

An annual gathering

The Luang Por Chah Memorial Week

Every year during the week leading up to the anniversary of Ajahn Chah's death on 16 January, there is a great gathering at his monastery in north-east Thailand when many of his disciples come together for six days of Dhamma practice.

Ajahn Siripanyo, currently the senior monk at Wat Dao Dum, provides the following account from his perspective living as a monk in Ajahn Chah's branch monasteries in Thailand.



12 JANUARY 2009, AND ALL OVER THAILAND MOTORBIKES, CARS, PICKUP TRUCKS, MINIVANS, AND TOUR BUSES ARE MAKING THEIR WAY to the north-eastern province of Ubon, heading for a certain monastery – Wat Nong Pah Pong. Those making the journey are looking to spend a week imbibing the spirit and teachings of a forest master now long gone: Ajahn Chah. Most have never met him in person, but the books, tapes and first-hand accounts of his life have inspired them enough to make changes in their own lives; to take up meditation; and now join the annual pilgrimage to where it all began and take part in a week of communal Dhamma practice.

The name of the event translates as 'Dhamma practice festival in honour of the Teacher'. Actually, the word *ngan* – here translated as 'festival' – usually means work. But it can also mean any kind of event or celebration: birthdays, weddings, funerals, festivals – any kind of activity really. The Ajahn Chah *ngan* combines many things: the serious spiritual work of keeping precepts, meditating and listening to Dhamma Talks; socializing with old friends and having fun making new ones.... This is against the backdrop of re-affirming ones' dedication to living in line with the teachings of the Lord Buddha, and more recently Ajahn Chah, or Luang Por ('venerable father') as he is affectionately known. Of the thousands who arrive from near and far, some come to practise and hear the Dhamma, some to give and participate in large measure or small, and some come just to check out the scene, and enjoy the free food available for all.

Luang Por Chah passed away on 16 January 1992, and every year since his funeral on that date the following year, a gathering has taken place at his monastery Wat Pah Pong. The number of participants keeps increasing.

This year saw over a thousand monks and novices and five thousand laypeople put up mosquito nets (and, more and more these days, tents) all over the monastery, doing their best to let go of the outside world and focus their hearts on a different dimension. With Luang Por's teachings as the conduit, the practice turns one inwards – to taste peace, know truth and find oneself.

Tan Ajahn Liem, the abbot of Wat Pah Pong (and these days himself referred to as 'Luang Por') is sitting under his *kuti* (simple dwelling place) receiving some monks as they arrive to pay their respects. A man of few words, he gives the young monks advice and encouragement like a warm father:

'It just got a bit colder, but it's not too bad. Last night was about 15 degrees. It'll take a couple of days for the body to adjust, that's all. If you put your sleeping sheet directly on the hay it will be warmer. A plastic groundsheet will stop your body heat from getting trapped in the hollow stalks, so you'll be colder. We have plenty of toilets these days, so you should be comfortable ... not like before. There's space to put up your mosquito nets behind the Uposatha Hall. Around the *Chedi* (Thai for stupa, or pagoda) is full of laypeople these days, so it's not so appropriate. How many of you came? For the next few days you should surrender to the schedule. This will help eradicate unwholesome states of mind such as arrogance and conceit, and the need to have things your own way. Otherwise you will always fall under the sway of defilements and craving. It takes effort, though – *viriyena dukkhamacceti*: "suffering is overcome through effort". But if you practice correctly your hearts will experience the happiness of inner peace...'

He pauses and looks up: 'Have you set up your bowls for the meal yet? No? Off you go then. It's almost time.'

The monks and novices head for the eating hall, directly behind the main *sala* (meeting hall), which is now slowly filling with white-clothed lay people. The women far outnumber the men. Before the meal every day the Eight Precepts are given and there is a half-hour