

# **Forest Path**

**Talks, essays, poems, drawings and photographs  
from the community at Wat Pah Nanachat**

**For Free Distribution**

*Sabbadānaṃ dhammadānaṃ jināti*

The gift of the Dhamma surpasses all other gifts.

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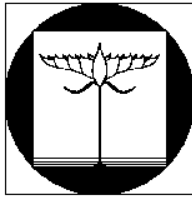


## Dedication

In commemoration of Wat Pa Nanachat's twenty-fifth vassa,  
we offer this publication as a dedication to  
Luang Por Cha

and to the first abbot of Wat Pa Nanachat,  
Luang Por Sumedho.

No them, no this.



### **Abbots of Wat Pa Nanachat**

Ajahn Sumedho	2518–2520 (1975–77)
Ajahn Pabhākaro	2520–2522 (1977–79)
Ajahn Jagaro	2522–2526 (1979–82)
Ajahn Passano	2526–2539 (1982–96)
Ajahn Jayasāro (Acting Abbot)	2539– (1996– )

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Luang Por  
You were a fountain  
of cool stream water  
in the square of a dusty town,  
and you were the source of that stream  
on a high unseen peak.  
You were, Luang Por, that mountain itself,  
unmoved  
but variously seen.



Luang Por, you were never one person,  
you were  
always the same.  
You were the child laughing  
at the Emperor's new clothes, and ours.  
You were a demand to be awake,  
the mirror of our faults, ruthlessly kind.  
Luang Por, you were the essence of our texts,  
the leader of our practice,  
the proof of its results.  
You were a blazing bonfire  
on a windy bone-chilled night,  
how we miss you!  
Luang Por, you were the sturdy stone bridge  
we had dreamed of.  
You were  
as at ease  
in the present  
as if it were your own ancestral land.  
Luang Por, you were  
the bright full moon  
that we sometimes obscured with clouds.  
You were as kind as only you could be.  
You were hard as granite,  
as tough as nails,  
as soft as butter  
and as sharp as a razor.  
Luang Por, you were a freshly dripping lotus  
in a world of plastic flowers.  
Not once did you lead us astray.  
You were a lighthouse for our flimsy rafts  
on the heaving sea.

Luang Por,  
you are beyond my words of praise and all description.  
Humbly I place my head  
beneath your feet.

*Buang*



## Preface

WAT PA NANACHAT has published many books over the years — in English and in Thai — but never a newsletter. This year we decided to mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of a conservative wat by breaking with tradition. So many people contributed to the project however, and with such enthusiasm, that a *sambhavesi*<sup>1</sup> newsletter finally entered the world of print as this 250 page book.

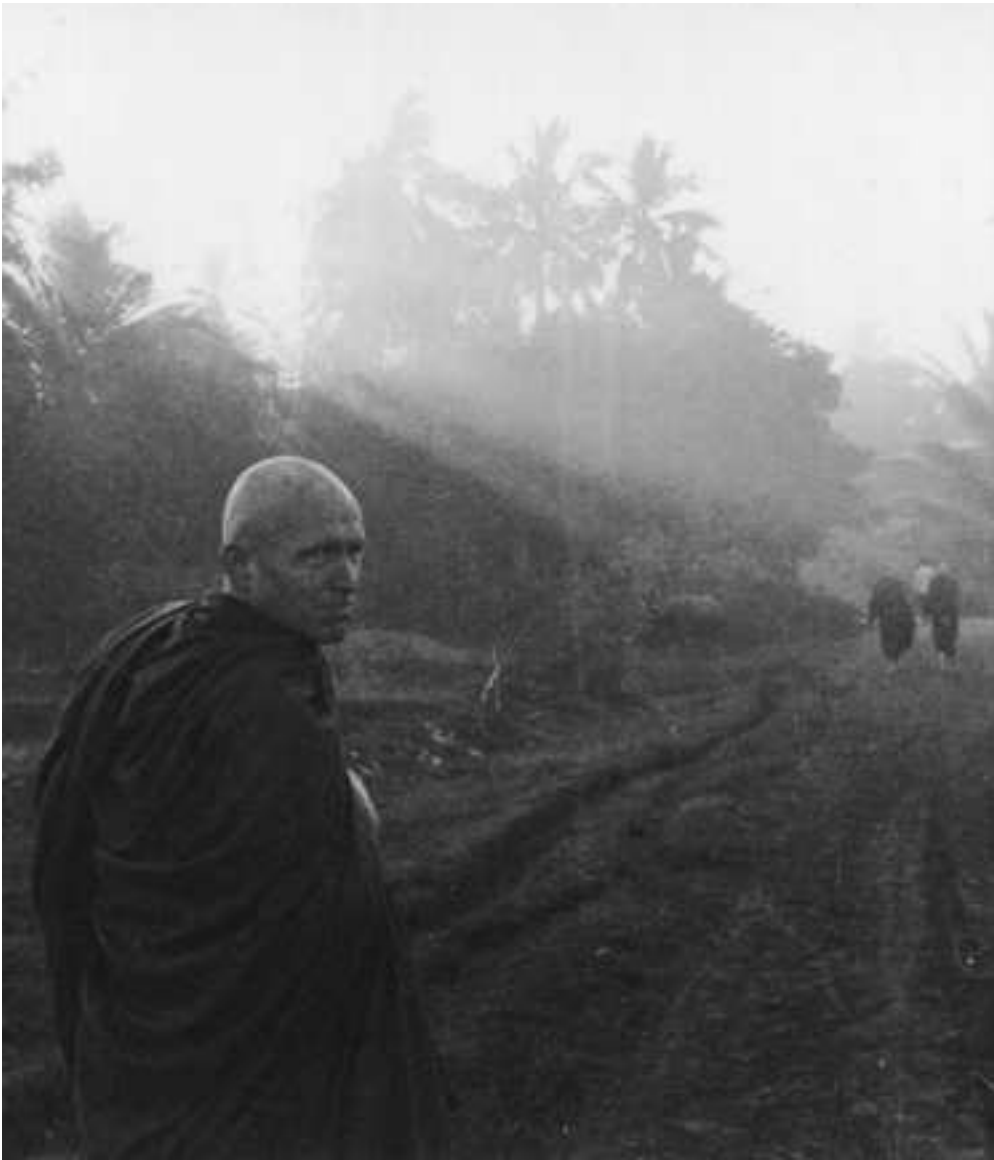
Rather than giving a historical review of the last twenty-five years, the following pages provide more of a present-moment snapshot of Wat Pa Nanachat. The articles come from a broad cross-section of the community from the abbot to the most newly ordained novice. The book opens with excerpts from two chapters of ‘Water Still, Water Flowing’, Ajan Jayasāro’s forthcoming comprehensive biography of Ajan Cha’s life and teaching. The other pieces are by senior *theras*, *majjhima* and *nāvaka* monks, novices and two lay supporters. To give a visual impression of monastic life, the book also contains a number of photographs and a selection of illustrations by Ajan Abhiñāṇo.

Few of our monastic community have much, if any, formal writing experience. For many this book represents the first time that anything they have written has appeared in print. We have taken heart from the words of the great Japanese monk, Dogen:

“Just write what is in your heart.  
You contribute to Buddhism if the truths are there.”

We also would like to express our gratitude to all the people who have contributed to this publication. We are indebted to the various monks and lay supporters who contributed skills in typing, formatting and editing, as well as helping in other often invisible ways; without their many hours of work the book never would have been completed. The Saṅgha would also like to express their appreciation for the generosity of all those lay supporters of the wat who offered funds for the book to be freely distributed. *Anumodanā.*

1 See Glossary at the end of the book.  
Pāli and Thai words are italicized on first occurrence.



# Twain Shall Meet

Ajan Jayasāro

## Introduction

FROM THE MID-FOURTEENTH century until its sack by the Burmese in 2310 (1767), Ayudhya was the capital of the Thai nation. Established on an island in the Jow Phya River it was ideally situated to act as an entrepot port at a time when land routes were safer than sea, and merchants in the Orient sought to avoid the Straits of Malacca. Within two hundred years Ayudhya had become one of the most thriving cosmopolitan cities in Asia. Its population at a million exceeded that of London. Around five hundred temples, many with pagodas covered in gold leaf, lent the city a magical, heaven-like aura that dazzled visiting traders. By the mid-seventeenth century the inhabitants of Ayudhya were accustomed to the sight of *farang*<sup>2</sup>. Communities of traders from France, Holland, Portugal and England were housed outside the city wall. The kings of Ayudhya often employed foreign mercenaries as bodyguards. To the Thais these strange white beings seemed like a species of ogre: hairy, ill-smelling, quarrelsome and coarse; lovers of meat and strong spirits, but possessors of admirable technical skills, particularly in the arts of war.

The ogres had a religion — priests and monks accompanied them but it was unappealing to the Thais who were content with their own traditions. Having long equated spirituality with renunciation of sensual pleasures they perceived the Western religious to live luxurious lives. They found the way the missionaries slandered each other in their competition for converts undignified; they saw little agreement between their actions and words. The Ayudhyan Thais gently rebuffed what they saw as an alien faith with politeness and smiles. But the legendary Siamese tolerance was stretched to the limit during the reign of King Narai (1656–88), when a Greek adventurer, Constantine Faulkon, became Mahatthai, minister for trade and foreign affairs, second in influence to the king himself.

2 Derived from 'Frank' or 'French', the first Westerners known to the Thais.

After his conversion to Catholicism Faulkon became involved with the French in plots to put a Christian prince on the throne, and thus win the whole country for God and Louis XIV. At the old king's death in 1688, however, conservative forces prevailed, French hopes were dashed and Faulkon was executed. For the next 150 years the Siamese looked on Westerners with fear, aversion and suspicion.

But as French and British power and prestige spread throughout the region in the nineteenth century, the image of the Westerner changed. He came to represent authority and modernity, the new world order that had to be accommodated. As all the rest of the region fell into European hands, Siam's independence became increasingly fragile. King Mongkut (1851–68) reversed policies of previous monarchs and cultivated friendships with Western scholars and missionaries. He believed that the only way for a small country to survive in the colonial era was to earn the respect of the Western powers by becoming like them. He introduced Western styles of dress and uniform. He predicted eclipses by scientific means, undermining the hitherto unshakeable prestige of the astrologers. He sought to reform popular Buddhism along more rational 'scientific' lines to protect it from the missionaries' disdain. After King Mongkut's death, his son, King Chulalongkorn sought to create a modern centralized state and administration, relying heavily on Western expertise. Members of the royal family and aristocracy were sent to study in the West, particularly England. The humiliation inflicted upon the Thais by the French annexation of their eastern territories confirmed the superiority of the West in things worldly.

By the time that Ajan Cha reached manhood Western culture had already attained its pre-eminent position. Amongst the wealthy elite, expensive imported clothes, motor vehicles, gadgets and foods were the sought-after status symbols. The absolute monarchy was overthrown in 1932 in favour of a Western style democracy that was soon displaced by a more potent import: military dictatorship. Fascism was the new vogue — far more appealing to the military men running the country than the messiness of political debate, far more accommodating to the Thai penchant for uniforms. Field Marshall Pibulsongkram passed laws making it compulsory for men to wear hats and kiss their wives on the cheek before leaving for work in the

morning. The country's name was changed to Thailand. Chauvinism was promoted in the guise of patriotism. The marginalization of Buddhist goals and ideals, coupled with official support for Buddhist forms and rituals, became a feature of future development.

In the hamlets of Ubon, images of the West came from Hollywood. Travelling movie companies set up their screens and loud speakers in village wats; Clark Gable and Greta Garbo enchanted their audiences in homely Lao, dubbed live from behind the screen. Thus, the first flesh-and-blood glimpse of farangs in Ubon, exciting though it was, came as a shock. While the newly-ordained Ajan Cha was studying in local village monasteries, a group of gaunt ragged P.O.W.s, was gaoled in the centre of town. They were prisoners of the occupying Japanese forces, hostages against allied bombing raids. The local people smuggled them bananas.

Then in the nineteen sixties came the Vietnam war. Ubon, closer to Hanoi than to Bangkok, attained a strategic importance once more. By the end of the decade twenty thousand young Americans were stationed on a sprawling airbase to the north of the town. Huge uniformed men, black, brown and white, strode along the streets hand-in-hand with mini-skirted prostitutes, caroused in tacky nightclubs with names like 'Playboy', took their minds on vacation with 'Buddha sticks'. Overhead, every few minutes, came the deafening sound of F4 fighters and heavily-laden bombers taking off on missions over Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam.

American military personnel were not, however, the only young Westerners in Thailand at that time. It was during this period that villagers working in the fields to the east of Wat Pa Phong became used to a strange new sight. Tall, fair-skinned young men with long hair, T-shirt and faded blue jeans would often be seen walking along the ox-track with a dogged diffident stride, large grubby backpack like a malignant growth behind them. These young men were the first trickles of the steady stream of Westerners that was to find its way to Ajan Cha. They were to become the senior members of a Western Saṅgha that now numbers around a hundred bhikkhus and nuns.

### More than words

“Luang Por, only a few of your Western disciples speak Thai and you can’t speak their language. How do you teach them?” This was one of the most common questions that Ajan Cha faced from the early seventies onwards as the number of his Western disciples rapidly increased. He would explain that he was teaching Buddhism not as a philosophy but as a way of liberation; pointing directly to the experience of suffering and its cause was more important than finding words to describe the process. Sometimes, to clarify this point, he would pour from the thermos flask on the table beside him into a cup:

“In Thai we call this *nam rawn*, in Lao it is *nam hawn* and in English they call it *hot water*. These are just names. If you dip your finger into it there is no language that can convey what that feels like; but, even so, people of all nationalities know it for themselves.”

On another occasion, a visitor seeing all the foreign bhikkhus, asked Ajan Cha whether he spoke English or French or German or Japanese, to which, in every case, Ajan Cha replied that no, he could not. The questioner looked confused: how did the foreign bhikkhus learn anything then? Ajan Cha replied, characteristically, with a question:

“At your home do you keep any animals? Have you got cats and dogs? Have you got any oxen or buffalo? Yes? Well can you speak Cat language? Can you speak Dog? Can you speak Buffalo? No? Then how do they know what you want them to do?”

He summarized:

“It’s not difficult. It’s like training water buffaloes. If you just keep tugging the rope, they soon catch on.”

To Thais, water buffaloes are the epitome of dullness and stupidity. Comparing a human being to a buffalo would normally be considered offensive; someone who calls anyone a *kwai* to their face is either very angry or is spoiling for a fight. Given the exaggerated respect for the intelligence of Westerners common in Thailand, Ajan Cha’s audience would always find the buffalo comparison hilarious.





The sight of the Western bhikkhus was a powerful one. At a time when Western technology, material advances, expertise were being so touted, here were to be found educated young men who had voluntarily renounced the things that people were being encouraged to aspire to; men who had chosen to live austere lives in the forest as bhikkhus: not understanding the language, eating coarse food, striving for peace and wisdom in the same way that Thai bhikkhus had been doing for hundreds of years. It was baffling, fascinating, and, above all else, inspiring. Many visitors would leave Wat Pa Phong thinking that perhaps there was more to Buddhism than they had thought. If the Westerners had so much faith in it, how could it be outdated?

Luang Por's basic technique was not, he insisted, particularly mysterious; he led his Western disciples, he showed them what to do, he was an example. It wasn't necessary to impart a great deal of information.

"Even though I have a lot of Western disciples living with me, I don't give them so much formal instruction. I lead them in the practice. If you do good, you get good results; if you do bad,

you get bad results. I give them the opportunity to see that. When they practise sincerely, they get good results and so they develop conviction in what they're doing. They don't just come here to read books. They really do the practice. They abandon whatever is bad in their hearts and goodness arises in its place."

The Westerners came to Buddhist teachings and monastic life without the cultural conditioning of the Thais. In one sense they had 'beginners mind'. Their open, questioning attitude Ajan Cha found refreshing and stimulating. As students they were free of the complacency that he considered such a serious obstacle for his Thai disciples. But their openness was not without drawbacks: the Westerners were often dragged into the quagmires of doubt. Whereas the Thai bhikkhus could usually give themselves to the training in a wholehearted way, fired by an unquestioning faith in the teacher and the tradition, the Westerners were often fettered by doubts. Ajan Cha said:

"Once you've got them to stop, these Westerners see clearly exactly how they've done it, but in the beginning it's a bit wearing on the teacher. Wherever they are, whoever they're with, they ask questions all the time. Well, why not, if they don't know the answers? They have to keep asking until they run out of questions, until there's nothing more to ask. Otherwise they'd just keep running — they're hot."

### **The first disciple — Ajan Sumedho**

In 1967 a Wat Pa Phong bhikkhu called Tan Sommai returned from a thudong trip to the north of Isan with an old friend who literally stood head and shoulders above him. Even the most restrained bhikkhus in Wat Pa Phong were unable to resist at least a surreptitious glance. The new bhikkhu was 6 foot 3 inches tall, had blonde hair, an angular nose and bright blue eyes. His name was Sumedho.

The two men had run into each other for the first time in Korea more than ten years before, dressed in the creased white uniforms of their nation's navies. And now a second time, by coincidence, dressed in the yellow robe of the bhikkhu, they had met in the meditation monastery on the banks of the Mekhong River, where Sumedho had

recently been ordained. They exchanged their stories. Sumedho told Sommai how he had returned to college after the Korean War and gained a Masters degree in Asian Studies from Berkeley. After graduation he had joined the Peace Corps and taught English in Borneo before moving on to a spell at Thammasat University in Bangkok; that it was after receiving meditation instruction at the nearby Wat Mahadhatu that his interest in Buddhism, born in Korea, had ripened into the decision to become a bhikkhu. Now, though, after some months of solitary meditation in a small hut, Sumedho was beginning to feel some frustration about the form of his monastic life, and was feeling the need for a more rounded way of practice. Tan Sommai's descriptions of Wat Pa Phong were opportune and inspired him. His preceptor kindly gave permission for him to leave and the two bhikkhus set off to walk down to Ubon, Sumedho feeling 'as if I was being pulled by a magnet'.

The attractive force held. Eventually Sumedho would stay for ten years, form the nucleus around which the Western community of bhikkhus would coalesce, establish Wat Pa Nanachat, before moving to England to begin at Chithurst in Southern England, the first of nine overseas branch monasteries.

Someone once asked Luang Por whether he had any special connection with Westerners that led to so many becoming his disciples. He replied that his acquaintance was restricted to cowboy movies he had watched before he ordained.

"It was *deja vu* — when I was a small child I went to see a cowboy movie with my friends and one of the characters was this big man smoking cigarettes. He was so tall it fascinated me. What kind of human being could have such a huge body? The image has stuck in my mind until now. And so a lot of Westerners have come. If you're talking about causes, there was that.

"When Sumedho arrived, he was just like the cowboy in the movie. What a long nose! As soon as I saw him, I thought to myself, "This bhikkhu is a Westerner", and I told him that I'd seen him before in a movie. So there were supporting causes and conditions. That's why I've come to have a lot of Western kith and kin. They come even though I can't speak English. I've

tried to train them to know the Dhamma as I see it. It doesn't matter that they don't know Thai customs. I don't make anything of it, that's the way things are. I just keep helping them out — that's the gist of it."

When Ajan Sumedho asked to be accepted as a student, Luang Por agreed but made one condition, that he fitted in with the Thai bhikkhus and didn't expect any special considerations.



“At the other monasteries in Thailand where I’d lived, the fact that I’d been a Westerner had meant that I could expect to have the best of everything. I could also get out of the work and other mundane things that the other bhikkhus were expected to do: ‘I’m busy meditating now. I don’t have time to sweep the floor. Let someone else sweep it. I’m a serious meditator’. But when I arrived at Wat Pa Phong and people said, ‘He’s an American; he can’t eat the kind of food we eat’. Luang Por said, ‘He’ll have to learn’. And when I didn’t like the meditation hut I was given and asked for another that I liked better, Luang Por said, ‘No’. The whole way of training was that you had to conform to the schedule. When I asked Luang Por if I could be excused from the long Dhamma talks, which I didn’t understand, he just laughed and said you have to do what everyone else does.”

Wat Pa Phong provided a very different monastic environment to the one Ajan Sumedho was familiar with. In his previous wat he had been living in solitude, sitting and walking at his hut, single-mindedly devoted to the development of a meditation technique. The only human contact of the day had been a daily interview with his teacher. It had been a beneficial period for him, but he had become unsure how sustainable such a kind of monastic life would be in the long term. What he felt he lacked was *Vinaya* training.

“At Wat Pa Phong the emphasis was on communal activities, working together, eating together, etc., with all its rules. I knew that if I was going to live as a bhikkhu I needed the bhikkhu’s training and I hadn’t been getting that at the meditation centre that I had been in before. What Luang Por gave me was a living situation to contemplate. You developed an awareness around the monastic tradition and it was something that I knew I needed. I needed restraint and containment. I was a very impulsive person with a tremendous resistance to any kind of authority. I had been in the navy for four years and had developed an aversion to authority and rank. And then before I went to Thailand I had spent a few years at Berkeley, California, where it was pretty much a case of ‘doing your own thing’. There was no sense of having to obey anybody, or live under a

discipline of any sort. But at Wat Pa Phong I had to live following a tradition that I did not always like or approve of, in a situation where I had no authority whatsoever. I had a strong sense of my own freedom and rights and asserting them, but I had no idea of serving anyone else: being a servant was like admitting you were somehow inferior. So I found monastic life very useful for developing a sense for serving and supporting the monastic community.

“What impressed me so much about Luang Por was that although he seemed such a free spirit, an ebullient character, at the same time he was very strict with the Vinaya. It was a fascinating contrast. In California the idea of freedom was being spontaneous and doing what you felt like; and the idea of moral restraint and discipline in my cultural background was like this big ogre that’s coming to squash you, with all these rules and traditions — you can’t do this and you can’t do that — and pressing down on you so much.

“So my immediate reaction in a strict monastery like Wat Pa Phong was to feel oppressed. And yet my feeling about Luang Por was that although his actions were always within the margins of the Vinaya, he was a free being. He wasn’t coming from ideas of doing what he liked but from inner freedom. So in contemplating him I began to look at the Vinaya so as to use it, not just to cut yourself off or to oppress yourself, but for freedom. It was like a conundrum: how do you take a restrictive and renunciant convention and liberate your mind through those conventions? I could see that there were no limits to Luang Por’s mind. Oftentimes attachment to rules makes you worry a lot and lack confidence, but Luang Por was radiant. He was obviously not just someone just keeping a lot of rules, anxious about his purity. He was a living example of the freedom that comes from practice.”

Ajan Sumedho was impressed and reassured by Ajan Cha’s inquiries about his meditation practice. Ajan Cha merely acknowledged the method Ajan Sumedho was using as valid with a grunt, and gave him permission to carry on with it if he found it useful. It did not seem to be a crucial issue. It was clear that what Ajan Cha was teaching was not confined to a particular meditation technique but

consisted of a comprehensive training, the creation of a context or environment in which any legitimate technique would bear fruit. This was exactly what Ajan Sumedho felt he needed.

“You have to find someone you resonate with. I’d been in other places and nothing had really clicked. I didn’t have a fixed idea of having a teacher either, I had a strong sense of independence. But with Luang Por I felt a very strong gut reaction. Something worked for me with him.

“The training at Wat Pa Phong was one of putting you in situations where you could reflect on your reactions, objections, etc.; so that you began to see the opinions, views and prejudices and attachments that come up naturally in those situations. Luang Por was always emphasizing the need to reflect on the way things are. That is what I found most helpful because when you’re as self-centred and opinionated as I was then, you really need to open your mind, and so I found Luang Por’s way much more clear and direct. As I was very suppressed already, I really needed a way of looking at myself honestly and clearly, rather than just trying to suppress my feelings and force my mind into more refined states. He was also very aware of the individual needs of the bhikkhus, so it wasn’t like there was a blanket technique. He realized that you really have to figure it out for yourself and so how I saw him, how he affected me, was that he seemed to provide a backdrop for my life from which I could reflect.”

Even with this kind of appreciation of the way of practice at Wat Pa Phong, Ajan Sumedho did not find it easy. Apart from the easily foreseen difficulties and frustrations he experienced with the language, culture, climate, diet and so on, he began, ironically, to harbour misgivings about the Vinaya. His personality had always been an idealistic one, he was drawn to the big picture, the unifying vision, and tended to get impatient with the nuts and bolts of everyday life. He felt a natural antipathy to the nit-picking and cavilling over trivial matters that seemed to him to characterize Vinaya instruction.

“Even when I could understand the language, the Vinaya readings were excruciatingly boring to listen to. You’d hear about

how a bhikkhu who has a rent in his robe so many inches above the hem must have it sewn up before dawn and I kept thinking, "This isn't what I ordained for!" I was caught up in these meticulous rules, trying to figure out whether the hole in my robe was four inches above the hem or not and whether I should have to sew it up before dawn. Bhikkhus would even become argumentative about the borders of sitting cloths! When it came to the pettiness of everyday life and of living with people of many different temperaments, problems and characters, whose minds were not necessarily as inspired as mine seemed to be at the time, I felt a great depression."

The Vinaya texts prescribe various duties to be performed towards a teacher by his students. One of them is to wash the teacher's feet on his return from almsround. At Wat Pa Phong as many as twenty or thirty bhikkhus would be waiting for Ajan Cha at the dining hall footbath, eager for the honour of cleaning the dirt from his feet or of having a hand on the towel that wiped them dry. At first Ajan Sumedho found the whole thing ridiculous. Every day he would begin to fume as bhikkhus started to make their way out to the footbath. It was the kind of ritual that made him feel alienated from the rest of the community. He would feel angry and critical.

"But then I started listening to myself and I thought, 'This is really an unpleasant frame of mind to be in. Is it anything to get so upset about? They haven't made me do it. It's all right; there's nothing wrong with thirty men washing one man's feet. It's not immoral or bad behaviour and maybe they enjoy it; maybe they want to do it — maybe it's all right to do that. Perhaps I should do it.' So the next morning thirty-one bhikkhus ran out and washed Luang Por's feet. There was no problem after that. It felt really good: that nasty thing in me had stopped."

Although the Buddha called praise and blame 'worldly dhammas', not even the most dedicated and unworldly spiritual seekers can avoid them. Throughout his early days at Wat Pa Phong, Ajan Sumedho received generous praise. In Buddhist cultures the voluntary renunciation of sensual pleasures for spiritual training is an esteemed virtue. The sacrifices Ajan Sumedho had made to become a bhikkhu inspired both his fellow monastics and the monastery's





lay supporters. In leaving America, and donning the yellow robe, not only had he given up a standard of living that Isan peasant farmers could only dream about, but he had done so in exchange for a life in one of the strictest and most austere forest wats in the country. The conservative Isan people—their sense of security and well-being so bound up with the maintenance of their traditions—were impressed at how well Ajan Sumedho could live in exile from the conditions he was used to, how readily he adapted to a new climate, language and (especially) diet. They were inspired at how diligent and dedicated he was in his practice. As the only Westerner he stood out and was a centre of attention wherever he went, second only to Ajan Cha himself.

On the other hand the Thais have a natural, apparently almost effortless physical grace and the monastic techniques of developing mindfulness by close attention to detail enhances it. For them to see Ajan Sumedho — physically intimidating and with an obvious zeal for the practice — at the same time, by their standards, so awkward and ungainly, confused them. In most it provoked a quiet but affectionate amusement; for some that amusement was soured with a hint of fear, jealousy and resentment. Ajan Sumedho, both a little paranoid at the attention and also enjoying it, could not help but feel self-conscious.

“They would ask, ‘How old are you?’ I’d say, ‘thirty-three’. And they’d say, ‘Really? We thought you were at least sixty.’ Then they would criticize the way I walked, and say, ‘You don’t walk right. You are not very mindful when you walk’. And I’d take this *yarm* and I’d just dump it down, without giving it any importance. And they’d say, ‘Put your bag down right. You take it like this, fold it over, and then you set it down beside you like that’. The way I ate, the way I walked, the way I talked — everything was criticized and made fun of; but something made me stay on and endure through it. I actually learnt

how to conform to a tradition and a discipline — and that took a number of years, really, because there was always strong resistance. But I began to understand the wisdom of the Vinaya and over the years, my equanimity grew.”

### Pushed

Ajan Cha’s attitude to Ajan Sumedho changed after a few years. Seeing his disciple’s growth in confidence and the praise he was receiving, he began to treat him more robustly. Ajan Sumedho remembers:

“For the first couple of years Luang Por would compliment me a lot, and boost up my ego, which I appreciated, because I tended to be self-disparaging, and to have this constant very positive attitude towards me was very helpful. Because I felt so respected and appreciated by him I put a lot of effort into the practice. After a few years it started to change, he saw I was stronger and he began to be more critical. Sometimes he would insult me and humiliate me in public — but by then I was able to reflect on it.

“There were times that Luang Por would tell the whole sālā—full of laypeople about things I’d done that were uncouth, like my clumsy attempts to eat with my hands. He would imitate me making a ball of sticky rice and then making a complete mess, pushing it into my mouth and nose. The whole sālā, bhikkhus and laypeople would be roaring with laughter. I’d just sit there feeling angry and embarrassed. One time a novice picked up my outer robe by mistake and gave it to him. Luang Por laughed and said he knew immediately whose it was because of the bad smell, ‘the farang stink’. When I heard Luang Por say that of course I felt pretty indignant; but I could endure it, and because of the respect I felt for him I didn’t show any reaction. He asked me if I was feeling all right and I said yes, but he could see that my ears were bright red.

“He had a wonderful sense of timing and so I could work with it, and I benefited from being able to observe my own emotional reactions to being insulted or humiliated. If he’d done that at the beginning I would never have stayed. There was no

real system that I could see; you just felt that he was just trying to help you — forcing you to look at your own emotional reactions — and I always trusted him. He had such a great sense of humour, there was always a twinkle in his eye, always a bit of mischief, and so I just went along with it.”

Many of Ajan Sumedho’s most potent memories of his early years at Wat Pa Phong are of occasions in which some dark cloud or other in his mind dissolved through a sudden insight into the desires and attachments that conditioned it. Ajan Cha’s genius as a teacher seemed to him to lie in creating the situations in which this process could take place — bringing a crisis to a head, or drawing his attention most skilfully to what was really going on in his mind. His faith in Ajan Cha made him open. A smile from his teacher or words of encouragement at the right time could make hours of frustration and irritation seem ridiculous and insubstantial; a sharp question or a rebuke could wake him up from a long bout of self-indulgence.

“He was a very practical man and so he was using the nitty-gritty of daily life for insight. He wasn’t so keen on using the special event or extreme practices as getting you to wake up in the ordinary flow of monastic life and he was very good at that. He knew that any convention can become perfunctory and deadening after a while if you just get used to it. He was aware of that so there was always this kind of sharpness that would startle and jolt you.”

In the early days anger was the major fuel of Ajan Sumedho’s suffering. He relates how exhausting the afternoon leaf-sweeping periods could be in the hot season. One day as he toiled in the sun, his body running with sweat, he remembers his mindfulness becoming consumed by aversion and self-righteousness: “I don’t want to do this. I came here to get enlightened, not to sweep leaves off the ground”. Just then Ajan Cha had approached him and said, “Where’s the suffering? Is Wat Pa Phong the suffering?”

“I suddenly realized something in me which was always complaining and criticizing and which was preventing me from ever giving myself or offering myself to any situation.

“Another time I had this really negative reaction to having to sit up and practise all through the night and I must have let it

show. After the evening chanting Luang Por reminded everyone that they should stay and meditate right through to dawn. "Except", he said, "for Sumedho, he can go and have a rest". He gave me a nice smile and I just felt so stupid. Of course, I stayed all night.



"There were so many moments when you were caught up in some kind of personal thing and he could sense that. He had the timing to reach you in that moment when you were just ripe so that you could suddenly realize your attachment. One night we were in the little *sālā*, where we did the *Pāṭimokkha* and his friend Ajan Chalooy came to visit. Usually, after the *Pāṭimokkha* was over we would go and have a hot drink and then join the laypeople in the main *sālā*. But on that night he

and Ajan Chalooy sat there telling jokes to each other for hours, and we had to sit there and listen. I couldn't understand what they were talking about and I got very irritated. I was waiting for him to tell us to go to the hall but he just carried on. He kept looking at me. Well I had a stubborn streak and I wasn't going to give up. I just got more and more angry and irritated. It got to about midnight and they were still going strong, laughing like schoolboys. I got very self righteous; they weren't even talking seriously about practice or Vinaya or anything! My mind kept saying, 'What a waste of time. They should know better'. I was full of my anger and resentment. He knew that I had this stubborn, tenacious streak and so he kept going until two in the morning, three in the morning. At that time I just gave up to the whole thing, let go of all the anger and resistance and felt a wave of bliss and relaxation; I felt all the pain had gone. I was in a state of bliss. I felt I'd be happy if he went on forever. He noticed that and told everyone we could leave."

### **Dhamma Talks**

Given Ajan Sumedho's celebrity, and his steadily growing proficiency in Thai, it was natural that Wat Pa Phong's lay supporters would be eager to hear him give a Dhamma talk. Four years after Ajan Sumedho's arrival, Ajan Cha decided that the time was ripe for his first Western disciple to begin a new kind of training: that of expressing the Dhamma in words.

One night, during a visit to another monastery, Ajan Cha caught Ajan Sumedho by surprise. With no prior warning, he asked him to talk to the lay supporters that had gathered in honour of their visit. The prospect of ascending the monastery's Dhamma seat and struggling to give an extempore address to a large audience in a language in which he was not particularly fluent, was overwhelming. Ajan Sumedho froze and declined as politely but firmly as he could. But strong in his trust in Ajan Cha and the realization that he was merely postponing the inevitable, he began to reconcile himself to the idea. When Ajan Cha 'invited' him to give a talk on the next Wan Phra, he acquiesced in silence. Ajan Sumedho was well aware of Ajan Cha's view that Dhamma talks should not be planned in advance but he

felt insecure. At the time he was reading a book on Buddhist cosmology and reflecting on the relationship between different realms of existence and psychological states. He made some notes for the coming talk.



Wan Phra soon came and Ajan Sumedho gave the talk. Although his vocabulary was still quite rudimentary and his accent shaky, it seemed to go down well. He felt relieved and proud of himself. Throughout the next day laypeople and bhikkhus came up to him to express their appreciation of a fine talk and he looked forward to basking in the sun of his teacher's praise. But on paying respects to Ajan Cha beneath his *kuti*, he met a stony frown. It sent a chill through his heart. In a quiet voice, Ajan Cha said, "Don't ever do that again". Ajan Sumedho realized that Ajan Cha knew that he had thought the talk out beforehand and that in his eyes, although it had been an intelligent, interesting and informative discourse, it was not

the Dhamma speaking, it was merely thoughts and cleverness. The fact that it was a 'good talk' was not the point.

In order to develop the right attitude in giving Dhamma talks a bhikkhu needs a thick skin. One night Ajan Cha told Ajan Sumedho to talk for three hours. After about an hour Ajan Sumedho had exhausted his initial subject and then began to ramble about, hunting for things to talk about. He paused, repeated himself and embarked on long meandering asides. He watched as members of his audience, got bored and restless, dozed, walked out. Just a few dedicated old ladies sat there throughout — eyes closed — like gnarled trees on a blasted plain. Ajan Sumedho reflected after it was all over:

“It was a valuable experience for me. I began to realize that what Luang Por wanted me to do was to be able to look at this self-consciousness, the posing, the pride, the conceit, the grumbling, the laziness, the not-wanting-to-be-bothered, the wanting to please, the wanting to entertain, the wanting to get approval.”

Ajan Sumedho was the only Western bhikkhu at Wat Pa Phong for four years before, in 1971, two more American bhikkhus arrived to spend the Rains Retreat. One of them, Dr. Douglas Burns, was a psychologist based in Bangkok who intended to be a monk for the duration of the retreat; the other was Jack Kornfield, (Phra Suñño) who after practising in monasteries throughout Thailand and Burma, was to return to laylife and become one of the most influential teachers in the American *Vipassanā* movement. Neither bhikkhu stayed at Wat Pa Phong very long but both exerted a strong influence on future developments. At the end of his short period in the robes, Dr Burns returned to Bangkok where he would recommend any Westerners interested in ordaining to go to live with Ajan Cha. A number of the first generation of bhikkhus came to Ubon after such a referral. In the months that Jack Kornfield was with Ajan Cha he made assiduous notes of the teachings that he received and later printed them as the extremely popular *Fragments of a teaching and Notes from a Session of Questions and Answers*. Subsequently, as Kornfield's own reputation spread in America, his frequent references to Ajan Cha, introduced him to a Western audience. This acquaintance was strengthened by *Still Forest Pool*, a collection of Ajan

Cha's teaching which Kornfield coauthored with Paul Breiter, another ex-bhikkhu (formerly Venerable Varapañño).

Ajan Cha's charisma and his ability to move and inspire his Western disciples soon became well known. But if Ajan Cha was the main reason why Wat Pa Phong became the most popular Thai forest monastery for Westerners seeking to make a long-term commitment to monastic life, Ajan Sumedho's presence may often have been a deciding factor. Here was someone who had proved it could be done, who had lived a number of years in austere conditions with no other Western companions, and had obviously gained much from the practice. He was both a translator, elder brother and, more and more, although he resisted the evolution, a teacher in his own right. Phra Varapañño arrived in Wat Pa Phong at a time when Ajan Cha was away for a few days. His meeting with Ajan Sumedho was crucial to his decision to stay.

"Sitting up there on the porch in the peace of the forest night, I felt that here was a place beyond the suffering and confusion of the world — the Vietnam war, the meaninglessness of life in America and everywhere else, the pain and desperation of those I had met on the road in Europe and Asia who were so sincerely looking for a better way of life but not finding it. This man, in this place, seemed to have found it, and it seemed entirely possible that others could as well."

In 1972, the Western Saṅgha of monks and novices numbered six and Ajan Cha decided that they should spend the rains retreat at Tam Saang Pet, a branch monastery perched on a steep-sided hill overlooking the flat Isan countryside, about 100 kilometres away to the north. Personality conflicts festered, away from the guiding influence of Ajan Cha and Ajan Sumedho felt burned.

"To begin with I felt a lot of resentment about taking responsibility. On a personal level, the last thing I wanted to do was be with other Western bhikkhus — I was adjusted to living with Thai bhikkhus and to feel at ease within this structure and culture, but there was an increasing number of Westerners coming through. Dr Burns and Jack Kornfield had been encouraging people to come. But after the Western Saṅgha had this



horrendous vassa at Tam Saang Pet I ran away, spent the rains in a monastery in the South-East and then went to India.

“But while I was there I had a really powerful heart-opening experience. I kept thinking of Luang Por and how I’d run away, and I felt a great feeling of gratitude to him, and I decided that I would go back and serve. It was very idealistic. ‘I’ll just give myself to Luang Por. Anything he wants me to do.’ We’d just opened this horrible branch monastery at Suan Glooay down on the Cambodian border, and nobody wanted to go and stay there. I’d gone down there for a Kathina ceremony and been taller than all the trees. So in India I thought I’d volunteer to go and take over Suan Glooay. I had this romantic image of myself. But of course, when I got back Luang Por refused to send me there and by the end of the year there were so many Westerners at Wat Pa Phong that he asked me to come back to translate for them. Basically I trusted him because he was the one pushing me into things that I wouldn’t have done by myself.”





## Doubt and other Demons

Ajan Jayasāro

DOUBT IS OF TWO MAIN KINDS. Firstly, there is the doubt born of a lack of sufficient information or knowledge to perform the task in hand. We may doubt, for instance, as to the Buddhist teachings on a particular subject. We doubt as to the best route to take to a new destination. The Buddha recognized such doubts as legitimate and did not consider them an obstacle to spiritual growth. On the contrary, a healthy scepticism and a questioning mind were praised by him, “Good, O Kalamas, you are doubting that which should be doubted”. The fifth hindrance to meditation, usually rendered in English as ‘sceptical doubt’, is not the mere awareness of a lack of information, but rather the unwillingness or hesitation to act upon it. The person afflicted by *vicikicchā* is paralysed by his inability to be sure that he is following the best course of action. In other words he must have proof of the truth of a proposition before seeking to verify it. The Buddha compared this to travelling in a wilderness. The commentary explains:

“A man travels through a desert and being aware that travellers may be plundered or killed by robbers, he will, on the mere sound of a twig or a bird, get anxious and fearful, thinking ‘The robbers have come!’ He will go a few steps, and then, out of fear, he will stop, and continue in such a manner on his way; or he may even turn back. Stopping more frequently than walking, only with toil and difficulty will he reach a place of safety. Or he may even not reach it.”

It is similar with him in whom doubt has arisen in regard to one of the eight objects of doubt. Doubting whether the Master is an Enlightened One or not, he cannot accept it as a matter of trust. Unable to do so, he does not attain to the Paths and Fruits of Sanctity. Thus, as the traveller in the desert who is uncertain whether robbers are there or not, he produces in his mind, again and again, a state of wavering and vacillation, a lack of decision, a state of anxiety; and thus he creates in himself an obstacle for reaching the safe ground of Sanctity. In that way sceptical doubt is like travelling in the desert. Modern education teaches us to think, to compare, to analyse, to use

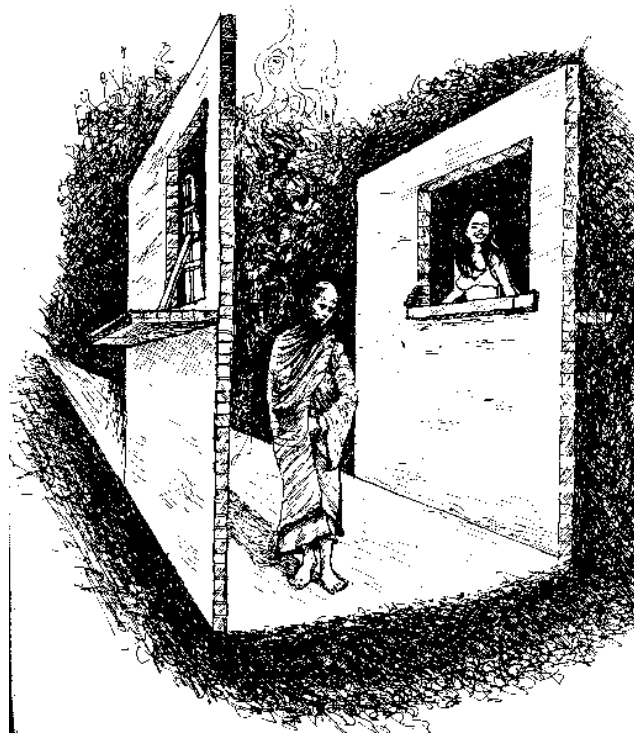
logic — ‘left-brain’ abilities of great value in our daily lives. A mind that is aware of many different ways of looking at things is also usually a tolerant one. But without a strong conviction in his chosen path a meditator may often lack the ability to stick with that path when the going gets tough. On the purely rational level there are always reasonable objections to making the sacrifices that spiritual life demands, there are always more comfortable alternatives. When the emotional assent provided by faith is absent, reason can make Hamlets of us all. This hindrance particularly affects those meditators who have been successful in the conventional education system; it is the dark side of an enquiring mind. A lot of learning can also be a dangerous thing. The particular form of doubts varies. A practitioner may harbour doubts about the efficacy of the technique or its suitability to his character; he may be unsure of the teacher, agonize about his ability to practise. Vicikicchā is the most disabling of the hindrances, because unlike for example, lust or anger, it is often not perceived as being a defilement. The element of indulgence tends to be concealed. In the early days of Wat Pa Phong the majority of the monks and lay supporters had strong faith in Ajan Cha and little formal education; crippling doubt was never a major problem. In later years with more middle class city dwellers arriving and a growing number of Western disciples, it became more of an issue. The response of Ajan Cha to the chronic doubters was always to point out that:

“Doubts don’t stop because of someone else’s words. They come to an end through your own practice.”

A suppression of doubts through belief in the words of an authority figure must always be fragile. Blind faith makes the mind rigid and narrow. Ajan Cha’s view was that the only way to go beyond doubts was through understanding their nature, as impermanent, conditioned mental states. On one occasion he explained why he didn’t conduct daily interviews with the monks, as is the practice in many meditation centres:

“If I answer your every little question, you will never understand the process of doubt in your own mind. It is essential that you learn to examine yourself, to interview yourself. Listen carefully to the Dhamma talk every few days, then use the teaching to compare with your own practice. Is it the same? Is it

different? How do doubts arise? Who is it that doubts? Only through self-examination will you understand. If you doubt everything then you're going to be totally miserable, you won't be able to sleep and you'll be off your food, just chasing after this view and that the whole time. What you must remember is that your mind is a liar. Take hold of it and look. Mental states are just that way; they don't last. Don't run around with them. Just know them with equanimity. One doubt passes away and then a new one arises. Be aware of that process for what it is. Then you'll be at ease. If you run after your doubts then you won't just be unhappy, but your doubts will increase as well. That is why the Buddha said not to attach to things."



Some practitioners reach a certain point in their practice and then doubt what they have attained, or what state they are in as they are meditating. Ajan Cha would say there were no signposts in the mind like there are on highways:

“Suppose that you were to give me a fruit. I might be aware of the sweetness of the fruit and its fragrance, know everything about it except for one thing: its name. It’s the same with meditation. It’s not necessary to know what things are called. If you know the name of the fruit that doesn’t make it any sweeter. So be aware of the relevant causal conditions of that state, but if you don’t know the name it doesn’t matter. You know the flavour. You’ve grabbed both its legs, let it struggle all it wants. The name isn’t so important. If someone tells you then take note of it but if they don’t there’s no need to get upset.”

On another occasion Ajan Cha comforted a Western disciple:

“Doubting is natural. Everyone starts out with doubts. You can learn a great deal from them. What is important is that you don’t identify with your doubts: that is, don’t get caught up in them. This will spin your mind in endless circles. Instead, watch the whole process of doubting, of wondering. See who it is that doubts. See how doubts come and go. Then you will no longer be victimized by your doubts. You will step outside of them and your mind will be quiet. You can see how all things come and go. Just let go of what you are attached to. Let go of your doubts and simply watch. This is how to end doubting.”

### **Views and opinions**

Concentration is that clear stable tranquillity that forms the basis for the wisdom that knows things ‘as they are’ and uproots the delusions that generate suffering. In other words, wisdom is both the beginning and end of the path of practice. Initially, the meditator must ‘straighten his views’, develop a sound understanding of the value and purpose of meditation. If he doesn’t, much sincere effort may be wrongly directed and thus wasted. An important element of Ajan Cha’s meditation teaching involved pointing out the fallacy of wrong views and opinions held by his disciples, and giving authentic reasons for the practice of the correct path and encouragement in its practice.

### **Impatience**

The untrained human attention spans seem to get shorter and shorter. We have come to expect and often demand quick results at the press of a button or key. Our underlying assumption is usually that speed and convenience are good per se. But in spiritual life this does not always apply as there are no shortcuts waiting to be discovered. It is, the Buddha declared, a gradual path, one that depends on a gradual maturation. If we are in a hurry our inability to speed things up can feel highly frustrating. Once Ajan Cha taught an impatient disciple:

“Meditating in order to realize peace is not the same as pressing a switch or putting on an electric light and expecting everything to be immediately flooded with light. In the sentence of effort you can’t miss out any words or phrases. All dhammas arise from causes. When causes cease then so do their results. You must keep steadily doing it, steadily practising. You’re not going to attain or see anything in one or two days. The day before yesterday a university student came to consult me about his practice. When he meditates, his mind is not at ease, it’s not peaceful. He came to ask me to charge his batteries for him (laughs). You must try to put forth a constant effort. You can’t comprehend this through someone else’s words. You have to discover it for yourself. You don’t have to meditate a lot, you can do just a little, but do it every day. And do walking meditation every day as well.

“Irrespective of whether you do a lot or a little, do it every day. Be sparing with your speech and watch your mind the whole time. Just refute whatever arises in your mind, whether its pleasure or pain. None of it lasts; it’s all deceptive. With some people who’ve never practised before, when a couple of days have passed and they’re still not peaceful they start to think they can’t do it. If that happens, you should ask yourself whether you received any teachings before you were born. In this life have you ever tried to pacify your mind? You’ve just let it go its own way for a long time. You’ve never trained your mind. You come and practise for a certain time wanting to be peaceful. But the causes are not sufficient and so the results fail

to appear. It's inevitable. If you're going to be liberated then you must be patient. Patient endurance is the leading principle in practice. The Buddha taught us not to go too slowly and not to go too fast, but to make the mind 'just right'. There's no need to get worked up about it all. If you are, then you should reflect that practice is like planting a tree. You dig a hole and place the tree in it. After that it's your job to fill in the earth around it, to put fertilizer on it, to water the tree and to protect it from pests. That's your duty; it's what orchard owners have to do. But whether the tree grows fast or slow is its own business, it's nothing to do with you. If you don't know the limits of your own responsibilities you'll end up trying to do the work of the tree as well and you'll suffer. All you have to do is see to the fertiliser, the watering and keeping the insects away. The speed of growth of the tree is the tree's business. If you know what is and what is not your responsibility then your meditation will be smooth and relaxed, not stressed and fretful.

"When your sitting is calm then watch the calmness. When it's not calm then watch that — if there's calm there's calm, if there's not there's not; you mustn't let yourself suffer when your mind's not calm. It's wrong practice to exult when your mind is calm, or to mope when it's not. Would you let yourself suffer about a tree? About the sunshine or the rain? Things are what they are and if you understand that, your meditation will go well. So keep travelling along the path, keep practising, keep attending to your duties, and meditating at the appropriate times. As for what you get from it, what you attain, what calmness you achieve, that will depend on the potency of the virtue you have accumulated. Just as the orchard owner who knows the extent of his responsibilities towards the tree keeps in good humour, so when the practitioner understands his duties in his practice, then 'just-rightness' spontaneously establishes itself."

### **Ambitious**

Ajan Cha would constantly encourage his disciples to cultivate the spirit of renunciation, to see practice as a gradual process of letting





go of attachments rather than as one of gaining attainments. Practice fuelled by the desire to get or become is more likely to lead to new realms of existence rather than liberation:

“Sometimes in meditation practice people make determinations that are too extreme. Sometimes they light incense, bow and make a vow: ‘If this incense has not burned down then I will not get up from the sitting posture under any circumstances. Whether I faint or die, whatever happens, I’ll die right here.’ As soon as they’ve made the solemn declaration they start to sit and then, within moments, the *Maras* attack them from all sides. They open their eyes to glance at the incense sticks. ‘Oh dear! There’s still loads left’. They grit their teeth and start again. Their minds are hot and bothered and in turmoil. They’re at their wit’s end. They’ve had enough and they look at the incense sticks again as surely they must be at an end. ‘Oh no. Not even half way!’ This happens three or four times and then they give up. They sit and blame themselves for being hopeless. ‘Oh, why am I such an idiot, it’s so humiliating’, and so on. They sit there suffering about being insincere and bad, all kinds of things, until they’re in an utter mess, and then the hindrances arise. If this kind of effort doesn’t lead to ill-will towards others, it leads to ill-will towards yourself. Why is that? Because of craving.

“Actually, you don’t have to take resolutions that far... You don’t have to make the resolution to tie yourself up like that. Just make the resolution to let go.”

### **The desire to know and see**

The goal of meditation is to understand the nature of all experience rather than to attain any one particular experience, however exalted. Many who take up the practice of meditation are dismayed to discover just how much agitation and defilement there is in their minds and may come to believe that the unpleasant things they see are caused by meditation rather than exposed by it. Many start to crave for some special kind of experience to validate their efforts. If a particular experience is agreed to be ‘special’ then its experiencer or owner must be even more so and the feelings of rapture that accompany such experiences seems to confirm their significance. We tend to believe that the more intense an experience is, the more real it is. Ajan Cha’s unbending insistence that all experiences are ultimately of the same value, and equally able to cause suffering to one who delights in them, was often hard for his disciples to appreciate. Meditators want some return for all the work they put in. On one occasion a monk came to ask Ajan Cha why it was that despite putting great efforts into his meditation he had still never seen the lights and colours that others said they saw. Ajan Cha replied:

“See light? What do you want to see light for? What good do you think it would do you? If you want to see light, go and look at that fluorescent lamp. That’s what light looks like.”

After the laughter had died down, Ajan Cha continued:

“The majority of meditators are like that. They want to see light and colours. They want to see deities, heaven and hell realms, all those kind of things. Don’t get caught up with that.”

### **Only the posture changes**

A constantly recurring theme in Ajan Cha’s teachings is the emphasis on continuity of mindfulness. On one occasion he instructed the Saṅgha:

“Meditation isn’t bound to either standing or walking or sitting or lying down, but as we can’t live our lives completely motionless and inactive we have to incorporate all these four postures into our practice. And the guiding principle to be relied on in each of them is the generation of wisdom and rightness. ‘Rightness’ means Right View and is another word for wisdom. Wisdom can arise at any time, in any one of the four postures. In each posture you can think evil thoughts or good thoughts, mistaken thoughts or correct thoughts. Disciples of the Buddha are capable of realizing the Dhamma whether standing, walking, sitting or lying down. So where does this practice which is carried out in the four postures find its focal point? It finds it in the generation of Right View, because once there is Right View then there comes to be Right Aspiration, Right Speech and the rest of the eightfold path.

“It would then be better to change our way of speaking. Instead of saying that we come out of *samādhi* we should say merely that we change our posture. *Samādhi* means firmness of mind. When you emerge from *samādhi* then maintain that firmness in your mindfulness and self awareness, in your object, in your actions, all of the time.

“At the end of a meditation session it’s incorrect to think that you’ve finished work. Put forth a constant effort. It is through maintaining a constancy of effort in your work, in your actions and in your mindfulness and self awareness, that your meditation will develop.”

### **Slightly better than a dog**

At a certain stage in practice the ‘defilements of insight’ may arise. Here such wholesome qualities as illumination, knowledge, rapture, bliss, strong mindfulness and equanimity occur and mislead the meditator into a belief that he or she is enlightened.

“Don’t stick your nose up in the air because of your practice. Don’t make too much out of your experiences. Let things proceed in peace. You don’t have to be ambitious and want to get or to become anything at all. After they’ve been practising for a while, some people have a few experiences and take them to

mean that they've really attained or become something. That's incorrect. Once at Luang Por Pow's monastery a nun went to see him and said, 'Luang Por, I've become a stream-enterer!' He replied, 'Errr. Bit better than a dog.' As soon as he said that the 'stream-enterer' screwed up her face and stormed out. That's what happens you see: people go right off the track.

"In practice, don't ever allow yourself to get puffed up. Whatever you become then don't make anything of it. If you become a stream-enterer then leave it at that. If you become an arahant then leave it at that. Live simply, keep performing beneficial deeds and wherever you are you'll be able to live a normal life. There's no need to go boasting to anybody that you've attained this or become that. These days when people become arahants they can't sit still. They think, 'I'm an arahant', and have to keep telling everyone else the good news. In the end there's nowhere they can live. In the Buddha's time arahants didn't make any problems. Not like the 'arahants' today."

The ability to distinguish between genuine insight and the more subtle kinds of delusion in another person, is the prerogative of the enlightened. Ajan Cha used to tell the story of the inexperienced teacher who sanctioned the realization of a precocious novice only to become aware, when his body was found hanging from a tree, that the novice was in fact mentally disturbed. Even if, as in the case of Ajan Cha, a teacher has the ability to tell people's state of mind straight away, it does not ensure that he will be believed. Powerful experiences in meditation can engender an unshakeable self-confidence in the meditator. The disciple will tend to interpret the teacher's refusal to accept the validity of his enlightenment as a misjudgement or perhaps as jealousy. Strong measures may be needed in such a case and a short, sharp shock is usually recommended.

In the scriptures there are stories of enlightened monks disabusing others of their delusions by creating authentic hologram-like images of elephants in rut or alluring women. Caught by surprise the monk who had thought himself free from fear and lust is suddenly made painfully aware that the defilements have only been suppressed and have been merely lying latent in his mind. On one occasion a nun at Wat Pah Phong also thought that she had attained a stage of

enlightenment. She asked for permission to see Ajan Cha and doing her best to curb her excitement informed him of her great realization. He listened to her silently and then with his face a stern mask, his voice as cold as ice, said:

“Liar”.



# Keep It Simple

Ajan Pasanno

WHEN CONSIDERING THE DHAMMA if you look at it in one way it is quite complicated, quite complex, there is a lot to know, a lot to figure out, a lot of information to digest. Looked at another way it is quite straight forward — it is just a matter of following it, of doing. There is a certain element, particularly it seems in the western temperament, that makes us believe that the more information we have the better we will get to know about something and so the more information we have the better we would be at practising the Dhamma. This is actually not true.

A lot of importance should be given to patience; to being able to be patient with one's experience, observing oneself, observing the world around one and learning to trust the observer, the watcher, the ability of the human mind to pay attention to itself. When we talk about liberation or enlightenment, it is actually just about paying attention, what the attention is directed towards. So it is a learning to observe oneself, one's experience, to recognize the quality of the mind.

The Buddha particularly emphasized the quality of suffering, of unsatisfactoriness. The Four Noble Truths are based on the observance of this quality of unsatisfactoriness. It is something to be known. It is a duty to oneself that of understanding unsatisfactoriness. And then you go on to something else. The problem is how we relate to the world around us. The way we relate to each other we tend either to create or experience unsatisfactoriness. Then hold on to it, we cling to it, we judge it, we try to avoid it, we create incredible scenarios around it, we look for someone to blame because of it or we feel sorry for ourselves. So we create a whole range of reaction around *dukkha*. But what Buddha says is all you have to do is just know it, you just have to know it.

This quality of knowing is to be turned to, to be focussed onto our experience and we learn then to recognize that this knowing is a point of balance, not wanting, not affirmation or rejection, not a

wanting or not wanting, it is the balancing of the faculties of the mind. What we experience, the world, with a body and a mind, they are the tools that we have. We revolve around the sense faculties of the body and the faculties of the mind, the ability to create and experience emotional tones of happiness or suffering or neutrality, the ability to remember to conceptualize, to put labels on things, perception, the ability to act in a volitional way, to initiate process of thought and to be conscious of the world around us. These are the tools we have.

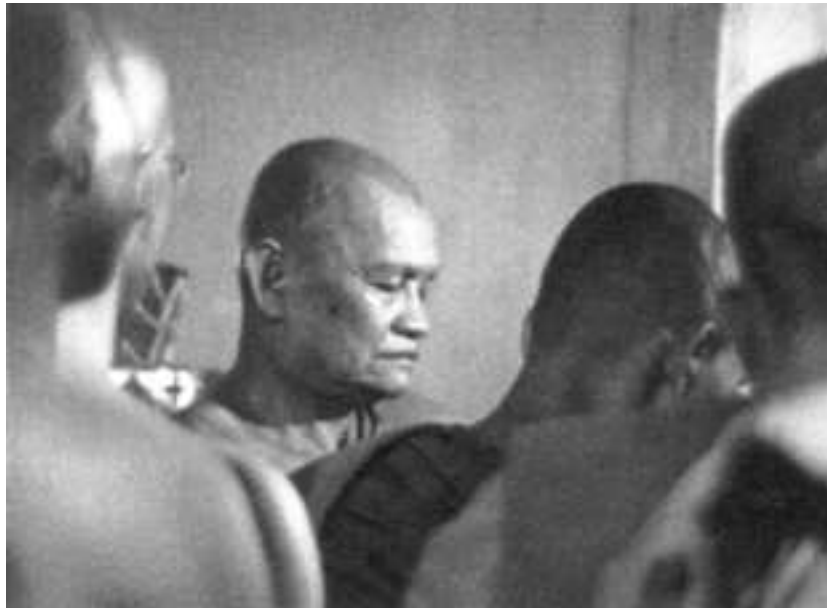
The practice of the Dhamma is learning the quality of knowing, to know the world around us, both the material world of the physical body and the sense spheres of the mind, the faculties of the mind. Just to know, not reacting to the proliferation around them but just being with the knowing. So this practice is therefore of knowing. It seems complicated because the simplest things are difficult to sustain.

So we need to develop certain tools, certain qualities. The Dhamma provides a theoretical framework that could look complicated but it facilitates this knowing. It requires us to come back to the human heart which is capable of knowing, capable of peace, capable of creating hell round us and capable of creating celestial worlds. We have to see this point of clarity and stillness within us in order to stop creating worlds around us. Once Ajan Cha and a group of his disciples went to visit a well-known disciple of Ajan Mun, Luang Por Khau. Ajan Sumedho was one of the group. They listened to a Dhamma teaching and when they were leaving Ajan Sumedho as the most junior monk in the group had to be the last to leave the room. Just as he was leaving Luang Por Khau rose quickly and came up to him and since Ajan Sumedho did not know much Thai at the time. Luang Por Khau pointed at his heart and said, "It's all here, it's all here". All the talking, the explanations, all come back to the heart, we have to see this clearly and pay attention to the mind, to the heart.

This is the reason the Buddha gave the teaching of the Four Noble Truths as it is the heart, the mind that motivates us. All sentient beings prefer happiness to suffering. So we are motivated to try to free ourselves from suffering. Often however our attempts to do so are either superficial or misguided, and are only a temporary



appeasement of suffering. We put off really dealing with it to a distant future, or an immediate future. The Buddha said that the way it should be dealt with is by understanding the causes because we can understand something only when we understand its cause. The Buddha pointed out that often our misapprehension of the truth, of reality is because of *avijjā*, non-knowledge.



*Avijjā* is often translated as ignorance but it is really the lack of true knowledge. Through this lack of true knowledge, different kinds of desire are created: the desire to seek out sensual gratification, the desire for the affirmation of self, for becoming, the desire for self-negation, for annihilation, the pushing away of experience; not wanting to experience things is also a desire. So this pushing and pulling, the grasping after experience is the real cause of our suffering. And so it is the relinquishing of desire that brings about the cessation of suffering.

We do not relinquish suffering but we try to push away the immediate cause of it and try to find something more satisfactory. This is not dealing with the real causes, which have to be seen for what they are and relinquished. Letting go is something that one needs to feel, feel

consciously. To let go of the holding in our hearts of the emotional reactions to experiences and relationships and judgements, how things should be or not be. It is this relinquishing of the whole of this, letting go of all of it that is summed up in a short teaching the Buddha gave when he said, "*All dhammas are not to be clung to*". It is like the core of his teaching — everything has to be relinquished, given up.

The nature of desire is to hoard, to cling, to attach to things, to hang on. We have to establish attention to this tendency in our practice and try to go against this trend to let the whole of it go. When you actually see suffering you want to let go of it. The more clearly you see suffering the more willing you are to let go. It is somewhat similar to the method of trapping monkeys. A small hole is cut in a coconut; it should be just big enough for a monkey to put his hand in. A piece of some hard fruit is put inside the coconut. Then when a monkey comes and being very curious puts his hand in and finding the fruit, he grabs it. Then he is stuck as the hole is too small to get his fist out with the fruit in it. When the hunter comes, the monkey keeps pulling at his fist but will not let go of the fruit. The desire for gratification is stronger than the recognition of the suffering that would follow when the hunter gets him by the scruff of his neck. If the monkey could really see the suffering it would be easy to let go of the fruit and get away.

We do the same thing. Suffering is there all the time but we do not relinquish it because we do not see it clearly enough. As soon as we see it, we should let it go. But we do not recognize the suffering and carry it around with us, the aversion, ill-will, anger, for long periods of time — minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, years — because we can justify it in some way. We are also able to suffer tremendously over the things we perceive could give us pleasure, and which may even be pleasurable on a certain level, but suffering is inherent in them. The clear recognition of suffering is therefore related to the ability to let it go. And the ability to let go is clearly related to the degree of awareness and mindfulness, the stability of knowing. So we come back again to this quality of knowing to the establishment of awareness, the establishment of mindfulness.

This is the purpose of this path, the whole point of our practice to facilitate this quality of clarity. It is not a passive mindfulness or

awareness, there is a sense of moral responsibility within it, a sense of patience and endurance, the ability to bring up effort. Our path lies in developing virtue or *sīla*, to see clearly and take responsibility in a moral sense for our actions and speech. And we need to develop in our practice the quality of renunciation and the quality of wisdom — to question, to investigate, to reflect.

Our training, on the level of mental training is a training in bringing forth effort, a training to recognize ways of cultivating the wholesome and to let go of the unwholesome. It is a developing of the stability of mind, a concentration, a steadiness of mind. The steadiness of mind that has to be developed is an emotional steadiness, it is in the sense of the heart and mind and not in the sense of the analytical mind. It is the ability not to be drawn by our habitual preferences, the wanting and not wanting but of establishing a stability. Concentration sometimes has a sense of focussing, of exclusion. The exclusion, the blinkering of the mind does not lead to a really stable and still mind. There has to be an openness, not reacting to likes and dislikes, an ability to observe, it's a staying with the knowing. So the steadiness pertains to the ability of recognition to the ability to observe without a sense of focussing in an exclusive way.

So we need to develop the qualities of investigation. And the Buddha has given the parameters, the boundaries of investigation, what to investigate and the tools for investigating experience. The structures of the Four Noble Truths, the five *khandhas* or aggregates of being, the six sense spheres, are tools for the delineation of our experience. They enable us to recognize the patterns of our mind, the patterns of our experience.

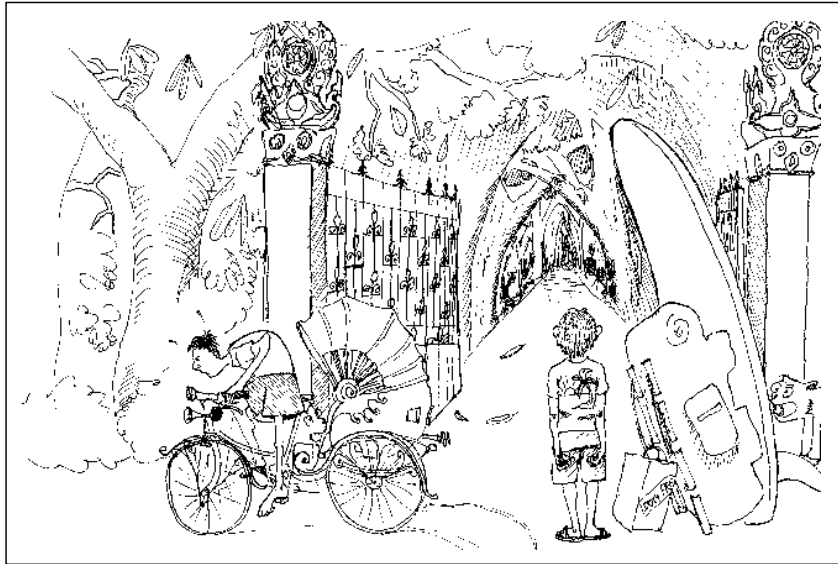
When we sit in meditation therefore, it is very important to have a structure, a framework to guide us in investigating our experience. If we just sit and watch the breath going in and out pretty soon either the mind starts wandering and gets hooked to something or other or else it gets bored and collapses on itself and you sit in a state of dullness. When the mind is in *samādhi* it is ready for work, the work of a meditator, which is to investigate one's experience, to investigate what it is that motivates one, what causes the mind to proliferate, what it is that creates suffering what brings a point of balance to minds.

These are questions that need to be investigated when we are engaged in meditation. Sometimes we sit and wait for an illumination to descend upon us and free us from all confusion — but that's not how the mind works. One has to apply the mind to look at and investigate the actual problems that one keeps running up against in one's experience in order to understand the mind and oneself more clearly, that this is where one develops the exercise to encourage mindfulness, coming back to the breath. The in-breath and the out-breath, used to clarify the movement of the mind. Using the breath as it keeps going in and out as a framework to see where the mind is moving, to clarify the movement of the mind. This close observation within the framework of the meditation object clarifies, makes one understand the nature of the mind.

The calmness of the mind is not obtained by shutting out things or forcing the mind to a point of stillness. The more you force the mind the more tense it becomes. What is needed is the application of the mind using the tools set out for us by the Buddha. With the application of effort the practice takes on all kinds of meanings and one finds that gaps in one's understanding are filled in and doubts and misunderstandings overcome. So this aspect of wisdom is not just passive knowledge or a piece of information that you get from a book or from a teacher. It is arrived at through application of one's mind, investigating one's mind honestly. Oftentimes our minds create distractions for themselves, creating stories around ourselves. Unless you see the mind for what it is you keep buying into these stories, into all that proliferation. So we have to develop the clear understanding so that we can let go, relinquish the mind's creations and proliferation, let it all cease.

As we get more and more familiar with the knowing, we are able to find a quality of relinquishment, a point of stillness within that knowing. There is a lovely image that Ajan Cha has used to describe the proliferation of the mind. He compares them to the wheels of an oxcart because those wheels create deep tracks that seem to go on endlessly. The wheels are not all that big, but the tracks are very long. The purpose of our training and our practice is to stop that oxcart, let it come to a rest. And this is where our practice should be going, in the direction of a point of rest.





## Facets of Life at Wat Pa Nanachat

Ajan Vipassi

THE NORTH-EAST OF THAILAND IS FLAT — the once thick forests are long gone — and when one drives along the long straight roads one passes through mile after mile of flat, scrubby land given over to cultivation, mainly of rice. There are trees, but just here and there in the open spaces, occasionally providing a bit of shade, but there's no hint of the majestic and almost impenetrable forest that once dominated the north-eastern region. At that time villages would have been linked by rough jungle tracks, human beings cutting back the undergrowth here and there to grow their crops, and they would have had to keep cutting lest nature returns to reclaim these clearings for herself. These days here nature is firmly under the thumb of mankind.

Driving along the main Si Saket Road out of Warin, the first distant sight one has of Wat Pa Nanachat is a long, high white wall behind which is — a forest. The trees are tall and the growth is thick — a noticeable contrast to the surrounding terrain. Arriving at the wat on a hot afternoon one's first impression upon being put down at the gate is of being about to enter a different world. The view up the drive is like looking up a tunnel — a tunnel of trees. Upon venturing up the drive one immediately feels the cool of the shade — the forest canopy is thick, and the sun can only glint through the trees, finding an opening here and there down which to pour a pool of fierce light. The wide, swept concrete drive opens out after a hundred metres or so into a circle as one comes to a long low building on the right, the kitchen, and further on the large unadorned *sālā*. In the centre of the circle, around which cars can turn but beyond which they cannot proceed, there is a strange rectangular brick structure, loosely covered with a few scraps of corrugated iron. In a few days there might be a large crowd of people gathered here, for this is the place where the villagers cremate their dead, something which has been going on here long before Wat Pa Nanachat was ever thought of.

The wat came into being twenty-five years ago in a rather unlikely way. Ajan Sumedho, who had already been training with Luang Por

Cha at Wat Nong Pa Phong for many years, together with a group of Western monks, were wanting to fire some alms-bowls. This is a process whereby a rustproof coating is baked onto an iron bowl, and it requires that the bowls be heated in an intense fire for several hours. In the forest at Wat Nong Pa Phong it was actually difficult to come across sufficient quantities of firewood — there were so many monks, and firewood was needed all the time for dyeing and washing robes. Hence it was recommended to Ajan Sumedho that he and the monks go to the forest at the nearby village of Bung Wai, where there were plentiful supplies of fallen branches and dry bamboo.



So this group of monks came to the forest, put up their *glots* (large umbrellas) and mosquito nets and began their work. This soon attracted the attention of the local villagers, however, who were impressed that these farang monks had the courage to pitch their umbrellas and camp out there, for this was their cremation forest — a place haunted by ghosts and spirits, and a place so feared by the locals that it was left unused.

As often happens on such occasions, when the monks were ready to move on, the local villagers begged them to stay. And it just so happened that Luang Por Cha had already decided that it would be good to start a branch of Wat Nong Pa Phong specifically for the farangs. Ajan Sumedho, who had been with Luang Por Cha for eight years, would be the teacher and the farangs could train in their own language. So, as has happened so many times in Thailand, the simple act of a monk hanging his umbrella from a tree was the seed that sprouted and grew into a flourishing monastery.

Throughout the twelve years of my monastic life in England I had heard many things about Wat Pa Nanachat, and had met and lived



with many of the monks who began their monastic careers there. Several of the Wat Pa Nanachat monks who came to live with us in England ended up disrobing. Likewise several of our monks who went out to stay there did the same. It appeared that each of our situations represented a last chance for the other: “If it won’t work in Thailand, at least try it in England before calling it quits”, and vice versa. It was impossible not to form impressions based upon what I’d heard, but I knew from experience that things are never quite like you imagine — no matter how good somebody’s description, the actuality is always far richer and more multifaceted than can be conveyed by words.

So having spent more than ten years in a non-Buddhist country, where one is part of a small group of monastics trying somehow to model Theravadin monasticism for the surrounding culture and where the feeling is often one of learning to be a monk somewhat ‘secondhand’, I decided to come East and experience Theravāda Buddhism in some of its native settings. Wat Pa Nanachat seemed the natural terminus for my journey, but I was in no hurry.

I arrived on hot evening in July 1997, the journey having taken a year and a half — much of that staying in several different locations in Sri Lanka, followed by a stint in a Wat Nong Pa Phong branch monastery in central Thailand, attempting to get a foothold in the Thai language. The first impression was of the size and scale of things, the large, rather gloomy *sālā* and the numbers of people.

On my first morning I watched as two large coaches pulled up and disgorged their contents — a posse of faithful Thai people come to make offerings before the start of the rains retreat. The *sālā* was full — maybe 150 people gathered to hear Ajan Jayasāro convey some words of wisdom. “This is impossible!”, I thought, “How can the monks here survive if these kinds of numbers of people are descending upon the place?” However, I later realized that this impression lacked a context. I was just seeing things in terms of the situation in England, where people are often coming to the monastery maybe for the first time and they have a full bag of questions to ask. They may also be carrying a large number of inaccurate preconceptions about Buddhist teachings — “Is the Buddha a God?”, “You Buddhists believe that life is suffering don’t you, and you’re trying to take the easy way out” — which have to be slowly and patiently

dismantled so that sufficient openness appears for the teaching to begin to penetrate. Not so here, where the people already do have faith, where we are only one amongst thousands of monasteries, and where this group of monks is not solely responsible for presenting and modelling Buddhism for the culture.

In fact there are not so many tour bus parties, but things do build up just before the Rains Retreat period as people go off on pilgrimage for a few days, each day perhaps visiting six monasteries (and making two shopping trips). After they've been to Wat Nong Pa Phong they simply must come and have a look at where the farangs live. Receiving these visitors can be quite straightforward. Usually they have just come for a quick look, and often don't expect much teaching to speak of, it can be enough for them to see foreigners with shaven heads and robes for it to affect them profoundly. However, this kind of superficial interest is changing somewhat as Thai laypeople seem to be getting more involved in practising the Dhamma. Although the conversations may begin with a few innocent and apparently superficial questions — "How many monks are there here?" and "Do you eat once a day?" — it is more and more noticeable that the conversation will move on to questions about meditation and how to practise Dhamma in daily life.

Well, on that first morning, as so often happens, the wave of visitors receded as quickly as it had flooded into the monastery, and there prevailed a humid stillness soaked with the high-pitched sounds of cicadas. So, to pick up the question, how many monks do we have? These days it is getting on for twenty monks and novices of about twelve nationalities. The number of monks who began here and who still live in Thailand is considerably greater. At any one time we will have four or five junior monks placed at some of the Wat Nong Pa Phong branch monasteries, having been sent there to learn the ropes of living with a Thai community, and to learn to speak the language. Having spent his first five years training under guidance at Wat Pa Nanachat, the monk is then usually 'freed from dependence' and from then on it is up to him. Some monks go off walking on thudong, visiting other teachers and regions. Some settle in other places and some go abroad, but people still keep in touch and usually regard Wat Pa Nanachat as some kind of home base, coming back to check

in once in a while. This means at certain times of the year there is a lot of coming and going — in fact the population of the monastery can sometimes fluctuate from week to week. Thai monks also happen by, usually on thudong, and more often than not when we really get down to it they are interested in learning English. This is not enough of a reason to stay beyond three nights, says the Abbot, and off they go. We usually do have two or three Thai monks here, but they already speak English and have some prior Dhamma connection with Ajan Jayasāro or the community. For instance, one Thai monk here at the moment was working as a doctor in America when he met Ajan Jayasāro and his faith arose there, upon hearing the Ajan teach.

The monastery serves several different and quite distinct groups of people, and for the abbot this is quite a balancing act. There are the many guests from all over the world who, for many different reasons, spend time here developing their understanding and practice of Buddhism through experience of monastic life. Long term and loyal support, of course, has come from the local Bung Wai villagers, about a dozen of whom come every day to cook and help out, and many regular supporters come to the monastery from the local towns of Warin and Ubon. There is a sizeable following of Bangkok people who come and stay when they can — one group of air hostesses even arrange their schedules so that they can fly up to Ubon on the evening flight, spend all of Wan Phra night meditating and then fly back down to Bangkok on the morning flight. In fact, on the weekly Wan Phra observance days it is common for there to be approaching 100 people observing the eight precepts and staying to practise and hear the Dhamma in the monastery until the following dawn. On these observance days the abbot and the second monk divide their attention between the various groups, talks being given simultaneously in Thai and English in different locations.

The steady stream of non-Thai visitors come and stay for varying lengths of time. Usually the initial period is limited to three days but in most cases this can be extended, depending upon the availability of accommodation. We require that people write beforehand and will only take those who turn up unannounced if there is space. Demands upon accommodation are getting tighter these days, so quite often we have to ask people to come back at a later date. It is

through coming to stay at the monastery that interest in monastic life can be sparked off. Men are asked to wear white and shave their heads after three days while women wear a white blouse and black skirt but keep their hair, and these gestures give them a chance to feel like they are part of the monastic community for the time being and they are indeed perceived as such by the local people. For many, the level of renunciation required is quite demanding — living according to the eight precepts, eating just one meal a day, following a routine which requires one to get up at 3.00 a.m., and having many hours of the day with no form or structure. All of this can be quite a challenge.

For men who wish to go further the next step is to request to become a *pah kow* (in the monasteries in the West, *anagārika*) — someone who formally joins the community in a ceremony where he is given the eight precepts in front of the Saṅgha. Pah kows wear a white sarong and white sash and begin their training in the rudiments of monastic life under the guidance of the senior monks. There are no equivalent facilities for women to train here, but on occasions committed women who can manage to fit into what is undoubtedly a male oriented atmosphere have been granted permission to stay for periods of time.

When people have been with us for some time as pah kows and wish to make a deeper commitment, we consider arranging for them to become *samaṇeras* (novices) — taking the brown robe and looking and behaving to all intents and purposes like the bhikkhus, except for the fact that their code of discipline is less demanding. They have alms bowls and go on almsround with the monks, are given a Pāli name<sup>3</sup> and are expected to commit themselves to training for one year. Those wishing to take higher ordination can request to do so and on taking full ordination are expected to stay for five years as bhikkhus under the guidance of the abbot.

Community members and as far as is possible lay guests are each assigned a *kuti* — a simple wooden hut on stilts about 30 of which are scattered around in the forest (about 150 acres or 300 *rai*).

3 The first letters of Pāli names are derived from the day of the week upon which the individual is born, and their meaning usually provides an ideal to which to aspire.



Accommodation is basic — there is no electricity in any but a few kutis, and a trip to the toilet can mean a walk through the forest. At night it is not uncommon to encounter snakes and other creepy-crawlies. Life at Wat Pa Nanachat was once described to me as being ‘total insect attack’, which, while it is an exaggeration, does convey something of the flavour of the experience. From time to time people are forced to evacuate their kuti as ants or termites invade their living space, which they have usually had to reckon upon sharing with geckos (lizards about 20cm long which punctuate the stillness of the night with a loud “gekk-kko” call) bats, spiders and sometimes the odd snake which decides to coil itself around the rafters. Rats also compete for the space and help themselves to anything which can be eaten.

The daily routine varies according to the season. Usually there is a period of morning chanting and meditation at 3.30 a.m. in a large open sālā on the edge of the forest, followed by a leaf sweeping period for the lay guests while the monks go out at dawn on their almsround. The meal is taken at 8.00 a.m. and is followed by a period

of cleaning chores. From then until mid-afternoon there is free time, and besides spending that time in meditation people will make use of the well-equipped library to read and study. At 4.30 p.m. the community gathers for tea which is an informal affair where questions can be raised and things discussed in a good humoured spirit. A couple of days a week are kept as silent days; one when all formal meetings are cancelled and the other on which the community follows a structured practice routine together. On these evenings a formal talk is given.



The atmosphere of the monastery also varies according to the season. During the three months of the Rains Retreat (*vassa* in Pāli, *pansa* in Thai) the community is quite stable, since the Saṅgha members are not allowed to travel away for more than six days during this period. This is a time of focussed practice and study, in particular the study of the monastic discipline is undertaken during these three months. At the end of *vassa* comes the *kaṭhina*, the ceremonial presentation of cloth by the laity which is collectively sewn into a robe by members of the community who spent the *vassa* together. This is one of the biggest festivals of the year, and draws the community together before monks move on to other monasteries

or return from other places to live here. There is also a tradition amongst the branch monasteries of Wat Nong Pa Phong to attend one another's Kaṭhina ceremonies, and so it is a month of travelling here and there, listening all through the night to Dhamma talks and trying to stay awake and centred amidst the swirling changes going on around one. For new monks who are just starting to find their feet in their first vassa this time can be quite disorientating.

When the wind swings around to blow from the north the local people say that this marks the beginning of the cold season. As the rain stops and the weather turns cooler people fly kites in the almost continuous breeze, flying them high over the rice fields. They attach a device to them which plays a low, melancholy kind of tune over and over, and this characterizes the atmosphere of the cold season. This is really the most pleasant time of the year here and it is common for senior monks from England to come visiting during this period from late October until February. Last cold season we had Bhante Gunaratana from Virginia in October, Ajan Munindo in November, Ajans Pasanno and Viradhammo in December and Ajans Sumedho and Attapemo in January. Luang Por Sumedho comes to Thailand annually for the commemorative celebrations for Luang Por Cha, which are held at Wat Nong Pa Phong in the week leading up to the anniversary of his death and cremation (which was one year later) on January 16<sup>th</sup>.

The cold season is also a time when frequent trips are made out to the nearest of our small hermitages. Poo Jom Gom — which means 'little pointed hill' — is situated on the Laotian border about 150 km from here and is set in a large area of national parkland. Four or five monks stay there most of the time and live spread out over an area of about two square miles — some in caves others in simple thatched kutis. Some of these dwellings look out over the great Mekhong river that forms the border between Thailand and Laos, and which flows south from China, touching Burma, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia before reaching the sea in Southern Vietnam. It's one of the world's great rivers, comparable to the Amazon, the Nile and the Mississippi in length. At the moment, just a few little motorized canoes ply back and forth linking the villages on either bank, which share one language and one set of customs. In a few years though, this area will probably develop and be much like the rest of

Thailand, but at present it is still quite remote and is touched only lightly by the hand of modern culture.

At the end of February almost the entire community travels across the country to our other hermitage Tao Dam on the Burmese border in Saiyok National Park, beyond Kanchanaburi. This leaves just a skeleton crew minding the monastery and so things quieten down as the hot season begins. Wat Pa Nanachat remains quiet for two



months until the Saṅgha returns at the beginning of May. During the following months leading up to the pansa there are more comings and goings, people returning to Wat Pa Nanachat to spend vassa here, and young monks being sent off to Thai branch monasteries to spend a year away. By the time of Luang Por Cha's birthday celebrations at Wat Nong Pa Phong on June 17<sup>th</sup> it is usually clear who is going to be where for the next four months or so and the monastery starts to take on much more settled and stable atmosphere.

It was this situation I encountered when I first arrived here, and for the first few months the impressions I formed were based upon this background feeling of stability in the community. It was some surprise to see what happened here in the months after vassa when all of a sudden there was a lot of coming and going. This is quite difficult and challenging for people who are still fairly young in the



training. As a young monk spending your first vassa here you're just starting to get your bearings and settle into the training with the group of companions you've been living with over the last three months. Suddenly the vassa is over and two people have disrobed, three people have shown up from other places, three more have left for other monasteries and the character of the Saṅgha has completely changed. This is quite a contrast to monastic life in England where there simply aren't the opportunities to leave and go elsewhere. You can go to Ratanagiri or Chithurst if you've been at Amaravati for a long time and are feeling in need of a change, but that's about it, apart from going abroad. Hence the atmosphere in the communities there is often more stable, and I think it is easier there in some ways to stay put and endure the difficulties you might have. And from that you can learn and gain strength.

The wealth of different monastic opportunities here in Thailand is both a blessing and a curse — one is surrounded by a culture that still carries the monastic form with considerable confidence, and this can be tremendously uplifting for a monk who has grown up in the U.K. For me simply going on alms-round every day in the traditional way has felt like such a shot in the arm, after thirteen years of not having had the opportunity. The faith of the laypeople in Thailand is an unending source of support, and there are opportunities here to meet and live with monks of wide experience and of great wisdom. On the negative side it can be difficult to settle. There are always people coming and going with tales of this place or that, this Ajan or that, and for someone who has a lot of restlessness or discontent the temptation to go off and explore new pastures is indeed great.

Reflecting on this, I feel quite grateful to have spent my first thirteen years or so living in just three places. When you stick with one thing you see how moods and atmospheres in a place change on their own. At times it is difficult, but uprooting and going somewhere else is not always the answer. As Luang Por Cha once said of a monk who was forever going off in search of a better place to practise:

“He's got dog-shit in his bag. He gets to a place and thinks, 'Oh, this looks promising, nice and peaceful, good teacher, good community, I should be OK here', and he puts his bag down and settles in. Then after a while, 'Hmmm, what's that bad

smell? I can't stand for that, the place seems to be full of it. Oh well, better try and find somewhere else', and he picks up his bag and off he goes."

So in just staying put in a place one has to be willing to roll with the changes, which can help to develop some internal stability. One has to investigate things, reflecting again and again that this is not going to last, and this one, and this one, and so on, just letting go, letting go and not creating problems over how it changes. It's a relief to realize that one does not have to fix things or try to hold them steady in order to feel at ease. The problem comes from being convinced that they should be otherwise, when, perennially, it is 'just this way'.



One factor that has brought an increased sense of stability to Wat Pa Nanachat is the decision by Tan Ajan Jayasāro to stay put here for five years as abbot. In the past Ajan Jayasāro and Ajan Pasanno would take it in turns to administer the monastery for a year at a time, which allowed each of them to have a period of retreat every other year. Looking back however, I think that Ajan Jayasāro wonders how good this was for the community. An additional thing that

has made being abbot more workable is the new abbot's kuti. The previous one was virtually open on all sides, like living on a platform, and only a stone's throw from the sālā, which meant that visitors could seek the abbot out at any time of the day or night. No wonder it was stressful — the abbot had very little privacy there. I thought it a healthy sign, then, when I saw that Ajan Jayasāro was having a new abbot's kuti built — quite a distance from the sālā in a less conspicuous location — and with a much greater feeling of privacy to it. "That's significant", I remember thinking. "If the abbot knows how to look after himself, can take space and find some recuperative solitude here, he won't feel the need to escape to get some time on his own. That seems like a healthy direction".

These days, Ajan Jayasāro has commented that there is a more harmonious atmosphere here than he can ever remember, and whereas monks in the old days used to look forward to getting past the five vassa mark so that they could go off on their own, there is less of this kind of talk, and monks who have grown up here in the last five years seem to regard Wat Pa Nanachat as home. When the community is harmonious, the abbot is better supported and he is more effective at what he does. So it becomes a more attractive prospect to stay here.

Here then are just a few fleeting impressions of this mysterious multifaceted place. One of the things I've heard Ajan Jayasāro comment upon more than once is how he feels when people talk about what Wat Pah Nanachat is — "Oh, you don't want to go to Wat Pah Nanachat. It's like this or that", or "Wat Pah Nanachat is a really great place". He says that he's been around Wat Pah Nanachat for over twenty years and the place is constantly changing. You can't say for certain what it is, even though people try. They take away a snapshot of how it might have been at a particular time they visited or lived there, and then they tell people, "Wat Pah Nanachat is like this", grinding out the same old stale impressions year after year when in fact it has long since changed. Well, if the abbot himself declares that he doesn't really know what Wat Pah Nanachat is like, then who are the rest of us to presume to say?



# The Beauty of Sīla

Ajan Jayasāro

AJAN CHA TAUGHT US to constantly bear in mind that we are *samaṇas*; we have left behind the household life for an existence single-minded devoted to peace and awakening. He would say that now we must die to our old worldly habits, behaviour and values, and surrender to a new higher standard. But how exactly do we follow the way of the *samaṇa*? In the *Ovāda Pāṭimokkha*<sup>4</sup> the Buddha laid down the most basic and important guidelines for the *samaṇa*'s path, and there we find that harmlessness is the principle he most emphasized. Through our way of life as *samaṇas* we offer the gift of harmlessness to the world. People may be inspired by how we live our lives, they may be indifferent, or they may even be contemptuous of us, but whatever the various reactions to a Buddhist monk people might have, fear is highly unlikely to count amongst them. People see a Buddhist monk and they know that he is not dangerous to them. Animals see a Buddhist monk and they sense that he is no threat to them. This is a singular thing.

It's very unusual, isn't it, to be so scrupulous and so caring for even the smallest kind of creature — not just human beings, not just the cuddly lovable kinds of creatures like Shetland ponies and fluffy cats, but even poisonous centipedes, geckos and biting ants. You find that after you've been keeping the Vinaya precepts sincerely for a while the idea of depriving even a venomous snake or a small poisonous insect of its life becomes almost inconceivable. With the cultivation of *sīla* and *mettā-bhāvanā* it's just no longer an option. Through our practice as *samaṇas* we are able to observe how closely the devotion to moral precepts is connected to being truly

4 *Not to do evil, to do good, to purify the mind — this is the teaching of the Buddhas.  
The best austerity is patient endurance. The Buddhas say Nibbāna is supreme.  
One who has gone forth does not harm others; one who harms others is not a samaṇa.  
Not to revile, not to do any harm, to practise the Pāṭimokkha restraint, to be moderate in taking food, to dwell in a secluded place, to devote oneself to the higher mental training — this is the teaching of the Buddhas.*

benevolent and altruistic. If we continue to harm other beings by body and speech, our expressions of mettā remain hollow and cannot lead us to peace. At the same time, if we attempt to uphold a strict level of sīla without a spirit of goodwill and compassion, without a kind and forgiving heart, then we can easily fall into the traps of self righteousness, a false sense of superiority, and contempt for the unvirtuous. This is what is called losing the plot.



Our practice of sīla and mettā starts to mature when we don't consider that our life and our comfort have any more ultimate significance than that of even a housefly or a mosquito. Why should our life be any more valuable than that of a malarial mosquito? I can't think of any logical reason myself. The Buddha said that as all living beings desire to be happy and fear pain just as we do, then we should abstain from all actions that deprive beings of happiness or increase their pain. Sīla is an offering of *dāna*, a gift of fearlessness and protection to all sentient beings. To live our lives within the boundaries de-

defined by the precepts, mindfulness of our commitment has to be constantly maintained; sensitivity and skill are continually called for. With wisdom and understanding of the law of *kamma*, we abstain from killing, harming, and hurting any sentient being through our actions and speech. Gradually, our good intentions unbetraysed by our actions, we are able to tame our unruly minds.

'Not-doing' or refraining, is a kind of creativity. This morning I was speaking to a group of art students. I mentioned to them how much I admire Chinese brush paintings. In these works of art only a very small portion of the canvas is painted on; the effect and the power of the picture is conveyed by the relationship between the painted

form or the painted area, and that which is not painted. In fact the large blank area of the white canvas is what gives the black brush strokes their power and beauty. So if you were to say to a Chinese landscape painter, ‘what a waste of good paper, there’s a big white area there that you haven’t painted on at all’, he would probably snort with derision. But in terms of human behaviour, sometimes we don’t see that. I think it’s rarely appreciated that certain things that we do have weight, beauty, integrity, nobility, precisely because of other thing that we don’t do. And that skilful abstention from actions, from certain kinds of speech, or from certain kinds of proliferation or imagination — this is the creativity.

Artists and writers mention this often. They tend to agree that the art lies in the editing — in what is left out. Many writers will say that it is much more difficult to write in a simple style, than in an ornate, complicated one. Simplicity is a skill to be learned; it does not come easily. And this is another aspect of our life, isn’t it, making simplicity a standard to return to. We must seek not only to refrain from the immoral but also from the needlessly disturbing. We can measure our practice by how simple our life is. We can ask ourselves: Is my life getting more complicated? If it is then maybe we need to re-establish our attention on the basics. Pictures need frames. We need wise limits for our actions. Otherwise our lives become cluttered and our energies dissipated.

Appreciating the austere beauty of the simple, taking joy in simplicity leads the mind to peace. What could be more simple than the *samatha* object in meditation? Whether it is the breathing process or the word *Buddho*, the experience of unifying the mind in meditation goes against the whole tendency for mental and emotional proliferation (*papañca*). Through meditation we acquire the taste for simplicity in every aspect of our lives. In the external sphere, in our relationships with others and the physical world we rely on certain abiding principles that support the simplicity we seek. The most important of these is non-oppression towards oneself and others.

As *samaṇas* we seek to imbue our actions with a reverence for life, a spirit of kindheartedness, benevolence and altruism. And we learn to make that reverence for life unqualified. The sanctity of life, and the potential of all beings for awakening forms the basis for the 227 precepts of the Pāṭimokkha. When Ajan Cha asked Ajan Man about

the discipline and voiced his fears that there were just too many rules to make it a practical guide for conduct, Ajan Man pointed to *hiri*<sup>5</sup> and *ottappa*<sup>6</sup> as the heart of Vinaya. Develop these two things he said and your practice of the Vinaya will be impeccable. The commentaries state that these two dhammas are based respectively on respect for self and respect for others. Respect for life, our own and others, is the foundation of noble conduct. So we train to strengthen our devotion to harmlessness — harmlessness to others, harmlessness of oneself — to bear the welfare of self and others always in mind. The more you open up to the pervasive nature of suffering the more compassion arises, the more care you take about the quality of your actions. You realize that whenever you are not part of the solution, then you're bound to be part of the problem.

In fact the welfare of self and others is complementary. If we truly understand what our own welfare is, then we don't neglect the welfare of others, because in helping others we grow in virtue. If we really understand what the welfare of others is we don't neglect our own welfare, because the more peaceful and wise we are the more we are able to truly benefit others. When there seems to be a conflict between our welfare and that of others, it is usually a sign of confusion about the nature of welfare.

A second fundamental principle underlying our lives as samanās is that of contentment. We are taught to cultivate gratitude and appreciation for the robes, almsfood, lodgings and medicines that we receive, whatever their quality. We go against the worldly desire for the biggest, the finest and best. We're willing to make do with second best or third best. We find we can be happy with the worst, the things that nobody else wants. That is a wonderful discovery. Whatever we are given, we remind ourselves, is good enough. 'Beggars should not be choosers.' Even the coarsest requisites that we use have been offered freely with faith, and have been purified by the benevolence of the donor. It is our responsibility to make use of the requisites that are given to us with mindfulness and wisdom. The Buddha said that the merit gained by the donor is directly

5 A sense of shame regarding unwholesome actions.

6 An intelligent fear of the consequences of unwholesome actions.



affected by the purity of mind by which we receive and make use of their gift. Our life, even in solitude, is thus always being affected and affecting others.

To be content means that we don't waste our time scheming about getting things that we don't have or don't have a right to. It frees the body for more wholesome activities and frees the mind for more wholesome thoughts. As *samaṇas* we do not covet the *borikan* of other monks with narrow beady eyes. We don't even touch the possessions of others unless we have been invited to.

The Vinaya lays down many detailed rules concerning our behaviour towards the material world. In the forest tradition we're taught that the second expulsion offence can be incurred by theft of even the smallest object, something the value of one baht (about three US cents). In the *Anusat*, which forms part of the *upasampadā* ceremony, the preceptor teaches the new monk to take nothing whatsoever that does not belong to him, even as much as a blade of grass.

To take on that standard — a single blade of grass — is the essence of 'leaving home'. It entails a radical shift of perspective from lay attitudes. Such a standard differs not only from that of criminals and thieves but also that of most 'law-abiding' citizens. There are few people who would not take advantage of some kind of little loophole in the law if they were absolutely sure they could get away with it. 'Everyone does it, I'd be a fool not to.' Moral rectitude is not unknown outside the walls of monasteries of course — I'm not by any means suggesting we have the monopoly on honesty — but for a whole community to abide by such principles scrupulously is extremely rare.

The essence of our daily life as *samaṇas* consists of putting forth effort to abandon defilements and develop wholesome qualities through meditation practice. We spend hours a day sitting cross-legged and walking on our *jongrom* paths. Even if we may not always be so satisfied with the results of our efforts we can at least take heart from the fact that we've done something practical to purify our minds. By comparison the training in *sīla* seems nondescript and its effects intangible.

To maintain our devotion to precepts and *kor watr* we need to remember that spiritual life is not just about doing, it's also about not doing. Abstaining from things is neither immediately inspiring nor dramatic. We don't see sudden progress in non-harming or in non-acquisitiveness, or in not coveting things which are not ours, in the same way that we might from a good sit or a good retreat. But there is movement, even if it is like that of the hour hand of a clock. And *sīla* is a treasure. It is merit, it is *paramī*. How wonderful it is that by living this life sincerely *sīla* is steadily accumulating and maturing in our heart. The Buddha said that *sīla* is the most beautiful adornment for a human being, it's the only fragrance that is all-pervasive. But the skill is to remember it, to recollect the beauty of virtue, bringing it up to refresh and give joy to your heart and mind.

The third principle underlying the life of a *samaṇa* deals with integrity, restraint and chasteness in matters related to the sexual instincts of the body. That a group of young men — most of you young, Ajan Vipassi and I are getting on a bit — are able to lead a completely celibate life, this is almost unbelievable to many people in the world. They assume that we have some kind of sexual release, that we must have homosexual relationships or else that we masturbate. They don't think it's possible to live this way. People these days can hardly credit the idea that a community of men can live in a completely chaste way, and not be utterly screwed-up, repressed or misogynist. Maybe we are! — if we were repressed we wouldn't realize it would we? But I don't think so. I think our community is living the 'Holy Life' in a resolute but intelligent way. And though it's not difficult all the time, for almost everyone there are periods when it is definitely challenging. It's a struggle, and it is fitting to feel a sense of wholesome pride in the fact that you can do it.

It's only through taking this impeccable standard that we can begin to understand the whole nature of sexuality. We begin to see its conditioned nature, how it arises and passes away. We begin to see the suffering inherent in any attachment to it, how impersonal it is, what feeds it, what gives power to it, whether it be physical conditions, food, lack of sense restraint or indulgence in imagination. We begin to see it as a conditioned phenomenon. But we can only have a

distance from it, be able to reflect on it and see it for what it is by refraining from its physical and verbal expressions.

There is an important point about defilements here: that we have to pin them down on the mental level before we can let go of them. And the way we pin something down on the mental plane is that we refrain consciously, or endure through the intention to express it physically or verbally. This is where the relationship between *sīla*, *samādhi* and *paññā* becomes very clear. As long as we're still expressing sexual feelings physically, or indulging in lascivious or careless speech about sexual matters, then we can never isolate it. It's moving, it's still receiving energy. We're still keeping it in motion, we're still feeding the flames. So we seek to counter the stream of craving. And to do that successfully we must aspire to transcend sexuality altogether. It is that aspiration, as much as the actual restraint, that distinguishes the *samaṇa* from the layperson.



So as celibate monks we take a whole new stance toward our sexual feelings, towards women — half of the human race. We practise looking on women who are older than us as mothers, if they're just a few years older than us as older sisters, if a few years younger than us as younger sisters. We substitute wholesome perceptions of women for the sensual. This is a beautiful gift that we can give women. An attractive woman comes into the monastery, and we refrain from indulging in sexual perceptions, sexual thoughts about that woman and substitute it with wholesome reflections, whether it is consciously trying to perceive the woman as a sister, or wishing that person freedom from suffering. Practising *mettā* we reflect, 'may they be well'.

We offer women the gift of a wholesome response to them as human beings rather than following the instinctive attraction or obsession with their body or some aspect of their physical appearance. Through that intention we experience an immediate elevation from

the blind instinctual level of our being to the uniquely human. It is a movement from the coarse to the refined. Indeed, the Pāli word *brahmacariya*, which we translate into English as celibacy, literally means ‘the way of the gods’. In other words, within the human realm, a chaste life led voluntarily and with contentment is the most refined, sublime and happy form of existence.

As a fourth principle in the Dhamma, we have a love of truth. We endeavour to uphold integrity and honesty in every aspect of our life. Honesty includes here non-deceit, non-trickiness, non-hypocrisy, not trying to appear in a way that is not a true reflection of how we are. This includes not trying to hide our faults, or to exaggerate our good points. The goal is to develop clarity and straightness. This may also be seen as a two-way process. The more honest we are with ourselves about what we’re feeling and thinking, then the easier we find it to be honest with other people. Similarly, the more we train ourselves to be honest in our external dealings, the easier it becomes to be honest about what’s going on within us.

An important obstacle to honesty is the sense of self. We often attach to an idea of how we are or how we would like to be. We find it difficult, we feel resistance to owning up to those things that don’t fit the picture of ourselves that we identify with. We feel embarrassed, ashamed, we find good reasons to dissemble. Everybody likes to be liked and respected. Nobody likes to lose face. Integrity demands courage. An unflinching gaze and a devotion to truth — these are powers, strengths to be developed.

I read something in a book about the *Jātakas* the other day that really struck me. In the *Jātakas*, the *bodhisatta*, the Buddha-to-be, through his countless number of lives throughout the myriad realms and different kinds of birth, broke every kind of precept except for one. The Buddha-to-be never told a lie or spoke a mistruth. There is no *Jātaka* story, as far as I am aware, where you find the *bodhisatta* misrepresenting the truth. Sometimes he may kill, on some occasions he steals, commits adultery, and gets drunk, but nowhere throughout the *Jātakas* does the *bodhisatta* consciously lie.

Truth is power. In many lifetimes the *bodhisatta* harnesses the power of his speech through an *adhiṭṭhāna*, a resolute determination: ‘I have never in my life done this or done that. By the power of these

words may such and such happen.’ And it happens. In some profound inexplicable way the truth exerts a tangible impact on the physical world. It can affect events in the most marvellous kind of way. When one has built up that power of truth, one can draw on that power of integrity with a sincere, solemn declaration.

So in the path of awakening we take a joy and wholesome pride in caring for the truth. We contemplate a word the Buddha would use, *saccanurak*, having fidelity to the truth, loving the truth, being devoted to truth, and being careful to be honest about what we really know; it means having the clarity when you speak, to only utter words that we know to be accurate; being open to receiving others viewpoints and not thinking that what we presently know is timeless absolute truth; learning to distinguish between what we know, what we believe, what we think, and what we perceive — not confusing them. Often when people say they know something they mean they believe it. Religious people may often consider their strong faith to be direct knowledge. The Buddha said that we care for the truth by being very scrupulous in distinguishing what we know as a direct experience from what we believe to be the truth.

Lastly, the fifth principle and the fifth precept is devotion to sobriety. The word ‘sobriety’ doesn’t have such a pleasant ring to it. In my mind it used to bring up an image of thin pinched people in tight clothes sitting on the edge of chairs in rooms with flowered wallpaper, sipping tea and talking about the weather. Carlos Castaneda’s use of the word rescued it for me. Now I’ve come to like its hard edges. Here I am using sobriety to signify that clarity and sharpness of mind that is so infinitely superior to confused, dull or altered states of consciousness.

After my travels and adventures in the East as a layman, on my way back to England, I stopped off to visit a friend in the mountains in Austria. She was away for a while and I was in her house by myself. Flicking through some of her books, I came across a pamphlet *Questions and Answers with Lama Govinda*, a transcript of a session he’d had with some Westerners in Darjeeling. I was particularly taken by one of his replies. Somebody asked Lama Govinda, “What do you think of mind-expanding drugs?” and he said, “Well, if you’ve got an ignorant mind all you get is expanded ignorance”. That was it for me: game, set and match to sobriety.

Mind-expanding, mind-altering drugs and altered states of consciousness are all still within the sphere of darkness. It's still playing around with different modes of ignorance. Even if someone experiences different dimensions of reality, without the wisdom and discernment of *paññā* you can't benefit from it. You may transcend one particular room of ignorance, but you're still in the same building of unknowing. When you're not out of the building, you're still in the prison.

So this sobriety means turning away from the whole razzmatazz of abnormal experiences, visions and physiological and mental states that are available through liquids, fumes, powders and pills. It means grounding yourself in the simple down to earth clarity of awareness — of the eyes seeing forms, ears hearing sounds, nose contacting odours, the tongue tasting flavours, the body experiencing sensations and the mind cognizing ideas. Seeing the true nature of these things. Being with these things as they are. And taking joy in that. Coming more and more to focus on the one who knows, the knower and the knowing. This is the great mystery of our life. We don't want to fuzz and confuse that. We want to clarify it. As we start to clear away all the garbage of the mind, the sense of knowing becomes clearer and sharper.

Luang Por Tate, one of Luang Boo Man's senior disciples stresses the sense of knowing. He talks about the *jit* and the *jy*. By *jy* he means the sense of equanimity, the clarity of knowing; *jit* refers to thinking, feeling, perceiving. This is his way of talking. And he gives a very simple means of understanding what he's talking about. He says to hold your breath for a few moments. Your thinking stops. That's *jy*. Start breathing again — and as the thinking reappears, that's *jit*. And he talks about getting more and more in contact with *jy*, as the mind becomes calm in meditation. He doesn't talk about a *samādhi nimitta* or a mental counterpart to the breath, he talks about turning towards the one who knows the breath. So as the breath becomes more and more refined, then the sense of knowing the breath becomes more and more prominent. He says then to turn away from the breath and go into the one who knows the breath. That will take you to *appanā-samādhi*.

So it's sharpening this sense of knowing. Knowing the one who knows. And that's what will take you to peace. But this ability — to

go from the obsession with the content of experience back to the state of experiencing and that which is experiencing — is simplifying, bringing the mind more and more together. The mind becomes more and more composed and more and more one-pointed.

So this evening I invite you to contemplate these principles which give grace, beauty and meaning to life. Recognize the extent to which they are already a part of your life, and continue to consciously cultivate them: principles of harmlessness, honesty, integrity, chastity, love of and devotion to truth, devotion to truth, sobriety, and above all the constant clarification and sharpening of the sense of knowing.







## Mindfulness with Mosquitoes

Tan Saññamo

*I find it a challenge to be able to translate many of the Pāli words found in the Suttas into day-to-day experience. Sometimes even the most common words such as sati or saddhā can remain at best loosely defined concepts in our minds; how we personally experience these concepts in our minds is not clearly understood. Is it not worthwhile taking the time to investigate our use of these terms for ourselves? I have thought so, and at times have been surprised at what a little discursive thought can drudge up. When these terms are not clear I have noticed that doubt tends to infiltrate through this vagueness. By defining the terms more clearly and connecting them to our experience, not only do we patch up obscurities but we can identify the presence of the qualities these terms refer to and their nature to rise and fall. The following is an extract from my journal relating to an incident that has since redefined and clarified experientially what I take to be mindfulness in action.*

TODAY DURING OUR EVENING MEETING at the outside meditation hall, clouds of bloodthirsty mosquitoes descended upon our vulnerable and defenceless Saṅgha. Lately I have been struggling to understand how to work skilfully with unpleasant situations that inevitably crop up in life. This was a fortuitous occasion to explore the possibilities! A Dhamma talk was offered this evening. When it ended, I was feeling unusually content, with no real motivation to pursue a particular meditation object. Instead I was satisfied with watching the momentum of my thoughts naturally still and settle. Inspired by such a peaceful mind-state, I generously offered my exposed right arm and shoulder to the mosquitoes. The response was overwhelming, so much so that my arm started twitching involuntarily from the strain of hosting such a banquet. Frustration began to grow and the din in my mind that was telling me that nothing was going on and that everything was OK was not very convincing. Basically, I was being eaten alive. I didn't want to admit, "This is unpleasant". Instead, thoughts like, "If you just get concentrated, you won't feel it" or "Develop compassion" arose in my mind.

In unpleasant situations I find I habitually try to convince myself of a solution rather than looking directly at the matter at hand. The thoughts play the part of 'the one who knows' and supply answers for 'the one who doesn't'. Though these suggestions and advice are not necessarily wrong, they don't give space for a real understanding or acceptance of the situation to arise.

Eventually however, my capacity for abuse reached its threshold. With patience and goodwill exhausted, I withdrew my offering back into the folds of my robe. Not a minute later, a mosquito landed on the back of my head. Because both of my arms were bound beneath my robes I was helpless. How exasperating! What happened, though, was interesting. I was being mindful of the sensations. I noted the mind and the object of the mind. From looking more deeply, their separate natures became increasingly distinct as did their connections and the way they influence each other.

When pain arises in formal practice, often I can't bring myself to have an honest look at it. However, tonight the mind admitted, "This body and mind are agitated! The entire sensory experience is unpleasant. Telling myself how I should feel only further obscures how I do feel". I noticed that through the admittance of these feelings, the pain did not increase. Instead, a courage born of this detached acceptance began to strengthen which gave me confidence to look even more closely at what was going on. The pain continued but no longer seemed to afflict the mind. At that point the sensations were more interesting than unpleasant; no aversion towards them



was present and so there was no desire to end the sitting. Mindfulness and concentration were growing together! This was a wonderful surprise: despite all the violent sensations, I found the mind to be quite concentrated! "Interesting", I thought, "even if the pain is stabbing and coarse, with enough courage and resolve to observe the sensations, one can just as well attend to them as any other mind object".

Perhaps though, the more important insight which arose was on observing the relationship between mindfulness and concentration (at least in how I experience them). What I noticed was that mindfulness indicates the object of our attention, while concentration is a measure of the purity of the mindfulness itself. When we speak in terms of concentration, we are really speaking about the quality of our attention. In this sense, mindfulness and concentration go hand in hand.

Suppose we look at a flower garden. A casual glance will likely give us general impressions, such as the variety of colours, and the general layout, but we will likely not be able to identify any of the flowers. If we focus in on a specific area, we may see the flowers more clearly and the petals and shapes become distinctive. By looking closer still, the stamen, anther, and the pollen may come into view. In this example, it can be seen how mindfulness responds to an increased quality of attention. With more concentration, the object we are mindful of comes more into focus.

In our day-to-day life, our attention is diverse for the most part. The many sense impressions we receive in consciousness dilute the quality of our attention. When we accommodate this variety, the quality of our attention becomes spread out, less unified and less focussed. Alternately, the more unified our attention becomes, the greater the degree of discernment. The more discernment we are capable of, increasingly subtle mind objects become accessible for investigation.

The more concentration developed, I felt the rise and fall of sensations became more clear. I saw that the continuity of events we mechanically string together in everyday consciousness hides the immediate presence of a single point or object. For the unconcentrated mind, it is difficult to discern the constant rising

and falling of phenomena. As the mind grew more concentrated, I was able to get closer to seeing things arise and cease. The series of events became more distinct. As a result, the illusion of continuity began to waver. I watched the process. It was then I felt I had a choice — fix my attention on a single object or contemplate the continuous flux of change. However, being unable to sustain this concentration, I lapsed back into a more normal state of awareness. Once again, these sensations appeared to me as a continuity.

We all have views and opinions about life and about meditation that we hold on to and part of the task of meditation is learning how to let go of our views. As I reflected upon this evening, what struck me was that the night's struggle was not so much about how I related to the meditation object, rather it was more about the difficulty of recognizing and addressing the personal views that I attach to. Letting go of views is difficult. These views define our relationship to certain aspects of experience. Relinquishing them leaves us insecure, without a strategy for dealing with the unknown. When we do manage to let go, this space provides the opportunity for wisdom to arise. With more clarity around the basic nature of the mind, I found that certain assumptions and tendencies I held around meditation began to surface. For instance, I observed how I have been sabotaging the more contemplative elements in meditation practice by attempting to force the process rather than letting it organically unfold.

Contemplation involves a great deal of receptivity. When we attach to and limit ourselves to our preconceived ideas, our receptivity is compromised. This is an obstacle. Sometimes I give undue attention to phenomena that may arise as a by-product of my concentration. By attending to these new and often fragile objects, I end up abandoning my original meditation object. As a result, everything falls apart! This approach has never been successful. Oddly enough, I had never seemed to notice...





## Progress without Movement

Sāmaṇera Khemavaro

MY FIRST ENCOUNTER WITH THE DHAMMA was about eight months ago at the end of 1998. A friend of mine, Al, was undergoing a short term ordination as a monk in a temple near Bangkok and invited me to come along to the ceremony and spend a week at the monastery. Al's teacher was an English monk, Phra Peter. When I first heard some of the Buddha's teachings from Phra Peter, even though the concepts were all new to me, something resonated in my head. It was as if he was expressing something deep inside but inchoate in my consciousness. The teachings on kamma and sīla — if you do good then good things will happen to you and that your goodness will protect you from harm — these were teachings that I felt and have always tried to live by.

### New Experience Yet Familiar

While I believed in morality and ethics, I remained sceptical due to the association with Christian puritanism and self-righteousness. The Buddhist approach seemed to have a different tone. I found the teachings on keeping precepts quite attractive. I was taught that this is something you offer to the world and not something that is demanded from above. Another appealing aspect of Buddhism I found is that we are responsible for our own enlightenment. The Buddha discovered the path to Nibbāna but it is up to each one of us to make the effort and walk down that path. The first time Phra Peter told me about the goal of Buddhism, which is to do good, refrain from doing evil and to purify oneself, it felt so natural and familiar that I thought to myself, "If I were to verbalize the criteria or goal of my life, this would be it".

That whole week at the monastery in Nakorn Sawan, I felt a bit odd. While everything was new to me, there was something vaguely familiar about the monastic setting. I felt really at ease. For example, the daily devotional chant, even though it was in Pāli and I couldn't understand a word, gave me great inspiration and so I went to all morning and evening sessions. Phra Peter also introduced me to

meditation. Growing up in Los Angeles, a place of never ending new age/spiritual fads and fashion, I was prejudiced against meditation. Rather hastily, I lumped it with all that trendy, newfangled stuff. My initial impression of meditation and yoga was that it was something for bored corporate wives with little to do, the type who would only drink hyper-hygienic sparkling water with just a twist of lime organically grown on a politically correct commune and do some yoga or meditation before visiting her spiritual guru to have her aura examined.

Phra Peter felt my keen interest and offered to be my teacher if I wanted to pursue this religious path further. While I was grateful for the offer, I felt that a major component of being a monk was discipline and, unfortunately, this temple was a city temple which was somewhat lax in its interpretation of the Vinaya rules. For example, one monk owned a car and was driving it around on the temple grounds. So Phra Peter told me about Wat Pah Nanachat — he had spent some time at Amaravati, an affiliate branch monastery in England — and what he told me interested me, so I decided to visit. I still remember the powerful surges of conflicting emotions during my first few days at Wat Pah Nanachat. While the monastery is only an hour's flight away, my lifestyle as a stockbroker in Bangkok seemed worlds apart from the lifestyle of the monastery.

### **Past Life, Fast — Work Hard, Play Hard**

As a stockbroker, my life revolved around information, a constant flow (sometimes a whirlwind) of information. A large part of the job is to be able to sift through the stream of information and determine which piece of news will have an impact on the stock market. Hence, there is a relentless search for the most updated news and 'new' news. By nine o'clock in the morning I would have read four newspapers (two local, one regional, and one international), then I would continue to scan for further news updates from international news services (Reuters and Bloomberg) on the computers and check with the research department regarding recent developments of companies as well as broad economic and political trends.

Working in such a fast-paced environment, the momentum tends to continue throughout the day. After work, I would rush to the gym



for a quick workout, then meet up with friends and colleagues for drinks and then dinner. I would be out until about 10:30–11:00 p.m. two or three times during the week. The weekends would be filled with brunches and lunches, dinners and clubs. Sometimes I would be literally running from one appointment to the next. Rarely would I be home before midnight. And then there would be weekend trips to Phuket, Chiang Mai, Hong Kong or Singapore. It would be not uncommon for me to go to the airport from work on Friday night and come back to the office on Monday morning straight from the airport, having spent the weekend in Hong Kong or Singapore. I was brought up with the motto: *Work hard, play hard*. Unfortunately, nobody told me about contentment.

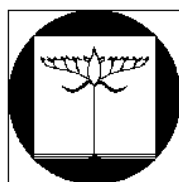
So, in spite of all the sensory diversions and options available to me, during the past couple of years I was feeling bored and disenchanted with life. Things started to slow at work due to the economic recession. But regarding my personal life, I began to notice that no matter where I was or what I was doing, there was this undercurrent of boredom and existential anxiety. I would be at some ‘fabulous party’ or the ‘in’ club and then this feeling would come over me and I would look around and realize that everybody looked as lost as I was and seemed to be trying to fill up their lives with the same type of material possessions: clothes and cars, and sensory diversions like going to restaurants and clubs and travelling to strange and exotic places, or self-annihilation through drugs and alcohol.

### **Life in the Monastery — Paradoxes and Parables**

Coming from such a fast-pace and sensory driven world to Wat Pah Nanachat, where it seemed that the only sounds were from the swaying bamboo bushes and leaves falling, was a bit of a shock. It was like running on the treadmill with the headphones on listening to music with the volume on high and suddenly someone comes up and pulls the plug. Coming from such a sensual world, I remember feeling at times quite lost and ill at ease with the calm and stillness of monastery life. I can recall experiencing many mood swings during my first week. Yet overall, I was quite attracted to the simple and peaceful life in the monastery and the structured environment of having scheduled activities throughout the day really appealed to me.

In contrast to the myriad choices in the outside world, this structured and simple monastic lifestyle may seem stifling and monotonous. But nothing could be further from my experience so far. As a layperson, I was rushing from one sensory experience to the next, constantly planning where I should be next but never really being present wherever I was. If I was eating dinner then my mind would be planning where to go afterwards: 'Should I go to so and so's party or hit the bars or both?' And then there was the dilemma of tomorrow: with whom should I go to lunch. And that would lead to where should we go to lunch, and the same goes for dinner and then bars and clubs, and on and on. The irony in such a go-go and 'glamorous' life, was that everything ended in boredom or, worse, oblivion. Most of the time I could not remember what I did yesterday. I remember thinking: 'I got cheated somehow! I have done everything I am supposed to do. They all told me that if I worked hard, followed all the rules, and paid my dues, success would come, and with that everlasting happiness. By all accounts, I am the poster-child of success. I am barely in my thirties, bringing home six-figure paychecks, dining at the best restaurants, taking holidays anywhere in the world and buying whatever I want. Yet I feel so bored and discontented. This is utterly, utterly unfair!!'

In my fast-paced life there were endless variations, yet my habitual way of reacting limited my world. A good image to illustrate this is a small circle flying through space: although the space surrounding the circle is infinite yet my habitual way of responding and seeing things limits my vision to just that small circle. In a similar way, the Wat Pah Nanachat logo of a lotus in a square is for me a meaningful image for monastic life. While the lotus is contained in the square it has an endless variation in terms of its positions. Here at the monastery the slight differences and nuances in the monastic life fascinate me. Every day I am excited to wake up to the endless permutations of life in the monastery. How mindful will I be during the meal? Walking on almsround? In my interactions with different members of the Saṅgha?



The scenery of the sunrise over the rice fields outside the gate is a source of constant surprise and delight. Mundane things like the

texture of the gravel road I walk on during the almsround take my interest. Is it soft and muddy from the rain last night or is it hard from being baked by the hot sun yesterday? What is the sensation on the bottom of my feet? Why does it hurt more today than yesterday? Am I mindful of my steps or am I off somewhere plotting a revolution? And then there are my mind states in the morning. Am I happy and relaxed? Or a bit anxious and irritated? And what is the cause of these different feelings? And am I mindful of them as feelings or do I get caught in them? I am still quite mystified by the paradox of how rich and diverse life at the monastery can be.

On one level, life at the monastery can seem quite repetitious and regimented. With few exceptions, certain things take place every day. We go on almsround at five thirty in the morning and have our one meal at about eight o'clock after that an hour of chores, followed by more work or meditation and then it is tea time at 4:30 p.m. Yet within that regulated environment there are countless variations and permutations within the surroundings and within myself as well. It is through this repetitious and structured environment that I learn about myself, how I perceive and react to my surroundings.

There are many levels to the practice. For example, at meal time, how mindful am I walking down the line to collect the alms food? Did I exercise self-restraint and take only a few pieces of mango and leave some for the people behind me in line? Or did my defilements overwhelm me and I filled half my bowl full of mangoes? Am I exercising sense restraint in terms of keeping to myself or am I anxiously looking at the front of the line to see which monks taking more than his share of the mangoes and feeling ill-will towards him!

### **The Practice — Walking the Walk**

Two areas of the monastic practice that I find interesting in its contrast to my laylife are: the practice of meditating throughout the night on Observance Day (*Wan Phra*) and eating once a day. Before being a stockbroker, I was an investment analyst, which entailed writing research reports about companies listed on the stock market. Working for ING Barings, one of the top international brokerages in Thailand, there was a heavy workload and strict publishing deadlines. The company's mantra was: *Publish or perish*. Hence, it was not

uncommon to work throughout the night to meet a particular deadline. As a matter of fact it was about once a month that I had to pull an 'all nighter' to get a certain report published by the deadline. During these all night sessions, we had lots of help to keep the adrenaline going. There would be a group of people at the office to help finish the report, and then there was the TV and radio, and pizza and beer. There was much talking and running around to complete the final details.

### **Altered States, Altered Egos**

At Wat Pah Nanachat we are encouraged to stay up all night and meditate on Wan Phra which is about once every week. But instead of all the sensory stimuli to help keep the adrenaline going and the body awake, the only help in that area is a cup of coffee at midnight. Other than that, one is supposed to meditate quietly by sitting or walking. Needless to say, staying awake all night is more challenging without the aid of external stimuli such as TV or radio. But working with my mind states from 2:00 to 4:00 a.m. has been quite revealing. One moment I can be feeling dull and sleepy, then the next restless and resentful. The following is the type of internal chatter that took place at the last Wan Phra at 3:15 a.m.

"I should be in bed. This is a silly practice staying up all night. It's a dead ritual without any rhyme nor reason. What am I trying to prove anyway? How much samādhi could I get in this current state of stupor? Where is everybody, especially the monks? Why aren't they up meditating? And why is that senior monk nodding off? He has been doing this for a while, you would think that he could get over this problem? He doesn't seem very developed anyway, and it looks like he has not got much to show for all those years. Maybe it's not him, maybe it's the practice. Maybe it does not work after all. And why doesn't that stupid clock move any faster. My knees are sore, my back hurts, and I hate this place."

This is hardly the picture of the calm, collected, and compassionate person that I have of myself. But the beauty of the teaching is that we are taught to accept things for what they are, being open to all the aspects of our personality, the good, the bad, and the ugly. The practice has been helpful for me in recognising and dealing with my

weaknesses and shortcomings. It is liberating to realize that I have these unwholesome mind states but also realize that they are just mind states and to be aware of them as such and not get caught in them or to identify with them.

One of the biggest challenges I have faced so far has been not eating after twelve. Part of the forest tradition discipline is that monastics only eat one meal a day. With few 'medicinal' exceptions, such as dark chocolate, sugar, and butter, no solid food should be consumed after midday. Before coming to Wat Pa Nanachat, food has not been an issue for me. I have never had a weight problem and can pretty much eat whatever I want, but always in moderation. However, in the monastery, with so few outlets for my desires to express themselves, food has taken on a disproportionate role. I constantly think of things I can eat or reminiscing about all the nice dining experiences I have had. Being a *pakhaw*, part of my responsibilities, is to prepare the afternoon drinks for the Saṅgha. This entails being in the kitchen and around food, which has been a challenge in keeping the food precept. Part of my problem in dealing with the food issue has been that I do not see the logic in being able to eat dark chocolate in the afternoon but not a banana. However, after several discussions with senior monks, I am beginning to realize that the purpose of the ascetic practices of one meal a day and not indulging in any worldly behaviours is to calm the mind, which is conducive to achieving *samādhi* in meditation.

While a beginner meditator, here again, there is that feeling of *deja vu*. Not that I was entering the *jhānas* in my first week of meditation, but at the end of most sessions, there is a sense of calmness and self-centredness that I find quite refreshing. There is not so much restlessness and the preoccupation with food is not so gripping. My perception of my surrounding seems to be enveloped in this mist of goodwill and gentility. The irony with just sitting is that in contrast to my blind pursuit of happiness and excitement in my laylife, which ended up in boredom and desperation, just sitting in my *kuti* and counting my breadths, I am finding enthusiasm and contentment.

### Conclusion

While I have had my share of frustrations and disappointments at Wat Pah Nanachat dealing with my own defilements, overall, I find the experience to be fascinating and delightful. And though my monastic life has been somewhat short, only six months, I am finding joy. There is excitement, but it is a different kind of excitement than I found working on the stock market.

I ordained as a samanera before the vassa and plan to remain one for one year. While I feel quite fortunate in having had the opportunity to be living as a monastic so soon after my introduction to the Dhamma, I also realized that there is much work to be done ahead. While there is a strong sense of responsibility in being diligent in putting forth the efforts required of a monastic, there is also a sense of thrill and anticipation on this journey of self-discovery.



### Nothing Compares to Food

It's been 23 hours, 56 minutes, and 43 seconds, since I sat here last.

All day yesterday, I was thinking  
of all the glorious meals gone past.  
Don't know how I am going to endure  
this daily fast.

Went to my teacher and told him  
my aversions to this one-meal-a-day deal.  
And you know what he told me?

Guess what he told me?  
It don't matter whether it's steak or stew  
or chicken cordon bleu,  
'cause by tomorrow it will all be in the loo.  
Which is absolutely true,  
but I still crave...

'Cause nothing compares,  
 Nothing compares to food.  
 Told me that I should go and contemplate  
 this constant urge to masticate.  
 But how can I meditate  
 with this mind numbing belly-ache.  
 'Cause every time I close my eyes  
 and try to concentrate,  
 all I see are bowls of frosted corn flakes.  
 Then I go off into the forest  
 for some walking meditation,  
 but before I know it I am back in the kitchen  
 due to this oral fixation.  
 'Cause nothing compares,  
 Nothing compares to food.  
 I know that all this yearning and craving  
 is not from the perspective of One Who Knows,  
 And it's humbling to know  
 that it's this belly below that's really in control.  
 Ultimately, it's the Buddha's teaching that I will surely follow,  
 but in the meantime,  
 how am I supposed  
 to do without  
 my morning cappuccino.  
 'Cause nothing compares, nothing compares to food.  
 'Cause nothing compares,  
 nothing compares  
 to food  
 food  
 food





## Some Dhamma for my Heart

### An Interview with Tan Kongkrit

*Tan Paññāvuddho:* Tan Kongkrit, how many years did you practise in Korat with Ajan Supot?

*Tan Kongkrit:* I stayed with him four years.

TP: Were you a second monk?

TK: No, I never been the second monk. When I stay with him during the vassa another monk always come and I am always the third monk.

TP: What was the teaching like there? How is it different or similar to Wat Pa Nanachat?

TK: I think the Thai's way (Ajan Supot) — when Tan Ajan wants to talk something or do something it's not necessary to consult with the monks. Sometimes he just do it and if nobody ask him he didn't explain even sometime he didn't give answer — the right answer — when he do something or teach someone quite strong or very hard when he talk.

TP: How does it feel being with Westerners who like explanations and these kinds of things? How do you feel it as a practice?

TK: In the early days, I thought it made things too busy when Tan Ajan or senior monks have to talk over even small matters with the monks. In some matters the senior monks know better and if they consult with junior monks sometime more problems arise because the junior monks don't know about or have no experience. In the early days I didn't like it but after some time I changed my mind. It helps to know other people's mind. When I stayed with Ajan Supot I had to calculate what his thinking was when he punished someone. Sometimes when he said strong words to me, but in his mind, his intentions is not to teach me, but he want to teach others. I tried to hold it and think he don't want to teach me but others. When he want to teach me he did the same way. When I stay here, sometimes it's too 'real'. Tan Ajan Jayasāro explains

everything, sometimes no need to explain, in my idea, no need to explain, to tell anyone, he can let the student look and concentrate.

TP: What do you think of the teachings of Ajan Jayasāro like Dhamma *desanā* teachings to lay people and to monks?

TK: With the monk Ajan very soft. I really feel. Few time I heard him talk — very strong — like the one who show power of the teacher. With the laypeople he's very nice. I stay with Tan Ajan Supot, he talk very strong with the laypeople, too strong even sometimes I cannot accept it. "Why Ajan talk very strong?" I feel angry. But long, long time I think again and it's very powerful and helpful.

TP: What about the practice of meditation at Wat Pa Nanachat? Is it the way we practise *ānāpāna-sati* similar to the *Kruba Ajan*.

TK: I think, about meditation, I think it is the same... Tan Ajan Supot or Tan Ajan Jayasāro never push us this way or that way, just explain, explain. But in Korat we did not have much schedule, in the early days quite nice but when I stay for a long time or many vassas it's not useful with the group, on the other hand more schedule is quite good 'cause when I don't want to go I have to go.

TP: When we went to Tao Dam this year, you became *Jao-awas* ('Abbot') at Wat Pa Nanachat. How does it feel to be the *Jao-awas* of a large monastery, a monk of only seven vassa?

TK: To be *Jao-awas*, I used to help Ajan Supot many times 'cause he travel often, but not for long time like this. But anyway, I don't have to take any responsibility 'cause I can contact Tan Ajan for everything so it's not too hard. When I have problems, I can call him and talk with him or write him a letter. The most difficult thing is when I think too much 'cause so many things about work or job. Sometime I think no need to tell me why you tell me, like the water leaking or the power went out, sometime I think it's too busy for me. "No need to tell me you can do it yourself." But I didn't say, I keep it within myself and concentrated. I think being *Jao-awas* is very difficult when we have someone consult us for everything. In Korat sometime people come and complain with the Ajan even about the dog — *Jao-awas* have to concern even the dog in the monastery.

When I stay here at that time I have the same problem, they come to me for everything. When people give you power, you have power to solve many thing but not everything. I mean no need to tell me everything.

TP: Very soon, Ajan, you will be going to America, with what kind of expectations? What do you think of practice there? What have you heard about the way we practise at Abhayagiri? And what do you think it will be like for you?

TK: I have very few information about practice at Abhayagiri. But I think that place is very big monastery but not so many people, only four or five monks. I... Tan Natthiko he, suggest me to not to enter the computer room... (laughing) But for me I think I want to... I... How to say...? I don't expect about, how it will be, only want to go and have a look, maybe I can practise by myself, more for myself, I already have seven pansa, I am quite old now 28. If possible I think better to ordain in the Buddha way. I ordain for 7 years but sometimes I think not in the Buddha way. I just follow my wants, my *kilesas*, I want to learn something but sometime it's not the Dhamma, sometimes it's Dhamma but worldly dhamma not the Buddhist Dhamma. If I can go to America, I hope I can, if it possible I want to practise more than more than now. Everything about the worldly dhamma, I think I can practise more simply way. No need to study very hard. No need to push myself to learn about the language too much, I just come and listen and stay with our friends, if I stay at Abhayagiri I think I like to do this way. First when I come here I want to learn the language and practise the Dhamma together. I keen to study English but now it's more soft 'cause I need to practise more about Dhamma. I want some Dhamma for my heart.

TP: For me as a Westerner coming from America, the Dhamma is special but so many Americans don't understand yet. Because they don't know about the Dhamma. What do you think is so special about the Dhamma that can be given to the people in the West, that would give them happiness? When you have people come to the monastery or are new to the Dhamma? What do you want to give them from Thailand, with a very beautiful tradition, the Kruba Ajans from the forest tradition? What do you want to give to them, in terms of the Dhamma?

TK: For me I want to be a samaṇa, just let them see the samaṇa.

TP: Please explain that.

TK: When you see someone have a peaceful mind, his body look very peaceful, doing everything very peaceful, for me I think it's enough for them to see someone peaceful... enough and can talk with them, with him in the peaceful way. I think it's enough. But I don't know yet how to be the peaceful one.

TP: Tan Kongkrit is there anything you want to say in closing. Any words you want to add?

TK: So many thing...(laughing) when I come here in the early day I was very strange, when I want to go somewhere I always think too much like I want to do it, I want to train myself better, harder but in my mind sometime I know I cannot do it. Then when I stay here in the early day I always paraniy, I think many people look at me and think: 'what are you doing?' Actually, nobody but my mind like to say that.

TP: Like when I first came I know that I would look to you many times to see how to do things right, very graceful, very naturally, we never got a chance to talk and you never had a chance to explain in words, but I would watch and it's very helpful,

TK: That's my idea, when I learn something from someone I don't just want to listen. Because talking it's easy to make it beautiful or I can train myself to do it in a beautiful way then someone show us how to do it is more difficult. When I stay here for a long time with everybody, I think nobody change but my mind change a lot; farang in my mind is not farang in the old day at all. It's nobody change — they are still farang — I think, but my mind. I stay here, now and I compare with the early days. I think, 'Korat is better'; 'that better'; 'this better'. Then, after two years... almost two years and a half, when I went to visit Korat again, I think that 'Korat is not so good'. I think that the wat in Korat have lots of problems. Korat is very relax, everybody can do his way.

Funny thing about mistake about language; a lot of joke for me at Pah Nanachat. For example, one day Mae Jorm, an old woman she died and her coffin is in the sālā and Tan Ajan said on the tea time

something like... “there is coffin in the sālā”... I just get the coffin, but I can get the coffee. After tea we go to the sālā and get a coffee, and I think, ‘Oh! We get coffee’. So about... with Tan Ajan Vipassi, about a week ago Tan Ajan Vipassi asks me in Thai, *antarai* — we walk pass the window and he said, “antarai”, which means ‘it’s dangerous’ in Thai. ‘Anta-rai’ but I thought ‘an-tow-rai’, which means, ‘how much’ and I said, “I don’t know Ajan, you have to ask Paiboon”.

About language I have lots of mistake but I really like to stay here. I think it’s a good opportunity to stay here, so many people want to come and stay here but cannot make it — cannot stay. I think I have enough boon [merit] to stay here and I can learn more and more about the nationalities and about relationships to contact with different cultures, people from other cultures. When I stay in Korat I never contact many people like this. Staying with Tan Ajan Jayasāro I really love the way he talks to people, he is a very good story teller. When he tells story, even when it’s not a good story, he tells it well. And with our friend so many people I can learn from him a lot — no need to come and ask them to teach me about language or about culture. It’s very helpful for me.

Also, I remember Tan Ajan Jayasāro when he tolds us about Tan Ajan Sumedho told him that: “Do not find the best or perfect monastery”. I really love this teaching: ‘Do not find the perfect monastery’. It is true isn’t it?

TP: This was when Tan Ajan Jayasāro was in England and very idealistic and wanted to find the perfect monastery where everybody is enlightened.

TK: Actually, it’s true because nobody like that. Even when they have a good Kruba Ajan but not good community, nobody interested in the practice or sometimes the Kruba Ajan not interested in teaching and if everything good then the food is not good. I am very lucky to have opportunity to stay here and to thank everybody, my friends, for teach me how to act, for show how to develop my mind.

TP: Thank you Tan Kongkrit. And may you bring the Dhamma to America and bring many people much peace.



# Ten Thousand Joys and Ten Thousand Sorrows

**Life and Times at Wat Pa Nanachat — The Teaching of My Life**

**By Christine Lem**

*Born in Canada of Chinese origin, Christine has spent the last six years in Thailand and India practising the Dhamma. Her introduction to the Dhamma began with Tibetan Buddhism in India. Eventually her travels led her to Southern Thailand to a retreat at Wat Suan Mokh in 1993 where she first encountered the teachings of Theravada Buddhism.*

*Soon after that retreat she visited Wat Pa Nanachat for the first time in August 1993. The monastery was part of the Dhamma trail and on 'her list'. Since then she has visited and lived at Wat Pa Nanachat many times, the latest stay for seven months. Presently Christine is spending four months at Abhayagiri Forest Monastery in America and may spend the upcoming year at Amaravati in England.*

WHEN I WAS ASKED to write a piece for this Wat Pa Nanachat publication, I found it was an opportunity to reflect on and digest the challenges, experiences and insights that arose during my extended period of practising the Dhamma at the monastery. Upon arriving at the monastery I was similar to many women who came with the hope of devoting focussed energy towards the practice. Admittedly, at many times during my stay the benefits of living in a primarily male monastic environment were questionable. I continued to stay on because I was open to experiencing the way of training in the community and to learning more about the reality of life, as taught by the Buddha. Over time, I eventually gained insights about myself and the nature of life which astonished me. Through practising the Dhamma I continually found it fascinating to learn and understand more about myself.

One of my first teachings which amazed me was related to anxiety. I remember on four different occasions I asked completely different questions with different story lines. The same monk began every response with the following, "well, anxiety is like this..." I could not understand why this monk focussed on anxiety while my questions were not being addressed. It took me a month to figure out I had anxiety and the story lines were meaningless. I thought it was not possible that anxiety could exist in my life. My lifestyle was on the nomadic side which meant I had high coping mechanisms which was supposed to mean that I was in tune with impermanence. But to my surprise as I began to investigate deeper, I uncovered areas of my life that needed to be reflected on. The spiritual urgency was ignited.

The practice situation for women at Wat Pa Nanachat presented the opportunity to embrace whatever arose in the present moment, whether it was a pleasant, unpleasant or neutral experience. Living in a monastic environment gave me the time and space to deeply investigate and examine what caused my mind to move. Was it due to external conditions or was it coming from a place inside? What seemed so real and solid in my mind one minute was not the same the next.

During my stay at the monastery, all situations and incidents which moved my mind were considered valuable and opportunities for potential insights. It required a lot of work to have to be with what I didn't always find pleasant. It took energy to go against the grain. Mindfulness was needed to hold back views and opinions. And it took a lot of time to be able to see through the superficial story lines in order to search internally for a path leading out of dukkha. Idealism, anxiety, views, opinions, perceptions as well as the joy, insights, understanding, compassion, respect, humility and inspiration were all part and parcel of the teaching of my life.

While living at Wat Pa Nanachat it was sometimes difficult to assess the progress in my practice. Yet after being away from the monastery for several months, I realized the positive fruits of the practice could clearly be seen. I have already experienced glimpses of insight that have had a profound effect in my life. With the encouragement and support of the Wat Pa Nanachat community my practice



continues to gain momentum. So where did the experiences and challenges of Wat Pa Nanachat begin?

### **Relating to Monks**

The first evident challenge for lay visitors to Wat Pa Nanachat, especially women, is the question of how to fit into a monastic training centre for males. In particular, due to the monastic discipline and conventions, women might find that they don't fit into Wat Pa Nanachat to the extent that they wish. For me, this was an ongoing challenge, I felt more at ease as the practice gained strength. The existing hierarchical system was a part of monastic training which helped define how monastics interacted with each other as well as how they interacted with lay people.

In addition, the Thai culture has placed the monks upon a pedestal. In some respects it seemed like they were no longer ordinary beings. An explanation given by a Thai lay supporter gave me insight as to why monks got special treatment which Westerners might not be familiar with. She said, "I'm a householder with many responsibilities and duties, that's my kamma. It gives me great joy that I can support the monks because they can live and dedicate their lives fully to practising the Dhamma, which I can't do right now."

The generosity of the Thais not only affects the monastics but also those lay people who visit and live in the monastery. Often Westerners do not fully understand the interdependent relationship between Thai lay Buddhists and monastics. The lay people support the monks with simple material requisites and the monks support the lay people by passing on and exemplifying the Buddha's teachings.

What strikes Western women at the monastery as surprising are the old, traditional ways of behaviour. In Thai monasteries lay people sit and eat after the monks, kneel down or stand lower when speaking with a monk, and fulfill the role of cooking and serving the monks. Western women wonder: "Where does equality fit in at Wat Pa Nanachat? This is the twentieth century, is it not! These are Western monks who surely must be aware of modern times." Western women may suddenly find themselves in a position where they don't know how to act or relate to Western men in robes.

The question of appropriate protocol coupled with the need to be consistent with one's own familiar comfort zone can produce heightened levels of anxiety. What is considered appropriate conduct and what is not? Anxiety increases, especially for those women who are unsure of themselves or are unfamiliar with the formalities of the monastery. Regardless of the fact that they might be new to Thai culture and monasticism some women found they needed to know exactly what to do and how to act in every situation, which was a phase I also went through.

It was important to remember that the monks follow a code of discipline composed of 227 training rules; these were their rules, not mine. This was a good reminder to relax at Wat Pa Nanachat. I noticed that Westerners tended to worry about the monk's code of discipline more than necessary. It was not as though we have adopted the 227 precepts the moment we entered the monastery. There was a period where I thought Thai people knew best about the formalities of the monastery. The reality was the monks knew best. They were the ones who lived and abided by the training rules.

Sometimes, even when I was familiar with the protocol of the monastery, anxiety would still arise. I found the mind proliferated as follows: "There are Thai monks and Western monks. Should I be formal with Thai monks and informal with Western monks? But then, how do I act with the Westernized Thai monks or the Malaysian or Japanese monks? Maybe I should be formal with all the monks at all times? But if I were a Western monk perhaps I would think it is not necessary to be so formal? Should I continue to talk with the monks I was friends with when they were lay men?" The thoughts proliferate on and on.

After much anxiety, I learnt to relax a little and search for balance. I found that each situation and each person was different and one acted appropriately according to the circumstances. There were no fixed rules. What I found was if I was respectful and polite and I was sensitive to the cultural differences, I can't go wrong.

I went through other phases as well. In Thai society women have to maintain a certain physical distance from monks as if women were dangerous. I would think, "If I were in the West the distance between males and females would not be a big issue. This monas-

tery is a bit odd. What am I doing here? I'm living in a male monastic community!"

I questioned my stay in the monastery. Monastic life and Thai culture are interesting combinations for Western women. After making a commitment to the monastery for a period of time, I felt a rebellious rumble in my mind. I would express exactly what was on my mind. Once I admonished a bossy novice who rudely interrupted my conversation so that I could complete his duties. I used strong words and told him to tidy up his own mess and take responsibility for his actions. I thought I was speaking the truth but harmful speech is not considered 'right speech' either. It was a good teaching for me as I was beginning to understand that true and honest thoughts could be dangerous mind states. This was one of many insights which meant my stay at the monastery was challenging and fruitful.

Although the monks tried to explain the situation at Wat Pa Nanachat and how and why the rules and conventions exist as they do, Western women mentioned that it was difficult to listen to or even hear the words of these privileged monastics in robes explaining the way things were in the monastery. Monks were explaining the reasons for their own privileges. Women found that it was easier to hear things when a Western female with Asian roots living for an extended period of time explained the whole scene of the monastery.

I once thought that monks at Wat Pa Nanachat were constantly mindful and that they probably practised twenty-four hours each day. What else would monks do? I sometimes forgot that I only saw the monks four times a day, at morning meditation and chanting, the daily meal, teatime and the evening meditation and chanting. Well of course they were mindful all the time! Monks were supposed to behave this way during formal meetings and especially when sitting on the *āsana* before the meal with so many people looking in their direction. The brief moments that I saw the monks gave an impression of heightened mindfulness and awareness.

Wat Pa Nanachat can be an intense place for Western women when small and trivial matters get magnified. There were moments when there was not enough tea, sweets, cushions or chanting books for the people sitting at the lower end of the hierarchy. Did it happen every



time? Was it due to an inexperienced person setting up or perhaps due to someone working with greed that day? Depending on my mind state I was sensitive and sometimes I took things personally as if there was someone who was directly trying to create dukkha for me. There were many different ways the mind could proliferate in response to a given situation.

I have also experienced monks who were sensitive to the position of women in the monastery. I've noticed the gestures of kindness and concern. There was a novice who made a separate kettle of cocoa for women so that they wouldn't have to wait so long and there were other novices who would personally pass on the spare sitting cushions to women. At other times monks would ask if there was enough food or tea for the women or a monk would make a sincere apology for his lack of mindfulness towards women. All this took effort, energy, humility and awareness to the sensitivity of women living in the monastery which was much appreciated. Honest mistakes and miscalculations do happen.

It takes at least a few visits and sometimes more to understand Wat Pa Nanachat. To get a deeper understanding of the monastic training set-up, I needed to take the time and energy to keep asking questions. At the same time I had to be open to receive answers.

I found it was important to dispel doubts by asking questions in order to benefit from the new experiences gained from living in a Thai monastery. My doubts or misunderstandings occurred because there were many perceptions to a given situation. I experienced one monk who did not use eye contact during a dhamma discussion with the lay residents. My judgemental mind was saying, "he is a young monk and he must lack confidence, be insecure and have women issues to deal with in his practice". It being odd or impolite not to make eye contact when one speaks was part of my conditioning. In a monastery a little or no eye contact was appropriate for a 'good' monk. It was obvious he was a 'good' monk because his dhamma responses were sharp and clear, with compassion and wisdom.

Timing and not taking everything so seriously is also important. I remember one occasion when someone asked me, "How come all the monks are so young?" I said, "It's all that meditation they do".

I'm not quite sure what role humour plays in monasticism, but it certainly helps to drop unnecessary barriers between people and allow space for new growth.

### **Language and Cultural Challenges**

The position of women in a male monastic community can blind Western women from seeing the benefits of the practice opportunity at Wat Pa Nanachat. The inability to communicate in the native language adds to the challenge to practise at Wat Pah Nanachat. Western female guests at Wat Pa Nanachat can find their anxiety level increase due to the lack of English speakers. Thoughts about what to do, where to go and how to do things might be overwhelming when you cannot understand the answers but the Thais will come to your assistance if you look lost. It is also important to smile. If I ever felt at a loss for words and did not know what to do, I just gave a great big smile. It is the Thai way. Smiling is considered a higher realm of communication.

Not knowing the Thai language can also be a blessing. I found it was interesting to observe the movement around the community and the people in it. Without knowing the right words and speaking little I had an opportunity to experience the monastery on a different level. Many times the challenges and aversions that came with community living were limited to thoughts. In these times, I saved myself from creating any unwholesome kamma which I would have regretted later — What a relief! It was also an advantage not to understand or get acquainted with kitchen gossip. Reduced mental proliferation was always conducive for my meditation practice.

In addition to language, unfamiliarity with Thai customs added to my anxiety. In general, I found it was a good idea to follow in the footsteps of the Thais, literally and figuratively, especially when ceremonies occurred at the monastery. The best policy was to go where they went, sit where they sat and do as they did. For me, Thais were good examples to gauge what was deemed appropriate in a monastic community until I developed the confidence to know what was best based on my own experience. I remember one incident when I randomly placed bananas in a bowl that was going to be offered to the monks. The bananas had undergone a transformation

when I briefly left the kitchen. The bananas were wiped and cleaned with a wet cloth, both ends were snipped for a tidy appearance and then neatly arranged in a bowl.

Most of the time, if a mistake happened, it was not actually any major error on my part. It was hard for me to believe, but the Thais staying at the monastery had an even stronger perfectionist tendency than I did. The Thais were meticulous in everything they presented to the monks, which I made a point of observing in order to smooth out any future incidents.

Interestingly, I learnt a lot when I made mistakes and the memory was recorded in the mind to ensure the same mistake did not happen again. This put me at ease on some levels. I felt as if someone was showing me insights into Thai culture and protecting me from making any major blunders that might cause embarrassment to myself and to others in the community.

I found the challenge in the kitchen was that I needed to keep paying attention to what was useful and to take the initiative to perform tasks that were appreciated. The Thais expressed delight and encouraged me when I cooked Western food. The villagers inquired about what I was cooking and what kinds of ingredients I used. I took all this interest as a sign of Thai-style praise, which may have been a bit of a projection on my part. It didn't seem to matter if the Western food looked, tasted or smelled pleasing to their eye, tongue or nose contact. The important thing was that it was Western food and the pot came back fairly empty so the monks must have liked it.

One area that the Thais did not encourage me to emulate occurred when preparing fruits. Thais were skilled at carving and arranging fruit into beautiful shapes and designs. Thais cut with the hands in mid-air, rarely using a chopping board. So I didn't either. Also, the Thai-style of using a knife was to cut away from the body rather than cutting towards the body which is Western-style. I did try a few times to cut and design fruit in a manner pleasing to the eye, using the Thai method with a knife. The results were disastrous. I did not adjust to carving a piece of fruit with a machete-like knife without the fruit turning into juice in my hands.

I soon noticed that Thai people offered very subtle hints in regards to where my talents were most useful and beneficial in the community. I learnt to be alert to how I could be useful, especially in the kitchen where communication was in the form of body language. When preparing the meal, the Thais would rarely suggest to Western women what to do.

Overall, insights and challenges from my daily experiences and interactions with the Thai culture brought an enormous amount of joy. Their kindness, generosity, respect and humble nature were qualities I continuously tried to rediscover in myself and aspire towards. These qualities that the Thai community exemplified in their day to day lives had a tremendous impact on my attitude toward life. The relaxed and easygoing style of Thai people influenced nearby Westerners. I examined my resistance to these wholesome qualities, which the Thai community continuously expressed to others. I learnt a lot by simply noticing, listening, observing reactions, going against the grain of my cravings, using my favourite word 'whatever', talking little and smiling a lot. I believe living for any period of time in a Thai monastic community might enable people to make great progress in their practice. I was able to let go of fears and anxieties related to my own cultural conditioning and open up to a new set of heartfelt wholesome qualities. What joy and relief it was to let down my barriers of resistance.

Another cultural difference that deeply affected me occurred during Thai-Buddhist funerals, where the dead bodies were brought to the monastery to be cremated in the open air. I appreciated the increased contact with death which decreased any fears I had around it. Watching a body being cremated was a powerful reminder that my body was of the same nature. It was interesting to witness that Thai-Buddhist funerals were ordinary, peaceful, and simple, quite a contrast to my experiences of Chinese funerals. The bodies were naturally decaying and not decorated to look beautiful or full of life. I felt that funerals were authentic for the first time. I noticed that less fuss and distraction regarding funeral arrangements enhanced the death being more real for those involved.

Anyone who wished was able to watch the body burn and melt from skin to bones to ashes. The heat element from the fire was raging and powerful. It had a life force of its own which felt so natural and



freeing. It felt as if life and death were coming together in harmony and balance. Burning a body in the open-air in the centre of a forest monastery seemed quite naturally in tune with nature. I was very moved by these funerals. When I die, I might consider Wat Pa Nanachat as an option for my cremation.

Through interacting with the Thais, I realized that being born in the West with Chinese roots, I perceived the world in a way that appeared to be a contrast to the reality of experience. It was an incredible experience to discover that I knew so little about the true meaning of life, which I felt was being revealed to me in the monastery.

### **Practice in Communal Life**

I've spent a great deal of time in numerous communities, usually passing through them. At Wat Pa Nanachat, for the first time, I lived in a community for an extended period of time. This made a considerable difference to my practice. In making a commitment to a community it meant there was no escape from confronting my habits of body, speech and mind. I learnt to live with the kamma created in the present and to resolve the kamma created from the past.

Living in a community was intense and sensitive buttons were pushed. When practising with others, I found that I was no longer dealing with just my own five khandhas — I had taken onboard the entire community's khandhas. If there were twenty people in the community there were one hundred khandhas to interact and deal with in a compassionate and skilful way.

I was also aware that in most communities there always seemed to be one or two odd characters who test all those living in the monastery. They came in a variety of forms: monks and nuns, Western and Thai, men and women, young and old. I noted how these types of characters affected the entire community even though I thought I was the only person in the monastery who was experiencing major dukkha with this particular person.

There was one Western layman who visited the monastery who did not want to speak or have any contact with any of the women. At the same time, he continued to frequent areas where women gathered,

like the kitchen. These characters were challenging and could lead me to react unskillfully. I noticed if I was in a good mood these characters do not move my mind, instead, compassion arises. My thoughts about this situation were: "I wonder what it would feel like to be living in this person's shoes. Sounds like a lot of anger. I wonder where it comes from. His dukkha can't come from me. We don't know each other. We have never met before. I can't take this personally." I noticed my thoughts and immediately what came to my mind was that he's not supposed to be acting this way or saying these absurd things. "What is he doing here? This is a monastery!"

Confusion and dukkha arose as I was reacting to his comment towards women on the external level. But in reality it was not his comments that were causing the dukkha. It was my own internal struggle with idealism that created true dukkha. The scenario was all happening so fast that I could barely keep up with being mindful. I reacted to external scenarios and blamed the external world for my dukkha but in fact the real dukkha was my own internal issues. Whenever mindfulness returned, it amazed me the amount of confusion that I could create for myself. Idealism was an ongoing struggle because it seemed so real and solid. I was absolutely positive beyond a shadow of a doubt that the dukkha was coming from the people or places that caused me to react with negative mind states. As I continue to experience scenario after scenario, I hoped to learn from each and every incident rather than react to the endless incidents that are all integral parts of life.

As a contrast to odd men that came through Wat Pa Nanachat, there were also women who were challenging. One woman constantly complained about living at Wat Pa Nanachat. Yet, at the same time she continued to stay on in the monastery for quite some time. We had a discussion and slowly her personal history, perceptions and feelings began to unfold. I was startled to hear the amount of suffering she experienced. It was a strong and solid reality for her. It was difficult to relate or connect with this dukkha because it didn't affect me in the same way. After the meeting, there was a shift in attitude: I found space and compassion to allow this person to be who she was.

In the beginning I reacted to her continuous stream of complaints. I felt they were unrealistic or they were exaggerated. Idealism affected my mind state. I would think, "If she doesn't like the

monastery why continue living here?" I lacked the patience to accept what was happening in the present moment. I noted how idealism takes up a vast amount of time and energy to cover up the present reality and create the reality I wanted. I realized it would be wiser to bring up the effort to work with the issues occurring in the present moment. My ideal was that I loved everybody because that was the practice. But in reality, I avoided those whom I didn't love which made it easier to love everybody! What a delusion! It would be better to learn to be with people whom I wished not to be with. Community living was like that.

I was continuously learning and gaining insight about others and myself in the community. It was an opportunity to take on the challenge and work with what moved the mind. I didn't get overwhelmed with my dukkha or try to leave the monastery by the back door. If I was not going to practice with the difficulties that came up with living in the monastery what was I waiting for? There was a tendency to be waiting for the right moment to really put in the effort to practise. I've said things like, "when I find the right teacher then I'll practise; when I find the right community then I'll practise; when I'm in a happy mood then I'll practise; when I'm not so tired then I'll practise; when I'm in solitude then I'll practise." The list goes on. The right moment is here and now because I might die before the next moment happens. Death does not wait for the 'right moment'. It's known for bad timing. Imagine dying waiting for the 'right moment to practise'. To talk about the practice more than practising the practice sounds like hungry-ghost realm material. It was always good to remind myself that it was useful to take every opportunity to practise and not to waste a precious moment.

The practice continues. Wat Pa Nanachat was an inspiration because people were practising, living and working with reality, life as it was happening. I tried to spend my time being with whatever was in the present moment and going against those old habits that continuously pushed me around. I examined what exactly was pushing my buttons. Was it really ever coming from external conditions?

I noticed there were a variety of incidents that caused my mind to move in different directions. Sometimes I let it go, other times I reacted because I was right and they were wrong and there were times when fire came flying out of my mouth with zero mindfulness.

It was all about watching the mind, fully reaping the consequences and learning from these incidents. If I was not making the effort to practise and learn in a conducive and supportive environment like the monastery where else was I going to do it? Will I ever find the perfect place so that I can have perfect meditations?

### **Investigating Idealism**

After leaving Wat Pa Nanachat, a major insight revealed itself to me. These reflective periods outside the monastery offered an opportunity to step back and create some space for the challenging situations I had experienced living in a community. The key issues that entered my mind were idealism, perfectionism and anxiety, which extend into honesty, trust and refuge. I noticed that I had difficulties being honest with myself particularly related to feelings, opinions, thoughts and decision-making due to idealism. I had practically taken refuge in idealism. I had put my trust and faith in idealism because it won't fail me. It was that perfectionist idealistic tendency that invaded my mind. I continually denied the reality of where I was at because I was not the ideal. I was not as honest as I could be in my practice because of fear that I was not living up to my idealism. This was a lot of dukkha.

I remember I was surprised and impressed with talks made by a visiting Ajan. I noticed he was outrageously honest with his past and present experiences. He openly admitted and discussed his challenges, difficulties and complaints. I thought Ajans would have been above and beyond these mundane issues. He used personal experiences as he was not afraid to freely express where he was at. He was not embarrassed, as he didn't have anything to hide. I was caught up in my own idealism and I did not allow enough space for the practice to unfold naturally. The effects of a highly respected senior monk who spoke in an alternative style helped me let go of the ideals I had about the practice. I suddenly felt I had a lighter load to carry. It was easy to forget that the Ajans were just ordinary sentient beings like everyone else. It was difficult to think they still had dukkha like anyone else. It was the approach and how they responded to dukkha in a compassionate and wise way which made the difference. The skillfulness, clarity and honesty in their body, speech and mind

were beautiful to experience and inspiring to watch. The presence of senior monks was a powerful teaching.

I found Wat Pah Nanachat was conducive to deepening my practice. I felt the foundation of my practice shake and move because it immediately reflected back to me, the question, 'how honest was I with where I was at in my practice?' It was not as though I was going around lying to people about my practice. What I was doing, was that my living, breathing reality consisted of thoughts related to incidents such as irritation that came up due to loud and disrespectful lay visitors who visited Wat Pa Nanachat. I thought, "I should not be sinking into these low-level mind states! This is not how one trains the mind". I would reflect on how wonderful it was that people had discovered the dhamma and how great it was they had a chance to visit the monastery. That's the ideal. It was a pleasant thought, but dukkha wouldn't go away that easily!

Sometimes I can't clearly see the difference between reality and idealism. In community life, the ideal was that people should be aware of what tasks needed to be done and then do them. But the reality was that some people didn't make the effort or they didn't care. I usually went through a mind-spin and wondered what kind of practices they were doing? How can people use and abuse such a wonderful place? Didn't they hear the evening talk? It was so powerful. When reality doesn't meet up with idealism, the dukkha escalates. How many times has this happened? I've lost count.

A monk once said something to me that had a powerful effect. He said, "It's good to have you here Christine, it's good to have someone we can trust". He used that 'trust' word often with me and I thought to myself, "Well of course you can trust me. I've got too much idealism, I would never ever think of doing anything intentionally harmful to the monastery". In hindsight, however, I realized that he was trying to say, "Christine, we trust you, therefore you should trust yourself". For me this meant I needed to give myself some credit and probably believe and trust myself with where I was at. I'm okay!

I was fine most of the time, but I got thrown off because my feelings, memories, opinions, views, and criticisms all seemed accurate, justifiable and appeared to be an absolute truth. Other times, I was very

clear it was dukkha, aniccā, anattā and not worthy to hold on to. I needed to work on letting go of these absurd fixed ideas.

Self-criticism arose and I wondered how I could possibly trust myself when I made so many deluded mistakes. It was interesting to watch and notice the anxiety, idealism and perfectionist tendencies when I could catch them. It was better than spinning in it. What a waste of my time and energy.

In the monastery, I was a long-term lay woman who lived and worked near the kitchen, spoke English and a little Thai and had a shaved head, which led people to believe I was the local information source. Sometimes I felt I was engaged in idle conversations more than necessary, which meant less time to do the 101 things on my wish list. This increased my craving for solitude. I thought if I had enough solitude than my whole practice would come together. I was forever complaining that there was not enough time in the day to do all that I wished to do. If only I had more time then I would be happy. I would renounce tea or fast in order to increase the time leading to happiness.

One of the subjects for frequent recollection is the following: 'Do I delight in solitude or not? This should be reflected upon again and again by one who has gone forth.' The answer is YES. Which mountain or cave or jungle do I get to meditate in to delight in solitude? Unfortunately, it was 'not recommended' for women to stay in some branch monasteries unless there were two women together. It was also 'not recommended' for women to go to certain areas of a monastery. The 'not recommended' word was frustrating for me because I believed that deep and heartfelt insights came with intensive solitude practice. Women practitioners who wished to meditate in more isolated areas were bound to come in contact with the fears, worries, anxieties expressed by Thai people. Thais asked, "what if ghosts should appear!" What was considered appropriate, safe and respectable for women were other factors that made it challenging for women who wished to delight in solitude.

In hindsight, there was enough solitude but I let dukkha get the better of me. Living in my kuti in the forest, sweeping, and meditating were periods of solitude which were overlooked because it didn't meet up to my ideal type of solitude. It was pure dukkha to

have high standards and not be able to maintain or keep up with those standards. I experienced the ideal type of solitude a few times but using that memory to compare daily life experiences of solitude only created unease in my mind. I didn't appreciate or make good use of ordinary, everyday solitude, which probably would have measured up to that dream type of solitude that I frequently envisioned in my mind.

I noticed that some days I would love Wat Pa Nanachat: "It was the best monastery with the best monks. It was the most authentic and pure practice place in all of Thailand. Everyone was wholeheartedly into the practice. We had the most faithful and dedicated villagers who came every day to support the monastery". Then there were other days when I said: "I'm leaving tomorrow and I'm never coming back. It's all wrong here, they should be updating and adjusting their rules of discipline to keep up with the modern times, I'm not going along with these outdated, old-fashioned ways of interacting with one another." What was real and what was not? I can't believe in these passing thoughts or moods. It was too much dukkha. I found it time consuming as well as tiring to resist the present conditions of the monastery. I spent too much energy not accepting the way things were. It was less exhausting to let go and conform to the way things were because Wat Pa Nanachat is a fine place to practise. In the monastery, I meditated, ate a little, slept a little and lived simply in the forest. After a while I noticed: "what else do I really need in life?"

I heard myself saying things like, "I love Wat Pa Nanachat 95% of the time in order to reserve room to express my frustration and complaints". Was the dissatisfaction reality or not? On different days different mind states appeared, directed at different situations and different people. The changing moods of the mind were ongoing. What could be so important to take away my peace of mind?

### **Closing**

I continued to make frequent visits to Wat Pa Nanachat because I loved the simplicity, authenticity and purity of the living Dhamma that existed in this monastery. I felt a powerful opening in my life when I came into contact with the straightforward teachings of the

three characteristics of existence — *aniccā*, *dukkha* and *anattā*. Wat Pa Nanachat provided a good setting to continue to investigate these truths at ever deepening levels. I kept going back because realistically there was no going back to my old ways of thinking.

In retrospect, I can see how Wat Pa Nanachat shook the foundation under my feet. The experience of living for an extended period of time in a community of full-time Dhamma practitioners — people with whom I did not individually choose to live — became the teaching of my life.

Although Wat Pa Nanachat always managed to provide an array of challenges, I learnt that the monastery had no inherent *dukkha*, like it had no inherent *sukha* (happiness). I need to take responsibility for my own experience of life.

Women who visit Wat Pa Nanachat perhaps will feel it is similar to a boys' club. Some women might wish to be part of the boys' club. Who likes that feeling of being excluded or left out? This is the challenge for all women who visit Wat Pa Nanachat.

Whether male or female the practice is to keep watching the movement of the mind and protect it from falling into states of greed, hatred and delusion. Some women find Wat Pa Nanachat a useful place to practise for a few days, others for weeks and months, and some are not yet ready for it. This is all just fine. It is good to acknowledge where we are at in the present moment.

My experience of living in a monastery was intense because this meant I had to be with things I wished not to be with, I was separated from the things I wished to be with and I didn't get what I wished for. There was no escape except to face the *dukkha*. *Dukkha* was crystal clear as well as the path leading out of *dukkha*. These were the sorrows and joys of living at Wat Pa Nanachat. It was an opportunity to deepen my understanding, reflect on my defilements and my habits in order to learn and know more about myself.

I saw myself investing energy into confronting situations and striving for ideals, which were beyond my ability to do anything about. Meanwhile what was in my power to change did not seem as appealing to work with.



While living in the monastery I experienced what 'real life' was all about. I heard lay visitors express comments such as, "the monastery isn't real life". I felt I began to learn about my multidimensional mind states in the monastery. My attitude began to change and insights came through — experiencing community life, understanding Thai culture, relating to monks and observing my idealism.

The simplicity of living in a forest and the ascetic practices of monastic life resonated well. I felt in tune with this lifestyle because I was drawn to simplicity and to what was 'real' which were elements that were lacking in my life.

For me, 'real life' meant reflecting and working with the dukkha that appeared in the present moment. This meant that there was a lot of 'real life' in the monastery!

I would like to express my sincere appreciation and deep gratitude to Ajan Jayasāro, Ajan Vipassi and the entire Wat Pa Nanachat community and all those wonderful beings who have supported, lived, and visited Wat Pa Nanachat. Thank you for your kindness, generosity and the opportunity to practise at Wat Pa Nanachat. Thank you for the teaching of my life.

I hope what I have written is helpful for all beings who find themselves at Wat Pah Nanachat, especially for women who might find the experiences of monasticism, Thai culture, and Buddhism challenging.

## Small wee mountain



*Wat Poo Jorm Gorm (Small Wee Mountain Monastery) is a branch monastery situated in the national park adjoining the Mekhong river, which forms the eastern border of Ubon*



*province. It was established in 1990 with the intention that it should function as a hermitage, providing monks with the opportunity for periods of individual retreat to complement the more communal style of practice at Wat Pa Nanachat.*



## Hey Man, don't give up your music!

**Samaṇera Gunavuḍḍho**

BARELY A MONTH IN THE ROBES, I am a newly ordained samaṇera who still tries to understand exactly what has happened to his life. Sometimes I wake up from sleep in a moment of disorientation and ask, "Where am I and why am I dressed like this?" I thought my goal in life was to be a jazz recording artist, but somehow I have made the transition into the Theravadin monastic lifestyle. I have a desire to better understand the transition; and I admit that it is only now through writing this piece that I am able to start investigating the deeper reasons of why I am willing not to play music again. I wish to open this piece as an exploration of my experiences in music practice and monastic practice in hopes of better understanding what happened.

When I look deep in my heart and ask why I practise Dhamma, I see that the answer comes forth with great energy. I practise to learn the truth of how nature works and to do what is good. After the heart has spoken, I feel a heating-up of the body with an increased flow of blood, my back straightens up nobly, my mind becomes quiet and my gaze softens. I am also told by my heart that the same goal had been the powerful current that had carried me through all those years of music practice. When this is revealed, I see that I have not given up what I find truly important and I see that there was a natural flow to the recent transition I've made into the monastic lifestyle. Like a raft, music practice was able to bring me part-way across the river, but I have now switched to the raft of Buddhist monasticism which I believe has the ability to crossover to the shore of liberation.

By looking at the similarities between my music practice and this monastic practice, I am able to feel a deep sense of gratitude for my past musical experience while investigating the differences in how the monastic practice goes further on to my goal. I have experienced the role of devotion, sacrifice, the teacher, solitude, the , awareness, creativity, effort and challenge in both my past music practice and the monastic practice of the Thai forest tradition.

### **Devotion**

My music practice started with devotion. Being born into a family devoted to music, all the conditions were ripe for setting me on the path of music practice. Even though my family would occasionally go to church, music was the religion I practised at home which I could trust as well as use to relate to the world. My grandfather had a music store and taught my father music. My father taught me, and I eventually taught others after many years of practice. Playing a musical instrument almost seemed to be a prerequisite for being in the family. A visit to my Grandparent's house always included an offering of a musical performance from someone. I remember my father would play music on the fishing boat as we sat meditating on our floating bobbers, in the house while we cleaned it and even in the bathroom as he showered.

Our house always had many different instruments: drums, saxophones, keyboards, trumpets and others, to experiment with. Teaching music and selling instruments were what put food on the table and enabled us to continue our musical practice. My father and I would talk for hours about music; this was one of our main ways of bonding. I would also carry his instruments to his public performances in order to watch him play, which he did in a way that was inspiring and magical for myself and others. My father taught the values of music to me through example from the very beginning of my life, and after seeing my deep desire to follow in the path of music, he started formally giving me piano lessons at the age of five.

I grew up with small ceramic clowns holding instruments and Christmas ornaments that played music. Our house was also filled with paraphernalia like mugs, posters, belts, scarves, T-shirts, neckties and stationary which were all decorated with musical notes. A bit obsessive don't you think? Believe it or not, it all made perfect sense at the time. Upon reflection I think the effect of always seeing those musical trinkets in my environment strengthened my identity as a musician. Likewise, someone can strengthen an identity of being a Buddhist by merely owning a statue or image of the Buddha, but I think it is more beneficial to use the Buddha statue as a devotional tool to open the heart and the mind. When I bow to the statue of the Buddha, I have the opportunity to recollect the Buddha's qualities of virtue and his teaching, as well as bring my mind back to the

practice. I feel that I am fortunate in having such an object of devotion as the Buddha, and there is a feeling that every ounce of effort I give is returned one hundred fold. The goodness that can result from the practice of Buddhism seems limitless to me, so it is worthy of limitless devotion.

### **Sacrifice**

With deep devotion, one is willing to sacrifice just about anything. In my life, music always came first and I would sacrifice many things without question. Sleep would be sacrificed by waking up early in the morning or staying up into the late hours of the night practising the piano or listening to jazz performances in clubs. After-school activities, sports and dances didn't seem nearly as important as going home to practice music. My parents spent much money on music lessons, instruments and recordings in order to support my cultivation as well as putting in many hours behind the wheel of the car in order to drive me to lessons and performances. At home, my family sacrificed their outer silence in order to let me practise; and my sister can testify to the hours and hours of piano playing on the other side of her bedroom wall.

Now that I have ordained, I have given up my worldly possessions. My identity as a musician started to fade away bit by bit as my instruments, recordings and other tools of the trade made their exit from my life by being sold or given away. Having left my position as a teacher and bandleader in the field where I had experience, I have now traded that status in order to be a beginner at the bottom of the line. After ordaining, I found simple actions such as getting dressed hard to do. I thought I was shown how to dress myself when I was a little boy, but the familiar pants are gone and the robes are hanging in their place. So many actions I thought I already knew such as walking, eating and sleeping are now challenged by the monastic training. Even the name I've used since birth has changed. There have been possessions and experiences that I once believed were necessary for survival, but as I experiment with living very simply, I experience some joy from learning that my safety doesn't hinge on having those things after all. I would say that the main thing I thought I knew was that I was a musician, but where has that gone to?

Realizing that I have personally felt a fair bit of thrashing around in my life in an attempt to 'be somebody', I hope to resist the temptation to merely trade my identity as a musician for that of a monk. Trading for the identity of an ex-musician is probably another trap as well. At some level I understand that attaching to the identity of being a monk is entirely different from actually being present to the way things are through the monastic practice as taught by the Buddha. Sacrificing the need for attaching to an identity is extremely hard to do, but I believe that the invaluable guidance provided by an experienced teacher on the spiritual path can make it possible.

### **Role of the Teacher**

Sometimes the teacher will select a practice which is not one we would select ourselves, but out of faith and trust we follow the guidance we have been given. Great experience gives the teacher the wisdom to see where the student is weak in the practice and the ability to protect the student from training in a harmful way. In both music practice and monastic practice the teacher is one to whom we can sacrifice our ego. Even though I would admit what I did not know to my music teachers, they could already hear it in my playing. There was nowhere to hide and it felt great to be seen.

I think in the holy life, while in a relationship of trust, this attitude of observing and exposing weakness is a central part. In the monastic practice I find there is much more of an opportunity to humble oneself and fully give of oneself to the teacher due to safety of the Dhamma teachings and morality practised in the environment. We can bow with reverence to the teacher and allow this relationship to develop as a spiritual tool in order to dissolve egotism. There are opportunities to tend to the teacher by carrying his bag, washing his feet, washing his clothes, bringing him something to drink, cleaning his lodging and cleaning his bowl. Even though this man can do these things for himself and has done so for many years, this opportunity to think of someone besides oneself even for a moment can be very powerful.

With my music teachers, the relationship was usually only musically and financially based. It always felt like there was a cut-off after I paid for the lesson and was out the door. If I would not pay for the lessons, the relationship would end. That's the way it works in the



business. Some teachers would take more time to talk after the lesson, go to the store and help me buy recordings, or invite me to come to their performances, but that is as deep as the relationship would go in the context of my life as a whole. The only opportunities to give of myself were to pay for the lesson, practise what I was assigned, provide supportive energy in the audience at a performance and maybe give a gift at Christmas. It would be quite strange to go early to a piano lesson to tidy-up the teacher's studio and bring him a drink on my knees. There just isn't room for it.

### **Solitude**

Both musicians and monks spend a great deal of time in solitude in order to deepen their practice. I remember the small piano rooms at college dedicated to solitary practice. Each was insulated with white-walled foam for soundproofing in order to create an environment of minimal distraction. The restraint of the non-listening senses was an aid to concentration. It was in these rooms that most of the daily sweat was released. I spent many timeless hours in these practice rooms, and sometimes I would emerge surprised to see that it was already dark outside, or that a snowfall had already blanketed the city without my knowing.

So after years of this experience, I don't mind practising in the kuti. Having space in the forest to oneself functions like insulation from many worldly dhammas. I've searched for solitude in both practices, and I am just starting to understand that true solitude is a state of mind. Whether from amplified long-haired guitarists, mango pickers, aeroplanes or loud insects, there is always outside noise. The silence must come from inside. Just as the silence or 'rests' in music give the listener space to appreciate all the notes, similarly, our mental silence brings awareness and meaning to our actions and to the actions of those we are in contact with.

### **Working with the Sangha and Helping Others**

As Buddhists, a central part of our practice is to work with the community of monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen who make up the sangha. Similarly, musicians work with their bandmates to give to and receive from an audience. In each public performance there is an opportunity for the band to give a teaching in the virtues of diligent

practice by providing a good example through the way they play their instruments and through the way they act onstage or offstage. Each composition brings focus to different aspects of life, and if the composition touches something inside the listener or the performer, then the experience can be used as a point of reference or inspiration to better understand what is truly important in their own lives. If the music provides an environment for blocked energies such as stress and anxiety to be released, then there is an opportunity for healing and insight to occur.

In the jazz world, it is completely appropriate for the listener to respond to the music during the song. The listener has an opportunity to be an active part of the improvisation, and their response becomes a part of the music. Some responses may be in the form of shouting out, "A-MEN!", or "That's right!", or "!". Clapping and whistling after a musician has played a solo improvisation are also common responses. If the band is really 'burnin' or if a player is playing so well that they may be described as being 'on fire', then the audience's response will reflect exactly that and be more animate and lively. I see this as a sharing of energy. The musician directs energy through the instrument, and the audience transmits their energy through their verbal and physical responses. It is this sharing of energy that makes the performance experience alive and so special.

When people come to hear the Dhamma teaching with sincere interest and faith, they reciprocate the positive energy of the inspiring truths they hear back to the teacher. The teacher may respond by touching the heart with humour which will be met with wholesome laughter by the listeners. The fearsome demons of negative mental states can be transformed into little puppies during these special moments of a powerful Dhamma teaching. A release of fear and anxiety can bring a sigh of relief and a moment of silence to the listener. Breathing may become deep and slow. Others may feel open and safe enough to respond by asking questions that touch tender areas of their lives. As with jazz improvisation, if the teaching is done naturally in the moment, the product is much better than anything one would preplan.

The development and communication of the most profound insights in music occur during rehearsals, performances, instruction and

jam-sessions. Through these forms we have the opportunity to help others with the challenges of life. Personal issues will come up during rehearsals and the group contact can help bring awareness to certain issues. If a musician only plays alone in the practice room he will never have the use of the group to experience the contrasts that expose his habits. But when a musician plays with a group, he can investigate if he plays too loud, too soft, too slow, too busy, or in balance with the others.

Similarly, in Buddhist practice the Saṅgha is the community of disciples that work together through the traditional form of daily group activities, ceremonies, instruction and discussion. In relation to the group, we constantly compare ourselves to the way the group practises as a whole. Does one walk too slowly or walk too fast? Does one eat more slowly or more quickly than the others in the group? In relation to the group how does one speak, sleep, do chores, or put forth effort? Being aware of these habitual energies is a preliminary step, but in the monastic practice the awareness is encouraged in order to transform the unwholesome habits into the wholesome ones which lead to liberation as taught by the Buddha.

On one occasion a community member spoke with me about my tendency to chant louder than others in the group. It was only through chanting with the Saṅgha that I had the opportunity to have this tendency brought forth into my awareness. The old tendency of playing louder than some bandmates used to crop-up in my jazz playing at times as well. Training with the Saṅgha helps me to bring my habits under the light of mindfulness so that I can begin to change them for the good of all.

### **Awareness**

In both the practices of music and monasticism there are repetitive actions that are used to cultivate mindfulness. The scales, finger techniques and following music theory rules are to the daily life of a musician as bowing, meditation techniques, and following Vinaya rules are to the daily life of a monk. Walking, speaking, washing things, moving things, leaving and entering the *sālā* or *kuti*, and getting on the *āsana* are all areas that, if approached with great care and awareness, become beautiful and magical. How many times do we take off our bowl lid each day? There are opportunities to act

with dignity and allow the sacred to enter our lives even in the smallest of acts. How does one ring the bell? If we listen closely to the way it is rung we can learn about the one who is ringing it. Is there a sense of urgency, frustration, or restlessness? Can one hear the focus of the act or is there an irregularity? In general, does the execution of our actions support the mind in abiding peacefully as well as inspire others? For myself, I find it very inspirational to witness masterful expression through the living examples of experienced practitioners.

I was introduced to the Theravadin tradition at Abhayagiri Monastery near my home in California. I remember how the everyday tea conversation at Abhayagiri was turned into an art. It was a safe place for people to ask questions about the practice. Ajan Pasanno would answer the questions of the laity with ease and then skilfully allow for a space of silence. It was a moment of being with things as they were. At this time, one could be conscious of the breath and let what had been said be observed fully. If the person had another question, they had the opportunity to ask it. There was a feeling that a person could ask all of their questions until there were none left. And after that period passed, there was another time of silence. Since at that time I was an enthusiastic layman with many questions, I remember feeling very satisfied in being listened to. The whole approach was peaceful, and allowed for anxious energy to be released.

Usually in life, I experience conversations that move quickly, jumping around from one topic to another. People rarely listen to what has already been said and may even interrupt each other. The interruption is not a personal attack but a reflection of the restless mind. When conversing in the language of music it is the same restless mind which interrupts others on the bandstand or interrupts one's own thread of continuity during solo improvisation. I have noticed that many of these unsatisfactory conversations tend to be oriented towards trying to be understood instead of trying to understand what others are experiencing. We may have to embrace an uncomfortable feeling if we wish to truly understand the suffering another is expressing. If we are not aware that we are uncomfortable with an issue brought up in a conversation or if we are not aware that we are interrupting others, then we will always be blinded by the restless mind which selfishly only wants to be understood. It helps to use

creative means to keep the mind malleable and receptive in order to listen with understanding to whatever comes to us in life.

### **Creativity**

Sometimes 'life just happens' on the bandstand and in that moment some playful creativity may work better than letting it all fall apart. In jazz improvisation a mistake is worked with right on the spot in live time. For example, if the saxophone player accidentally makes a high-pitched irritating squeak on his reed, this mistake can be transformed by intentionally inviting it into the piece. If the player makes the mistake twice in a row, another band member could notice the rhythmic pattern of the squeak and incorporate that rhythm in some form of a response. Sometimes the reed may be difficult to work with, but many times the squeaking is a result of the player experiencing fear. Think of how someone's voice may crack or squeak if they are excited. It can be similar to that. This process of befriending the fear happens all in the moment. There isn't time for thinking, and it takes practice in creativity to pull this off.

Creativity is a necessity in both practices. Ajans use creative means in relating the teaching. One of my favourite devices is humour and as musician, I would use humour in compositions or in improvisation. I have noticed that the Ajans in this lineage use wholesome humour as a skilful device to make things light enough for the mind to be malleable and receptive to the teaching. I bet the Buddha had a good sense of humour, but unfortunately I don't hear much about this personality trait. It takes creative means such as this to really reach people. If they feel bored or just talked at, then they may get up and leave the Dhamma teaching behind.

Metaphor and analogy are creative devices that the Buddha had used and his disciples continue to use today. The ability to find creative ways to relate the Dhamma in simple terms people can understand is the mark of a masterful teacher. All the teachings I've heard of Ajan Cha are of this style. The teaching is clear, simple, and goes straight to the heart.

### **Effort**

In the music world, challenges such as anxiety, fear, absent band mates, miscommunication, drug and alcohol use, bad attitudes and

different ability levels are just some of the reasons why proficiency can decrease during a performance. My piano teacher would recommend putting forth effort through pushing up tempos and practising long hours in order to have the strength and endurance needed to persevere in such challenging situations.

In the monastic training effort is put into pushing up tempos and practising long hours in order to cultivate the focus of mind needed to greet the raw conditions of life exactly as they are in the given moment. Doing group activities briskly, walking barefoot over long almsround routes, and sitting in meditation for vigils and retreats are all ways we put forth effort in the monastery. When one puts effort into making things neat and tidy, there is an opportunity to see the result of a job well done, which provides a space for future good actions to arise. I remember seeing a monk working with great vigour as he shovelled sand on a workday, and that inspirational display of effort wholesomely affected many areas of my practice long after the workday was over.

While cultivating music I found that good results were more likely to arise if I put effort into maintaining a daily practice. As momentum built up and less effort was spent on getting myself simply to sit on the piano bench, I could redirect my energy towards the more refined aspects of the music. Just as I would wake up early before school as a child to practise piano, or would stay up late at night enduring fatigue in order to get in that daily practice which had not happened yet that day, I now put in that same kind of effort to go to the meditation hall in an attempt to cultivate good qualities. Even though there are times when I don't feel like practising, there is a deep joy and a desire to do the practice that seems to summon the necessary effort for the occasion.

### **Challenges**

When I was introduced to Abhayagiri Monastery, I was given a Xerox of what visitors needed to know before staying at the monastery. I remember reading the eight precepts and laughing out loud when I got to what I now affectionately refer to as 'number seven'. I didn't understand why refraining from playing or listening to music would even make the list. I remember showing this precept to a few people close to me and saying, "I can do it for a week, but that's it!"

The one week stay gradually turned into a three-month lay residency. That period of time was fraught with 'number seven' questions. I remember Ajan Pasanno gently answering my questions relating to the monastic practice. I would ask, "Ajan, can monks give music instruction if they don't touch any instruments? Can monks at least accompany the chanting with guitar?" My mind wrestled with absolutes. I wondered, "Was music wrong action? Was I a bad person for playing music?" I noticed from the questions that friends and family members asked that they also looked at the precepts more as commandments than training guidelines. If I looked at number seven as 'Thou Shall Not...', then I could only feel guilt and remorse. Through the instruction at Abhayagiri, I feel that I was able to both appreciate what my music practice had given to me as well as see how unwholesome environments and mental states often associated with music practice can be a hindrance to the holy life and true peace of mind.

I was also glad to see that by giving up my music for the practice of the Thai forest tradition I was not giving up challenging situations to learn from. In this Thai forest tradition there is a warrior spirit that is willing to 'go against the grain' by marching fearlessly into the middle of the battle to endure whatever comes, even if it is uncomfortable. One is encouraged to give 100% to the training with fierce determination. I find it particularly challenging at this point in my development to find the balance in knowing when it is time to push and time not to push, but I feel that I have an opportunity through the practice of the Thai Forest tradition to find the middle way by seeing where the boundaries lie.

With my music practice I was constantly looking for challenges in order to sharpen my skills. Some of them included moving far away from home to study at one of the world's most intense music colleges, taking almost any opportunity to put my practice on the line in a public performance situation, sharing my most personal original compositions with others, enduring the discomfort of playing with musicians who were much more advanced instead of trying to be in the superior position, seeking out the most qualified and disciplined teachers available, and playing demanding music that was outside of the comfort zone of the traditional jazz I specialized in.

Similarly I looked for challenges in the monastic life such as moving far away from home in order to participate in the intense practice at Wat Pah Nanachat led by some of the most disciplined and experienced practitioners who hold a strict standard of Vinaya. Seeking the opportunity to put my practice on the line by working out-in-the-open with the Saṅgha, I expose my most tender moments in the context of community where it is impossible to have a secret. While training as a beginner at the bottom of the line I am constantly in a position to learn about all the do's and don'ts of the monastery standards instead of comfortably sticking to what I learned years ago in the music field.

Living this monastic life is the greatest challenge I feel that I can use to meet my goal of learning the truth of how nature works. The restraint of the senses feels like a pressure-cooker at times. We don't eat whenever we wish, there's no flipping on the television for a little distraction, and there's no sexual activity whatsoever. The rules of training ask one to give up many means of outer control, and put one in a position where there is much less room to run away and hide from long-avoided fears. By going against the grain of these habitual tendencies, we have the opportunity to learn the ways of the mind.

Even though the monastic life is difficult enough as it is, I find that being in Thailand adds another layer of challenge to my practice. The environment of the forest in Thailand is constantly changing and has an aggressive quality to it that never gives one a chance to completely relax. There are intense weather conditions of heat and rain. Mosquitoes and ants are either biting you or you know that they could bite at any time. There are other insects, scorpions, centipedes, poisonous snakes and wild animals to be mindful of here in Thailand as well. Recently, thousands of termites overtook my kuti swarming all over the walls and door just inches away from me. Walking through the night with the belongings that I thought would be considered edible and tasty to the termites, I found refuge in the monastery's sewing room. In the mornings on alms round, I am challenged by walking barefoot over sharp stones while dodging occasional shards of glass and ridged bottle caps. Even though there may be cuts on my feet, walking through the widespread buffalo dung smeared on the road by the village traffic is sometimes unavoidable.



Compared to the USA, in Thailand I am challenged by the different sanitary standards, increased threat of disease, different cultural values, different language, and being apart from family and the familiar. Even though the challenges I've mentioned have been difficult, they aren't as bad in the moment as my mind would like to tell me. I also realize that I am supported through these challenges by generous lay supporters, Saṅgha members, family members, and supported in general by practising in the context of a Buddhist country.

So how do I blend music with the monastic life now? I like to appreciate the sound of dissonance from out-of-tune Saṅgha members during the chanting. Other times I enjoy the sound of someone mistakenly hitting their bowl or spittoon, appreciating the different timbres each produces. I enjoy the chance to ring the monastery bell as well as listen to the others briefly express the causes and conditions of nature through ringing the bell themselves. And of course, it may not be a surprise to anyone that I enjoy chanting.

"Hey man, don't give up your music!", counselled my jazz piano player friend with a tone of urgency and disappointment as he saw me move off the path of music practice that we had once shared. I've been questioning what I have actually given up and 'what is happening' in my life, but after the exploration of writing this piece I feel that the question of 'Who am I?' is closer to my heart. Even though there are many layers to my recent transition from music practice into the monastic life, ordaining as a samanera has been predominantly marked by an intense questioning of my identity and sense of self. Uncomfortable with not knowing who I am, I feel that holding the question is more important than trying to wrap-it-up neatly with a bow on top, tucking it away as if I've found a conclusive answer. So in the midst of uncertainty I will practise on.



## Refuge in Saṅgha

*Many people in Thailand have ties to Wat Pa Nanachat. The villagers of Ban Bung Wai, even those who rarely go to the wat except for funerals see the monastery as 'theirs'. They feel a sense of pride about it and a sense of responsibility. Then there are the people from surrounding villages and the local town of Warin and the city of Ubon who regularly come to make merit, to keep the eight precepts on Wan Phra days, or to practise for longer periods in the monastery. There are also lay supporters from Bangkok and other provinces who may come up to stay in the wat during their holidays. This section consists of the words of Mae Samlee, a village woman who lives in a house in the fields outside the monastery and Por Khroo a primary school teacher from Ubon.*

### **Mae Samlee**

THE PAIN'S NOT BEEN SO BAD REALLY. My husband ordained as a monk for fifteen days to make merit for me (she smiles at him warmly) and I've been feeling better ever since. It's just the past three or four days that have been a bit more difficult.

*Mae Samlee is 55. She has cancer of the spleen which is metastizing. She has spent many months in hospital over the past year and had two operations. Now she is back at home in her house amongst the rice fields between the monastery and the main road.*

I've been going to monasteries for as long as I can remember. As a young girl, my mother would always take me with her when she went to make merit. After I got married, I used to go to Wat Pa Phong on Observance Days. I loved it so much: making food for the monks, listening to Dhamma talks, meditating. Then we moved to Kanchanaburi and stayed there for six years. It was a rough place. My husband became the Village Headman and everywhere he went he had to carry a rifle and a pistol, he said one weapon wasn't enough. Then he read a talk by Luang Por Cha and we decided to come back to Ubon. My brother-in-law lives in Bung Wai. He wanted us to come here and said he'd look around for some land for

us. I said, "I don't care how expensive it is, please find us land close to the monastery, so that I will be able to go every day, even when I'm old". Everything worked out: we got this plot of land right in front of the wat, we built a house on it and now (she smiles widely) it looks like I'm not going to have an old age after all. I must admit that sometimes I wish I had accumulated more merit in my life.

I meditate whenever I can, whenever the pain is not so bad. I chant in the morning and evenings. Actually, these days I often do the evening service at three o'clock in the afternoon! The pain usually comes on in the evening you see and I'm afraid it will stop me from chanting. But today, I've been so excited all day waiting for Ajan Jayasāro to come to visit that I've felt fine all day.

I felt homesick when I was in the hospital in Bangkok having my operation. It all took such a long time. On the days I could sit up, I did the morning and evening chanting normally. When I couldn't sit up, I chanted as best I could lying down. Then that first time Ajan Jayasāro walked into the ward I felt so happy! It was such a wonderful surprise. And he brought me a little picture of Luang Por Cha too, to put on the table by my bed. After he'd gone, the other patients were really curious. Who is that Western monk? Where does he come from? How do you know him? I felt much better after he came. Things didn't seem so bad. I remembered the things he taught me and they were a refuge to me. I always kept in my mind the virtues of the Buddha, Dhamma and Saṅgha.

Next Wan Phra, if I'm feeling any better, I hope I will be able to go to the wat. I don't want to miss the morning talk. It's another few days yet. I hope I'll feel a bit better by then.

### **Por Kroo**

*Thanapong is a male primary school teacher aged 57 and a member of the lay monastery committee.*

I've been going to monasteries since I was a child, when my father used to take me. I first went to Wat Pa Phong way back in 1959. But it was so difficult to get there that I didn't keep it up. I was disillusioned by the monasteries near my home in Ubon. One day I went to invite some monks from the local monastery to come and eat in my house. I happened to see them acting in ways completely unfitting for monks. I lost all my faith. I didn't go near monks again for three

or four years. I didn't even put food in monks' bowls on almsround. During that time I felt as if I'd lost my sense of purpose, that I had no refuge and was just drifting through my life. Then I thought of Wat Pa Nanachat and it happened that that year — it was 1983 or 1984 I think — the ministry made it compulsory for teachers to go to listen to Dhamma teachings in monasteries. Our group came to Wat Pa Nanachat. I walked into the *sālā* and the first thing I saw was Ajan Pasanno and Ajan Jayasāro sitting on the *āsana* talking together. It was such a moving sight for me to see two Westerners so restrained and composed in their bearing; I felt a new wave of inspiration and I started coming regularly. I was impressed by the dedication of the monks. I came to know for the first time that monks are not supposed to use money, and I began to realize the way monks are supposed to live.

The result of coming to the wat over the years that I see most clearly is that I'm a lot more calm and patient than I used to be. I'm basically quite a forceful, headstrong kind of person. Listening to the Dhamma and the teachings of the Buddha, and trying to put them into practise, I've seen my mind cool down and become more peaceful. I don't lose my temper or get angry when I'm provoked in the way that I used to. My ill temper has improved a lot. Also, I feel more mindful in my daily life. I always tell people that I've been to many monasteries but it's here that I've received the most beneficial teachings.

I've had some difficult times at work over the past few years. Sometimes when I see something wrong I can't always keep quiet. On occasions when I've spoken up against corruption, I've been slandered and victimized by my seniors. At home too it's been hard. My wife was in a motorcycle crash last year. Worse than that, a few years ago my son died. One day he returned from work in Bangkok in his boss's car. His boss had driven him up himself. He said my son had an inoperable brain tumour and didn't have long to live. That night I spent many hours with my son teaching him the Dhamma reflections that I had learned from my teachers. The following morning I went to the wat and when I came home in the late morning I found him lying dead on the couch. It was a terrible shock for my wife and it took her months to get over it. I've had a lot to endure. If it wasn't for the Dhamma and the advice and support of the Saṅgha I don't know how I would have coped.



## Tao Dum Forest Monastery

### An interview with Ajan Jayasāro

*Tao Dam Forest Monastery is a branch monastery of Wat Pa Nanachat located in the mountainous, thickly-forested jungle of Mae Nam Noy, Sai Yoke National Park in the Kanchanaburi Province of Thailand. Mainly through the tireless efforts of the monastery's main lay supporter, a brave and determined woman called Tivaporn Srivorakul, the pristine, lush quality of the Tao Dam forest has been well preserved. Tivaporn operates a tin mine in the Tao Dam area, employing Burmese, Karen and Mon workers who live in this remote border region in order to escape the social and political strife of present-day Burma. Despite great pressure on her for many years, she has stood up to all those interested in destroying the forest.*

*At the onset of each hot season, the monks and novices of Wat Pa Nanachat make a three-day thudong through the National Park into the monastery, where they spend two months in retreat. This year the thudong was cancelled due to cattle and drug smuggling activity in the outlying area — forcing the Saṅgha to be brought in by four-wheel drive vehicles. The following interview covering these and other issues related to Tao Dam was conducted by Tan Paññāvuddho in the Tao Dam forest at the dtieng of Ajan Jayasāro in April of 2542 (1999).*

*Tan Paññāvuddho:* Tan Ajan, to begin, could you give a brief history of Tao Dam Forest Monastery? How was this place founded, and how has it developed and evolved to get to its present state today?

*Ajan Jayasāro:* In 1979, Ajan Pasanno was on thudong in Kanchanaburi. He got to know Khun Sunan, the owner of another mine in this part of Kanchanaburi, and she built a kuti for him in the forest near her mine where he spent pansa. That mine is now abandoned — we pass it as we come into Tao Dam. Years later, the owner of the Tao Dam mine, Yom Tivaporn, was struggling to preserve the forest here in the National Park, and thought this would be a wonderful place for forest bhikkhus to live and train, and hoped that

their presence might also deter hunters and loggers. So she made an invitation to Ajan Pasanno to bring some monks in and do a retreat here. She offered to make sure food and any other requisites would be provided, as there's no village for almsround. The idea was that if it was appropriate then some basic kutis would be built and two or three monks could stay on for pansa. Everything worked out as she hoped.

TP: So, in what year did Ajan Pasanno first bring the monks?

AJ: About eight years ago. That year two monks spent pansa here in kutis built at the foot of this mountain. Since then, the monks have spent the rainy season on a regular basis. Gradually, over the years, developments have been made. A few years ago we had a tractor come in and cut a road up to the upper sālā. Three kutis have been built up on the ridge there.

As you know, where we are now (to the west of the upper sālā on a different mountain, where the inner sālā is located) is a very densely-forested plateau through which the stream meanders. We have twenty dtiengs scattered throughout the forest for the monks to use during the hot season. On this plateau the climate is very pleasant in the hot season, but extremely damp and unpleasant in the rainy season; There are many leeches and if you put a robe out to dry after washing it, it may still be wet after twenty-four hours. Hence the need to build the upper sālā and three small kutis on the more exposed ridge over to the east of here so monks can stay at Tao Dam during the rainy season.

We also built a lower sālā down at the base of these two mountains. The monks walk down in the early morning, take their daily meal and then come straight back up the mountain afterwards. There's no village for monks to go on almsround, which makes this quite an unusual place for monks to live, and puts serious restrictions on how many can stay here on a long-term basis. But we have a lot of lay supporters, particularly in Kanchanaburi who give food and provisions to Yom Tivaporn to bring in to the monastery, when the whole community comes out in the hot season. There are a couple of Burmese families, particularly one lady, who cook for the monks.

PV: Is it common for monks to inhabit forest in National Parks?



AJ: About six years ago, there was a period in which the presence of forest monks was looked upon by the government as being detrimental to the forests. In a number of highly publicized cases monks were accused of felling trees to build lodgings and developing monasteries in a way that harmed the forest. A government plan proposed having all monks living in national parks or reserved forests ejected from them. In fact, although there have been isolated instances of monks being insensitive to forests they were living in, it has never been one of the major problem facing forests in this country. But anyone who lives out in country areas knows that the presence of monks is the major factor inhibiting deforestation. It's hard to say to what extent the plan was devised out of ignorance and to what extent it was influenced by the forces who want to get the monks out of the way. Fortunately, however, there was an about-face — the plan aroused a lot of opposition; Tan Jow Khun Phra Dhammapitaka wrote an influential pamphlet explaining the importance of the forest to Buddhism and Buddhist monasticism — and subsequently a new plan emerged that involved giving opportunities for monastic communities to help to care for the forest. The new plan allowed monasteries to apply for permission from the Forestry Department to look after a certain area of land, a thousand rai upwards to five thousand rai. Looking after the forest in this case, means little more than living on it in very basic dwellings. The respect that monks command, at least amongst the local people, is acknowledged to inhibit the destruction of the forest.

The Royal Forestry Department is seriously understaffed and underfunded. The U-turn regarding the role of monks in forest conservation was more or less an admission of defeat. They know that they can't prevent the forest from disappearing and the government has other things it prefers to spend its money on.

So we applied to participate in this programme. In fact, we asked for a lot more land than we were eventually given. The head of the national park (suspected by many to be deeply implicated in illegal logging in the park and now transferred) was not supportive and cut our application down to a thousand rai. The only condition laid down for us to be here is that we don't do a lot of building, and don't cut down any trees. We have fulfilled our plan to build the three small *sālā* and the three *kutis*, so as for the material development of

Tao Dam, I can't see that there is really much more that needs to be done. Anyway, Tivaporn feels that if there was to be any more building, the officials hostile to her would use it as a pretext to accuse her of something.

TP: Who are these officials? Why are they apparently so adversarial to Tivaporn?

AJ: Well she's a thorn in the side of the 'baddies'. She stands in the way of certain people making a lot of money. Every branch of the Thai civil service is plagued by corruption. It seems, at least from the outside, that the corrupt officials outnumber the honest ones to a frightening degree. In many places the corruption is institutionalized, difficult to avoid being sucked into, because social pressures to conform in the work place are so powerful. Of course, there are some who manage it, but if you stay honest it means you're unlikely to advance very far in your career. Your boss may well not put you forward for promotions. Some people who are ambitious and feel they have something to offer to society justify their corruption by arguing that it is the only way they can get in a position where they can change things for the better.

In the eyes of many people in this country, forests mean money. Tao Dam is — to put it bluntly — big bucks. Some of these people who hate Tivaporn, when they see a forest they don't see nature as we do, they don't see wildlife — they see money in a previous existence. Trees are money. Land and animals are money. And because there is so much corruption, there's so much influence peddling up to the very highest levels. It means the laws don't have the kind of irrevocable fixed quality that they have, at least in most people's minds, in the West. In Thailand you always feel that there's a way to get around things. You can often get things changed, get exceptions made if you know the right people, or if you are the right people yourself. There actually was a law prohibiting gas pipelines through national forests, so a special law was passed to make it all right. At the same time a subclause allowing mining operations in national parks somehow slipped-in.

There are various kinds of scams for forestry and national park officials, the most obvious one being turning a blind eye to the illegal logging interests. As time goes on and good timber becomes

increasingly rare, the whole business becomes more and more lucrative. National parks can be eligible for grants for reforestation but the area in question has first to be classified as degraded forest. So a common ploy is to light a fire or cut down some trees, then getting the designation of the land changed. Once it has been declared 'degraded forest' you can apply for funds for reforestation. Then, using one part of the grant for reforestation, you can keep the rest for yourself and your henchmen. You can also let the loggers have more of the original big trees. And so on.



On the national level, forests all over the country are under pressure from the growing human population. The whole question of land settlement has become a political hot yam and it brought down the government before last. The question that has arisen with some urgency over the past few years is: What do you do when poor and desperate people encroach in national park or reserved forest in order to clear the land and grow themselves some food? If you evict them, where are you going to put them? What will be the political repercussions for political parties that seek to present themselves as protectors of the poor? The answer given by the previous government was to pass a law giving these people squatters rights, which, in effect encouraged people all over the country to clear land in national parks for farming.

So there are many pressures on Tao Dam. Corrupt local politicians, government officials, businessmen, soldiers, border police: a lot of ethically-challenged people have their eyes on the place. Theoretically it should not be too hard to protect Tao Dam. To get wood out, there's only one road, and there's a border police barrier across it, and a barracks overlooking it. But of course, all the

people at the police post are on a very low wage, far from home. People at the national park are involved. Everyone takes their share.

PV: Tan Ajan, a couple of weeks ago, several of us climbed to the top of the tallest local mountain peak, where one can get a vista in all four directions. From there one can see forest as far as the eye can see. You have mentioned before that there are plans to build a road from Burma into Thailand through this mountain pass. Why are various parties so interested in building a road through such remote, mountainous forest?

AJ: If you look on a map, you'll find this pass is the shortest and most direct route between the city of Kanchanaburi and the Burmese port of Tavoy, which is maybe forty kilometres away. That's not a long way to cut a road. It would provide Thai industry with direct access from Bangkok, through Kanchanaburi to the Andaman Sea — port facilities, holiday resorts, and so on. The army officers, politicians etc. who've been buying up land on either side of the prospective road would make huge profits when the land prices go up. And of course, once the road is cut you open up the entire forest for exploitation. In every case that I can think of, a road built through a forested area has signalled the beginning of the end for that forest.

I don't think that there's any question that the road will be built — it's just a question of what route it will take. The pass here happens to be the easiest traverse of this mountain range. Further to the south and to the north the mountains are much more difficult to cross. This is why in the past, during conflicts between the Thai or Burmese, this is the pass that the invading armies would march through. It's kind of a gap in the mountain range. From where we are sitting right now at an elevation of about seven hundred metres, we're only about a fifteen minute walk from Burma. From an engineering point of view it would be a relatively easy job. Driving along this route, you'd hardly notice the gradient.

PV: So, out there, what interested parties are there, besides the monks, working to preserve this Tao Dam forest?

AJ: Well, the Thai environmental movement is in many ways still in its infancy. Probably only in the last five to ten years has it had any kind of muscle. It is only very recently that the authorities have

even felt a need to pay lip service to environment protection. Of course, there have always been people warning against the destruction of the environment but during the boom economy that preceded the economic collapse, many people just assumed that environmental degradation is the price you have to pay for prosperity. Preserving forest was considered the concern of romantics or people not living in the real world. After all, what does a tree contribute to the gross national product? Now of course, with the economy on the rocks the reasoning is that there are more pressing priorities.

Another telling factor is the perception of forest. Until recently forests have been associated in Thailand, and indeed throughout Asia generally, with backwardness. Cities mean civilisation. For example, you have the Thai word *Pa-theuan*. 'Pa' means forest and 'theuan' means uncivilized, implying that people who live in the forest are backwards and uncivilized and that everything associated with nature is the past. That's been a strong underlying idea in the views of the urban population, and particularly perhaps amongst businessmen and politicians. There has never been any sense of the forest as a national heritage that should be looked after. And this prejudice is still very strong. It's only recently that there been attempts to introduce a more progressive understanding of nature in the school curriculum, with the aim of creating a new respect for nature.

Perhaps a period of alienation from nature is necessary. As far as I know, the love of nature did not develop in the West until the industrial revolution either. If you look at the history of Western art, for example, it wasn't until the eighteenth century until you'd get pure landscapes — paintings in which nature was considered an interesting topic in itself, rather than as merely a backdrop for human beings.

So there are various non-governmental environmental groups at work. But as far as the government itself is concerned, the ministry of environment is officially called the Ministry of Industry, Technology and Environment, to give you some kind of idea of priorities and conflict of interests there.

PV: All three interests lumped together?

AJ: All lumped together. And it's the same with the forestry department. It has a dual role: one, caring for the forest while, secondly, the promotion of agro-forestry. So it's inevitably tied up with big business and not free to preserve the forest.

There are good people, educated people particularly, who are starting to appreciate nature and coming together to protect what is left but they often feel somewhat helpless and intimidated by all the forces against them. These people live in the cities, a long way away.

As you can see, I am not particularly optimistic, but there is a bright side.

Here at Tao Dam we have representatives from the palace helping us. Right from the first days of the Thai kingdom in Sukhothai, there was a custom whereby on the Wan Phra, anyone could go to the palace, ring a certain bell to request an audience with the king in which to let him know your grievances. You could discuss a problem in which you hadn't been given a fair deal from the government authorities for instance, or where you'd been the victim of corruption. It was a very special appeal court that bypassed the judicial system. And this custom has come down to the present day. Now it takes the form of an office in the palace to which anyone can write and appeal. The people who work in this office liaise with the Queen's private secretaries — so you go right to the top — investigate these claims. And since the power of the monarchy is strong, this office does exercise a lot of influence outside of the conventional power structures of parliament. People from this office have been instrumental in getting some of the most corrupt officials transferred for example. We also have friends in various conservation bodies, as well as a senior minister in the present government

PV: What about 'Nature Care' — the environmental preservation organisation founded by Ajan Pasanno? How are they involved?

AJ: Nature Care is an NGO, a non-governmental organisation, set up originally in Ubon for helping to preserve the forest bordering the Mekhong River. Subsequently, with our association with Tivaporn, Nature Care has established a branch in Kanchanaburi.

This facilitates the application for funds from businesses and government bodies for conservation purposes.

Returning to Tao Dam again, one of the things that complicates the issue here is Tivaporn's mine. She has been running this mine since well before the area was declared a National Park. And she's deeply in debt. The mine also functions as a kind of welfare programme for over 100 workers and their families most of whom are undocumented immigrants from Burma. Her concession to mine lasts for another four or five years. But people who wish she wasn't here — she is the main obstacle to people destroying the forest — have gone as far as to threaten her life on a number of occasions. Others have instigated various rumours to blacken her reputation. One of the things that people say is that she invited the monks here as a front. Or they say that she's trying to create this image of being an environmentalist when all she is interested in is keeping her mine going. She even has been accused of building a private luxury resort here.

PV: That's pretty unbelievable!

AJ: Well, you'd think so, but as the people spreading it were powerful and influential this accusation apparently reached the highest circles of the government and the royal family. As you know, last year Tivaporn was given a prize in recognition as the Thai Citizen of the Year by a leading charity in which the Crown Princess is the patron. The charity were worried they'd been deceived and decided to investigate. Of course, they found it to be baseless. But these kinds of slurs are leaked to the newspapers.

Also, senior army officers are given folders containing facts about Tao Dam which distort the picture. For instance, Tivaporn was shown a folder two weeks ago in which her signature had been forged for an application of funds for reforestation of Tao Dam. Whether someone is attempting to embezzle these funds — or whether someone is trying to accuse her of receiving the funds and not using the money for reforestation — it's not clear. But this kind of thing is going on all the time. All the various parties involved, even the environmental groups, have their own contacts, and they hear these things. Naturally, they're not always sure what to believe.

So the policy for us has been to invite these people in to see for themselves.

Another problem down the road is when the mining concession ends. One of the plans is to have various kinds of scientific projects going on especially those related to biodiversity and botanical research. This is an area rich in biodiversity. There was a botanist here a few weeks ago and he was extremely excited by what he saw: all kinds of things that he'd never come across before. So there is a hope that there will be some kind of botanical or biological station down at the base of the mountain where graduate students can come and do research.

PV: What about the animal life? We've seen all kinds of exotic animals from elephants to black panthers to white tigers, and bizarre looking creatures unlike anything I've ever seen before.

AJ: That's why we have those animal siting forms to document that these animals are really here. It's a matter of getting this information into the hands of the people with the right intention towards forests.

PV: Tan Ajan, you've alluded to it somewhat, but could you articulate your role as abbot and as a forest monk in addressing these problems?

AJ: Well, as you know, I am conventionally speaking the abbot of Tao Dam, but most of the year I live at Wat Pa Nanachat. I'm able to come out for a month or two in the hot season, but I keep in contact by telephone with Tivaporn when I'm back in Ubon to keep abreast of what's going on and to give her support and encouragement. She gets bullied and slandered a lot. It's a lot to put up with apart from the ordinary pressures of running a business in adverse circumstances and struggling to make enough money to keep going.

You know what an incredible drive it is in and out from here and you know how often she does that. She goes out for a day, then comes back in again, then drives a truck all the way to Phuket to sell the ore from the mine, then drives all the way back up again to meet with all these academics and scientists here for a visit tomorrow. If anything really difficult or heavy comes up I ask her to phone me up



right away. For example, she gave us the advance warning about the cattle and drug smuggling going across the border this year.

Also, a role that one plays as a forest monk who is also an abbot is to be a liaison or central figure. Being the abbot of a large monastery, and being in Thailand for many years, I've come to know a lot of people, and I can help interested parties get in contact with each other. So, to summarize my role I'd say it involves first, giving moral, spiritual support, Dhamma teaching, encouragement, and reflections; and second, in the social role as the abbot of a well-known monastery who knows lots of people, I can help the right people get in touch with each other.

PV: Seems, potentially, like a pretty adversarial situation. How do you manage to maintain a nonpartisan position in a scenario that is very partisan?

AJ: As the abbot of a monastery one usually plays the role of being the referee or the impartial resort for both sides in a dispute — whereas here it's a little different in that we're part of it. I'm not absolutely equanimous about this. I'm not totally impartial. I'm definitely on the side of the people who want to save this forest. But I find it important to avoid the 'us' and 'them' way of thinking. Also, personally, I don't have to confront these people trying to destroy the forest the way Tivaporn does. I've met very few of the leading figures. And Thai society being what it is, one always keeps up social proprieties. If someone were to wish bad things for the forest monastery and curse us to our backs, if he met me he'd probably bow and speak very politely.

As a monk the principle is always 'what's correct according to Dhamma-Vinaya?; what's wholesome, what's right?', and standing up for that in certain circumstances while being sensitive to time and place and the way to go about things. And not to come across as being adversarial. For example, if something illegal is going on in the forest, I wouldn't confront the person directly, but I might try to see their superior, or superior's superior. Rather than being a problem between me and someone, it's a problem in the wider community that call for the right people to be alerted.

PV: As a personal experience, training here in this remote, wild forest has been a very enjoyable and profound experience. Could you put into words why it is so important for monks to train in forests? What are the advantages? How do we reflect on and learn from nature in the context of Dhamma practice?

AJ: Well, the practice of Dhamma is one in which it's very important to develop the ability to calm the mind, to make the mind peaceful and concentrated. That being so, it's essential to have a conducive environment in which there is nothing too jarring or too exciting. So we lead a very simple life, one pared down to the essentials, not surrounded by anything man-made or anything that's going to pull you out of yourself. Living in a forest, there's nothing really, nowhere for your eyes to go — just greenness and trees all around. It automatically encourages you to incline inwards.

The natural rhythms of the forest, of the trees and the streams gives a sense of uplift and well-being to our minds. They ground us. This provides a very important foundation for the meditation practice. It comes to feel natural to be by yourself and you come to delight in solitude. Sitting meditation and walking meditation become obvious ways to spend time, not something you have to push yourself into. I think for most people support from the environment is still vitally important to success in practice. Ajan Cha would often talk of the relationship between physical seclusion and seclusion from the hindrances.

The forest is not quiet but it is tranquil, and it is teaching you the laws of nature all the time. The things you see around you are just natural phenomena. You're surrounded by birth, ageing, sickness and death — arising and passing away in the most raw and obvious forms. As you reflect on those principles internally, your contemplations find a resonance outside of you. The phases of the moon, dawn and dusk, the play of heat and cold, the whole natural environment attains a heightened profundity, because they express the nature of things you're investigating internally. You feel a sense of harmony and a seamless unity between the inner and the outer.

Living at the foot of a tree, keeping the *dhutaṅga* practises, we also have this wonderful feeling of being the inheritors of a tradition, that stretches back for over 2500 years. We are not living so differently at

all from the way the great monks of the Buddha's time lived. That sense of being a part of something larger, something noble that stretches in an unbroken line right back to the Buddha: I think that's a very wholesome feeling, one that a bhikkhu may cherish.

This particular forest, being home to so many wild animals, gives us the opportunity to look at fear, anxiety, and attachment to the body in a very direct way. Seeing the effect it has on our mind, the sense of urgency that it gives us. While living in the forest a lot of these phrases 'a sense of urgency', 'making every moment count' — teachings we've read about and studied — they really come alive.

In a way it's difficult to articulate, I feel a sense of rightness, a feeling of 'this is exactly how I should be living', and 'this is how a monk lives'.

PV: In the Suttas, so many passages from the Buddha's enlightenment to the *parinibbāna* take place under trees. The Buddha, when possible, always lived and practised in the forest. How do you see, with the forest disappearing, and the subsequent likelihood that this will be the last generation of forest bhikkhus, a Buddhist monk responding to a predicament like this?

AJ: Well you don't have any choice really. There's not so much that can be done. As you become a more senior bhikkhu and you have more responsibilities and opportunity to teach the Dhamma to lay Buddhists then you can at least point out the value of the forest, how little remains, and the need to look after it. It's also important to point out the relationship between the forest and the Buddhist *Sāsanā*. As a younger monk, then just make the best of the forested areas available while you can. But I think it's really important to have young monastics come out and experience this way of practice right from the beginning of their monastic career because it can create such a strong impression. You know you'll remember this for the rest of your life.

Hopefully you will continue to have the chance to keep coming here, or to places like this to train. But even if that is not the case, for monks to have the experience of living simply in a forest like this even once, has a ripple effect. As monks become more senior and

have their own monasteries and their own disciples they will pass on their love of nature and appreciation of the role of solitude in monastic life.

But you know, sometimes I must admit I feel that this destruction is not going to stop until every last tree outside of private hands is gone.

To really effect a change, it has to start in the schools. Last week when I went out to see what was going on with the various arson fires in the area, Tivaporn was running a retreat for school kids in the village at the edge of the forest. And the kids loved it — they really responded to the teaching about nature very well. At one point the children were asked what their parents do for a living and three of them replied that it was illegal logging.

It's the same everywhere. In Huay Ka Kaeng, just north-east of here, there is a lot of wild forest. It's labelled a World Heritage Site. It's also the place where a forest park official called Seup Nakasatheean killed himself as a gesture to call attention what is happening to the forests across Thailand. A foundation was set up in his name and the army was sent in to look after and patrol the land. But still there is cutting going on to this day.

I myself don't see any fundamental changes being made until there comes a point where laws are laws and whoever breaks the law is wrong and is dealt with appropriately.

But I feel reasonably confident about the prospect of saving Tao Dam. It is really hard to say when you don't know everything going on, really hearing everything second or third hand. Still, overall, I think there are enough people with influence who know about Tao Dam to keep this tract of forest intact.

PV: You mentioned that you went to a conference about Tao Dam last year. What was that like?

AJ: Well, yes, it was strange for me. One has the idea that Tao Dam is a forest far away from any place else where we come on retreat every year. And so at this conference I walked into a large room with academics who all seemed to be experts on Tao Dam. I

was wondering where did these people come from? They're talking about the biology and topography and all kinds of esoteric subjects.

PV: Ajan, I sometimes get the sense when I'm practising *sīla*, *samādhi*, *paññā* in long periods of solitude in the forest, that that in itself feels like the most direct, authentic response to the threat of this forest being destroyed not to mention all the other environmental, economic and socio-political calamities on earth. But I find it challenging to articulate this. If I were to try to explain it to somebody who hasn't had much experience with meditation, I wouldn't know how to put it into words. But the sense of authenticity seems true and real.

AJ: Yes, I agree, but I also have the same kind of difficulty in explaining it — why it is best to practise in this way. The one thing I said the other day: if we look at the root cause of all mankind's self-imposed difficulties, there is a common underlying cause. We find that because mankind doesn't know himself, he constantly acts in conflict with his own best interests, living merely as the puppet of desires, fears and delusions. But practising *sīla*, *samādhi*, *paññā*, deals with these things at their very root. That way one really works with the whole structure of what is going on rather than just responding to a particular expression of it. We study the mind to understand what greed is, what hatred is, what delusion is, even in their most subtle forms, while developing the skilful means to abandon them, to let them go. That seems to me to be as an intelligent response as any other.

But, with trying to save the forest, or whatever, I, myself, am always wary of getting into the trap of 'I've got to do it', or 'We've got to do this'. Once you fall into this 'we've got to!' mentality, you've lost it already. Yes, I will do what I can. But who knows what will happen. These things occur due to causes and conditions, many of them way out of my control.



# Learning Forest Dhamma

**Paññāvuḍḍho Bhikkhu**

*As long as there are bhikkhus who delight living in the forest at the foot of trees the Buddha-Sāsana, the Way of the Awakened Ones, will not decline.* (D.II.77; A.IV.20)

## **Alone with other creatures**

EMERGING FROM MEDITATION while nestled in an isolated spot deep within the folds of the forest certainly makes for a wonderful way to greet the day. Sitting here on my dtieng in Tao Dam, the crescendo of the birds and insects celebrating the crack of dawn has subsided, and shafts of light begin to seep through the trees. The beams of sunshine from the early morning sun rising over the mountainous horizon produce a dance of light throughout the trees and imbue the forest air with a glowing yellow-orange hue.

Here in the lush, tropical forests of Tao Dam I often catch myself marvelling at the degree to which the forest brims with life. The natural surroundings pulsate with a vibrant energy. From the gurgling flow of water in the creek to the bass undertone of humming bees, to the punctuated, high-pitched cries of barking deer, the forest provides a constant symphonic medley of sound. At dawn the energy peaks; while nocturnal creatures return to their abodes, the rest of the fauna awake with the sun to embark on a search for a new day's meal. A little bird perched just on the front ledge of my dtieng sings a small song. Then with the sudden quiver of its wings it slices through the timelessness of a moment. I note how a detached observation of nature's rhythmic movements brings peace, ease and a sense of release to the ceaselessly thinking mind. In my Dhamma practice, the pristine wilderness inspires me to turn within and attempt to attune to that which is true. The whole environment encourages me to develop a deeper awareness of the present moment and practise letting go.

Suddenly, while sitting on my dtieng, I hear a commotion in the brush several metres away. The noises are insistent in their

beckoning. Noting a subtle ripple of sensation from my abdomen up to the crown of my head, I anticipate the onset of some mental proliferation. I make an effort to bring attention to the breath to re-establish mindfulness in the present moment, but the mind doesn't cooperate. Instead, the sounds trigger a reminiscence of a similar occasion one year ago. Immediately I feel myself reliving the scene.

I have just completed my early morning meditations, concluding with a chant of the *Mettā Sutta*, the Buddha's discourse on loving-kindness for all beings. I check my clock and discover that I am a little late for the descent down the mountain to take the daily meal. But this is my favourite part of the day and I want to soak up a bit more meditation in the radiant morning sun. The fresh dew drops on the abundant flora indicate the cool, crisp moistness of the air, and I feel quite content to remain sitting here comfortably tucked away in my robes.

I re-close my eyes to sit in meditation for a couple more minutes, but a sudden crashing sound in the brush competes for my attention. To hear sounds, even loud sounds, in the forest is so common that I tell myself not to take note and to return to the meditation. But as the volume and frequency of the fracas in the brush increases, I can't refrain from speculation. I realize that whatever is going on is coming closer. Unable to control my curiosity, I open my eyes and slowly rotate my neck to look over my left shoulder. It takes my vision a moment to focus. The greenness of the forest all seems to melt together like an impressionist painting. And then I see it.

The form of an animal is darting to and fro between clusters of bamboo and through the dense underbrush. I make out the shape of a large sandy-beige feline-like form, about human size, jumping up and down and zipping left and right in an almost playful fashion. Two butterflies flutter their wings over its head. Is it chasing butterflies, or following some ground animal through the brush? I can't foresee. Everything is taking place so quickly. But whatever is happening, this feline creature apparently doesn't see or smell me and is on a collision course with my *dtieng*.

Not really thinking of anything, I find myself making a noise by gently, but audibly clearing my throat. The large cat instantly stops



jumping around, ducks low behind some tall grass and shrubs, then shoots clear out of sight. It had been only three or four metres from my dtieng.

### **Finding Resolve in the Forest**

The proverbial forest bhikkhu story revolves around the encounter with a tiger. As the fiercest predator to be found in the wild, this large flesh-eating character unquestionably rules the jungles of Southeast Asia. Tigers notoriously reek with the smell of death on their breath, usually strong from a recent kill. Yet interestingly, in recent recorded Thai history, although there are countless documented instances of forest bhikkhus meeting up with tigers, there is not one single known case of any forest monk being killed by one of these beings. I had just met up with a relative of one of these regal beasts, (later I discovered the animal I saw was probably a Golden Asian Cat, not a properly striped full-grown Bengal Tiger), and fortunately I did not become the first victim on the list.

Now, a year later, as I sit at the foot of a giant tree at a new spot in the same Tao Dam forest recollecting this encounter, I contemplate why fear did not arise. Why do I feel so at home in this seemingly wild and uncontrollable environment? Practising in the forest in accordance with a forest monastic tradition dating back to the time of the Buddha, I get a gut sense of the authenticity of this form of training, although it is a far cry from my upbringing and education in America. As a forest monk there is a bare-bones honesty and naked simplicity to the daily life. Everything is a teacher. Every moment is geared toward Awakening. Ajan Cha points the way.

“Whether a tree, a mountain or an animal, it’s all Dhamma, everything is Dhamma. Where is this Dhamma? Speaking simply, that which is not Dhamma doesn’t exist. Dhamma is Nature. This is called the *Sacca* Dhamma, the True Dhamma. If one sees Nature, one sees Dhamma; if one sees Dhamma, one sees Nature. Seeing Nature, one knows the Dhamma.”

And elsewhere:

“Where is the Buddha? We may think the Buddha has been and gone, but the Buddha is the Dhamma, the Truth of the way

things are. The Buddha is still here. Regardless of whoever is born or not, whether someone knows it or not, the Truth is still there. So we should get close to the Buddha, we should come within and find the Dhamma. When we reach the Dhamma we will see the Buddha and all doubts will dissolve.”

In the solitude of the deep forest, however, inspiration in practice is always quickly tempered by the work at hand — overcoming the kilesas. For me, battling the kilesas involves a continual struggle with some deeply ingrained proclivities: always catching myself ruminating about some aspect of the past, present or future; trying to let go of and unlearn desires that have been drummed into me by society to become ‘somebody’ or to achieve ‘something’; being mindful of the arising and passing away of moods, emotions and unskilful habitual tendencies; and forever uprooting and investigating deeply entrenched perceptions.

With nowhere to go and nothing new to see, I experience a spaciousness and lightness of mind that allows some deep stuff to percolate up, flooding the mind with a deluge of memories. I’m reminded of various accounts about the experience of the mind just before death. Here at Tao Dam I’ve managed to review what seems like my whole life, remembering some of the tiniest details, recollecting where I did no more than spit on the ground. Yet when I can get beyond this recursive thinking, there’s absolutely nothing to do all day to distract me from a full-on practice of sitting and walking meditation. Any patterns of greed, hatred and delusion are given room to manifest in their most subtle forms. The process of birth, sickness, ageing and death, internally and externally becomes so obvious. As Ajan Cha liked to say, “we practise to understand just this much”.

In similar intensive meditation situations of the past I often found support and encouragement though practising with others and surrendering to a retreat schedule. But at Tao Dam there is no retreat schedule to surrender to. Although I have gratitude for those years of formal retreats in America — they now provide me with an invaluable array of tools to help put my time to wise use — I recognize the level of surrender here on a long-term retreat in solitude is of an entirely different order. I realize that in the past I often motivated myself to practise through working with a teacher or a group or fellow-practitioners. Here, although the Saṅgha is scattered

throughout the surrounding Tao Dam forest in isolated spots, when it comes down to it I must muster up the gumption and resolve to maintain an impeccable standard of discipline on my own. In solitude a more honest and natural kind of effort replaces any determination fuelled by hubris.

The anchor for my practice of awareness is ānāpānasati, mindfulness of breathing. I learn to come back to the breath, in the here and now, again and again and again. With one-pointed awareness of the breath in the present moment, I practise quieting the mind, cutting off the incessant internal chatter, and, as Castaneda says, “stopping the world”. As the practice moves towards a balanced sense of serenity and tranquillity, I note how investigative energy begins to transform the very base of conditioned consciousness. Instead of relating to nature by dividing experience into dichotomous fictions of ‘self’ and other, as my mind becomes more silent, I see the possibility of experiencing things simply and truly as they are.

Recollecting family and spiritual companions, teachers and students, and wishing I could offer them a realisation of peace and truth elevates my mind and gives it motivation. But over time I witness my mind oscillating between inspiration and a more humble recognition of how much there is to do. Slowly I learn to see these passing emotions as just more mind states. Could it be any other way? I keep the goals of the Buddha’s path clear in my mind, but the art is learning how to relate to these goals in a skilful way. The sincere desire for true freedom from the compulsions of craving is usually the most direct way to give rise to right effort. Over the weeks and months at Tao Dam, I gradually learn how to exert an effort that is wholehearted and rigorous while at the same time balanced, measured and at ease with letting go. Ajan Cha remarks:

“The worldly way is to do things for a reason, to get some return, but in Buddhism we do things without any gaining idea ... If we don’t want anything at all, what will we get? We don’t get anything! Whatever you get is just a cause for suffering, so we practise not getting anything ... This kind of understanding which comes from [practising Dhamma] leads to surrender, to giving up. Until there is complete surrender, we persevere, we persist in our contemplation. If desires or anger and dislike arise in our mind, we aren’t indifferent to them. We don’t just

leave them out but rather take them and investigate to see how and from where they arise. We see them clearly and understand the difficulties which we cause ourselves by believing and following these moods. This kind of understanding is not found anywhere other than in our own pure mind.”

### **The Challenge to Live in Harmony with Nature**

In the forest bhikkhu life, there are various themes which undergird our practice to give us a form in which to surrender. One main theme is that of *nekkhamma*, simplicity and renunciation. The Buddha and our teachers urge us to eat little, sleep little, talk little, and practise a lot. We're far away from any distraction. The nearest Thai village is over forty kilometres away, three hours by a difficult four-wheel drive journey. When it rains the road is easily washed out. So here at Tao Dam the sense of *viveka* — solitude, quietude and detachment — from the world is real.

Furthermore, we undertake a number of dhutaṅga practices to cultivate a spirit of simplicity and renunciation in relation to our four requisites of food, shelter, clothing and medicine. We live at the foot of trees on small open-air bamboo platforms, take just one meal a day in one bowl, wear and sleep with our robes and get by with a modest supply of communal medicines.

At the same time, the natural habitat and wildlife make me feel deeply enmeshed in nature. Biologists and botanists who visit speak with great enthusiasm about the diversity of the ecological surroundings. The place is a tropical paradise. Exotic, funky-looking palms and ferns abound. Ancient hardwood trees tower over dense thickets of bamboo. It takes seventeen people with arms stretched to form a ring around the base of the tree at which I sit this year. The tree top provides a home for a cornucopia of life forms. There are dozens of bee colonies, whose beehives at this time of the year drop like grenades every so often from the branches over one hundred feet above. Ancient ferns sprout out from the hardwood branches. A family of hornbills make their nest in the tree as well. Indeed, looking up at the top I find a whole ecosystem. In several recent visits to Tao Dam forest a group of birdwatchers spotted and catalogued over two hundred bird species, some of which were thought to be

extinct in Thailand. And I can only speculate about how many *devas* make their home here.

Throughout the forest, water flows everywhere. From the cusp of the mountain ridge to the depth of the valley several hundred metres below, the creek cascades into a meandering staircase of waterfalls which furnish the community with invigorating showers. Small pools at their bases offer fresh water baths — that is if we can withstand the curious nibbling on the skin from schools of colourful fish which dart about. When bathing, we have agreed to not use soap products in or near the water, washing by gently scrubbing with sand, or taking a bucket of water to a spot away from the creek if we use soap. Ajan Cha, having spent many years living in the forest, would teach his monks how to live off the forest in harmony while keeping the strict precepts of the Vinaya (Buddhist monastic discipline). He would describe the different trees and plants, indicating which ones could be used for medicines or allowable food. So although we hardly have any possessions beyond a few simple requisites, we rarely feel a sense of lack in such a natural environment. The whole experience creates an attitude of mind that easily learns to let go and live in harmony with surroundings.

While living in such an environment may sound quite idyllic from a romantic standpoint, on a practical front a number of difficulties exist. The hour-long daily climb up the mountain after the meal is always a hot and sweaty affair. Any water drawn from the creek used for drinking must be filtered and then boiled to prevent sickness. And perhaps the most incessant challenge comes from the impressive array of insects and creepy-crawlies that have to be reckoned with: ticks, biting horse flies, bees, termites, ants, mosquitoes, spiders, snakes, scorpions, rats and centipedes. Bloodsucking leeches, albeit harmless creatures, also can cause quite a mess of blood. If not from a leech, my body always manages to get cut, scraped, bloodied and bruised in some manner.

It requires constant effort to keep my few possessions dry from the rain and free from the creatures that ascend the dtieng. The nights are cold and damp. When I awaken in the night on the dtieng, I often get the sense that I am open prey for any large flesh-eating creature. It is not uncommon in the middle of the night to hear footsteps of animals, or even to hear the breathing of some confused animal

(such as a bear or wild boar) next to my dtieng seemingly trying to determine what it has bumped into. Invariably, these animals smell who I am and leave me alone. On more rare occasions, monks have come across deer being attacked by wild dogs, or a panther. Other monks have seen tigers while doing walking meditation. Some locals even have reported running into wild rhinoceroses. One recent night a monk walked down the path from his dtieng to investigate a curious sound of bamboo being munched upon, only to his astonishment to find a herd of wild elephants. The earth shook, rumbling as if there had been a small earthquake, as the elephants fled in surprise.

The one creature in the forest that does offer a serious health hazard is the malarial mosquito. Five members in our community of about twenty have contracted the malarial parasite from a mosquito bite this year and have had to be brought out to a hospital for treatment. Mosquito nets offer some protection, but the insects apparently can bite at any time of the day, not just dawn and dusk. All in all I experience a renouncing of many comforts and securities I didn't even realize I had. The tenuous, uncertain nature of the body really draws me within in an urgent search for a peace unconditioned by these external phenomena. If I complicate my daily life by holding on to any attachments, or acting in an unwholesome way, the suffering and negative *kamma vipāka* seems almost instant.

Lastly, the sense of urgency in practice is heightened by the fact that the forested Tao Dam area, which undoubtedly has taken centuries to grow, could be gone or nearly destroyed within the next few years. The hardwood trees fetch a good price for loggers in the timber industry and the wild animals are prized by hunters. National Park officials have been known to burn the forest to get reforestation funds. I can vividly remember sitting in meditation at the upper sālā late one night, with a clear vista of the forest for miles and observing lines of fire apparently set by arsonists blazing from mountain to mountain. Now commercial interests want to cut a road through the heart of this pristine, virgin forest to expedite the transfer of goods from a port in Burma to Bangkok. Firsthand accounts from fellow monks who have done thudong throughout Thailand indicate that forests like this, which one generation ago covered this country, now

are almost non-existent. When I think about this it makes me want to practise even harder.

### **Cultivating the Sublime Mind**

A second theme penetrating many aspects of our practice is the diligent development of *sīla*, *mettā* and wholesome, radiant states of mind. As Buddhist monks, the primary precept guiding our relation to the world is harmlessness. Expressed in a positive way, this means the cherishing of all life. Interestingly, living in a wild environment, this also functions as our greatest protection. Giving great importance to our *sīla*, and actively practising the brahma vihāras of *mettā*, *karunā*, *muditā* and *upekkhā* gives us a skilful method to work with fear.

Dealing with the wild animals is not a matter of bravado or machismo. Asserting a self against nature only gives rise to conflict. Instead, we learn through the cultivation of *mettā* to emanate a kindness that gives no footing for fear to arise. Indeed, in the forest we can study how fear and love are like darkness and light — the presence of one drives out the other. In the forest we are instructed not to go out and look for wild animals, nor to shun them. We just attempt to look at whatever comes our way with equanimity. When we face wild animals with *mettā* and succeed in letting go of fear, we can unearth a deep Dhamma treasure buried beneath the fear. This can open us up to a new taste of freedom and ease. It is a common theme in the poems written by monks and nuns at the time of the Buddha:

“I am friend to all, companion to all,  
sympathetic to all beings,  
and I develop a heart full of *mettā*,  
always delighting in non-harming.”

*(Theragāthā 648)*

Holding to the principles of non-violence and harmlessness, a bhikkhu trains to not lift a finger to harm another sentient being, even in self-defence. Of the 227 major training precepts in the Buddhist Monastic Code many cultivate a respect for animal and plant life in the most refined ways. Monks are prohibited from digging the earth, trimming foliage, or uprooting plants. Drawing drinking or bathing water from the creek, we must carefully check

the water for any beings visible to the eye. If there is even a tiny mosquito larvae the water cannot be used, or it must be filtered, and any living creatures returned to the water.

These details of the monk's discipline might appear excessive, but they create a new attitude of mind in relation to nature. We endeavour to look upon everything in nature as worthy of care and respect. Rather than being a source of material for use and consumption, nature is understood as a process that incorporates our very life. I am aware that the dting upon which I meditate and sleep is constructed from dead bamboo, and when I move away the bamboo rots in the torrential rains and becomes a natural part of the forest carpet as it would anyway. As alms mendicants, the Saṅgha depends upon lay support for the building of these simple structures in the first place, so we learn to relinquish any sense of ownership.

The practice of living in harmony with nature also extends to the method we use to wash our robes. Lay people offer a piece of heartwood from a jackfruit tree, which the monks in turn chop into small chips and boil in water, making a *gaen-kanun* concoction for washing. The *gaen-kanun* has a marvellous disinfectant and deodorising effect that lasts for days. If robes washed in the *gaen-kanun* should become sweaty, hanging the robe in the sunlight gives it a natural freshness in minutes. In understanding that we are an aspect of nature, the emphasis is upon living in harmony, attuned to nature's processes. The fortnightly recitation of the discipline is scheduled according to the lunar cycle, occurring every new and full moon. By forgetting the date and month of the worldly calendar and just living according to the patterns of the sun and the moon, we create a sense of timelessness. There's no time to practise awakening except the present moment.

The effect of this shift in attitude generates some positive results. To begin, wild animals respond differently. They can intuitively sense harmlessness and any accompanying fearlessness. When we encounter wild animals in the forest, they seem to simply mirror what they sense. Many people also respect the strict ethical standards of forest monks. Lay Buddhists consider it auspicious to have forest monks around, and as a subsequent effect, the monastery not only protects the forest in its own immediate area, but the whole forest around it. Lay Buddhists in Asia find inspiration if their monks are



putting forth a lot of effort in practice. Although few people make it into Tao Dam, the ones who do come from across Thailand and range from businessmen to ecologists to military historians.



Another interesting development in Thailand is that a tradition of ordaining trees has been instigated — tying a semblance of the gaen-kanun coloured forest monks robe around the trunks of trees — to protect the forest from logging. With a monk's robe tied around a tree even the most callous Thai logger will think twice before killing the tree. To be sure, there are glaring exceptions to this trend towards respect for the trees and the wildlife in and around the forest monastery, but generally the presence of monks has a

strong deterrent effect on deforestation, inhibits the hunting of wild animals and engenders an increased appreciation and love of nature.

As forest bhikkhus, our teachers encourage us consciously to reflect on the value of forest, and bring to mind that our presence and sincerity of practice is intended to be a preservation force. At Tao Dam Ajan Jayasāro spurs us on with an analogy:

“Living in a forest threatened with extinction is like encountering a human being, injured, or with an illness, possibly dying on the side of the road. One doesn’t worry about the person’s previous behaviour, inquire about their nationality or ethnicity, wonder whether the human being is rich or poor, young or old, famous or not. In any case, human life is sacrosanct. You attend to the threat on the person’s life by taking them to a hospital or doing whatever possible to try to save them. Similarly, just as human life has intrinsic value, so does the life of the forest, with the multitudes of life within it. Who knows, the forest may contain a rare plant species that leads to a cure for cancer. Or maybe not. One way or the other, a forest supports the lives of countless beings, and if it is subject to destruction, it merits an immediate and appropriate response towards protection and preservation.”

### **The Intrinsic Power of Mind**

A third major theme of the forest Dhamma practice, in many ways the point of retreating to the forests, is to develop sati, *sampajañña*, and samādhi. Ajan Thanissāro (abbot of Wat Mettā in California) once challenged my enthusiasm for practising at a place like Tao Dam, perhaps sensing my enchantment with the exoticism of the retreat setting, by remarking, “It’s a good thing as long as it helps you with your meditation”. This echoes a relevant exhortation by the Buddha in the Saṃyutta Nikāya of the Pāli Canon,

“Guarding oneself, one guards others;  
guarding others one guards oneself.  
And how does one, in guarding oneself, guard others?  
By patience and forbearance  
by a non-violent and harmless life,

by loving kindness and compassion  
and by the diligent and unwavering practice of meditation.”  
(v.168)

With the simplicity of the viveka environment, all the energies of the day can be focussed resolutely on cultivating the four foundations of mindfulness. Sati functions as a fulcrum for every aspect of our practice. It is the sine qua non of the spiritual life. In whatever posture one finds oneself, there is the determination to give rise to sati and sampajañña of the situation, knowing the body as body, feelings as feelings, the mind as mind, and dhammas as just dhammas. We practise to know things just as they are — impermanent and empty of an inherent self. The sati and sampajañña both bolster the strength of the samādhi cultivated in the formal sitting practice, and operate as extensions of it. Ideally, the sati and sampajañña form a seamless continuum of awareness and investigation throughout the entire day and night. They are the presence of mind that is life itself; without them, there is heedlessness. When we are heedless, as the Buddha said, it is as if we are dead.

Over an extended period of diligent practice, I begin to experience how the power and knowledge of sati and sampajañña organically grow and build upon themselves as they develop. The power and knowledge intrinsic to these qualities of mind are not derived from force or coercion. Once in motion, with continual effort, they naturally deepen. By their inherent nature the faculties of sati and sampajañña are ready for development in all human beings. And although they can be aimed toward a variety of ends, our task in Dhamma practice is to use sati and sampajañña as tools to be awakened by all things. We're not trying to concoct beautiful theories and ideologies, but to develop a penetrative clarity in the study of moment to moment experience. We learn from Dhamma, manifest in the nature around us, through *opanayiko*, turning inwards. We endeavour to continue to take the practice yet further, looking deeply at the nature of the mind. Indeed, by getting in touch with the pristine, natural state of the mind we let the rigid separation between inside and outside become deliquescent, giving rise to a more unified awareness.

The breath, in constant flow between the inner and outer natures, is an ideal samatha meditation object for myself and many others. As I

learn to let the breath breathe itself, naturally, accompanied by a suffused and unwavering awareness, I try to let the doer of the meditation process disappear. Only when the doer steps out of the way, and the knower of the breath lets go of any attachment and identification with the process, does samādhi mature. But as soon as my mind proliferates — “How can I give impetus to the samādhi nimitta?” or “Will this lead to jhāna?” — a taint of craving, a glimmer of grasping, and a subtle sense of lack all obfuscate the knowing, and my mind gets distracted. With distraction there is no possibility to cultivate awareness of phenomena just as they are. With even a subtle sense of contrivance, luminosity fades. But fortunately, there’s always the next breath, another mind moment, to begin anew.

### **The Wisdom to Let Go**

According to the Buddha’s teaching, sīla and samādhi are the ground for paññā to arise. With a mind brought to malleability, sharpness, clarity and deep peace through samādhi, the defilements are held at least temporarily at bay, and the investigative faculty of paññā is tractable for making some decent headway.

Again from Ajan Cha:

“With right samādhi, no matter what level of calm is reached, there is awareness. There is sati and sampajañña. This is the samādhi which can give rise to paññā, one cannot get lost in it ... Don’t think that when you have gained some peace of mind living here in the quiet forest that that’s enough. Don’t settle for just that! Remember that we have come to cultivate and grow the seeds of paññā.”

Reading the Suttas, I am struck by the plethora of passages in which a monk or a nun, given the teachings by the Buddha, retreats to meditative solitude at the foot of a tree, and in no long time, ‘does what is to be done’. That is, the monk or nun sees the five khandhas as impermanent and empty, puts an end to dukkha, liberates the mind from the samsaric treadmill of birth and death, and realizes complete Awakening. It sounds utterly straightforward. Yet in my practice, without constant heedfulness, it can be natural for mindfulness to lose touch with the present moment and allow the kilesas to

slip in. Memories from the past coupled with creative imagination about the future perpetually enchant and fascinate. Or conversely, my mind can feel immured by the extremes of languor and impetuosity. Practising in America, I never considered myself to be interested in sense desires. Now though, living the renunciant life of a bhikkhu in the meditative solitude of the forest, I am more acutely aware of sense impingement and the lure of sensuality. The ostensible comfort of the familiar and the secure, and the ensuing entanglements of the worldly life can seem more alluring than ever before. Such is the pathos of dukkha! But the words of monks and nuns before us, like the Indian Buddhist monk Shantideva, inspire me onwards:

“When dwelling in caves,  
In empty shrines and at the foot of a tree,  
Never look back —  
Cultivate detachment!”

If I do get a bit of sustained success in the practice, I notice that a subtle sense of pride for living a pure and good life can enter the mind. Unwittingly, as I attempt to live a simple, selfless life, the sense of self tends to emerge in new and unforeseen forms. It wants to claim ownership of any goodness and wisdom that might arise. Here Ajan Cha continues the encouragement:

“For the ultimate in the practice of Buddhist Meditation, the Buddha taught the practice of ‘Letting go’. Don’t carry anything around! Detach! If you see goodness, let it go. If you see rightness, let it go. These words, ‘Let go’, do not mean we don’t have to practise. It means that we have to practise the method of ‘letting go’ itself. The Buddha taught us to contemplate all of the dhammas, to develop the Path through contemplating our own body and heart. The Dhamma isn’t anywhere else. It’s right here! Not someplace far away. It’s right here in this very body and heart of ours.”

Still on other occasions, I find the sense of self assert itself through doubt. My mind wonders, “Would it be better to go out and help others? What use am I to the world sitting at the foot of this tree? What if I don’t awaken to the unconditioned truth of Nibbāna? Isn’t it a bit presumptuous for me to think that I can realize the ultimate

truth?" The Theravāda forest masters' arousing exhortations in this respect are echoed in Patrul Rinpoche's classic introduction to Tibetan Buddhism, 'The Words of My Perfect Teacher':

"Until you have overcome wanting anything for yourself, it would be better not to rush into altruistic activities... The ancient [practitioners] had these four goals: Base your mind on the Dhamma, base your Dhamma on a humble life, base your humble life on the thought of death, base your death on a lonely cave. Nowadays we think we can practise Dhamma alongside our worldly activities, without the need for bold determination, courage, and difficult practices, all the while enjoying comfort, well-being and popularity... But how could there be a way to marry Dhamma and worldly life? Those who claim to be doing so are likely to be leading a good worldly life, but you may be sure that they are not practising pure Dhamma. To say that you can practise Dhamma and worldly life at the same time is like saying that you can sew with a double pointed needle, put fire and water in the same container or ride two horses (simultaneously) in opposite directions. All these things are simply impossible. Could any ordinary person ever surpass Sakyamuni Buddha? Yet even he found no way of practising Dhamma and worldly life side by side."

Another reflection that sits powerfully in my mind is the story of a Zen Buddhist monk, who, as I remember the story, was asked, "What would you do if you were told that you had twenty-four hours to live?" He responded, "Sit straight zazen samādhi" — that is concentrate the mind in meditation in the sitting posture. The questioner persisted, "What about your vow to liberate all sentient beings?" The monk retorted, "That is the most direct, complete way to liberate all sentient beings".

Our teachers remind us that the mind absorbed with the bliss of samādhi is far from intoxication. With a pliant and supple mind primed for the work of investigation from one-pointed concentration, it's natural for insight into the tenuous, transient nature of conditioned existence to deepen. I notice in the forest when my mind is in a peaceful state that ordinary discursive consciousness dissatisfies; thoughts, even astute ones, are of their nature ephemeral and

capricious. To indulge in the thinking mind gives me a feeling akin to not having taken a shower or brushed my teeth for days.

When I realize a dispassion towards mental proliferation, the practice takes on a greater immediacy for me. Dukkha is ubiquitous. It is imperative to understand the source of the incessant torrent of suffering and to tread the path to realize its cessation. Resorting to belief systems, philosophical explanations of ultimate truth or supplication to an external being only takes me further away from peace. Any approach that is bound up with the five khandhas is still within the realm of dukkha. But how do I penetrate or transcend the conditionality of the five khandhas while still operating from within their realm? I find this the heart of the investigation.

Ajan Buddhādāsa in his book 'Heartwood of the Bodhi Tree' mentions that in the *Majjhima Nikāya*, the Buddha is asked to summarize his teachings in one statement. To this the Buddha responds, "*Sabbe dhammā nalam abhinivesaya*" — nothing whatsoever should be clung to. Implicit in this utterance is the teaching of anattā, (not-self, voidness of separate self, emptiness of a soul-entity). So in the Dhamma practice I attempt to see though the seemingly a priori concepts of 'I', 'me' and 'mine'. Ajan Cha explains:

"So we practise not getting anything. Just this is called 'making the mind empty'. It's empty but there is still doing. This emptiness is something people don't usually understand, but those who reach it see the use of knowing it. It's not the emptiness of not having anything, it's emptiness within the things that are here."

### **Investigation of Birth and Death**

In my Dhamma practice, the steady contemplation of birth and death brings the practice right to the heart. The forest affords numerous opportunities to confront the matters of life and death. Walking along the forest paths, one frequently comes across a snake eating a frog or lizard, swallowing the animal whole and head first. The process takes maybe twenty minutes, and the snake, once having poisoned his victim, rarely stops the process because of a curious onlooker.



In the investigation of birth and death I make a repeated effort to come to peace with the fact that my body — this bag of flesh and bones — although not likely prey, will certainly die and is not really mine. Its constituent parts comprised of the four elements are constantly returning to their nature. When I look closely, I can begin to see this process of birth and death every moment. We all have known many people who have died. I find the practice most honest and powerful, however, when I am able to weigh the fact of death not just with others, but with my own body.



So contemplation of my death helps brings the essence of the practice into the present moment. Ajan Cha would ask newcomers to his monastery, "Did you come here to die?" (Interestingly the word 'die' is the same in Thai and English). This kind of vital question catapults us from the dogmatic slumbers of our everyday existence into awakeness. Making an investigation into death with continuity and sincerity breathes a heedful clarity into our daily life. The Buddha exhorts his bhikkhus to repeatedly recollect, "Has my practice borne fruit with freedom or insight, so that at the end of my life, I need not feel ashamed when questioned by my spiritual companions?" By frequently reflecting on death I find my understanding of life and death gradually takes on an earthy honesty. Death can become just like an old friend. Connecting this with the fact that death spurs urgency, I then ask, "Within just this, what is it that does not die?"

### **Everything or Nothing?**

So as a community of forest bhikkhus, our endeavour at Tao Dam is to make progress on the noble path to Nibbāna. Naturally, in this process, our gift to the forest is our very practice of *sīla*, *samādhi* and *paññā*. In the balance of virtuous and evil forces in the world, our aim is to decisively effect the balance towards goodness. And if a positive evolutionary change is to take place in the world in a significant and fundamental way, from a Buddhist perspective, it must grow from an enlightening shift or awakened transformation in consciousness. Without such a change, any attempts to heal the world are just bandaids remedies. Although perhaps well intentioned and important, these efforts are not enough. The Buddha has indicated that the human being has the potential to go beyond the samsaric realm of *dukkha* altogether, and settling for anything less would be to sell ourselves short.

But, to see beyond the clutches of conditioned existence necessarily entails experiential knowledge of the unconditioned. In other words, to paraphrase Einstein, the most significant problems we face cannot be solved by the same level of thinking which created them. Similarly in the practice of Dhamma we see that *dukkha* is a problem that cannot be extinguished by the same mind set that fabricates it in the first place. Thus, the imperative to develop the path to get beyond our conditioned perspective. And the Buddha, and the

Arahants show us that the goal of realizing the unconditioned is achievable in this life, and worth any sacrifice.

The teachings of the Buddha also indicate that the effects of the profound transformation of Awakening reverberate far and wide throughout the web of life, although perhaps in ways imperceptible to the unenlightened eye. We're more interconnected than we think. Systems theorists make a parallel point when they contend that a seemingly small input at the beginning of a process can have huge ramifications in the big picture. And quantum physicists concur that the effect of something as small as one electron making contact with another electron might not bear any fruition until over a thousand years later. From a Buddhist perspective, it's the accumulation of the moment-to-moment efforts to practise *sīla*, *samādhi* and *paññā* and tread the path to Nibbāna, over the long haul that count.

So given that every small action can carry significant kammic weight, before we (as monks) presume to know what is the best way to help others, and before we get too engaged in resolving worldly matters, we need to be solid in our realisation of Dhamma. Again we can draw a final parallel with contemporary science. David Bohm, the eminent quantum physicist, also holds that the process to change the world occurs first through transforming the mind:

“A change of meaning [within the human mind] is necessary to change this world politically, economically and socially. But that change must begin with the individual; it must change for him... if meaning is a key part of reality, then, once society, the individual and relationships are seen to mean something different a fundamental change has taken place.”

In any case, for the meditator who has success in the practice, all of these explanations are superfluous. From reading the Suttas and hearing words of contemporary masters we see that the enlightened, liberated mind validates itself and inherently knows what is the best thing to do to truly help others. Even the teachings and the practice become just the raft to the other shore. They are the finger pointing at the moon, not Awakening itself. As Ajan Cha indicates:

“The Buddha laid down *sīla*, *samādhi* and *paññā* as the Path to peace, the way to enlightenment. But in truth these things are not the essence of Buddhism. They are merely the Path... The

essence of Buddhism is peace and that peace arises from truly knowing the nature of things... Regardless of time and place, the whole practice of Dhamma comes to completion at the place where there is nothing. It's a place of surrender, of emptiness, of laying down the burden...."

So here at Tao Dam, through various aspects of the practice of Forest Dhamma, I have come to find that many of the Buddha's discourses from the Suttas which once seemed recondite or beyond me now are more apparent and easy to apply to my life. Pāli words such as nekkhamma, viveka, sīla, mettā, sati, sampajañña, samādhi, and paññā become the vernacular of everyday situations. The Suttas, far from ossified or esoteric teachings from two and a half millennia ago, become living teachings. They are urgent reminders and vivid pointers to the way it is with the body and mind right here and now. I ask myself, can my practice with heartfelt dedication make progress towards the goal of awakening, dropping the burden of dukkha and at last transcending the vicious cycle of birth and death?

My mind returns once more to the time of the cat encounter. It is forty-eight hours later and I have just spent another pleasant morning of meditation at my dtieng. I pick up my robe and carry-bag and set out for the morning descent down the mountain for the meal. Having taken only several steps on the path, I suddenly see a large black animal up ahead, but I am not fully sure what it is. It apparently has just stepped off the path about twenty metres ahead of me and has hunched itself right behind a large cluster of brush.

From sight, I can't make out the type of animal for certain from its general physical form, but I am instantly reminded of the large black panther (of three and a half metres in length!) sighted several times wandering around the Tao Dam forest in recent weeks. (Several nights earlier, one of the novices had been circled by the black cat while walking the thirty minute walk from the upper to the inner sālā late at night with only his candle lantern. The workers at the mine had also seen it one recent morning.) In any case, the animal is far too large to walk up to it on the path and it seems to have its gaze fixed dead centre on me.

Spontaneously, and perhaps with a bit of overconfidence and fearlessness from my previous cat encounter I clear my throat as if to

signal an indication of my presence and wish to walk by. The animal does not budge.

Then I feel a wave of energy coming from this impressive cat sweep over me. It has a very strong and fierce feeling-tone. If I had to put it into words it would be something like: "Who in the world do you think you are to be telling me to get off this path. I am in charge here!"

That feeling sense that I get from the stealthy animal on the path is unlike anything I have ever experienced in daylight hours of the forest. To be sure, at night, on countless previous occasions I have heard the footsteps of a large animal padding through the brush, gently crushing the bamboo leaves as it moves. On these occasions fear sometimes would arise, but I actually never have seen any animal that I recognized as a tiger. This morning, however, I am looking at a giant black cat. There is uncertainty and I feel a profound presence of death. I collect my sati and slowly take a couple of steps backwards without turning around. My hands instinctively go into añjalī (palms joined in reverential salutation) and I start to gently chant the Mettā Sutta, the Buddha's words of loving-kindness that I had chanted moments before at my dītieng. I close my eyes and tap into the energy I had felt so strongly that morning. And with the mind imbued with mettā, I practise letting go.

After finishing the chant about three minutes later I open my eyes and can't make out any more large black animals in the brush. Keeping my hands in añjalī, I chant homage to the Buddha (*Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammā Sambuddhassa*) and proceed down the path. Whatever was previously there has walked away silently.

While walking down the mountain that morning my mind naturally turns to the contemplation of death and the empty and impersonal nature of the five khandhas. The energy from the encounter gives me a definite penetrative push. During these moments, I feel a deep and meaningful trust in the Buddha and the path of Dhamma. To the extent that I have been able to devote my life to the cultivation of the path of sīla, samādhi, and paññā, my heart feels good and true. In the face of what appeared to me as death, or at least a purveyor of it,

the question of what really matters hits home. I experience an appreciation for my life that resonates deeply in my bones.

Yet while contemplating the empty nature of the five khandhas and feeling immeasurable gratitude for the Buddha's teaching, there is a wonderful and ineffable mystery to it all... a kind of 'Don't know mind'. The experience is light and peaceful. Although my heart feels full of mettā and connected to the beauty of everything around it, paññā insists that everything is completely empty, with nothing really there at all. And for once I don't experience the pressing need to reconcile this seeming contradiction. How to realize these two insights as not separate, but one, is the practice of Forest Dhamma that I continue to learn.



## Haiku in Four Postures

by Tan Paññāvuddho

Planting feet above  
Seeds beneath the rich dark soil  
Waiting for the rain.

Standing I listen  
To a voice of beating wings  
Cross over the path.

While I was sitting  
A butterfly came to rest  
Quite still on my hand.

Recline the body  
As a tree fallen to rest  
Deep in a forest.





## What it takes to reach the goal

*During the first few years of their monastic careers, a young monk's training is divided between Wat Pa Nanachat and other branch monasteries of Wat Pa Phong. One of the disciples of Ajan Cha who has helped to train Wat Pa Nanachat monks is Tan Ajan Peeak, abbot of Wat Cittabhavanarama, a branch monastery situated to the north of Bangkok. The following conversation with Tan Chandako took place in 1998.*

*Tan Ajan Peeak:* The Kruba Ajans rarely say anything directly about Nibbāna because it is beyond the realm of possible experience of a normal person. Even if the people listening believe the explanation it still doesn't actually help them much, and if they don't believe it they may make a lot of bad kamma for themselves. So the Kruba Ajans usually refer to it using metaphors or refuse to speak of it at all, only teaching the path to get there.

The important thing is to keep going straight without stopping. For example, say you want to go to Fa Kram Village over there, if you follow the path and keep walking you'll get there in a short time. If you stop to take a look at something and then chat with people, then go off with them to go see something else, it will take a long time before you reach Fa Kram — if ever. But the reality is that almost everybody gets sidetracked or at least stuck in samādhi, thinking that they've arrived already. Even Luang Por Cha was stuck for a while; Tan Ajan Mahā Boowa for six years; Luang Pu Tate for ten years; Ajan Sot (Wat Bahk Nam) for twenty years.

*Tan Chandako:* Because for all intents and purposes it appears to be full enlightenment?

TAP: Yes. There seem to be no kilesas whatsoever. Everything is clear. Many people don't make it past this stage.

Other people practise five vassas, ten vassas, and still feel like they haven't made much progress and get discouraged. But one has to keep in mind that it is always only a very few people who have the paramī to reach the goal. Compare it with the U.S. President or the Thai King. Out of an entire nation of millions of people only one

person at a time has the paramī to be in the top position. You have to think in terms of what you are going to do to set yourself above the crowd, creating the causes and conditions for future liberation.

Effort in the practice is what makes the difference. There are thousands of monks in Thailand who ordain with the sincere intention to realize Nibbāna. What sets people apart — why some succeed while others don't — is mainly due to their level of effort, as well as the effort they've put forth in the past. A person has to train himself to the point where it becomes an ingrained character trait to be continuously putting forth effort, whether you're around other people or alone. Some people are very diligent as long as there is a teacher or other monks watching, but as soon as they're alone their effort slackens.

When I was a young monk and my body was strong, I'd stay up later than everyone else walking jongrom and see the candlelights at the other kutis go out one by one. Then I'd get up before the others and watch the candlelights gradually being lit. It wasn't like I had it easy. The kilesas in my heart were always trying to convince me to take a rest: "Everyone else has crashed out. Why shouldn't you do the same?" The two voices in my head would argue: "You're tired. You need a rest. You're too sleepy to practise". "What are you going to do to overcome sleepiness? Keep going". Sometimes kilesa would win, but then I'd start again and eventually they weakened.

TC: It's often when samādhi or vipassanā has been going well that kilesas seem to arise the most. At such times it seems I've got more kilesas than ever. Is it normal?

TAP: Very normal. The average person has a huge amount of kilesa. Just to recognize that one has a lot of kilesas is already a big step. Even the *sotāpanna* has many kilesas to get free from, much work to be done. Even at that stage it's not as if everything is *sabai*. It's as if there is a vast reservoir of kilesa below us which gradually comes to the surface, and it's not easy to know how much is remaining. Just when you think you've fully gone beyond a particular kilesa it will arise again. This happens over and over. The only thing to do is to keep using paññā to keep pace with it, meet and let go of the kilesas as they arise in the present.

TC: Have you ever met or heard of anyone who has attained *magga/phala* by only contemplating and not practising *samādhi*?

TAP: No — if you want a straight answer. *Samādhi* is essential for the mind to have enough power to thoroughly cut through *kilesa*. However, if one is practising *vipassanā* with the understanding and intention that it will lead to the development of *samādhi* at a later stage, this is a valid way to go about it.

Almost all meditation monks — both Thais and those born in western countries — have a character such that they need to use a lot of *paññā* right from the very beginning in order to gradually make their mind peaceful enough that they can develop *samādhi*. Only a very small percentage of Thais, and possibly no westerners, are the type to fully develop *samādhi* before beginning *vipassanā*.

TC: Can it be said how deep and strong *samādhi* must be in order to attain *magga/phala*?

TAP: It must be strong enough to be still and unified as one, without any thinking whatsoever. There will still be awareness — knowing what one is experiencing.

TC: According to whether one is in a remote location or in a busy monastery, should one's Dhamma practice change or remain the same?

TAP: Dhamma practice takes on a different character if you are in the city or are busy with duties in a monastery. In the forest there are few external distractions and it is easy to make the mind peaceful. If you have much sense contact and dealings with other people, it is essential to figure out how not to pick up other people's emotional vibes (*arom*). Otherwise what happens is that the people around us feel lighter while we feel heavier and heavier. It's necessary to be able to completely drop the mental engagement as soon as the interactions with other people are finished. Otherwise when one goes to sit meditation one has all the conversations and emotions of the day floating around in the *citta*.

It's easy to say, "just be mindful," and "don't pick up other people's baggage," but it is very difficult to do. Luang Por Cha could take on the problems and sufferings of others without picking up any of it

himself, because his citta was very strong. The people around him didn't know what was happening. They just knew that they felt cool and happy around Luang Por. But this is not a practice for beginners. Most people just get burned out. Practising in the forest is easier and I recommend that you should, as much as possible, try not to get involved with too many responsibilities — especially being an abbot.

If someone tries to tell you that you are selfish and should be helping others, reflect that this is due in large part to the conditioning from western society. If the Buddha had thought that way, we never would have had a Buddha. In order to put your mind at rest, reflect on the goodness you've done and rejoice in the paramī that you're creating. Those who try to help others too much before they've helped themselves will never be able to teach or help beyond the superficial. If their teachings mislead others due to their own ignorance, they can make a lot of negative kamma. Many of the Wat Pa Phong monks try to emulate Luang Por in his later years — when he would talk with people all day — rather than his early years of difficult practice. But it was precisely those years in the forest that made Luang Por into the great teacher that he was.

TC: Have you ever heard of anyone attaining magga/phala by any means other than analysing the body into its component parts and elements?



TAP: No. At the very least when the citta is clearly known as anattā, the knowing mind will return to thoroughly know the body as anattā as well.

TC: In one of Luang Por Cha's Dhamma talks he says that even for arahants there still is kilesa, but it is like a bead of water rolling off a lotus petal: nothing sticks. How do you understand this?

TAP: Luang Por liked to use language in unconventional ways in order to get people's attention and make them think. What he was referring to was the body — the result of previous kamma — but the citta was completely devoid of kilesa. Normally people use other terms to refer to the body and the physical dukkha of an arahant, but Luang Por was quite creative in his use of the convention of language.

TC: I've heard that while still a student before you'd met Luang Por Cha you had a vision of him.

TAP: That's right. I'd intended to return [to New York to finish a master's degree in business management,] but soon after I'd begun to meditate I had a clear vision of a monk, whom I didn't recognize, chewing betel nut. I went to see many of the famous Kruba Ajans at that time — Luang Pu Fun, Luang Pu Waen — but when I met Luang Por Cha I recognized him from the vision and figured that he would be my teacher.

When I began to consider ordaining instead of completing my studies, my family tried hard to dissuade me, but I found meditation so peaceful that everything else felt like dukkha.



## Acceptance, forgiveness and deep blue empathy ... Going home

Tan Acalo

*It had been three years since I'd spent any time in the country of my birth. Recently I unexpectedly had the opportunity to return to Australia with one of my teachers. Tan Ajan Anan had been invited to Melbourne to visit a newly established meditation hermitage and to give teachings at the local Buddhist society. Several other monks were going and we would be passing through the cities of Sydney and Canberra, staying in Thai wats and then later going onward to Melbourne. From Melbourne I would take leave of my teacher and travel to Queensland to spend time with my mother and father. As a monk, one tries to practise in all situations. Going to Australia I would be being close to the members of my family. I would have to honour our own relationship and also their relationships with others. I would have to be considerate of their lifestyles and views yet at the same time I must maintain my own loyalties. The following article explores some of the challenges along with what were to me some of the more significant and moving times.*

AN INCIDENT THAT HAPPENED last year is a good way to introduce Tan Ajan Anan. It was the middle of my second rains retreat and I was staying for the first time at a Wat Nong Pa Phong branch monastery where everyone, except for myself and another English-speaking monk, was Thai. In one evening meditation session I was concerned about myself. I was stuck in a negative mood that just wouldn't move. All the other monks appeared so sweet and kind and I was sitting there being angry thinking about what was wrong with everyone and everything: "Maybe everyone else's moods arise and pass away but maybe mine won't! Maybe I'm just too defiled to be a monk". Distantly I knew all these thoughts were silly yet somehow I couldn't arrest them and it was very uncomfortable. The rains retreat can be a tense or difficult period and most monks at some time or other in it's three month duration will experience some kind of

negativity. All this I knew, but this particular time I couldn't help making a big deal out of my negative mood.

After the evening sitting the bell was rung routinely and we chanted in Pāli and Thai, sharing merit and taking refuge, bowing our respects to the Buddha and our teacher. As the monks left the room, I lingered a little wanting to be alone. When I left a few minutes later, passing through the rear door I noticed that Tan Ajan Anan was seated alone on a wooden dais in the corner of the balcony surrounding the hall. Intuitively I lowered to my knees and respectfully approached. With a characteristic firmness that is caring he looked at me raising his chin in acknowledgement and asked, as if he had been waiting, "*Achalo, tum-mai mai sa-ngop ley?*" (Why are you not peaceful at all?) Defeated, I looked, I couldn't actually articulate anything yet I knew he was not angry at me, he was not demanding that I answer. After what seemed like a very long but exquisitely empathic moment, he said to me in carefully practised English, "You think a lot about Australia", a statement and a question to which I replied, "Yes it's true". Then he continued, "When you think about the future you throw your mindfulness in the dirt". Another pause. "When mindfulness is not strong you cannot let go of arom."

We talked a little more then about how I'd been feeling and what to do about it. The Ajan described that the mindfulness of a good meditator is usually a nice clean white colour, while the mindfulness of an enlightened being is radiantly clear and impenetrable like a diamond, but when a person is lost in some kind of delusion the mindfulness degenerates to the colour of dirt or mud. After allowing me some time to describe my difficulties of late, this kind and wise teacher assured me that it was ordinary for young monks to experience such things. He then encouraged me very gently to keep to myself for a few days, to try to eat lightly and to refrain as much as possible from thinking about the future, letting mindfulness re-establish itself.

It was true I had been obsessing about the future, a transgression in the Buddhist sense if ever there was one, particularly for the person who has made a firm resolve to cultivate awareness in the present. But I'd been caught off guard when just a month before I'd found that there was an opportunity to go to Australia and that my family were eager to help with the ticket. There had previously been an



assumption in my mind that it would be a few more years before I returned to Australia. For as a young monk who is still learning the ropes, I would ideally choose to stay within the most clear and supportive of contexts. However, the opportunity to return to my country with one of my teachers seemed a blessing too providential to refuse.

Now that there was an upcoming travel date to fuel proliferation, I had gotten lost in remembering, fantasizing and planning. Certainly there were things to think about. I would have to prepare my mind for the change of locations and consider what rules of discipline to brush up on so that I could maintain my practices while travelling. Also, I would have to consider my relationship with the members of my family. How should I relate to them?

Over the years I've been fairly diligent in maintaining correspondence with my family. Basically they have been supportive of my choice to be a monk. My mother gave me her blessing and encouragement before I'd even asked for it. With affection I recollect the words she spoke to me before I left Australia last: "You seem very happy and the monastery sounds like a safe place. I always knew you'd find what you needed to do with your life. I never knew what you should do that's why I used to worry about you so much! But I knew you'd find your niche. If you want to become a monk you have my blessing."

Indeed I have the blessing of my parents for they are happy that I seem well, but at the same time I sense an absence of true empathic appreciation. For my parents appear to be unconcerned about spiritual matters. And even though they are supportive, perhaps reasonably enough, there is always the lament: "We're glad that you're happy but we miss you and it's sad that you have to live so far away."

At Wat Pa Nanachat a few days before our departure I was meditating alone in the main *sālā*. I had been busy getting things together for my trip and had decided to take a few quiet moments to collect my mind. When I opened my eyes, a layman approached where I was sitting and said that he wanted to offer me the Buddha statue placed by his side. Saying that the abbot would be along in ten minutes, I suggested that he wait and offer it to him. He went away for a

minute but then came back and said that he wished to offer it to me, so this time I received it happily. Ironically this small figure was in the same standing posture as the large Buddha statue in the ceremonial hall where I'd been ordained. I remembered the morning of my ordination in pre-dawn darkness looking up at an ominous black figure standing with both hands held in the posture named 'holding back the waters'. His arms and hands were straight and taut with palms exposed in a gesture that seemed to be making a firm command. At that time I had seen the gesture as an emanation of assertive compassion compelling me to see the importance and urgency of my opportunities. The figure I held in my hands was a more androgynous and serene one. With both palms out he seemed to be saying something more along the lines of, "Truly I come in absolute peace". When I showed it to Tan Ajan Jayasāro he suggested that I let my parents be its new owners. As I looked at the statue's expression I had a feeling that my mother would adore it but I wasn't quite sure. It was unarguably a religious object and, as my parents do not profess any faith, they may in fact find it objectionable. I decided to trust my feeling and take it anyway.

On the day of our departure in Bangkok, at the airport moving towards the check in counter a short haired, robust woman was vigorously employing her feet, kicking and pushing her backpack along the ground whilst heaving another large bag in her arms. In the queue alongside her I was standing with my teacher and three other senior monks. They were quiet and composed in manner. The young woman then began arguing with the delicately mannered Thai assistant behind the counter in an English that screamed 'Australia!' "This is the bag I want to take onto the plane." "I'm sorry but it's too big", came the quiet and polite reply. Then unrelenting and confrontational the passenger continued, "But they let me take it last time!...They did! This same bag! They let me take it last time!" After several more imploring but quiet pleas, the check-in assistant gave in and allowed her to carry the large bag.

As a rule Thai people abhor public conflict. At once I felt deeply embarrassed and a terrible sense of trepidation about our journey. The incident reminded me of some of the defects in the character of my country-people. As I look to my right, I can see a row of monks who have come to bid farewell to their teacher. Their robes are

immaculate, their countenance serene, they are sitting in a neat row together talking quietly among themselves. The dichotomy created an uneasy tension

I shouldn't have taken it so personally. I should have just accepted things as they were and taken solace in the equanimity and wisdom of the other monks and my teacher. But as the only Australian in our group I felt somehow responsible. We would be flying economy class on Qantas, the Australian national carrier and I couldn't help worrying that the plane would be full of poorly mannered drunken people who would be rude to my fellow monks. The ground staff were organising a first class classification for our luggage and a security escort onto the plane and it was then that I was acutely aware of the grace, humility and kindness of so many of the Thais.

We were the last of the passengers to enter the plane on stopover from London. As we were led through the aisle to our seats I was struck by the sheer number of big bodied white people and at the same time I was relieved to see that for the most part they appeared personable and harmless enough. As my anxiety level lowered, I forgivingly remembered that, for the most part, that is the way Australians are. After sitting, I noticed it was a fascinating realm caught in limbo and in many respects could already be considered part of Australia. The air was thick with a familiar slouching accent and hearty laughter. Swiftly up and down the aisles the airline hosts walked confidently, heavily, stopping occasionally to receive loud orders or to deliver food and beverage with an equally enthusiastic command to enjoy! I must admit I really did enjoy the spectacle and was surprised by the amount of affection I felt for everyone inside the plane.

In the aircraft at last my mind felt clear and it was easier to feel prepared for the impending change of situation. After four or so hours in the air, the Thai monk next to me said that he would really like to meet the captain and have a look at the cockpit. He'd seen pictures before but never the real thing. Seeing the eager look on his face I knew I would have to ask one of the cabin crew. "Why not?" I thought, "they might just say yes," and so feeling stupid I asked. Twenty minutes later there were three Buddhist monks in the cockpit and the one by my side was positively delighted. Rolling 180 degrees before us were scores of magical billowy, cumulus

clouds illuminated by the clear blue sky of mid afternoon. Eager to know how the captains were trained the senior monk asked many questions and we were both impressed by their impeccable discipline. The monks were drawing parallels between the discipline of the pilots and our own training. Much to my surprise the co-pilot then confessed that he thought he was a Buddhist.

It was a timely sojourn into the cockpit as the captain announced that in a few minutes we would come to the northwestern corner of the Australian continent. Feeling sad for the other two monks still on the lower level, I asked if it were possible to send for them. My friends departed satisfied and a few minutes later my teacher and another monk were with us in the cockpit. As we approached land I was surprised by an unfamiliar burst of patriotism, as if this really was my country. Looking through the many windows the view was fantastically unobscured. A delicate white strip of sand gracefully traced around the coast of the semi-arid, ochre coloured earth, defining it as separate from the huge expanse of ocean directly below. Before us the continent seemed endless and once over the land I was emotional for a different reason. Years ago I left this country seeking a lifestyle with purpose and an authentic spiritual training. Now physically I had returned and as I realized that one of my much revered teachers was sitting just a little to my left, I felt exultant at such good fortune.

Upon arriving in Sydney I was met by my younger-by-eighteen-months brother and it was weird to look into a face so similar to mine. He was easy in manner and happy to see me and I felt the same. Over the following few days I had the opportunity to spend some time with both my younger brother and elder sister who came to visit me at the Thai temple and also took me on a picnic. The talk was mostly about jobs and careers, politics and current affairs. We all felt affection and joy at being able to be with one another after such a long time. Upon returning to the wat however, I did feel a little scattered and was grateful to participate in the evening chanting and meditation with the resident monks and a few local Thais.

Throughout the entire trip the visiting monks were surrounded by the warmth and courtesy of faithful Thai Australians and were taken on many sight-seeing tours by their eager hosts. In Sydney, my Dhamma brothers were equally impressed by the clean and free

flowing roadways and the large suburban houses as they were by the Opera house, the deep harbour and its famous old bridge. Although there were no particular teaching engagements in Sydney the Thai community truly relished the presence of Tan Ajan Anan. Some asked questions about meditation practice or inquired about his monastery and our lineage and several people subsequently made plans to visit and spend some time practising back in Thailand.

From Sydney we drove to Canberra and all, including myself, were awestruck at the vast expanses of pasture lands so sparsely inhabited. Heavy spring showers had rendered the land a gorgeous rich green with large patches of lilac wildflowers. Staying in a Thai monastery once again we were pleased to see that the Wat in Canberra was very well supported. Each evening a good number of lay people came to chant and meditate and either listen to a taped Dhamma talk or a teaching by one of the Ajans. Ajan Anan gave a teaching on the second evening.

Having been away from Australia for some years and then returning surrounded by Thais, I felt I could contemplate aspects of the country of my birth with a greater degree of detachment. Asking myself such questions as what did nationality actually mean? What did it mean to be Australian and what were the core values of this culture? I wasn't looking for answers so much as stimulating reflection. In Canberra, the nation's capital, the war museum and parliament house were particularly thought-provoking.

In Parliament house walking through vast rooms and corridors, I was wondering to myself if, in this place that cost over a billion dollars to build, I was close to the heart of Australia? I was certainly grateful to such an abundant and well-organized society and all the opportunities it made available to me. But somehow I felt unmoved. One notable quote made by the other English speaking monk seemed to capture something of my sentiments: "The design seems to be full of complicated patterns, shapes and angles but it doesn't seem to be going anywhere or pointing to anything. Like cleverness just for the sake of cleverness." Admittedly, sitting in the Senate Room and House of Representatives with my teacher was unarguably fun and there is one particular image that I will always remember. There was a curving corridor, large panes of

plate glass looked over a perfectly tended garden lawn. Above the mirror-like granite floor an impressive roof hung loftily emanating soft and even golden light. A huge hand-woven woolen rug with a bold geometric design of black with reds and yellows lay at the foot between two large dark leather sofas. On one of these large lounges sat myself and a Thai layman, and sitting alone on the other was my teacher. Amid such contrived beauty, cleanliness and order the look on my teacher's face was probably that of equanimity, yet that word somehow doesn't capture it. Cool, relaxed, detached and unmoved, the air around him was not a vacuum. It seemed in fact a pronouncement, saying something about where to place one's efforts and attentions in order to know that which is most worthy of reverence.

In Melbourne, we were received by members of the Buddhist Society of Victoria. It was an inspiring sight to see a room full of practising Buddhists from many different ethnic origins. Here, in the evenings, Tan Ajan gave several Dhamma teachings followed by questions and answers, all of which were translated. Many practitioners were keen to ask specific questions about their meditation practice and Tan Ajan was pleased with their energy and willingness to learn. People stayed for hours listening to the answers to questions and all of the evenings ended quite late.

It was a pleasure to be practising the dhammas of listening and meditating among sincere Australians. As most of my Dhamma experience is associated with Thailand, these occasions helped me to feel more of the global relevance of the Dhamma and to feel less isolated from where I began my life. Tan Ajan instructed me that I must practise very hard to develop my skills well, so that I could come back and truly help these people. Although I was flattered by his faith in me, I was more than a little daunted at the prospect.

After four days in Melbourne it was time for me to separate from my teacher. He and the others would stay on for a while and then fly to our branch monastery in Perth. I would be going alone to Sydney, travelling to the Blue Mountains to spend a few days with my eldest sister and her children. From there I would go back to Sydney to meet one of the monks and we would fly to Brisbane together. It would be a valuable support having a friend who was a monk as my companion and I felt lucky that he had been willing to meet up with me again. After performing the ceremony for asking forgiveness, I

asked Tan Ajan Anan if he had any advice. He simply answered that I should take care of my heart and mind. We were drinking an afternoon tea when a kind Sri Lankan doctor arrived to pick me up. As I drank the last few mouthfuls of tea, I became aware that I was suddenly feeling very vulnerable. Moments later I noticed a distinct lightness in my heart. The feeling grew and my face smiled broadly as if of its own will and then I was left feeling supported and safe. I realized then that my teacher was radiating loving kindness toward me, a highly developed ability for which Tan Ajan Anan is renowned.

Away from my teacher and the Thais who surround him like a comforting universe, it was interesting to see that I did feel a little less safe and confident. Having a few days alone in Sydney however was pertinent to my experience of going home. It was like going on a pilgrimage into my past. As a young adult these streets were the backdrop of my life and I was keen to walk them alone, to observe my thoughts and notice if there had been any changes. With nothing but my robe and the train ticket offered by a lay supporter I walked down the main street of the central business and shopping district. Observing people's faces I could feel the way I used to live my life and the thoughts I used to think. Most people looked physically healthy yet distracted and tense, in a hurry. While walking the street I was determined to think thoughts of kindness and keep in mind my faith in the Buddha's teaching.

Although I was a little fearful, it was interesting to see that amongst all the diverse inner-city subcultures, there were very few comments, sneers or noticeable reactions to my presence. I had wondered if people would move away or be uncomfortable standing close to me at traffic lights or while waiting on the train platform. Repeatedly people stopped close by and seemed quite at ease, so much so that my faith in the human capacity to sense a commitment to harmlessness grew. From the corner of my eye an elderly Aboriginal woman caught my attention. Outside the Town hall toward the end of my pilgrimage she was sitting on a park bench by the entrance to the underground. As I walked towards the stairs, she looked me momentarily in the eyes then raised her joined hands to her forehead in the traditional Buddhist gesture of respect. I felt as though I'd been blessed by a true native elder. This incident touched

me profoundly as it was so completely unexpected. Looking her in the eyes with tremendous appreciation I'm sure she began to blush.

Visiting with my eldest sister in the Blue Mountains entailed a significant shift in modes of relating. I was glad that I'd had a few weeks to adjust to being busier and talking more. It was also interesting that for this leg of the journey I was not accompanied by any other monks. My sister's own ten-year-old son fulfilled the requirement of the Vinaya for the presence of another male, permitting a lot of space for spending very natural time talking in her home. Before living overseas I had been especially close to this sister. Dianne trained as a nurse and a midwife and had also travelled through Asia as a backpacker in her mid-twenties. With the arrival of three delightful children she had ceased caring for other people's babies to pay attention to her own. She has a love of good natural food, yoga, alternative medicine and Asian arts. We always got on well together. After living for a year or so in Thailand my sister had a falling out with her husband and what ensued was a long and painful separation, complete with custody battles and ugly court cases. That time in Thailand was difficult for me also. I wanted to be physically and emotionally present for my sister and her children. Feelings of love and guilt tugged at my heart often. I'm quite sure that had the difficulties begun before my departure I wouldn't have left such a situation. As it happened though I'd relinquished all of my possessions and was already wearing the *samaṇera's* robe when the news reached me.

Seeing her waiting on the train platform with her beautiful fairy-like three-year-old daughter I was relieved to notice that Dianne was radiant with life. I still remember her first few words: "God look at you! You look great... I suppose I can't give you a hug? ... How strange! ... Oh well doesn't matter! ... Wow it's great to see you ... The colour of your robe is beautiful, so earthy and natural". When I explained to her that the dye was handmade from boiled-down heartwood she was overjoyed and started telling how she had begun taking African drumming classes and that the drums were carved from the heartwood of big old mango trees. Later, my sister appreciated the handiwork of my crochet bowl cover and hand made monk's umbrella. Things had settled into a new kind of order



and my sister and her children were quite well, indeed all having a lot of fun.

The new house they were renting was perched on a small hill which backed directly onto an expansive area of undulating ranges carpeted in a reserve of native Australian bush. The forest was a beautiful backdrop to our many long conversations. It was a relief to be able finally to listen, to hear the many details of the past years of struggle, to encourage her in maintaining a generous heart and in learning to forgive, a process in which she was already well established. She and her children performed a show of tribal rhythms and dance on their drums and Dianne later played some songs on the piano, the very songs she used to rehearse in our family home and which I would wake up to as a five-year-old all those years ago. Admittedly these were strange activities to be participating in as a monk yet in such a context they seemed harmless enough.

I also visited the school classes of my niece and nephew and gave a talk about the lifestyle of forest monks. Happily the school children were enamoured by the forest monk uncle, asking many questions about my daily routine, meditation and Thai culture. Some curious questions were put to me: "Can you make yourself float up in the air? ... I know you can't eat at night but if you're really hungry can't you just have some crackers or something?" They were amazed when I explained that I didn't have a refrigerator or cupboard or even electricity. On both occasions I left classrooms hearing such exclamations as: "That's what I'm gonna do. When I grow up, I'm gonna be a monk!" I had intended these talks to be a gift to my young niece and nephew, to show them that, although I lived far away, I still cared for them. There had been some reservation in my mind however as I was not sure that such exotic spirituality would be appreciated by all. The fears were unfounded. When I asked my nephew whether any of the kids thought I was weird he answered, "Nuh ... They all thought you were cool!"

My bhikkhu companion met me for the flight between Sydney and Brisbane, which was probably the most nervous time during my travels in Australia. When thousands of feet above the ground, a person is propelled within minutes several hundred miles from where a life was recently being conducted, I expect it is normal to become very circumspect. I thought a lot during that flight. After so

many phone-calls now that I would really be meeting my parents and would again be staying in their home the nagging little thoughts which had been lingering in the recess of the mind came clearly into view and expressed themselves ... "I do live a long way away ... A son being a Buddhist monk would be challenging to most conservative parents ... Maybe they've been pretending to be supportive out of fear of estrangement ... Maybe the truth is that they have many reservations and once I am again within their sphere of influence they will be angry or possessive". As I muddled over the possibilities, I laughed to think that they were probably thinking uneasy thoughts themselves: "He might be demanding or difficult to take care of ... Maybe he will try to convert us! ... Maybe he'll just want to meditate and be by himself all the time". Remembering the small Buddha statue, I recollected his message and reminded myself that I was also coming in peace. Foremost in my mind was that we should all have a pleasant and relaxed time to remember happily. I had already decided not to try to teach my parents anything about Buddhist spirituality unless they asked out of their own interest. With this attitude I hoped they would feel open and unthreatened. But even with such a sure game-plan the nervousness persisted. As we started to descend, I decided that there was nothing to do but let go of wanting to control and to be with the anxious, gurgly feelings in the stomach. It would be how it would be, I'd done everything I could to try to set things up right.

Upon landing I asked my friend to wait a minute so that we could leave last and take things slowly. Walking down the connecting corridor between aircraft and terminal I was embraced by an incredible sense of familiarity. The weather in the other cities we'd visited recently had been surprisingly cool to our seasoned, tropical bodies. Brisbane, an hour south of my parent's house, is notably subtropical. It is the region where I spent my childhood and though I could not say exactly what they were the very air seemed pungent with familiar smells.

Reaching the end of the corridor and seeing my mother and father, I noticed that they looked older than I remembered but I was glad to see such big smiles and joyful light streaming from their eyes. My father moved forward as though he were about to embrace me. Slowing a little, I looked at him firmly — they had promised to save

their hugs for once we got home. As I took the last few deliberate steps, he responded to my hesitation with a hearty, “you’re my son I haven’t seen you for a long time and I’m gonna give you a hug”. In his strong embrace I felt humbled, childlike and a disarming kind of happiness. Concerned thoughts were whispering in the back of my mind. “He hasn’t honoured my wishes to be discreet and restrained. He’s not going to respect the boundaries that a monk needs to maintain”. Gently I pushed the thoughts aside. For a sixty-year-old Caucasian man to publicly hug another man, shaven headed and clad in religious robes seemed a gesture too beautiful to be censured. There was also a feeling of acceptance. The boldness of his affection signalled that he had indeed respected my decisions. My mother by his side smiled a little awkwardly but didn’t assert any demands for physical affection. I introduced them both to Tan Neng, the monk who had accompanied me, and then presented my mother with the gift which I had carefully wrapped myself. She gazed at the black and gold paper testing the weight in her hand and I caught a sparkle in her eye — my mother always loved gifts! My father insisted on helping with the bags and he was talking: “When you didn’t come with the others, I thought, ‘Uh Oh! He’s missed the plane’... When we saw you walking down you did look very peaceful. You look healthy but you seem to have lost some weight”.

In the car my mother opened her gift. “She’s beautiful...”, she exclaimed then kissed the statue and held it to her breast. I explained that it was an image of the Lord Buddha and that it would probably be best if she didn’t kiss it. My mother promised that she would find a nice place for it in the living room. In the company of a Thai bikkhhu, I was embarrassed at my parents lack of familiarity with Buddhist customs but I was so happy that they appreciated the gift.

Things were going well at my parent’s house. Although Tan Neng and I continued to eat our main meal from our almsbowls alone on the verandah, Ajan Jayasāro had given special permission to have a breakfast with my parents to enjoy a casual time for chatting. There were many simple joys to be reacquainted with. Looking at childhood photographs, eating favourite foods specially home cooked, walking through the local forest reserves and after discussing at length what would be a most suitable and practical gift in the future,

I drew a pattern and taught my mother how to sew the monks lower robe.

One day after about a week or so with my parents, having spent the day at a meditation centre in the Tibetan tradition, my father came to pick up Tan Neng and myself. Much to my astonishment a little more than halfway home, I caught myself speaking to my father in a sharp and angry voice. He'd said something about some of my habits in adolescence and an unexpected ball of fire began flaring in my abdomen. Do parents have a special gift for poking the most sensitive spots in their children's hearts? I implored myself to abide with the feeling and contain it skilfully hoping that my father wouldn't say anything else to exacerbate the situation, but inevitably he did and out flew my grievances. In his eyes I had been in some respects an obnoxious teenage son. In other respects he appeared to me to be a distant man who could have paid his children a little more attention. Was there any point to discussing these things after so long? Sitting in the strained silence afterwards, I was sure the rest of my stay would be tainted by this unfortunate outburst and I couldn't help feeling sad.

Returning to Thailand for a moment, in the forest monasteries one finds oneself with many hours to consider things deeply, to investigate affections and disaffections and the layers and aspects of attachments as they present themselves. I must have asked myself a hundred times what I missed about Australia and have been frequently surprised to find that except for a few primary relationships, I didn't really miss much. It seems that once we've firmly established new habits and a new lifestyle old memories and old habits fade slowly and unless deliberately recollected become increasingly distant. But one memory that would always assert itself hauntingly was the memory of the beach and the ocean.

I spent my entire childhood and early adult life within a short distance of the deep blue Pacific. Along the entire east coast from spring through autumn, the water is cool but not really cold and when people go to the beach it may be for a half day or indeed an entire day. A day at the beach is an Australian institution and if the sun is shining, there are always as many people in the water as there are on the sand. The surf of the east coast has received me in its waters on thousands of occasions over many years, propelling me

between waves, pummelling my body or allowing me to float out past the breakers stilled by the sheer immensity below, around and beyond. The ocean seemed to possess an awesome power, being capable of empathizing with anything that I could feel, offering a supine watery cushion between myself and the demands of living back on the shore-bound world. Having entered the sea, hours could go by before I returned from this watery other-world. I was never a surfer but as long as I can remember I was a swimmer. Sometimes in the dry or hot seasons in Thailand my body would lament and grieve, aching for the temporary respite that can be had within the Pacific. During my trip to Australia I had several opportunities to go and visit the ocean. One time in particular was especially sublime.



It was the weekend and I was walking along the beach with my father. The terrible feelings from in the car the other day, seemed to have evaporated. What appeared to be a disaster had surprisingly triggered a warm opening in my father's heart. Perhaps it was wisdom coming from age or perhaps it was my long absence and impending departure that stimulated a kind of urgency in him. His

past habit would have been to talk little if at all about such tension, but this time he wanted to discuss things with an interest for the details. What ensued were several beautiful conversations and an opportunity to learn many unknown things about one another.

On this fantastically bright day my father is wearing his swimming trunks, I am wearing my robe and my twin brother has lent me his sunglasses. We walked for many minutes along an endless beach and then turned around to enjoy the long walk back. The smell of the salt air, the tumbling roar of the waves and my father by my side engendered an exquisite sense of reunion. Our discussions led us to the place where I could lovingly acknowledge the honourable qualities of my father. Walking over the silk-like sand we were discussing each others good qualities, the sky above was a clear and brilliant blue while the ocean beneath it was darker, rich and deep. Hearing about my father's own experiences with his father and teachers, I feel sure that he has done a better job than the examples given him. Learning about his past opened up a space in my mind which placed him in a larger context. Aware of my pain and aware of his pain I was experiencing a vast sense of empathy and I wondered if there was ever a father and son who did not feel such things. Approaching our spot on the sand, my sun-bronzed twin brother who had driven up for the weekend waved from the site of his beach towel, pleased to see us together.

The remaining few days went by easily. On the last day we performed a small ceremony where my parents formally offered me a new lower robe. I had drawn the pattern, my mother had sewn the fabric and my father had helped with the dyeing. On the way to the airport we visited the memorial where my grandmother's cremated remains were stored and I recited some funeral chants. I had been unable to come to her funeral, so this was a kind of symbolic goodbye and it felt good to be able to offer the chanting.

Once again in an airport — another meticulous, expensive new building of well-considered design — sitting in large comfortable chairs arranged around a coffee table to give the sense of lounge room intimacy, my family and I are drinking some 'goodbye espresso'. Brisbane airport is a large, cube-like open space with veritable walls of glass and huge skylights that nourish the fully grown palm trees that towered around us inside. The polished

marble and chrome and sophisticated displays of the duty free shops gave the place more an air of the modern art gallery than a transit centre. The monk who had accompanied me earlier had left for Bangkok a week before. After five weeks in Australia sitting there then I was feeling conspicuously out of context. My father and eldest brother were talking about car insurance, my twin brother was exploring the options for rust proofing his new four-wheel drive, while my sister-in-law complained that her work was boring. Nervous and self conscious I reacted to the discussion of my family by feeling impatient.

I was guilty of indignation and I could have been fairly accused of having judgmental and critical thoughts. At this time and at other times during the preceding weeks I had felt exasperated by the nature of some of the conversation from the members of my family. It would have been nice if it were not so, for that would have been most comfortable. But there were times when I was confounded at what appeared to me to be my family's disinterest in engaging their experience of life with integrity. I had to remind myself several times to see things in a suitable context.

As a member of a community of dedicated contemplatives I have begun to take the qualities of meditation and frank investigation for granted. If you were to define a religious life by the qualities of honesty, morality and generosity then the members of my family are in fact quite religious. I've had to remember simply to be grateful for the Saṅgha back in Thailand, to recognize that they are people dedicated to spiritual cultivation, and to respect the members of my family for the decent people that they are. I should add however that at times my critical thoughts were not based in negativity. As an observer I could see that some of my family's habits were bringing them more pain and danger than happiness. When these came up in conversation I had wanted to interject. More often than not however I bit my tongue as I know that people must feel a lot of trust and be in an open, willing frame of mind before any criticisms can be received skilfully. This particular time at the airport my frustrations were running high.

Within minutes I would have to leave them once again and it seemed somehow important to say something of integrity. Deciding there was little to lose, I interrupted the flow of things and

announced that I needed to say something. "Mother, father, thank you very much for looking after me and making my visit comfortable and enjoyable. I really am grateful and impressed with the way you made so much effort and took so much time for me. If there's anything that I said or did that was inappropriate, please forgive me. And if there was anything that I didn't say or do which I should have, please forgive that also."

"No, it was great having you here, mate!", says my father while my mother looks at me in a moment of intense uncharacteristic concentration and says all of a sudden, "And will you please forgive me?" The look in her eyes is surprisingly emotional. As I expect is the case for everyone, my mother and I have had our share of confusion and pain. As an adult and as a meditator, one who has had ample time to notice his own shortcomings and human fallibility more and more I have grown to appreciate both of my parents, more and more and to feel very much at peace with them. The past ten or so days have been very pleasant and it seems there is no particular 'thing' to forgive. But I feel I know somehow what she is saying. When separated from loved ones by large distances and time it is normal to ask oneself questions such as: "Did I do something wrong for them to want to stay away?" Or to have worrying thoughts like, "Maybe I shouldn't have said those things in the past. Or maybe I should have done more or given more". These thoughts have occasionally been in my mind in Thailand. Being close to each other and allowing the worries a moment of acknowledgement seemed important. It was with earnest sincerity and much relief that I could look her in her caring eyes and truthfully say, "I forgive you". I could have said much more but that phrase seemed to say just enough.

Both of my parents are over sixty years old now and they are in some respects creatures of habit. We have discussed the possibility of their coming to visit me in Thailand and although they try to sound willing, I sense that perhaps they're just not that adventurous. Sadly, it may once again be years before I see them. Indeed, as the Buddha encourages us to consider, if one or all of us should pass away, this may have been our last opportunity to see each other. It may sound precious or excessive but it was important to give them the messages and to let them know, "I really am okay with you people. I care for you and when I think of you it will be kindly".



The sudden shift to frankness and resolution left me feeling a little bewildered and then it was time to go. My father followed me to the escalator and insisted upon another hug. Alone at the top of the escalator with my father I felt something very consciously for the first time: that I was a man just as he was a man. Indeed I actually stood a little taller than he. There was an uncanny sense of mutual respect and separateness yet at the same time I felt closer to him than I ever had before. Going down the escalator and through customs wearing my new lower robe I was quite astonished by the sense that things had gone wonderfully, that in fact I couldn't have hoped for a more positive visit.

There were many events that I could later share with my teachers and the other bhikkhus. Tan Ajan Anan had been very supportive of this visit with my family. I would tell him how my mother had decided to offer flowers to the Buddha statue, fresh from her own garden, whenever she was thinking about me, so that she could feel that she was giving something instead of just worrying.

Once a person has taken the mendicant's vows the question of where exactly home is becomes a primary one. For me, though, I suppose home is the place that I miss most. After five weeks in Australia, my years in Thailand had begun to feel like a short vacation I'd had years ago. Although I'd had many pleasant experiences and met with many good people, I was missing the quiet of the forest monasteries. I missed my Dhamma brothers and I missed the simplicity and clarity that come from monastic routine. After having such a pleasant time with the members of my family, I anticipated then that perhaps upon returning to Thailand I will feel even more at ease. After coming home I felt that I could once again go home.



## Two months at Wat Pa Barn Tard

Tan Yatiko

Mosquito repellent? Check. Ground sheet? Check. Road map of Isan? Check. Spare flashlight batteries? Check. Water filter? Check. Candle lantern? Check.

So I was packed and ready for my upcoming thudong. I had decided that I would start from Wat Pa Barn Tard, the famous monastery of Ajan Mahā Boowa, and from there walk through much of the province of Udon thani in the Northeast of Thailand. My plan was pretty loose, if you wanted to call it a plan. I would keep my ears open for tips on good teachers and monasteries in the area that monks would recommend. It would be my first real thudong on my own, and I was looking forward to the adventure and the uncertainty that thudong would be sure to offer.

The thudong, however, never even began.

I remember going to Ajan Paññāvaḍḍho's kuti the day after I arrived at Wat Pa Barn Tard, to introduce myself and ask permission to stay. Ajan Paññāvaḍḍho is a senior English monk of over forty rains and is in charge of the practical running of the monastery, while Luang Pu (Venerable Grandfather) Mahā Boowa occupies his time in receiving guests and teaching. Ajan Paññāvaḍḍho's kuti is a simple wooden structure in the forest built on concrete posts about four feet high. Internally, it is perhaps some ten by ten feet, and it has rectangular porch out front, large enough to sit four or five people. Just in front of this old, well-worn kuti is a sandy meditation path that stretched out some eighteen paces, shaded by the shadow cast by a tall wooden pole. Ajan Paññāvaḍḍho's solar panel, which he uses to recharge batteries and run his water heater, is secured atop the pole.

I coughed as I entered the sandy yard, and when he invited me up, I ascended the kuti steps and saw him sitting on the step between the kuti door and the porch, with knees up near his chest and his elbows on his knees. I felt immediate affection for Ajan Paññāvaḍḍho. His gentle old eyes glowed at me as I bowed to pay my respects, and his informal greeting, "So, how's it going?", made me feel quickly at



ease. I explained to him that I wanted to spend a few nights at the monastery, pay respects to Ajan Mahā Boowa and then head off on my thudong trip through the province of Udorn thani. Ajan Mahā Boowa, he explained to me, had gone away to Bangkok until New Years, still two weeks away, but I would be welcome to stay until he came back.

Well, it wasn't what I had planned, but I thought that this would be an ideal opportunity to spend some time at the monastery and receive some teachings from Ajan Paññāvaḍḍho. Besides, after Ajan Mahā Boowa came back, I could just carry on with my thudong as I had planned. So I decided to stay on till Ajan Mahā Boowa returned.

That afternoon Ajahn Paññāvaḍḍho took me personally around the monastery. It's a fairly small place, maybe some 200 acres in area, and with a forbidding chicken population one's first impression is that it's a rather unlikely place to come and calm your nerves. Within the monastery confines there are about forty little shelters, mostly open-air, wooden platforms with iron roofing, and a handful of larger kutis. He took me to one of the kutis which had recently been evacuated by one of the senior monks and suggested I sweep around the kuti and spend the day meditating.

With the monastery being about as peaceful as a chicken-farm and with Ajan Mahā Boowa's current fund-raising programme to help the country out of its financial crisis (he thus far has raised over a billion Thai Baht as an offering to the National Reserve), I wasn't expecting much out of my meditation. I prefer the silence of caves to the cocking of chickens and I have always been sensitive to noise when I sit. But, quite unexpectedly, I found that as I sat in my hut my mind felt brighter and stronger than usual. "Must be a fluke," I thought to myself.

But no, there was no denying it, after a few days I found that my meditations had improved — I was feeling much more focussed. I mentioned this to Ajan Paññāvaḍḍho, and he said it was the power of living in Ajan Mahā Boowa's monastery. "He's a special man", he said with an air of understatement, "and that's why your meditation is going so well here. Living under a teacher like Luang Pu is a critical part of the practice".

Well, I'm not so sure that just being there had any magical influence, but it's certainly true that I took to reading Ajan Mahā Boowa talks like never before and I felt a confidence in the tradition and in the man that surprised even me. When one is in the presence of a realized being, it helps one to realize that this is not a path that 'I' am walking on, and one for which 'I' must have the qualifications to succeed, but rather that the path is a simple cause and effect process. Just as any one of these realized masters were once as deluded and self-centred as I am now, so too, can this set of five khandhas one day be as free of suffering and delusion as theirs.

The afternoon tea would take place at the dyeing shed at shortly past one p.m., and then I would have the chance to ask questions about Dhamma. During my stay there I would have many inspiring conversations with Ajan Paññāvaḍḍho over a hot drink. A small handful of westerners would gather around outside the shed and squat down on these tiny five inch high wooden stools. One of the resident monks would make Ajan Paññāvaḍḍho's usual: a cup of black, unsweetened Earl Grey, and would make for me a cup of black coffee. I'd set my stool on the dusty soil to the left of Ajan Paññāvaḍḍho, while a dachshund, a poodle and a few cheerful dalmatians would playfully compete for our attention around the shed.

As the conversations evolved, almost invariably the talk would turn to, or at least encompass, Dhamma.

Often when talking Dhamma with someone it's not so much the content of what is said that educates, but rather it's the way a point is made, fashioned exactly to illuminate an aspect of practice you may have overlooked or forgotten. Ajan Paññāvaḍḍho had that valuable knack of being able to offer a poignant reflection on any given topic of Dhamma that one may raise. I was describing to him once how my meditation was losing some of its sense of direction and my mind was beginning to wander again. Ajahn Paññāvaḍḍho response was almost uncannily fitting. He told me that whatever we do in meditation, the main point is to undermine the defilements. That's it. Simple words. Nothing I couldn't have thought of myself, but its simplicity and directness gave me a new outlook on meditation and I found my sittings improved. I noticed that I had been getting bogged down with techniques and strategies without focussing on the actual purpose. A good teacher is one who can notice these subtleties in a student and point them out.

That being the case however, the most educating thing about being with Ajan Paññāvaḍḍho was more just his relaxed and mild presence. He was a man with nothing to prove to anyone, and he was not out to convince me of anything. One point he would make often was that a meditator has to have samādhi before he can get very far with vipassanā. "Without samādhi", he'd say with a gentle authority, "it's unlikely that one will have the emotional maturity to deal skilfully with profound insights. When deep insights occur, one can be left with the sense that there is no place for the mind to stand, and this can be very unsettling. When one has samādhi, one has a comfortable abiding, and one has the freedom to ease into one's insights with skill". I then asked, "What about the need for jhāna on the path? Do you feel it's necessary to have jhāna?" A reserved look appeared on his wrinkled face, and in his soft voice explained that, "The thing is that people will often talk about jhāna without knowing what it really is. Ajan Mahā Boowa prefers to use the word samādhi. We need samādhi and the more we have the better, but we must not neglect our investigation".

One of the practice techniques that is often encouraged by the forest Ajans is the investigation of the body. This practice will involve

visualising a part of the body, focussing on it and studying it so as to achieve a soothing and dispassionate calm and to counterbalance an underlying infatuation with the body that lies within the unenlightened mind. It is a practice that for those unacquainted with Buddhism is often unpalatable and hard to understand. Ever since I ordained I have had a chronic avoidance of this technique, and I asked the Ajan about it. He said that the fact I avoid it probably shows that there is much for me to learn in that area. "That's your front line of investigation".

He'd go on to say, "Why do you think you are so hesitant to pick up this practice? I'm not saying it is necessarily an appropriate meditation theme for you to work with simply because you are resistant to it, only that you should, at the very least, understand the nature of that resistance before you just go ahead and believe in it". So I looked at it deeply and found it hard to see exactly what the resistance was all about. After a few weeks of being in the monastery and taking up a considerable amount of contemplation of the body as my meditation theme, I began to feel a certain weariness with it and felt a kind of depression coming up. I went and told this to Ajan Paññāvaḍḍho, and he smiled knowingly and shook his head as if to say, "Yup, that makes sense", and he explained to me, "Yes, this can happen to some people if they are doing a lot of body contemplation. It can feel disappointing if you suddenly start to see the reality of the body's unattractiveness and impermanence. After all, most of us have been running around glorifying it for lifetimes".

I sat and listened to what the Ajan was saying, somehow sensing that the truths that he was talking about weren't sinking in. I tried to force myself to believe what he was saying, but found that I couldn't. And yet, I trusted the man, and I trusted in the truths of which he was speaking. In the end, I found myself stuck between a reality I couldn't accept and a trust I couldn't deny.

I asked him how should I proceed if I found this kind of meditation left me feeling a bit down. His answer was reassuring. He said I shouldn't force it and that it is important to balance this meditation technique with other techniques that I find uplifting. For years one of my major meditation themes has been a contemplation of the Buddha, something that has always brought me great joy. I told this

to Ajan Paññāvaddho and he said that it would be an excellent counterpart to body contemplation.

While at Wat Pa Barn Tard I actually had very little contact with Ajahn Mahā Boowa himself. He keeps quite aloof from the monks and will give more attention to the laity. I remember, a few days after he had returned from Bangkok, there was word going around that Ajan Mahā Boowa would be giving a talk at the dyeing shed that night at eight o'clock. "That must be nice," I thought to myself. I imagined the group of monks gathering around Luang Boo during the cool of a chilly Isan night, warmed by a fire lit in the wood stove, listening to personal, stirring Dhamma from the master himself.

Not quite. I approached the dyeing shed around five minutes to eight and saw Ajan Mahā Boowa studying some newspaper clippings that had been posted on the wall of the shed. There wasn't a soul around and I thought to myself, "What an opportunity to approach Ajan Mahā Boowa and say a few words!" So, somewhat meekly, I approached Luang Boo, held my hands up in the traditional gesture of respect, when suddenly, from out of the shadows of the night appeared a nervous young monk tugging at my robes, whispering in Thai, "Come here! Come here!", and gesturing me to steal away behind a pile of buckets and squat down.

As we squatted there in the silence, with eyes glued to the Ajan, I noticed that to my left behind the water tank was another shadowy figure squatting, and then to my right, closer to the wood stove, was another one. This one had a pair of headphones on and some electronic gadgetry with little red LED indicators that would dance up and down to the crackle of the fire. He reminded me of some FBI agent or private eye. The whole scene in fact was a kind of *deja vu* of some half forgotten memory from high school. I was both amused and confused, and it took more than a few seconds to realize what was going on. Ajan Mahā Boowa wasn't giving a talk to the monks, he was giving a talk to a certain lay person, and the resident monks were gathering around in the dark to hear, and even tape, the conversation.

It was strange. I didn't understand. Why was Ajan Mahā Boowa so aloof from the monks? He is known for his uncompromising



strictness and his readiness to scold and I found it hard to understand to what purpose. Was this really coming from a heart of mettā?

Like any person or situation that one wants to understand, one has to understand it from within its own context. It wasn't until I had stayed there for several weeks that I began to get a feeling for how Ajan Mahā Boowa motivates his monks. It isn't through playing the charming, soft, lovable role of a guru. He doesn't get informal with any of his disciples, and this serves for establishing a very specific role in their relationship that is felt and understood by those who practise under him and which may not be felt and understood by newcomers.

It is obvious that Ajan Mahā Boowa cares for the monks, he cares for the world, he cares for the religion and he sees the sincere practice of monks and nuns as an immeasurable contribution to the virtue in the world. He wants to protect the high standards of Dhamma and his life is dedicated to that valuable end:

“Don't waste your time letting any job become an obstacle, because exterior work, for the most part, is work that destroys your work at mental development... These sorts of things clutter up the religion and the lives of the monks, so I ask that you not think of getting involved in them”.

For Ajan Mahā Boowa the role of monastics is clearly defined. He says that it is the ones who have gone forth that are the:

“...important factors that can make the religion prosper and [the monks] can serve as witnesses [of the Dhamma] to the people who become involved with it for the sake of all things meritorious and auspicious ...”

It is the monastics who preserve the actual teachings through their practice, and it is the teaching which will help promote goodness and virtues in all those who come in contact with it and take an interest in it.

It seems that one of the dangers he sees for monks is over-association with laypeople. Particularly in a country like Thailand where so much of the population have great faith and respect, I think he sees that respect as a possible source of corruption for monks. Maybe

that's partly why he doesn't seem to value too much the impressing of laypeople with politeness. He shows no interest in receiving respect for mere social niceties and when he teaches the monks, he warns them of the danger:

"No matter how many people come to respect us, that's their business. In practising the Dhamma we should be aware of that sort of thing, because it is a concern and a distraction, an inconvenience in the practice. We shouldn't get involved in anything except the contact between the heart and the Dhamma at all times. That's what is appropriate for us ..."

There is a story he tells in one of his talks about a childhood experience. It seems his father was a short-tempered man, and one day while having the evening meal, his father began to rally on him and his several brothers:

"You're all a bunch of cow manure. All of you. I don't see a single one of you who is going to ordain as a monk and make something of yourself... none of you except maybe... Boowa over there. He might have what it takes... but other than him, you're all a bunch of cow manure, you'll never come to anything".

The scrawny little Boowa was so shaken by this first and only 'compliment' from his father, that he got up from the meal and ran out the house with tears welling up in his eyes. He leaned up against one of the water tanks with his head on his arm trying to collect his emotions and thoughts. There was no denying the feelings rushing through him. His fate had been sealed. "It's decided," he felt in the pit of his guts, "I'll be a monk, and if I'm going to be a monk, I'll do it right. I'll spend however long it takes to pass the third grade of Pāli studies and then I'll go off to the mountains and spend my life meditating". And that's exactly what he did.

It's perhaps this determined nature that comes across most clearly in his talks, and it is what he seeks to cultivate in his disciples. He makes frequent references to the need for whole-heartedness in one's practice and candidly recounts his own attitude as a young monk:

“From the very start of my practice, I was really in earnest — because that’s the sort of person I was. I wouldn’t just play around. Wherever I would take my stance, that’s how it would have to be. When I set out to practise, I had only one book, the Pāṭimokkha, in my shoulder bag. Now I was going for the full path and full results. I was going to give it my all — give it my life. I was going to hope for nothing but release from suffering.”

He is uncompromising in the teaching and devotes a large part of its content to the dangers of being consumed by the changes of modern society and all its trappings. I have heard the occasional person comment that Ajan Mahā Boowa is old-fashioned. I consider the comment as missing the point of Dhamma practice. Yes, he keeps to most of the old traditions and may not be in touch with the younger generation and where they are at, but that’s where we must use our own wisdom to unearth where he is at, and learn from that. There is a well-spring of wisdom in the forest tradition which people are liable to overlook because it doesn’t answer their questions in the way that they are hoping. Ajan Mahā Boowa is not interested or willing to dress up the Dhamma to make it tastier medicine to swallow, and this may make him distasteful to the modern spiritual seeker. But what he does teach is powerful and transformative for those who are willing to commit themselves to it.

One of his constant refrains to monks is to seek out the forests, the hills, the lonely places, and meditate. Distractions not only interfere with our cultivation of meditation, but, more seriously, they can delude us into taking the worthwhile to be worthless and the worthless to be worthwhile. Computers, books, worldly conversation — it’s not so much that he sees these as bad in themselves, but he sees them as great dangers to the meditating *samaṇas*, and puts them in their proper perspective. Regarding material society, Ajan Mahā Boowa says:

“We’ve gone way out of bounds. We say we’ve progressed, that we’re advanced and civilized, but if we get so reckless and carried away with the world that we don’t give a thought to what’s reasonable, noble, or right, then the material progress of the world will simply become a fire with which we burn one another and we won’t have a world left to live in.”

And elsewhere he suggests:

“The teachings of the religion are an important means for putting ourselves in order as good people living in happiness and peace. If you lack moral virtue, then even if you search for happiness until the day you die you’ll never find it. Instead, you’ll find nothing but suffering and discontent.”



While there is almost certainly no forest monastery in Thailand that could bring in anywhere near as much money as Wat Pa Barn Tard, still Ajan Mahā Boowa lives in a simple wooden hut. As he approaches his late eighties he still eats at only one sitting. His monastery still has no electricity running into it (though there are generators used for certain things) and thus when the monks clean the Dhamma-hall they do so by the light of candle lanterns. Apparently the King of Thailand has

repeatedly offered to build a new, modern Dhamma-hall for the monastery but Ajan Mahā Boowa has insisted upon keeping the old, original wooden structure in use.

So, in a sense, he is a bit old-fashioned; he’s certainly not intoxicated with progress and development, as he sees virtue and insight as the most significant factor in peace and happiness. When I first arrived at the monastery, I was not without some critical feelings. I wondered if there might not be a better system of running a monastery than having hundreds of laypeople donating food to a monk who is in the midst of receiving his fifteenth bowl-full that morning. But when I looked closer, when I looked from within, I could see that Ajan Mahā Boowa is operating from a fundamental premise that nothing has more value than the Dhamma, and that indeed its value is immeasurable. That’s what the fault-finding mind tends to forget. I would get frustrated over the speed with which the monks there

ate, or their style of going almsround (they walk very fast) because I failed to remember that behind all this, in the backdrop, is an enlightened mind which is creating the conditions for profound transformation within individual minds. In one of his Dhamma talks he compares the happiness of the world like the happiness of a prisoner, and the happiness that comes from Dhamma like the happiness of freedom:

“[As we practise] the happiness that comes from the outside world — in other words, from the current of the Dhamma seeping into our heart — we begin to see, step by step, enough to make comparisons. We see the outside world, the inside world, their benefits and drawbacks. When we take them and compare them, we gain an even greater understanding — plus greater persistence, greater stamina.... The more peace we obtain, the greater exertion we make. Mindfulness and wisdom gradually appear. We see the harm of the tyranny and the oppressions imposed by the defilements in the heart. We see the value of the Dhamma, which is a means of liberation. The more it frees us, the more ease we feel in the heart. Respite. Relief.”

That’s what it all comes down to. He wants his monks and lay supporters to practise. And when I read one of his books or listen to one of his talks I can sense the intelligence that goes into them, and the will that is doing part of the work for me by inspiring me and instructing me.

When it came time for me to leave Ajan Mahā Boowa’s monastery I felt richer and more connected to the forest tradition. For three or four years now I have had a strong appreciation of the Suttas, but, not having known Ajan Cha in his teaching days, I never had that good fortune to train under a fully enlightened master. My trip to Ajan Mahā Boowa’s, and subsequent trip to the monastery of one of his great disciples, Ajan Wun Chai, opened my eyes to the Saṅgha, the enlightened Saṅgha, as a living force in this world, shaping and moulding the understanding and right intentions of those who come into contact with them.



## Faith in the Quest

Ajan Jayasāro

AS A CHILD I was fascinated by quests: I loved reading about Greek heroes facing tests of their endurance and ingenuity as they sought some great treasure, and of the knights of the Round Table searching for the Holy Grail. In my teens I discovered the Buddhist vision of life as a spiritual quest. At a time in which I was finding the values of the world in which I lived hollow and inane, the Buddha's declaration of the search for freedom from ignorance and attachments as the truly Noble Quest seemed to me — and it still does today — as irrefutable. I became convinced that any human endeavour alienated from the Noble Quest, no matter how conventionally worthy it may be, was ultimately trivial.

As monastics, we take on the form of the Buddhist monk with its discipline and regulations, not as a new identity, but out of a recognition that in our chosen quest we need a certain degree of structure and support. Any quest worthy of its name involves facing up to demons, avoiding quicksands and disregarding sirens. With the backing of Saṅgha and faith in the value of the quest we can achieve this.

Faith has been an unpopular word in some Western Buddhist circles, especially with those people who have felt bitter about their theistic upbringing and seen in Buddhism something more 'scientific'. For myself I like the word, and I find 'confidence', the other popular choice as a translation for 'saddhā', too mundane. Anyway, however this term is rendered into English, I think we must first acknowledge that we can't do without it. Nobody can prove that there is such a thing as enlightenment but if we don't have faith that there is, our practice is unlikely to go very far. Faith clarifies the goal, focuses our efforts and fills us with energy. Ultimately it is wisdom rather than faith that moves mountains, but it is faith that impels us to move them in the first place, and faith that sustains us through the inevitable frustrations that dog our efforts.

There are so many things that human beings can search for in life: security, wealth, power, fame, respect, love, immortality and even

annihilation. Many people spend their life searching without ever clarifying exactly what it is they want; all they know is that, whatever it is, they haven't found it yet. Some give up their quest, some turn to drink or drugs, others become bitter and cynical. Many people search for the ultimate experience, doing outlandish things merely because nobody has ever done them before. They want 'the challenge', they crave the adrenaline. They want to stand out from the crowd. Everyone is afraid that their life doesn't mean anything.

But all experience, right from cleaning out a dingy drain filled with human hair up to sexual bliss in Shangrila, lies within this very narrow circumscribed realm which the Buddha called the *āyatanas*. We see that none of the exotic, mind-boggling things that people get up to in the world ever transcend the sense spheres. No matter how much money people have and how well-endowed they are with worldly blessings, wherever they go they are still stuck fast within the realm of the sense bases. No matter how exalted the aesthetic experience, nobody is ever going to be able to see a form with their eyes which is anything other than a form. Form is just form. It arises and then it passes away. That's all it knows how to do. Quite pathetic when you think about it. *Samsāra* just doesn't live up to the hype.

When we understand a form as a form, then the content of that form starts to lose its power to enthrall or enslave us, depress or enrage us. Sounds are only ever just sounds. No matter what sound it might be, the nature of a sound is always the same — it's just this much, unstable and inconstant. Sound is just sound. Odours are just odours. Flavours are just flavours. Physical sensations are just physical sensations. Thoughts, moods, emotions are just that, and they can't ever be more or less than just that — impermanent, empty and ownerless. Not one of the *āyatanas* can be sustained and enjoyed for an indefinite length of time. This, I feel, is where the whole concept and idea of renunciation starts to become so compelling, uncommon sense. Racing around, struggling and striving just to be able to experience more forms, more sounds, more odours, more flavours, more physical sensations, more emotions, thoughts and ideas start to appear tiresome. Is it really a satisfactory way to spend a human existence? Prince Siddhartha and countless men and women after him have started their spiritual quests with the conviction that 'there must be something more to life than this'.



But in the world, pursuing sense desires is the norm. Enjoying certain kinds of feeling and avoiding others is the aim. The more experiences you have the fuller your life is considered to be. Intensity and passion are seen as ends in themselves. From an early age we absorb the idea that romantic love is the supreme fulfilment — poetry, novels, television, movies all tell us the same thing. Freedom is usually considered to lie in consumption; the more money we have, the greater the choice of hamburger fillings available, the freer, it seems, we are to consider ourselves. Even financial markets are called free.

The monastic life is one, however, in which we are willing to look into everything carefully in order to see what is truly what. Our role in the world is to step back a little from the pace and pressures of the world, to investigate and penetrate the nature of existence. We do this with the understanding that it is not an exclusively intellectual quest. Success will depend to a great deal on our moral integrity and emotional maturity. In the uncovering of truth, our effort is not to try to make all our ideas conform to what's written in the Buddhist books, but to use the teachings as working hypotheses. Do they adequately, completely explain human experience? The idea that with the power of *sati*, *samādhi* and *paññā*, we learn to see the truth, just as it is.

What we're being offered by the Buddha is a teaching that opens our eyes to look at life and at experience. We investigate: 'What is this?' 'What am I?' 'What is this life ... this body ... this mind?' And humble acknowledgement that we don't know is the motor for the search. We cherish a faith in the ultimate value of the search for a direct experience of truth. Ajan Cha once spoke of a bird waking up and realizing it's in a cage. No matter what the cage is like, even if it's a most beautiful ornate cage with gold bars, once the bird clearly understands what a cage is and that liberation lies outside it, it can never be content with its old life ever again.

We undertake the spiritual life to seek freedom from the confines of the cage. The path we follow, the way that we live our life as *samaṇas*, only becomes really sensible and meaningful in light of the aspiration for transcendence. We must believe in the vision of freedom outside the bonds and attachments founded on a sense of self. That freedom comes from fully understanding, moment by

moment, the nature and mechanics of bondage. We practise to understand the nature of the five khandhas and the six āyatanas.

The reason why attachment to forms and sounds and odours and all the āyatanas is so treacherous is, quite simply, because they don't last. I went to visit our old lay supporter, Mae Jorm, in the hospital today. Her cancer is now at the stage where she doesn't even have enough energy to swallow water. Her throat was dry and she desperately wanted some water. But when it was poured into her mouth she couldn't swallow it. The water started to drip from the side of her mouth. It was a heartbreaking thing to see. Her body and sense organs are shutting down. I have known this woman since I was a novice and soon she will be dead.

Our eyes start to go, our ears start to go and even if the forms are still there, they are not for us any more. Sounds were there before we were born and will be there after we have died. No one has ever become free through looking at beautiful things. No one has ever become free, liberated from the vicious round of birth and death, through listening to beautiful music, or hearing beautiful sounds. We might have become quite peaceful for a short while, but there's no wisdom there. We are merely fine-tuning the quality of our distraction.

With basic faith and confidence in the teachings of the Buddha, we get a foretaste that there is such a thing as freedom, and that it is realizable. It is possible. There is hope. There is a path. But as long as there is still attachment to the five khandhas, as long as there is still clinging to delight in the physical body, to delight in feeling, perception, thoughts, ideas, emotions, and sense-consciousness, then there is still delight in dukkha. The Buddha made this very clear. The attachment to the five khandhas is attachment to dukkha. One who is attached to dukkha cannot be free from dukkha.

So there is really nowhere to go — nowhere new anyway. Wherever we go, we're always going to be in exactly the same place. We'll be in a place where there are forms, sounds, odours, tastes, physical sensations and mental events. This is it. We've already got the whole package. No matter if we're trekking through a pristine Himalayan valley, or struggling through a crowd in a frowning city, we have the same work to do. We can see the truth of things wherever we are. Of

course, certain environments are more conducive to the work than others — that is why the Buddha established monasteries and a monastic order — but even so wherever we are, in whatever posture we find ourselves, we can do the work of developing awareness, turning the light within.



We seek to learn from experience whatever it is, learning to see things as dhammas rather than as 'this person', 'that person', and 'this and that'. We steadily apply ourselves to the process of de-conditioning and re-education. Stopping the rot. Making a fresh start, again and again. Infinitely patient. Until the work is done.

With the faith that the Buddha was fully enlightened, with the trust that the teachings which he shared with human beings and devas for forty-five years are true, and with the conviction that the *ariya*

*sāvaka*s truly penetrated those teachings, it follows that each one of us, wherever we're from, wherever we were born, whatever language we speak, man, woman, old or young, we all bear within us this capacity to realize the truth. Human beings can attain Awakening, can realize Nibbāna, because we're the fish in the water — why shouldn't fish be able to understand what water is? It's all around us, it's all within us. All we have to do is learn how to open our eyes.

It's common amongst Buddhist practitioners, however, to realize that their strong sense of *saddhā*, or faith in the Buddha, Dhamma and Saṅgha, a profound trust and confidence in the truth of the Buddha's teachings, is not matched by faith in their capacity to realize that truth. But without this faith in ourselves, the five *indriyas* have no opportunity to mature. This lack of faith in our potential for enlightenment is crippling and it's unwise. The doubt is based on a mistaken way of looking at ourselves. Swallowing the whole myth of the independent 'I' gives us spiritual indigestion.

We can't force ourselves to have faith and we don't need to. We merely have to remove the wrong thinking that prevents faith from arising, and start paying more attention to our experience.

Our tradition makes an important distinction between two levels of truth: the conventional and the absolute. The term 'conventional truth' refers to the conditioned, phenomenal or relative sphere: in this sphere it is valid to talk about 'self', 'human beings', 'monasteries' and 'monastic orders'. The 'absolute truth' refers to the way things are, unmediated by concepts and bias; in this sphere language and thought are transcended. The wise person uses conventional truths in order to communicate, but he is not fooled by them. Understanding this way of exposition, certain Buddhist teachings which would otherwise remain quite puzzling, become clear. In particular those regarding 'self'.

The number of references in the suttas to 'self' — for example, the famous saying that the self should be the refuge of the self, and the instructions on various kinds of self-development — these are expressions on the conventional level. They do not clash with the 'absolute' truth of *anattā*. The teaching of *anattā* does not mean that the Buddha is refuting the self on the conventional level; he is simply reminding us not to confuse a useful social fiction with ultimate

reality. There is no independent, timeless 'I', no unmoving centre of experience, no soul-entity, no separate ego-identity, as we assume. However closely we look we cannot find 'one who acts', 'one who thinks', 'one who does' and 'one who wanders from life to life'. But there is a conventional 'I'. One teacher puts it well: "There is a self; it's just not permanent".

Our discouragement in the practice frequently comes from trying to imagine how this limited 'I' could possibly realize the unlimited. How could this bounded 'I' realize the unbounded? Having posed a question based on false premises (the 'I' is real) we naturally conclude with a false answer, "No, I can't see how realizing Nibbāna could ever happen; it just doesn't seem possible". In other words, how could little old me ever realize something so marvellous? The gap seems too wide.

How can this person realize the truth? Well, that's exactly the point, isn't it? It can't. This 'person' doesn't realize the truth. Rather it's through understanding what this 'person' is, that truth is revealed.

The realization of the Third Noble Truth leads to the unveiling and manifestation of Nibbāna. It involves, in the words of the Buddha, 'upturning something that has been overturned'. It is a 'shining of light in the darkness'. Nothing new is created, what occurs is a radical re-appreciation of experience and recognition of something which has always already existed. The deathless element is also a birthless element. It is not something that is brought into existence. Instead, those things which conceal or envelop it are removed. If we can grasp this point, then we can feel a new surge of energy. We see that any sense of inadequacy that we might feel is founded on attachment to the conventional self as being ultimately real. At this point, our effort and energy, our persistence in practice is greatly strengthened and the nagging doubt about our capacity to follow the path to its end may even disappear in a flash. We start to give what it takes.

If doubts arise in practice, investigate the discouragement, the uncertainty and hesitancy as mental states. Watch when questions like, "Could I possibly reach the same level as Ajan Cha and Ajan Mun and all those great teachers?", arise. Dwelling on 'me' and 'my' personal history, 'my' foibles and idiosyncrasies, it seems ridiculous to

even imagine that we could possibly ever dwell on the same level as monks like that. But the essence of the practice is not — what a relief! — the gradual perfection of character and personality; it is the understanding of character and personality as conditioned phenomena. Certainly, unwholesome features like selfishness, jealousy, anxiety etc., inevitably abate through practice, but the idea is not to mould our self into a new more 'spiritual' being. Character and personality are not and never have been, who we are. They are not self. They are not anything ultimately real. So we have to learn to stand back from the idea of becoming an enlightened being. Otherwise when we contemplate, "Is enlightenment really possible for me?" — and we are unsure: is this hubris, worldly ambition, spiritual materialism? — then we may decide, "No, not me", and then falsely dignify that wrong view by calling it humility.



*Asmimāna* (the subtle conceit 'I am') is the crux of the problem, the spoiler, the fly in the cosmic soup. It's the most difficult thing to see through because the self-assumption is the foundation on which unlightened human beings build their whole world-view. The existence of an independent self-existent 'I' seems obvious, everyone takes it for granted; it's common sense. That's why it's so hard to face up to the realities of life, birth, old age, sickness and death — we see them as things that happen to 'me'. It's 'my' dilemma, it's 'my' problem. 'I' was born, 'I'm' getting old and 'I'm' going to die. If you study Thai you know the word *samkan* means 'important'. But sometimes the word *samkan* is used as a verb, to *samkan tua* — which means, to give importance to self. And we give importance to self in so many ways. Not just in our arrogance and pride but also in our humility. Or in being anything at all. We see it clearly when we compare ourselves with others, considering ourselves as better, as equal, as worse and so on. This is where we 'samkan tua' This is where we most prominently uphold the myth of self.

The Buddha said that the practice which most directly opposes or undermines *asmimāna* is *aniccā saññā*, the contemplation or constant recollection of transience and change. The investigation of the impermanence and inconstancy of phenomena enables us to see that those things that we've always assumed to be solid are in fact not solid at all; that which we think is permanent is not permanent at all. This solid 'I' who does things, has experienced things, has highs and lows, ups and downs, is not a coherent entity at all. If you take a light, a candle, a torch, and you wave it around in a circle fast enough, you get the illusion of a fixed circle of light. But in fact there is no such thing. With our investigation of the mind and the five *khandhas* the same principle applies. Through the practice of, being fully awake and alert in the present moment, the truth of change becomes manifest. Mindfulness slows things down, at least subjectively. Suddenly we have time. There are gaps. There is a sense of things not moving so fast anymore. And when there is that penetrative awareness and presence of mind, then there is the opportunity for circumspection and for the recognition of things arising and passing away. The arising and passing away of the five *khandhas* may be seen as a simple, impersonal truth. We know consciousness as just that, without having to add anything to it. With mindfulness and wisdom we don't make a big story out of things any more. We

experience the episodes of our life more as haikus than scenes from a fat and portentous autobiographical novel.

Faith is what keeps us going through the difficult times. Faith and endurance. Human beings in extreme conditions show an incredible capacity for endurance — the prisoners of war on the Death Railway in Kanchanaburi during the Second World War are a good example — but whether people survive ill-treatment and deprivation seems often to lie more in whether they want to endure, rather than if they can. Those who don't see the purpose or the value of endurance are alienated from their innermost resources and die. They lose their will to live, or we might say, their faith. In spiritual life, our capacity to endure through the ups and downs, the dark nights and deserts and sloughs of despond, is dependent on our wanting to. And if we want to, it's because we believe it to be worthwhile. This is faith.

Blind dogmatic faith was sharply criticized by the Buddha. He taught a faith that welcomes the critical faculty and does not claim to be more than it is. He pointed out that it is possible to have a strong faith in something and to be completely mistaken. The strength of the feeling is not a proof. He taught us to take the teachings as working hypotheses and then put them to the test of experience. Observe yourself and the world about you. Many years ago I experienced a small epiphany, one that greatly increased my faith in the capacity for radical change in my life. What I experienced wasn't an intellectual proof of that capacity, but it was an experience that had a deep emotional significance for me, which has not faded.

I was travelling in a bus through a huge desert. The journey was to take fifteen to twenty hours and there was almost nothing to be seen on either side of the bus — just sand and rock. At the time I was in my late teenage years and I was at a pretty low ebb in my life. I'd been in India practising meditation, and just starting to feel that I was making some progress. But then I had to leave because my money ran out. During the many adventures I had as I travelled westwards there was this underlying feeling that I had squandered a marvellous opportunity. Something had been lost. So I was travelling through a seemingly endless expanse of desert. Looking out the window all I could see was just sand and rock everywhere. I remember thinking, "That's me, just sand and rock, as far as the eye can see



...“ Every time I’d look out the window this thought just kept coming up. “That’s me, sand and rock”. Then I must have dozed off.

During the night quite an unusual thing happened: there was a rain storm in the desert. As I came around I could feel straightaway that it was more cool and fresh. I looked out through the window and I couldn’t believe my eyes. All throughout the desert and on the rocky outcrops there were these beautiful flowers — a profusion of the most vibrant yellow, mauve and turquoise blooms! It struck me as a miracle. How could these flowers exist in such a place? Where did they come from? Just a few hours ago there were endless stretches of sand and rock. Now there were beautiful wild flowers everywhere! The flowers were not big flowers, just tiny little flowers, but they sprang up in such a short time. And already being in a metaphorical frame of mind, the beauty and surprise of the experience made me think, “I’ve got all those little flowers in my heart, they’re dormant in my mind, and all they need is just a little bit of rain on them”. And so with that thought a big smile broke out on my face and I felt, “Yes, I can do it”.

Even the desert can sprout flowers. Even when your mind is feeling dry and lifeless and dull, if we just keep at the practice, continue the development of the five indriyas, sprinkling the water of Dhamma, of mindfulness, clear comprehension and sincere effort, skilfully applying all the wonderful Buddha’s teachings that we’ve learnt, then we can create freshness and beauty in the mind. There’s always a way forward. There’s always a way to peace. This is the hope that the Buddha held out to us. All mental conditions are just that: they’re conditions. They change. And we can influence the nature of that change through seeing life just as it is, by doing something wise about it through our study and practice of Dhamma.

So with *saddhā* in the path, in the quest for truth, seeing its value, there arises a *virīya* independent of all the passing feelings of inspiration, depression, like, dislike and pleasure — those are all part of it, they’re not something outside of it. Practice is developing this right, wise attitude to practice, and not taking all those feeling so seriously — not taking the person who seems to experience them so seriously.

Practically speaking, it is *sati* and *samādhi* that enables us to see what is what. The practice of *samatha* meditation, concentration on an object, is in fact a kind of mindfulness practice. It's training our awareness to maintain an uninterrupted conjunction with an object, for example the breath. Mindfulness of breathing has been called the king or the crown jewel of meditation objects because it may be used both as a means of calming the mind and also for the direct penetration of *aniccā*, *dukkha*, and *anattā*. By arousing the feeling that the breath is more important, more interesting, more fascinating than anything else in the world the practice progresses. We generate the deep faith that mindfulness of breathing can take us to liberation. This faith energizes the mind.

When the mind becomes calm, notice how your attitudes and values change. There is a recognition that stuffing the mind full of thoughts and fantasies is pointless, that dwelling in even subtle forms of anger, ill-will or greed is painful and a waste of time; that searching the universe for pleasant sensory experiences is demeaning and irrelevant. You wonder that you never ever thought about getting out of these traps before. *Samādhi*, the deep peace and happiness of mind, brings forth a very different kind of logic to that of the busy mind. Suddenly there is a sense of sadness for the time that you've allowed the mind to hang out with the hindrances. All the time that has been squandered! You think, "How could I have been so foolish?" To the peaceful mind, only peace makes sense.

The mind stabilized by *samādhi* loses its habitual reaction to objects, which is to rush towards the pleasant and away from the unpleasant. Without *samādhi* the mind has no home. It has no dwelling place, it has nowhere it really wants to be. And so when faced with objects the mind rushes around moving towards the pleasant, away from the unpleasant, and hovering around the neutral, not quite sure whether to move towards it or away from it. But peace of mind, has a stabilizing effect on this process. Suddenly it's almost as if the mind is too content; it just can't be bothered to make a fuss about things any more. The mind in *samādhi* is quite happy to be where it is, at home.

But the mind is not peaceful all the time. Awareness of the value of *samādhi* can be lost again. When we're in the hindrance-mode, then *samādhi* seems so far away. All the teachings about peace of mind

seem like pious platitudes, and the practice really doesn't gel. We may even find ourselves trying to avoid meditation, even though we still aspire to its fruits. But then, if we are willing to go against the grain, once the mind starts to become calm, and *sati* and *sampajañña* increase, then that kind of negative thinking appears foolish once more. The pacification and clarification of the mind's intrinsic power seem so obviously the most intelligent thing that we could be doing. We see how state-specific are our thoughts about life.

If the mind takes joy in its object, chooses it wholeheartedly, then what starts to become clear is the inherently peaceful nature of the mind. The meditator experiences clarity, transparency, brightness and purity; he connects with the strength, resolution and firmness of the concentrated mind. At the same time, with *samādhi*, we are aware of a flexibility, suppleness and malleability in the mind. Put into words that sounds self contradictory doesn't it. How is that possible? How can the mind be both firm, resolute and rock-solid, and yet at the same time flexible and pliable? Well why not? It's not a logical theorem. It is '*paccatam*', to be realized by each person for themselves.

With the practice of *samādhi* the meditator samples the initial wonders of the inner world. He reaches the gates to the marvellous: something few human beings ever experience. Here is where the mind begins to intuit its full power and potential and is exhilarated by that. The meditator sees how unsatisfactory and superficial ordinary sense consciousness is — it's as if human beings are just skating around on dirty ice looking for water, never aware of the beautiful, cool flow beneath their feet.

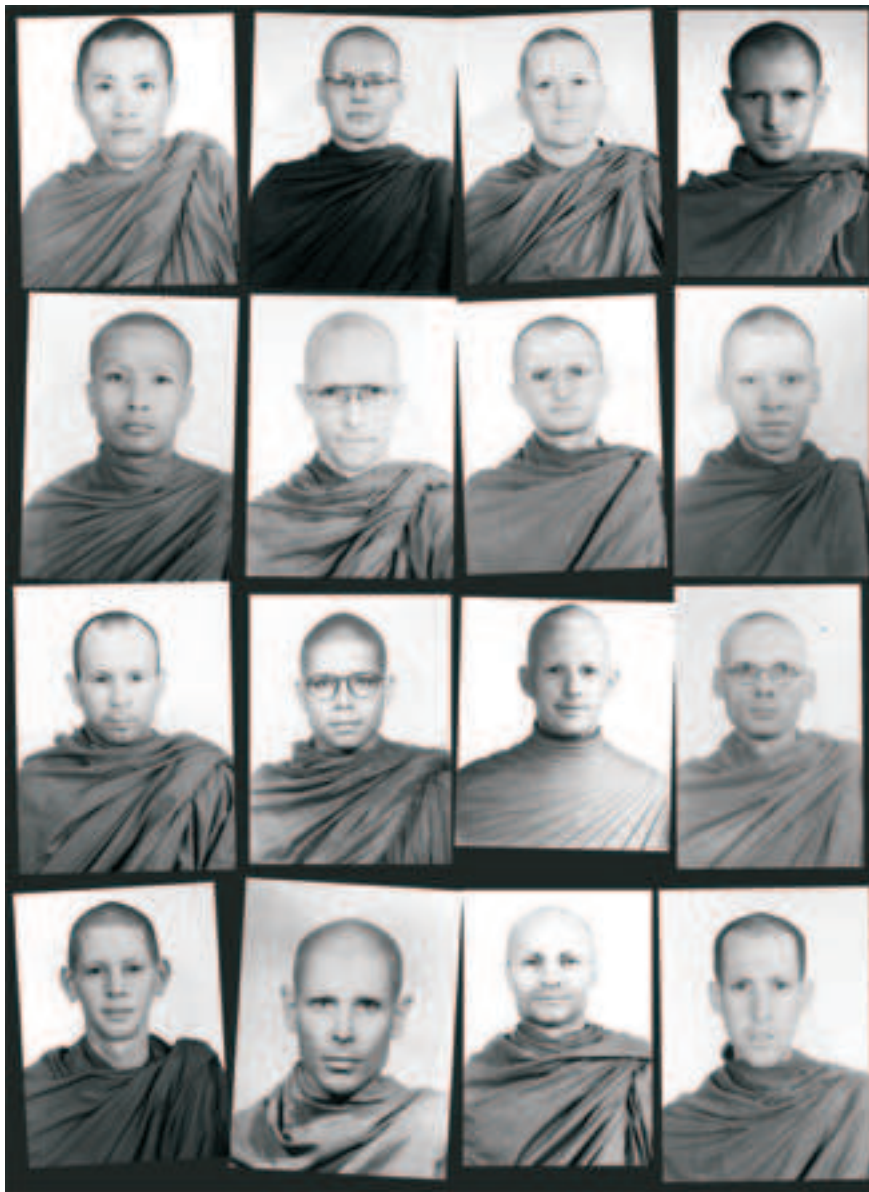
Here, as the mind becomes imbued with *sati* and *samādhi*, the powers of this penetrative awareness can be applied. The mind, in accordance with its nature, will move and flow towards the objects of investigation and contemplation. The mind emerging from *samādhi* is naturally ripe for the emergence of *paññā*. With *paññā*, what becomes most clear to us is that every aspect of our experience, everything that we can perceive and conceive, has the same value. We enter a calm egalitarian land. Everything does exactly the same thing: it arises and then passes away. For the first time the nature of experience far outweighs the significance of its content. We make a radical switch or revolution from obsession with

the contents of experience to the cool, clear-eyed appreciation of the process or contour of experience, this rising and passing away. With insight and understanding of the process of rising and passing away — it's here that *asmimāna*, the upholding of the idea of self, raising the flag of 'me' and 'mine', starts to be undermined.

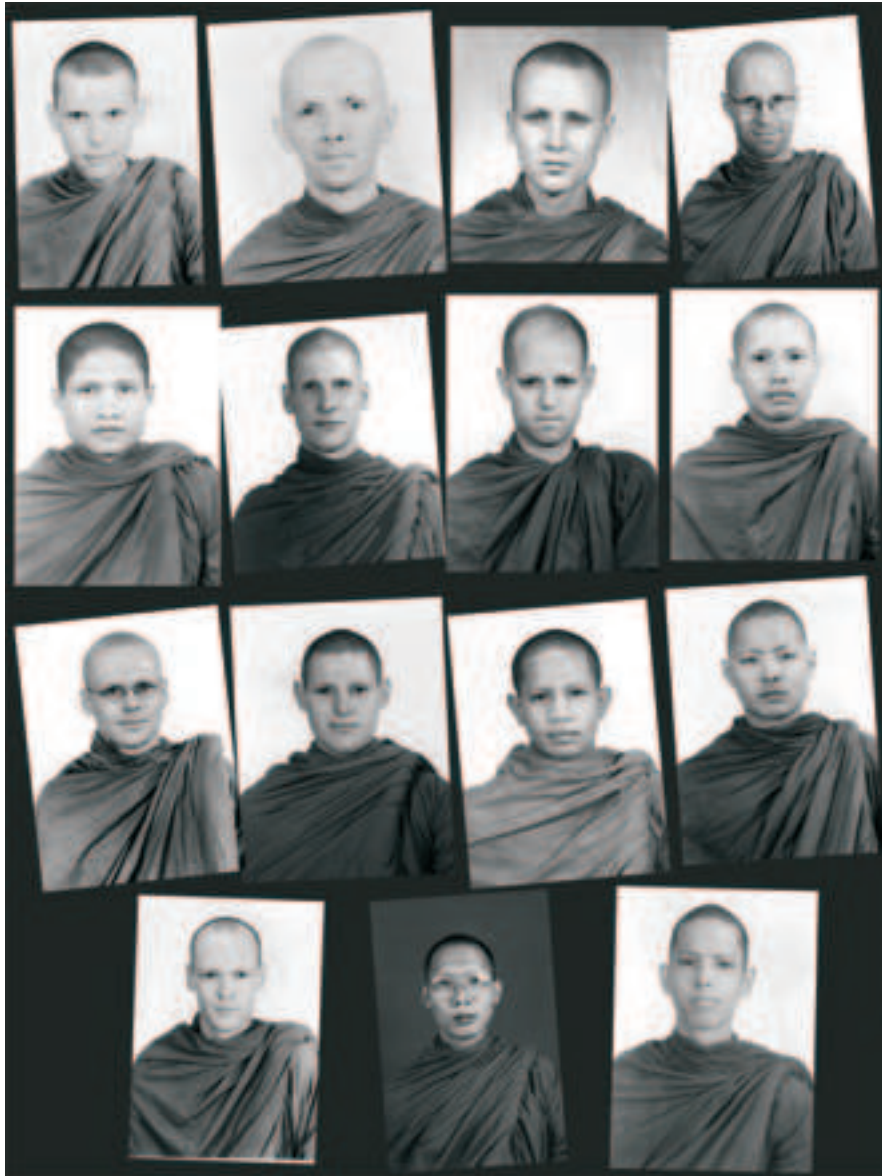
So as we progress down the path we come to understand that part of our development as human beings is the gradual maturation in our understanding of happiness. The increasingly subtle and profound forms of human happiness developed through the five *indriyas* of *saddhā*, *virīya*, *sati*, *samādhi* and *paññā* are sometimes invisible to others, especially those who do not practise; they're not objects of possession and they're not founded upon the *āyatana*s; and yet these qualities truly sustain the human heart. But if we find ourselves trapped in that no-man's land where we have given up some of the coarser pleasures based on gratification of sense desire, but do not yet have any real access to the higher more subtle and refined pleasures, enjoyments and happiness of the path, then we need to be very patient and dwell in faith in the Buddha.

Even though I don't think my critical faculty is lacking in any way, after devoting over twenty years my life to studying and practising the Buddha's teachings to the best of my abilities, I have yet to find a single teaching that I have been able to disprove. This gives me a great deal of faith in those aspects of the Dhamma that I have not yet verified. It's like a map. If you have found it to be trustworthy in one area of the landscape, you find it unlikely to be at fault in another. The Buddha teaches that the practice of Dhamma brings happiness to the human heart. We trust the Buddha's teachings not by dismissing doubts but by putting our life on the line. Faith does not entail the mere acceptance of a philosophy. Buddhist faith is the faith to do. It is a trust in our capacity, a belief in our own potential; something we can put to the test. The daily practice may sometimes feel little more than a stumble or crawl, but through faith our underlying effort and sincerity is unwavering. Eventually, attainment of the goal is assured.





Wat Pa Nanachat Saṅgha members.





→ วัดป่านานาชาติ  
สาขาที่ ๑๑ ของวัดหนองป่าพง บ้านบุ่งหวาย  
ต.บุ่งหวาย อ.วารินชำราบ จ.อุบลราชธานี

WAT PAH NANACHAT  
BUNG WAI FOREST MONASTERY



## About Wat Pa Nanachat

Wat Pa Nanachat (Many-Countries Forest Monastery) is situated in a small forest in the Northeast of Thailand about 15 kilometres from the city of Ubon. The monastery was established in 1975 by Ajan Cha, a meditation master of the Theravada Forest Tradition, to provide a traditional monastic training community for non-Thais. Today the monastic community consists of monks, novices and postulants from all over the world. English serves as the primary language of communication and instruction. At present, there is no permanent nun's community at Wat Pa Nanachat. Women interested in a monastic commitment are invited to contact our affiliated nun's community at Amaravati Buddhist Monastery, Great Gaddesden, Hemel Hempstead, Hertfordshire HP1 3BZ, England.

Although Wat Pa Nanachat is not a meditation centre, there are facilities for a limited number of male and female guests to stay at the monastery and practise with the resident monastic community. Guests are expected to follow the daily routine of the monastery and join in with all communal meetings and work activities. In accordance with the monastic environment, emphasis in practice is placed on co-operation, self-sacrifice and communal harmony. The monastic training aims to follow the Dhamma-Vinaya, as taught by the Buddha, respecting both the letter and the spirit. The life of the monastery encourages the development of simplicity, renunciation and quietude. It is a deliberate commitment to this way of life that facilitates a community environment where people of diverse backgrounds, personalities and temperaments can co-operate in the effort to achieve the goals of a spiritual life.

### **Practice Schedule**

In general, guests have many hours a day for study and meditation practice, so it is advisable to have had previous meditation experience in a retreat setting and exposure to Buddhist teachings to make best use of the situation. Below is an outline of the standard daily routine, which varies from time to time.

- 3:00 a.m. Morning Wake-Up Bell
- 3:30 a.m. Morning Meeting: Meditation and Chanting
- Dawn Monks go out to surrounding villages on almsround.  
Layguests sweep the monastery or help in the kitchen.
- 8:00 a.m. The meal
- 9:00 a.m. Chores Period
- 4:30p.m. Afternoon Drink. A senior monk meets the lay guests once a week for tea.

The schedule is supplemented by days of group practice which include Dhamma talks from the abbot, and regular periods of structured Sangha retreat. All or some meetings may be replaced by periods of individual practice according to the abbot's discretion. From the end of the meal until midday the abbot or a senior monk is available to receive visitors and resident guests. Once every seven days or so on the Wan Phra (the Buddhist Holy Day, which falls on the quarter moon) the community observes an all-night vigil, during which time there is the opportunity to discuss aspects of Dhamma practice with one of the senior monks.

### **Training in Discipline and Renunciation**

Lay guests who stay at Wat Pa Nanachat are expected to abide by the traditional eight Buddhist precepts. The first five form the basic Buddhist guidelines for conduct leading to harmony and self-respect. The other three precepts encourage a spirit of renunciation and simplicity and are among the fundamental principles of monastic practice.

### **The Five Training Precepts**<sup>7</sup>

- Harmlessness: to refrain from intentionally taking the life of any creature.
- Trustworthiness: to refrain from taking anything that is not given.
- Chastity: to refrain from all sexual activity.
- Right Speech: to refrain from false, abusive or malicious speech and worldly gossip.
- Sobriety: to refrain from using intoxicating drink or drugs.

### **The Three Renunciation Precepts**

To refrain from eating after midday. The monastery practice is to eat one meal in one bowl at one sitting.

To refrain from using entertainment such as music, dance, and games and to refrain from beautifying or adorning the body. This precept simplifies daily living, eliminates distractions, and inclines the mind inward toward spiritual practice.

To refrain from using luxurious dwellings and from indulging in sleep. As a positive expression this entails practising wakefulness and mindfulness in all postures and in all activities throughout the day.

In sum, these training precepts are guidelines for good conduct in body and speech and provide a necessary foundation for the inner work of mindfulness, clear comprehension and meditation in our endeavour to cultivate the Noble Eightfold Path. The precepts serve the dual purpose of restraining unwholesome speech and action to promote harmony within the community and cultivating the self-discipline necessary for spiritual development. It is important not to see these guidelines as commandments imposed from

<sup>7</sup> See also *The Beauty of Sīla*, page 57.

without, but as principles of training taken up as a act of deliberate personal choice and initiative.

With respect to meditation instruction, rather than concentrate on a particular technique, we aim our practice to include all aspects of daily life, however simple and ordinary, as opportunities to develop mindfulness and other spiritual qualities such as effort, joy, contentment, patience and faith. In time the virtuous qualities that grow out of such a training will gather strength and contribute towards deeper peace and insight in meditation and daily life.

### **Staying as a Guest**

Anyone wishing to come and stay at the monastery must write in advance to the guest monk and allow several weeks in which to receive a written response. Guests are accepted initially for three days. If they wish to stay longer, they should consult the guest monk or the abbot. Traditional Thai lay monastic attire (men wear white loose and long trousers with a white shirt, and women are loaned a white blouse and long black skirt) is expected to be worn by resident lay guests. Men wishing to extend their stay beyond three days are asked to shave their heads. While the monastery provides bedding and a mosquito net, guests are expected to supply their other requisites (e.g. a good torch/flash light, an alarm clock, flip-flop sandals, candles, washing powder, mosquito repellent, and toiletries). Lay people share in the food that is offered to the monastic community each morning.

If you would like to visit and stay at Wat Pa Nanachat, please write suggesting dates to the Guest Monk.

### A note on the transliteration of Thai words

Thai words are notoriously difficult to transliterate. A choice must be made between being faithful to the spelling or to the pronunciation. Most systems settle for a compromise between the two. In this book we have adopted the official Thai system, which gives precedence to the spelling. Thus, for instance, 'a' is used to represent both the short 'a' sound and the long 'a' elsewhere variously rendered as 'ā', 'ah' or 'ar'. A soft 't' sound is rendered as 'th' in this system so as to allow 't' to be used for the harder 'dt' sound which English lacks. Similarly a soft 'p' sound is rendered as 'ph' leaving 'p' to stand for the harder 'bp' sound for which we have no direct equivalent. The letter 'u' is pronounced in this system as in the English 'put' rather than 'cup'. We have been inconsistent in certain cases, e.g. 'Luang Por' and 'Tan', where there is an established Romanized spelling.

## GLOSSARY

<i>Ajan</i> (Thai):	teacher, from the Pāli ' <i>ācāriya</i> '.
<i>ānāpāna-sati</i> :	mindfulness of breathing; breathing as a focus for meditation.
<i>anattā</i> :	not-self, voidness of separate self, emptiness of a soul-entity.
<i>añjalī</i> :	a gesture of respectful greeting where the hands are held with palms joined at heart level.
<i>arahant</i> :	an enlightened disciple of the Buddha, the fourth and last stage of the Buddhist path.
<i>ariya sāvaka</i> :	'Noble beings'; those who have hearkened well to the Dhamma.
<i>arom</i> (Thai):	feeling, atmosphere; mental object (derived from the Pāli <i>ārammaṇa</i> ).

- āsana*: raised platform on which monks sit.
- avijjā*: ignorance.
- āyatana*: sense bases of the eye and sight, ear and hearing, nose and smelling, tongue and tasting, the body and physical sensation, the mind and cognition.
- bhikkhu*: Buddhist monk.
- borikan* (Thai): monk's requisites.
- Brahmacariya*: celibacy, the celibate path, 'the Holy Life'.
- Brahma vihāras*: sublime abidings of loving-kindness (*mettā*), compassion (*karunā*), empathetic joy (*muditā*) and equanimity (*upekkhā*).
- citta*: mind/heart (Thai); *jī*; see also *jy*.
- desanā*: Dhamma talk
- deva*: celestial being.
- dhamma*: in this use meaning the mental objects that arise and pass through the mind.
- Dhamma; Dhamma-Vinaya*: The teaching and monastic discipline laid down by the Buddha. Or, the truth of the way things are and the code of virtue and morality in accord with that truth.
- dhutaṅga*: See *thudong*.
- dtieng* (Thai): an open-air bamboo platform which functions as a meditation and sleeping platform.
- dukkha*: suffering, unsatisfactoriness, instability.
- farang* (Thai): European, foreigner.
- Four Noble Truths*: the fundamental Buddhist teaching of suffering, the cause of suffering, the cessation of suffering and the path leading to the cessation of suffering.

- gaen-kanun* (Thai): dye made from the heartwood of the jack fruit tree, used for dyeing monks' robes.
- glot* (Thai): a monk's umbrella, which when opened and suspended from a line allows for a mosquito net to be hung from it, giving protection from insects.
- Indriya*: faculty; when developed — power.
- Isan* (Thai): the north-east region of Thailand.
- Jataka*: a story of one of the Buddha's previous lives.
- jhāna*: absorption; a high level of concentration.
- jongrom* (Thai): walking meditation.
- ji* (Thai): mind, heart.
- kamma*: intentional action; the law of cause and effect.
- kamma vipāka*: The result of intentional action.
- karunā*: compassion.
- khandhas*: five 'aggregates' which the Buddha used to sum up all the physical and mental phenomena of existence: form, feelings, perception, mental formations and sense consciousness.
- kilesas*: greed, hatred and delusion; basic obstructions to spiritual practice.
- kor watr* (Thai): monastic regulations and observances.
- Kruba Ajans* (Thai): literally 'forest teachers'.
- kuti*: a small cabin or hut.
- kwai* (Thai): water buffalo.
- Luang Por* (Thai): Venerable Father, a title used for respected monks.
- magga/phala*: the four stages of the path and the fruit of practice.

- majjhima*: middle; a monk of from five to ten years standing.
- Majjhima Nikāya*: Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha, part of the Theravāda Pāli scriptures.
- Māra*: the personification of evil, temptation; a demon.
- mettā*: loving-kindness.
- muditā*: empathetic joy.
- nāvaka*: new — a monk of less than five years standing.
- nekkhamma*: renunciation.
- Nibbāna*: the goal of Buddhist practice, the end of suffering.
- nimitta*: See *samādhi nimittā*.
- opanayiko*: a quality of Dhamma, leading onward.
- paccatariṇ*: individually experienced. (A quality of Dhamma.)
- Pāli*: ancient scriptural language of Theravāda Buddhism.
- paññā*: wisdom based on understanding the Four Noble Truths.
- pansa* (Thai): the Rainy Season — also called *vassa* in Pāli.
- pārāmī*: accumulated virtues which manifest as skills, talents or predilections.
- Parinibbāna*: The passing away of the Buddha into Nibbāna.
- Pāṭimokkha*: the 227 rules of conduct for bhikkhus.
- pha kow* (Thai): literally ‘white cloth’ — an eight precept layman who shaves his head, wears white and lives in the monastery. In the western monasteries, called *anagārika*, from the Pāli meaning ‘homeless one’.
- rai* (Thai): an area of land just less than half an acre.



- sabai* (Thai): content, at ease, well, comfortable.
- saddhā*: faith in the Buddhist teachings, confidence.
- sālā*: a hall.
- samādhi*: mental concentration or focus; peaceful, unified, and blissful sustained awareness.
- samādhi nimitta*: a sign which appears in the mind during *samatha* meditation.
- samatha*: meditation; meditation emphasising the calming and stilling of the mind that culminates in *jhāna*.
- sambhavesi*: a being-to-be-born.
- sampajañña*: clear comprehension, intelligent awareness, alertness.
- samaṇa*: peaceful renunciant.
- samaṇa dassana*: the sight of *samaṇas*.
- sāmaṇera*: novice, the stage of ordination before bhikkhu.
- saṃsāra*: the wheel of endless aimless wandering through birth and death.
- Saṃyutta Nikāya*: Kindred Sayings of the Buddha, part of the Theravāda Pāli scriptures.
- Saṅgha*: the community of those who practise the Buddha's Way. More specifically, those who have formally committed themselves to the lifestyle of a mendicant monk or nun.
- Sāsana*: religion, the Buddha's Dispensation, 'Buddhism'.
- sati*: mindfulness, recollection.
- sāvaka*: see *Ariya sāvaka*
- sīla*: virtuous conduct of body and speech.

- sīla, samādhi, paññā*: the three fold training of virtue, meditation, and wisdom.
- Sotāpanna* (Pāli): See *Stream-enterer*.
- Stream-enterer*: one who has achieved the first of the four stages of the path of enlightenment.
- sutta*: discourse of the Buddha recorded in the Pāli scriptures.
- thera*: a monk of more than ten years standing.
- thudong* (Thai): Pali *dhutaṅga*. Literally ascetic practices that 'shake off' defilements. In general usage, the practice of wandering.
- upekkhā*: equanimity.
- vassa*: the monastic rainy-season retreat, a period of 3 months between the full moons of July and October. See also *pansa*.
- vicikicchā*: sceptical doubt, one of the 5 hindrances to progress on the spiritual path.
- Vinaya*: the monastic code of discipline.
- vipassanā*: insight, of such a type as is deep and effective in curing the *kilesa*. It is insight which arises from wisdom and is based on a clear and quiet mind.
- virīya*: effort, energy.
- viveka*: solitude.
- Wan Phra* (Thai): weekly Buddhist holy day.
- yakkha*: giant, ogre.
- yarm* (Thai): a monk's shoulder bag.