



# FOREST SANGHA newsletter

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## Ajahn Chah Passes Away

Venerable Thitapanno sent us an account of the events at Wat Pah Pong immediately following Luang Por Chah's death.

*On the morning of 16th January, the Sangha in Britain received a brief message from Wat Pah Nanachat to inform us of the death of Luang Por Chah. The Venerable Ajahn had been critically ill, paralysed and rendered completely incapacitated by brain damage and numerous strokes over the past ten years. Our winter retreat offered us an ideal opportunity to pay honour to his example, reflect upon his teachings and further our practice in the way that he made clear. Venerable Ajahn Sumedho, who was in Thailand at the time, will be leading the formal commemoration for Luang Por Chah in Britain at Amaravati on April 25th. It is an event that we hope all of Luang Por Chah's disciples in the West can attend.*

It was during a retreat at Wat Keuan that Ajahn Sumedho, and the Western Sangha who had gathered there, heard that Luang Por Chah had been admitted into Ubon Hospital. Malfunctioning kidneys and heart complications had proved to be beyond the medical skills of the monks nursing him. During the ten years of his illness Luang Por had entered hospital many times, yet on each occasion he had recovered miraculously. However, reports soon began to reach us that his body was refusing to take food and the general state of his health was deteriorating.

Early on the evening of the 15th January the doctors at the ICU realised that Luang Por's condition had deteriorated to the extent that he was beyond medical assistance. At 10 pm Luang Por was taken by ambulance to his nursing kuti at Wat Pah Pong in compliance with his previous request that he might pass away in his own monastery. It was at 5.20 am on the 16th January that the body of Luang Por Chah breathed its last, and in an atmosphere of peace the life of a great Buddhist master came to its end.

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But really this mind of ours is already unmoving and

peaceful - really peaceful! Just like a leaf which is still  
as long as no wind blows.

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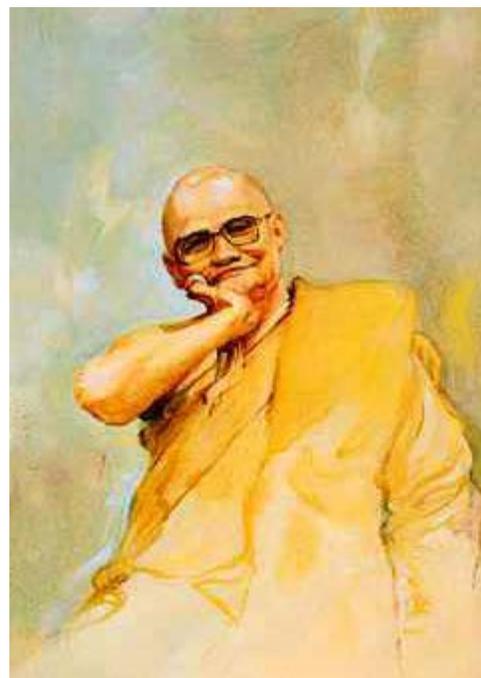
The attendant monks chanted the reflections that death is the natural consequence of birth and in the cessation of conditions is peace, then prepared Luang Por's body for the funeral services. As the news of his death spread, people began to arrive to pay their respects. Soon government officials, as representatives of the King, came to perform the initial ceremonies necessary for a royal funeral.

Within hours the corpse was moved to the main sala, where it was laid in an ornately decorated coffin. The coffin was then sealed, and a picture of Luang Por was placed to the left along with different requisites such as his bowl and robes. Wreaths from the King, the Queen and other members of the royal family were placed to the right. In front of the coffin, extensive flower arrangements created the finishing touches.

As the news of Luang Por's death spread, his disciples rushed to the Wat to pay their respects and to offer their support with the preparations to receive visitors to the monastery. It was decided that for the 15 days following Luang Por's death a Dhamma practice session would be held, as an offering of remembrance and as a focal point for the many incoming lay and monastic disciples to collect themselves around. The Sangha from Wat Pah Nanachat would come over every day at around 5 pm and stay until midnight. During this period of 15 days, about four hundred monks, seventy nuns and five hundred lay people resided at Wat Pah Pong, practising meditation until midnight, listening to talks on Dhamma themes and participating in various funeral ceremonies. Most of the Sangha were living out under the trees of the forest, using their grotes (mosquito net umbrellas) as protection from the elements and insects. The monastery became a grote village.

Soon a huge open-air restaurant complex sprung up at the entrance to the monastery, serving free food and drink to the enormous numbers of people that began to make their way there from all over Thailand. As the days passed, I began to feel a sense of awe as people streamed into the monastery, from early morning to late at night: people of all ages - families, school groups and individuals. In those first few days over 50,000 books were distributed, which gives some indication of the numbers coming. By the 14th and 15th day, the number of people coming was steadily increasing to over 10,000 people per day.

As the people entered the monastery they filed quietly down the road leading to the sala, waited for an opportunity to enter and bow in respect, then to sit for a short while before making way for the next group. Meanwhile the monks, nuns and resident lay people would be sitting in meditation, chanting or listening to a talk. Luang Por Jun led the funeral chanting and various senior monks gave talks. Ajahn Maha Boowa, the renowned forest meditation master, came over from his own monastery near Udorn to give a Dhamma talk and



commented on the quiet, harmonious atmosphere of the Wat in contrast to the confusion and noise he had experienced at similar funerals.

A visit from the King's sister at this time seemed to presage the arrival of the King for the 50th day ceremonies on the 6th of March. As always in Buddhism however, especially in Thailand, nothing is certain. The 100th day after the death of Luang Pot will also be a day of considerable importance.

Because of the arrangements for the hundreds of thousands of people expected to attend the actual burning of Luang Por's body (at similar funerals for famous teachers, up to a million people have attended), and also to find a day suitable for the King, it was decided to hold the funeral early in 1993.

For each of us Luang Por Chah has a personal meaning depending on our contact with him. Yet, for me, I will always wonder and be inspired at the sight of tens of thousands of people coming to Wat Pah Pong, to pay respects to a person who had not spoken for ten years and with whom most had never had the opportunity to speak. They came to bow before the body of a being whom they recognised as personifying our highest aspiration - a life free from the blindness of self-centred action. Freed of this delusion, the goal of the Buddhist path is fulfilled. For me, the whole occasion demonstrated the breadth and power of the influence of such a being.

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But really this mind of ours is already unmoving and peaceful - really peaceful! Just like a leaf which is still as long as no wind blows. If a wind comes up, the leaf flutters. The fluttering is due to the wind - the 'fluttering' (of the mind) is due to those sense impressions; the mind follows them. If it doesn't follow them, it doesn't 'flutter'. If we know fully the true nature of sense impressions, we are unconcerned.

*Ajahn Chah*



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## The 50th Day Commemoration

*Ven. Nyanaviro sent us a report of the commemorative services at Wat Pah Pong fifty days after the death of Venerable Ajahn Chah.*

At 1 pm 300 lay people and 200 monks and nuns gathered in the new sala. The floor is polished granite and the walls are partially marbled. Four huge chandeliers hang from the high ceiling. Large garlands of flowers hang from the walls and the shrine is covered in artificial lotuses - which look beautiful. The cry of the wild chickens breaks into the silence - they are all over the Wat!

Ajahn Jun gave a desana at 2 pm mentioning the debt of gratitude we all have to Luang Por Chah. He exhorted us to make an effort to keep up the practices that Luang Por Chah taught. He also talked about the benefits of keeping good standards regarding sila and the monastic conventions, and reminded us that the practice was not in the forest or the Wat, but is the work of the mind in the body. 'So all of Buddhism is right here in this body/mind. Don't let the practice become perfunctory - put life into it.'

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Even though Ajahn Chah is dead, the goodness and virtue that he embodied is still alive.

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At 7 pm about 3000 lay people and 300 monks and novices gathered in the new sala for the evening chanting. At 9 pm Luang Por Pannananda gave a desana:

He started by praising Ajahn Chah as one of the great monks of this era who taught a pure kind of Buddhism, with nothing extraneous. Ajahn Chah had trained a Sangha which could continue, most notably overseas where monasteries had arisen from his inspiration. They represented an historic occasion in the development of Buddhism.

Luang Por Pannananda commented that Ajahn Chah had taught people to be wise. The way the Pah Pong Sangha was handling the proceedings was a good example: in Thailand some degenerate practices had crept into funeral services, making of them an excuse for a party with gambling and alcohol. Yet the purpose of a funeral is for the study of Dhamma, not for distraction! It's a lesson, a reminder.

Even though Ajahn Chah is dead, the goodness and virtue that he embodied is still alive. We must maintain that which he gave to us all: we have to be 'mediums' for Luang Por Chah, channelling his goodness and virtue through our hearts. If we reflect on Luang Por Chah's metta, sila and panna and

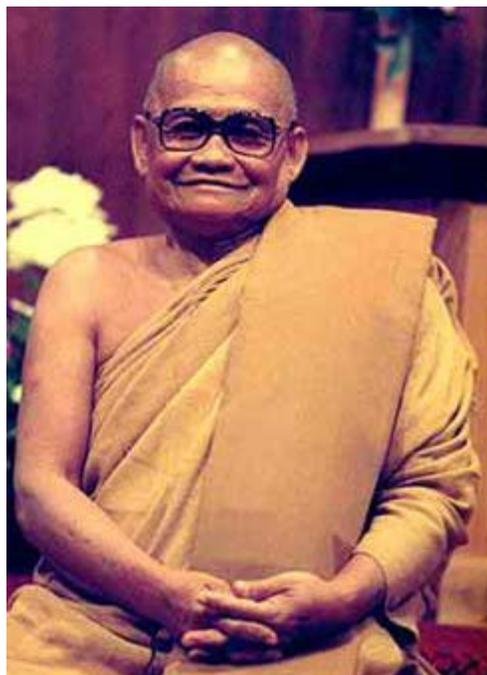
internalise them, then it's as if he is in our hearts, far better than hanging a medallion with his picture on it around our necks.

Luang Por Pannananda concluded by reflecting that the Buddha left the Dhamma-Vinaya, not an individual, as our teacher, and that his teaching was one of sustaining compassion, wisdom and purity. So our practice is to wish all beings well, refraining from harming others or the environment. Then to have wisdom - whatever we're doing, inquiring as to why are we doing it, what our purpose is, and what is the most skilful means. And to dwell in purity - honouring goodness by making body, speech and mind good; associating with good people, and frequenting places of goodness.

Luang Por Pannananda had witnessed a decline in most monasteries after the teacher died, with schisms occurring between the disciples. So we should be careful not to get attached to views, or to wealth and gains, and agree to have regular meetings in order to maintain harmony. Sangha and laity should support all the things that are in line with the way Luang Por Chah taught - and refrain from the things he cautioned us about. We must all help to do this.

The evening continued with different senior monks giving talks. Ajahn Santacitto was next and his memory of Thai was excellent. They were still talking when we left at 4.45 am - but probably finished at dawn with morning puja.

With respect and anjali  
Wat Pah Nanachat, 6th March



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## A Noble Life:

June 17, 1918 to January 16, 1992

Venerable Ajahn Chah was born on June 17, 1918 in a small village near the town of Ubon Rajathani, North-East Thailand.

Between the ages of 9 and 17 he was a samanera (novice monk), during which time he received his basic schooling before returning to lay life to help his parents on the farm. At the age of twenty, however, he decided to resume monastic life, and on April 26, 1939 he received upasampada (bhikkhu ordination).

Ajahn Chah's early monastic life followed a traditional pattern, of studying Buddhist teachings and the Pali scriptural language. In his fifth year his father fell seriously ill and died, a blunt reminder of the frailty and precariousness of human life. It caused him to think deeply about life's real purpose, for although he had studied extensively and gained some proficiency in Pali, he seemed no nearer to a personal understanding of the end of suffering. Feelings of disenchantment set in, and finally (in 1946) he abandoned his studies and set off on mendicant pilgrimage.

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The emphasis was always on surrender to the way things are, and great stress was placed upon strict observance of the vinaya.

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He walked some 400 km to Central Thailand, sleeping in forests and gathering almsfood in the villages on the way. He took up residence in a monastery where the vinaya (monastic discipline) was carefully studied and practised. While there he was told about Venerable Ajahn Mun Buridatto, a most highly respected Meditation Master. Keen to meet such an accomplished teacher, Ajahn Chah set off on foot for the North-East in search of him.

At this time Ajahn Chah was wrestling with a crucial problem. He had studied the teachings on morality, meditation and wisdom, which the texts presented in minute and refined detail, but he could not see how they could all actually be put into practice. Ajahn Mun told him that although the teachings are indeed extensive, at their heart they are very simple. With mindfulness established, if it is seen that everything arises in the mind . . . right there is the true path of practice. This succinct and direct teaching was a revelation for Ajahn Chah, and transformed his approach to practice. The Way was clear.

For the next seven years Ajahn Chah practised in the style of the austere Forest Tradition, wandering through the countryside in quest of quiet and secluded places for

developing meditation. He lived in tiger and cobra-infested jungles, and even in charnel grounds, using reflections on death to overcome fear and penetrate to the true meaning of life.

In 1954, after years of wandering, he was invited back to his home village. He settled close by, in a fever-ridden, haunted forest called 'Pah Pong'. Despite the hardships of malaria, poor shelter and sparse food, disciples gathered around him in increasing numbers. The monastery which is now known as Wat Pah Pong began there, and eventually branch monasteries were also established elsewhere.

The training in Ajahn Chah's monasteries was quite strict and forbidding. Ajahn Chah often pushed his monks to their limits, to test their powers of endurance so that they would develop patience and resolution. He sometimes initiated long and seemingly pointless work projects, in order to frustrate their attachment to tranquillity. The emphasis was always on surrender to the way things are, and great stress was placed upon strict observance of the vinaya.

In 1977, Ajahn Chah was invited to visit Britain by the English Sangha Trust, a charity with the aim of establishing a locally-resident Buddhist Sangha. He took Venerable Sumedho and Venerable Khemadhammo along, and seeing the serious interest there, left them in London at the Hampstead Vihara. Another two of Ajahn Chah's Western bhikkhus, who were then visiting their families in North America, were invited to stay in London to make up a small resident Sangha.

He returned to Britain in 1979, at which time the monks were leaving London to begin Chithurst Buddhist Monastery in Sussex. He then went on to America and Canada to visit and teach.

After this trip, and again in 1981, Ajahn Chah spent the 'Rains' away from Wat Pah Pong, since his health was failing due to the debilitating effects of diabetes.

As his illness worsened, he would use his body as a teaching, a living example of the impermanence of all things. He constantly reminded people to endeavour to find a true refuge within themselves, since he would not be able to teach for very much longer.

Before the end of the 'Rains' of 1981, he was taken to Bangkok for an operation; it, however, did little to improve his condition. Within a few months he stopped talking, and gradually he lost control of his limbs until he was completely paralysed and bedridden. From then on, he was diligently nursed and attended by his bhikkhu disciples, grateful for the occasion to offer service to the teacher who so patiently and compassionately showed the Way to so many.

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The Buddha is to be found right in the most simple things in front of you if you're willing to look. And the essence of this is finding the balance which doesn't hold and which doesn't push away.



**Ajahn Chah**



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## A Niche in the Woods

*Ajahn Sucitto talks with Ajahn Viradhammo, the senior monk of Bodhinyanarama Monastery, New Zealand.*

Ajahn Viradhammo stopped over in Britain for a few days in December. Normally based at Bodhinyanarama Monastery in Stokes Valley, New Zealand, he is invited every year to Canada by a group in Toronto who are interested in setting up a forest monastery nearby. That gives him a chance to visit his mother in Canada, the Sangha in Britain (he was one of the first bhikkhus to come over from Thailand in 1977) and the Sangha in Thailand on his way back to New Zealand. Such contacts with the larger Sangha are essential he feels, in order to learn from different approaches, keep up with developments and keep things in perspective. 'I miss the feed back,' he commented in the course of our brief conversation at Amaravati. With characteristic vigour and straightforwardness, 'Ajahn V' was gathering feedback from all corners in his brief visit to Britain. Visiting Chithurst, Amaravati and Harnham, and conversing with their resident Sangha and guests in the space of a week, takes some enthusiasm and stamina; but remembering him from the strenuous years spent in establishing Chithurst Monastery, this hardly seemed unusual.

**Having trained in Thailand, helped establish Chithurst, worked in the early days at Harnham, and now living in New Zealand with a yearly world tour, have your perspectives on the role and responsibilities of a bhikkhu developed?**

One thing I suppose is. . . I realise now what my niche is. I see the value in going around and meeting people. I didn't see the value for the world at large when I was in Thailand; I just saw the value for myself and I never had the vision of having value for society. And in travelling around I see there is a lot of misunderstanding of what a bhikkhu is and why this tradition is needed. Why not have money, a car and a brown suit? Why do you have to hassle people with all your rules? Why don't you adapt to the times?

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If one does not have a kind of mind which likes to research the text and language, then perhaps it is helpful to have more formalised ways of study in our tradition.

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So that's one misconception I see: people don't understand that the bhikkhu life offers a way of training - the teaching is secondary.

And then I also see there are very few places that have a spiritual centre that they can plug into - whether it's Sangha or lay people - and always have the practice and be able to talk on Dhamma; values of non-competition and non-becoming. Competition and ambition are so

strong in society. But one thing I realise we're offering is that very rare kind of situation which is of such great value. However, many lay people don't understand that they can share in it.

Also, I suppose I see that very few people have a philosophy of life where they have some kind of direction in their life. Many people just make do or try to be happy or think of things like feeding the poor - but finally, what's the point, if they're just going to watch more television, more Dallas? I recognise we're also offering people a life philosophy.

### **More specifically then, how are you going about creating situations for fuller understanding?**

In the past I've been more involved with building up situations in terms of organisation, though of course I teach as well. Now I want to offer formal situations for Dhamma. Lay people do ask to be given formal structures to study. So, I want to learn how to create Dhamma situations which will bring lay people to the monastery. Like at Amaravari, where you have afternoon talks by Luang Por, you have children's summer camp, different kinds of publications, you study and have sutta discussion groups - the kind of things which I've never done much of because I've always been busy with organising things.

Also I want to give the Sangha more formal training in Dhamma. If one does not have a kind of mind which likes to research the text and language, then perhaps it is helpful to have more formalised ways of study in our tradition. So those are the kinds of things I would like to see happen also as a challenge to myself... because I'm the kind of person that tended to have no confidence in my own ideas - or I tended not to have any ideas!

### **Does Buddhism have a fairly good image in New Zealand; or is it seen as a strange cult?**

No, I think now, especially in Stoke's Valley, we're treated with great respect. We've helped the police with some refugee matters, we've been active in the community centre, we donated excess food to them and got involved in communal things. We've had quite a high profile I suppose, because it's such a small community, with so few people doing spiritual things, and everyone seems to know about everyone else. So I feel very much involved with this.

### **And there are other Buddhist groups in New Zealand?**

There's a few Asian bhikkhus, and a supportive Tibetan Sangha. I'm on the committee that is helping organise the visit of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. I'm on the national committee, and we have regional committees. Two of the national meetings have been in our monastery and we have a senior Tibetan Rimpoche coming with four nuns, and some of their monks. Lay people also. it's been a very harmonising situation with all these different traditions coming together.



**I suppose, when you're at a big place like Amaravati, set up to hold a lot of active functions, you can fantasise about a quiet little place like New Zealand.**

New Zealand is really romanticised as being the ideal place where there is no suffering! But yes, there is a lot more personal space because of the kutis; and because the bulk of the work now of establishing the monastery is done. So up until last year it was hard to get in a longer retreat, it was just getting stuff built, but that's done now. Now the building work is about adding facilities for the Sangha, so there is more space. But what the difficulty is, is the isolation. It can get quite claustrophobic because it's in a tight valley and you're always with the same seven people. There is nowhere else to go.

But each monastery has its challenges, and you figure out what the challenges are. I try to create some sense of space for people - that's possible now.

We've also been given a summer cottage. One of the original founders of the monastery died at the age of forty. His family gave us this. It's close to the sea. He was a Zen practitioner; he got involved with us to help set up, though his love was Zen. He had a brain haemorrhage two months before he was due to become a Zen monk in up-state New York. He was just about ready to sell his house, he was organising everything, and he just died in forty-eight hours. We had our first funeral at the monastery.

So we have a good involvement with the Zen people. Feels quite good.

During the Rains Retreat we have three months of formal practice. Two of the senior bhikkhus are involved with the teaching duties, so we don't have as strict a retreat as you do. Every Sunday twenty to thirty Lao people come to the monastery; someone is involved with running the place. So it has its challenges. One thing we really miss is that sense of a larger Sangha. With a larger Sangha, the younger monks can see what Sangha is about as distinct from the characters that are here.

I reckon that each monastery has its own variables, has its own lay people and monks, and you figure out what this place is about. You get on with helping it and helping your practice.

New Zealand has had a lot of experiments with communities, because it is that kind of romanticised place, but very few have lasted. I think a lot of people want the Dhamma but to practise as a spiritual community is very rare. I do not hear of many communities that are able to stick together and have a good Dhammic philosophy and good Vinaya. Very few people want to live as monks, or practice at all. So I find it inspiring and important that in some way we're actually doing it: that's our niche.

So I'm more and more confident about the value of what we're offering. Just look at what's happened at Amaravati, compared to 1977 when we were four bhikkhus and three lay people in a house in London. Because what's happening in New Zealand is what's happening everywhere. We're at the end of a suburb and we have lay people buying houses near us and a community has been able to form. So the society changes from the roots, rather than through the government changing society. And we're beginning to in our small way create a different kind of society.



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## Life of a Forest Monk (Pt III)

*The continuing account of the life and times of Luang Por Jun, a senior disciple of Ven. Ajahn Chah.*

On tudong there were many opportunities and experiences to facilitate the arising of wisdom. In mountains, forest, caves, and all different places one can see and experience Dhamma. The insights, and understanding that arise through seeing different provinces and different people shows how everything is really the same everywhere - it is only the outward appearances that differ. Ajahn Chah always gave me the opportunity to consider this reflection wherever we were. He always encouraged me to be open to dhammas that revealed the true nature of all things.

My own nature was not one that was peaceful, and I didn't find it easy to sit in meditation and examine my mind states. My strength was more from learning from the observation of external stimuli, like seeing the things that happened outside the monastery and then contemplating it. In this way the mind gained peace without any turmoil or chaos of investigating these things directly. We develop concentration and then wisdom arises. Regarding myself, I had to search for this peace by using wisdom to bring things inward for contemplation to see truth. Once we begin to know and realise things for ourselves we can understand the Dhamma in all places, no matter where we are. Ajahn Tongrut\* once said, 'The Dhamma isn't in the forest, it isn't over there in a cave, it's behind you.' Now I know what he meant. The Dhamma is often passed over because we go off looking for it elsewhere and pass over it. It's right here, right now, the very place where we're at.

*\*one of Ajahn Chah's mentors, known for his eccentric means of demonstrating points of Dhamma.*

The Buddha was the same. He travelled around in the beginning looking for teachers. He starved himself and practised extreme asceticism. One can't say that this was wrong, because these things were the Buddha's teachers before he realised the truth. Making a mistake can teach us. We have opportunities to rectify our mistakes and learn from them if we are shown the right way to do it.

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He wants to be finished but he will never finish. Let  
him keep at it!

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### How many times did you go on tudong with Luang Por Chah?

Only once. Not all of Luang Por Chah's monks had the opportunity to go tudong with him. Ajahn Teeang lived with Ajahn Chah before I did but never had the opportunity to go tudong

with him - I was very fortunate and learned a great deal. I remember how my feet split open on that first tudong. We came to a village with a very stony road and he offered me his own sandals to wear until we got onto a better road.

On my second tudong I went with several other monks.

**Did you have any novices or pahkows with you, Luang Por?**

No, just the monks. We went to a mountain Ajahn Chah had spoken about called Lang Kuh mountain. It was very high and not an easy climb. When we got to the top the clouds were around our knees.

**What province was that, Luang Por?**

It was in Nong Kai province in Ampher Beung Gan. We stayed there for three days, though we had planned to stay for four or five days. We had to fast.

**Weren't there any villages nearby, Luang Por?**

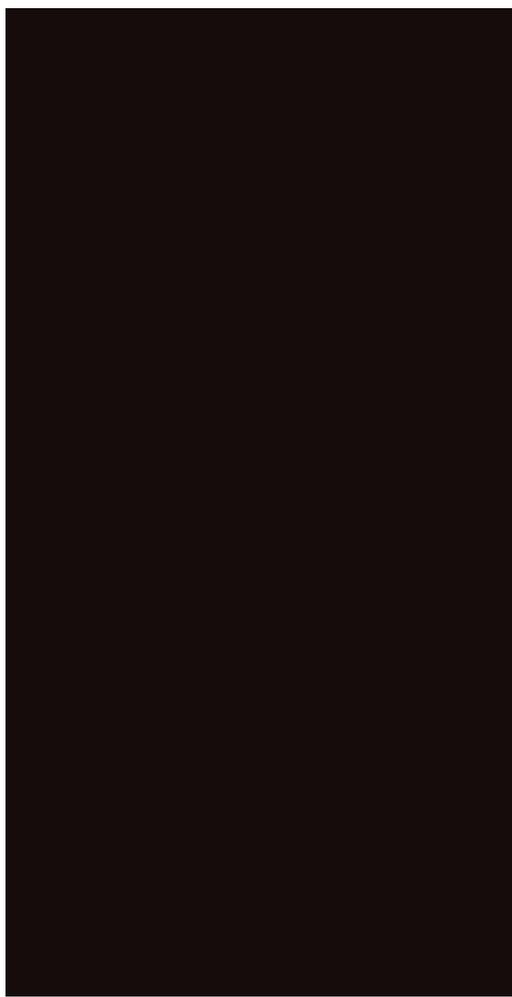
No, it was too high up. We were afraid we wouldn't have enough strength to climb down. The first day we climbed up when we finished our meal. It took the entire morning to get to the top. We wanted to stay longer but because of the problem with alms we could only stay for three days.

My third tudong was through some of the districts in Ubon with a novice and a Cambodian boy. So I only did three tudongs - two on my own and one with Ajahn Chah. Enough to know what it was about and understand how to practise outside the monastery.

My nature is to keep busy and stay active. I had done some building work and always had plans going around in my mind. Ajahn Chah understood this, so he put me in charge of the work in the monastery. I wasn't ready for this responsibility but Ajahn Chah let me get on with it. 'Just let him go, let him do it.' Ajahn Chah laughed, 'He wants to be finished but he will never finish. Let him keep at it!'

**Normally Luang Por Chah would have one do the opposite of what one wanted to do. Isn't this right, Luang Por?**

Yes, always the opposite. If we followed our wishes, Ajahn Chah would say that was the way of the world, and we were always encouraged to go against the way of the world. He would use the old example of the five basic precepts as guidelines for not following desire, and therefore going against what the flow of humanity. Going against that flow is like going upstream. After the Buddha's enlightenment he established the five precepts as a way of going against desire. Learn to resist. If you want to go, then don't go. If we want to lie down, we should stand, if we want to stand we should start walking, and so go against the defilements. This is called the period of training. Once we have this training, then we are free



to live by conventions without being affected by the ways of the world. If we don't have this training then we continue to follow our defilements. Wishing to separate ourselves from the world isn't the right training either. In ancient India the caste system divided people from each other and this didn't make the world a better place.

In the early development of Wat Pah Pong it was only accessible via a narrow path that was just big enough for one or two people to pass through at a time. As time progressed the fruits of Dhamma and sila begin to manifest, with Ajahn Chah leading us in the practice and training our lives. The lay supporters began to come more often, some of them even came from the surrounding villages to hear the Dhamma. Pretty soon they built a wider road to the monastery and supporters in a nearby village asked Ajahn Chah to establish a branch monastery there.

I trained with Luang Por Chah at Wat Pah Pong for seven Vassas. A family from my home village came to Wat Pah Pong to practise and later asked me to return to my village for a visit. I was quite enthusiastic to go back and tell them about Ajahn Chah and his way of practice. Looking back I think this must have been quite courageous, because I genuinely wanted to sort things out and train the monks in my home village to understand the discipline as Ajahn Chah had trained me, and get them on the right path.

**Did you want to go back because you thought about changing things at the village monastery?**

Yes, that's right. The different ceremonies and traditions were being done for the wrong reason and I wanted them to see the right practice. Remembering my past life with these people I had a feeling of metta towards them and hoped I could show them something beyond the empty rituals and ceremonies they revered so deeply.

The time came for me to leave, and Ajahn Chah said to me: 'I really don't want you to go. You're one with lots of saddha (faith) and are very useful to have around. By staying with me here, we become partners in cultivating the paramitas (transcendent virtues). But it's normal to want to go away. I was the same after understanding the truth - as I began to think of my home village, I too wanted to take the teaching back there and cultivate the beautiful. It doesn't mean that one has begun worrying about one's village, it means one wants to correct



things that are wrong. When we see the beautiful then we are moved to want to help in this way. I can't forbid you from going, you'll be useful to others. So go, we will be separated eventually by death anyway, and here we have the opportunity to be separated in a different way. Cultivate the Dhamma for those still submerged in darkness. I will learn to manage without you. Do your best, keep the Vinaya, and if you run out of bullets you can always return here to replenish your ammunition.\*\*

*\*\*Ajahn Chah often used military metaphors to express the sense of powerful application to eliminating ignorance and attachments.*

At this time Luang Pot Ginerlee\*\*\* visited and I told him what I was intending to do. He replied, 'Is that really a good way to think? When you go back to your village it will be really difficult. Even the Buddha waited a long time before he went back to his own village, are you sure you can handle it?' I wasn't sure, but I felt quite courageous and wanted to give it a try, and if it proved too difficult I was prepared to come back. The Ajahn then warned me: 'Be careful of your old friends that you used to have a good time with. These are the ones that can lead you to ruin. Whatever you love, whatever you hold near and dear, these are the things that will cause you the greatest suffering.' He was right.

Returning to my home village was a constant challenge. I gave my life to the village, and the constant contentiousness sometimes caused me to have thoughts of resentment. But it became a part of my practice, helping others and myself at the same time. At first, they didn't understand anything about my way of practice. A hundred years earlier, a forest master who had lived with Ajahn Sao\*\*\*\* lived at this monastery, but his disciples from that day had all died out.

*\*\*\*Another one of Ajahn Chah's mentors  
\*\*\*\*the teacher of Ven. Ajahn Mun*

The monastery had a history of being deserted and re-established several times. My way of doing things was completely opposite to the way the village monks did things, they asked where I had studied my way of practice, and wondered why I had learned this sort of teaching. They accused me of being a Dhammayut and belonging to another sect, and then blamed me for trying to destroy old customs and rituals as well as the peace and harmony in the village. I did my best to explain myself, and fortunately I often had the opportunity to go and consult Luang Por Chah. He was a source of encouragement and support. I went in the year 2509 (1966), and had Ajahn Toon with me that first Vassa.

### **How many monks went with you that first Vassa, Luang Por?**

I had taken two other monks and a novice with me. Ajahn Toon was with me, and he had been around for some time and knew the routine and the practice quite well. He was a good companion. He offered good support and helped when we had conflicts with the monks in the monastery.

### **Which monks were those, Luang Por?**

The monastery where I was staying had previously been a village wat. Three monks were there when I arrived, and I tried to explain the discipline and the practice to them, and gave them the opportunity to train and practise as we were practising. I also gave them the opportunity to go elsewhere, too. We got on with living there, and I gave talks and desanas [Dhamma talks]. Of course our practice went against their ways, and this was noticed by the lay supporters. It created turmoil for the village monks and became increasingly difficult for them. They complained to the village chief, telling him that they just could not live with me and accused me of criticising them. I told the village chief that I wasn't criticising anyone -

that we were just living as specified in the Vinaya, and leaving it up to the other monks to decide how to practise. I explained how I had once lived the same way myself, and had learned to correct my old ways. It was entirely up to the monks to give up their old ways if they wished to do so. The two junior monks decided to disrobe, and the third, the abbot, who was actually my cousin, stayed on to train and practise with us.

We asked to extend the monastery's boundaries to include a small forest and ancient burial ground, and at first the laity agreed. When they heard desanas against their defilements, they began to resist and became contentious. There was also a large lake nearby that we asked to be annexed to the monastery. Some people sided against this, and this became another bone of contention for them. The sala was too small so we tore it apart and built another. We received criticism for this also. I told them to neither blame nor praise us, and continued to make alterations where necessary. Many saw the good of these changes and continued to support us, but others would tear down the fence around the monastery after they went out drinking, or steal the fish living in the pond. They would come at night and we would chase them away - sometimes I had to pretend to be really fierce and would brandish a large samurai sword at them. I would wave my torch at them and yell, 'Let's get em! Let's get 'em!!' It was just a threat, I wouldn't have really hurt them, but the novices and I gave them quite a fright chasing them through the dark!

At first, there was nothing but contentiousness and strife. It took ten years before the village monks would live with us harmoniously. We continued to be kind to them and treat them with respect. Ajahn Chah had a similar problem with the abbot at the village monastery near Wat Pah Pong, who was critical and abusive. He just endured it.

to be continued....



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## Work in Hammer Woods, Chithurst

*An update by Mike Holmes*

It was in 1987 that Ajahn Sucitto and I were stuck in a traffic jam on the M25. The Ajahn produced a tape recorder and interviewed me about the Hammer Woods at Chithurst. That interview appeared in the Forest Sangha Newsletter. I would now like to tell you a little about the work that has gone on since.

You may remember that the basis of the management plan was to change areas of non-native tree species to those that grew in the old English oak forests. This entailed getting rid of large areas of our commercial chestnut coppice and replanting.

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All through the South, the old Woodland Management ways, which disappeared after the Second World War, are beginning to start up again.

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We now have about sixty acres of chestnut remaining, which is just right for our needs. Apart from producing our firewood, it is an important industry in the local area. It provides work for a number of people, who make fence posts, tree stakes, bean poles and many other forest products.

I have been able to find local workers who are interested in the monastery, respect the woods and have a love of nature. These people are great to have around and very different from those who worked here when I first arrived. We even have a 'bodger' who makes besoms from the birch saplings that grow so vigorously and often swamp the trees that we plant.

We have plantations of non-native conifers, which consist of Japanese Larch, Douglas Fir, Western Hemlock and Spruce. This winter, a market has been found for such timber and many of these trees are being felled. The area of Japanese Larch has already been re-planted with native broad leaves, part of the over one thousand trees and shrubs that I alone will have planted this winter.

### Sunlight on Water

The turning earth obscures the sun,  
night comes over England.  
Vixens bark,  
badgers trundle out,  
mother calls the children in.

A breath of sleep and then  
a skyful of stars as dawn comes.  
Wake! Again!! Begin!!!

Hollow-legged, blinking;  
emergence from oblivion  
and the strange dream-logic  
wherein vague feelings,  
and half-remembered characters  
balloon into huge reality  
then fade  
without a murmur.

In the forestry world we are being told that a market is starting in Sussex for the products of hazel coppicing. Such a market has existed in Hampshire for the last few years and it is growing. We have an area of derelict hazel coppice and with the help of the local British Trust for Conservation Volunteers, I am getting this into working order once again.

All through the South, the old Woodland Management ways, which disappeared after the Second World War, are beginning to start up again. This is great for wildlife and the countryside.

We have various schemes to help wildlife, which I shall list at another time. Suffice to say now, that we have in general been successful and things are well in the Hammer Woods.

Owl-calls echo through the woods;  
dew drips,  
clattering softly on chestnut leaves.  
Pale violet, rose,  
the sky fills with light,  
amethystine.

Venus and the crescent moon  
have given up their sparkle  
to the dawn.

Colour and birdsong  
wash through the hills,  
the dark is over.

***Amaro Bhikkhu***



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## Being Nobody

*Ajahn Sumedho, reflecting on his own training under Luang Por Chah, concludes that what was most significant about the life in the austere forest monastery, with its accomplished master, was its ordinariness.*

The first year that I practised I was on my own and I could get into highly-developed concentrated states of mind, which I really enjoyed. Then I went to Wat Pah Pong, where the emphasis was on the way of life, in accordance with Vinaya discipline and a routine. There one had to go out on alms-round every morning, and do the morning chanting and evening chanting. If you were young and healthy you were expected to go on these very long alms-rounds - they had shorter ones that the old feeble monks could go on. In those days I was very vigorous so I was always going on these long, long alms-rounds and then I'd come back tired, then there would be the meal and then in the afternoon we all had chores to do. It was not possible under those conditions to stay in a concentrated state. Most of the day was taken up by daily life routine.

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Reflecting on life in this human form: it is just like this,  
it's being able to sit peacefully and get up peacefully  
and be content with what you have.

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So I got fed up with all this and went to see Luang Por Chah and said, 'I can't meditate here', and he started laughing at me and telling everyone that, 'Sumedho can't meditate here!' I was seeing meditation as this very special experience that I'd had and quite enjoyed and then Luang Por Chah was obviously pointing to the ordinariness of daily life, the getting up, the alms-rounds, the routine work, the chores: the whole thing was for mindfulness. And he didn't seem at all eager to support me in my desires to have strong sensory deprivation experience by not having to do all these little daily tasks. He didn't seem to go along with that; so I ended up having to conform and learn to meditate in the ordinariness of daily life. And in the long run that has been the most helpful.

It has not always been what I wanted, because one wants the special, one would love to have blazing light and marvelous insights in Technicolor and have incredible bliss and ecstasy and rapture. Not be just happy and calm - but over the moon!

But reflecting on life in this human form: it is just like this, it's being able to sit peacefully and get up peacefully and be content with what you have; it's that which makes our life as a daily experience something that is joyful and not suffering. And this is how most of our life can be lived - you can't live in ecstatic states of rapture and bliss and do the dishes, can you? I used to read about the lives of saints that were so caught up in ecstasies they couldn't do anything on any practical level. Even though the blood would flow from their palms and they could do

feats that the faithful would rush to look at, when it came to anything practical or realistic they were quite incapable.

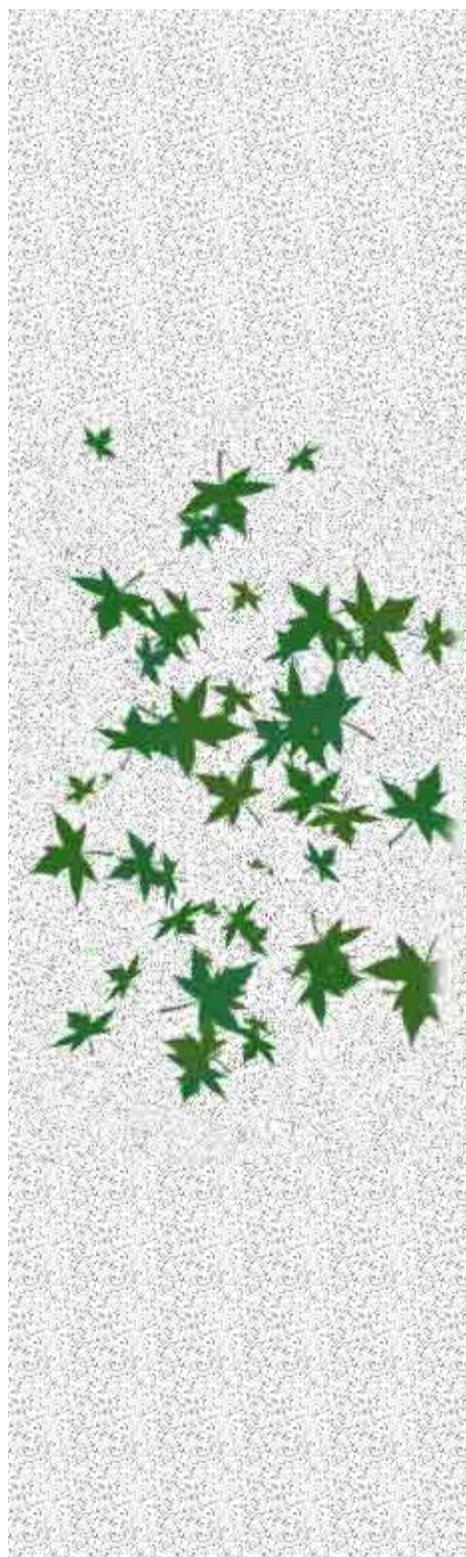
And yet when you contemplate the Vinaya discipline itself, it is a training in being mindful. It's about mindfulness with regard to making robes, collecting alms food, eating food, taking care of your kuti; what to do in this situation or that situation. It's all very practical advice about the daily life of a bhikkhu. An ordinary day in the life of Bhikkhu Sumedho isn't about exploding into rapture, but getting up and going to the toilet and putting on a robe and bathing and doing this or that; it's just about being mindful while one is living in this form and learning to awaken to the way things are, to the Dhamma.

That's why whenever we contemplate cessation we're not looking for the end of the universe but just the exhalation of the breath or the end of the day or the end of the thought or the end of the feeling. To notice that, means that we have to pay attention to the flow of life - we have to really notice the way it is rather than wait for some kind of fantastic experience of marvelous light descending on us, zapping us or whatever.

Now just contemplate the ordinary breathing of your body. You notice when you're inhaling that it's easy to concentrate. When you're filling your lungs you feel a sense of growth and development and strength. When you say somebody's "puffed up" then they're probably inhaling. It's hard to feel puffed up while you're exhaling. Expand your chest and you have a sense of being somebody big and powerful. However, when I first started paying attention to exhaling, my mind would wander; exhaling didn't seem as important as inhaling - you were just doing it so that you could get on to the next inhalation.

Now reflect: one can observe breathing, so what is it that can observe? What is it that observes and knows the inhalation and the exhalation - that's not the breathing, is it? You can also observe the panic that comes if you want to catch a breath and you can't; but the observer, that which knows, is not an emotion, not panic-stricken, is not an exhalation or an inhalation. So our refuge in Buddha is being that knowing; being the witness rather than the emotion or the breath or the body.

This way you begin to see a way of being mindful, of bringing mindfulness to the ordinary routine things and experiences of life. I have a nice little picture in my room that I'm very fond of - of this old man with a coffee mug in his hand, looking out of the window into an English garden with the rain coming down. The title of the picture is 'Waiting'. That's how I think of myself; an old man with my coffee mug sitting there at the window, waiting, waiting.. watching the rain or the sun or whatever. I don't find that a depressing image but rather a peaceful one. This life is just about waiting isn't it? We're waiting all the time - this experience of waiting. So we notice that. We're not waiting for anything, but we can be just waiting. And



then we respond to the things of life, to the time of day, the duties, the way things move and change, the society we are in. That response isn't from the force of habits of greed, hatred and delusion but it's a response of wisdom and mindfulness.



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## Why Are We Here?

*A talk given at the remote Turn Saeng Pet Forest Monastery, North-east Thailand, in September, 1981. This talk was one of the very last that Luang Por gave before he lost the ability to speak.*

Today all of you - both lay people and monks - have come to offer flowers as an act of reverence. Making offerings to, and showing respect towards our seniors is very auspicious. This Rains Retreat I don't have much energy; I am not well, so I have come up to this mountain to get some fresh air for the Rains. People come to visit, but I can't really receive them like I used to because my voice has just about had it and my breath is nearly finished. You can count it as a blessing that there is still this body to sit here for all of you to see now. This is a blessing in itself. Soon you won't see it. The breath will be finished, the voice will be gone. They go according to the supporting factors of all compounded things. As the Lord Buddha called it, KHAYA VAYAM, the decline and fall of all conditioned phenomena.

How do they decline? We can compare this to a lump of ice. Originally it was simply water; they freeze it and it becomes ice. But it doesn't last many days and it's melted. Take a big lump of ice, say about as big as this tape-recorder here, and leave it out in the sun. You can watch the decline of this lump of ice, much the same as this body. It will gradually melt. In not many minutes or hours the lump of ice is gone, melted into water. This is called KHAYA VAYAM, the decline and cessation of all compounded things. It's been like this for a long time now, ever since the beginning of time. When we are born we bring this inherent nature with us: we can't avoid it. On being born we bring old age, sickness and death with us.

So this is why the Buddha spoke of KHAYA VAYAM, the decline and cessation of all compounded things. All of us sitting in this hall here, without exception - laymen, lay women, monks and novices - are simply 'lumps of decline'. Right now the lump is hard, just like the lump of ice which was previously water. It becomes a lump of ice and then it melts again. Can you see its decline? Look at it. This body of ours is declining every day; the hair is aging, nails are aging. Everything is declining.

You probably weren't like this before, were you? You were probably much smaller than this. Now you have grown and matured. From now on you will decline, following the way of nature. One declines just like the lump of ice. Soon it's all gone: the lump of ice becomes water. Our body is like this. All bodies are made up of the elements of earth, water, wind and fire. When there's a body the four elements of earth, water, wind and fire come together, and we call that a 'person'. Originally it's hard to say what you'd call it, but now we call it a 'person'. We get elated over it, saying that's a male person, this is a female person; we give them names - Mr. This and Miss That - so that we can identify each other and perform our functions more conveniently. But actually there isn't really anybody there. There's earth, water, wind and fire. When these are all brought together as a body we call that a 'person'. Now don't get all excited over it. If you

really look into it there isn't anyone there.

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They're so busy looking at other things that they never see themselves. To be honest, people are really pitiful. They have no refuge.

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That which is solid is the body - the flesh, skin, bones and so on - is called earth. Those aspects of the body which are liquid are the water element. The aspect of warmth in the body is called fire and the winds coming and going throughout the body are called wind.

At Wat Pah Pong we have a body which is neither male nor female. It's a dead body from which all the flesh has been removed, leaving only the bones. It's the skeleton which hangs in the main hall. Looking at it one can't tell if it's a man or a woman. People ask whether it's a man or woman, and all they can do is look blankly at each other because it's only a skeleton. All the skin and flesh are gone.

People are ignorant of this. They go to Wat Pah Pong, go into the main hall and see the skeletons . . . some people can't bear to look: they run outside again. They're afraid . . . afraid of themselves! I figure these people have never seen themselves before. Afraid of the skeletons . . . they don't reflect on the great value of the skeleton. In order to get here they had to ride in a car and walk ... if they didn't have bones how would it be? Would they be able to walk about? They sit in their cars and go to Wat Pah Pong, walk into the hall, see the skeletons and run straight back out again! They've never seen such a thing before. They're born with it and yet they've never seen it. They sleep in the same bed with it yet they've never seen it. It's really fortunate that they have a chance to see it now. Older people, 50, 60, or 70 years old, see the skeletons and get scared. What's the fuss about? This shows that they are not at all in touch with themselves, they don't really know themselves. Getting home they can't sleep for three or even four days and yet they're sleeping with a skeleton, nothing else! They get dressed with it, eat food with it, do everything with it... and yet they're scared of it. This shows that people are really way out of touch with themselves. How pitiful! They're always looking outside, looking at trees, looking at other things, saying this is big, that's small, this is long, that's short. They're so busy looking at other things that they never see themselves. To be honest, people are really pitiful. They have no refuge.

When I conduct ordination ceremonies the ordinands must learn the five basic meditation objects: kesa (hair of the head), loma (hair of the body), nakha (nails), danta (teeth) and taco (skin). Students and learned people probably snigger to themselves when they hear this: 'What's Tahn Ajahn trying to teach us here? Teaching us about hair when we've had it for ages. He doesn't have to teach us that. We know about it already. Why bother teaching us something we already know?' People who are really dim are like this, they think they can see hair already. I tell them that when I say 'to see the hair' it means to see it as it really is. See body hair as it really is; see nails, skin and teeth as they truly are. That's what I call 'seeing'. It doesn't mean just seeing in a superficial way, but to see according to the truth. We probably wouldn't be so sunk up to the ears in this world if we could see things as they really are. Hair, nails, teeth, skin . . . what are they really like? Are they pretty? Are they clean? Do they have any real essence? Are they stable?

No . . . there's nothing to them. They're not pretty but we imagine them to be so. They're not substantial but we imagine them to be so.

Hair, nails, teeth, skin . . . people are really hooked on these things. The Buddha laid these down as the basic objects for meditation. He taught us to know these five things. They are impermanent, imperfect and devoid of self; they are not 'us' or 'them'. We are born with these things and become deluded by them, but they are in truth foul things. Suppose we didn't bathe for a few days, could we bear to be close to each other? We'd really smell bad. When we sweat a lot, such as when working hard together, it really stinks. We go back home and rub ourselves down with soap and the smell abates somewhat; the fragrance of the soap replaces it. Rubbing soap on the body may make it seem fragrant but actually the bad smell of the body is still there, dormant. The smell of the soap just covers it up. When the soap is all gone the smell comes back as before.



Now we tend to think that these bodies here are pretty, delightful, solid and strong. We tend to think that we will never age, get sick or die. We are deluded and charmed by the body so we don't know how to find the real refuge within ourselves. The true place of refuge is the mind. The mind is one's true refuge. This hall here may be big but it's not a true refuge. It's simply a temporary shelter. Pigeons take shelter here, geckoes take shelter here, skunks take shelter here. Anything may come and take shelter here. We may think it belongs to us but it doesn't. We live here together with the rats and everything else. This is called a 'temporary shelter'. Soon we must leave it. People tend to take these shelters as a refuge. Those who have small houses are unhappy because their houses are too small, but those who have big houses are unhappy because they're impossible to keep clean. In the morning they complain, in the evening they complain. . . . People take things and leave them around, never putting them away.. . the lady of the house ends up having a nervous breakdown!

Therefore the Buddha said to find your refuge. That means to find your real heart. This heart is really important. People mostly don't look at the important things, they spend all their time looking at unimportant things. For example, when they sweep the house, wash the dishes and so on, they're aiming for cleanliness. They wash the dishes to clean them, they want to clean everything . . . but they fail to see that their own hearts are not very clean. This is called 'needing a refuge but taking only a temporary shelter. They beautify house and home, beautify this and that, but they don't think of beautifying their own hearts. They don't examine suffering. This heart is therefore the important thing. The Buddha urged us to find a refuge in

our own hearts: attahi attano natho - 'Make yourself a refuge unto yourself'. Who else can be one's refuge? That which is the true refuge is our own heart, nothing else. One may try to depend on other things but they aren't a sure thing. One can only depend on other things if one already has a refuge within oneself. We must have a refuge first. Before we can depend on a teacher, depend on family, friends or relatives, one must first make oneself into a refuge.

So today, both the lay people and monks who have come to visit and pay respects, please take this instruction and contemplate it. Ask yourselves: 'Who am I? Why am I here?' Ask yourselves often, 'Why was I born?' Some people don't know. They want to be happy but the suffering never stops. Rich or poor they suffer. Young or old they still suffer. It's all suffering. And why? Because they don't have any wisdom. If they're poor they're unhappy because they're poor; if they're rich they're unhappy because they're rich, there's too much to look after. In the past, when I was a boy novice, I was once asked to give a Dhamma talk. I talked about the wealth of having servants. Let's say one had a hundred servants . . . say, a hundred male servants, a hundred female servants, a hundred elephants, a hundred cows, a hundred buffaloes. . . . a hundred of everything! People really lapped it up. But would you like to look after a hundred buffaloes? Say you had a hundred buffaloes, a hundred cows, a hundred male and a hundred female servants, and you had to look after all of them yourself. Would that be fun? People don't think of that. They only have the desire to have . . . to have the cows, the buffaloes, the elephants, the servants . . . hundreds of them. That's worth listening to. . . . Ah, makes you feel really good, doesn't it? But, say, fifty buffaloes would be already too much. Just twining the rope for all those brutes would be too much! But people don't think of this. They only think of acquiring but they don't think of the trouble involved.

If we don't have wisdom everything within us will be a cause for suffering. If we have wisdom it will lead us out of suffering. Eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, mind. . . . The eyes aren't necessarily good things, you know. If our heart is not good, just seeing other people can make us angry and ruin our sleep. We may see other people and fall in love with them; that kind of love is suffering too, if one doesn't get what one wants. Aversion is suffering and attraction is also suffering, because of one's desire. Wanting is suffering, not wanting is suffering; the things we don't like, we want to get rid of. We want to acquire those things that we like but even if we get them it's still suffering.., afraid that we shall lose them. There is only suffering. How is one to live?

Therefore all of you should take a look at yourselves. Why were we born? Have we ever really gotten anything? I've asked various elderly people, eighty years and over, simple farmers. In the countryside here people start planting rice right from childhood. When they reach 17 or 18 they hurry to get married because they're afraid they won't have enough time to get rich. So they start working from an early age thinking they'll get rich that way. They grow rice until they're 70, 80 or even 90. When they come to hear a talk I ask them, 'From the day you were born until now you've been working. Now it's almost time to go, have you got anything to take with you?' They don't know what to say. All they can say is: 'Beats me! Beats me!' We have a saying in these parts, 'Don't waste your time picking berries along the way. Before you know it, night falls'. Just because of this 'beats me!' They're neither here nor there, content with just a 'beats me!' Sitting among the branches gorging themselves with berries. . . . 'Beats me! Beats me!'

When you're still young you think that being single is no good, if you find a partner you'll be better off. So you find a partner to live with. But if you put two things together they collide! Living alone is too quiet, one feels lonely, but living with makes for friction... clunk! clunk! clunk!

When the children are born and they're still small the parents think, 'When they get bigger we'll be all right'. So they raise their children, three, four, or five of them, thinking that when

the children are grown they'll be better off. But when they grow up it's even heavier. It's like two pieces of wood, one small and the other big. You throw away the small one and take the big one thinking it will be lighter but of course it's heavier. When children are small they don't bother you very much really - just a ball of rice and a banana now and then. When they grow up they start asking for a motor-cycle or a car. Well, you love your children, you can't refuse, so you try to give them what they want. Problems. Sometimes the father and mother argue: 'Don't go and buy him a car, we haven't got enough money!' But when you love your children you have to borrow the money from somewhere. Sometimes you may even have to go without food to do so. Then there's education. 'When he's finished his studies we'll be all right'. There's no end to the studying! What's he going to finish? There's no end to it. Only in the science of Buddhism is there an end to the studying; all other sciences just go round in circles. In the end it's just a headache. If there's a house where four or five children are studying at once, the parents argue every day.

The suffering that is imminent in the future we fail to see; we think it'll never happen. When it arises, then we know. That kind of suffering, the suffering inherent in our bodies, is hard to foresee. When I was a child, minding the buffaloes and cows, I'd take charcoal and rub it on my teeth to make them white. I was just getting charmed by my own bones, that's all. When I reached 50-60 years' old, my teeth started to get loose. When the teeth start falling out you want to cry, it hurts so much. When you eat, the tears start falling - you feel as if you're being kicked in the mouth. The teeth really ache, it's a lot of suffering and pain. I've been through this already. I just got the dentist to take them all out. Now I've got false teeth. They were giving me so much trouble that I had them taken out, sixteen in one go. The dentist was reluctant to take out sixteen teeth at once, so I said, 'Doctor, just take them out, I'll take the consequences.' So he took them all out at once. Some were still good too, at least five of them. Took them all out. But it was really touch and go. After taking them out I couldn't eat for two or three days.

Before, when I was a child minding the buffaloes, I used to think that polishing the teeth was really good. I loved my teeth. I thought they were good things but in the end they had to go. The pain almost killed me. I had toothache for months, years. Sometimes both my gums were swollen at once. You may all have a chance to experience this for yourselves someday. Those of you whose teeth are still good, brushing them constantly to keep them nice and white - watch out! Watch out they don't start acting up on you later on. Now, I'm just letting you know. You may meet up with this yourselves someday - the suffering that arises within us, the suffering within our own bodies. There's nothing in the body which one can depend on. But it's a bit better when you are still young. As one gets older things begin to break down. Everything begins to fall apart. The sankharas (compounded phenomena) go their natural way. Whether we cry or laugh they just go on their way. However we feel about it they go their own way regardless. Whether we're in pain or distress, whether we live or die, they just go on like that. There's no knowledge or science which can prevent this. You get a dentist to look at your teeth; even if he can fix them they eventually go on their way. Eventually even the dentist has the same trouble, he can't do any more. Everything falls apart in the end.

These are things we should contemplate with a sense of urgency while we still have some vigour, we should start to practice. If you want to make merit then hurry up and make it. But most people just leave it up to the oldies. People wait till they get old before they go to the monastery to study Dhamma. Women and men are the same: 'Wait till I get old first.' I don't know what they're thinking of. Does an old person have any energy? Try racing with a young person and find out. Why must they leave it till they're old? Just like they were never going to die. When they reach 50 or 60 years: 'Hey Grandma! Let's go to the monastery.' 'Oh, my ears aren't so good any more!' You see? When her ears were good what was she listening to? 'Beats me!' Just dallying with the berries. Finally when her ears are gone she goes to the temple. It's hopeless. She listens to the sermon but hasn't a clue what he's saying. People wait

till they're all used up before they'll think of practising.

In the past my legs could run. Now just walking around they feel heavy. Before, my legs carried me; now I have to carry them. When I was a child I'd see old people getting up from their seats, 'oooy!', sitting down, 'oooy!' Even when it gets to this stage they still don't learn. Sitting down they moan 'oy!', getting up they groan, 'oy!' There's always this 'oy'. But they don't know what it is that makes them groan like that. There's only the 'oy . . . oy . . .

Even when it gets to this extent people still don't see the bane of the body. We never know when we're going to be parted from it. That which is causing all the pain is simply the sankharas going their natural way. People think it's rheumatism, arthritis, gout and so on. The doctor comes and gives you some medicine, but it never really goes. In the end it all falls apart, even the doctor! This is the sankharas declining according to their nature. That is their way, that is their nature.

So therefore, brothers and sisters, take a look at this. If you see it in advance you'll be okay, like seeing a poisonous snake which lies ahead of us. If we see it first, then we can get out of the way and it won't bite us. If we don't see it we go walking right on and step on it. And then it bites. Then, if suffering arises we don't know who to go to. Where will you go to treat it? People only want not to have suffering. They want to be without suffering but they don't know the way to treat it when it arises. And they live on like this until they get old . . . and get sick . . . and die.

In olden times people used to say that when someone was mortally ill, lying on his death bed, then one of his next-of-kin should quietly go up to him and whisper in his ear, 'BUDDHO, BUDDHO'. What's he going to do with 'BUDDHO'?

When they're almost on the funeral pyre what good is 'BUDDHO' going to be for them then? When they were young and active why didn't they learn 'BUDDHA' then? Now with the breath coming in fitful gasps you say, Mother, mother! . . . BUDDHO BUDDHO.' Why waste your time? Don't bother, you'll only confuse her: let her go peacefully.

People just like the beginnings and endings. The middle they don't really bother with. That's the way they are. All of us are like that, lay people, monks, novices. . . they don't know how to solve problems within their own hearts. They don't know their refuge. So they get angry easily, have a lot of desires. Why is this? They have no refuge in the heart.

Married couples, when they're still young and healthy, can bear to talk to each other somewhat. But after 50 or so years they can't understand each other. The wife speaks and the husband can't endure it. The husband speaks and the wife won't listen. So they turn their backs on each other. One favours the son, one favours the daughter, there's no harmony.

Now I'm just saying this: actually I've never had a family. And why haven't I ever had a household? Because just looking at these words 'house hold', I knew what it was all about. What is a household? This is a 'hold': if we're just sitting here comfortably and then somebody gets something and surrounds us with it, what's that like? Sitting normally is bearable, but if we box ourselves in with something, that's called 'being held'. Whatever that's like, 'holding' is like that. There is a 'confining ring'. When I read this word 'household' . . . oh! it's a heavy one. The word is no trifling matter, it's a real killer. The word 'hold' is a word of suffering. One can't go anywhere, got to stay in ones ring of confinement.

It's due to this word that I became a monk and didn't disrobe. 'Household' is frightening. One is stuck and can't go anywhere. Problems with the children, with money and all the rest, but where can one go? One is tied down. There are sons and daughters - arguments galore until one's dying day and there's nowhere else to go, no matter how much suffering it is. The tears

pour out and they go right on pouring. The tears are never finished with this 'household', you know. If there's no household then maybe one can be done with the tears but otherwise it's just about impossible to find an end to them.

Let all of you consider this. If you haven't come across it yet you may later on. Some people may have experienced it already to some extent. Some are already at the end of their tether: 'Will I stay or will I go?'

At Wat Pah Pong there are about 70 or 80 huts. Sometimes when they are almost full I say, 'Keep some aside. Maybe some husband or wife will have an argument and come looking for a place to stay.' Sure enough, here they come! A lady arrives with her bags. I ask, 'Where are you from?' 'I've come to pay respects, Luang Por. I'm fed-up with the world.' 'Whoa! don't say that! I'm really scared of that one!' Then the husband comes and says he's fed-up too. They stay two or three days in the monastery and then their world-weariness disappears. The lady says she's fed-up - she's just fooling herself. The man says he's fed-up . . . fooling himself. They go and sit alone in separate huts, in the quiet, on their own, thinking: 'When's the wife going to come and ask me to go home?' 'When's Hubby going to come and take me home?' There! They don't really know what's going on. What is this 'being fed-up' of theirs? They get angry and frustrated and so run to the monastery. When they were at home, they could only see what was wrong with everything else: the husband is all wrong, the wife is all wrong. After three days of thinking, it's: 'Oh, the wife was right after all, it was I who was wrong.' 'Hubby was right, I was wrong.' They change sides like this. This is how it is, so I don't take the world too seriously. I know it's ins and outs already so I've chosen to live as a monk.

When you are in the fields or doing the garden take these words and consider them. ... 'Why was I born? What can I take with me?' Ask yourselves over and over. One who asks like this often will become wise. Those who don't consider it will remain ignorant.

You may listen to today's talk and then understand it when you get home - perhaps this evening or in no long time - it happens every day. When listening to a Dhamma talk all is subdued but maybe things are waiting for you at the car. Or when you get in the car and 'it' gets in with you. When you get home it becomes clear, 'Oh, Luang Por had something there. I couldn't see it before. All right, I think that will be enough for today. If I talk too much this old body gets tired.



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## Santacittarama

Dhamma greetings from Santacittarama, the Vihara in Italy. As the cold winter winds are bracing the bare hills of Sezze, our community, only two at the moment, is getting ready for the winter retreat. Now the heat of summer months are only a memory, although the sun is still mercifully warming up the days after the long frosty nights.

Luang Por Sumedho enjoyed his time with us, and brightened our minds once again with the light of Dhamma. The retreat in Rome organised by the A.M.E.C.O. group ('association for meditative awareness founded by Prof. Corrado Pensa) was well attended, with Luang Por in great form, although he had to teach sitting in a wheelchair, having broken his leg in Hamburg, on his way to Italy. While we were in Rome we were also able to bring to completion the legal founding of the 'Santacittarama association', receiving from Mr. & Mrs. Piga the generous donation of the Vihara building.

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The past year's experience has provided us with wise reflections for the furthering of our practice and Dhamma activities.

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Our activities are well supported by the interest of many groups and individuals. In 1992 I will continue teaching weekly meditation classes for beginners, as well as further ten-day meditation courses and lectures. The presence of Theravada monks in Italy has enriched the spectrum of the Buddha's teachings, and our laity has benefited from the visits of some of our elders from Sri Lanka and Thailand.

The support and growth of Buddhism in Italy has culminated in the legal recognition of the 'U.B.I' (Buddhist Union of Italy) as well as the Maitreya Foundation (for the propagation of Buddhist culture, of both of which I am a representative member. In the month of March we should start the much needed renovation of the foundations of the Vihara building, and if fund raising efforts will cover the costs, we plan also to extend our guest facilities to accommodate both men and women practitioners, and convert a large room into the main Shrine and Meditation room.

All in all we could say the past year's experience has provided us with wise reflections for the furthering of our practice and Dhamma activities.

Yours in the Dhamma

*Thanavaro Bhikkhu*

## Angulimala's Song

I am hungry yes my hands are burning  
Shaking still my heart is full  
But look at these hands, Sir, the fingernails are  
clean

These days I spend my time learning how to sit  
I have spent half my life afraid  
I have raged like a bull which has no master  
I have drunk from a thousand rivers  
But still I could not quench this thirst

How many times I have felt strong  
The strength of a hundred men  
But when it came to it  
I myself could not stay this hand

I have followed this mind like a child follows its  
father  
Over a million miles I have wandered  
What else could I do? It was the only way I knew  
Then one day I got tired of running  
And your voice came as clear and still as mountain  
air  
What could I do but respond?

Outside, the children press their faces up against  
the window  
In the streets they throw stones, I hear their  
laughter and their song  
And I laugh too - their song is good

I'm glad I have stopped running  
For in my dreams I stumble on  
I who thought I understood so much in one fell  
vision  
Who now knows nothing have wanted to hear your  
voice again  
But nothing comes. Silent I learn to listen inwardly.  
I sit up straight and wait.



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## Brightness

*From a Dhamma talk given to the community at Amaravati by Ajahn Sucitto during the Winter Monastic Retreat, 1990*

We long for brightness of mind and brightness of the heart. These are attractive qualities that are sometimes difficult to find in contemplative life. Normally, of course, brightness and lightness of heart and clarity are associated with things that we can get high with - singing, dancing, dressing up to look attractive, or intellectual stimulation. Our renunciant life isn't so interesting; it doesn't have such powerful stimulation in it, so the mind can get really dull and dreary. Yet the brightness of the Buddha, the brightness of the awakened mind, is far more radiant than the brightness of the people in the advertisements on TV, or singing, dancing, looking glamorous or having brilliant ideas. We call the brightness of the awakened mind 'unconditioned' because it's not conditioned by the situation, experience, time, place, age, sickness, health and so on. The possibility of Buddhist practice is to experience a brightness, a radiance that's not just dependent upon circumstances and conditions.

This Dhamma and training is not based upon attachment to conditioned things but on the renunciation of hankering and longing for things in the world - for situations, for being influential, for having fine material things and so on. We put these aside. We may use such influence and possessions that we have skillfully, but we don't base our lives on them. However, the mind remains preoccupied with conditions because of our instinctive nature to seek objects, any objects: the fundamental conditioning process is of attachment to an object. When we have beautiful, pleasant things we feel beautiful and pleasant; interesting things, we feel interested; and so there is that instinctive movement towards some sort of object or another.

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Mindful attention tends towards the unconditioned because it's not being conditioned by what we are doing or by the mood we're in. It operates independently...

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When we meditate, we are inclining towards things that may be calm, but they are not necessarily bright. After a while, many of the meditation objects, such as the breath, seem rather dreary; at best, they give us calm, if we have fine concentration. The breath is something that we don't normally associate with as an object of attention; it doesn't have the graspable successes and pleasures that we can get out of thinking or doing things. Then again, the highs we can derive from activities are cut back in monastic life: much of one's training is in cultivating restraint with regards to activities and speech. We prune them, in order to use them upon what needs to be done, so that our energies are reined in and directed. We do this not because activities are by themselves harmful, but because we tend to attach to them. Then there is no unconditioned life in our responses, they are conditioned in worldly ways.

Going forth, the holy life, is essentially a life of faith in which we don't hold on. We give ourselves; we offer to serve, we go forth - and because of that, we are uplifted. We are willing to take up the training. We take up the burden of dependence. This is very important for development in the holy life. If that going forth and giving is not constantly remembered and refreshed, there is no uplift. We just lodge and gradually drift and flounder until we sink into a stagnant state or a whirlpool.

Whether sitting in meditation or chanting, or attending to the simple things that we do in the monastery, we try to keep that quality of trained attention clear. That's where we get brightness of mind. We can say that mindful attention tends towards the unconditioned because it's not being conditioned by what we are doing or by the mood we're in. It operates independently, entailing a rising up and an application - more through a positive attitude of mind than through a great deal of effort.

In the teaching on mindfulness of breathing - Anapanasati Sutta [Middle Length Sayings, 118]- the Buddha asks us to attend to what is conditioning the mind, then to steady the mind, so that the perceptions are not running out of control and we are able to notice what is in the mind. Then, from that, gladdening the mind, concentrating the mind, freeing the mind - this is the sequence.

So to brighten the mind, first of all, we have to really experience what is occupying and affecting it, not in a passive way whereby we just get dumped upon by the mind's moods but actually going forward to open up to some of the mind's kamma; the passions or the moodiness of it.

The Satipatthana Sutta [Long Discourses, 22] encourages us to know that the mind with greed is the mind with greed, the mind with fear is the mind with fear, the mind with joy is the mind with joy. This is insight. Being with greed is an accurate insightful description because the mind itself is not greed, hatred or delusion. The mind is not actually any object or state. The mind is by its nature bright, radiant, knowing. What we call 'mind' is the function of knowing and recognition. These are the fundamentals of mind. Greed is not mind, worry is not mind, fear is not mind - these are mind-objects or mind-states that visit and accompany mind when it is unfulfilled by awareness.

So the mind can be associated with these things, visited and pestered by them. It is only when we get right up close to them, putting aside the sadness, the hankering and the covetousness that comes from wanting to be or have a particular mind-state that we notice the knowing of these things. We can know the complaining of the mind.

This life, as we all know, is frustrating to our feelings and perceptions. We don't get what we



want, things do not go according to our feelings and perceptions. And we can complain about it or feel dislocated by it, but actually, it must be that way. There is nothing really wrong, but it is this very rubbing against our feelings, perceptions and assumptions of what is convenient, comfortable or normal that brings us to realise the mind which is beyond feeling and perception. That is why we undertake this training - we can't just learn transcendence through an effort of the will. We have to train our whole life to work around to it: to do things independently of feelings and perceptions. In this way we find a mind that can operate independently of objects.

The Anapanasati Sutta talks about contemplating impermanence, dispassion, and cessation - cessation of the grasping that is the foundation of 'self'. In this teaching, freedom from conditions is based upon being able to understand, and witness conditions as impermanent, and to experience dispassion and the cessation of identification with them. Now when we are looking at the conditions of the mind - whether they are vigorous or dull - these three signs become very important. By applying them we realise the brightness that is the faculty of awareness independent of conditions. You could say that this brightness is right at the beginning of the Path, whether your mind is tranquil or not.

What obstructs this natural brightness of mind is the grasping at mind objects. When meditation seems to 'go well', when it's not just hours of backache and drivel, it gets to be really pleasing. Then there is tranquillity and some of the rapture - after many years of struggling with the gnashing of mental states, they settle down and the mind starts to purr - then you really want to hold the mind and stroke it forever.

This is when the defilements of insight arise - things like joy, happiness, determination, energy, and knowledge. These are called the defilements of insight - not because there is anything intrinsically wrong with them, but because of the tendency to hang onto them as objects. They are blameless objects, hard-won objects, but still objects. And on the other hand there are the times when you find your mind has to be full of unpleasing objects, like making decisions, figuring things out, resolving problems and soon. But all objects are impermanent things that that one has to recognise with dispassion: much as one would like to be some of them and have them forever, they are not self.

Another sign which is mentioned in the Anapanasati Sutta is abandonment. This abandonment is a cultivation of self-relinquishment, where, having dispelled the influence of the five hindrances, we can be equanimous with whatever mind-objects the world brings. We don't identify with, approve or reject mind-objects. This is different from the cultivation of tranquillity, which can lead to a sense of attachment to peaceful states of mind. With tranquillity you don't have complete freedom; there is always the possibility of being disturbed by things changing. And things are always changing - especially when you live a homeless life.

Living as a samana in relationship to the world, dependent upon and available to all kinds of people, means that there are a multitude of mind-objects coming in. So even without our own obsessive mind-objects there are other people and external situations to respond to. Then abandonment is the ability to relinquish that sense of distaste for mind-objects, the preference for some over others, or the need to create them.

So in insight we aim for the most complete freedom; and for this we cultivate the recognition of impermanence, dispassion, cessation, and abandonment. We cultivate those as modes of being, as ways to work with body-mind as it is now, with this experience. So we are feeling, rather than clinging to the quality of the feeling, be it pleasant or unpleasant, whether we approve of it or not. We focus in this way so that we can step back from the aversion or the fascination, and open our attitudes towards our experience.

These cultivations can bear great fruit in our life, as they bring about a kind of selflessness, a humility that makes us available to deal with whatever conditions come up. Not out of a sense of dogged duty but because we gradually realise that whenever we rise up to conditions we feel this sense of uplift. Even if it is just doing the washing up, we feel this definite movement in the mind - it is not just 'O.K.' or 'I can't get out of it' or even 'Well, I suppose I ought to', but a real inclination towards objects, an uplifting from the heart.

We find then that brightness can arise from any object. The mind can be trained to notice things that the ephemeral surface of things is flickering. It all seems intensely personal but actually covers a universal truth, a stillness that we can experience. Herein is the brilliance of the mind, released from the khandhas, from perceptions and feelings, and from the memories and habits that we assume constitute the 'real world'.

It is wonderful how the world changes when we move towards it. When we open awareness towards beings as they are rather than cling to our perceptions of personalities with desire, insecurity or jealousy, we see in people a universal quality. This is the awareness of 'Sangha', of that in humanity which inclines towards goodness, towards gentleness, and towards truth.

Initially as a meditator much of my drive in meditation practice was to want to get away from it all. But in training as a bhikkhu, strangely enough, there has been a going towards those very situations that bring up my instinctive wish to get away. And in going towards, in abandoning self, I found that I could go towards what is beautiful, to where the perceptions and the assumptions and the habits cease. There, a great sense of warmth, vibrancy and vitality arises. And with that, the whole situation changes.

During my last year at the Buddhist Society Summer School I found that I really enjoyed it, whereas when I first went there I used to dislike; all that chit chat, sitting around talking about Dante and Plato and drinking tea. I wanted to be doing the real practice - to be still, to sit up straight and lock into samadhi.

I used to go with Ajahn Sumedho, and I would get disappointed because he would be quite happy talking to people. He was totally at ease with it all, but I would be thinking, 'Oh, come on, let's get out, I'm restless, let's get into something serious.'

Then I discovered over the years of going forth to conditions that I lost that ugly feeling in the mind; and for the last couple of years I've really enjoyed it. I can now chat, drink tea, wander round looking at roses and flowers and feel totally at ease with it all.

It's because the most dependable brightness of the mind is not that of conditions but of the attitude that you bear towards conditions. The mind can go forward towards things, not out of greed but in the spirit of abandonment of one's views. Then I've found a kind of brightness and a lovely quality behind everything. All the conditions arise supported by and lead into an unconditioned, something that is always bright and beautiful in life.

So it seems to me that the experiences of contemplative life are a kind of test, because as you get through one experience, then sooner or later something comes up that you haven't quite resolved your feelings about. You think, 'Oh, I don't like that.' You think that the unpleasantness you experience is caused by people or things out there; and that it shouldn't be

that way. After a while you begin to realise that the pain is because of your own perception and view.

The objects, the successes and failures are impermanent and can cease. Grasping can be abandoned. Life will always be unsatisfactory as long as one doesn't see the mind as distinct from its states, moods and feelings. And to see that one needs faith and the willingness to go towards objects, towards the negative; to embrace and even rejoice in the quality of being aware of the dreariness of mental states.

And you'll be surprised how that act of faith, that real going forth will melt these seemingly dense mind states that we become encumbered with.

So I offer this for your reflection.



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## EDITORIAL

### Staying Alive

Much of the content of this Newsletter speaks for itself: accounts of the passing away of a master of the Dhamma, and tributes that honour him with wise reflection on his life and his teachings. How fine that wisdom is that knows, while bowing in gratitude and deep respect, that the true quality of the master is not born and does not pass away!

Nor can it be defined as ultimately his. If it was, it couldn't be taught; it wouldn't be Dhamma. Then reverence for the special quality of a teacher could actually become an excuse for the disciple not to fulfill the teaching. However, as the Buddha said before his own passing away, it is in sustaining the Dhamma in the testing ground of this world that we pay the highest homage to the teacher.

Luang Por Chah drove people to come alive from the near-death, the stillbirth of delusion, to the life of the Dhamma which is called the Deathless. And he did that in many ways to many people. Now there are over one hundred monasteries founded in his name that thousands of monastic and lay disciples can make use of. Naturally it was impossible for Luang Por himself to be present at all of these; so one of his most significant gifts has been the establishment of a style and training that would carry out his teaching. This kind of education takes place in the dynamic of situations: in the monasteries a strong sense of Sangha was always a basic ingredient, and an austere lifestyle - such fundamentals placed communal responsibility and personal resilience at the heart of the practice. Then, the refinement of behaviour and the hardiness needed for forest life; the solitude of the forest and the populous melee of the festival days and Sangha functions; the effects of rousing exhortations and energy-sapping heat - always accompanied by the reminder to patiently endure - these created the crucible for the alchemy of the noble birth. The Master, benevolent, human and super-human, was the example of the fruit of the practice that kept the heart alive through those trials, until, for some, there was indeed a precious coming alive.

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Coming alive to Dhamma entails a struggle like that of awakening from a drugged sleep, or carrying a heavy load to a place of rest; it's like the pangs of birth, accompanied by the same sense of urgency. But then there is the long test of staying alive: something learned not through a moment of insight, nor through the dropping away of frustration, doubt or impatience, but through the arising of the faith and compassion to bear with conventional life for the welfare of others. Something in us could choose to escape from the responsibilities of training problematic beginners, from attending to the daily round of the same old chanting, chores and the influx of visitors whose only interest might be to ask for a good luck token or take a few photographs.

When the 'great insights' have happened, who wants to live with a heart attentive to this plane of existence? Whose Dhamma can stay alive through the inevitable complaining of the world, the disappointments of disciples going astray and the going nowhere-ness of samsara? Staying alive is as tough as being born. Even the sense of progress, personal or collective, has to be abandoned. That's what it comes down to, when the major work projects are completed, the new ideas have become old established views, and the youthful energies start to wane.

So I think of the last decade Luang Por Chah's life as a reflection on what it takes to stay alive. Some people criticised the Sangha for holding the Master to a degraded level of physical existence for so long (neat judgements are dangerously attractive!). However, the practice of nursing his paralysed body never lacked for volunteers and created a situation for tremendous devotion, patience, and mindfulness. Such grand-heartedness is exactly what is needed to bring the True Life into this conditioned realm. Moreover the results of that quality of practice transcend the decay of the world: whenever we use conditions to keep the Dhamma alive, however unsatisfactory they may be, there is a mind that doesn't complain, and a heart that is willing to give of itself. We can abide peacefully in this outrageous realm of birth and death. There, surely, is the place of no-abiding to which Luang Por directed us.

*Ajahn Sucitto*

