well as versions in four other languages.

Based on the pamphlet *What Did the Buddha Teach?* by Her Royal Highness the Princess Mother, published in 1967, the interactive multimedia programme is an open invitation to travel in space and time on a pilgrimage at the click of a mouse button, following the footsteps of the Lord Buddha.

The CD-ROMs will take the viewer some 2,500 years back into the past, to follow Prince Siddhartha during his last 10 lives to his becoming the Buddha, the Enlightened One, transporting the viewer from India to Nepal revisiting the original locations related to the Buddha's life \_ Lumbini, Kapilavatthu, Sarnath, Savatthi, Bodhgaya, and many more.

Click on the virtual monks meditating in the verdant Jetvana Grove in Savatthi and you will hear them reciting verses from the Dhammapada, the sayings of the Lord Buddha, each of the "clickable monks" reciting a different verse.

Click on the narrative mode and you will feel like you're in a movie theatre watching richly-animated scenes with a lavish and specially-composed soundtrack.

Click on the third disc entitled "The Sangha" and you will be able to flip through hundreds of pages of palm leaf manuscripts.

But the journey can also take you into the most minute details of the mural paintings of the chapel walls inside Wat Phra Kaeo, across 1,700 square metres of a magnificent fresco depicting the life of the Lord Buddha.

On the way you will find a unique visual representation of the fundamentals of Buddhist philosophy, including the Four Noble Truths on the nature, origin and cessation of universal suffering, the Eightfold Path of Liberation, as well as the doctrine of Non-Self, the Five Aggregates, the Wheel of Life and much more.

The potential of these three little discs is beyond imagination.

This extensive and profound adventure \_ which took more than three years to complete and which would require about two months of continuous viewing to explore completely \_ would not have come to life without the high-calibre efforts of award-winning multimedia director Titus Leber.

His receptiveness, quick-wittedness, time-tested and proven abilities and unequalled mastery over the most advanced production technologies were the right match for the project.

The Austrian-born multimedia director, or creator as he says, whose credits include ``Vienna Interactive'', ``Mozart Interactive'', ``The Great Louvre'', and ``The World of Louis Pasteur'', which have won numerous international awards, conceived, wrote and created the entire product.

It all started when Leber was asked by the Mae Fah Luang Foundation to film the royal funeral of the late Princess Mother in March 1996. Held in Sanam Luang, the ceremony provided the director with an opportunity to glimpse the artistic beauty and meaningful depths of the nearby Wat Phra Kaeo, the Temple of the Emerald Buddha.

Thanpuying Putrie Viravaidya, deputy secretary-general of the foundation, explained at length the significance of the mural paintings inside the chapel, introducing Leber to Buddhist philosophy.

His entrepreneurial spirit was quick to show itself.

``This fantastic fresco rendering the Buddha's life was the ideal starting point for an interactive project. Each one of the scenes could be linked to actual places in India and Nepal," Leber said.

Within two to three weeks his proposal for the CD-ROM project was approved by the Mae Fah Luang Foundation, established in 1972 to help carry out the humanitarian, ecological, cultural and spiritual development efforts initiated by the Princess Mother.

``It fell on open ears, and matched some of the foundation's goals to promote Buddhism and the Thai cultural heritage," Leber said.

The multimedia project also fit nicely with plans to help promote Buddhism, the Princess Mother's pamphlet, as well as the centenary celebrations for the Princess Mother's birth.

The foundation thus gave Leber carte blanche: top quality equipment, such as analogue and digital editing rooms; a competent team to execute and programme the work, including a technical director, programmers, graphic designers, an avid operator, an assistant/secretary; and the necessary time to bring such a monumental task to a satisfactory conclusion.

``A heavenly environment," said a pleased Leber, dressed in a soft green waistcoat.

Leber received his PhD from the University of Vienna. He also obtained a Master's from the American Film Institute in Hollywood as a director, before going on to MIT as a Research Fellow. He then spent three years as a professor for Electronic Publishing at the Media Academy in Cologne.

A few days before the official release of the CD-ROM Triptych, after having added one more prestigious achievement to his career, the world-renowned director looked back with amusement on the three-year odyssey of working on the project.

``I have done biographies of artists such as Mozart, or scientists such as Pasteur. But when approaching a spiritual leader, the most challenging thing was to create a visual and

`edutaining' [educational and entertaining] look at his philosophy, to find a lively method to translate his message, making it accessible to young people around the world who are fond of zapping and clicking, and who don't have much patience and need their curiosity triggered all the time," Leber said.

`` Another great challenge was the fact that there was very little visualisation of the Buddha's teachings; the paintings mostly deal with his biography. Consequently we had to create `mind maps', and then `mindscapes' translating these universal maps of Buddhism into something you can explore, almost like an adventure \_ an intellectual adventure," said the multimedia director.

The second disc of the three-disc set, devoted to the visualisation of the Wheel of Life \_an often-used element in Tibetan Buddhism\_ required one entire year of work as the symbolism used to represent it had to appeal both to Eastern and Western audiences.

`` I had to resort to some kind of universal archetypal language that hopefully will be intelligible for people everywhere in the world," he said.

`` It's all about going in depth into the featured person's mind and trying to imagine and recreate a universe consistent and coherent in itself. For this project, my goal was to render the emotions of this young prince coming from such a fantastically rich background, spoiled with everything one can desire and who at the peak of his life decides to drop it all and become a hermit. The degree of self-negation he went to is unbelievable. It is this kind of emotion I wanted to transmit."

Filming was a feat. Leber and his team recall torrid scenes under the South Asian sun in India and Nepal, of shooting at the hottest time of the year (May) with temperatures reaching 50 Celsius and more, causing their cameras to fail from the heat, and of walking barefoot on scorchingly hot temple floors during the hottest time of the day (noon) to get shadow-free shots so that they could be all linked together in 360-degree panorama scenes.

The pioneer work of filming every square metre of the 1,700-square-metre mural inside the Temple of the Emerald Buddha in Bangkok also yielded many challenges.

The lack of adequate lighting, grounded electricity, and close access to the paintings due to the layout of the chapel, the height (the upper part of the paintings being perched 26 metres above ground), the problem of image distortion \_ there were many obstacles to overcome.

The veteran director resorted to drastic means to handle this mountain of difficulties. Internationally renowned museum photographer Ali Meyer came to their rescue with brand new digital equipment from Europe, with which the wall painting was scanned in situ, metre by metre.

This device didn't solve other headaches, though, such as the swaying of the 26-metre platform, and the assembling and disassembling of the scaffolding.

`` We worked 30 nights in a row, starting at 4 pm and working till 4 am. It was very hot with no air circulation, during the monsoon season. The computers were crashing all the time. We had to fly in a specialist from London to repair the equipment, which had, so far, never been used outside a museum."

There was also much work behind the 3D animated scenes, the minutely detailed scoring of the soundtrack made by platinum-sales composer Robert Ponger, and much more.

The outcome was an unmatched accomplishment on many levels, said Dr Sumet Tantivejkul, board member of the Mae Fah Luang Foundation, noting that it was the most important

interactive CD-ROM ever produced in Thailand, the first time that royal permission had been granted by His Majesty the King to reproduce the paintings inside Wat Phra Kaeo, and the first comprehensive "dramatic" narration of the Buddha's life based on a traditional work of art.

The Mae Fah Luang Foundation followed strict scholarly and editorial standards in preparing the project, and Thai and non-Thai scholars, including monks and lay people, reviewed all the texts, pictures and music for accuracy and consistency.

"How many of us have been able to spend time in the interior of the Temple of the Emerald Buddha, observing in detail every square centimetre of the painting from all the possible angles? This CD-ROM enables us to penetrate the real environment and atmosphere in which the Buddha lived, giving a new dimension to our search. It feels as if we were really there," Dr Sumet said.

Leber said: "It has been an ongoing source of enlightenment and a very humbling experience. It has changed my whole perspective on life. The light of the Lord Buddha has been with me throughout the entire project and I consider myself extremely fortunate to have been able to accomplish this in my lifetime."

He will now get down to the business of many other projects, including production of a one-hour documentary with the same title: *What Did the Buddha Teach?*

Unless, of course, the 50-volume set of the Sacred Books of Buddhism, which sit enthroned in his office in the compound of the Mae Fah Luang Foundation, set him firmly on the path to Nirvana.

A limited English edition of 2,543 special sets, to commemorate the birth centennial of the Princess Mother, will be available from December 17 onwards.

For more information, orders or enquiries about further editions, contact the Mae Fah Luang Foundation, Bangkok, Thailand. Telephone: (662) 251-3582-3, fax (662) 253-8333 or (662) 255-0830, or email [mfiCDROM@](mailto:mfiCDROM@)

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