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Learning and Spirituality

Taken from a talk by Ajahn Sucitto given at the Dhamma School Meditation Weekend, in May 1992.

We want to learn, we have an urge to know, because that knowledge serves as a connection between ourselves and the world, the other-than-self. This need to connect lies behind most of our seeking for knowledge, relationship, ownership and position. To feel unconnected is to feel insecure and unfulfilled.

However, this thirst for knowledge has built-in drawbacks: it may be motivated by a desire for worldly gains, personal prestige or aimless intellectual stimulation. Through such biases the ability to learn is hampered by impatience, competitiveness, anxiety or a general lack of true receptivity. To learn fully, to really connect, we have to return to a state of un-knowing, where our pre-conceptions of 'What's in it for me?' are laid aside. True inquiry can only proceed when we are willing and free to give the attention that is needed, rather than just what we assume is worthwhile. Only then can we fully appreciate both what is in front of us and what is within us.

This free awareness, and the means to cultivate it, are at the heart of Buddhist practice, most significantly the practice of insight meditation. Actually the notion of meditation itself can bring about the same pitfalls of desire as I mentioned before - the love of refined pleasure, the impatience to 'get there' and the inability to attend wisely and respond to what is actually right with us. So it's good to re-align the concept of meditation with reflections on what is needed for true learning, for a real union and 'merging in the Deathless' to happen, rather than an opportunity for self-view to take over more of the free space of the mind.

We may not be without blemish, but surely spirituality
is a basic pre-requisite for anyone's life.

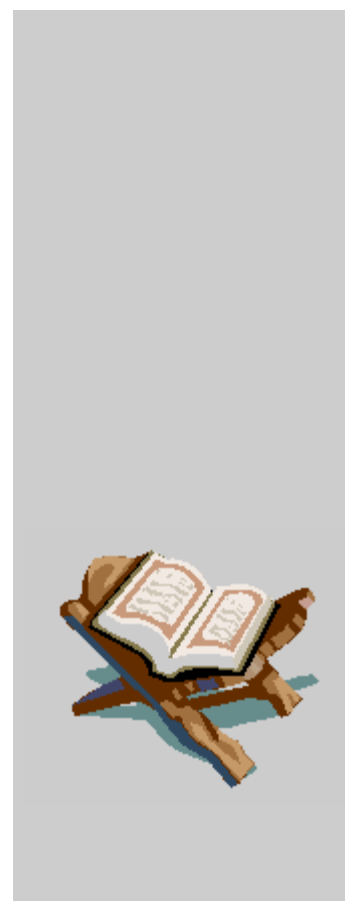
To learn, or to meditate, is not a simple, one-step activity. It is a graduated training in attending, reflecting and responding; it requires the movement of the mind from inquiry rather than fixation onto a particular idea or condition. Such fixation can grant a brief sense of security or conviction, but it also freezes the wisdom faculty and replaces it with will-power. No, true learning has to be a fluid process for the fullness of the mind to come alive and bring its life into what it works with.

We seldom fully recognise the initial stage in learning. We have to start with the sense of the unknown; at the beginning of learning there is uncertainty, and the reaction to that is to try to get knowledge or to see what we want to see. From that beginning, no true learning can occur. In the way of the Buddha, the beginning of learning is an act of faith, of trust and openness, a confidence that can't come from what we know, but from a willingness to let things be unknown. In that unknowing, we can get in touch with our own fundamental awareness; we can appreciate what we are and bring that forth. This side of education has hardly been recognised - we don't come from a position of trust to 'e-ducate' (from the Latin meaning 'to lead out') someone's wisdom, we find ways to stuff our minds full and thereby confirm our essential inadequacy while attempting to assuage its pangs. It's more a matter of getting programmed quickly to avoid self-recriminations or the scorn of others.

To stimulate faith, then, is the spiritual contribution to education. It is the work of affirming ethical norms as qualities that uplift and support our presence of mind and independence from success and failure. One obvious way of stimulating this kind of faith is through presenting (and as much as possible, being!) a living model of harmlessness, kindness and honesty. The primary role of a teacher has to be to serve as a source of faith, being someone who stimulates a pupil's/disciple's self-confidence and exemplifies the benefits of learning. The teachers I learnt best from at school and University were the ones who seemed at ease and interested in me and who seemed to be genuinely brightened and brought alive by their subject. Even in such an apparently 'worldly' context as a Geography or History lesson, one is very much affected by the teacher's spirituality.

Does the term 'spirituality' seem alien to secular activities? Here again, we need to consider how we have defined, and refined almost out of practical existence, such a fundamental quality of the human being. Is it not possible to experience kindness, discernment and a zest for truth in daily life? We may not be without blemish, but surely spirituality is a basic pre-requisite for anyone's life. The sad truth is that we don't commonly think in those terms. For millennia our culture has separated the world from the spirit - heaven and hell are characteristically not on the earth and not related to this life - and spirituality has become a part-time hobby for the leisured, or slightly eccentric few, hedged around by special jargon and systems. This perception is what the Buddhist practice of mindfulness should effectively dispel, but perversely, Buddhists have managed to make mindfulness an esoteric attainment, with Nibbana an inconceivably remote state at the end of it.

I suppose the crunch point for all learning, and why spirituality has become divorced from common parlance, is that we assume that learning has to be a steady smooth success. We're not prepared to learn from mistakes; and spirituality is largely associated with positive states of mind. Hence the split between God and Satan, the spirit and the flesh, or the perceptual difficulties that people have in bringing mindfulness to bear on negative states. Confusion, anxiety and dullness, if not attended to with wisdom and compassion,



destroy our confidence, and the whole possibility of learning is limited. Yet to come to know what we don't know, whether this be through the 'self-inquiry' of insight or in the field of 'external' knowledge, is always going to bring up a certain amount of confusion. It is just there that only true spirituality, a self-abandonment, a willingness to be with that and let things change, will be effective. And honestly being with that which we don't know and haven't got a conceptual framework for is, conversely, the way to induce a spiritual response. It strengthens the heart without the power-control systems of the ego. It's the way a samana learns, by continually going beyond the edge of their knowledge and security.

To encourage that, to 'lead out' someone's wisdom, to bring forth true human beings, is a truer education than simply programming semi-automatons who don't even know that they don't know - who have dismissed the quickness and beauty of the mind as unproductive or unsafe. Surely it's better that we live honestly with unfulfilled alertness than stuff down borrowed knowledge to feel we're part of the right team. Even if the knowledge is true, it's not real if we haven't learnt it by taking it into ourself and working with it. We haven't made the real connection that will help us to realise our innate wisdom. Only that will give us the freedom to operate knowingly with the changing circumstances of life. But such a learning requires patience, effort, and above all faith.

"Like the Buddha, we too should look around us and be observant, because everything in the world is ready to teach us.

With even a little intuitive wisdom we will be able to see clearly through the ways of the world. We will come to understand that everything in the world is a teacher. Trees and vines, for example, can all reveal the true nature of reality. With wisdom there is no need to question anyone, no need to study. We can learn from Nature enough to be enlightened, because everything follows the way of Truth. It does not diverge from Truth"

Ajahn Chah



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Complementary Education

Medhina Fright, who has been involved with the Dhamma School Project since its inception, outlines some of the principles and concerns that have guided the first steps towards a new Dhamma School.

The Dhamma School Project is well under way to establishing a new Buddhist school. Fundraising is progressing in earnest and discussions have explored questions about the kind of school it will be: will religion overshadow academic qualification? Will it be expensive and elitist? Will it remove children from the family to board away from home?

The Dhamma School initiative is neither a result of rejecting the state system nor a plan to separate Buddhist children from the mainstream culture of this country. Rather, it is an attempt to look at the whole picture of educating children to be in harmony with themselves and the society in which they live. It is felt that this could well be achieved through a school which provides a clear foundation in values taught by the Buddha.

All the teachers at the school must be well-practised in the Dhamma so that they can lead by example rather than by just speaking of the teaching. Living and learning in small-scale groups in an atmosphere of patience, kindness, and determination may alleviate some of the confusion faced by growing children and help them to understand themselves and others around them. The natural, spontaneous instinct to learn can then progress less hindered by conflict, distraction or apathy.

The holistic view of the individual, in which mind, body and spirit are all nurtured, creates an opportunity to balance academic excellence with respect for moral and spiritual values.

The children may come from families where the Dhamma practice comes from other Buddhist traditions or even from families where the Dhamma principles are valued but not categorised formally as Buddhism. This openness would be encouraged by keeping the study of such things as chants or suttas separate from the set school day.

The value of the Five Precepts and moments of quiet reflection can be appreciated by children of all faiths and backgrounds, and no child need feel different or separate from their peers. Extra-curricular activities may well include formal meditation practice as an option (to which the whole family and school staff would be invited), but the curriculum content of the working day will vary little from the academic structure of most schools. The monastic Sangha from Chithurst or Amaravati do not intend to teach subject studies but will be available for advice and visits to the school when invited.

Since the economic realities of life are an undeniable pressure on pupils, the appropriate examination syllabus will be followed so that when they complete their education they will have, to the best of their ability, the qualifications to follow the living they choose. Encouragement to practise the qualities of wisdom, energy, truth, generosity and morality (among others!) will develop young members of society who will respect their community and its resources and have a clear picture of the role they play in it. When the value of knowledge and understanding is clearly seen, motivation to learn is further reinforced.

The holistic view of the individual, in which mind, body and spirit are all nurtured, creates an opportunity to balance academic excellence with respect for moral and spiritual values. The holistic view of the school creates a situation in which the pupils, teachers, families, and neighbours of the school all share in the responsibility and benefit from its activity. A geographical location accessible to many Buddhist families has been sought to achieve this end.

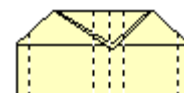
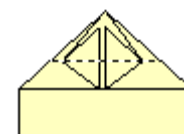
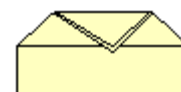
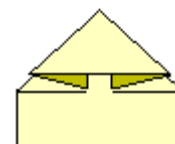
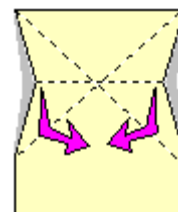
Politically-motivated education policies are inevitably coloured by such things as economic structures, national identity and educational theory. It is possible for opposing ideologies to react against each other so that the pendulum swings to left and right in an attempt to redress the balance of preceding systems. Buddha-Dhamma teaches the Middle Way, in which the excesses of each system are avoided. With an open mind it should be possible to use the best of all styles - formal, informal, traditional, progressive, subject-based, or integrated-study - as appropriate.

When the government seeks to develop the moral foundations of education by insisting that RE be compulsory and broadly Christian in nature, they are recognising the need for a clear guide for the young people in our care. In that we all agree, but it is less confusing for youngsters when the culture at home and school are the same, for example when children from Buddhist homes are able to attend a Buddhist school where religious language, symbols and practices have the same frame of reference as their home environment.

Progress through school is more coherent and leads to greater stability and continuity, when all the teachers hold the same values and follow the same path, for themselves as well as the pupils. There are currently four thousand voluntary-aided schools of Anglican, Roman Catholic, Methodist, or Jewish affiliation, and twenty-one private Islamic schools. In this democratic country where independent schools are an established form of education, the expression of diversity and expansion of choice is being revived. Buddhist parents, as well as parents who sympathise with Buddhist ideals, will also be able to choose an appropriate style of education for their children once a Buddhist school exists.

There is still a lot to be done and it will depend on the determination of families in the UK how soon and how widely this opportunity can be made available. We currently aim to start in the very near future with one full-time day school in Brighton for school-age children under thirteen years old.

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Meditating with Children

Sister Abhassara describes some of the methods she has used to teach children, how to turn the mind within and appreciate their inner world.



We are all children that have 'grown up'. We came into this world as children and when we enter old-age, we become again as children - dependent and weak, reliant upon the care and support of others. As parents or teachers, we can rediscover the child within us by staying in touch with that innate spirit of innocence and spontaneity. This can improve our ability to communicate effectively with children and to instil in them the values we cherish. At the same time, teaching children can be a great source of joy.

During the early years at Amaravati, when we held Family Days, at first the question seemed to be, 'Do we really want to have children around in the monastery?' and 'Won't they be noisy?' and so on. My curiosity was keen to see if the children could cope with meditation.

I started to teach children years before I was allowed into the adults' arena and I always felt that the adults seemed much more complex, cerebral and somehow 'stuck' in comparison to the children.

I had a hunch, which proved to be correct, that a child's mind is naturally imaginative; children learn to assimilate pictorial images in the mind before they can understand linear concepts. So I found it best to begin with simple breathing and visualisation exercises.

Children seem to respond very well to guided meditations. There was a lot of enthusiasm one year when we all went up in a space-rocket to the stars. You may well ask, 'What's the point of going up in a space-rocket?' The value of such meditation is that the children experience their inner world in a safe way and begin to see how they can actually guide their minds creatively. At the same time, they are able to develop and sustain attention and concentration. Since so many of the modern games, television and other popular stimuli make a child's energy very

restless and agitated, merely getting children to sit for five minutes is a major achievement; so a quiet return to the inner world and its wonders is a very welcome change.

Children always know if you're putting on a show or
trying to be something you're not.

Children are especially receptive to visualisation and loving-kindness or metta practices. They can easily visualise the sun at the heart and imagine the waves in the sea coming up and down the beach. They can breathe in and out with the waves' movement and also float on the sea or dive deep into the blue depths and stay there for a while. Sending metta to Mum and Dad, and family and friends is another favourite.

On the whole, I tend to dream up most of the images that we use in these meditations quite spontaneously. Occasionally, there may be problems with very young children crying and being restless, but their mothers are usually sensitive enough to carry them out so as not to disturb the others. There is nothing quite like the absorbed silence of 20-30 meditating children - it has to be seen to be believed.

Most children put up very little resistance to being guided - once they know that you are 'on their side' and they feel kindness and respect is being shown to them. And they always know if you're putting on a show or trying to be something you're not. Children can be amazingly blunt and direct at times, so my motto has always been to 'be prepared for anything'.

If there are too few children to split into several separate age groups, those between 4 and 12 years of age can meditate together. They are able to sit on a cushion with great ease, their supple limbs not yet feeling the wear of age. Many can actually get into full-lotus at the drop of a hat, although this is not mandatory! I remember once seeing a row of slumped backs and asking the children to grow towards the ceiling like plants - up they came with wonderfully erect postures.

Sessions should usually last between 5-10 minutes for the younger age groups and gradually increase, even to 30 minutes for the older children. Usually one can sense the group getting towards its threshold by the increase in shuffling and restlessness. After a meditation, it's always good to hear from the children themselves about their experiences.

When parents and children meditate together, it is also a very special event. It's a rare chance for that love and closeness to be experienced through the silence of the practice.

Teaching meditation to children is not always easy. Sometimes, with older boys, a ripple of explosive giggling will appear that is impossible to smother. The others in the group may try to continue regardless, but it usually means that the session has been well and truly sabotaged. Not to worry. We need only remember that it's all still an experiment, and we can't expect success every time. I suspect that if the over-energised children were to

A Mother's Poem

Venerable Manito's parents found it difficult to accept his choice to become an anagarika two years ago. But after several visits together, reading some books about Buddhism, and reflecting on why he chose this life, their attitude has slowly changed. These lines were written shortly after he received the Upasampada as a Buddhist monk.

o o ~O~ o o

What strangeness is this that I am looking at.
What non understanding is this that I am hearing now.
What is this, who are they, with robes of differing
shades of brown?

A chink of light as I read on

exercise vigorously until exhausted, then some deeper meditation might follow.

When children misbehave, it can be very difficult to judge if they need to be restrained or reprimanded in some way; I don't like to turn them off completely. But I learned that giving children boundaries helps them to feel secure in the group and that a gentle 'ticking off' need not be done through anger or aversion. It can sometimes prevent the whole class from degenerating into chaos.

Much of the time, teaching children is a matter of channelling their energy - most children being naturally quite exuberant - especially away from Mum and Dad. This energy can be channelled into non-competitive games and nature walks in the surrounding countryside. Leaves, stones and flowers that are picked up can be offered to the shrine when arriving back.

Children appreciate these simple acts of devotion. They enjoy the puja and chanting that we do at the start of our Family Days and Summer Camps. We usually introduce the children to the shrine, light the candles and incense, and practise putting our hands together in anjali and bowing. I composed a short Puja for children in the Family Camp based on 5 different notes. Their response to the chanting and the level of participation has been very good.

In the early years, the songs which I wrote for the children with titles like 'I am a child of light' and 'We are all one family' brought much joy. Singing is a very effective medium for conveying messages and feelings to children and they would be singing these songs over and over together by the camp-fire before bed-time.

Basic Buddhist principles such as generosity, renunciation and loving-kindness can be conveyed through reading stories from the Jataka Tales and the life of the Buddha. The children like to illustrate these stories with coloured crayons and paints. When reading these stories, it's good to make the space to ask the children questions in order to draw in their interest.

Discussions in general are very useful. For instance, when I teach the chant on the four Brahma-Viharas, I describe each quality in turn and ask the children to give examples from their own school and family life of times when loving-kindness or compassion came in useful. Children have an innate sense of the good and this needs to be brought out and encouraged.

I use a simplified form of chant to teach children about the 3 refuges and the 5 precepts. I often find that I have to be as willing to receive and learn from the children as they are from me. If I ask a question with a fixed reply in my mind, and a child replies in a completely different and quite baffling way, does this mean that the child is wrong? It is a great challenge to come into a teaching situation with the children in as open a mind space as possible; to be receptive to them and to pick up which way the lesson should flow. Plans and routines are just basic sketches to be changed according to the moment's needs.

Each child is a person in their own right with their own unique potential and difficulties.

The books, the talking, can it be so,
That I understood all along?

And two years on a peaceful recognition
That all around are bound as one,
Could it be my heart is full of fun?

Unnecessary as it may be
To write these words of what I see.
The proud and loving feelings shared of one so dear,
to hold that light
Ever present, but now glowing bright.

Yet such a gift has helped me know
That loving-kindness will grow and grow.
And when things are not quite right,
I can look up at a tree or star
And accept that this is the way things are.

Under the right conditions, each can blossom. Meditation and chanting can nourish that process. May our efforts in teaching children enable them to discover their own inner wisdom, to live in the light of a greater spiritual awareness that lies beyond this world and yet shines upon it.



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Life of a Forest Monk (Pt V)

The last in a series of recollections of Luang Por Jun, one of Ven. Ajahn Chah's most senior disciples.

These days the saddha (faith and devotion) of both the laity and Sangha members seems to be waning. This is different from how it used to be. For example, take the pre-ordination anagarika period. Men seem to find the three-month anagarika period too difficult, particularly the civil servants and policemen who come to take ordination, they really struggle with their defilements. They have so much worldly knowledge these days, and find it difficult to conform to monastic life after holding a position of power or influence in the world. Particularly in the early years, when Ajahn Chah first began teaching the Dhamma, he had a great influence over those who came into contact with it. Several generations have passed and times have changed in Thailand. Today's generation will listen to the teaching, but most of them don't seem to have the same faith and trust. I began to feel disappointed and I gradually stopped receiving civil servants, as I could see they were not willing to practise in a way that would bear fruit. As for the anagarika period, it is often disregarded these days and some men are only postulants for two or three weeks, usually three months at the most. Even after they've become monks, they don't show a lot of faith in genuine practice. It seems that the most sincere monks are those who come from a distance to find the teaching. The local men become monks for a short time just to follow custom. But those who stay and train long enough become fine monks, suitable to look after the monastery and the branch monasteries.

On several occasions I have found Mahatheras - who hold important positions of administrative power - to be quite obstructive. Even the ecclesiastical head of a province or a district has been known to forbid dhutanga* bhikkus from residing within his jurisdiction. Some of these monks holding positions of power within the Sangha are antagonistic and prevent faith from arising in our supporters. I tried to stand up to this and contend with this as best I could, but at times it was a bit much. After Ajahn Chah received his honorary title and his reputation became more well-known this helped matters tremendously. Whatever the situation, I feel that the saddha is bound to wane regarding practice.

* dhutanga refers to the ascetic practices allowed by the Buddha.
Such monks who live an austere life in the forest,
are often called 'dhutanga' or 'tudong' monks.

Once you are established, then you can gently inform
people. I'm sure they will be understanding of our
ways.

Then we had Westerners coming to Thailand to train as monks. This was a great source of

inspiration to the monks here, to see men travel across the world to live this way of life with sincerity. This was very exciting for the laity. Soon people came from many places to see these farang monks, and other monasteries wanted to invite them to their ceremonies and hear them speak. When Ajahn Chah was still in good health, he made a special effort to train these Western monks.

Question: Luang Por, could you tell us your memories of when Ajahn Sumedho first arrived?

Answer: When Ajahn Sumedho first arrived, if I recall correctly, I had left Wat Pah Pong, and met him when I went there for an overnight visit. He had come from Nong Khai with Phra Sommai - the one who went mad. Ajahn Sumedho was very sincere in his practice, but Phra Sommai was more of a study monk and not really into practice. I remember once when Phra Sommai didn't show up at chore time. That evening Ajahn Chah asked me to exhort the monks, so I gave a teaching to the monks and mentioned Phra Sommai's absence at chore time. I said that everyone that comes to the monastery must follow the practice we observe and work together, whether it be sweeping or hauling water. We should perform these duties out of respect for our teacher, and withhold our views if they differed. This went against Phra Sommai's views, and Ajahn Sumedho brought news that he had become quite angry after this talk. I had given a teaching, as Ajahn Chah had asked me to do, and spoke of things as they were.

Ajahn Sumedho spent one Vassa with me and I remember he was having problems with his foot, so I helped him look after it. I felt sympathy for the Western monks, because they did have to endure many hardships and often only had their inspiration and their sincerity to keep them going. In fact, I often used the farang monks as an example for the Thai monks because of their genuine zeal for the practice.

At one point Ajahn Chah had to become protective with the Western monks, and stopped allowing them to accept invitations to go here and there, because their popularity was beginning to cause problems for their meditation practice.

Now that I've experienced the way Buddhism is flourishing in the West, I can say that I have been pleased to see how fruitful it is. However, one can't expect everything to be the same as it is in Thailand. It's a different part of the world, and the customs and the climate are so different. But seeing how it is being done, I feel it is doing very well indeed. The changes made are good, and suitable for the Western culture. I ask you to make a constant effort, to reflect on this, and not change the unnecessary. Only change that which is really necessary. Regarding dress and attire, it will be necessary to make some changes; if you don't, then it will make practice difficult because of the climatic conditions here. In other respects, strive to safeguard the tradition. I feel this is possible. It may be objectionable in the beginning, but stay with it. Once you are established, then you can gently inform people. I'm sure they will be understanding of our ways. Like our custom of not touching women: initially one will make some mistakes, because the customs here are different. But once we are well-founded, then more and more people will understand.

Firstly, we must start with an understanding amongst ourselves. Most importantly, is the relationship with the nuns. This is essential. There must be a mutual support and help that will in turn help others outside to understand.

Q: Luang Por, from what you have observed, what do you feel the monks have to be most careful of?

A: The one thing you must be most careful about is contact with women. Even if you don't have any lustful intention and there is nothing to it, you must still preserve our discipline out of respect for our teachers and for the students and disciples for generations to come. In Thailand and India, the history was like this. Even the Buddha and arahants preserved the customs and discipline for this same reason, for future generations. So we may say to touch women is no problem if we have no defilements or desire, or thoughts of that sort. This may be true for some, but still we should keep our discipline. This will be the cause for faith arising in those from outside, like the Thais. If Thais come here that are accustomed to the appropriate ways of relating and see otherwise, it will be harmful and offensive for them and could cause their faith to decline; for some, even to be put off. So this is something we must help each other with, both the Thais and Westerners. Although it is not against any existing customs here, we still should observe it. This will bring us closer together in mutual support and understanding.

Q: Luang Por, what do you feel about the monasteries you have seen here that are already established and those planned for the future?

A: For the future establishment of new monasteries, I feel it is important to train the leaders well; to make sure they are qualified and competent. Don't be careless and simply follow their requests or willingness to go. The Ajahns should take a close look and test their abilities and knowledge first. Can they teach and give advice to the laity? Then one should keep an observant eye on them by periodic mutual visits. Don't let them be contentious or obstructive. The same applies for the lay people: if they want to have monks in their respective countries and towns, they should come and train first. They should be willing to be told the proper behaviour and relationship to us. It can be done as in Thailand where, say, two or three lay people come to learn to look after monks; how to offer food and the other relevant gestures of respect. Once you make the proper procedures known, I feel it will help things to develop and



expand continually.

Q: Luang Por, regarding the heads or leaders of a monastery, what do you see as the appropriate guidelines? For example, how many Vassas should he have?

A: He should have five or more Vassas. One must consider his understanding of the discipline. He should know what is a heavy offence, and what is a light offence, and have memorised the Patimokkha. His personal practice should be such that it inspires confidence and respect in others, and they wish to listen to him. He is one who is not over-familiar or indulging in much laughter or joking, but also not too serious or quick to anger or make threats. He knows the balance between what is too slack and too strict for those living with him. He is called one who leads others without causing the heat of strife. He is cool-hearted. If he does cause contention and strife, then he should be changed. Regarding visiting senior monks who wish to stay with you, they shouldn't be senior to the abbot. This is the practice in Thailand. If the visiting monk is senior there must be an agreement about his surrender to our form. Monks with many Vassas may mean many problems because of pride. So if we have a visitor senior to us, it is best to advise him to go to a monastery where the abbot is senior to him.

Abbots can make mistakes you know, myself as well as our teachers. Ever since the time of the Buddha this has been so. Even the Buddha gave open invitation to his disciples and the Sangha to correct him if he made a mistake. If we leave all the decisions to one monk, then there will be some things that get overlooked; therefore we must help to inform each other.



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Alone on a Mountain

Venerable Chandako reflects on the quality of practice in the remotest outpost of the International Forest Sangha, Thailand.

Three hours from Wat Pah Nanachat, driving toward the Lao border over increasingly rough dirt roads, crossing bridges which wash out during the rainy season, one finally comes to the small village of Ban Toong Na Meuang. Going another half kilometre one finds a metal sign leaning against a rock, half hidden by weeds. Hand-written in Thai, it reads, 'Wat Pah Poo Jom Gom.' One has arrived at Wat Pah Nanachat's first branch monastery, the wilderness outpost for Western monks in Thailand.

The monastery is located on a small mountain (in the local dialect 'Jom Gom' literally means 'teeny weeny') overlooking the Maekong River in a forest reserve. This land was recommended as suitable by a Thai lay-supporter during the phansa (Rains Retreat) of 1989. Before the following phansa, local villagers from Bung Wai, and Wat Pah Nanachat monastics, combined efforts to build a main sala and kitchen by a stream at the bottom of the mountain. Six huts and a cave sala were built at the top.

Beginning the ascent up the mountain, one sees huge black boulders balanced at angles not easily believed, creating shapes to test the imagination. Wind-twisted trees with Bonsai branches rise out of cracks in the rock. Roots cling where they can. At the top there is a small canyon in the middle of which rises a seven-meter column of solid rock (Ashoka's pillar or Shiva worship?). The exotic stone formations seem to turn the entire area into a cross between a T'ang Dynasty rock garden and the setting for a Carlos Castaneda novel. In every direction, rocks are found in such refined symmetry and balance that one suspects them to be the work of some divine landscape artist.

The environment is a powerful tool at a Dhamma-practitioner's disposal. In theory, whether in a city or a forest, practice is the same, but at Poo Jom Gom there is a gut feeling that this is the appropriate context for a forest bhikku. For one who understands the urgency of the human condition, this monastery offers the supportive conditions of solitude, silence, no fixed schedule and vast open space. Poo Jom Gom affects one on unseen levels, and one is intuitively steered towards austerity, energetic exertion, a non-interest in comforts and an appreciation for making do with the bare minimum.

Trekking down and up the mountain for the meal each morning takes a total of at least five hours, and sometimes monks opt to fast.

I see solitude as a necessary complement to community religious life. To temporarily cut

oneself off with a determined resolve of renunciation gives a great sense of clarity and simplicity to practice. It affords the opportunity for deepening, refining and strengthening the mind. One is free to confront the perceptions of self head-on and to spiritually 'Let it all hang out.' The benefits are quickly noticed in formal practice. The expansive horizon helps to develop an internal spaciousness, drowning out the childish voices of the petty entangled mind. The entire setting is naturally soothing, quieting and peaceful. Depending on the person, solitude can also be a self-centred escape from responsibility and unpleasant sense-contact. An open schedule can lead to wasted time, and with little contact with other Sangha members for feedback, one can more easily become caught up in moods and opinions. A balance is necessary.

The bamboo hut I'm staying in is set on the brink of a sheer rock wall. My jongrom (walking meditation) path ends in open space - cliffs down to the Maekong. Peeking over the edge, I can see treetops, and have to confront sloth and torpor in a dramatic way. Venturing over the edge of the cliff, following a path of bamboo ladders and precarious narrow ledges, one clings and winds one's way barefoot, or with plastic sandals, to a twenty-metre horizontal crack in the side of this rock wall. It has been furnished with a level but slightly 'S'-shaped jongrom path and a bamboo platform. Many such spots have been prepared for the monks to stay, since the shaded folds of the mountain help one to survive the hot season.

The daily descent down the mountain begins in the freezing darkness of 4:30am. One heads out into the field of barren rock at the summit. Mist creates a moonscape - a maze of boulders, crevices, and precipices. It is truly the signless, and the newly-arrived often wander in frustrated aimlessness as their flashlight batteries run down. Trekking down and up the mountain for the meal each morning takes a total of at least five hours, and sometimes monks opt to fast.

The monks and novices gather for alms-round (pindapat) at the sala, a grass-roofed structure of hand-sawed planks and woven bamboo-mat walls. Each Wan Phra (Observance Day) we come here together with the villagers for puja, Dhamma teachings, and all night meditation. In contrast to most Thai wats, those who come are mainly teenagers.

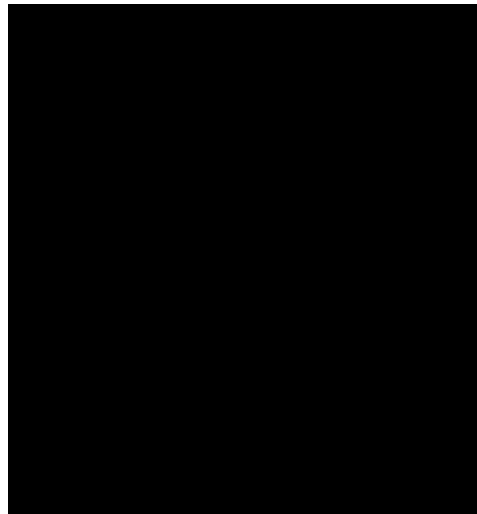
The pindapat route through the village follows a road of sharp rocks that tests one's patient endurance. The smell of fresh water-buffalo manure mixes with that of smoky hearth fires and steaming sticky (glutinous) rice. Small children with big eyes squat and stare up in wonder as their mothers put rice into our bowls. Some are in torn rags, others in New Wave Surf Club T-shirts - part of the supplies from the Kathina festival - passed out by the monastery. A tiny withered old woman with trembling hands plays out her role as a heavenly messenger. Empty structures in the village remind us of our Lao friends who were herded up in an early morning police raid last pansa and packed off to a refugee camp.

There always seem to be plenty of sweet children around, and at the end of the pindapat route, eager boys receive and carry our bowls. After the meal, brown robes fit naturally into the landscape as monks wash their bowls by the stream. After caring for the bowl, the



monks again go their separate ways.

Even in the cold season, daytime temperatures are in the thirties (Celsius). The more trees that are cut in Thailand the hotter it gets. We watch rain storms blowing toward us from Laos only to evaporate at the border. To cool down and wash up there is a stream. At this time of the year, the water is still flowing. However, even though this is officially a forest reserve, so many trees have been cut that by New Year the stream stops and becomes stagnant. Since we have been here, the tree-cutting has stopped, and the monastery has built a series of small dams in an attempt to slow the drain-off and retain water in the upper valley.



The stream-bed is littered with boulders and pockmarked with craters and cylindrical holes, creating a maze of pools, eddies, underwater tunnels, and idyllic sandy-bottomed bathing spots. Tiny fish nibble at one's feet. During the rainy season the stream can swell to a violent torrent, leaving monks stranded or clinging precariously to a rope while water rushes by at chest level. Local villagers have now built a bridge spanning a small gorge. It consists of two shaky logs with a few boards nailed crosswise.

In case of accident or emergency each person is outfitted with a whistle to alert others. If hospitalisation is necessary, one can be driven out in the monastery vehicle - a small motorbike with a wagon on the back - although the ride itself may kill you.

As the sun drops so does the temperature. Staring down the winding green Maekong valley at dusk one can feel the calming power of the river. In watching the process of flowing rather than following a particular ripple, perspective changes. Endless flux, melancholy timelessness.

On the further shore are the nearly untouched forests of Laos, and hills roll on until lost in obscurity. One can actually hear the abundance of wildlife. The near shore is quiet because the Thais have hunted the animal population to near extinction, but sounds from Laos are thick with strange bird calls. Ajahn Pasanno is trying to instigate the creation of an international park which would include land on both sides of the river.

Throughout the day the perception of beauty arises over and over to such an extent that the effect on the mind becomes clear. One more beautiful sight tugging at my past conditioning. Dukkha. I only want to be free.

The cold-season gales begin to blow at night. My glot (monk's umbrella) shakes, and the cloth mosquito net billows and flaps. Yet there is a sense of security and contentment. A single candle light and many hours of meditation. My three robes will protect me from the chilling cold.

Looking down from my cliff-edged jongrom path I can see the scattered wooden houses along the banks of the river of the small village called Kan Ta Gweean. It is literally the end of the road as the next village upstream can only be reached by footpath or canoe. Kan Ta Gweean provides alms-food for one monk, and those here take turns going on the pindapat route, thus giving the opportunity for complete solitude. During this time the monk usually has no human contact except for those who put food in his bowl.

Heading down the steep mountain path at dawn, walking stick in hand, one has the opportunity to experience the classical form of the samana (spiritual seeker). There is a great

sense of connectedness to the tradition through time and space. Tied to my Dhamma brothers and sisters in this way I never felt alone. The wisdom behind this traditional set of conditions becomes apparent as one lives it. Much of the culture and etiquette of north-east Thailand is supportive of mind-cooling sense restraint. The utter simplicity of the requisites helps to pare life down to the bare necessities.

Going on this pindapat route I feel the power of mendicancy. What I get in my bowl is what I eat. Taking even this small step away from the complacent security of having a kitchen and the insidious tendency to become domesticated is very freeing and vitalising for the mind. Taking refuge in the insecurity of not knowing and not expecting brings one to the present.

On this route monks eat like the locals. Heavy glutinous rice makes up the bulk of the meal, with chilli sauce, spicy green papaya salad, bananas and slightly stale cakes on the side. Often it is easy to take food for granted, but here there is a great appreciation for every banana received.

Walking along the main street one sees that the sandbagged army bunker facing Laos now stores bananas - a sign of peace. The sense of timelessness at Poo Jom Gom is aided by being cut off from news of international events. Wars begin and end. The perennial problems of humanity continue on. Our job as samanans remains unchanged.

Nature is the big Ajahn at Poo Jom Gom. Focusing on its general characteristics rather than how wonderful it is, the forest becomes a fruitful field for investigation. Each particular, encapsulating universal laws, becomes a metaphor for the big picture. Living outside one becomes keenly aware of and attunes to the interwoven revolving rhythms of the environment. By contrast, one realises how far removed and alienated the ego-inundated hyped-up sensuality of the modern world is from the earth, wind, sun and moon. Everywhere Dhamma reveals itself. Each rock, plant and the flow of water is calling out, 'Look! This is how I adapt to my surroundings. This is how I display my characteristics. This is how I follow the laws of nature, and this is how I dissolve and fade away.'

Not every monk likes to stay at this monastery. It takes a certain commando spirit to put up with the hours of climbing up and down the mountain each day, the extremes of temperature, the simple food, the poisonous snakes, and the heavy strain of malaria. After being here a while, the monks take on a rugged appearance. The robes become a mass of patches, the feet are full of cuts and blisters, and the angsa* is worn as a head covering against the sun. The body becomes lean, the beard infrequently shaven. And yet even in the wild, bhikkus retain a refined gracefulness due to their training in Dhamma-vinaya.

* angsa, a broad sash, worn modestly to cover the chest when the upper robe is not being worn.

Dhamma practice at Wat Poo Jom Gom is uncomplicated, direct and down-to-earth. One of the biggest advantages of living here is that there is no need to do a lot of conceptualising about practice. You just do it.



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In the Deathless Land

Originally written for her own journal, Sister Rosemary, a senior Carmelite nun of the Sisters of the Love of God, in Oxford, describes the experience of her stay at Amaravati, during the Rains Retreat of 1991.

When I was invited by Mother Anne to take a two month sabbatical, I had no doubt about where I would like to spend the time: at Amaravati Buddhist Centre, Great Gaddesden, a few miles from Hemel Hempstead. Nuns from Amaravati had visited us at Boxmoor and Fairacres and I knew from that contact and from their publications that I would have much to learn there, especially from the teaching of the abbot, Ajahn Sumedho. I wanted to let it be a real Sabbath, to allow some things to remain undone and attend to what is vital, life-giving. In this I looked to the long and highly developed Buddhist tradition of meditation as a guide to the art of paying attention. Two other factors encouraged me: Theravada Buddhism is non-theistic, reverently agnostic about ultimate answers of any kind, so I would not need to either defend or compromise my own position; and it is nothing if not monastic. I felt intuitively that I would be at home with their silence and their life-style, and this indeed proved to be the case.

If there is one word which sums up the teaching given at Amaravati it is 'mindfulness', the practice of attention to the present moment, awareness shorn of projections. This is not unlike the 'practice of the presence of God' associated with Brother Lawrence, or that clear-sightedness desired by Van Gogh who longed to see a cornfield merely, and marvellously, as a cornfield.

Mindfulness is a deceptively simple discipline. It is not dependent on particular techniques or conditions, nor confined to the time of formal meditation. It requires only enough hopeful faith not to be discouraged when the mind wanders off, gets bored, and bolts into the blue. Very often the breath, in its natural rhythm, is taken as the focus for attention. The very dullness of that makes one notice both how constantly the mind flits about and that what we perceive is itself changing. Perseverance bears fruit in direct insight into the nature of what is there and this gives rise to serenity. It is no longer necessary to be so anxious. It is possible to live at peace with oneself, and so to live wholeheartedly. Mindfulness is as much a matter of the heart as the mind and, I was told, 'the whole practice takes place within the body.'

Buddhism, skilfully used, punctures the illusion that the universe revolves around me, and so calls a halt to ego-centric demands and all our consequent discontent.

I did have some misgivings about attempting to come to any understanding of Buddhism outside of its native culture: could it be 'the real thing' in the buildings of a former school in the home counties, where most of the monks and nuns are Westerners? Yet in a bare two months I could not have hoped to appreciate the meaning of life and ethos I was sharing in,

had it not already been subject to a considerable process of translation. The complexities of that process are witnessed by the varying fortunes of the English Sangha Trust, which has been trying to facilitate Buddhist monastic life in Britain since the 1950s. At Amaravati now there is a sense of purpose and stability, undiminished by recent disrobings, and it is striking how people from Buddhist countries as well as Westerners feel at home there. Members of the Thai, Sri Lankan and Cambodian communities from London come regularly to offer the meal and to practise because they feel that it is their monastery. While I was there, a Thai couple came for a blessing of their marriage and whole families came for blessing or to 'take the Precepts'. For my part, I soon learned to be at ease with oriental customs, to take off my sandals on coming indoors, to sit on the floor, to join my hands in a gesture of greeting, and to appreciate the graceful simplicity of the traditional robes and shaved heads of the monks and nuns. But, more important, I learned that Buddhist experience is not foreign to me and that a meadow ringed with oak trees is as good a place as a Thai jungle for meditating on impermanence.

I arrived at the beginning of September and the onset of three charmed weeks of unbroken sunshine. We were woken each morning at 4 a.m. by gentle strokes on a Burmese bell (a flat bell-shaped gong) and I went across to the meditation hall while it was still dark, the sky pricked by Orion, with Venus low on the horizon. I came to relish the sight of the sunrise and the sunset and the sense of wholeness which comes from witnessing the beginning and ending of each day. Because the monastery's weekly 'observance day' is determined by the phases of the moon, I also found myself using that ancient 'clock': I looked with wonder at the thin sickle which defines the dark side of the moon for us, and stood spellbound on clear nights when she was ringed with rainbows, or on windy nights when she seemed to run wild in a private heaven, rushing clouds in her wake. Then one morning the whole hilltop was thick in mist, and the sun, when it did appear, could have been the full moon, white and ghostly behind the black jaunty figure of the Buddha in the courtyard intent on walking meditation. When the mist cleared, every shrub and hedgerow was festooned with shining wheels, cobwebs, which by mid-afternoon were in tatters, flying like streamers in the grass.

Not to see clearly that birth leads inevitably to death is a recipe for unhappiness - we cling to what is transitory and feel aggrieved when nature is simply taking its course. So at Amaravati we were encouraged to notice beginnings and endings and how we ourselves are part of nature, subject to arising and ceasing: each breath, each footstep, all that is received by our senses, all our complicated responses, will in time go as they have come. In the romantic poets, how often this realisation gives rise to melancholy: elegies and laments, at best Keats glutting his sorrow on the morning rose whose beauty will fade before the day is out. Not so in Buddhism where, skilfully used, it punctures the illusion that the universe revolves around me, and so calls a halt to ego-centric demands and all our consequent discontent. It offers the possibility of disentangling ourselves from webs of our own making and opens up another way, the religious way of going beyond. And this, as one of the nuns commented, is achieved not by floating off and ignoring the world in which we live but by penetrating to the heart of it.

Amaravati belongs to the southern Buddhist tradition which traces its lineage back 2,535 years to the Buddha himself. The name Theravada means 'elder way' and the fact that the monastic order (the Sangha) was founded by the Buddha

gives his authority to the code of discipline followed by the monks. This is called the Patimokkha and consists of 227 rules of conduct. It is recited aloud (it takes about forty minutes) every two weeks on the full and new moon observance days. It would be almost unthinkable to change it and, in the Theravada school, certainly every effort is made to keep to it in both letter and spirit. Questions of interpretation are decided by the abbot or the Sangha, not by the individual. The point is not that the form is ideal, but that it is the given and serves the purpose of enabling the bhikkhus (monks) to practise and realise the teachings of the Buddha in a comprehensive way.



The teaching of the Buddha is summed up in the word Dhamma, 'the way it is', and the way to practise Dhamma is to pay attention, 'mindfulness'. So alongside respect for tradition and commitment to it, there is another and essential element characteristic of the Buddhist quest for enlightenment: go to your own direct experience. The monks and nuns are asked both to 'surrender to the form' and to 'believe your teacher only fifty percent'. Investigate, find out for yourself.

At Amaravati there is also an important area in which the Sangha itself, under the guidance of Ajahn Sumedho, is experimenting. The Buddha in his life-time, and under pressure from his female relatives, did found an order of nuns as well as an order of monks, but the Bhikkhuni Order survived for only about a thousand years. In Theravada Buddhist countries it is the Bhikkhu Sangha which alone carries the tradition and is the third object of refuge for Buddhists. If there are nuns, they are in a very inferior position, hardly more than servants to the bhikkhus, and not permitted to ordain fully. But there is now a considerable Buddhist community in the West and naturally there are women who want to undertake the Holy Life in its fullness.

In 1979 Chithurst Monastery was opened with the 'Nuns' Cottage' on the grounds, and in 1985 Amaravati was opened as a monastic centre for both monks and nuns. Sister Thanasanti 'went forth' as a nun near the beginning of my stay and there are now ten nuns, committed to the Ten Precepts as the basis of the Holy Life. However, they do not follow the Patimokkha and are not on an equal footing with the monks. Ajahn Sumedho commented on the experiment: 'It works well, but it is under fire from both sides - the conservatives in Thailand who say it goes too far, and feminists who want the nuns to be on equal terms with the Bhikkhu Sangha.' I was impressed by the attitude of one of the first nuns who embarked on monastic life about twelve years ago now; she said, 'When people ask me about the Bhikkhuni Order, I reply that I don't

know, and that is very peaceful. I did not come to the monastic order to become anything anyway, so it is not a problem. To be free is what is important. It is not important to become somebody, becoming is suffering.'

What the nuns are doing is a striking instance of the daily practice at Amaravati: discerning and continuing to honour the essentials of a venerable tradition while living in a modern (and non-oriental) culture.

The shaved head and almsbowl, traditional signs of Buddhist monasticism, symbolise renunciation and mendicancy and therefore another subtle balance in the life of the monks and nuns: they have left the world, or, as they proclaim it daily in the morning, have 'gone forth from home to homelessness', and yet must have daily contact with people in the lay Buddhist life on whom they depend for food and the basic necessities of life. They renounce everything in order to receive everything as a gift. When there is the possibility of a new monastery being opened (plans are afoot to do this in California) the first question to be asked is, 'Is there a Buddhist lay community of sufficient size, interested and committed enough to give on-going support?' Lay people who come to the monastery are regarded not as visitors so much as participants with an essential role in its life, whether they put food in the almsbowls, prepare it, or give of their time, skills and energy in helping to maintain the monastery in other ways. They come in great numbers and with great generosity, and the interaction in giving and receiving builds up a very strong natural relationship. The traditional way in which the monks and nuns repay their benefactors is by giving Dhamma teaching, by talks, but also by the witness of 'living blamelessly', simply being what they are meant to be.

Such interdependence extends beyond human and social relations, making a Buddhist community naturally sympathetic to environmental and ecological concerns. The first of the Five Precepts, undertaken by all who seek to follow the Buddhist way, is to refrain from taking life, which is often interpreted in the more searching and subtle form of harmlessness towards all living things. It is stressed that sila, morality, is essential for peace of mind as it is the basis for living at ease with oneself and one's environment. If you live innocently you will be less fearful, and the effect of living well over a period of time is a sense of personal well-being. I certainly experienced Amaravati as a place where I could safely 'let go' because I knew no-one was going to do me any harm. It was salutary to realise that that in itself constitutes quite a special experience in today's world. And I noticed, during the ten-day meditation retreat for lay people in which I took part, how our faces changed as defensive energy was withdrawn from them and we became vulnerable. It was like entering a strange land or returning to childhood. I began to see such quiet virtues as modesty, moderation, patience, and the restraints of the Holy Life in their true colours. Victorian moralism spoilt them for us, obscuring their inherent attractiveness; there is buoyancy and energy there just waiting to be recovered.

Amaravati means 'the deathless land' and what I have said about it may have given the impression that it is heaven, or at least a temporary sanctuary from stress, conflict and the confusion of daily life. It is true that there is a peace there, as there is at Fairacres and in many Christian monasteries, but there is no escape from the contrariness and difficulties of life.

One of the most striking and helpful features of Ajahn Sumedho's teaching, following that of the Buddha, is that it is precisely these things which are our real teachers. 'Are you frustrated, irritated, riled?' (and monastic life there, as here, gives plenty of occasion for it) '... well, go to it, investigate it, watch your mind!' Difficulties are not to be glossed over or repressed, nor is the monastery meant to provide idyllic conditions in which there are no difficulties. Difficulties confront us with 'suffering', not necessarily in acute form, just the commonplace discomforts which make us wish things were different, and so give us an opportunity to understand it. To study the unsatisfactoriness that impinges on us is already to become a little

distanced from it - to be in a position to distinguish whatever pain there is from what the heart makes of it. And this will be a valuable skill when suffering, in the more usual sense of the word, overtakes us. Like the Buddha, we may come to see that what we feel is determined less by circumstances, even the most truly painful and tragic of them, than by the insistence of our contrary desires. This is what the Four Noble Truths indicate, saying to us, if we will listen, 'Look, haven't you noticed what is going on?'

We are not going to be able either to avoid suffering or, necessarily, change the processes of the heart, least of all by adding yet another desire to those at work within us. But we can become compassionately aware of our drives and longings, and learn to bear with them without identifying with them or acting on them. We can learn to give time to the heart and its processes; we can wait and allow stillness to arise.

Jesus asks his disciples to watch and to stand as well as to pray. Did he mean something like the watchfulness which is practised in meditation? Are Christian prayer and Buddhist meditation, in some forms, like each other, or even the same?

In my experience, each time of meditation, each time of prayer, is different, so I am loathe to make generalisations. But what I did discover at Amaravati is that the obstacles and hindrances which Buddhists and Christians encounter are the same. Anyone who has seriously tried to pray will recognise those on the Buddhist checklist: wanting something, not wanting something, sloth/torpor (cf. accidie), restlessness and doubt. And the mortal enemies, what Buddhists call 'the defilements of the mind', are all too familiar as well, though we may not be good at naming them: greed, hatred and delusion. So there is a sense in which the task confronting us is the same and all one can do each time is 'kneel down', or sit, 'and hope for the best'. As it is easy to delude oneself and go astray, I asked Ajahn Sumedho how could I know if what I am doing is sound, how to judge my own practice. He said, 'Patience. Are you becoming more patient with the hindrances?'

Ajahn Chah, Ajahn Sumedho's teacher in Thailand, was asked, 'What is it like to be enlightened?' He replied, 'Have you ever eaten a banana? You put it in your mouth and eat it! Well, that's it!' He might have given the question about prayer and meditation similar treatment. Somewhere in such immediacy, and within the range of that word like, there is the opening prospect of long dialogue between Buddhists and Christians, holding the tension between continuity and discontinuity, sameness and difference.

So what is it like? It is like watching over a sleeping child, or someone whom I love very much, or someone who is ill and dependent on me. Full of love and tenderness, I read her body as she stirs, and follow her every breath, noting the slightest change, wholly at her service. She is oblivious, she is simply there. I could stay with her like this for ever. Sometimes meditation is like that, perfectly combining uncertainty and contentment, rest and alertness.



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Questions & Answers - Luang Por Chah

Extracts from a conversation between Luang Por Chah and a lay Buddhist.

There are those periods when our hearts happen to be absorbed in things and become blemished or darkened but we are still aware of ourselves - such as when some form of greed, hatred, or delusion comes up. Although we know that these things are objectionable, we are unable to prevent them from arising. Could it be said that even as we are aware of them, we are providing the basis for increased clinging and attachment and maybe putting ourselves further back than where we started from?

That's it! You must keep knowing them at that point; that's the method of practice.

I mean that, simultaneously, we are both aware of them and repelled by them, but lacking the ability to resist them; they just burst forth.

By then, it's already beyond your capability to do anything. At that point, you have to readjust yourself and then continue contemplation. Don't just give up on them there and then. When you see things arise in that way, you tend to get upset or feel regret, but it is possible to say that they are uncertain and subject to change. What happens is that you see these things are wrong, but you are still not ready or able to deal with them. It's as if they are independent entities, the leftover kammic tendencies that are still creating and conditioning the state of the heart. You don't wish to allow the heart to become like that, but it does and it indicates that your knowledge and awareness is still neither sufficient nor fast enough to keep abreast of things.

When you reach the point where you are able to know things and put them down with ease, they say that the Path has matured...

You must practise and develop mindfulness as much as you can in order to gain a greater and more penetrating awareness. Whether the heart is soiled or blemished in some way, it doesn't matter; whatever comes up, you should contemplate the impermanence and uncertainty of it. By maintaining this contemplation at each instant that something arises, after some time you will see the impermanence of all sense objects and mental states. Because you see them as such, gradually they will lose their importance and your clinging and attachment to that which is a blemish on the heart will continue to diminish. Whenever suffering arises, you will be able to work through it and readjust yourself, but you shouldn't give up on this work or set it aside. You must keep up a continuity of effort and try to make your awareness fast enough to keep in touch with the changing mental conditions. It could be said that so far your development of the Path still lacks sufficient energy to overcome the mental defilements; whenever suffering arises, the heart becomes clouded over. But one must keep developing that

knowledge and understanding of the clouded heart; this is what you reflect on.

You must really take hold of it and repeatedly contemplate that this suffering and discontentment is just not a sure thing. It is something that is ultimately impermanent, unsatisfactory, and not-self. Focusing on these three characteristics, whenever these conditions of suffering arise again, you will know them straightaway, having experienced them before.

Gradually, little by little, your practice should gain momentum, and as time passes, whatever sense objects and mental states that arise will lose their value in this way. Your heart will know them for what they are and accordingly put them down. When you reach the point where you are able to know things and put them down with ease, they say that the Path has matured internally and you will have the ability to swiftly bear down upon the defilements. From then on, there will just be the arising and passing away in this place, the same as waves striking the seashore. When a wave comes in and finally reaches the shoreline, it just disintegrates and vanishes; a new wave comes and it happens again - the wave going no further than the limit of the shoreline. In the same way, nothing will be able to go beyond the limits established by your own awareness.

That's the place where you will meet and come to understand impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and not-self. It is there that things will vanish - the three characteristics of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and not-self are the same as the seashore, and all sense objects and mental states that are experienced go in the same way as the waves. Happiness is uncertain; it's arisen many times before. Suffering is uncertain; it's arisen many times before. That's the way they are. In your heart you will know that they are like that, they are 'just that much'. The heart will experience these conditions in this way, and they will gradually keep losing their value and importance. This is talking about the characteristics of the heart, the way it is. It is the same for everybody, even the Buddha and all his disciples were like this.

If your practice of the Path matures, it will become automatic and it will no longer be dependent on anything external. When a defilement arises, you will immediately be aware of it and accordingly be able to counteract it. However, that stage when they say that the Path is still neither mature enough nor fast enough to overcome the defilements is something that everybody has to experience - it's unavoidable. But it is at that point where you must use skilful reflection. Don't go investigating elsewhere or trying to solve the problem at some other place. Cure it right there. Apply the cure at that place where things arise and pass away. Happiness arises and then passes away, doesn't it? Suffering arises and then passes away, doesn't it? You will continuously be able to see the process of arising and ceasing, and see that which is good and bad in the heart. These are phenomena that exist and are part of nature. Don't cling tightly to them or create anything out of them at all.

If you have this kind of awareness, then even though you will be coming into contact with things, there will not be any noise. In other words, you will see the arising and passing away of phenomena in a very natural and ordinary way. You will just see things arise and then



cease. You will understand the process of arising and ceasing in the light of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and not-self.

The nature of the Dhamma is like this. When you can see things as 'just that much', then they will remain as 'just that much'. There will be none of that clinging or holding on - as soon as you become aware of attachment, it will disappear. There will be just the arising and ceasing, and that is peaceful. That it's peaceful is not because you don't hear anything; there is the hearing, but you understand the nature of it and don't cling or hold on to anything. This is what is meant by peaceful - the heart is still experiencing sense objects, but it doesn't follow or get caught up in them. A division is made between the heart, sense objects and the defilement; but if you understand the process of arising and ceasing, then there is nothing that can really arise from it - it will end just there.



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SIGNS OF CHANGE

Getting Rooted on the Hill

Ajahn Munindo reports on the changing fortunes of life on Harnham Hill.

In the last issue of Forest Sangha Newsletter we spoke of the legal dilemma we've found ourselves in at Harnham. Regrettably, no resolution has yet been reached. The trustee's solicitors remain confident about the eventual outcome, but at this time patience and skilful negotiations are called for. Most definitely the donations that are being received are sincerely appreciated.

Fortunately, solicitors and land agents are not the only thing happening on the hill. It is lovely to hold the thought in the mind that a stupa is being built at Harnham at the same time as one is being built in Wat Bodhinyanarama on the opposite side of the planet. On the day that people began working on the foundations for our solid Derbyshire stone stupa, we received news of the projected stupa in New Zealand. The Buddha recommended that, in order that disciples could be supported by the memory of him, stupas could be erected: this same principle of devotion to the Triple Gem is being made manifest at Harnham, with the particular dedication to the late Venerable Ajahn Chah. Our stupa will stand a modest seven feet high so as not to overextend the generosity of the local planning authority, but it will be imbued with immeasurable goodwill and gratitude.

At the time of writing this report we are 10 resident monastic Sangha and 22 lay guests sitting together on a one week retreat. For the first time we don't have to be concerned about space and weather. With the newly-laid floor of oak from Chithurst forest, the secure gale-proof windows and mountains of good intention, all that is left is to get on with the meditation practice. Yet it sometimes seems that the more sincerely we commit ourselves to simplicity and renunciation, the more we discover complexities and apparent obstructions. Here in our new Dhamma Hall a constant reminder of this will soon be provided by a mural painting (commissioned by a group of Thai friends), of the Buddha-to-be encountering the host of Mara. Although he was assailed by previously unimagined difficulties, that was the night of his enlightenment.

Stupas and murals, courtrooms and meditation retreats can all strengthen the spirit of Dhamma that we live by. We find that living with such conscious commitment means that the wild winds of change and uncertainty serve to send our roots deeper. And one thing becomes sure: to realise the 'unshakeable heart' that we aspire to, takes a lot of effort.

The New Temple at Amaravati

Sister Jotaka writes about the progress to date on plans for a new building.

As many of our readers already know, plans are taking shape to erect a new Meditation hall and Temple building at Amaravati. The project, initiated by a number of generous supporters in Thailand, was approved in principle by the English Sangha Trust 14 months ago, and the architect chosen, Tom Hancock, a Buddhist himself, was delighted at the opportunity of designing a Theravada temple in the Western style.

The Temple will be situated with its front roughly where the workshop now stands, on an

east-west orientation, and will be visible directly along the line of the cherry tree drive. The new building will replace the old Dhamma Hall and Meditation Room. In addition, the present workshop will be demolished and its contents moved to the site of the existing boiler house. A new workshop is planned for a later stage, and we hope that work on an independent central-heating system for the Retreat Centre will be completed by winter.

It was decided at the outset that the building work would be undertaken in stages, as and when sufficient funds were donated for each phase. For this reason, it is difficult to predict how long the whole project will take to complete. However, we are already receiving generous offerings of money and art-work, and there have been most encouraging expressions of support from both Thailand and Malaysia where large fund-raising efforts are underway.

In England, a Temple Building Fund has already been opened at the Thai Farmers Bank in London, to keep money specifically for the project separate from other donations. Supporters of the monastery who reside in this country will be initiating schemes to raise funds once planning approval has been granted.

Our application for planning approval is due to be considered in mid-September. If we are successful, we will publish a detailed description of the proposed building in the next Forest Sangha Newsletter. We will then be able to commission an updated version of the model which was taken to Thailand earlier this year, and in this way, visitors to Amaravati will be able to see more easily the actual form of the proposed new Temple building.

An American Dream

The slow progress towards establishing an American Vihara, as Venerable Subbato describes, continues ...

On arrival in San Francisco in May of this year, it was obvious at first glance that saving all sentient Americans from the gnashing jaws of greed, hatred and delusion was not going to be an easy task. Undaunted, however, Ajahn Amaro and I settled into our unfurnished Dhamma fortress on top of Diamond Heights in southern San Francisco. Old friends from Ajahn Amaro's previous three visits to the West Coast rallied to support us and a church nearby was rented to hold bi-weekly evening meetings.

We accepted invitations to receive alms-food, we expounded the Dhamma and witnessed the drama of this most colourful and cosmopolitan realm. With an increasing number of hard-core meditators joining us for morning puja, oatmeal and Dhamma discussions, the welcome presence of Venerable Chandako visiting from Wat Pah Nanachat, followed by Sister Medhanandi from Amaravati, and a regular almsround over the whole period, we indeed had us the makings of a monastery.

On the road, we ventured as far south as Wat Pah Mettavanaram, a Thai forest monastery in an avocado orchard, about 40 miles north of the Mexican border. We journeyed as far north as the Sunshine Coast, a couple of hours across the Canadian border. In between, we visited the very Eastern, City of Ten Thousand Buddhas for Wesak, and enjoyed the summer solstice flair of the extremely Western, Esalen Institute, and from the many and varied Buddhist groups we met, both ancient and modern, one could easily imagine we were in a Buddhist country.

However, outnumbered by the homeless urban wanderers of the shopping-cart sect, at least 1000 to one, bombarded by billboards and declarations from people's licence plates (e.g. 'I have PMT and a handgun'), as well as a direct, if not encouraging, response from a burly bodhisattva hanging out of his pick-up truck with a loud 'Get xxxxxxxx real will ya!!!', we were reminded that other major social forces were at work here.

Even though the 'great American nightmare' is alive and well, there is clearly a widespread interest and support for a future monastery. The monastic community in Britain, however, is still depleted following the successive disrobings of the past eighteen months, which makes it unlikely that we will be establishing a monastery in the next year. Although this news was met with some disappointment, the general response has been one of resolute enthusiasm, in the best American tradition, unshakeable in the face of all vicissitudes.

One morning on Mission Street, a man in a wheel-chair greeted us with a smile, an empty tin,

and a few words in Spanish. Ajahn Amaro and I responded with our recently acquired 'Somos monjes Buddhistos' (we are Buddhist monks). 'Ah!' he said, 'Monjes turistas!' 'No, no,' we attempted, 'monjes Buddhistos.' Even with Sister Medhanandi's help in fluent Spanish, we could not convince him otherwise. But he understood that our 'tins' were empty also and accepted our blessings as if we had filled his cup.

So, whether our short visit heralded the arrival of a new monastery or we are simply to be remembered as the 'monjes turistas', it was just what it was, thoroughly worthwhile. Our best wishes to many friends and to all those indifferent and hostile. God Bless America!

Ajahn Amaro and Ven. Subbato are planning a similar visit to the West Coast in 1993.



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EDITORIAL

The Ground of the Temple

There is news in the air concerning stupas and temples, edifices of the holy life whose many forms date from ancient times and transcend cultures. Symbolically, the stupa is the Axis Mundi, the central still point of the world, around which conditioned dhammas turn. It is a place of recollection of the example of a Master and of the transcendent goal, the Deathless, where the elements find rest.

Currently they're building a stupa at Wat Pah Pong, Ajahn Chah's main monastery, and bhikkus have been coming from branch monasteries in Thailand to contribute their efforts in erecting a sacred structure that will serve both as a funeral pyre and a reliquary for the Master's ashes. At the same time, stupas are also being built in New Zealand and at Harnham - and why not? In the realm of spiritual geography 'the world' of consciousness is immeasurably manifold, and the Axis Mundi, be it a Mesopotamian ziggurat, a Chinese pagoda or the mind of a Buddha, is present at each point of stillness that centres it.

There are also plans, which we hope will be realised, for a temple building at Amaravati - functioning as a meditation hall, but also existing in the realm of symbol. While the stupa symbolises the point of attention, the temple represents the spiritual space that allows reflection. Such a space requires the movement of phenomena freely within it, phenomena that are circumscribed only by the purity of the intent to see truth directly. Our word is derived from the Latin 'templum' meaning a consecrated space marked out on the ground within which one observes the movements of Nature; quite literally and more universally, the ground where one stands to contemplate the way things are.

Deep-rooted perceptions of inadequacy, hard-heartedness, subconscious emotional needs for Mother/Father/personal identity - the Western expressions of Mara's host - can all savage the heart's resolve.

In practising contemplation, it doesn't take long to find out about the ground. Meditation may sound ethereal - and life in monasteries seem quaint and padded out with archaic trappings - but the experience within these forms is often one of being quite rudely thrown onto the hard surface of the mind's resistances and unresolved need. Rather than take issue with them (how?) we are encouraged to define them through the many references of Buddha-Dhamma; to map out the ground of existence in terms of the four Foundations of Mindfulness, the five khandha, the Four Noble Truths and so on. That, rather than any other effort, is the heart of the practice. But even that act of marking out the ground is subject to the will and capacity to carry it out. Deep-rooted perceptions of inadequacy, hard-heartedness, subconscious emotional needs for Mother/Father/personal identity - the Western expressions of Mara's host - can all savage the

heart's resolve. Sometimes you even get caught by the suspicion that the whole spiritual path is yet another delusion, another fantasy contrived for the gratification or defence of the ego.

Actually the host of Mara points to a need to go deeper, to penetrate the fragmentary drives that create the self-image and replace them with gestures that are more holistic and sacred. When you enter the soft heart of the mind, you need spiritual references, not psychological techniques, to find a ground that doesn't give way beneath you. This, to a contemplative, is what religious form is for.

Hence spiritual life has always valued symbol and archetype, and a full commitment to enact them in terms of body, speech and mind. The cluster of Pali words that define Buddhist monastic life give some clues as to the form of those gestures: Puja - the daily offering of oneself, and praise (not acquisition) of the timeless truth; Uposatha - the 'drawing close' to the Sublime through precepts and meditation; Pabbajja - the 'Going Forth' from the aims and values of the material world, and a dying to that, so that with Upasampada one is 'raised up', resurrected to be 'born of the Dhamma'.

These create the walls of the temple wherein one discerns the Buddha-image, at first very dimly-lit and neglected, on a makeshift shrine. And there, slowly, the realisation and the gladness dawns. We are indeed fortunate to touch, even briefly, the true and selfless ground of being.

Living according to a tradition, connected to a Way that has thousands of observances - for laity and monastics alike - provides many occasions to enact selflessness in terms of renunciation and in terms of relationship to community. Both of these finally have to be carried out for no other purpose than devotion to Truth, both have their meaning - respectively inducing the still point of no-thing and the vast space of totality - and both are expressions of Ultimate Truth. But maybe at this time of the fragmentation of nations, societies and families, our approach has to be one of communion, of creating the temple that contains all beings. It could be in a crowded hall for a Kathina ceremony, in a house with a family - or wherever the mind of sharing pitches its tent.

Ajahn Sucitto

The Peoples of the Forest

Inspired by a Walk in Dhamma Class

The peoples of the forest
melting into their surroundings like sheets of glass on a frozen lake
adorned, rather than dressed, in the sharp green bracken fronds
And remains of the summer bluebells.
Barefoot on the wet, mulchy carpet of dead leaves
Two of them, strolling idly
With a wary step
cobwebbed and dappled by shafts of sunlight filtering through the beeches
frowning in puzzlement at a coke can
then leaving it alone;
We can smell them the sylvan ones
Dead leaves, wet grass, rain and pine needles

Just hear their crackling footsteps
But never see;
They are but shadows of shadows
Illuminated occasionally in patches
where the sky gets in
And one day they will all be gone
all
all except the two that were walking
civilisation creeping up behind them and a warm wind turning cold at their backs.
As we walk, swathed in dull winter coats
We cannot hear them any more
Do not smell the pines and beeches strong with their presence.
A shafting beam catches my cheek
And as we walk back past the city
A shop window reflects us like a mirror
And we see them at last for the first time;
We, too, then, are the peoples of the forest.

Jesse Errey Age 12

Luang Por Chah's Cremation

16th January, 1993, Wat Pah Pong, Thailand

The senior monks and nuns from the monasteries in England, Switzerland and Italy, as well as Sangha representatives from Australia and New Zealand, have been invited to attend the ceremonies at Wat Pah Pong from the 10-20 of January. Following this, there will be a gathering of Luang Por Chah's Western disciples at Wat Pah Nanachat from the 20-27 th of January.

Travelling to Thailand for the Ceremony

It is expected that there will be in excess of 100,000 people attending the ceremony in Thailand. Two of the Sangha's Thai supporters living in Britain have offered to coordinate travel arrangements for lay people in this country. The party is expected to fly direct to Ubon Rajathani, via Bangkok, where accommodation for lay people has been arranged. For further details please contact either Mudita (0730-812555) in the South of England; or Nantip (091-281-0161) in the North. Last bookings: 31st October.

