

FEARLESS MOUNTAIN

Inside:

From the Monastery

PAGE: 2

The Heart of a Pilgrim

PAGE: 4

Calendar

PAGE: 8

The Island

PAGE: 10

On Sabbatical

PAGE: 13

Upasika

Program PAGE: 15

When I lived with Ajahn Chah, he often admonished us not to worry about teaching others but instead to worry about teaching oneself. The foundation of teaching is always to teach oneself, to teach and encourage oneself. Then, later, one may teach others from the perspective of knowing how to teach oneself. One looks after oneself and then one looks after others.

There is a fundamental difference between study to find a job in the world and study of Dhamma. When we study in the world, it rarely leads to a decrease in greed, hatred and delusion. Yet this is fundamental to our individual study in the Dhamma. We need to ask if greed, hatred and delusion are decreasing, because that is when we experience the fruits of practice. The study of Dhamma is the study of internal truths. Ajahn Chah encouraged his students to close the books of external study and open the book of the heart. In the heart, you can learn much more about what leads to happiness and well-being than in the books of external knowledge. When we lack familiarity with the ways of the heart, we do not recognize



Teaching Oneself

by Ajahn Jundee

the moods and impressions that quickly lead to suffering. We must learn how the moods and contacts of the mind either trick us or support us. When we can understand that, then we can have a chance of establishing true happiness in the heart.

The focus of external knowledge tends to be upon the worldly *dhammas*, those for praise and wealth. The knowledge of the Dhamma, on the other hand, leads to relinquishment or letting go. One is not able to let go until one understands in the heart. The

worldly knowledge available in books does not really change the heart. As a lay man, I knew all about greed, hatred, delusion, impermanence, suffering and not-self. You can read all about these ideas in the books. But this knowledge didn't really change my heart. It was necessary to turn the attention back to the heart itself.

Once after a Dhamma talk, a drunkard came up to me and said he knew all about impermanence, suffering and not-self, but this intellectual knowledge had not helped him. He still had attachments and difficulties. He was not able to let go

(continued on page 12)

FROM THE MONASTERY

Community

The last few months of 2005 were characteristically eventful, with work projects being consolidated and completed, as well as a number of teaching events taking place both in the monastery and within the wider community. During the fall months, Ajahn Prateep and Anagarika Minh An spent many hours each day hunting for a mysterious water leak that was draining the supply to our tanks. Ajahn Sudanto and a crew of helpers also spent many hours working up in the forest, building a new water softening shed and helping Kathy Lewis to build a new meditation platform for Casa Serena guests. As the days grew shorter, the crews would often continue working in the forest in the dark, having begun in the early afternoon. Meanwhile, down at the Dhamma Hall, Ajahn Pasanno and Ajahn Amaro would be giving readings from Bhikkhu Bodhi's new anthology of the Buddha's teachings, and engaging in question-and-answer sessions with the rest of the community.

In early fall, the fourth annual two-day bicycle pilgrimage from Spirit Rock Meditation Center to Abhayagiri Monastery took place, with a visit to the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas. The bicycle journey combined aspects of a recreational cycling event with those of a pilgrimage. Many challenges faced the riders during this 150-mile ride, including a wide variety of hills between Marin and Mendocino counties. The riders were supported by a large volunteer crew. During the two days there was time for meditation and Dhamma teachings as well, with Ajahn Amaro and Anagarikas Aaron and Minh An following along in the monastery van and meeting

the group at various points along the way. The last and final stop was Abhayagiri Monastery, where the riders were met by Ajahn Amaro and other members of the monastic community, and took part in a closing ceremony of chanting and blessings.

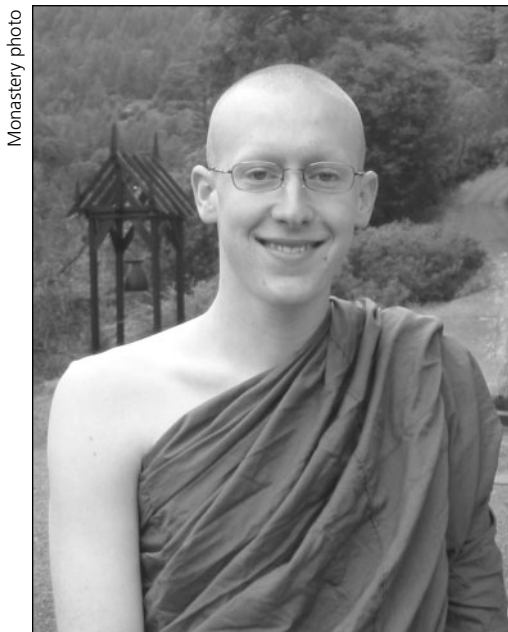
The day after the bicycle pilgrimage, Ajahn Amaro, Ajahn

Sudanto, and Tan Satimanto attended the 11th Annual Monastic Conference, together with over 30 other monastics from different Buddhist traditions. The event, held at Shasta Abbey in Mt. Shasta, California, was originally conceived by a group of Western nuns of the Gelugpa Tibetan tradition and has evolved into a much-cherished opportunity for Buddhist monastics living in the West to meet and share their practices and experiences. It is both an occasion for old friends to reconnect and for others to meet for the first time.

This year's event was comprised of nuns and monks of fifteen different lineages, including Soto Zen, Chinese Ch'an, Gelugpa and Nyingmapa Tibetan lineages, two varieties of Vietnamese Zen, and both Sri Lankan and Thai Theravada—a grand and colorful array of robes and streams of knowledge and experience. The gathering is mostly designed to be an opportunity to meet and support each other, rather than being filled with academic expositions, however there were a number of presentations on this year's theme of "Practice," which included an offering from Ajahn Amaro on the *Dhutanga*, or "austere" practices.

Ajahn Brahmavamsa (affectionately known as Ajahn Brahm), an English monk, disciple of Ajahn Chah, and abbot of Bodhinyana Monastery in Perth, Australia, stayed with us for three days in November. Having come to the U.S. on a tour sponsored by the publishers of his recent collection of stories and teachings, entitled *Who Ordered This Truckload of Dung?*, Ajahn Brahm took some time out to "spend Thanksgiving with family," as he put it. On his way to the monastery he stopped by the Angela Center in Santa Rosa to see Ajahn Amaro, who was leading the annual retreat, which by all accounts was a treat for everyone there. At the monastery he had time to reconnect with Ajahn Pasanno and meet with the community, answering Dhamma questions and offering a much-appreciated talk. It was a lively and joyous three days.

On December 9, Anagarika Aaron formally requested the Going Forth, or *Pabbajja*, as it is called in the Pali language, in a ceremony held after our regular evening puja. After completing a year in training as an *anagarika*, he decided to make a further one-year commitment to being a *samanera*, or novice monk. Many members of his family came to the monastery to witness the occasion (including his step father, who arrived unexpectedly, having ridden his motorbike all the way from Tucson, Arizona), as did a large group of lay supporters from different locations—creating a warm and supportive atmosphere. Ajahn Pasanno led us through the formal proceedings, carefully explaining each section and conveying both the literal and symbolic meaning of the chanting and the gesture of going forth. After the exhortation had finished, the ajahns revealed Aaron's new name, Thitabho, meaning "one of unwavering radiance."



Monastery photo

Samanera Thitabho



Monastic gathering at Lake Siskiyou, near Shasta Abbey

Ajahn Prateep left Abhayagiri in November in order to help Ajahn Nyanadhammo and the Sangha at Wat Pah Nanachat prepare for the WAM (World Abbots' Meeting), which was to be held there in January. It was felt that his skill in building and construction would be supportive to the Wat Pah Nanachat community at this time, since there was a plan to build some new kutis and washroom facilities before the large gathering of senior Western monks arrived. He intends to return to the community in spring of this year. Pamela Kirby completed her year as caretaker of Casa Serena in October. We thank her for her diligence and care in making Casa Serena a conducive place for lay women to practice. Anagarika Kevin also left the community early this year; we wish him all the best for the future and extend our gratitude to him for his wide ranging service to the monastery.

Tan Jotipalo returned to the monastery in early December, having spent the better part of 2005 living at Arrow River Forest Hermitage in Thunder Bay, Ontario. As many are aware, he also spent several months accompanied by Austin Stewart on a pilgrimage heading north up the Mississippi River. They both became ill, however, and the pilgrimage, which had been rich with many blessings, insights (and challenges) had to come to an end sooner than it was hoped.

Ajahn Pasanno left Abhayagiri in late December for his time of sabbatical (see page 13) and also to take part in the gathering at Wat Pah Nanachat and the CALM pilgrimage (see page 7). Around the same time, Ajahn Amaro, Ajahn Sudanto

and Debbie Stamp also left for Thailand. Ajahn Amaro and Ajahn Sudanto took part in the above events, and also had an opportunity to reconnect with old Sangha friends from around the world, such as former Abhayagiri residents Tan Thanuttaro, who has been living in Thailand for the last little while, Tan Achalo, who has been staying with Tan Ajahn Anan (a much respected disciple of Luang Por Chah) at Wat Marp Jun, Tan Hasapañño, who is currently staying at the secluded Wat Dtao Dum on the Thai-Burmese border, and Tan Phasuko and Tan Nyaniko, who met the group in Bangkok and went on to Wat Pah Nanachat. Both ajahns reported having a very fruitful and nourishing time, particularly in terms of the qualities of *kalyanamitta* (noble friendship) and a sense of communality and harmony within the wider Sangha. Debbie also took part in the bus tour and other activities, and will be spending February and March on retreat at

Wat Boonyavat, the monastery of Tan Ajahn Dtun, also a highly revered disciple of Luang Por Chah.

During this year's winter retreat, the monthly talks at Berkeley Buddhist Monastery have been led by Fred (Santideva) Kral, Kathryn Guta and Rev. Heng Sure. The retreat itself has been supported by an excellent crew—Michael Dietzel, Bruno Casolari and Lee Mintz staying for the full three months, with Alex Perotti staying for the first month and Catherine Direen staying for the last. Their selfless giving and harmonious nature have benefited the community greatly over this time.

Teachings

From September 16 to 19 Ajahn Amaro and a group of six Abhayagiri residents made the journey to Tucson, Arizona, to receive three days of teachings from His Holiness the Dalai Lama. The teachings were centered around the eighth chapter of Shantideva's *Bodhicharyavatara* (The Bodhisattva Way of Life), an eighth-century Sanskrit text. Ajahn Amaro joined a panel of other Western Buddhist teachers in offering evening-session commentaries on His Holiness's teachings. Much gratitude goes to Samanera Thitabho's family, who generously offered lodgings and hospitality to five of us during this time.

Abhayagiri once again hosted the annual Spirit Rock Teen Retreat from September 2–4. Fifteen teens and nine adults were here this year, with both new and old faces in attendance.

(continued on page 14)



The Heart of a Pilgrim

by Jayanta

From January 1 to 17, 2006, the eleven women and men who make up the CALM (Community of Abhayagiri Lay Ministers) group journeyed on a pilgrimage to Thailand under the guidance of Ajahns Pasanno and Amaro. This group recently completed over three years of training aimed at enhancing their leadership abilities and grounding them further in the Dhamma in order to better serve Abhayagiri and beyond. The Thailand pilgrimage was envisioned as a way to link the CALM members more firmly to the roots of the Thai Forest Tradition and to strengthen ties with fellow lay supporters there.

The CALM group visited many Thai forest monasteries, met with senior monastics, toured meditation centers, witnessed Buddharaupa pouring ceremonies, sponsored and served at an outdoor kitchen during Ajahn Chah's memorial celebration, and more. Following are reflections from group member Jayanta (Shirley Johannesen) of British Columbia, Canada.

Off on a journey—one that I anticipated would be an adventure of the heart, regardless of what and how things unfolded. I love both the countryside and the history of Thailand, so the idea of a pilgrimage was exciting. It was not my first trip to Thailand; therefore the culture and the customs were somewhat familiar and comfortable. Especially dear to me are the Thai people, whose approach to life is deeply influenced by the Buddhist teachings and its psychology.

In 1974 I sat my first vipassana retreat with the Canadian Buddhist nun Dhamma Dinna, and it left me with the feeling that I had “come home” after years of spiritual searching. My practice and study of the Dhamma began earnestly at that time. Then, some years later, I met Ajahn Pasanno and was introduced to the teachings of Ajahn Chah, which impressed me because they were so simple and straightforward. The forest tradition was the root of both my teachers, and so I was hoping that this pilgrimage would provide a deeper understanding and connection to Theravada Buddhism and in particular to Buddhist meditation. I also had an inner feeling that this trip would provide some clarity and direction not only for my own practice but also for future sharing and teaching of the Dhamma to my students.

To begin the pilgrimage we all gathered together and stayed several nights at Sathira-Dhammasathan. This beautiful seven-acre retreat center and monastery is located within the Bangkok city limits, but it feels worlds apart. Formerly an undeveloped rice paddy, the grounds are now graced with mature trees, lotus ponds, winding paths, and numerous meditative

structures. The venerated Buddhist nun MaeChee Sansanee Sthirasuta is the founder and director. A well-known and respected nun, she uses Dhamma to bring peace, harmony, and respect—without discrimination—into a world of suffering. MaeChee radiates a pure heart, a joyous smile, and a lot of power. As a result of these wonderful qualities, the center is thriving with life and energy, which I experienced as a natural manifestation of her practice and dedication to the Buddha’s teaching. Over many years she has developed a wide variety of programs: teaching meditation to convicts in prison, providing support to abused and deserted mothers, and educating youth. It was very inspirational to see the center, meet the people involved, and learn about all that is being offered by MaeChee Sansanee’s community. I came away not only with ideas for future projects but also with a contented heart, knowing that many of my own Dhamma undertakings are similar (although on a smaller scale!). I am convinced that right intention and a pure heart will lead to inner and outer peace and harmony.

Further along on our journey we visited and stayed a night at Wat Sunandavanaram near the Burmese border. Venerable Ajahn Mitsuo Gavesako, a Japanese disciple of Venerable Ajahn Chah, is the abbot. As with Sathira-Dhammasathan, this monastery serves several distinct groups of people. Although the physical setting is different, the focus on helping others is the same. Ajahn Gavesako teaches insight meditation and runs classes at the monastery both for the general public as well as for large groups of civil servants, county officials, and students. One of his projects involves working with the government to protect the forest and to reforest some of the devastated areas around the monastery. Another is the Maya Gotami Foundation, whose goal it is to provide education, moral training, food and clothing to rural students in need. He has also established a project to help victims of the Tsunami disaster in southern Thailand. Here in the West, we might categorize this as “engaged Buddhism,” but for Ajahn Gavesako and others like him, it is simply living the Dhamma. Learning about his many efforts created a further opening and inspiration to the endless possibilities of sharing, giving, kindness, and compassion.

Something very dear to my heart is meditation. For over thirty years I have had the opportunity to do extensive practice and study, both formal and informal, in community and in solitude. So, needless to say, I was also excited to visit some of the quieter forest monasteries that focused on individual practice. They had a familiar feeling of ease and comfort—although I had to be very mindful of the many cultural differences such as when to bow and in what sequence. The abbots at these monasteries are highly esteemed disciples of Ajahn Chah; just to be in their presence was an honor. Peacefulness emanated through their gentle facial expressions, shining eyes, wide smiles, and quiet composure. I felt privileged to meet the senior teachers, to pay respects, to make offerings, to talk with them, to listen to the Dhamma, and to hear their personal stories. They encouraged us to ask questions and wanted to know where we were from, the training we have had, and our connection with Abhayagiri monastery. I felt a great deal of gratitude for their dedication to the practice, to keeping the Dhamma alive, and to sharing the Buddha’s teaching.

As we travelled and stayed at the different forest monasteries affiliated with Ajahn Chah, the accommodations ranged from simple and basic (where there was no electricity and a trip to the toilet—in the forest, in the dark of the night—was an adventure) to simple and elaborate. In some

(continued on page 6)



From top: lotus pond at Sathira-Dhammasathan; Ajahn Anan; Jayanta, Usa, Pesala, Mettika, Cittasubha and Ladawan; meal offering. (Photos by Kondaña and Geof Karlson.)

The Heart of a Pilgrim

(continued from page 5)

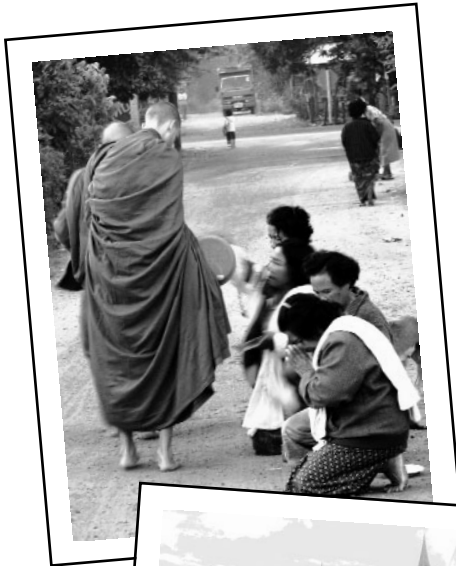
locations our mosquito nets were greatly appreciated and at one monastery we joked about the “five-star” restroom—and what a treat it was! Although our accommodations were simple and shared, I noticed that the Thai people (even the obviously wealthy) seemed very content without all the luxuries that we (and they) are likely accustomed to. For me personally in these settings, I experienced some quiet and spaciousness of heart/mind, joy, and a great appreciation for the austere beauty of the simplicity.

Many of the monasteries were in the forest, in mountainous terrain, and had abundant wildlife all around. *Kutis* (meditation huts) were scattered in all directions, along with walking paths, a meditation hall, a kitchen, and a few other buildings. I found these places to be physically similar to Abhayagiri. A favorite monastery for our group was Wat Poo Jom Gom, a small forest retreat facility that Ajahn Pasanno had established along the Mekong River. Ajahn Pasanno was also instrumental in the development of the Nature Care Foundation to protect the forest in that area and the formation of a cooperative handicraft center to provide a livelihood for the local people. What wonderful Dhamma work he and the other monastics have done, and continue to do. Our time there was very rich as we explored the area, met the people, and relived some of Ajahn Pasanno’s stories.

As CALM members and representatives of Abhayagiri Monastery, we had the privilege, for three days, to sponsor an outdoor dana kitchen at Ajahn Chah’s annual memorial celebration. It was the first time that *farangs* (foreigners) had taken part in preparing and offering food to the monks and the pilgrims at this celebration. We were indeed a novelty and attracted long lines of curious Thais waiting to taste one of our funnel cakes. Dressed in our colorful “Abhayagiri Kitchen Crew” aprons, our “*sukha*” and “*mudita*” crews worked either the four-to-seven a.m. or three-to-seven p.m. shift. The first afternoon a 15-year-old Thai schoolgirl, Ah, stopped by the kitchen and ended spending the rest of the shift helping us while practicing her English. She was such a delight, fitted right in with our booth, and was invaluable as a translator. What really impressed me was that she came again early the next morning. I can’t imagine my 14-year-old granddaughter getting up at 4 a.m. to help make funnel cakes! I was also warmly touched by the recognition and gratitude expressed to us by both the pilgrims and the monastics. Ours seemed like such a small offering compared to everything that we were experiencing and receiving. I trust that our presence there (and the offering of funnel cakes) will help nourish and strengthen future ties with Abhayagiri’s many friends and supporters in Thailand.

The formal part of the Ajahn Chah memorial celebration was huge and “awesome”! The procession included 770 monks, silently and humbly circumambulating Ajahn Chah’s *chedi*—followed by thousands of lay pilgrims dressed in white, each holding a bouquet of flowers, candle, and incense. What a contrast to the small handful of monks and laypeople that I experience at Abhayagiri. I talked with many people who had traveled from other parts of Thailand and from other countries. They had come to Wat Pah Pong to pay respects, to make offerings, to show gratitude to Ajahn Chah for his life, his teaching, his wisdom, and for establishing monasteries not only in Thailand but around the world. He has definitely had a major influence on Theravada Buddhism—and we in America have the good fortune of having access to this tradition through Abhayagiri and Venerable Ajahns Pasanno and Amaro.

The monks get a lot of support and respect in Thailand, more than I



From top: on almsround; Thai-style house; Ajahn Pasanno as tour guide; Buddharupa pouring (Photos by Kondañña and Geof Karlson.)

have seen in the West. Joy and happiness arose when I saw the great reverence that the Thais have towards the Western monks at Wat Pah Nanachat. The monastics walk on daily almsrounds as part of an ancient tradition—maintaining a relationship between the monks and the surrounding community. The faith, devotion, and generosity of the lay supporters were wonderful things to experience and be part of. I saw very young children at the monastery, with their parents holding their hands in *añjali* (paying respect), and placing food in the alms bowls as the monastics walked the village pathways on *pindabat*. The mounds of food were incredible, and many people arrived at the monastery loaded down with all sorts of donations. To join the fray of the numerous volunteers in the kitchen—sorting, organizing, arranging the long buffet tables, and then offering the meal—was great fun. The Thai lay people are always smiling and willing to help. Even though I only knew a few Thai words, they would explain and show me what to do. I learned a lot about “presentation” as the food was carefully and beautifully arranged on the trays.

In America most people come to learn meditation and are later introduced to virtue (precepts) and generosity (*dana*). It is the other way around in the East. I am very grateful to the Thai people for their patience and kindness in guiding us in monastic etiquette, as well as for their hospitality and graciousness in hosting us at the many events we attended. I am greatly inspired by their example and their happy faces. The Buddha’s teachings are based on a foundation of virtue and generosity. From my own practice, giving and helping others creates a good feeling and sense of spaciousness in my mind/heart, resulting in warm and heartfelt connections. On the pilgrimage I experienced this kindness and generosity in so many different ways. Generosity was not just expressed through material things, but included generosity of time and service and giving of oneself.

Abhayagiri Monastery is small in comparison to Wat Pah Nanachat, and is the only Ajahn Chah branch monastery in the U.S. However, the bond between Abhayagiri and the other Western monasteries was very evident as the abbots gathered for the Abbots’ Meeting. I feel that we all benefit immensely from the connection to such a large and stable Thai forest tradition. For the CALM group it was an exciting time to meet with Ajahn Chah’s senior disciples and one thing that resonated with me was how fortunate we were to be on this pilgrimage—a result of Ajahn Pasanno’s *paramis* of generosity, energy, patience, wisdom, determination, and kindness. How humbling How appreciative How very true!

Gratitude. At the top of the list is Ajahn Pasanno, for his commitment to Abhayagiri Monastery and to the CALM group. Ajahn Pasanno is certainly highly regarded and respected in the West, but to witness the esteem in which he is held in Thailand, everywhere we went, was truly amazing. The Thais would quietly and humbly approach him with hands in *añjali* and make the traditional three prostrations in the meditation hall, on the pathway, or wherever they happened to meet him. I could feel their joy and happiness when they met him and this would bring a smile to my face.

What a joy it is to be a part of Ajahn Chah’s lineage and to work together with both the lay and the monastic communities. It is indeed a rich experience to lend a hand and to support the tradition. It is such a lovely circle of giving and receiving between the monastic and lay communities. It is a chance to express how much the teachings mean to me and to the support that is given. I am most grateful and very happy to be able to serve Abhayagiri and the larger community whenever the occasion presents itself. ❧



From top: CALM “kitchen” at Wat Pah Pong; Mettika serves funnel cakes; ruins at Ayutthaya; Jayanta. (Photos by Kondaña and Geof Karlson.)

The Island That You Cannot Go Beyond

by Ven. Ajahn Sumedho

A difficulty with the word *Nibbana* is that its meaning is beyond the power of words to describe. It is, essentially, undefinable.

Another difficulty is that many Buddhists see Nibbana as something unobtainable—as so high and so remote that we're not worthy enough to try for it. Or we see Nibbana as a goal, as an unknown, undefined something that we should somehow try to attain.

Most of us are conditioned in this way. We want to achieve or attain something that we don't have now. So Nibbana is looked at as something that, if you work hard, keep the *sila*, meditate diligently, become a monastic, devote your life to practice, then your reward might be that eventually you attain Nibbana—even though you're not sure what it is.

Ajahn Chah would use the words “the reality of non-grasping” as the definition for Nibbana: realizing the reality of nongrasping. That helps to put it in a context because the emphasis is on awakening to how we grasp and hold on even to words like *Nibbana* or *Buddhism* or *practice* or *sila* or whatever.

It's often said that the Buddhist way is not to grasp. But that can become just another statement that we grasp and hold on to. It's a Catch 22: No matter how hard you try to make sense out of it, you end up in total confusion because of the limitation of language and perception. You have to go beyond language and perception. And the only way to go beyond thinking and emotional habit is through awareness of them, through awareness of thought, through awareness of emotion. “The Island that you cannot go beyond” is the metaphor for this state of being awake and aware, as opposed to the concept of becoming awake and aware.

In meditation classes, people often start with a basic delusion that they never challenge: the idea that “I'm someone who grasps and has a lot of desires, and I have to practice in order to get rid of these desires and to stop grasping and clinging to things. I shouldn't cling to anything.” That's often the position we start from. So we start our practice from this basis and, many times, the result is disillusionment and disappointment, because our practice is based on the grasping of an idea.

Eventually, we realize that no matter how much we try to get rid of desire and not grasp anything, no matter what we do—become a monk, an ascetic, sit for hours and hours, attend retreats over and over again, do all the things we believe will get rid of these grasping tendencies—we end up feeling disappointed because the basic delusion has never been recognized.

This is why the metaphor of “The Island that you cannot go beyond” is so very powerful, because it points to the principle of an awareness that you can't get beyond. It's very simple, very direct, and you can't conceive it. You have to trust it. You have to trust this simple ability that we all have to be fully present and fully awake, and begin to recognize the grasping and the ideas we have taken on about ourselves, about the world around us, about our thoughts and perceptions and feelings.

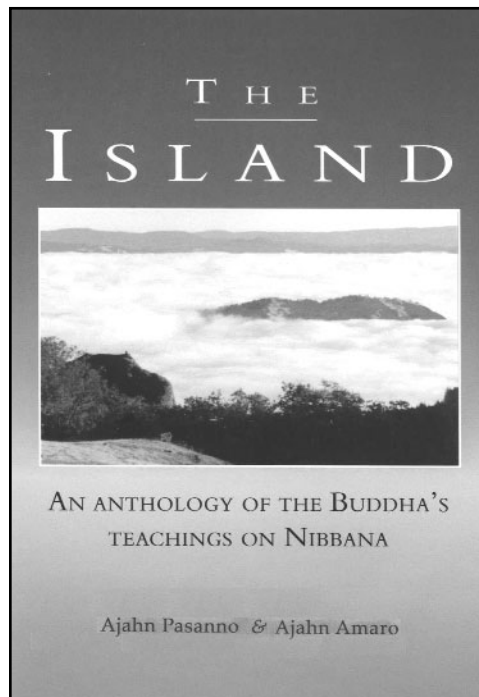
The way of mindfulness is the way of recognizing conditions just as they are. We simply recognize and acknowledge their presence, without blaming them or judging them or criticizing them or praising them. We allow them to be, the positive and the negative both. And, as we trust in this way of mindfulness more and more, we begin to realize the reality of “The Island that you cannot go beyond.”

When I started practicing meditation I felt I was somebody who was very confused, and I wanted to get out of this confusion and get rid of my problems and become someone who was not confused, someone who was a clear thinker, someone who would maybe one day become enlightened. That was the impetus that got me going in the direction of Buddhist meditation and monastic life.

But then, by reflecting on this position that “I am somebody who needs to do something,” I began to see it as a created condition. It was an assumption

that I had created. And if I operated from that assumption, then I might develop all kinds of skills and live a life that was praiseworthy and good and beneficial to myself and to others but, at the end of the day, I might feel quite disappointed that I did not attain the goal of Nibbana.

Fortunately, the whole direction of monastic life is one where everything is directed at the present. You're always learning to challenge and to see through your assumptions about yourself. One of the major challenges is the assumption that “I am somebody who needs to do something in order to become enlightened in the future.” Just by recognizing this as an assumption I had created, that which is aware knows it is something created out of ignorance, out of not understanding. When we see and recognize this fully, then we stop creating the assumptions.



Awareness is not about making value judgments about our thoughts or emotions or actions or speech. Awareness is about knowing these things fully—that they are what they are, at this moment. So what I found very helpful was learning to be aware of conditions without judging them. In this way, the resultant karma of past actions and speech as it arises in the present is fully recognized without compounding it, without making it into a problem. It is what it is. What arises ceases. As we recognize that and allow things to cease according to their nature, the realization of cessation gives us an increasing amount of faith in the practice of nonattachment and letting go.

The attachments that we have, even to good things like Buddhism, can also be seen as attachments that blind us. That doesn't mean we need to get rid of Buddhism. We merely recognize attachment as attachment and that we create it ourselves out of ignorance. As we keep reflecting on this, the tendency toward attachment falls away, and the reality of nonattachment, of non-grasping, reveals itself in what we can say is Nibbana.

If we look at it in this way, Nibbana is here and now. It's not an attainment in the future. The reality is here and now. It is so very simple, but beyond description. It can't be bestowed or even conveyed, it can only be known by each person for themselves.

As one begins to realize or to recognize nongrasping as the Way, then emotionally one can feel quite frightened by it. It can seem like a kind of annihilation is taking place—all that I think I am in the world, all that I regard as stable and real, starts falling apart—and it can be frightening. But if we have the faith to continue bearing with these emotional reactions and allow things that arise to cease, to appear and disappear according to their nature, then we find our stability not in achievement or attaining, but in being—being awake, being aware.

Many years ago, in William James' book *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, I found a poem by Charles A. Swinburne. In spite of having what some have described as a degenerate mind, Swinburne produced some very powerful reflections:

Here begins the sea that ends not till the world's end.
Where we stand,
Could we know the next high sea-mark set beyond
these waves that gleam,
We should know what never man hath known, nor
eye of man hath scanned . . .

Ah, but here man's heart leaps, yearning towards the
gloom with venturous glee,
From the shore that hath no shore beyond it, set in all
the sea.

(from "On the Verge" in *A Midsummer Vacation*)

I found in this poem an echo of the Buddha's response to Kappa's question in the Sutta-Nipata:

Next was the brahmin student Kappa:

"Sir," he said, "there are people stuck midstream in the terror and the fear of the rush of the river of being, and death and decay overwhelm them. For their sakes, Sir, tell me where to find an island, tell me where there is solid ground beyond the reach of all this pain."

"Kappa," said the Master, "for the sake of those people stuck in the middle of the river of being, overwhelmed by death and decay, I will tell you where to find solid ground.

"There is an island, an island which you cannot go beyond. It is a place of nothingness, a place of non-possession and of nonattachment. It is the total end of death and decay, and this is why I call it Nibbana [the extinguished, the cool].

"There are people who, in mindfulness, have realized this and are completely cooled here and now. They do not become slaves working for Mara, for Death; they cannot fall into his power."

(from SN 1092–95, Ven. Saddhatissa trans.)

In English, *nothingness* can sound like annihilation, like nihilism. But you can also emphasize the "thingness" so that it becomes "no-thingness." So Nibbana is not a thing that you can find. It is the place of no-thingness, a place of nonpossession, a place of nonattachment. It is a place, as Ajahn Chah said, where you experience "the reality of nongrasping." ♡

From the introduction to the forthcoming *The Island: An Anthology of the Buddha's Teachings on Nibbana*, by Ajahn Pasanno and Ajahn Amaro, to be published Fall 2006.

Ajahn Sumedho was ordained in Thailand in 1966 and is currently abbot of Amaravati Monastery outside London.

Here, Ananda, having gone to the forest, to the foot of a tree or to an empty hut, a monk reflects thus: "This is peaceful, this is sublime, that is, the stilling of all formations, the relinquishment of all acquisitions, the destruction of craving, cessation, Nibbana. Anguttara Nikaya 10.60

Teaching Oneself *(continued from page 1)*

even though he understood the concepts of impermanence and suffering and felt their sting. There is a qualitative difference between knowledge and attention directed outside. When attention is directed towards the heart, the natural development is mindfulness and wisdom. When mindfulness and wisdom have an opportunity to function freely in our lives, it is natural to turn towards letting go and relinquishment.

The teaching of the Buddha is often not palatable to those in the world because it goes against the direction or flow of the world. It is important to understand that there are two different directions. There is the direction of the world and the direction of the Dhamma. If that weren't the case, there wouldn't have to be a Buddha to point out the Dhamma. However, it is necessary for a Buddha to come along and point out a different direction. Then there is an opportunity to step back from the pull of the worldly tendencies and settle into the stream of the Dhamma. The Dhamma stream takes a different direction, the direction leading to peace and clarity.

For myself, I don't have much external knowledge. Being from the countryside and from the outer provinces, I didn't go to school much. My temperament is more inclined to study the natural phenomena that I experience. When I came to train with Ajahn Chah, he understood my nature and gave me the simple meditation object of *Buddho*. I worked with *Buddho* for quite a while. I wasn't interested in the external study of books. I had faith in the teaching of the Buddha and confidence in Ajahn Chah, yet there was still an underlying doubt. Would I ever get anywhere? What is all this *Buddho* stuff? But as my meditation practice grew, I learned that *Buddho* was a mirror to understanding the movements, thoughts and impressions of the mind. I saw the way the mind goes out and entangles itself. *Buddho* became an increasingly stable mirror to understand the mind itself. My practice continued from that base.

What one considers as intelligent or stupid, accomplished or unaccomplished is different in the world and in the Dhamma. What do we know? What don't we know? How does our intelligence or foolishness manifest? We need to recognize our own ignorance or lack of knowledge. When we do that, it shows a humility that is wisdom. Even if there is understanding and intelligence, we need to see that it is only understanding. We need to recognize the limits of understanding and intelligence. Once, a disciple came to visit Ajahn Chah. Ajahn Kuhn didn't talk much and loved solitude. He would come from time to time to check in on his practice with Ajahn Chah. When Ajahn Chah asked how he was getting on with his practice, Ajahn Kuhn replied that he still seemed pretty foolish and ignorant. Ajahn Chah said that was all right. He directed him to look after the ignorance and know that it is there. The wisdom of the world and the wisdom of Dhamma are not the same thing.

Ajahn Chah praises someone who knows how to look after his ignorance. Views, opinions and intelligence can easily intoxicate someone who doesn't do this. Problems in the world often come from intelligent people who don't understand their boundaries. When a rice stalk is green and unripe, it stands up straight. As it matures and ripens, the stalk bends closer to the ground. The same is true with humans. If we don't know the difference between intelligence and foolishness, we will be trapped in our lack of understanding. We will stand up straight with pride and arrogance. With true wisdom and understanding, there is a humility and gentleness.

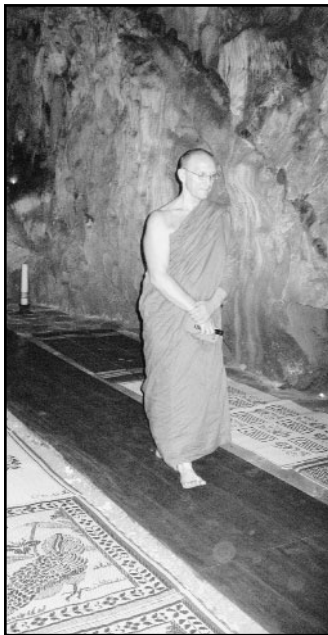
Understanding ourselves is central to our practice. To do this, we reflect on natural things within us rather than going for external knowledge. A pot that is empty makes a lot of noise. A pot full of useful things doesn't make much noise when you bang it. We also don't need to make a lot of noise. We need to put useful things into our container, and these things are mindfulness and wisdom.

One of the teachings Ajahn Chah emphasized over and over again was "speak little, eat little, sleep little." He encouraged us to reflect on this. Why did he do this? Humans by their nature do not to understand balance. Rather, there is the tendency is to refer to extremes. We may know what is a lot and a little, but we don't know what is just right. If someone tells us to speak, eat and sleep just enough, we will usually interpret this exhortation according to our preferences and defilements. We won't reflect deeply on what really is just enough. However, we can use "little" as an entryway and in this way find balance. We can reflect on what is just enough. We need to challenge ourselves and pull away from following preferences and standards that are comfortable for our defilements.

Ajahn Chah emphasized that we should not follow our untrained minds. Eating, speaking, sleeping little, we can put the brakes on our conditioning, habits and tendencies. We can see the reactions in the mind. When we follow our habits we cannot recognize clearly where our defilements lie. In the early days of practice with Ajahn Chah, he often suggested that we push our favorite foods to the side. So too, when you are moved to start a conversation, you might try to put the brakes on. What underlies the movements and tendencies of mind that lead us to indulge in sleep? What are the motivations? The standard is set at "little" to help us turn the attention around into the heart. The natural flow of the mind is out into the world. We need to learn to work with that. We need to train to see the mind itself. ♥

Adapted from a talk given to the CALM group in January, 2006, translated by Ajahn Pasanno.

Ajahn Jundee was born in Ajahn Chah's home village in Ubon Province,. He has been a monk for over thirty years and is currently abbot of Wat Pah Ampawan in Chonburi, Thailand.

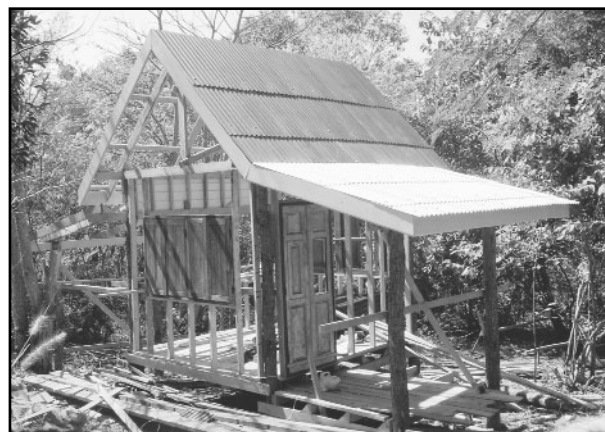
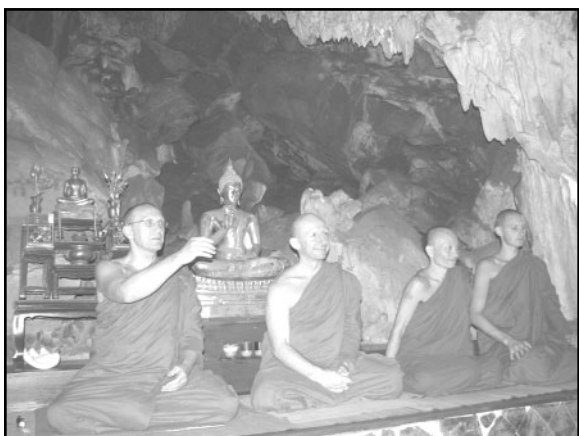


Ajahn Pasanno on Sabbatical

Ajahn Pasanno will be spending the next year or so on retreat in Thailand. He departed Abhayagiri in December 2005. It has been a very long time since Ajahn was able to spend an extended period on his own without being engaged in a teaching and leadership position. He has been particularly busy these last few years. During Ajahn Amaro's recent (and much deserved) sabbatical, Ajahn Pasanno was the focus of the community's attention, day in, day out.

Ajahn Pasanno intends to use the coming period of time to deepen both study and practice. A well-kept and spacious cave dwelling has been offered for his use during the dry season, and according to all reports, it is an inspiring place to practice. During the *vassa* (rainy season), when the cave becomes damp, he will reside in a *kuti* built for him in the nearby hills. The only contact he will have with other people is on the occasion of the daily meal offering and a public talk now and then.

The community wishes him the best for the coming year!



Clockwise from top left: walking meditation path in the cave; sign at entrance to cave ("Cave of the Lion's Roar Sangha Hermitage"); with kuti/cave donors (Khun Nong kneeling on left); kuti with antique teak doors and windows; on the meditation platform inside the cave. (Photos by Kondaña and Geof Karlson.)



Buddhist Bicycle Pilgrimage, Fall 2006

The Buddhist Bicycle Pilgrimage hits the road for its fifth year! This inspiring journey will bring together riders, volunteers and monastics, who will venture from Spirit Rock Center to the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas to Abhayagiri over the span of two days. Don't miss this opportunity to build community, experience the challenges of pilgrimage, and enjoy the great outdoors all at the same time! We're looking for volunteers, riders and supporters.

For more information (and photos!), visit www.dharmawheels.org or email buddhistbike@yahoo.com.

FROM THE MONASTERY

Monastery photo



Ven. Ahimsako, dancing on the dirt

*(continued
from page 3)*

The group was led by Heather Sundberg, leader of the Spirit Rock Family Program and longtime supporter of the monastery. The group's stay included following the Eight Precepts, and activities ranged from silent meditation, chanting, and Dhamma discussions to hikes on the land, solitary forest

meditation, and communal work.

Ajahn Amaro once again participated in the Mind and Life Dialogues, held in Washington, D.C., in November 2005. The topic was "The Science and Clinical Applications of Meditation," reflecting the growing interest in meditation within modern medicine and biomedical science that has arisen over the past thirty years. Ajahn gave a presentation on the Buddha's teaching of the Four Noble Truths and the Discourse on the Two Arrows (S 36.6), which was reportedly well received and much appreciated by those present. From November 18 to 27, Ajahn Amaro and Taraniya led the annual Thanksgiving retreat, held at the Angela Center in Santa Rosa. Aside from Ajahn coming down with a severe cold and missing out on the last few days, the retreat went very well, and it was a rewarding and valuable time for all.

Ajahn Pasanno co-led a yoga and meditation daylong with Cator Shachoy in early December. The subject was "Mindfulness of the Body," and the day of teachings drew from Ajahn Pasanno's experience practicing with the Buddha's teaching on the First Foundation of Mindfulness and Cator's training in Iyengar yoga and Buddhist meditation. Also in December, Ajahn Amaro led a daylong retreat at Spirit Rock on the theme of "Entering the Silence," and then went on to

the Insight Meditation Center in Redwood City to offer some Dhamma reflections and to have an informal tea with the children's Dhamma group there.

Development

This year the monastery began its long-awaited construction of the final buildings belonging to the first phase of a four-phase building plan. The first of the buildings to go up was the Cloister duplex. There were many monks and lay supporters who gave their time and effort to make the construction of this building go smoothly. We have almost completed the construction of the two new buildings that will form part of the cloister area. One is an office complex, while the other consists of much needed bathrooms and a resting room with disabled facilities. They will hopefully be completed and ready by the end of March 2006.

The community is also currently planning the construction of two new elders' cabins. One of these cabins will be built for Ajahn Pasanno, while the second will be built for visiting elder monks. It is hoped that one of the same design will be constructed for Ajahn Amaro in 2007. In addition, one cabin of simpler design will also be built this year. We have designated the sites for these and begun preparing the locations in order to begin construction in the spring.

—*The Sangha*



New cloister office building (back left) and restrooms (back right) under construction

Monastery photo

2006 Upasika Program to Feature a New Study Session Format

We hope you can join us at Abhayagiri for these days of community, Dhamma study, meditation, and renewal. The Upasika Program exists to provide an opportunity for lay women and men (*upasikas/upasakas*) to deepen their practice and their relationship to the monastery.

This year's program will feature a modified format for the afternoon study session, with each of the year's five Upasika Days focusing on a single topic. Topics will range from sutta studies, devotional practices, practice in daily life, and more. Each presentation will allow for group interaction and questions-and-answers.

More details of the program follow:

Purpose

- * To enhance individual practice and increase self-discipline through making a formal commitment to spiritual training.
- * To deepen both the intellectual and experiential understanding of the Dhamma.
- * To have more supportive contact with like-minded people and the ordained Sangha.
- * To be better equipped to communicate the Teachings to others.

Guidelines

- * To undertake to live by the Three Refuges and the Five Precepts, with the Theravada Forest Tradition as the focus of one's practice.
- * To attend regular gatherings with other Upasikas, either at the Monastery or in your own homes.
- * To visit the monastery and formally take the Refuges and Precepts at least quarterly.
- * To observe the Uposatha Days of the full and new moon in some fashion appropriate to your living situation.
- * To practice meditation daily.
- * To find some time each year to go on retreat.
- * To attend at least one festival day or communal gathering at the Monastery each year.
- * To cultivate a basic working knowledge of the Teachings.
- * To support the Sangha according to your means and abilities.
- * To keep to the training for at least one year after having made the formal commitment.

Those interested in making such a commitment are invited to visit Abhayagiri on one of the Upasika Days (see right), or to arrange to visit at some other mutually convenient time. The commitment ceremony for new Upasikas is quite simple: each individual brings from home a small tray of traditional offerings—candles, flowers, and incense. At the appropriate time, each person comes forward to offer their tray and to request the Three Refuges and Five Precepts. Afterwards, the afternoon study and practice session begins.

Everyone is most welcome to attend the Upasika Days, whether or not they have made a formal commitment to the program. There is no "in" or "out" group, nor any "secret teachings" for an inner circle! This program is offered freely as an opportunity to draw closer to the teachings and to make a public statement of one's intentions and aspirations as a support to one's practice.

Program Dates

April 2*

June 24

August 12

October 21

December 3

Schedule

10:30 am~ Meal offering
(bring a dish to share)

1:00 pm ~ Chanting,
meditation, Refuges/
Precepts, Teachings
& Discussion

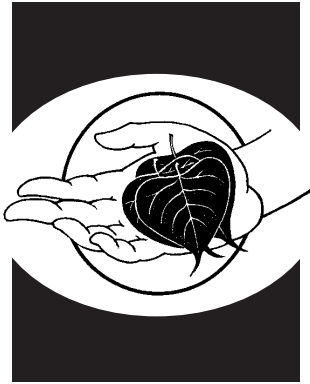
*Commitment ceremony for continuing and new program participants. Please bring an offering of flowers, candles, and incense if you wish to formally join the program or renew your commitment.

For more information, visit www.abhayagiri.org, or contact *Mettika Hoffman* at cindyho@mcn.org or (707) 964-4606.

SANGHAPALA FOUNDATION

**ABHAYAGIRI
MONASTERY**

16201 TOMKI ROAD
REDWOOD VALLEY CA 95470



SPRING 2006

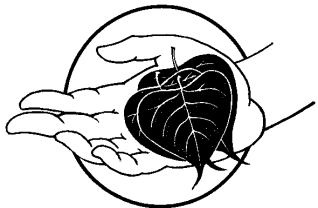
**FEARLESS
MOUNTAIN**

NEWSLETTER

NON PROFIT ORG.
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
AUTOZIP

Return Service Requested

June 3-4
10th Anniversary!
(see below for details)



Abhayagiri Monastery

10th Anniversary Celebration

Saturday, June 3 Open House with monastery tours, photos and video of Abhayagiri past and present. Reminisce with special guests and friends who have helped make Abhayagiri what it is today.

Sunday, June 4 Special Puja in gratitude to our teachers, mentors, and the mountain of blessings which the monastery is built upon.

Join monastics and lay friends—including Ajahn Visuddhi, one of the founding monks, visiting from England—in sharing stories and reflections from over the years.

The meal offering will take place at 11 a.m., followed by reunion activities beginning at 1 p.m.

For more information on activities or accommodations, call (707) 485-1630 or email sangha@abhayagiri.org.