Local healing in northern Thailand: An anthropological study of its effectiveness

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Chapter VI

The significance of the local moral world for the healing process
This chapter presents the local world that enables local healers in Northern Thailand to practice in a moral way, as promoted by the local healing tradition. This local world contains a culturally constructed reality in which spiritual entities and virtues are given a prominent place by healers, patients, and the community. The chapter describes the significance of these entities and virtues in the lives of villagers and healers, and the ways in which they succeed in overcoming the threats of encroachment of outside social forces into this moral world. This chapter describes how a particular local healer – who plays a key role in the struggle to sustain a life world in which traditional norms and values prevail – manages to keep the risk of losing social recognition and prestige at bay. The chapter demonstrates that without this recognition and prestige, and without adherence to the traditionally valued local morality, this healer would not be able to continue his healing practice effectively.

The main spiritual entities in Ban Denchai

This section presents the main spiritual entities in Ban Denchai. I focus on this village because it is where Mo Boon resides. It can also be considered representative of other villages in Chiang Mai since the beliefs and customs of villagers here reflect those belonging to Tai Yuan villagers elsewhere. Ban Denchai is a place where a particular healer, Mo Boon, has succeeded in holding on to the moral values of a good healer. The main spiritual entities that matter in the lives of the villagers and healers in the village therefore deserve to be explored in further detail.

One can distinguish two groups of entities. The first group consists of phi, the ancestral spirits that are the guardians of human beings, and the second of khru, the spirits of healer teachers who inhabit and guide current local healers.

Phi

Early in the morning, at the shrine in front of Mo Boon’s healing center, a ‘rite master’ dressed in white pays his respects to the spirit that protects the place (chao thi), while Mo Boon squats behind him. After a while, the master pauses, turns his face to the shrine, and resumes his recitation. With my gaze following his movements, I catch a glimpse of a set of bowls filled with food offerings placed inside the shrine, as well as a brightly colored plastic garland hanging in front of the shrine.

The rite did not take long since it was performed at an individual household as part of a larger communal village event which celebrated the inauguration of a new shrine hall at the Denchai Buddhist temple. Neighboring villages also participated in the celebration and were represented by processions of members carrying their donations in the form of ‘money trees’ to the temple. The entire village put in a lot of effort to organize the three day celebration, both at the temple and at individual houses, and much community resources – time, effort, and money – were spent on the special occasion. A number of prominent guests were in attendance, including celebrities from a free TV channel in Bangkok.
Illustration 8. Rite to pay respects to the spirit that protects the place (chao thi)

Illustration 9. The event to celebrate the new shrine hall at Denchai temple

Villagers in Ban Denchai, like villagers elsewhere in rural Northern Thailand, are Buddhists who also hold local beliefs and customs regarding natural, ancestral, and household spirits. For instance, they worship the spirits or phi, which are believed to be the guardians of places and communities, such as the protectors of a specific locality (chao thi) and protectors of a village (phi suea ban). The villagers also worship the ancestral spirits that protect and govern the descendants of the maternal lineage (phi pu ya). Mo Boon’s ancestral spirits inhabit the two shrines at his uncle’s house in a neighboring village. Every year, at the start of the local new year (Phaya Wan Day), which falls on April 15th, a rite is performed where all the members of Mo Boon’s maternal lineage gather together to pay their respects to the ancestral spirits.
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Illustration 10. The shrines of the ancestral spirits

*Khuet* (the word for taboo among the people of Northern Thailand, which I discuss in Chapter 2) still influences the lives of villagers in Ban Denchai. Any possible violations of *khuet* are a major concern. For instance, when Mo Boon presented his plan to use the disused Nong Chang temple as the location for his HIV/AIDS healing center, the temple committee raised concern over prohibitions that forbid the felling of trees for building houses in the vicinity of deserted temples. The project was only approved on the strict condition that Mo Boon would not fell any trees around the temple to build shelters or buildings for the treatment of HIV/AIDS patients.

Since the area surrounding the temple was planted with a number of longan trees, Mo Boon had to figure out ways to build the facilities necessary for his healing activities while at the same time observing *khuet*. First, Mo Boon built two wooden halls with palm leaf roofs among the longan trees. They provided shelter for the HIV/AIDS patients who had travelled from distant areas. Second, a chance incident helped him out when, a year later, he decided to have a concrete building constructed to serve as a shrine hall with a Buddha statue and as a room for treating patients every Buddhist holy day. When he measured the site, he realized that the space between the two rows of longan trees was too small for the size of the hall he intended to erect. A few days later, however, all six longan trees standing around the marked area inexplicably fell down simultaneously, opening up a space large enough for the construction. For some people, the incident was viewed as more than a mere coincidence. One of his neighbors even accused Mo Boon of hiring a backhoe machine to fell the trees. But Mo Boon and his friends believed that it was an act of angels (*thewada*) who wanted to help him succeed in making great merit.

*Phi ka* is probably the most well known spirit group that causes harm and evil to villagers in Ban Denchai.¹ They are ancestral spirits of the maternal lineage that turn malevolent

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¹ The story of *phi ka* is elaborated upon in the book *A Physician at the Court of Siam* written by Malcolm Smith (1985), who served as a court doctor for Queen Saowapa Phongsri, one of the four royal consorts of King Rama V, between 1905 and 1910. This was in the early period of the Christian mission in Chiang Mai, when villagers who were accused of being possessed by *phi ka* converted and became part of the Christian community.
because they are not treated properly or because their descendants have violated khuet. It is said that a phi ka family lived in Ban Denchai, and that its members usually shunned contact with their neighbors. Once, Pho Mo, Mo Boon’s father, when he was eighty years old, became sick and a woman from his family came to visit him in a hurry. She quickly entered the room of the sick man, removed the ring from his finger and put it on her own finger for a while before putting it back on his finger. After she had left, the healer began to show strange faces behind the backs of others – a sign of possession by phi ka. Mo Boon said that the woman came to get revenge on his father because Pho Mo used to release people from the grip of the phi ka when it possessed them. This story shows clearly how the belief that phi ka can inflict great harm on people remains strong in Ban Denchai.

The customs I observed in everyday life in the village reflect how deeply the belief in phi is ingrained in the consciousness of the villagers and local healers. When I paid a visit to the healers from the North who had travelled to Bangkok and stayed in a rented room while attending the National Herbal Medicine Fair, I found that every morning before breakfast they offered food placed on a plastic sheet to the protectors of the specific locality where they stayed (chao thi), in the belief that it would protect them from harm and danger.

When suffering from afflictions caused by phi or the violation of khuet, villagers in Ban Denchai will conduct a ritual to ask for forgiveness. I witnessed such a ritual held in a patient’s house and noticed that many villagers joined the event, which lasted for several days and in which folk plays and dances were performed, along with feasting. The ritual ended with the dedication of offerings at the shrine of the ancestral spirits.

It is interesting to note that since health officials have successfully conveyed the message that HIV is a communicable disease, the villagers in Ban Denchai do not associate the disease with phi. Some healers refer to HIV/AIDS by local terms such as mutta khuet (bad urine). From this point of view, AIDS is associated with khuet, as its cause is considered to be misconduct in sexual behavior.

Khru

Khru is the spirit of healer teachers from the past. It is considered an abstract entity rather than the spirit of a single teacher. Medical knowledge is thought to belong to the khru, who pass it on to new healers through the generations. Every year each local healer has to carry out a ceremony to pay homage to the khru (phi thi wai khru).

When Mo Boon conducted this homage ceremony on the local New Year’s Day of 2008, I was there to observe it.2 Presiding over the ceremony was a Buddha statue sitting on a wooden shelf. On the top of a three foot high cabinet, Mo Boon had placed a statue of the god Phra Phitsanu (Ganesh, see below in this section) and pictures of the monk Khruba Siwichai (see following section below). An assortment of offerings was arranged on a one foot high

2 The preferred date for this ceremony is any Thursday in the period between March and June. In Brahmanism, Thursday (Phraruehatsabadi day) is designated as teachers’ day, for the angel named Phraruehatsabadi is said to be the teacher of all angels. However, some healers hold the ceremony on any day that is convenient.
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table, and this was placed in front of a rattan tray holding a photograph of Pho Mo. All of the medical scriptures in Mo Boon’s possession as well as his healing equipment – the healer’s knife (mit mo) and a herbal rubbing tray – were also present. Mo Boon’s healer teacher’s bowl (khan tang) was placed in front of the picture of Khruba Siwichai.

Illustration 11. Mo Boon’s ceremony to pay homage to the healer teachers

It is tradition that when a patient starts receiving healing from a local healer, the patient has to pay a symbolic fee to honor the healer teachers. In Mo Boon’s case, the fee is four baht (approximately 10 euro cents) for massage, twelve baht (approximately 30 euro cents) for medicine treatment (herbal medicines), and thirty-six baht (approximately 90 euro cents) for awman (a special type of massage that his teacher had learned from a Burmese healer). The fees are kept in the healer teacher’s bowl until the next year. On the morning of the day of the ceremony, the money is collected from the bowl. In the year that I was present to observe the ceremony, there was more than five hundred baht (around 12.50 euro) in total. The money was spent on offerings and herbs, and the rest was donated to the temple.

One of the people attending the ceremony was a man from Lamphun whose granddaughter had fallen ill from febrile convulsions but had recovered after taking herbal medicines that were rubbed off with a rubbing tool. This man said that he was present to show his gratitude to the khru, because the medicine that had cured his little granddaughter had been passed down from the khru to Mo Boon. Mo Boon is thus seen as simply a carrier of the khru’s healing power and knowledge. The ceremony to pay respects to the khru, in the way prescribed by tradition, is thus vital for letting Mo Boon maintain his healing powers. On this occasion, since only a few patients could come personally to participate in the ceremony and pay their respects to the khru, Mo Boon performed the duty on their behalf.

Illustration 13. Phra Phitsanu (Ganesh) and the healer teacher’s bowl

Phra Phitsanu, as the Hindu god Ganesh is called in Northern Thailand, is originally a Brahmin deity worshipped for his expertise in all branches of the ancient arts and sciences. In the Central Region of Thailand, he is not regarded as a teacher of healers, though in the North he is highly respected as such. Phra Phitsanu, who has a human body, an elephant head, and four hands, represents the ability to overcome obstacles and accomplish things. Thus the local healers of Chiang Mai often invoke his power when they are healing their patients. I once observed Mo Som, a local healer in San Kamphaeng district, offering a
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statue of Phra Phitsanu to a patient who suffered from paralysis, and telling him to ask for the god’s blessing. Not long after this, the trembling that had kept the man awake throughout the night subsided and he was finally able to sleep. The power of the *khru* will be elaborated on in the next chapter (Chapter 7), where I will show how HIV/AIDS patients relate it to the effectiveness of the healing they receive.

**Khruba Siwichai (1878 -1938): The most respected monk in Northern Thailand**

Among the Buddhist monks in Northern Thailand, Khruba Siwichai is the most respected. He is acknowledged as a monk who possessed the virtues and supranormal powers of a bodhisattva (one who has strong intentions to attain enlightenment to help his fellow beings) (Tambiah 1984: 303). There are three reasons why this status has been accorded to him.

First, Khruba Siwichai was a Buddhist monk whose practice was grounded in the tradition of Northern Thai Buddhism. As political and cultural threats intruded upon the Northern people’s way of life as a result of the central government’s attempts to control the region, Khruba Siwichai’s support of the preservation of local traditions and customs was greatly appreciated by the people.

Second, Khruba Siwichai is a symbol of resistance against the power of the central government. Over a period of thirty years, he had to face three separate allegations from the Lamphun Sangha provincial chief on different charges. The first charge was related to the fact that, as a locally revered monk following local customs, Khruba Siwichai performed ordination. He was accused of performing illegal ordinations since he did not obtain the official permission to do so, as legislated in the 1902 Sangha Act (a law to control the monastic community of ordained Buddhist monks). His second charge came because he disobeyed the Sangha provincial chief’s order that every temple should be decorated with lights for the celebration of King Rama VI’s accession to the throne. Instead, Khruba Siwichai asked the locals to observe the precepts, pray, and meditate at the temple to celebrate the occasion. Finally, Khruba Siwichai was accused of performing illegal ordinations and cutting down trees in the forest to build a road to the Phrathat Doi Suthep temple on Suthep Mountain. Although he was arrested and taken to Bangkok twice to be questioned and educated on the new law, he was able to prove his innocence. He was acquitted and gained stronger support from many local people and monks.

The third reason for Khruba Siwichai’s high status is that he led local people in the North in raising funds and organizing the construction of new temples and the restoration of old and decayed ones. The story of how he led villagers and monks to build the road to Phrathat Doi Suthep temple using only voluntary manual labor and simple tools, and without any support from the state, has become legendary. Indeed, the number of people who wanted to participate in the project was so large that schedules had to be made to allow everyone to work.

As told in Chapter 4, Mo Boon himself takes pride in his ties to Khruba Siwichai through his grandfather, Ui Ta Kham, a local healer who lived in the same period as Khruba Siwichai. Ui Ta Kham was in his thirties when he left Mawlamyine, a Mon state in the Union of Burma.
When the borders between Siam and Burma were closed during World War II, he decided to settle in Ban Denchai in Chiang Mai and it was there that he started his career as a local healer. Because of Ban Denchai’s proximity to Lamphun province, where Khruba Siwichai resided, Ui Ta Kham became the personal doctor of the revered monk. Khruba Siwichai, according to Mo Boon, suffered at the end of his life from *mahok lueat* (an internal hemorrhoid) and took the traditional drugs given to him by Ui Ta Kham until he was eventually hospitalized and later died at the temple in Ban Pang, his birthplace. It was said that his illness worsened because he sat for too long receiving visitors who came to pay their respects or donate money for the construction or renovation of temples, and because he had eaten forbidden food while in the hospital.

In one way or another, Mo Boon tends to relate many of his healing activities to Khruba Siwichai, whether through the ceremony to pay respects to the healer teachers or his practices in daily life and at special events. This reference could possibly serve two purposes. First, by identifying himself with Khruba Siwichai, Mo Boon may make villagers more eager to donate money for his cause. In order to establish the healing center for HIV/AIDS patients, Mo Boon had to raise funds to build a concrete hall, wooden houses for the patients, and other facilities. The hall was named the Hall of Merit Making (*Sala Bamphen Bun*) and was dedicated to Khruba Siwichai.

Second, it is a way for Mo Boon to seek protection from the great merit of Khruba Siwichai and invoke his spiritual power to help him succeed in healing patients. Mo Boon pointed out to me that no HIV/AIDS patient had ever died at his healing center. Once there was a patient who suddenly fell very ill while staying there. His condition, which was caused by eating improper food, worsened before Mo Boon gave him the herbal medicines that cured his illness. In this case, Mo Boon attributed his success to the merit of his teachers and to Khruba Siwichai, who had saved the life of his patient and thus protected him from the accusation of being a quack.

*Illustration 14. Sprinkling water on the Buddha’s relics. Left: A silver flash pulling up to the pagoda of Phra That Hariphunchai temple. Right: Mo Boon walking around the pagoda to worship the Buddha’s relics.*
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**Phra that and Pho: Symbols of the Buddha**

My first visit to Mo Boon in 2006 fell on Visakha Bucha Day, the commemoration of the birth, enlightenment, and death of the Buddha, which takes place during the full moon of the sixth lunar month. On this occasion, I accompanied Mo Boon to Phra That Hariphunchai temple – one of the oldest temples in Northern Thailand (dating from 1108 A.D.), located in Lamphun province – to worship the *phra that* (relics of the Buddha or Buddhist saints). With a bunch of flowers, we lit candles and incense sticks, walked clockwise three times around the pagoda in which the Buddha’s relics are housed, and then sprinkled water with the dried fruits of soap pod (*Acacia concinna* [Willd.] D.C.) and safflower onto the pagoda, the Buddha statues, and the other holy figures placed around the pagoda. We concluded by collecting the water flowing down from the pagoda for worship at our houses.

The *phra that* (relics) are regarded as representations of the Buddha and held in highest reverence by Buddhists, who believe that it is auspicious and of great merit to pay homage to these objects of worship. Among Northern Thais it is believed that the Buddha’s relics are kept at twelve places: eight in Northern Thailand, one in India, one in Burma, one in Laos, and one in the heaven that is called Dawadueng. These *phra that* are associated with the twelve year animal cycle (*naksat*) in the local horoscope. At least once in a lifetime, a Buddhist should travel to pay his or her respects to the *phra that* that corresponds to his or her year of birth, and for this he or she will be rewarded with longevity, luck, and prosperity.

Of all *phra that* in Northern Thailand, those at Phra That Hariphunchai temple and Phra That Doi Suthep temple are the two most significant ones to Mo Boon, since the former is associated with the year of his birth, and the latter with Khruba Siwichai, his local spiritual teacher.

![Illustration 15. Procession of tree props. Left: Two four meter long poles carried by a pickup truck. Right: The moment the villagers cheerfully prop up the Pho tree’s branches.](image)

Another Buddhist event that Mo Boon and the villagers of Ban Denchai value very highly is the procession of tree props (*phithi hae mai kam*), which is a religious event distinct to Northern Thailand. I was once able to participate in this event and closely observe it. The
event was held in the evening of the final day of a three-day celebration for the local New Year in 2008. The centerpieces of the procession, in which the joyful villagers walked and danced, were the tree props placed on a pickup truck that the villagers used to support the *pho* tree (*Ficus religiosa* L.) on their way to the temple. This action symbolizes the efforts to uphold Buddhism. In doing so, longevity and safety in the coming year are promised to the participants.

From an academic Buddhist perspective, one can say that *phra that*, holy water, and the *pho* tree are symbols that Buddhists relate to the purity, compassion, and wisdom of the Buddha. The sanctity of these objects does not rely on the miracles or supernatural power usually associated with them. Rather, their true function is to serve as a reminder to people not to fall into carelessness. To be a good Buddhist, one needs to behave and lead one’s life in adherence to the Buddha’s teachings and not merely depend on sacred things. In other words, these things will protect only those who follow the right path and not those who deviate from it.

In Mo Boon’s healing center at the deserted temple, a Buddha statue was acknowledged as the president of the shrine hall, to whom HIV/AIDS patients always paid their respects before any affairs were performed there. Everything that was intentionally conducted in the shrine hall could then be related to the sanctity of the Buddha. This was why Mo Boon always conducted his healing practices in front of this Buddha statue. He also empowered his first set of traditional drugs for the treatment of HIV-positive patients with the power of the virtue of Buddha in the shrine hall of Nong Chang temple (see Chapter 5).

In short, traditional animistic beliefs have played a significant role in the mundane activities and kinship relationships of Northern Thais, who seek the protection of natural and ancestral spirits for themselves and their families against dangers and bad luck. This function has naturally been incorporated into Buddhism, and the respect accorded to the local spirits has been extended to religious objects such as Buddha statues, *phra that*, the *pho* tree, amulets, and so on. For Northern Thais, these symbols command even more respect than the local spirits, since their sanctity and potency in protecting them against evil spirits, dangers, and misfortune, as well as their power to reward them with success, are deemed greater.

**Hierarchical order of entities and human beings**

The entities in the local world are placed in hierarchical order according to their respective purity and kindness. Apart from the Buddha, who is the ultimate and most respected of all sacred beings, other beings inhabit different levels of heaven, which is higher than both the human world and hell.

Mo Boon described for me the three worlds where different beings reside. In the middle level, the human world to which we belong is located. The upper world is heaven, which is the residence of all sacred beings. The underworld is the place where human beings who have conducted bad deeds are consigned in their afterlife to face suffering and punishment.

Mo Boon told me that he had once witnessed the world of the dead in a dream during his three-month retreat at Nong Chang temple. In his dream he saw many dead people gathered...
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in front of the god of the underworld. Newly arriving people received food from one of his neighbors, who was a good merchant in the village. They were then brought to one of the nine levels. He saw that a neighbor who had just taken his own life by drinking pesticides was taken to the third level. Another neighbor was awaiting judgment over his misdeeds – grabbing women’s rears – but before the decision was handed down, a fat woman came to his defense saying that he had made merit by providing tents for the events held by the community, and for that reason he should not be punished in hell. This objection saved the man from his punishment. Another man, an earth digger, was in hell because he always dug the soil without asking permission from Mother Earth (Mae Phra Thorani).

Mo Boon said that in his dream he was only allowed to see the third and fourth of the nine levels of the afterlife. The third level was a gloomy, horrible place with houses like those in slums. When he saw several ghost-like beings walking toward him, he slipped into a house to hide. Inside he found worms crawling all over the bamboo walls. He also found a ghost lying in a pool of foul water. While walking to another level, he saw a boy and an old man wearing wet clothes, crying and asking for food. Mo Boon asked his elder brother to offer them celestial rice. The fourth level was a place that looked like the human world but was more beautiful and peaceful. He walked along a road lined with houses on both sides. The smaller houses belonged to those who made little merit, the larger ones to those with great merit. He knew intuitively that his mother could be found at one of the houses in the fifth group at this level. He stopped at a junction and started to search for her place, but he woke up before finding it.

I asked Mo Boon why he thought he had not been allowed to see the other places beyond the third and fourth levels. He replied that the sight of the third level was enough to imagine how many more horrible things there would be in the second and first levels. Likewise, visiting the fourth level, in which general conditions were a far cry from the third, was sufficient to picture how much better the higher levels would be.

Mo Boon told his neighbors about the dream. He also advised the person who was an earth digger to donate a truckload of soil to a temple as penance for his past misdeeds, and from then on to ask for permission from Mother Earth every time before digging the soil. According to Mo Boon, the actions of each man will decide to which level of this unseen world he will go after death. Those who regularly commit sins are destined to suffer in the lower levels, while those who always do good deeds will enjoy pleasant things and happiness at the higher levels. Having proper relationships with all beings and things is thus considered a moral issue. Even the soil is regarded as a divine being. Improper behavior with regards to the soil, with or without others’ knowledge, is therefore immoral and can lead to punishment in the afterlife. Merit can, however, compensate for such transgressions and save from hell those who accumulate it sufficiently.

When focusing on the virtues of human beings, Mo Boon distinguished people according to their efforts to help others. At the bottom are khon, those people who just work to earn money and take care of their own families. Greater potential have manut, who not only support their own families but also others in the community. The further a person’s efforts to
help others extend beyond themselves, the higher they will rise, to eventually reach the status of *thewada* (angels), *phaya in* (the chief of *thewada*), and *phrom* (noble beings in the high heaven), given here in ascending order.

Mo Boon’s thinking is evidently influenced by the value and application of local cosmology in everyday life. For instance, in traditional cosmology, *thewada*, *phaya in*, and *phrom* exist only in heaven. Humans who have amassed much merit from their past and present lives will change into one of these entities after their death. Mo Boon includes them in his classification for living beings, however, making the status achievable to persons also in the present life, instead of one having to wait for the next life in an invisible world.

**Merit (*bun*)**

Popular Buddhism has created its own sacred things, not only to answer people’s need for security and desire for luck but to fertilize their mind with the Buddha’s teachings, which emphasize the appropriate ways to elevate human spiritual well being. One of the teachings well known among Thai Buddhists is that of the three bases of meritorious action (*punnakiriya-vatthu*), which consist of giving or generosity (*danna*), observing the precepts or codes of moral conduct (*sila*), and mental development (*bhavana*) (Payutto 2002).

The concept of merit (*bun*) involves almost every aspect of the Northern Thai traditional way of life, because it assures Northerners of a good life in the present and promises a better next life. A good life is traditionally measured by a person’s ability to support himself, his family, and community in performing the three bases of meritorious action. Therefore, until the advent of modern day life, the norms for moral conduct in village society in the North were not very complicated or difficult to conform with.

In Ban Denchai, like elsewhere, the temple has remained the center of merit making for villagers. Every Buddhist holy day they go to the temple to pray, pay their respects to the statues of Buddha, give alms to monks, and donate money. These activities are commonly known as *tham bun* (merit making). Even though the Buddha’s teachings make it clear that meritorious actions encompass several actions (from moral conduct and mental development through meditation to giving), merit making has taken on a much narrower meaning that focuses on giving or donating money or things to monks and temples. Observing the precepts and practicing meditation are seen as activities only for elderly people, who dress in white and stay at the temple on Buddhist holy days.

In Mo Boon’s case, his father taught him that the ultimate goal of a healer is to amass merit, since merit is an essential attribute of persons who desire to help a large number of people. A healer who acquires great merit will attain a greater capacity to help patients. In the context of the Buddha’s teachings, this idea equates healing with a sort of giving – that is, to help others without expecting any reward in return. Since Mo Boon became a healer, this religious ideal has had a great influence on him. To some extent, Mo Boon attributes his success in healing to his own merit (*bun*) and to the *barami* of his healer teachers and Khruba Siwichai. The word *barami* refers to an aggregation of merit that one has cultivated in one’s past and present lives. It signifies a high quality of mind and moral authority, which
is needed to accomplish feats that ordinary people would fail to undertake. A culmination of *barami* is a prerequisite for achieving enlightenment. In this respect, the ideal of being a local healer implies more than a social or physical accomplishment; the act of healing is directly connected to the accumulation of *bun* with the ultimate aim of enlightenment.

It is not only healers who believe in the role of merit and its effect on healing; patients themselves also accept the importance of this role. I posed a hypothetical question to Sathit, a former HIV patient of Mo Boon, whom I introduced in Chapter 5. I asked him what he thought would happen when Mo Boon passed away. Would one of his sons succeed him and dispense the same medicines as his father? And would he be able to achieve the same results? Sathit thought that they would be different. This answer reflects the acceptance of some idiosyncrasy of the healer in the healing process, in which a healer’s virtues are significant. Apart from knowledge and experience, the accumulated merit of each individual healer, as perceived by others, also counts in their practice.

Wiyada, another of Mo Boon’s HIV patients, told me that when Mo Boon and she became more familiar, he told her the story of his lapse into unconsciousness for five days, during which his spirit sojourned in heaven and witnessed things that happen there. Before he was sent back, he had been told that he would be called to heal the sick. This implies that Mo Boon expects his patients to perceive him as a meritorious healer. When asked to choose between a healer who has a deep concern with merit and another one who does not, Toei, another HIV patient of Mo Boon, said that she would prefer the former. She reasoned that a healer unconcerned with merit would not care to use the money he receives from his patients to make merit. ‘Does this imply that a healer’s merit affects his practice?’ I asked. ‘Yes,’ she replied. Mo Boon also showed both Wiyada and Toei things that his father had given him – a lightening-struck stone, a healer knife, two ivories from water elephants, and an ancient broken metal utensil shaped like a serpent’s head. Traditionally, these items would have been used to ward off evil spirits, but they are believed to have magical powers and should naturally be in the possession of worthy owners like monks or healers with great merit.

Conventionally, local healers who adhere to merit will earn unwavering support – both material and social – from the entire community. This enables them to continue their practice and pass on the ideal of good healers from generation to generation. The story of Pho Mo, Mo Boon’s father, illustrates the zeal with which a healer, who faithfully regarded his practice as merit making, did his utmost to realize this ideal. Even when his own family barely had enough to eat, he still gave the little rice left in their kitchen to some of his poor patients. When he was young, Mo Boon had serious doubts about his father’s conduct:

Looking at my father, I often asked myself why he had to live such a hard life. Why had we no money? Things never improved for us, not for his

3 In Buddhism, *barami* is defined as ten qualities of the mind, namely giving, good conduct, renunciation, insight understanding, endeavor, forbearance, truthfulness, self-determination, loving kindness, and indifference to praise and blame in the performance of duty.

4 The water elephant is a mythical animal said to live near streams in deep forests. It looks exactly like an elephant but is very tiny in size. A traditional belief is that its ivory can frighten away elephants.
children and not for himself. At night he was deprived of sleep because the villagers called on him when somebody was ill or a child was crying and sick. He would go off in a hurry. They would protest noisily if he did not come immediately. My father knew that he would not be paid, even the medicines he had to give them. There was no rest for him. His eyes were perpetually red and wet from lack of sleep and keeping watch at the patient’s bedside. After a lot of thought, I told my father: ‘There’s nothing to gain in doing this. Give it up father, please. You’re getting old.’ He replied: ‘No, son. It’s making merit, and I’ll keep doing it.’

In order to fulfill the role of a good healer, Pho Mo had to sacrifice the prospect of receiving any material gain and even his children’s opportunities for further education. The ultimate goal of making merit was firmly held by the old healer throughout his whole life, and in turn greatly influenced his son’s life as a healer. But in order to sustain this ideal in confrontation with social change, Mo Boon has had to adjust his ideas and his practice.

Remaking a moral life amidst social change

To analyze the disturbance in healers’ moral lives in the context of large scale socio-political and economic changes, I apply the framework presented by Kleinman in his book *What Really Matters* (2006b: 227-228). According to this framework, the transformation of a moral life results from the interaction between three different things: ‘cultural meanings, social experience, and subjectivity (inner emotions and sense of self)’ (ibid.: 227). This framework can be used to argue that moral practices in response to human problems change when local worlds and the people living in them change.

In the case of Northern Thailand, changes in society, economy, politics, and mainstream culture have continuously influenced the local world of the villagers since the emergence of the Thai nation state. However, during the last three decades, these changes have become so profound that the local world can be described as somewhat confused (see Chapter 2). These changes have influenced what local people believe in terms of material growth, and have shaped a collective experience in which people are socialized toward competitive action. As I observed in Ban Denchai, the belief in animism and Buddhism has become weaker among the local youth. Young people in the villages participate vigorously in community events, in so far as they serve their needs for entertainment – for example, they will dance along with the mobile discothèque processions of money trees – but they will also abuse alcohol, which often leads to quarrelling and fighting. Free sexual behavior has also become widespread, contributing to the spread of HIV. Searching for material wealth by whatever means is another new trend, which has motivated some Northern villagers to join the narcotics business, which is spreading from the Thai-Burma border. All of these changes transform the selves of some people in the local world – especially the young – into new ones, which are likely to alienate them from their own past moral values.

As society is transformed, the fabric of community life that traditionally supported the role and practice of local healers is becoming unraveled. According to the local healers in
Chiang Mai, it used to be tradition that on local New Year event and at the start of Buddhist Lent many well wishers − most of them their present or past patients − would come to their house to pay their respects and bless them. This expression of gratitude was highly valued and crucial for local healers, who regarded the practice of their art as a moral obligation and did not expect any material gain in return. Today things have changed; on such occasions, fewer patients visit healers to pay their respects.

Mo Boon reasons that the advent of modern medicine has introduced a relationship between doctors and patients that is based on fees for their services, and this has significantly contributed to changes in local values. Most people think that they only have to pay money in exchange for a medical or healing service. No longer are they concerned with the traditional relationships between healer and patient. Local healers and their families find themselves in disarray amidst this change, which has profoundly shaken their beliefs and practices. Consequently, some healers have failed to hold to the moral values of a good healer. Others have turned their practices into a business or have tried to compete with modern medicine by adopting the use of modern equipment. Under the threat of punishment through the laws governing traditional medicines, many have chosen not to continue their practices at all, and they do not pass on their knowledge to their children.

Amidst the changes in cultural meanings and social experience in the local world, it is for Mo Boon a great challenge to live a moral life in line with the moral values passed down from his ancestors. He desperately wants to maintain the things that he thinks really matter, but he also has to take his family life into account. On the one hand, he knows that his sons must have a better education than he himself received. This means that aside from supporting his family, he has to earn enough money to pay their many educational related expenses. On the other hand, he has to keep living up to the traditional ideal of a local healer, who observes moral values oriented towards merit making.

Mo Boon applies at least four strategies to reconcile his morally grounded healing practices with the material needs of his family. These strategies represent his subjectivity in dealing with the changing local world.

First, he casts around for donations from people and organizations beyond his community. This is not too difficult for him since HIV and AIDS and traditional medicine have become prominent issues in Thailand, and his activities have received local and national publicity through books, radio, and television programs.

Second, Mo Boon places an emphasis on transparency in the healing center’s financial management. To build trust among the villagers for this endeavor, the center’s finances are overseen by a committee of advisers. An account of the donations and expenses, including all the receipts, is kept and is always ready for inspection. Moreover, the donations are differentiated according to their sources, so that the money can be spent according to the purposes intended by the respective donors. For example, donations from villagers go to the building of structures such as the shrine hall, shelters for patients, toilets, or maintaining the water supply, whereas a grant he received from the Department of Disease Control was spent only on organizing activities to empower persons with HIV/AIDS, such as occupational
training.

Third, Mo Boon informs his patients that his medicines are prepared from plant materials purchased from stores in the city and that they therefore have to share the costs. Despite this, the prices of his medicines are both reasonable and lower than those of other healers; for example, a powdered herbal medicine of 40 grams to be taken for one week costs a patient only 20 baht (around 50 euro cents), and a full medicine set comprising five medicines against HIV/AIDS costs around 12 euro a month. With patients who can afford to pay the full price, Mo Boon says that their money helps to cover the costs of medicines that he dispenses to poorer patients at a lower price or free of charge. Some patients write him letters asking for medicines, and in some cases he sends them free of charge. Mo Boon considers this act of giving access to medicines a way of making merit. Furthermore, by channeling help from well off patients to poorer ones, he lets these patients share the merit with him.

Fourth, Mo Boon supports his livelihood not by what he earns from healing but through the income he receives from his other activities. For example, he has a longan orchard business, and he makes money through the sale of powdered herbal materials from a tuberous root, a kind of \textit{Pueraria candollei},\footnote{\textit{Pueraria candollei} is a phyto-estrogen containing plant with great commercial potential, found mostly in the northern and north-eastern regions of Thailand. The name used in Thailand is \textit{kwao khruea khaw}. Its scientific name is \textit{Pueraria candollei} Graham & Benth. var. \textit{mirifica} (Airy Shaw & Suvatabundhu) Niyomdham.} to his former HIV positive patients, who use it as a growth hormone for chickens. He also sells traditional medicines to a Thai traditional practitioner in Bangkok, who in turn sells the products to his clients. Through these arrangements, Mo Boon does not have to live under financial pressure.

With these four strategies, Mo Boon has been able to continue practicing according to the local moral vision characteristic of the healing tradition, while living in the modern world. The strategies have worked well in maintaining his moral conduct and reputation in the village context. However, they were not effective when he got involved in a project embedded in a context transcending the local one, and on which he had no grip. I will describe this in the next section.

**Maneuvering in a situation of moral breakdown**

In what follows, I will explore the moral experience of Mo Boon during a difficult period, and through analysis of this situation I will try to interpret what really matters to him in his healing tradition.

**Mo Boon and the minivan**

At the beginning of my fieldwork, I was asked by the coordinator of the Northnet Foundation to help figure out the problem that had been troubling Mo Boon for over a year. It was related to a project funded by an international agency, which was supposed to provide him with funds for a minivan that he could use for multiple purposes: giving rides to potentially HIV positive people to visit a hospital for blood testing; transporting medicinal plant seedlings...
to be distributed for cultivation; conducting educational and nutritional programs; arranging emergency hospital visits for community residents; and making house calls. The rest of the funds would be used for training activities in four districts and for the provision of free lunches and token pocket money for orphans.

At first glance one might wonder why a project that promised such good things turned out to trouble Mo Boon so deeply. To find out what really happened, I spent a week talking with Mo Boon at his healing center, going through all the relevant evidence, and finally checking the project’s own bank account. Piecing together all the information, the following is what I believe happened to the project.

The project started in 2004 when the 15th International AIDS Conference was held in Bangkok. Mo Boon’s attendance was sponsored. At the conference, he was persuaded to participate in the ‘Mo Boon Project,’ which was initiated and run by a team of foreigners. When Mo Boon was first approached for his participation in the project, he was told of the plan to raise funds to construct a three story building on a three rai (1.18 acre) plot to serve as a community health center, which would provide care for people affected by HIV and AIDS. However, in the aftermath of the tsunami disaster in December 2004, most of the funds, as he was told, were diverted to provide relief for tsunami victims. Consequently, the funds reserved for the project were sharply cut, and the amount made available was just enough for the purchase of a minivan and the support of a few other activities.

To announce the funding of the project, a ceremony was arranged at a restaurant in Chiang Mai. It was attended by witnesses from a local charity organization, as well as Mo Boon and his wife, who were to play the key roles in the meeting. The declared purpose of the project was to assist Mo Boon, his HIV positive patients, as well as orphans whose parents had died from AIDS.

Illustration 16. The minivan at the healing center

The vehicle was properly registered under the Northnet Foundation, but it was agreed that the minivan would be transferred to the project when the project was registered as a foundation. The minivan was handed over to Mo Boon’s healing center in April 2006. Subsequently, the activities covering four districts commenced. After a short time, conflicts
between Mo Boon and the project’s translator began to surface, arising from the former’s suspicion of the latter’s misconduct in handling the project’s funds. According to Mo Boon, the project had overpaid for the second hand minivan, which had been procured from Bangkok by the translator herself and her boyfriend. Any mistrust that Mo Boon and his patients already had of the translator was deepened when she kept hold of the money that the villagers had donated for the construction of the center. She wanted to expand the project’s activities to five other districts where none of Mo Boon’s patients resided. When she forced the idea upon him, Mo Boon felt that it was the last straw and he stopped working with her altogether.

The clash was soon followed by the withdrawal of the minivan. After only nine months in community service under Mo Boon’s direction, the vehicle was taken from the healing center on January 31st 2007 with no clear explanation except that it needed repairs. From this time until when I met Mo Boon in 2008, he had heard nothing about the minivan and had received no funding at all for his activities.

Northnet was also unaware of what had happened to the minivan, either its whereabouts or for what purpose it was now being used. To make an enquiry into this, on March 15th 2008, the president of Northnet, Mo Boon, and myself paid a visit to the local project coordinator’s house in Chiang Mai. To find a solution acceptable to both parties, the Northnet president tactfully suggested that the coordinator would only be able to take control of the minivan if he obtained a letter from the funding agency stating that they approved the changes in the terms and conditions of its use, as stated in the agreement.

Following another meeting at the office of the Northnet Foundation on April 18th 2008, the local project coordinator returned the vehicle to Mo Boon. In addition, Mo Boon was told that he would receive further funds for his activities, totaling 50,000 baht (approximately 1,250 euro), to be paid in installments.

Not long after Mo Boon got the minivan back, he was informed verbally and by email by the local project coordinator that the funding agency had agreed to transfer ownership of the minivan to another foundation in Chiang Mai (which I shall refer to hereafter as the Feast Foundation). Since the vehicle was returned to his care in May 2008, I noticed a calmness in Mo Boon; he looked as if he had broken with his worries about it. Even the possibility of losing the minivan once again did not seem to upset him. I asked what he would think if the minivan would have to be handed over to the Feast Foundation. He replied that if that was the donor’s wish, he would accept it. Eventually, Mo Boon did have to hand over the minivan to the Feast Foundation in early 2009.

**Sensitivity to social recognition**

Why was Mo Boon so troubled the first time the minivan was taken away from him? And why did he want to get the vehicle back to the center so badly? I tried many times to get an answer to these questions. Although Mo Boon admitted that he had lost face in the incident, to me this did not suffice to provide an in depth understanding of the case. Once I suggested to Mo Boon that it may not be worth the fight to get back the minivan, pointing out that even if he succeeded, it would become a burden for him after the completion of the project because
he would have to spend his own money to have it serviced and repaired. But he could not be swayed. By examining his life story, I came to understand the reasoning behind Mo Boon’s reaction to the lost minivan, and what the vehicle signified to his family.

First, for Mo Boon, his family, and neighbors, receiving the minivan represented the recognition he gained from society as a good healer. Receiving funding from an international agency, which was socially recognized, was an event that reconstituted the social recognition which for long had been denied his healing tradition. It was also a way to prove that his dedication for nearly two decades to healing people with the spirit and tradition of Northern local healers was recognized, not only at the provincial or national level but also at the international level. The sudden loss of the minivan without a clear explanation therefore troubled him, since the event might symbolize that his social recognition was in danger.

Second, for Mo Boon and his family, the struggle to get the minivan back metaphorically represented a fight with a devil, one which impeded his good deeds. The minivan incident was the second time in his life that he faced a crisis that would test his mettle. The first time had occurred seventeen years earlier, when his decision to help HIV/AIDS patients drew the wrath of an influential woman in his village, who attacked the idea. Their meeting at this woman’s house became confrontational, but Mo Boon did not return the abuse. With the support of his father, whose words of wisdom – ‘To make great merit, one has to confront mara (a devil)’ – gave him courage, Mo Boon ignored the woman’s taunts and went ahead with his plan. He was vindicated when he showed that his healing could help HIV/AIDS patients, and the project began to receive support and contributions from local communities, local and national health authorities, as well as NGOs. His healing center received visitors from HIV self-help groups, and domestic and international public health agencies, who came to learn from its experience.

The mara (devil) which Mo Boon was facing in his second crisis was more formidable, and he could not solve the problem on his own as he was used to. He had no channels through which to make his predicament known to the local or international project coordinator or the funding agency, since all were English speaking foreigners. When he approached the agency’s local partner based in Chiang Mai for advice, they told him that the conflict was based on personal infighting and that it would be a discredit to Thailand if he aired his complaints to the funding agency. What he eventually did was to explain to everyone – the villagers, his patients, his colleagues, elderly people at the temple, a district chief, and even a few merchants that he knew in the city – about what had happened to the Mo Boon Project and the minivan. He told them that he had been a victim of the manipulations of the project’s translator, and that he needed somebody to help him uphold his right to reclaim the minivan.6

6 The question may be raised as to why I am sure that the translator was a tricky person. Some proof to support this allegation is the copy of the project’s bank account that Mo Boon received from her upon his request. What she produced was in fact her personal account, which had nothing to do with the project. It would seem that the woman did not want Mo Boon to have a look at the project’s financial standing. Another piece of evidence was the notification that the bank gave when Mo Boon and I went to there to ask for the project’s bank statement. It appeared that all the money deposited in the account had been withdrawn without Mo Boon’s knowledge.
With my help and Northnet’s support, Mo Boon felt emboldened in his moral right, since my status as a researcher from elsewhere and Northnet’s reputation as a non-profit organization would be seen as independent and free of personal interest. Ultimately, the return of the minivan would be a vindication of his belief that in the struggle between good and mara, the former always comes out on top.

Third, Mo Boon always had the hope that he would pass on his healing knowledge to his two sons so that they could become healers themselves and continue the tradition of his family. He realized that the daily experience in a contemporary healing center alone was not enough to inspire his sons. This thought resulted from what he had learned from his own experience, since he only came to appreciate his father’s work when he succeeded in helping someone to survive in his struggle with AIDS. This feeling was difficult to explain to those who had never experienced it themselves. To become a good healer, it is therefore necessary for someone to have such an experience himself. The convenience of transport and financial support provided by the project afforded Mo Boon an opportunity to create this form of apprenticeship for his sons. It was part of the process for them to absorb experiences through witnessing the suffering of the patients and observing the treatment given by their father. By these means, he wished to cultivate the desire in his sons to help and care for those who suffer.

Fourth, the minivan made the extension of the new role of Mo Boon as a local healer possible. The minivan’s arrival came at a critical juncture. In 2004, the move to provide universal access to antiretroviral therapy (ART) in Thailand threatened to diminish the role of local healing in treating the disease, particularly since users of local healing had to pay for the traditional drugs, whereas ARVs were distributed for free by the hospitals. Consequently, Mo Boon and other local healers saw the number of their patients dwindle. What concerned Mo Boon was not only the loss of his patients but the weakening of the prestige of his calling in the eyes of his sons. Therefore, under the Mo Boon Project, he wished to expand his role by making house calls, giving training to people with HIV, and so on. This was his way to cope with the new challenge, and for this the minivan was essential.

To summarize, the Mo Boon Project started with the creation of the expectation among Mo Boon and his family that Mo Boon’s healing activities could be more actively expanded, with the funding support and acknowledgment of an international organization. But it turned out to be a total disappointment. All that had been promised by the project vanished: the minivan – the evidence of material support – was taken away and the financial support was withdrawn. Instead of strengthening his capabilities and performance, it merely discouraged and troubled him.

It may be concluded that this sensitivity to social recognition, which has gradually developed among local healers and their families during the past half century, is their response towards the changing local world, which tends to threaten the local healing tradition. For Mo Boon and his family, the situation worsened when people from outside led them to expect that their healing tradition would be widely recognized due to its effectiveness, but instead they were cheated and exploited by persons whom they were unable to fight using their own
The significance of the local moral world for the healing process

means. It was a time in which Mo Boon felt a lack of power to control the situation, and in which he risked losing career prestige and facing defeat by devils. This circumstance can be further clarified using the notion of moral breakdown.

**Analysis of Mo boon’s coping with moral breakdown**

When Mo Boon decided to engage in the Mo Boon Project, he did not prepare himself for the adversity it would generate, even though Mo Somsak, his friend and fellow healer, warned him that getting something so easily may entail big trouble. Mo Boon, who had always succeeded in his healing career, was rather confident that everything would go well due to his good intentions and the protection of his accumulated merit.

Mo Boon came to experience that his optimistic view had brought him into a difficult situation. When he was engaged in the project, he found himself in an unfamiliar world in which he was unable to control its course, since it was administered by outsiders who did not share his values and those of the majority of villagers. He was abused, his words distorted, and his beliefs treated with total disregard. The translator, who allegedly abused the project’s funds and villagers’ donations for her own benefit, apparently looked down on the villagers and had no regard for the values of merit making that were central to Mo Boon and the villagers’ beliefs. Even though I explain above how many local beliefs are changing, particularly among youth, most villagers nevertheless hold on to their local values.

To respond to the situation of moral breakdown in which he found himself, Mo Boon dissociated himself from the Mo Boon Project – the unfamiliar world – and returned to his familiar local world to reflect on what was morally at stake for him. The stress caused by the breakdown made him retreat into his familiar local world and search for ways, based on his own moral beliefs, to legitimize his actions in dealing with the unfamiliar world.

The next step was the process of negotiation. With the support of Northnet and myself, Mo Boon was able to learn what had really happened. He was able to understand the values that he was encountering, and we could indicate the illegitimate actions of the project and find a strategy to negotiate with the project coordinator. It was clear that the conditions set for the use of the minivan in the agreement had not been broken by Mo Boon. Furthermore, Northnet was still its registered owner and Mo Boon needed it for his activities. These facts were sufficient for Mo Boon to negotiate and secure the return of the vehicle to his healing center, plus receive some funds to continue his house calls. Mo Boon thus felt vindicated and could continue with his everyday life, falling back on his previously held moral dispositions.

The risk of losing social recognition led Mo Boon to seek support from the members of his community, and to communicate openly with them about what had happened and the strategies he would follow to cope with the situation. In the end, Mo Boon survived his moral struggle unharmed in terms of his social recognition.

Mo Boon realized that he lacked the capacity to deal with the complexity of the modern world alone, and thus accepted assistance from others to deal with this complexity. He also learned a few lessons, for example that dealing with persons who have very different moral beliefs is sometimes not possible. When Mo Boon had to return the minivan at the end of
the project under the order of the funding agency, it went beyond his understanding why the values and meanings attached to ‘donation’ in the eyes of the funding agency were so different from those of his local community. Nevertheless, he complied with the agency’s decision without complaint.

One may ask why, this second time around, he did not find these differences in values as distressing as he did the first time he lost the minivan. A possible explanation is that the value attached to a donation – the value of the intention to help others – is a value that he and the local community shared with the funding agency. This common value meant that in the first episode of the minivan story, Mo Boon, his family, and the villagers had no reason to doubt the appropriateness of accepting the minivan from an unknown agency. This shared value also supported Mo Boon in his full acceptance of the eventual change in ownership of the minivan and its utilization to the advantage of other villagers. For that reason, he could without hesitation convincingly explain to the villagers that he would continue to practice without the minivan. ⁷

Conclusion

I have described the local world of one particular healer, his family, patients, and neighbors as a social world that is filled with a culturally constructed reality in which they all engage together in their everyday lives and in the context of healing processes. This reality consists in part of a cosmology in which beliefs in spirits, Brahmanism, and Buddhism are fused. The various cosmological entities guide healers such as Mo Boon and villagers in terms of how to properly relate to them and how to relate to one another in a morally justified way.

As I have frequently stressed, a moral code that is oriented towards merit making provides social space for a healer to practice healing for the benefit of patients rather than for material gain. This space can be seen as one where the local moral discourse of amassing merit and the macro forces that promote the quest for material wealth accumulation are in contestation. In this context, a healer has to organize his moral life carefully, engaging in strategies that are compatible with the material needs of his family, while still maintaining a healing practice based on the morality of the healing tradition on which his practice is founded.

⁷ After April 2009, the minivan was transferred to the Feast Foundation, and the license of ownership of the van was supposed to be transferred from the president of the Northnet Foundation to the Feast Foundation. For a long time I heard nothing more about it. However, in February 2011, the coordinator of Northnet told me that he had received a letter from the Highway Police Division informing him that the foundation had to pay a 400 baht (around 10 euro) fine, since someone driving the minivan had violated traffic laws by speeding. This event alerted us to the fact that the Feast Foundation had not transferred the ownership of the van as promised. Northnet then urged them to arrange it as soon as possible to prevent the same or bigger problems in the future. However, the Feast Foundation ignored the request. Finally, Northnet decided to notify the incident to the local police, officially blocked use of the vehicle, and informed the Feast Foundation to return the minivan. Now the minivan is under the care of Northnet and is being utilized for the activities of the Institute of Lanna Wisdom for Health, an organization set up by a group of social workers and local healers in Northern Thailand, of which Mo Boon is an active committee member.
The social engagement of the healer with the local world is not confined to contesting and negotiating all sorts of actions, however; it also includes encountered threats. My findings show that moral dilemmas easily emerge in difficult times. I have illustrated this by presenting the story of Mo Boon’s troubles with the minivan. Mo Boon encountered trouble when he became engaged in an unfamiliar world in which the dominant values were incompatible with his own. To emerge from this moral breakdown, he had to dissociate himself from that world and return to his familiar local world. To avoid the loss of social recognition and prestige as a healer and to legitimize his actions, negotiations were necessary to help him deal appropriately with the ethical dilemma he was confronted with. His final responses were aimed at maintaining the local morality inherent in the healing tradition that grounded his work as a healer. The manifestation of this local morality in its facilitation of the effectiveness of healing will be described in the following chapter.