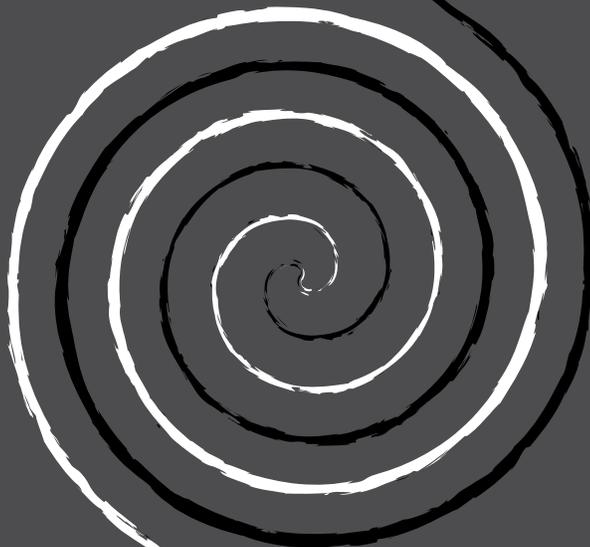


ROOTS AND CURRENTS



ARTICLES AND ESSAYS 1991-2014



AMARAVATI  
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BY AJAHN AMARO



## PREFACE

This book contains a miscellany of my writings, rather than transcribed talks, from throughout my life as an ajahn in the Western Thai Forest sangha. The first part, 'Roots', is mainly historical; its chapters introduce Ajahn Chah, our founder and inspiration, and Ajahn Sumedho who led us to the UK and beyond, and then describes various events in our Western history. The second part, 'Currents', contains both teachings and personal reminiscences, accounts of some of my recent travels. Of course, in both parts of the book teachings mingle with history, and history with teachings.

Many of the chapters were originally written as much as twenty years ago and hence are inevitably somewhat out-of-date. I have made some adaptations with a view to rendering them timeless or making them more topical; but sometimes it seemed better just to leave them in more or less their original state. Any historical account of a movement such as our sangha is likely to become out-of-date even before it is published. So lists of monasteries and numbers of monastics may no longer be relevant; what really matters is that our sangha continues to grow and flourish, for the benefit of humans and all beings.

*Ajahn Amaro  
Amaravati  
February 2017*

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AJAHN AMARO

# INTRODUCTION

## A HAPPY MONK<sup>1</sup>

### AN INTERVIEW WITH INQUIRING MIND

After spending time with the Western monk Ajahn Amaro, one is left with the unique feeling of having been in the presence of a truly happy man, and one whose happiness is born of wisdom. Ordained by Ajahn Chah in 1979, Ajahn Amaro has spent most of his life as a monk at Amaravati Monastery in England. In the 1990's he began to live in Northern California for several months each winter. Eventually he became co-Abbot of Abhayagiri Monastery in Redwood Valley, Mendocino County, California. The land for the monastery was given to Ajahn Sumedho, then the abbot of Amaravati, and to the Sanghapala Foundation, by the founder of the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas, Master Hua, who died in 1995.

<sup>1</sup> Previously published in *Inquiring Mind*, Vol.12, No.1 (Fall 1995). This interview was conducted for *Inquiring Mind* by Wes Nisker and Terry Vandiver in March 1995, when Ajahn Amaro was living in Marin County, California before the building of Abhayagiri Monastery. It was originally entitled *Living Buddhism in the West*.

INQUIRING MIND: How would you assess the study of Buddha Dhamma and the practice of meditation now being taught in the West?

AJAHN AMARO: In the West people tend to separate their meditation practice from the rest of their lives. Ajahn Chah emphasized that if you have time to breathe, you have time to meditate. You breathe when you walk. You breathe when you stand. You breathe when you lie down. Notice how the word ‘sitting’ has become synonymous with meditation or with practising Dhamma. ‘Sitting’ is the operative word, meaning, ‘I am here on my cushion, my eyes are closed, the world has dissolved into emptiness.’ We have learned how to concentrate our minds and then push out our worldly irritations and responsibilities. We create this great space inside and become very good at getting rid of thoughts and feelings. Meditation can thus become rather like being in a shooting gallery with little ducks. You can become a great marksman, shooting down the thought ducks and the feeling ducks.

I think part of the problem in the West is the emphasis on retreats. If you do a lot of intensive retreats you will develop strong concentration. Many of the people I meet in America have been doing retreats for fifteen to twenty years, and they are really quite accomplished concentrators. But I’m afraid they have not found much freedom.

IM: Is this emphasis on intensive meditation retreats unique to the West? Or is it imported from Asian traditions?

AA: One reason for the retreat emphasis, at least in vipassanā circles, is due to the Asian systems which have fostered many of our teachers and styles of practice. Goenka-ji and Mahasi Sayadaw's disciples emphasize a very controlled retreat situation as the primary path: retreat, retreat, retreat. Those teachers have had enormous influence and helped tens of thousands of people, but I think that their style has led to this imbalance, the unhealthy separation between life and retreat. Of course, if you go on retreats for twenty years you can create tremendous inner space. But it can become almost like a police state. You clear the streets of all the unruly inhabitants of your mind, but the guerrillas will still be active underground, so when you leave the retreat you begin to experience your ordinary life as difficult and turbulent. Then you can't wait to get to the next retreat. I am speaking very generally here and maybe exaggerating a bit, but I think I am describing a pattern that many of your readers will recognize.

IM: In contrast, Ajahn Chah and other teachers in the Thai Forest Tradition did not emphasize retreats so much, but gave equal importance to community and daily life.

AA: Ajahn Chah would have us do periods of intensive practice, but we would still go out on alms-round in the morning and there would always be work to do around the monastery. So even the times of intensive formal practice were not so separated from daily life or so completely free of stimulus.

When you focus on creating a clear, subjective interior space, your life is built around trying to be in that space, with as few distractions as possible. That space then becomes a counterpoint to the external world. Even though we might have great brightness of mind or experiences of selflessness within that space, those states exist in counterpoint to our family, our society and the entire phenomenal and physical world. We are losing half the picture. Furthermore, our peace and happiness become completely dependent on conditions.

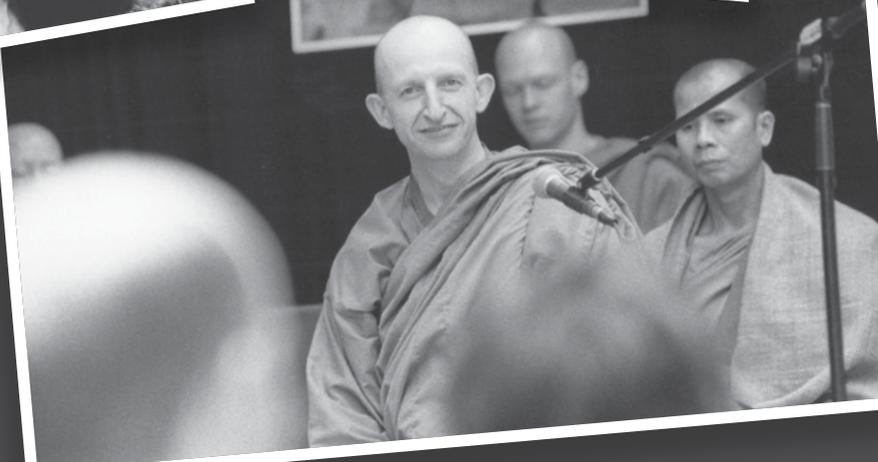
I have recently been examining this issue through the story of the Buddha's enlightenment. During the course of the night, as the story goes, the Buddha-to-be made the vow not to get up from his seat until he was completely enlightened. The Lord of Illusion, Māra, tried to disturb his meditation with fearful and sensual images, but was unsuccessful. By the end of the night the Buddha's realization of truth was complete, but although he was fully awakened the armies of Māra were still around him. Then Māra asked him: 'What right do you think you have to claim enlightenment?' The Buddha reached down and touched the earth, invoking the Earth Mother, who appeared and said: 'This is my true son and he has done everything necessary to claim full and complete enlightenment. He is the supremely awakened one.' Then from her hair she produced a great flood of water which washed away the armies of Māra, who eventually returned carrying flowers and other offerings. I think this story is saying that if our liberation is simply an interior, subjective mental experience, we are only half-cooked. Wisdom has to reach out into the world.

Even the Buddha had to make that gesture of humility and ask the Earth for her blessing. To entirely dispel the armies of Māra, we have to open our eyes and step out of that blissful interior space. For liberation to be finalized, we have to touch the earth.

IM: What prompted you to become a Buddhist monk?

AA: When I first visited Ajahn Chah's monastery in Thailand I found a group of Westerners like myself, with very similar backgrounds, who were living in the forest doing Buddhist meditation practice. And they all seemed remarkably cheerful. When they explained their way of life and the basis of their practice, it made perfect sense to me. Previously I had assumed that freedom came from having no rules and no boundaries. I'd never really questioned that premise, even though trying to live that way had been painful and difficult. These monks suggested that I look for freedom where it could actually be found. They pointed out that the material world is filled with limits, and you don't look for that which is boundless in the place where you find limitation. They explained that by living a life which is simple, disciplined and harmless, one could discover the true freedom which inherently lies within us. Upon hearing their words my immediate reaction was: 'How could I have been so stupid?' I felt simultaneously embarrassed and relieved.

IM: Did the monk's life live up to your initial expectations?



AA: Absolutely. Even though the last thing I would have planned for myself was a lifetime of celibacy and renunciation, what I discovered was a new delight in simplicity and the deep satisfaction that comes from not actively seeking satisfaction. It is a strange but sweet irony that in the monastery I find the very delight I was so rabidly searching for outside the monastery. It looks as if I've given up everything, but actually the inner experience is one of great delight. In fact, this monk's life is a feast! When I was first ordained I used to think: 'I don't deserve this,' or 'I'm not going to get away with this for very long.'

IM: Do you encounter any particular difficulties as a Buddhist monk in the West? How do you feel walking around in robes in this culture?

AA: For me it has always seemed like the most normal thing in the world. I think that to a degree we all feel like outsiders in life. We all feel slightly different from other people in one way or another, and being dressed like a Buddhist monk in the West is just another form of being different. Besides, even though we are Buddhist monks and nuns, we are only alien when we are outside the monastery. Inside the monastery it is normal to have a shaved head and wear brown robes; the women have shaved heads and the men wear skirts!

Living as part of a Buddhist monastic community makes all the difference whether you are in the West or the East. Ajahn Chah always emphasized the Sangha, the community, as a method of practice in and of itself. It wasn't a matter of living with a bunch of other people just in order to do meditation practice. The life of

the community of monks and nuns was itself a method of practice and a method of liberation. Although Ajahn Chah did teach individual meditation techniques, over and over again he stressed the importance of community. I think that is one of the reasons why our monasteries have succeeded in the West. Also, when you live in a community the monastic traditions make a lot of sense. They work, and they work well. We aren't just trying to maintain some archaic Asian system as a curio or a formality. The life of renunciation, living on alms, wearing the same robes as everyone else and all the rules are methods whereby we train ourselves. Through those forms the heart can be liberated.

IM: Most Westerners don't seem to be very attracted to community as a path. Perhaps one reason is because that path clashes with our cultural belief in the primacy of the individual, the importance of going it alone.

AA: I would agree. Community life is about setting aside my own desires for the sake of the group. It's self-sacrifice. To the individualist that sounds like death. But for many Westerners the training in communality is a blessed shift in perspective, because what makes us suffer most of all in life is having 'me' at the centre of it all. Our society supports and validates that attitude, which has led to deep feelings of alienation and insecurity. When we learn how to surrender our own urges and biases, we are not inevitably giving up our freedom or denigrating our individuality. Being able to listen and to yield to other people is a way of recognizing our relationship with them, and our interdependence

with all the life of the planet. As we let go of our selfish demands we begin to recognize the vastness of our true nature. That dynamic is extremely important in the full development of spiritual life.

IM: Do you feel there are significant differences between being a monk in Europe or America and being a monk in Asia?

AA: One of the great blessings of Buddhist monasticism in the West is that it becomes free of the formalism, ritualism and cultural accretions of Asia. In many ways it is much easier for Westerners to get to the essence of the teachings. Even our Asian teachers have remarked on this. They say: ‘You are really lucky. We have all this cultural baggage that we have to work through with our students.’ We Westerners don’t know anything about the ‘ism’ of Buddhism before we start our studying and training.

IM: On the other hand, Western monks and nuns don’t get as much support from the lay population as their Asian brothers and sisters.

AA: Yes, and that respect and support are very sweet. When I go to Thailand I’m treated like a visiting dignitary. In the West we still have to earn our respect. I’ve had people say to me: ‘What do you do for a living? What do you contribute to the Gross National Product?’

IM: You should just tell them you are working on the Subtle National Product.

AA: I respond by asking them what makes a nation healthy. Does it depend on how many sacks of wheat it exports or how many tons of steel it sells? Or does the health of a nation include the well-being of individuals; and furthermore, is that well-being only dependent on their physical health and comfort, or does it also involve their peace of mind? I try to expand the definition of national well-being.

IM: What are the hardest monastic rules to keep when you are living in Western culture?

AA: It is different for different people, I think, but for many of us the hardest rules are those around celibacy, maintaining a kind of evenness in our relationships with other people. And it's not just about refraining from sexual intercourse. Ordinary human affection and friendliness can easily lead to a flow of emotion which suggests something more intimate. While there is nothing wrong with that flow between human beings, when you have taken vows of celibacy that suggestiveness or flirtation is in violation of your commitment.

IM: What about entertainments? Do you miss listening to music?

AA: Not much, although I used to be a big music fan and listened to it all the time. Now that I don't deliberately listen to it, I find that when I do happen to hear music it's as if I'm hearing it for the first time. Music used to be such a

constant presence in my life that it had lost its power. If I hear it now it has an astonishing quality of freshness. I am with every note, every phrase.

When we adopt the renunciate life we aren't condemning the world of the senses *per se*, because that leads to aversion and negativity. Instead we are learning to accept whatever is offered to us with full appreciation. Whatever arrives is received and cherished, but we don't try to add anything. I think many people listen to music because they love the place to which the music takes them, which is the present moment. You are not thinking about anything else; you are experiencing the harmony, balance, and rhythm that the music suggests. But all those qualities are present in a meditative mind. If we need music to take us there, when there isn't music (or delicious food or beautiful surroundings, or whatever it might be), we are likely to feel bereft. We immediately start to look for another experience which will take us to that place of beauty. What the Precepts do is shut the door on all our habitual sources of satisfaction, so that our entire attention is directed inwards. That is where we discover a beauty and clarity, and a vastness of being, which are unshakeable, independent of circumstances and conditions. Then, when we hear a piece of music, or see a beautiful blue sky or the fine shape of a tree, that's an extra.

Believe it or not, I became a monk because I am a hedonist at heart. The fun began when I became a monk. I am not trying to be flippant by saying this. For

me at least, being a monk is the way I can most enjoy my life, and I do mean 'enjoy'. My life is en-joyed, filled with joy as an ongoing experience.

IM: Everybody is going to want to ordain after they read this interview!

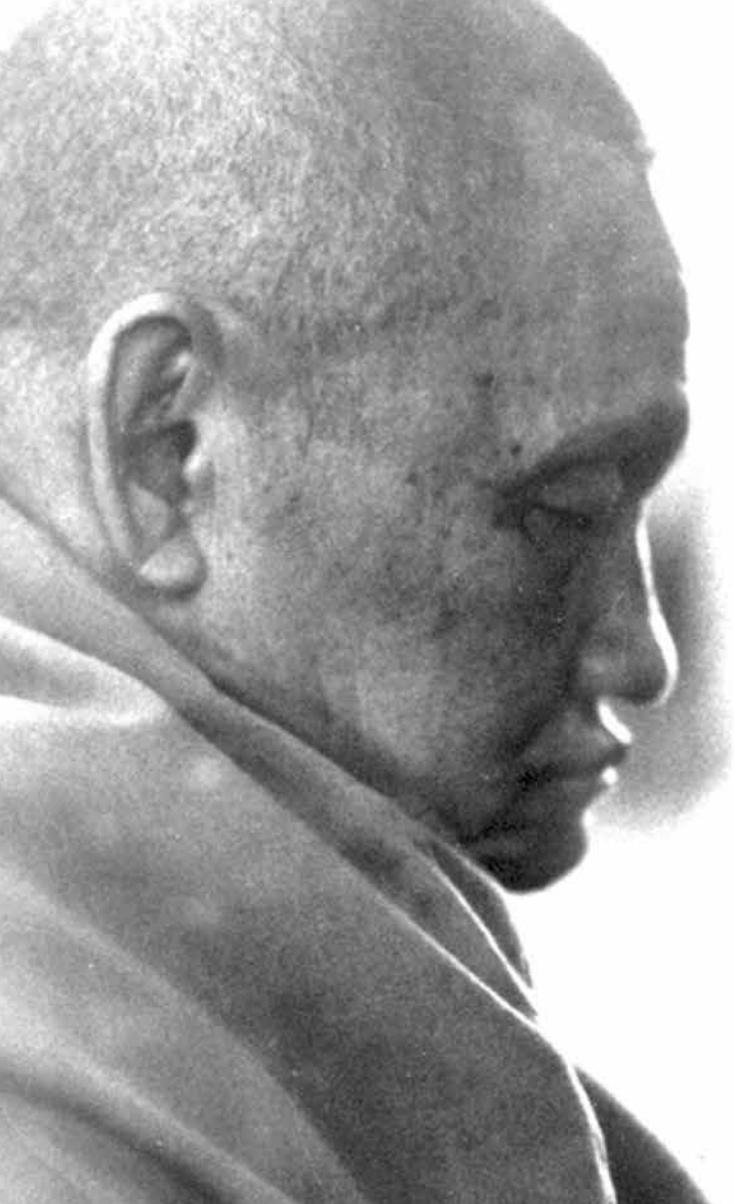
AA: That's fine. But remember that the joy only comes after the self-surrender and sacrifice. I think that as a culture we are afraid of sacrifice. We feel that we must own and accumulate things in order to be complete; not just material objects, but people and relationships as well. It is hard for us to understand that letting go is not a loss, not a bereavement. Of course, when we lose something which is beautiful or dear to us, a shadow crosses the heart. But we lighten that shadow with the understanding that the feeling of loss is just the karmic result of assuming that we owned anything in the first place. The renunciate life is based on the realization that we can never really possess anything.





PART ONE ROOTS





# 1

## THE TEACHINGS OF AJAHN CHAH<sup>2</sup>

### ONE EVENING IN NORTHEAST THAILAND

Night is falling swiftly. The forest reverberates with the undulating buzz of countless crickets and the eerie rising wail of tropical cicadas. A few stars poke dimly through the treetops. Amid the gathering darkness a pool of warm light thrown from a pair of kerosene lanterns illuminates the open area below a hut raised on stilts. Beneath it in the glow a couple of dozen people are gathered round a small, solidly-built monk who is seated cross-legged on a wicker bench. The air is filled with a vibrant peace. Venerable Ajahn Chah is teaching.

<sup>2</sup> Earlier versions of this chapter were published as the introduction to *Food for the Heart*, an anthology of Ajahn Chah's teachings, (Wisdom Publications 2002); the introduction to *The Collected Teachings of Ajahn Chah* (Amaravati Publications 2011); and as the booklet *An Introduction to the Life and Teachings of Ajahn Chah*, (Amaravati Publications 2012).

In some ways the group gathered here is a motley crew. Close to Ajahn Chah, affectionately called 'Luang Por', Venerable Father, by his students, is a cluster of bhikkhus and novices. Most of them are Thai or Lao, but there are also a few pale-skinned figures: a Canadian, two Americans, a young Australian and an Englishman. In front of the Ajahn sits a well-groomed middle-aged couple, he in a stiff suit and she coiffed and gold-bedecked. He's a member of parliament from a distant province; they're taking the opportunity while he's in the area on official business to come and pay their respects and make some offerings to the monastery.

A little behind them and to both sides are scattered a sizeable group of local villagers. Their shirts and blouses are worn thin and the skin of their lean limbs is sun-darkened, wrinkled, baked like the poor earth of the region. Luang Por played with some of them as a child, catching frogs and climbing trees. He helped and was helped by others before he became a bhikkhu, as they planted out their annual round of rice seedlings and then harvested the fields together at the end of the monsoon.

To one side, near the back, is a professor from Freiburg who has come to Thailand with a friend from her local Dhamma group to study Buddhism. An American nun has come with her from the women's section of the monastery, to guide her through the forest paths and translate. Beside them sit three or four other elder nuns. They have decided to take the opportunity to come over as well, to

ask Luang Por's advice on an issue in the women's community and request him to visit their side of the forest and give a Dhamma talk to their whole group; it's several days now since he last paid them a visit. They've already been here for a couple of hours, so they pay their respects and take their leave, along with the other visitors from the nuns' section, as they must be back before dark and they're already a little late.

Near the back, almost at the edge of the pool of light, sits a stern-faced man in his thirties. He is half turned to one side as if his presence there is uncomfortable, tentative. He is a local hard man, a *nak leng*. Deeply disdainful of all things supposedly religious, he nevertheless has a grudging respect for Luang Por, probably stemming as much from the monk's reputation for toughness and his powers of endurance as from the recognition that as religious people go, he might be the real thing: 'But he's probably the only one worth bowing to in the whole province.' He's angry and upset, sick at heart. A week ago his beloved younger brother, who ran with his gang and with whom he'd shared a thousand scrapes together, went down with cerebral malaria and died within days. Since then he has felt as if his heart has a spear through it and everything in the world has lost its flavour: 'If he'd been killed in a knife fight, at least I could take revenge. But what am I going to do, track down the mosquito that bit him and kill it?' 'Why not go see Luang Por Chah?' a friend said. So here he is.

Luang Por smiles broadly as he makes a point, holding up a glass to illustrate his analogy. He has noticed the young figure in the shadows. Soon he has somehow managed to coax him to the front, as if he was reeling in a tough and wily fish. Then the hard man has his head in Luang Por's hands and is weeping like a baby; and then he finds himself laughing at his own arrogance and self-obsession. He realizes he's not the only or the first person who has ever lost a dear one, and his tears of rage and grief have turned to tears of relief.

All this happens with twenty total strangers around, yet the atmosphere is one of safety and trust. For although those assembled come from all walks of life and from all over the planet, they are all united at this one time and place as *saha-dhammika*, 'fellow Dhamma-farers'; or, to use another expression from the Buddhist vernacular, they are all 'brothers and sisters in old age, sickness and death', and thus belong to a single family. This kind of scenario was played out countless times during the thirty years Ajahn Chah spent teaching. Often at those times someone had the foresight to bring along a tape recorder (and had managed to find enough batteries to keep it alive), and thus was able to record some of his teachings for posterity.

More often than not, especially in informal exchanges, the flow of teaching and the person to whom it was directed in particular were highly spontaneous and unpredictable. In many ways Ajahn Chah was like a master musician when he was teaching, both leading the flow of harmonious sound and producing

it entirely in response to the natures and moods of the people he was with, integrating their words, feelings and questions in the crucible of his heart and letting the responses flow forth freely. With any kind of crowd gathered around him, he might use the example of the right and wrong ways to peel a mango one moment and describe the nature of Ultimate Reality the next, with identical matter-of-fact familiarity. At one moment he might be gruff and cold to the inflated, at the next charming and gentle to the shy; he might crack a joke with an old friend from the village, and immediately after look a corrupt police colonel in the eye and speak sincerely of the centrality of honesty on the Path. Within a few minutes he might scold a bhikkhu for being sloppily dressed, then let his own robe slip off his shoulder and allow his rotund belly to show forth. A clever question from an academic type seeking high-minded philosophical discussion to display his own acumen might easily see Luang Por's hand moving to remove his false teeth and hand them to his attendant bhikkhu to be cleaned up a little. The great master would then respond to the academic's profound question through broad lips folded in over his gums, before his clean set of teeth was installed.

He also, of course, gave talks on more formal occasions, such as after the recitation of the Pāṭimokkha, or to the whole assembly of laypeople and monastics on the weekly lunar observance night. But whether the occasion was formal or informal, Ajahn Chah never planned his talks. Not one syllable of his recorded Dhamma teachings was plotted out before he started speaking. He felt

this was an extremely important principle, as the teacher's job was to get out of the way and let the Dhamma arise according to the needs of the moment; if it wasn't alive to the present, it wasn't Dhamma, he would say.

Once he invited the young Ajahn Sumedho, his first Western student, to give a talk to the assembly at the main monastery, Wat Pah Pong. This was a traumatic test; not only having to speak to a couple of hundred people who were used to Ajahn Chah's high standard of wit and wisdom, but also having to speak in Thai, a language Ajahn Sumedho had only started learning three or four years before. His mind teemed with fears and ideas. He had been reading about the six realms of Buddhist cosmology and their correlation with psychological states (anger and the hell realms, sensual bliss and the heavenly realms, etc.). He decided this would be a good subject and thought through all his ideas and the right phrases for them. On the big night he gave what he thought was a pretty good exposition, and the next day many members of the sangha came up and said how much they had appreciated his words. He felt relieved and quite pleased with himself. Some time later, in a quiet moment, Ajahn Chah caught his attention, fixed him with a direct look and gently said: 'Don't ever do that again.'

This style of teaching was not unique to Ajahn Chah, but is espoused throughout what is known as the Thai Forest Tradition. Perhaps it would be helpful at this point to describe the character and origins of this lineage, to give a little more sense of the context from which Ajahn Chah's wisdom sprang.

## THE FOREST TRADITION

In a way the forest meditation tradition pre-dates even the Buddha. Before his time it was not uncommon in India and the Himalayan region for those seeking spiritual liberation to leave town and village life and resort to the mountains and forest wildernesses. As a gesture of leaving worldly values behind this made perfect sense: the forest was a wild natural place and the only people to be found there were criminals, the insane, outcastes and the renunciant religious seekers. It was a sphere outside the influence of materialistic cultural norms, and thus ideal for cultivating the aspects of the spirit which transcended them.

When the Bodhisatta left the life of the palace at the age of twenty-nine, it was to move into the forest and train in the yogic disciplines which were available in his time. The story of how he became dissatisfied with the teachings of his first instructors and left them to find his own way is well-known. He did so, discovering that primal chord of Truth he named the Middle Way under the shade of the bodhi tree beside the River Nerañjara at what is now Bodh-Gaya, in Bihar State, India. It is frequently stated that the Buddha was born in a forest, was enlightened in a forest, lived and taught throughout his life in a forest and finally passed away in a forest. When he had the choice the forest was the environment where he chose to live, since as he would say: ‘Tathāgatas delight in secluded places.’ The lineage now known as the Thai Forest Tradition tries to live in the spirit of the way espoused by the Buddha himself, and to practise

according to the same standards he encouraged during his lifetime. It is a branch of the southern school of Buddhism, more commonly referred to as Theravada.

The sketchy historical accounts tell us that a few months after the Buddha's final passing away, a great council of elders was held to formalize and establish the Teachings (the discourses and the monastic rules) in a standardized form of the vernacular called *Pālibhasa*, 'the language of the texts.' The Dhamma teachings formulated in this way over the next hundred years form the core of the Pali Canon, the common basis of a range of subsequent Buddhist schools. A hundred years later a second council was held, again to go over all the teachings in an attempt to keep everyone in agreement. Instead it was at this time that the first major split in the Sangha occurred. The majority of the community wanted to change some of the rules, including to allow monastics to use money. The minority was cautious about these proposed changes, feeling: 'Whether it makes sense or not, we want to do things the way the Buddha and his original disciples did.' This group was known as the *Sthaviras* in Sanskrit or *Theras* in Pali, meaning 'Elders.' After about another 130 years it gave rise to the Theravada school. 'Theravada' literally means 'The Way of the Elders' and that has been their abiding theme ever since. The ethos of the tradition can be characterized as something like: 'Right or wrong, that's the way the Buddha established it, so that is the way we'll do it.' It has thus always had a particularly conservative quality.

As with all religious traditions and other human institutions, over time a number of branches sprouted from the Buddha's rootstock. It is said that by about 250 years after the Buddha's time, during the reign of the Emperor Asoka in India, there were eighteen or more schools and lineages with diverging views of the *Buddha-sāsana*, the Buddha's dispensation. One lineage became established in Sri Lanka, somewhat removed from the cultural ferment of India, where a Brahminical revival and religious influences from West and East all added to the stirrings of new forms of Buddhist thought. The Sri Lankan lineage developed in its own way, with less varied input and stimulation. It formulated its commentaries and interpretations of the Pali scriptures with a view not to developing new forms to meet the challenge of other faiths, but to adding details to the Pali texts. Some of these were of the nature of fables to catch the hearts of ordinary folk; others were more philosophical and metaphysical, with a scholarly appeal.

Out of all this Theravada Buddhism crystallized. And despite wars, famines and other cultural upheavals on the Indian subcontinent, the Theravadins have survived to the present day largely because they had become well established on the island of Sri Lanka, a safer haven than many others. Although other Buddhist schools operated there, Theravada Buddhism was continually restored and maintained as the island's main religion. The lineage eventually spread throughout Southeast Asia as at different times missionaries were invited from Sri Lanka and India; they went to Burma and later to Thailand, Cambodia,

and Laos, and latterly from those countries to the West. But throughout the geographical dispersion of the Theravada tradition, the principle of continually referring back to the standards of the Pali Canon has been maintained. The tradition has always been established in new countries with a strong sense of respectfulness and reverence for the original Teachings, and also respect for the style of life of the Buddha and the original Sangha, the forest-dwelling monastics of the earliest times.

Obviously there were many ups and downs during those many centuries, but a certain pattern was maintained. Sometimes the religion would die down in Sri Lanka, and then some monks would come from Thailand to lift it up again. Then it would fade in Thailand, and some monks from Burma would revive it. Thus its various homes have supported each other over the centuries and it has managed to stay afloat, still largely in its original form. Another aspect of these cycles, along with degeneration, would be the problem of success. Often when the religion was well developed it would grow rich, become obese and corrupt, and begin to collapse under its own weight. Then a splinter group would say: 'Let's get back to basics!' go off into the forest and return to the original standards of keeping the monastic rules, practising meditation and studying the original Teachings.

It's striking that this cycle of progress, over-inflation, corruption and reform has also taken place many times in many other Buddhist countries over the

ages. The lives and practices of such luminaries as Ven. Patrul Rinpoche in Tibet and Ven. Master Hsu Yün in China (both of the late 19th and early 20th centuries) are totally in accordance with the spirit of the Forest Tradition. Both these great masters chose to live lives of great simplicity, kept the monastic discipline very strictly and were accomplished meditators and highly gifted teachers. They largely avoided the burdens of rank and official responsibility, but inevitably rose to positions of great influence through the sheer power of their wisdom and virtue. This is exactly the pattern of life exemplified by the great Forest ajahns of Thailand.

By the mid-19th century Buddhism in Thailand had a rich variety of regional traditions and practices, but the general trend of spiritual life had become somewhat corrupt, with lax monastic discipline and Dhamma teachings mixed up with confused vestiges of tantra and animism, plus the fact that hardly anyone practised meditation any more. In addition, and perhaps most significantly, the orthodox position held by scholars (not just by lax, unlearned or confused monks) was that it was not possible to realize Nibbāna in this age, or even to attain *jhāna*. Those who revived the Forest Tradition refused to accept this, and it was one of the reasons why they were considered by the ecclesiastical hierarchy of the time as mavericks and trouble-makers. It also lies behind the obvious disdain many of them, Ajahn Chah included, had for the majority of study



AJAHN CHAH IN 1969,  
WITH THE FOREIGN  
MONKS OF WAT NONG  
PAH PONG. FROM THE  
LEFT: DR DOUGLAS  
BURNS, AJAHN SUMEDHO,  
JACK KORNFIELD.

monks of their own Theravada lineage, as well as their refrain that you don't get wisdom from the books. This explains why Ajahn Chah seemed somewhat hostile to study, though Theravada is supposed to have great reverence for the word of the Buddha. The determination to focus on lifestyle and personal experience rather than on the books (especially the Commentaries) is a crucial feature of Thai Forest monastics. Such sentiments might be considered presumptuous or arrogant, or as seeming to express an unlearned mind's jealousy of its betters, unless it is realized that the interpretations of scholars were leading Buddhism into a black hole. In short, this was just the kind of situation which made the spiritual landscape ripe for renewal, and it was from this fertile ground that the revival of the Forest Tradition emerged.

The Thai Forest Tradition would not exist as it does today were it not for the influence of one particular great master, Venerable Ajahn Mun Bhuridatta. He was born in the 1870's in Ubon Province, where Thailand meets Laos and Cambodia. It was then, and still is, one of the country's poorer regions, but it is also one where the harshness of the land and the good-humoured character of the people have led to a depth of spirituality rare in the world. Ajahn Mun was a youth with a lively mind (he excelled at the local art of *mor lam*, spontaneously versified folk-song), who felt strongly drawn to spiritual practice. Soon after his ordination as a bhikkhu he sought out Ven. Ajahn Sao, one of the rare local forest monks, and asked him to teach him meditation; he had also recognized that rigorous adherence to the monastic discipline would be crucial to his spiritual

progress. He became Ajahn Sao's student and threw himself into the practice with great vigour. Both these elements, meditation and strict discipline, might seem unremarkable from the vantage point of the present day, but at that time monastic discipline had grown extremely lax throughout the region and meditation was looked upon with great suspicion – probably only those who were interested in the dark arts would be foolish enough to go near it, and it was thought likely to drive one insane or cause possession by spirits.

In time Ajahn Mun successfully explained and demonstrated the usefulness of meditation to many people, and he also became an exemplar of a much higher standard of conduct for the monastic community. Despite living in remote provinces, he became the most highly regarded spiritual teacher in the country. Almost all the most accomplished and revered 20th century meditation masters in Thailand were either his direct disciples or deeply influenced by him. Ajahn Chah was among them.

## AJAHN CHAH

Ajahn Chah was born into a large and comfortable family in a village in Ubon Province, Northeast Thailand. On his own initiative, at the tender age of nine, he opted to move out of the family home and went to live in the local monastery. He was ordained as a novice and, still feeling the call of the religious life, took higher ordination on reaching the age of twenty. As a young bhikkhu he studied some basic Dhamma, the Vinaya and other scriptures. Later, dissatisfied with

the slack standard of discipline in his village temple and yearning for guidance in meditation, he left these relatively secure confines and undertook the life of a wandering or *tudong* bhikkhu. He sought out several of the local meditation masters and practised under their guidance. He wandered for a number of years in the style of an ascetic bhikkhu, sleeping in forests, caves and cremation grounds, and spent a short but enlightening period with Ajahn Mun himself. That most significant encounter is described in the biography of Luang Por Chah by Phra Ong Neung.

Ajahn Chah, together with three other monks, a novice and two laymen set off on the long walk to Isahn [in Northeast Thailand]. They broke the journey at Bahn Gor, and after a few days' rest began a 250-kilometre hike northward. By the tenth day they had reached the elegant white *stūpa* of Taht Panom, an ancient pilgrimage spot on the banks of the Mekong, and paid homage to the Buddha's relics enshrined there. They continued their walk in stages, by now finding forest monasteries along the way in which to spend the night. Even so it was an arduous trek and the novice and a layman asked to turn back. The group consisted of just three monks and a layman when they finally arrived at Wat Peu Nong Nahny, the home of the Venerable Ajahn Mun.

As they walked into the monastery, Ajahn Chah was immediately struck by its tranquil and secluded atmosphere. The central area in which stood a small meeting hall was immaculately swept and the few monks they caught sight of were attending to their daily chores silently, with a measured and composed gracefulness. There was something about the monastery that was like no other he had been in before – the silence was strangely charged and vibrant. Ajahn Chah and his companions were received politely, and after being advised where to put up their *glots*<sup>3</sup> they took a welcome bath to wash off the grime of the road.

In the evening the three young monks, their double-layered outer robes folded neatly over their left shoulders, their minds fluctuating between keen anticipation and cold fear, made their way to the wooden *sālā* to pay respects to Ajahn Mun. Crawling on his knees toward the great master, flanked on both sides by the resident monks, Ajahn Chah approached a slight aged figure with an indomitable diamond-like presence. It is easy to imagine Ajahn Mun's deeply penetrating gaze boring into Ajahn Chah as he bowed three times and sat down at a suitable distance. Most of the monks were sitting with eyes closed in meditation; one sat slightly behind Ajahn Mun, slowly fanning away the evening's mosquitoes. As Ajahn Chah glanced

3 A *glot* is a large umbrella from which a mosquito net can be hung; it provides a monk with shelter from insects and the weather.

up he would have noticed how prominently Ajahn Mun’s collarbone jugged through the pale skin above his robe, and how his thin mouth stained red with betel juice formed such an arresting contrast to the strange luminosity of his presence.

As is the time-honoured custom amongst Buddhist monks, Ajahn Mun first asked the visitors how long they had been in the robes, the monasteries they had practised in and the details of their journey. Did they have any doubts about the practice? Ajahn Chah swallowed. Yes, he did. He had been studying Vinaya texts with great enthusiasm, but had become discouraged. The Discipline seemed too detailed to be practical; it didn’t seem possible to keep every single rule; what should one’s standard be? Ajahn Mun advised Ajahn Chah to take the ‘Two Guardians of the World’, *hiri* (a sense of shame) and *ottappa* (intelligent fear of consequences), as his basic principle. In the presence of those two virtues, he said, everything else would follow. He then began to discourse on the threefold training of *sīla*, *samādhi* and *paññā*, the four Roads to Success and the Five Spiritual Powers. Eyes half-closed, his voice became stronger and faster as he proceeded, as if he was moving into higher and higher gear. With an absolute authority he described the ‘way things truly are’ and the path to liberation. Ajahn Chah and his companions sat completely enraptured. Ajahn Chah later said that although he had spent an exhausting day on the road, hearing Ajahn Mun’s Dhamma talk made





all his weariness disappear. His mind became peaceful and clear and he felt as if he was floating in the air above his seat. It was late at night before Ajahn Mun called the meeting to an end and Ajahn Chah returned to his *glot*, aglow.

On the next night Ajahn Mun gave more teachings and Ajahn Chah felt that he had come to the end of his doubts about the practice that lay ahead. He felt a joy and rapture in the Dhamma that he had never known before. Now what remained was for him to put his knowledge into practice. Indeed, one of the teachings that had inspired him the most on those two evenings was the injunction to make himself *sikkhibhūto*, i.e. a witness to the truth. But the most clarifying explanation, the one which gave him the necessary context or basis for practice he had hitherto lacked, was of a distinction between the mind itself and transient states of mind which arose and passed away within it.

‘Tan Ajahn Mun said they’re merely states. Through not understanding that point we take them to be real, to be the mind itself. In fact they’re all just transient states. As soon as he said that, things suddenly became clear. Suppose there’s happiness present in the mind; it’s a different kind of thing, it’s on a different level, from the mind itself. If you see that you can stop, you can put things down. When conventional realities are seen for what they are, that’s ultimate truth. Most people lump everything together as the mind

itself, but actually there are states of mind together with the knowing of them. If you understand that point then there's not a lot to do.'

On the third day Ajahn Chah paid his respects to Ajahn Mun and led his small group off into the lonely forests of Poopahn once more. He left Nong Peu behind him, never to return again, but with his heart full of an inspiration that would stay with him for the rest of his life.

After many years of travel and practice, in 1954 Ajahn Chah was invited to settle in a grove in dense forest near the village of his birth, Bahn Gor. The grove was uninhabited, known as a place of cobras, tigers and ghosts and thus, as he said, the perfect location for a forest bhikkhu. Around Ajahn Chah a large monastery formed as more and more bhikkhus, nuns and laypeople came to hear his teachings and stayed on to practise with him. Now his disciples are living, practising meditation and teaching in more than 300 mountain and forest branch monasteries throughout Thailand and the West.

Although Ajahn Chah passed away in 1992, the training that he established is still carried on at Wat Pah Pong and its branches. There is usually group meditation twice a day and sometimes a talk by the senior teacher, but the heart of the meditation is the way of life. The monastics do manual work, dye and sew their own robes, make most of their own belongings and keep the monastery buildings and grounds in immaculate shape. They live extremely simply, following the ascetic precepts of eating once a day from the alms-bowl

and limiting their possessions and robes. Scattered throughout the forest are individual huts where bhikkhus and nuns live and meditate in solitude, and where they practise walking meditation on cleared paths under the trees. The physical location of some monasteries in the West and a few in Thailand, dictates some small variations from this style. For instance, Dhammapala Monastery in Switzerland is situated in a old wooden hotel building at the edge of a mountain village. But regardless of such differences, exactly the same spirit of simplicity, quietude and scrupulosity sets the abiding tone. Discipline is maintained strictly, enabling monastics to lead a simple and pure life in a harmoniously regulated community where virtue, meditation and understanding may be cultivated skilfully and continuously.

Along with monastic life lived within the bounds of fixed locations, the practice of *tudong*, wandering on foot through the countryside, on pilgrimage or in search of quiet places for solitary retreat, is still considered a central part of spiritual training. Though the forests are disappearing rapidly throughout Thailand, and the tigers and other wild creatures so often encountered during such *tudong* journeys in the past have been depleted almost to the point of extinction, it has still been possible for this way of life and practice to continue. Indeed, not only has this practice been maintained by Ajahn Chah, his disciples and many other forest monastics in Thailand; it has also been followed by his monks and nuns in many Western countries and in India. In these situations the strict standards of conduct are still maintained: living only on alms-food freely offered by local

people, eating only between dawn and noon, not carrying or using money, sleeping wherever shelter can be found. Wisdom is a way of living and being, and Ajahn Chah endeavoured to preserve the simple monastic life-style in all its dimensions, so that people may study and practise Dhamma in the present day.

### AJAHN CHAH'S TEACHING OF WESTERNERS

There is a widely circulated and well-attested tale that shortly before the newly-ordained Ajahn Sumedho arrived to request training under Ajahn Chah's guidance in 1967, Ajahn Chah initiated the construction of a new kutī in the forest. As the timbers which formed the corner-posts were being put into place, one of the villagers who was helping with the construction asked: 'Eh, Luang Por, how come we are building this so tall? The roof is much higher than it needs to be.' He was puzzled because these structures are usually designed to have just enough space for one person to live in comfortably, customarily about eight feet by ten feet with a roof peak at around seven.' 'Don't worry, it's not being wasteful,' Ajahn Chah replied. 'There will be some *farang* (Western) monks coming here one day, they are a lot bigger than we are.'

In the years that followed the arrival of this first student from the West, a gentle but constant stream of them continued to enter through the gates of Ajahn Chah's monasteries. From the very beginning he chose not to give any special treatment to the foreigners, but to let them adapt to the climate, food and culture as best they could, and to use the discomfort they might feel as food

for the development of wisdom and patient endurance, two of the qualities he recognized as central to any spiritual progress.

However, despite the primary consideration of keeping all the monastic community to a single harmonious standard and not making the Westerners special in any way, in 1975 circumstances arose whereby Wat Pah Nanachat, the International Forest Monastery, was established near Wat Pah Pong as a place for Westerners to practise. Ajahn Sumedho and a small group of other Western bhikkhus were walking to a branch monastery near the banks of the Muhn River. They stopped overnight in a small forest outside the village of Bung Wai. Many of the villagers were longstanding disciples of Ajahn Chah and, surprised and delighted to see this group of foreign monks walking together on alms-round through their dusty streets, they asked if they would settle in the forest nearby and start a new monastery. The plan received Ajahn Chah's approval, and this special training monastery for the growing numbers of Westerners interested in undertaking monastic practice began.

It wasn't long after this, in 1976, that Ajahn Sumedho was invited by a group in London to establish a Theravadan monastery in England. Ajahn Chah came over the following year and left Ajahn Sumedho and a small group of other monastics to reside at the Hampstead Buddhist *Vihāra*, a townhouse on a busy street in North London. In a few years they had moved to the country and several other branch monasteries had been established. Since then many of Ajahn

Chah's senior Western disciples have been engaged in the work of establishing monasteries and spreading the Dhamma on several different continents.

Ajahn Chah himself travelled twice to Europe and North America, in 1977 and 1979, and wholeheartedly supported these new foundations. He once said that Buddhism in Thailand was like an old tree that had formerly been vigorous and abundant, but was now so aged that it could only produce a few fruits, and they were small and bitter. In contrast, he likened Buddhism in the West to a young sapling full of youthful energy and the potential for growth, but needing proper care and support for its development.

In the same light, during his visit to the USA in 1979 he commented: 'Britain is a good place for Buddhism to become established in the West, but it too is an old culture. The USA, however, has the energy and flexibility of a young country - everything is new here, it is here that the Dhamma can really flourish.' When speaking to a group of young Americans who had just opened a Buddhist meditation centre, he added the caveat: 'You will succeed in truly spreading the Buddha-Dhamma here only if you are not afraid to challenge the desires and opinions of your students [literally, 'to stab their hearts.'] If you do this you will succeed; if you do not, if you change the Teachings and the practice to fit the existing habits and opinions of people out of a misguided sense of wanting to please them, you will have failed in your duty to serve in the best way possible.'

## THE ESSENTIALS: VIEW, TEACHING AND PRACTICE

It may be helpful at this point to outline first some of the key terms, attitudes and concepts of Theravada Buddhism.

### THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS

Although there are numerous volumes of the Buddha's discourses in many traditions, it is also said that the entirety of his Teaching was contained in his very first exposition, called 'Setting in Motion the Wheel of Truth' (S 56.11), which he gave to five monastic companions in the Deer Park near Vārānasī (Benares) shortly after his enlightenment. In this brief discourse (it takes only twenty minutes to recite), he expounded the nature of the Middle Way and the Four Noble Truths. This Teaching is common to all Buddhist traditions, and just as an acorn contains within it the genetic coding for what eventually takes shape as a vast oak, so too all the myriad Buddhist teachings can be said to derive from this essential matrix of insight.

The Four Noble Truths are formulated like a medical diagnosis in the Ayurvedic tradition: a) the symptoms of the disease, b) the cause, c) the prognosis, and d) the cure. The Buddha often drew on structures and forms that were familiar to people of his time, and in this instance this is how he laid out the picture.

The First Truth (the ‘symptom’) is that there is *dukkha* – we can experience incompleteness, dissatisfaction or suffering. There might be moments or long periods when we experience happiness of a coarse or even a transcendent nature, but at other times the heart feels discontent. This can vary from extreme anguish at one end of the spectrum to the faintest sense that some blissful feeling we are experiencing will not last. All of it comes under the heading of *dukkha*. Sometimes people misinterpret this First Truth as an absolute statement that reality in every dimension is *dukkha*. The statement is taken as an value judgement of all and everything, but that’s not what is meant. If it were, that would mean there was no hope of liberation for anyone, and that realizing the truth of the way things are, the Dhamma, would not result in abiding peace and happiness as it does according to the Buddha’s insight. What is most significant, therefore, is that these are noble truths, not absolute truths. They are noble in the sense that although they are relative, when they are understood they lead to a realization of the Absolute or the Ultimate.

The Second Noble Truth is that the cause of *dukkha* is self-centred craving, *taṇhā* in Pali (*trṣṇā* in Sanskrit), which literally means ‘thirst.’ This craving, this grasping, is the cause of *dukkha*. It can be craving for sense-pleasure; craving to become something, to be identified as something; or craving not to be, the desire to disappear, to be annihilated, to get rid of. There are many subtle dimensions to this.

The Third Truth is that of *dukkha-nirodha*; this is the prognosis. Nirodha means ‘cessation’; thus the experience of *dukkha*, of incompleteness, can fade away, can be transcended. It can end. In other words, *dukkha* is not an absolute reality. It’s just a temporary experience from which the heart can be liberated.

The Fourth Noble Truth is that of the Path, how to go from the Second Truth to the Third, from the causation of *dukkha* to its ending. The cure is the Eightfold Path, which in essence is virtue, concentration and wisdom.

#### THE LAW OF KARMA

One of the crucial underpinnings of the Buddhist world-view is the inviolability of the law of cause and effect: every action (*kamma* in Pali, karma in Sanskrit) has an equal and opposite reaction. This is seen as not only applying to the realm of physical reality, but also, and more importantly, to the psychological and social realms. The Buddha’s insight into the nature of reality led him to see that this is a moral universe. Good actions reap pleasant results, harmful acts reap painful results; that’s the way nature works. The results may come soon after the act or at some very remote later time, but the effect which matches the cause will necessarily follow.

The Buddha also made it clear that the key element of *kamma* is intention, as said in the opening words of the Dhammapada, the most famous and well-loved of all Theravadan scriptures:



Mind is the forerunner of all things:  
think and act with a corrupt heart,  
and sorrow will follow one  
as surely as the cart follows the ox that pulls it.

Mind is the forerunner of all things:  
think and act with a pure heart,  
and happiness will follow one  
as surely as one's never-departing shadow.

Dhp 1-2

However, while *kamma* is something of an article of faith in the Buddhist world, it is also a law which one comes to recognize through experience, rather than accepting it blindly on the assurance of a teacher, or because there is some cultural imperative to abide by it. When Ajahn Chah encountered Westerners who said they didn't believe in *kamma* as he described it, rather than criticizing them or dismissing them as having wrong view, or feeling he had to make them see things his way, he was interested that they could look at things in such a different manner, would ask them to describe how they saw it all working and then take the conversation from there.

## EVERYTHING IS UNCERTAIN

Another central Buddhist teaching is that of the Three Characteristics of Existence In the Buddha's second discourse, the *Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta*, and

throughout the rest of his teaching career, he outlined the fact that all phenomena, internal or external, mental or physical, have three invariable qualities: *anicca-dukka-anattā*; impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and ‘not self.’ Everything is changing, nothing can be permanently satisfying or dependable, and nothing can truly be said to be ours, or absolutely who and what we are. When these three qualities have been seen and known through direct experience, insight can truly be said to have dawned.

*Anicca* is the first member of the insight-forming triad, and Ajahn Chah constantly stressed its contemplation over the years as being the primary gateway to wisdom. As he says: ‘What we call ‘uncertainty’ here is the Buddha. The Buddha is the Dhamma. The Dhamma is the characteristic of uncertainty. Whoever sees the uncertainty of things sees the unchanging reality of them. That’s what the Dhamma is like. And that is the Buddha. If you see the Dhamma, you see the Buddha; seeing the Buddha you see the Dhamma. If you know *anicca*, uncertainty, you will let go of things and not grasp onto them.’ It is a characteristic of Ajahn Chah’s teaching that he habitually used the less familiar rendition of ‘uncertainty’ (*my naer* in Thai) for *anicca*. ‘Impermanence’ can have an abstract or technical tone; ‘uncertainty’ better describes the feeling in the heart when it meets the quality of change.

## CHOICE OF EXPRESSION 'YES' OR 'NO'

One of the most striking characteristics of the Theravada teachings is that the Truth and the way leading to it are often indicated by talking about what they are *not* rather than what they *are*. In Christian theological language this is called the apophatic method: talking about what God is not, as contrasted with the kataphatic method, talking about what God is. The apophatic approach, known in Latin as the *via negativa*, was used by a number of eminent Christians over the centuries; one who immediately springs to mind is the famous mystic and theologian St. John of the Cross. As an example of this style, in *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, his description of the most direct spiritual method (i.e. straight up the mountain) is: 'Nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing, and even on the Mountain, nothing.' The Pali Canon possesses much of the same *via negativa* flavour, and because of this readers have often mistaken its view of life as nihilistic. Nothing could be further from the truth, but it's easy to see how the mistake could be made, particularly if one comes from a culture committed to expressions of life-affirmation.

The story has it that shortly after the Buddha's enlightenment he was walking along a road through the Magadhan countryside, on his way to meet up with the five companions with whom he had practised austerities before going off alone to seek the Truth in his own way. Another ascetic wanderer, Upaka by name, saw him approaching and was greatly struck by his appearance. Not only was he a warrior-noble prince with the regal bearing that came from that upbringing; he was also apparently well over six feet tall, extraordinarily handsome, was

dressed in the rag robes of the ascetic wanderers and shone with a dazzling radiance. Upaka was impressed:

‘Who are you, friend? Your face is so clear and bright, your manner is awesome and serene. Surely you must have discovered some great truth; who is your teacher, friend, and what is it that you have discovered?’

The newly-awakened Buddha replied: ‘I am an All-transcender, an All-knower. I have no teacher. In all the world I alone am fully enlightened. There is none who taught me this – I came to it through my own efforts. ‘Do you mean to say that you claim to have won victory over birth and death?’

‘Indeed, friend, I am a Victorious One; and now, in this world of the spiritually blind, I go to Vārānasī to beat the drum of Deathlessness.’

‘Well, good for you, friend,’ said Upaka, and shaking his head as he went, he left by a different path (MV 1.6).

The Buddha seems to have realized from this encounter that mere declaration of the Truth did not necessarily arouse faith and might not be effective in communicating it to others, so by the time he reached the Deer Park outside Vārānasī and had met up with his former companions, he had adopted a much more analytical method (*vibhajjavāda* in Pali) and thus composed the formula of the Four Noble Truths. This reflected the shift of expression from: ‘I have realized perfection,’ to ‘Let’s investigate why anyone experiences *imperfection*.’



The *Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta*, which was also given in the Deer Park at Vārānasī and was the teaching which caused all his five companions to realize enlightenment, displays the *via negativa* method most clearly. In it the Buddha takes the search for the self (*attā* in Pali, *atman* in Sanskrit) as his theme, and by using an analytical method he demonstrates that a ‘self’ cannot be found in relation to any of the factors of body or mind. After demonstrating this he states: ‘... the wise noble disciple becomes dispassionate toward the body, feelings, perceptions, mental formations and consciousness.’ Thus the heart is liberated. Once we let go of what we’re not, the nature of what is Real becomes apparent. And as that Reality is beyond description, it is most appropriate and least misleading to leave it undescribed; this is the essence of the way of negation.

Thus the lion’s share of the Buddha’s teaching, particularly in the Theravada tradition, addresses the nature of the Path and how best to follow it, rather than waxing lyrical about the Goal. This was also true for the most part of Ajahn Chah’s style. As far as possible he avoided talking about degrees of attainment and levels of meditative absorption, both to counteract spiritual materialism (the gaining mind, competitiveness and jealousy), and to keep people’s eyes focused where they were most needed: on the Path. Having said that, Ajahn Chah was also notable for the readiness and directness with which he would speak about Ultimate Reality should the occasion require it. But if he thought that a person’s understanding was not yet ripe, yet they insisted on asking about transcendent qualities, he might well respond: ‘It isn’t anything and we

don't call it anything – that's all there is to it! Be finished with all of it' (literally: 'If there is anything there, then just throw it to the dogs!')

#### EMPHASIS ON RIGHT VIEW AND VIRTUE

When asked what he considered to be the most essential elements of the Teachings, Ajahn Chah frequently responded that his experience had shown him that all spiritual progress depended upon Right View and purity of conduct. Of Right View the Buddha said: 'There is no factor for the arousing of wholesome states so helpful as Right View' (A 1.16.2).

To establish Right View means, firstly, that one has a trustworthy map of the terrain of the mind and the world, particularly with respect to an appreciation of the law of *kamma*. Secondly, it means seeing experience in the light of the Four Noble Truths and thus turning that flow of perceptions, thoughts and moods into fuel for insight. The four points become the quarters of the compass by which we orient our understanding and thus guide our actions and intentions.

Ajahn Chah saw *sīla*, virtue, as the great protector of the heart, and encouraged a sincere commitment to the Precepts by all those who were serious about their search for happiness and a skilfully lived life, whether the Five Precepts of the layperson, or the Eight, Ten or 227 of the various levels of the monastic community. Virtuous action and speech, *sīla*, directly brings the heart into accordance with Dhamma and thus becomes the foundation for concentration,

insight and, finally, liberation. In many ways *sīla* is the external corollary to the internal quality of Right View and there is a reciprocal relationship between them. If we understand causality and see the relationship between craving and *dukkha*, our actions are certainly more likely to be harmonious and restrained; similarly, if our actions and speech are respectful, honest and non-violent, we create the causes of peace within us, it will be much easier for us to see the laws governing the mind and its workings, and Right View will develop more easily.

One particular outcome of this relationship of which Ajahn Chah spoke is the intrinsic emptiness of all conventions (e.g. money, monasticism, social customs), but the simultaneous need to respect them fully. This might sound somewhat paradoxical, but he saw the Middle Way as synonymous with the resolution of this kind of conundrum. If we cling to conventions we become burdened and limited by them, but if we defy them or negate them we find ourselves lost, conflicted and bewildered. He saw that with the right attitude, both aspects could be respected in a way that was natural and freeing, rather than forced or compromised. It was probably due to his own profound insights in this area that he was able to be both extraordinarily orthodox and austere as a Buddhist monk, yet utterly relaxed and unfettered by any of the rules he observed. To many who met him he seemed the happiest man in the world – perhaps an ironic fact for a man who had never had sex in his life, had no money, never listened to music, was regularly available to people eighteen to twenty hours a day, slept on a thin grass mat, had a diabetic

condition and had had various forms of malaria, and was delighted by Wat Pah Pong's reputation of having the worst food in the world.

## METHODS OF TRAINING

There was a multitude of different dimensions to the way that Ajahn Chah trained his students. Instruction was certainly given verbally in many of the ways already described, but most of the learning process occurred through what might best be described as situational teaching. Ajahn Chah realized that for the heart to truly learn any aspect of the Teaching and be transformed by it, the lesson had to be absorbed experientially, not just intellectually. Thus he employed the myriad events and aspects of the monastic routine, communal living and the tudong life as ways to teach and train his disciples. Community work projects, learning to recite the rules, helping with the daily chores, random changes in the schedule – all these and more were used as an arena in which to investigate the arising of *dukkha* and the way leading to its cessation.

He encouraged the attitude of being ready to learn from everything. He would emphasize over and over that we are our own teachers: if we are wise, every personal problem, event and aspect of nature will instruct us; if we are foolish, not even having the Buddha before us explaining everything would make any real impression. This insight was also borne out in the way he related to people's questions; he responded more to where someone was coming from, rather than answering their question in their own terms. Often

when asked something he would appear to receive the question, gently take it to pieces and then hand the bits back to the inquirer; they would then see for themselves how it was put together. To their surprise he had guided them in such a way that they had answered their own question. When asked how he could do this so often, he replied: 'If the person did not already know the answer, they could not have posed the question in the first place.'

Other key attitudes which he encouraged were the need to cultivate a profound sense of urgency in meditation practice, and using the training environment to develop patient endurance. This latter quality does not always receive a great deal of attention, particularly in the 'quick fix' culture of some Western spiritual circles, but in the Forest life it is seen as almost synonymous with spiritual training. When the Buddha gave his very first instructions on monastic discipline, to a spontaneous gathering of 1,250 of his enlightened disciples, his first words were: 'Patient endurance is the supreme practice for freeing the heart from unwholesome states' (Dhp 183-85). So when someone came to Ajahn Chah with a tale of woe, of how their husband was drinking and the rice crop looked bad this year, his first response would often be: 'Can you endure it?' This was said not as some kind of macho challenge, but more as a way of pointing to the fact that the way beyond suffering is not to run away from it, wallow in it or even grit one's teeth and get through on will alone. No, the encouragement of patient endurance is to hold steady in the midst of difficulty, to truly apprehend and digest the experience of *dukkha*, understand its causes and let them go.

## TEACHING THE LAITY AND TEACHING MONASTICS

Many of Ajahn Chah's teachings were as applicable to laypeople as to monastics, but many others were not. The distinction was not made because certain teachings were 'secret' or 'higher' in some way, but because of the need to speak in ways that were appropriate and useful to particular audiences. Lay practitioners would naturally have a different range of concerns and influences on their daily life from those of a monastic, e.g. trying to find time for formal meditation practice, maintaining an income, living with a spouse. Most particularly, the lay community would not have undertaken the vows of the renunciate life. An average lay student of Ajahn Chah would commit to keeping the Five Precepts, whereas the monastics would be keeping the Eight, Ten or 227 Precepts of the various levels of ordination.

When teaching monastics alone, he would focus much more specifically on using the renunciant way of life as the key methodology of training; the instruction would therefore be concerned with the possible hurdles, pitfalls and glories of that way of life. Since the average age of the monks' community in a monastery in Thailand is usually around twenty-five to thirty and the precepts around celibacy are kept extremely strictly, there was also a natural need for Ajahn Chah to skilfully guide the restless sexual energy his monks would often experience. When well-directed, they would be able to contain and employ that same energy, and transform it to help develop concentration and insight.

His talks to monastics could sometimes seem much fiercer than those given to the lay community. This manner of expression represents something of the ‘take no prisoners’ style which is characteristic of many teachers of the Thai Forest Tradition. It is a way of speaking which is intended to rouse the ‘warrior heart’, an attitude to spiritual practice that enables one to be ready to endure all hardships and to be wise, patient and faithful, regardless of how difficult things get. Occasionally such a manner can come across as overly forceful in tone or combative in tone, but the spirit behind this language is the endeavour to encourage the practitioner, to gladden the heart and provide supportive strength when dealing with the multifarious challenges of freeing the heart from all greed, hatred and delusion. As Ajahn Chah once said: ‘All those who seriously engage in spiritual practice should expect to experience a great deal of friction and difficulty.’ The heart is being trained to go against the current of self-centred habit, so it’s quite natural for it to be buffeted around somewhat.

As a final note on this aspect of Ajahn Chah’s teachings, particularly with respect to those one might term ‘higher’ or ‘transcendent’, it is significant that he held nothing back as being especially for monastics. If he felt that people were ready for the highest levels of teaching, he would impart them freely and openly. For example, in one of his talks to a group of lay people he stated, ‘People these days study away, looking for good and evil. But that which is beyond good and evil they know nothing of,’ and then proceeded to give extensive descriptions

of how to transcend that dualism. Like the Buddha, he never employed the ‘teacher’s closed fist’, but chose what to teach solely on the basis of what would be useful to his listeners, not on how many Precepts they kept or their religious affiliation or lack of one.

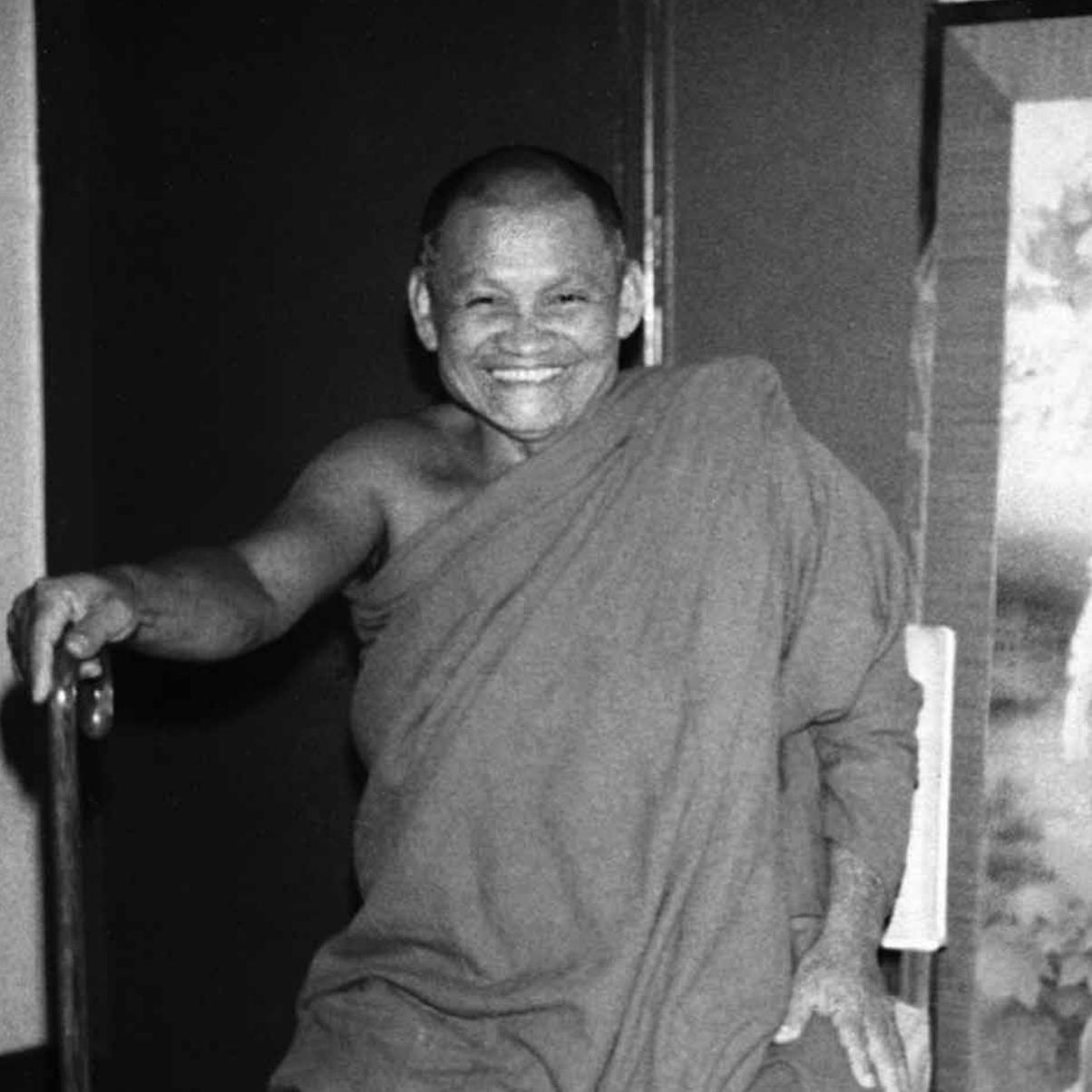
#### COUNTERACTING SUPERSTITION

One of Ajahn Chah’s best-known characteristics was his keenness to dispel superstition in relation to Buddhist practice in Thailand. He strongly criticized the magic charms, amulets and fortune-telling that pervaded so much of society. He rarely spoke about past or future lives, other realms, visions or psychic experiences. Anyone who came to him asking for a tip about the next winning lottery number (a very common reason why some people go to visit famous ajahns) generally got very short shrift. He saw that the Dhamma itself was the most priceless jewel which could provide genuine protection and security in life, and yet it was continually overlooked for the sake of the promise of minor improvements to *saṃsāra*. Over and over he emphasized the usefulness and practicality of Buddhist practice, ignoring the common belief that Dhamma was too high or abstruse for the common person, out of a genuine feeling of kindness for others. His criticisms did not aim just to break down their childish dependencies on good luck and magical charms; rather, he wanted them to invest in something that would truly serve them. In the light of this life-long effort, the twist of circumstances which accompanied

his funeral in 1993 was ironic. He passed away on 16 January 1992 and his funeral was held exactly a year later. The memorial *stūpa* has sixteen pillars and is thirty-two metres high, with foundations sixteen metres deep; consequently, a huge number of people in Ubon Province bought lottery tickets with ones and sixes together. The next day the headlines in the local paper proclaimed: LUANG POR CHAH'S LAST GIFT TO HIS DISCIPLES – the sixteens had cleaned up and a couple of local bookmakers had even been bankrupted.

## HUMOUR

That last story brings us to a final quality of Ajahn Chah's teaching style. He was an amazingly quick-witted man and a natural performer. He could be either very cool and forbidding or sensitive and gentle in his way of expression, and he also used a high degree of humour in his teaching. He had a way of employing wit to work his way into the hearts of his listeners, not just to amuse, but to help convey truths that would otherwise not be received so easily. His sense of humour and skilful eye for the tragi-comic absurdities of life enabled people to see situations in such a way that they could laugh at themselves and be guided to a wiser outlook. This might be in matters of conduct, such as a famous display he once gave of the many *wrong* ways to carry a monk's bag: slung over the back, looped round the neck, grabbed in the fist, scraped along the ground ... Or it might be in terms of some painful personal struggle. One time a young





AJAHN CHAH BEING SHOWN HIS PORTRAIT FOR THE FIRST TIME BY THE ARTIST, GERRY ROLLASON. IT HAD TAKEN GERRY TWO YEARS TO PAINT IT. IN THIS PHOTOGRAPH AJAHN CHAH HAS JUST SAID TO HIM: 'I BET YOU WOULD REALLY SUFFER IF I SCRIBBLED ON ITS FACE.'

PHOTOGRAPH BY GERRY ROLLASON.

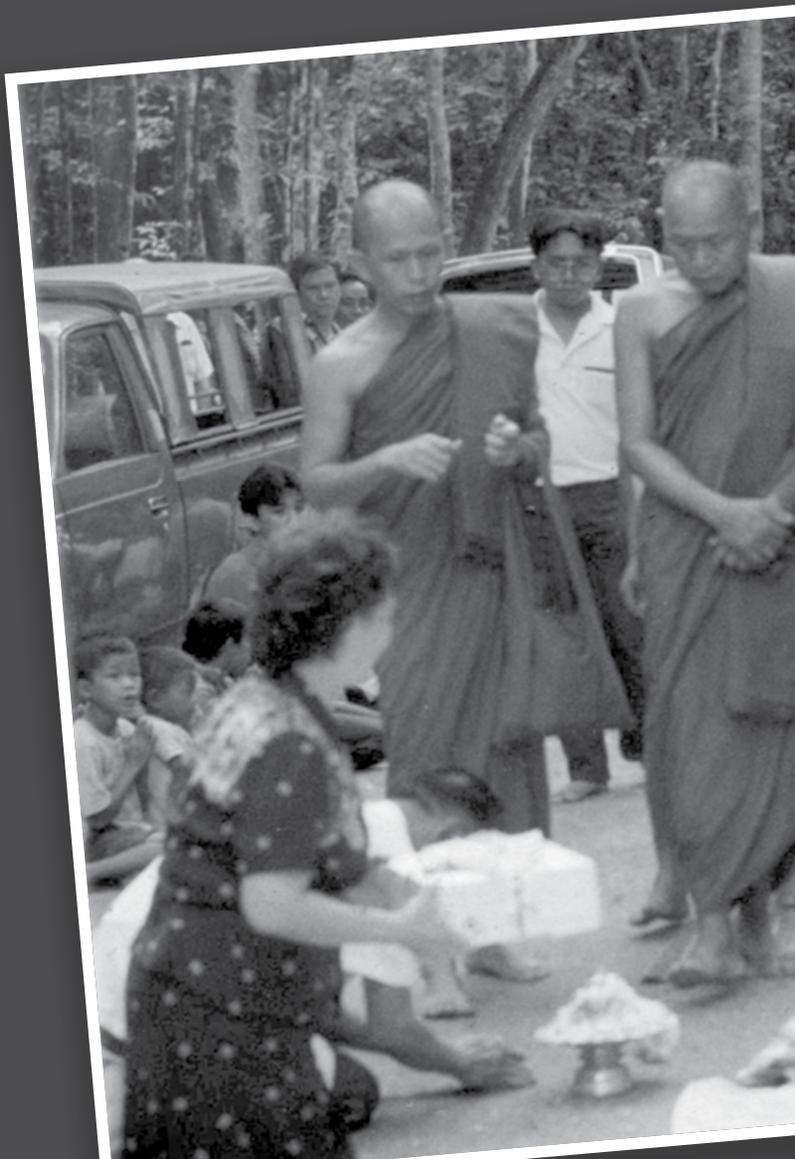
bhikkhu came to him very downcast. He had seen the sorrows of the world and the horror of beings' entrapment in birth and death, and had realized that, 'I'll never be able to laugh again - it's all so sad and painful.' Within forty-five minutes, via a graphic tale about a youthful squirrel repeatedly attempting and falling short in its efforts to learn tree-climbing, the monk was rolling on the floor clutching his sides, tears pouring down his face as he was convulsed with the laughter that had never been going to return.

## LAST YEARS

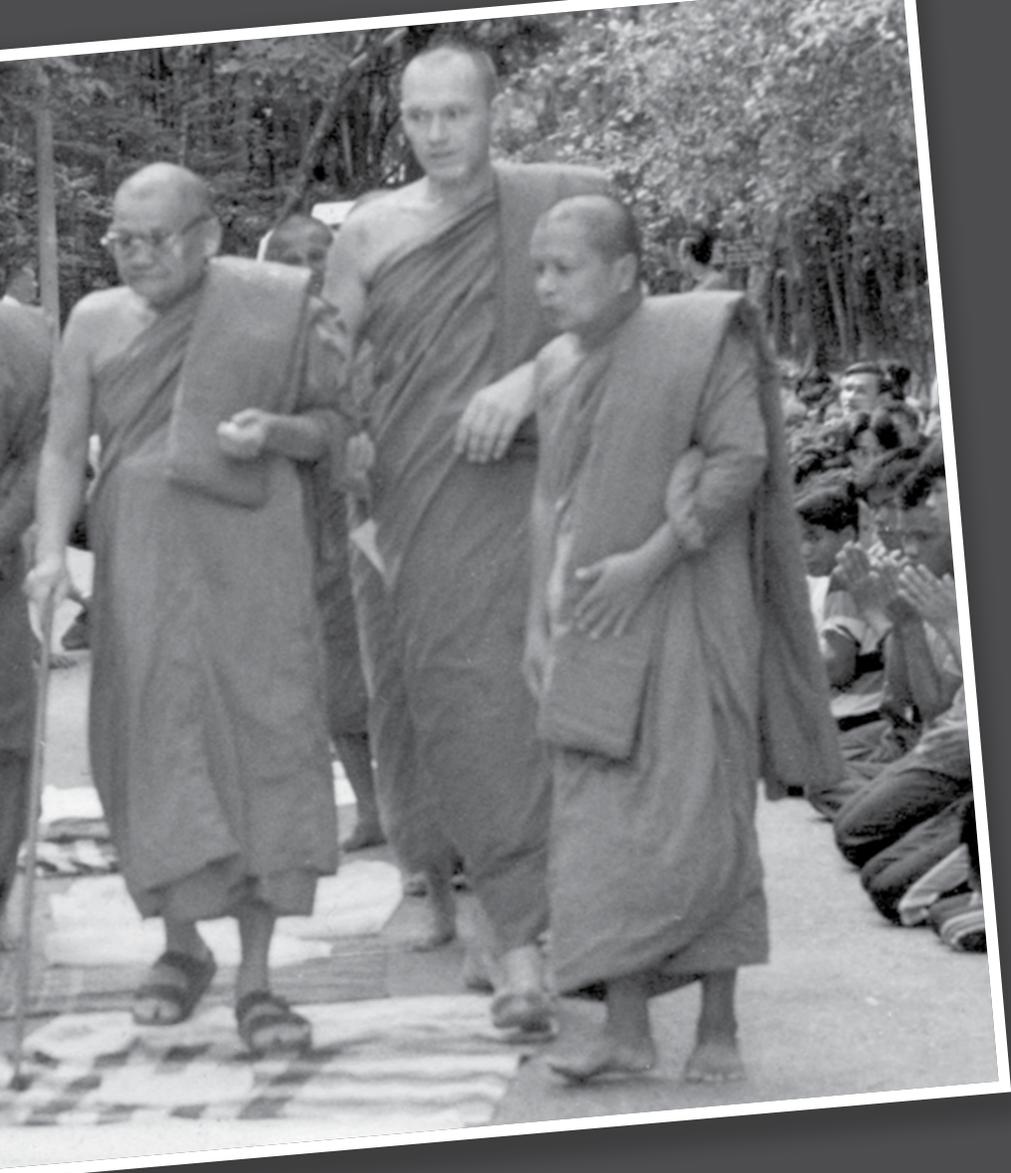
During the rains retreat of 1981 Ajahn Chah fell seriously ill with what was apparently some form of stroke. His health had been shaky for the last few years, with dizzy spells and diabetic problems, and now it went down with a crash. Over the next few months he received various kinds of treatment, including a couple of operations, but nothing helped. The slide continued, until by the middle of the following year he was paralyzed but for some slight movement in one hand and had lost the power of speech. He could still blink his eyes. He remained in this state for the next ten years, his few areas of control diminishing slowly until by the end all voluntary movement was lost to him. During this time it was often said that he was still teaching his students; hadn't he reiterated endlessly that the body is of the nature to sicken and decay, and that it is not under personal control? Well, here was a prime object lesson in exactly that - neither a great master nor even the Buddha himself could escape the inexorable laws of nature.

The task, as always, was to find peace and freedom by not identifying with the changing forms. During this time, despite his severe limitations, on occasion he still managed to teach in ways other than just by being an example of the uncertain processes of life and giving his monks and novices the opportunity to offer their support through nursing care. The bhikkhus used to work in shifts, three or four at a time, to look after Ajahn Chah's physical needs, as he required round the clock attention. On one particular shift two monks got into an argument, quite forgetting, as often happens around paralyzed or comatose people, that the other occupant of the room might be fully cognizant of what was going on. Had Ajahn Chah been active, it would have been unthinkable for them to have had such a spat in front of him. As the words grew more heated, an agitated movement began in the bed across the room. Suddenly Ajahn Chah coughed violently and, according to reports, sent a sizeable gob of phlegm shooting across the intervening space, passing between the two protagonists and smacking into the wall right beside them. The teaching was duly received and the argument came to an abrupt and embarrassed conclusion.

During his illness the life of his monasteries continued much as before; in a strange way, the Master's being there yet not there helped the community to adapt to communal decision-making, and to the concept of life without their beloved teacher at the centre of everything. After such a great elder passes away it is not uncommon for things to dissipate rapidly and for all their students to go their own way, so that their legacy vanishes in a generation or two. It is perhaps



LUANG POR CHAH RETURNING  
FROM HOSPITAL IN 1982



a testimony to how well Ajahn Chah trained people to be self-reliant that when he fell ill there were about 75 branch monasteries; they had increased to well over 100 by the time he passed away, and now there are more than 300 in Thailand and around the world.

After he passed away his monastic community set about arranging his funeral. In keeping with the spirit of his life and teachings, it was to be not just a ceremony, but also a time for hearing and practising Dhamma. It was held over ten days, with several periods of group meditation and instructional talks each day, the latter given by many of the most accomplished Dhamma teachers in the country. Some 6,000 monks, 1,000 nuns and just over Ten Thousand lay people camped in the forest for those ten days. Besides them, an estimated 1,000,000 people came through the monastery during the period; 400,000, including the king and queen and the prime minister of Thailand, came on the day of the cremation itself. Again, in the spirit of the standards Ajahn Chah espoused during his whole teaching career, throughout this entire session not one *baht* was charged for anything: food was supplied for everyone through forty-two free food kitchens, run and stocked by many of the branch monasteries; over £315,000 worth of free Dhamma books, at today's prices, were passed out; bottled water was provided by the ton through a local firm, and the local bus company, and nearby lorry owners ferried out the thousands of monks each morning to go on alms-round through villages and towns of the area. It was a grand festival of generosity and a fitting way to bid farewell to the great man.





ARCHAEOLOGISTS EXCAVATE THE OLDEST KNOWN BUDDHIST SHRINE  
UNCOVERED WITHIN THE MAYA DEVI TEMPLE AT LUMBINI, NEPAL

## 2

# THAI FOREST BUDDHISM COMES WEST<sup>4</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

The orders of Buddhist monks and nuns (the Sangha of bhikkhus and bhikkhunis) originated as followers of the Buddha who abandoned household life to live without home or money, in order to dedicate themselves more fully to living the transcendent Truth which the Buddha proclaimed. In India at that time this spiritual life of alms-mendicancy already had an accepted place in society. Sects of spiritual seekers then abounded in India, differing according to their philosophy or approach, but in general having abandoned caste and status in society. The most obvious outward signs of such renunciants were the head, either clean-shaven or with completely untended hair and, among those who wore clothes at all, a simple 'robe' made of rags, hide or even bark. The Buddha's development of this lifestyle, narrated time and again in the Pali scriptures, was to cultivate a Middle Path between asceticism and sensuality: 'The Middle Way,

<sup>4</sup> Ajahn Amaro wrote this chapter jointly with Ajahn Sucitto. An earlier version was published in *Monastic Studies*, Abbey of Our Lady Of The Holy Cross, Berryville, VA, USA 1991, Vol.19, p142-155.

fully realized by a Perfect One, avoids these two extremes, bhikkhus; it brings knowledge, leads to calm and insight, to awakening and to Nibbāna'. (S 56.11)

In terms of ultimate truth, the Middle Way is to be cultivated mostly through the fine balance of meditation. The teachings of Dhamma give guidance on the realization of Truth through an awareness which is ardent and one-pointed, yet patient, serene and gentle. The training of the Sangha backs this up, steering the course between asceticism and indulgence in matters of the monastics' livelihood. Attention to details of conduct, being content with whatever necessities of life (i.e. food, shelter, clothing, medicine) are offered without having been solicited and having a gentle attitude toward all beings are paramount themes. This training is narrated in minute detail through the books of the Buddhist Monastic Rule, the Vinaya. These weighty tomes record the Buddha's judgment on every contentious incident in the monastic life, from murder and false proclamation of one's sainthood down to the standards for the number and quality of robes and footwear.

The importance attached to these rules is made clear by the Buddha's exhortations on their efficacy in removing the hindrances to enlightenment ('vinaya' means roughly 'that which leads out,' that is, out of delusion and the wearisome round of re-birth); and by his declaration that the teachings and the monastic rule were to be the guide for future generations after his own death. The Theravada tradition which in part forms the subject of this chapter is based

upon a determination to retain the original words of the Buddha and maintain orthodoxy. So within this tradition in particular, strict Vinaya practice has always been regarded as highly praiseworthy, however capable an individual monastic may be of adhering to its strictures.

Vinaya establishes one-pointedness towards the spiritual goal of transcendence; its restrictions emphasize that realization of the goal requires great dedication. For a contemplative, such a discipline further encourages the sense of self-confidence and trust which is essential for the fuller opening and investigation of the mind. As the individual surrenders to the monastic form, letting go of personal preferences and desires for the sake of community harmony, many manifestations of selfishness are brought up into consciousness. The task of meditation is then to accept them, investigate them and let them go. As this process unfolds it becomes clear that understanding does not come through the exertion of willful effort alone; it is more a matter of undoing than of doing. Gradually a peace of mind which does not depend upon external conditions to support it develops, giving rise to joy, gratitude and a great sense of ease: ‘And when he knows that these five hindrances (desire, hatred, dullness, restlessness and doubt) have left him, gladness springs up in him on realizing that; joy rises in him thus gladdened, and so rejoicing all his frame becomes at ease; being thus at ease he is filled with a sense of peace, and in that peace his heart is stayed.’ (D 2.75)

In addition to its benefits to the monastics, the Vinaya was established by the Buddha to create and nourish a firm bond between the monastic order and lay people. Many of the rules were laid down to insure that bhikkhus and bhikkhunis did not exploit the faith of laypeople for selfish ends, or cause a waning of faith through wanton, greedy or insensitive behaviour. As the Sangha developed and became a source of teachings for laypeople, a close relationship based upon mutual trust and support developed, for the layperson through providing material needs, for the monastics through offering spiritual guidance. This relationship, carefully supported by the Vinaya, has remained the source of strength for Theravada Buddhism, the original Buddhism, from its origins in India and throughout its spreading across Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka, for over 2,500 years.

The relationship is one of interdependence. The monastic order does not possess any means of self-support, as the monks and nuns are prohibited from owning or using money and from growing, storing or cooking food. In fact, they are only allowed to eat food directly given to them between dawn and noon on the same day. So without daily contact with supportive laypeople the monastic order cannot continue. Their dependence upon others inspires the monks and nuns to be worthy of the faith and generous offerings they receive by applying themselves wholeheartedly to their training. For laypeople, unselfish giving becomes an active, joyful part of their spiritual life; entering into this relationship draws them close to the living teachings and helps to strengthen their practice of them.

In the Theravada recension of the Vinaya, the bhikkhu training includes 227 rules and observances which are collected to form the Pāṭimokkha, a Rule recited at fortnightly Sangha meetings. Many hundreds of other rules are also in use. The Bhikkhuni Rule is even more closely defined, with some 311 Pāṭimokkha regulations. ‘Pāṭimokkha’ actually means ‘a bond’: apart from its moral value, it also establishes a sense of fraternity, a common ground and allegiance which transformed the peripatetic alms-mendicants of the early years into a monastic order that over the centuries has become largely cenobitic and resident in permanent dwellings known as *vihāras*. Laypeople may stay in a *vihāra* as guests, generally living under a discipline which in simple form follows monastic moral standards in terms of the Eight Precepts outlined below:

Harmlessness: to refrain from intentionally taking the life of any creature. Trustworthiness: to refrain from taking anything that is not given. Restraint: to refrain from any form of sexual activity. Right Speech: to refrain from false, abusive or malicious speech. Sobriety: to refrain from taking intoxicating drink or drugs. Abstinence: to refrain from eating after noon. Renunciation: to refrain from entertainments, self-adornment and provocative dress. Moderation: to refrain from over-indulgence in sleep.

As the monastic system developed the monasteries became focal points for the wider Buddhist community. For laypeople, practice of the teachings became classified under three headings – *dāna* (generosity), *sīla* (virtuous conduct) and

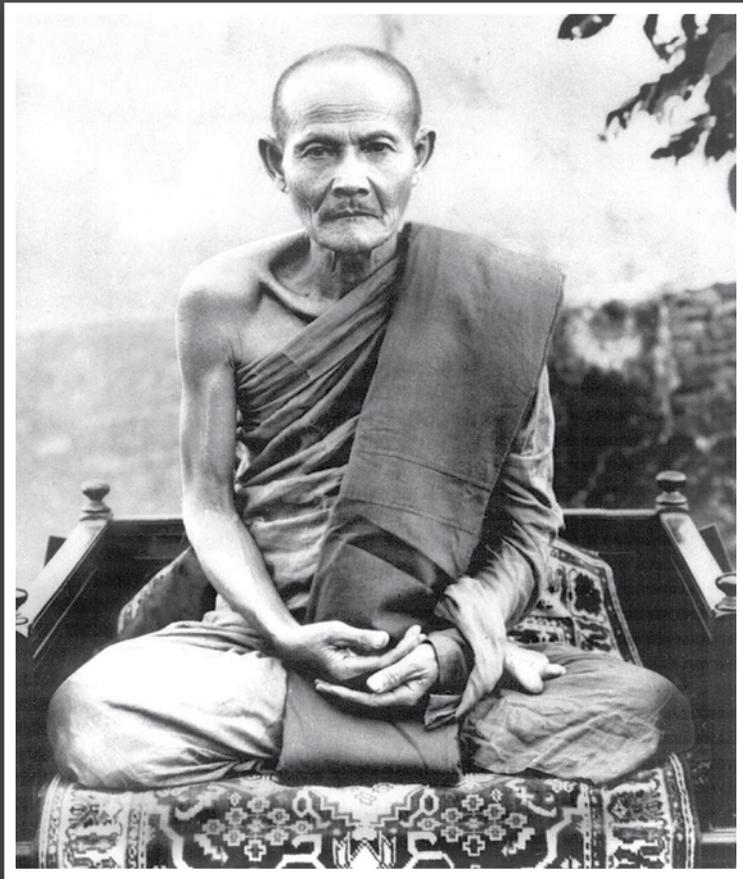
*bhāvanā* (cultivation of the mind or meditation). In counterpoint, the Sangha, dependent on alms, emphasizing the importance of moral precepts and teaching meditation, provided strong support for the value of these practices. In Theravada countries people line the streets at dawn bearing food to give the monks as they come on their daily alms-round. Villagers will often invite a bhikkhu to establish a monastery near their village and the more devout will visit the monasteries regularly, especially on the weekly Holy Days falling at each quarter of the moon. Many families have come to live near the English monasteries in order to have more contact with the Sangha, and so that their children can grow up in an environment in which wholesome values are encouraged. The sense of community which develops can thus support, balance, and nourish both sides in a way that is beneficial to everyone. In the monasteries people can establish contact with Buddhists of varying backgrounds and affiliations; some will stay as guests of the monastery for periods of time, receiving teachings and being accommodated free of charge. So the monasteries are more than residences for monks and nuns: they become a focal point to which anyone who is interested can come to hear and practise the teachings, and where Buddhists can reaffirm their faith in the Triple Gem, the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha. These are called the ‘Three Refuges’: they are the qualities which provide absolute security in life and are manifested as Wisdom, Truth, and Virtue. They form the foundation of the Buddhist approach to life:

‘Pray Venerable Sir, for what reasons was the course of training laid down for the disciples of the Perfect One and the monastic rule appointed?’

‘For ten reasons, Upali ... For the welfare of the Sangha  
 for the comfort of the Sangha  
 for the control of unsteady people  
 for the comfort of well-behaved bhikkhus  
 for the restraint of corrupting influences in this present life  
 for guarding against corrupting influences liable to arise in a future life  
 for the pleasing of those in whom faith has not yet arisen  
 for the establishment of True Dhamma  
 for the benefit of the Vinaya.’ (A 10.31)

## FOREST MONASTICISM

As seems to be the case with most major religions and religious orders, there is a division among Buddhist monastics between the priestly, secular, academic types and the contemplative or gnostic types. In the Theravada Buddhist countries (Burma, Thailand, Sri Lanka, Cambodia and Laos), this separation in monastic life resulted in two basic styles of monastery, in the town or village and in the forest. The former are by far the more numerous and, as one would expect, are the ones mostly concerned with the academic training of monks and the performing of religious ceremonies for laypeople. The forest monasteries tend to be more austere, and more concerned with the development of meditation than with



AJAHN MUN

intellectual excellence alone. It is understood that meditation, frugality, and simplicity of living conditions, coupled with a close observance of the monastic discipline, aid the fruition of inner spiritual potential.

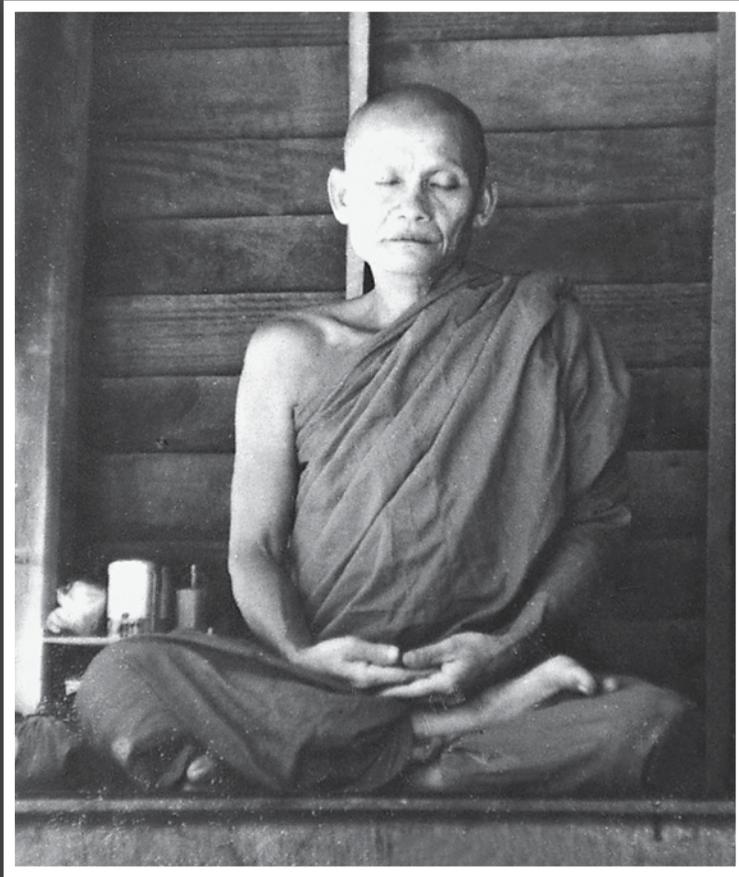
In Thailand in the early part of this century there was a resurgence of interest in the Forest monastic tradition. The religion had been in a state of some decay for a while; discipline was generally slack and many of the monks were quite ignorant of even the basic scriptural teachings, so the time was ripe for a reform movement. As has often been the case in Christian monasticism, reform manifested itself as a return to the standards of the 'early fathers', that is to say, the style of life exemplified in the scriptures. There was a general raising of standards in all monasteries, but most importantly, meditation monasteries once again began to be established in forest and mountainous areas. This was how the Buddha himself had lived and what he had most encouraged in those who aspired to the holy life: 'Here are roots of trees, here are empty places – meditate, bhikkhus Do not be slothful now lest later you regret it!' (M 8.18).

By far the most influential person in this revitalization of the contemplative Forest Tradition was Venerable Ajahn Mun. A native of rural Northeast Thailand with little formal education, he managed to develop a very clear understanding of the essence of the Buddha's teachings with only a small amount of guidance from his fellow monks. From the very beginning he pitched into the bhikkhu life

with great heart, and remained an inspiring example of frugality and energetic dedication all his life. Although he kept on the move, rarely staying in one place for very long, he managed to become well-known and trained a large number of monks in meditation and the refinements of monastic discipline. The great majority of the current generation of meditation masters in Thailand are either his direct disciples or have been heavily influenced by him.

One such monk was the Venerable Ajahn Chah, who was also born in a village in Northeast Thailand. He was ordained as a novice in early youth and on reaching the age of twenty took higher ordination as a monk. He received basic instruction in monastic discipline and the scriptural teachings, later practising meditation under the guidance of several local meditation masters. He wandered for many years in the style of an ascetic, sleeping in forests, caves and cremation grounds. After some fifteen years as a monk, Ajahn Chah spent a very short but enlightening period with Venerable Ajahn Mun. Despite its brevity, their period together proved a major turning-point for the young bhikkhu Chah. From that time on he developed a much greater confidence in his spiritual practice, particularly with regard to the relationship between scriptural knowledge and the direct knowledge of Reality which arises with meditation.

A few years later he returned to visit his home village, staying in a nearby forest where he was invited to remain. This grove was uninhabited by people, a place of cobras, tigers and ghosts; it was, as he put it: 'The perfect location for a forest



AJAHN CHAH

monk.’ Around Ajahn Chah a large monastery formed as more monks, nuns, and laypeople came to hear his teachings and stayed on to practise with him. Now, in 2015, there are over 300 mountain and forest branch monasteries throughout Thailand and in Western countries where disciples of his follow the lifestyle he exemplified.

On entering one of Ajahn Chah’s monasteries one is likely to encounter monks drawing water from a well and a sign on the path which says, ‘You there, be quiet! We’re trying to meditate.’ Although there is group meditation twice a day and sometimes the abbot gives a talk, the heart of meditation is the way of life. Monks do manual work, dye and sew their own robes, make many of their own artefacts, and keep the monastery buildings and grounds in immaculate condition. The monks and nuns live extremely simply, following the ascetic precepts of eating once a day from the alms-bowl and limiting their possessions and robes. Scattered throughout the forest are individual huts where the monastics live and meditate in solitude, and where they practise walking meditation on cleared paths under the trees. The strict observance of monastic discipline enables them to live a simple and pure life in a harmonious community, where virtue, mindfulness, and understanding may be continuously and skilfully cultivated. Wisdom is thus recognized as a way of living and being, not just a product of a meditation technique.

It is perhaps this recognition and the emphasis upon it which have made Ajahn Chah's style of practice so successful in the West. On beginning to practise, Westerners often thought that meditation meant sitting for long periods in quiet places with no disturbances. In his monasteries in Thailand, Ajahn Chah's frequent response to this attitude was to frustrate people's efforts to seek out tranquillity. The emphasis in monasteries is always on surrender to the community lifestyle, which can sometimes be quite busy. Investigation of Dhamma is encouraged in all situations, not just in formal meditation practice. The result of this is flexibility and adaptability of mind, rather than dependence on particular conditions which are felt to be necessary to support the spiritual life. A certain readiness to assess and adapt to novel situations has turned out to be a very prominent feature of Buddhist monastic life in the West.

When Ajahn Chah started teaching Westerners, Thai people asked him why he just taught them meditation, without stressing the first two steps, of generosity and virtue. He replied that, since meditation was what had first motivated them, that's what he emphasized as a spiritual entry-point. Westerners would in due course find it impossible to make progress without cultivating generosity of heart and a good moral foundation. He was, however, content to let them find this out for themselves:

'Our practice really isn't that difficult, there's not much to it ... simple things like cleaning basins and washing bowls, performing one's duty

to one's elders. Keeping rooms and toilets clean is important. This is not crude or menial work. Rather, you should understand it is the most refined ... Take care of moral discipline as a gardener takes care of trees. Don't discriminate between big and small, important and unimportant. Some people want short cuts. They say "Forget concentration, let's go straight to insight", or "Forget moral discipline, we'll go straight for concentration." Westerners are generally in a hurry, so they have greater extremes of happiness and suffering. The fact that they have many defilements can be a source of wisdom later on ... Don't be concerned with how long it may take to see results, just do it. Like growing a tree: you plant it, water it, feed it, keep the bugs away. If these things are done properly, the tree will grow naturally. The speed of the growing is something you can't control...'

## THE BUDDHA'S TEACHINGS COME WEST

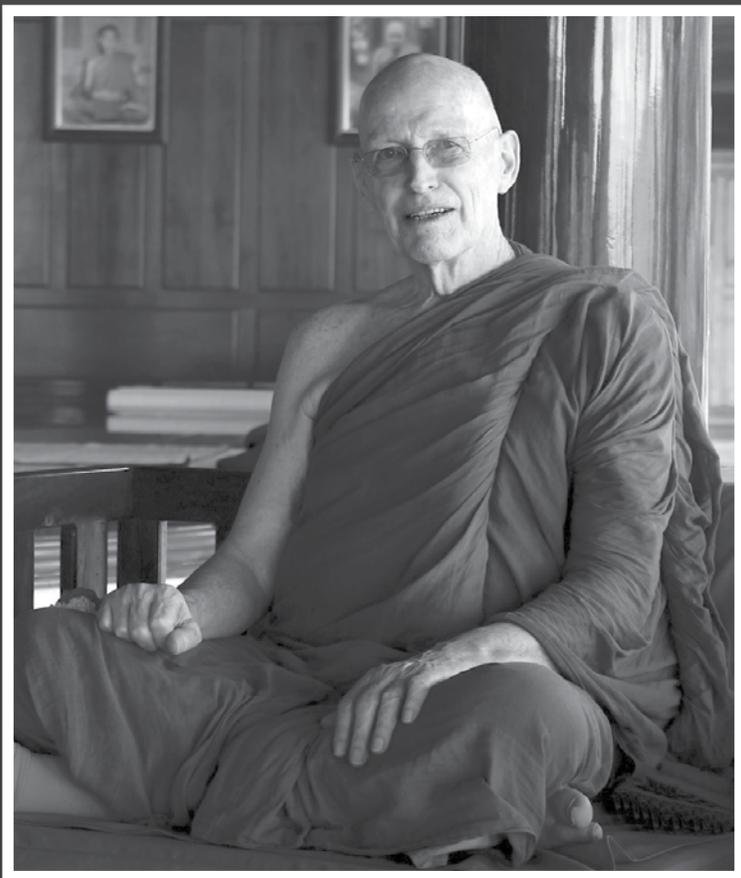
The Buddha's teachings had been known about in Britain for two centuries, but only started to receive serious attention toward the end of the Victorian era. The discovery of the ancient Theravada texts, still intact in the ancient Pali language, stimulated a lot of translation work. This scholastic approach certainly highlighted the profundity of the Buddha's teaching, but gave the impression that Buddhism was a philosophy rather than a religion. This affected the way people in Britain related to monastics, as unless they experienced the 'non-rational' qualities of faith and devotion, they did not immediately understand

the value of alms-mendicancy. Nevertheless, either through the interest of Asians or because people in Britain felt that monks – ‘professional Buddhists’ as it were – would make the best teachers, there were several attempts to introduce a Theravada Sangha from Southeast Asia, with limited success.

In the second half of the twentieth century there was a growing interest in meditation as a source of experience of spiritual truth and peace of mind. Worldwide travel became a practical reality for the average Westerner, and the differing cultures affect each other in sometimes unexpected ways. Eastern and Western minds can display very different tendencies, as was observed by Bhikkhu Nyanavira, an English monk living in Sri Lanka:

‘In Europe intellectualism takes precedence over tradition; in the East it is the reverse. In Dhamma terms, the European has an excess of *paññā* (wisdom) over *saddhā* (faith) and he tends to reject what he does not understand, even if it is true; the Oriental has an excess of *saddhā* over *paññā*, which leads him to accept anything ancient, even if it is false.’

In the 1960’s and 1970’s many Westerners, disillusioned with materialistic values, were attracted by Asian spirituality. Many went to Asia to explore the practice of meditation and were profoundly influenced by Eastern ways. Some found their way to the monasteries to try the Buddhist monastic lifestyle, and a few decided to stay on. For others who remained outside the Sangha, the generosity, faith, and devotion which permeate a Buddhist culture were



AJAHN SUMEDHO

an instructive example of a more graceful way of living – one of joy, respect, and concern for others. As a result, in many centres in Asia and numerous small enclaves on other continents, Western students of a great variety of different Buddhist teachers and traditions are quietly cultivating the Way.

## THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A COMMUNITY

The development which forms the theme of this chapter began in 1956, when a trust was set up by some people specifically interested in enabling Westerners to train and live as bhikkhus in England. This approach was unique in that it valued the monastic *per se*, rather than as someone who would do a job as a priest/lecturer/meditation teacher. Early attempts to achieve its aim did not meet with sustained success; it was not until 1976, when the chairman of the trust met Ajahn Sumedho, a senior Western disciple of Ajahn Chah, that fortunes began to change.

From that meeting in London came an invitation to Ajahn Chah to visit, which he did the following year, accompanied by Ajahn Sumedho and Ajahn Khemadhammo. They were joined by two more Western monks. Ajahn Chah judged the situation in England to be worth an experiment, and when he returned to Thailand he left the other monks to continue their practice in their new urban environment, living in a small house in north London. They aroused unexpected interest. These Forest monks were the ones who had most consciously turned away from Western values and mainstream Buddhism as

it appeared in the West. Most bhikkhus, particularly from Asian countries, had assumed that it was important to emphasize the intellectual approach to Buddhism, and Western lay Buddhists felt that 'Western Buddhism' should be devoid of rituals, devotions and archaic ceremonies. Conversely, Ajahn Sumedho felt that what he and his bhikkhus could offer was a traditional form, with chanting and attention to traditional Buddhist conventions. Rarely referring to the scriptures, he employed the direct approach of the Forest Masters, receiving guests all day to converse in an informal and personal way on Dhamma or, to use a phrase he often employs, 'the way it is.' This made it clear that the study of Buddhism was the direct investigation of one's own attitudes, habits, aspirations, and sorrows.

The emphasis on mindful activity which he had learned from Ajahn Chah had its appeal. It offered a way to live meditatively rather than undergoing the frustrating stop-go process of ordinary life interspersed with meditation retreats. But such an approach requires one ordering one's life around moral and ethical guidelines to sustain the contemplative approach, and most people need to be encouraged to make the commitment by the example of someone who is living the way happily. The Forest Sangha received so much support because of the real need for a more faith-oriented approach, and in no small way because of Ajahn Sumedho's personal warmth.

A large proportion of the financial and material support for the monastic sangha in Britain has always been provided by the Asian community. In the beginning life in the West was quite difficult for the newly arrived Forest monks, who found themselves living in urban London. However, the Western interest in meditation and the Asian delight in supporting the Sangha both found suitable objects in a mature well-trained monk like Ajahn Sumedho. A few more Western monks came from Thailand to join them, interest in the fledging monastic order grew, and in 1979 they were able to move to a larger house in the southern English countryside. This was the first step toward the creation of a proper monastery, now known as Chithurst Buddhist Monastery or Cittaviveka.<sup>5</sup> In this beautiful rural setting the sangha was able to present the inspiring example of community life in a more complete way, and the results were quite dramatic. Four monasteries have now been established in rural England, with others in Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand.

Along with monastic growth, there were developments in monastic style. It is illuminating, concerning the nature of change in a religious order, that the most significant such changes have never been brought about consciously; rather, they have evolved naturally as a result of the practice of awareness and response. Of course, there were some minor changes in dress to adapt to the colder English climate, but these are less significant than the changes in mood.

5 *Cittaviveka* means 'mental detachment.'

In a monastic form less committed to orthodoxy than Theravada, change would be directed consciously from a set of ideas. But in this case the very tenacity and firmness of the discipline, and the sincere commitment to it evidenced by Ajahn Chah and Ajahn Sumedho, avoided any change for the sake of change, or the imposition of a set of ideas from a personal viewpoint. There has been no change in the discipline itself: minor alterations in attitude, yes, but only of the kind exemplified in the Vinaya and according to the 'Great Standards' laid down by the Buddha himself for the adaptation of monastic form to a new environment. So the growth of this form seems to point to the soundness of the underlying bond between monastic and secular society as a fruitful promoter of development, and to the continuing spiritual vitality of the Western world.

The sangha's interdependence with secular society meant that its way of relating its presence and teaching to life in the West had to be recognizable to people unfamiliar with Buddhist monastic values and Buddhist culture. The traditionally impersonal and impassive behaviour of Asian monastics was frightening or emotionally chilling to Westerners brought up on sin, guilt and damnation. So the community has developed a more convivial and welcoming style, with monastics tending to take the initiative in engaging laypeople in conversation, 'drawing them out' so to speak. It doesn't take Western monks long to remember Western social graces and speech conventions, if they have ever forgotten them. Many have found themselves having to review the religious and cultural values of their society from a Buddhist perspective.



CITTAVIVEKA MONASTERY IN 1979, SHORTLY AFTER THE SANGHA ARRIVED. FROM THE LEFT:  
VENERABLES KITTISĀRO, SUCITTO, AJAHN SUMEDHO, LAKKHANA AND ARAÑÑABHO

In a context where there is frequent contact with many other religions and cultures, Buddhist teachers have needed to develop some familiarity with at least the terminology and major tenets of other religions, as well as psychotherapies and major Western thinkers, in order to be able to relate to the jargon and attitudes of their audience.

In Ajahn Sumedho's talks there are references to Western poets, Marxism, Advaita Vedanta, Greek mythology and, of course, the great monotheistic religions. In a mind able to reflect upon such themes, this produces remarkable results. In a television interview on religious attitudes toward warfare, for example, he nullified the twentieth century's major doctrinal conflict in the political arena by asserting that communism and democracy were very similar, and that both represented fine fruitions of human idealism. The underlying conflict, he suggested, arose because both of them were being used selfishly...

To one who assumes that Buddhists deny the existence of God, listening to Ajahn Sumedho talk on the subject can be either frustrating or insightful:

'The teaching of the Buddha is one that is to be realized: it is not a belief system. There is nothing to believe in. Many people in Europe are confused by this. People come and ask, 'What do you believe in? You must believe in something.' I say, 'We don't have beliefs.' 'You don't believe in anything, then. You believe that there's nothing.' 'No, we don't believe there's nothing.'

‘Then you believe that there isn’t any God.’ ‘No we don’t believe that – it’s not a matter of belief.’ And they’re totally frustrated. ‘You must believe in something. Religions are about believing in things, aren’t they?’

‘That’s what we think religion is – believing in something we’ve been told. They say, ‘You must believe in the Buddha.’ Or maybe they think there aren’t any beliefs, and there isn’t any God. But that is not it. Those are the two extremes – believing that there is a God or believing that there isn’t. But when you look at belief, what is it? If you believe in something, it is something you have accepted from someone else, something you haven’t realized yourself. If you realize something yourself, you don’t believe it anymore, you know it. Truth is a matter of knowing the real thing rather than believing what the authorities say. They might be right; even if they are right and we only believe what they say, we still don’t know.

‘So the Buddha, rather than creating beliefs, taught a way of realization of Truth, of knowing it directly ourselves. Then we don’t have to take positions where we do or don’t believe in God; or that there is only one God, or two or three or four ... I’m just recognizing the limitations of belief ... We can see those limitations as we sit in meditation. ‘I believe there is a God.’ ‘I believe there isn’t.’ Where does that come from? It comes and goes in your mind, doesn’t it? Believing is a condition of the mind, so you believe in various perceptions. If you have an affinity for believing in God, then do so. If you’re a rebel who doesn’t believe in things very much, you can take the atheistic view.’

In fact, on occasions Ajahn Sumedho employs a theistic approach, talking on the nature of Christ-consciousness or the nature of the Divine.

It is ironic that the broad intellectual scope of this teaching has been made accessible through practice in a tradition which attaches a secondary value to its own scriptures and little value to intellectual pursuits. In Forest monasteries heresy is difficult, because the emphasis is on *orthopraxy* rather than *orthodoxy*; the exact words you choose to point towards Truth need only be those which are meaningful to you or your listeners. You need resort to no other authority than that.

Another area where changes in style may be observed is in the relative activity and ‘active’ stance of the monastics as compared with the Asian tradition, although this should be qualified. The rules mention and regulate the need for monastics to construct and maintain their residences, and the larger and better-established the buildings are, the greater the monk’s level of activity. In practice this is often not the case in Asia, as lay devotees regularly manage these practical matters to a greater or lesser degree, so in this regard the monks’ role is commonly quite passive.

However, the sangha’s response to the needs of laypeople is ‘active’ to a greater degree than is often appreciated. In pre-modern societies especially, the monasteries provided much of the schooling and counselling on parish affairs, as well as the more customary rites such as funerals, house blessings and marriages. One of the motivations behind Forest monasticism was to curtail the

individual monk's involvement with such activities as this, i.e. subjects other than the realization of Nibbāna.

In the West the Forest model has undergone transformation in this respect, again as a response to needs. To begin with the monks had no lay devotees to undertake building on their behalf and so had to do it themselves. This was particularly the case at Chithurst, which was almost derelict when it was acquired. Moreover, the difficulties experienced by laypeople in finding suitable places in which to hold large meetings to hear teachings and have residential meditation retreats persuaded Ajahn Sumedho that a style of monastery different from the forest model was needed. This led to the establishment of Amaravati. In Thailand such needs are taken care of by alternative means. Forest monasteries don't as a rule conduct retreats for laypeople, because at least until recently lay disciples did not think that meditation was part of their life as Buddhists. If they wanted to develop meditation they would enter the Sangha as monks and nuns. This attitude is not shared by Westerners who would like to meditate and realize higher knowledge, but for family reasons or personal preferences do not want to embrace the renunciant life. So meditation retreats and engagements to teach meditation to laypeople have become a standard part of the sangha's life in the West. To a certain degree this puts the community in the spiritual marketplace with every other kind of meditation and 'inner growth' system.



THE CITTAVIVEKA  
SANGHA IN 1980



It says much for the monastics' confidence in their lifestyle that the sangha's retreats are conducted largely as days of meditation would be in a Theravada monastery, with a standard of the Eight Precepts, self-discipline and conformity to a 'monastic' routine being the norm. The day's practice will begin at 5 a.m. with morning chanting for everyone; the standard accommodation is adequate but simple; behaviour according to Buddhist etiquette is encouraged.

Concern for the welfare of laypeople has also resulted in creating situations in the monastery for families with children to hear and practise the teachings together. To date this has been done in the form of family days, weekends and an annual summer camp at Amaravati. Then there is a growing interest in having books and pamphlets of teachings by members of the sangha published.

In all these ventures, from building to family camps, one of the safeguards against over-involvement and losing sight of the spiritual goal has been offered by the monastic rule, the Vinaya. As all handling of money is prohibited, lay stewards always have to manage that side of things. Similarly, no charge is made for teachings or even for accommodation at the monastery, and the literature is given away. Thus these ventures are only made possible through donations given freely to the lay stewards. This cuts off the need to be popular in order to make money, and limits any venture to what is needed and is supported by the lay community. Such an unmaterialistic attitude may seem to limit the development of the Sangha, but it deepens its effect. In a country

where everything is for sale and even cathedrals plead for funds, this free-will approach inspires a sense of lasting trust.

Another way in which the Vinaya safeguards monastics from the pulls of the world is its emphasis on an apprenticeship of five years as a monk or nun before engaging in teaching. During this period monastics are trained in looking after the needs of the community's elders, washing and repairing their robes, cleaning their lodgings, etc. This helps to develop a sense of attentiveness and service, in the spirit of giving up one's own preferences for the sake of helping the community. These are also the years when the minutiae of the monastic rule slowly become assimilated into one's conduct. After five years of this training a monk or nun should have gained a fairly thorough grasp of the monastic life and its principles, and be able to explain them to others. Even then, however, teaching duties are allocated by the community elders rather than through personal choice, and the Vinaya prohibits teaching laypeople except if invited to do so. The Forest Tradition in Britain still emphasizes the need for private retreats for the Sangha, as well as wandering on *tudong*, i.e. undertaking a few weeks or months of walking and roughing it in open country whilst living on alms offered by local people.

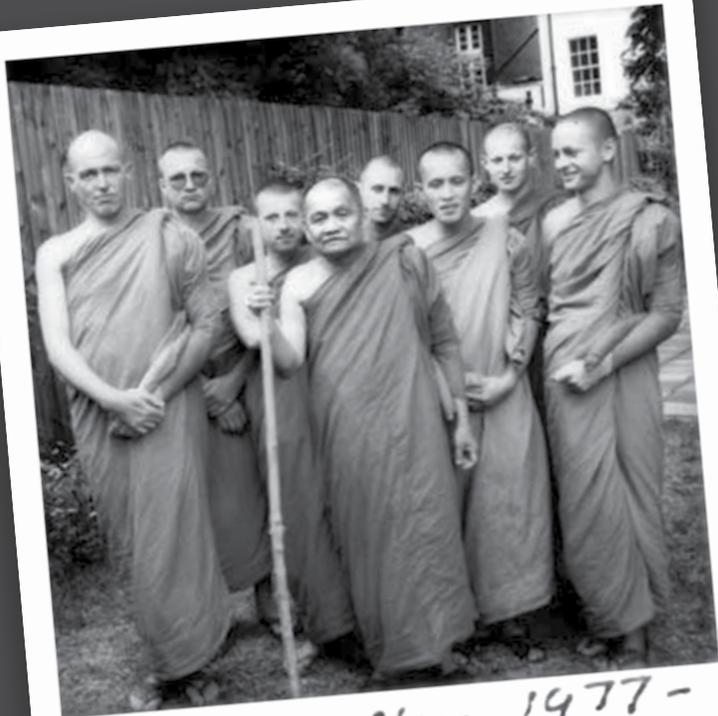
A further development has concerned the status of nuns. The original invitation to Ajahn Chah by the English Sangha Trust was concerned with setting up a suitable place for men to live and train as bhikkhus. No mention was made of

nuns, although several of Ajahn Chah's monasteries and many monasteries in Thailand have nuns in abundance. They are white-robed nuns who observe the Eight Precepts, since the Bhikkhuni Order disappeared from mainstream Theravada over 1,000 years ago and seemingly never existed in Thailand. While the ochre-robed monk has been a popular object of faith and inspiration, the idea of a female equivalent strikes more conservative Thais as a sort of sacrilege, or at least a parody in poor taste.

But shortly after Chithurst Monastery was established, four women expressed interest in joining the monastic community. Although Ajahn Sumedho had no experience of training nuns, he was impressed by their determination and sincerity and decided to make use of the Eight-Precept form for the time being, as it provided a basis on which to begin monastic training. After four years it seemed worthwhile and necessary to refine their training to accommodate their spiritual resolve. A Ten-Precept form of training which establishes mendicancy by forbidding the use of money is still available. In most Theravada countries it is used as a novitiate for men too young to become bhikkhus, and in Burma and Sri Lanka it is also used by women as a permanent monastic code. Such nuns are rare in Thailand, but Ajahn Sumedho received permission from the elders of the Thai Sangha to use this form to establish an order of Buddhist mendicant nuns (*siladharā*) in the West. Their training has evolved within the Ten Precepts, with many other minor rules, and essentially a growing degree

of autonomy within the relationship of dependence on the bhikkhu-sangha, as laid down by the Buddha.

This relationship receives criticism from Western laypeople and more progressive Buddhists, as it makes the nuns' order junior to the bhikkhu-sangha. On the other hand, some ultra-conservative elements feel that even this amount of change is too much. Notwithstanding this the Sangha has remained firm, determined to operate within the limitations which are accepted by orthodoxy. Ajahn Sumedho has dismissed the whole topic of status as irrelevant to the realization of transcendent Truth and even a detrimental consideration in the spiritual life. His stand on this point very much brings to the fore the priorities which keep the sangha in touch with its roots while still able to adapt to the West.



Hampstead Vihara 1977 -

# 3

## WHY AJAHN SUMEDHO CAME WEST<sup>6</sup>

By the mid-seventies the phrase ‘*doh-mi-no-ee-fec*’ was in wide and anxious circulation in Thailand. South Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia had all fallen to the communists in 1975 so it was easy to guess which domino was predicted to topple next.

At that time Ajahn Sumedho was the abbot of the newly-founded International Forest Monastery (Wat Pah Nanachat), with a sangha of a couple of dozen young Western monks, novices and postulants under his care. The monastery was tucked into that corner of Northeast Thailand that nudges against both Laos and Cambodia, with the former’s border 20 miles away and the latter’s about 45.

6 An earlier version of this chapter was published in *The Middle Way* Vol.87, No.2, August 2012

The sound of the big guns in the distance was a part of the daily norm. He often pondered, ‘How are we going to look after all these young monks if Thailand falls next? Where can we go?’

When he was invited back to visit his family in California in 1976, he had this question in mind and, since both he and a large proportion of the fledgeling community of Wat Pah Nanachat were Americans, he presumed that the USA was where they would settle. He therefore had his eyes open and was interested to see what options might unfold as he travelled there.

One of the central principles of the monastic discipline, the Vinaya, is never to ask for things or even to hint. He met with various people and groups but no invitations were made to him to settle and start a monastery. There was no door open there. So he travelled on, assuming now that they’d just have to stick with Thailand and hope for the best.

He had a three-day stop-over in London where, fortuitously, he came to stay at a small monastic residence run by the English Sangha Trust. This organization had been founded in 1956 by Ven. Kapilavaddho, the first English monk to be ordained in Thailand, but its *vihāra* had had no monastic residents, or even visitors for a couple of years. The group was very impressed by this unexpected American guest and made the invitation to him to stay and take up residence, then and there.

Ajahn Sumedho was struck by both their sincerity and faith but, more importantly, he felt that they had a good understanding of the role of monastic life in the tradition. A door had opened. He responded by saying something like:

‘Thank you very much, this is a very generous offer, but I am the abbot of a newly-opened monastery so I would have to get the permission of my teacher before I could accept.’

The short version of the story is then that, in the spring of 1977, Ajahn Chah, with Ajahn Sumedho and Ajahn Khemadhammo, came to see the place and meet the people. Ajahn Chah gave his approval and, to Ajahn Sumedho’s surprise, said, ‘You can both stay on here.’ He also suggested that two junior monks, Anando and Viradhammo, who were then visiting their families across the Atlantic, be invited to join them in London.

The original plan had been for all five monks to travel back to Thailand together. In order to let the two new younger monks know that they now had a new future in store, Ajahn Sumedho called them and said, ‘By the way, bring long underwear.’

## FOREBEARS AND PARALLELS

It was a daunting task but not without precedent; others of various Buddhist affiliations had gone before.

The ground had been broken, almost a hundred years before, by such influences as the publication of *The Light of Asia*, in 1879, the foundation of the Pali Text Society, in 1881 and The Parliament of World Religions, in 1893. This latter had brought the first eminent Buddhist teachers to the West; then, in 1908, the English monk Ven. Ananda Metteyya arrived in London from Asia to establish the first Buddhist monastic presence in Britain, under the banner of the original ‘Buddhist Society of Great Britain and Ireland.’

Hindered by insuperable health problems, Ven. Ananda Metteyya’s efforts did not flourish, but he planted many seeds that later took root, notably in the founding of the current Buddhist Society by Christmas Humphreys in 1924. In that same year Buddha Haus was established by Paul Dahlke, in Frohnau, Berlin. A few years later in 1928, as a result of the pioneering efforts of the remarkable Anagarika Dharmapala from Sri Lanka, the London Buddhist *Vihāra* was founded. The monks at this *vihāra* thus formed the very first Theravadan monastic community in the West.

Ten years later, Ven. U Thittila, a gifted Pali scholar and expert in Abhidhamma, arrived in England from Burma and became a much loved and appreciated teacher through the war years and after.

In 1956 Ven. Kapilavaddho returned from Thailand, shortly after his bhikkhu ordination, in order to help establish a community of native-born monks on

British soil. He founded the Hampstead *Vihāra* and organized the ordinations, again in Thailand, of three of his students. This initiative met with many obstacles and, within a short time, only one bhikkhu remained there, Ven. Paññāvaddho.

After he returned to Thailand, eventually joining Ajahn Maha-Boowa in 1963, the *Vihāra*'s next chief incumbent was the Canadian Ven. Anandabodhi, a student of Ven. U Thittila. He was followed by Ven. Sangharakshita, a Englishman who had been ordained in India.

For various reasons both of these monks moved on and, despite Kapilavaddho being persuaded to return to the robe and lead the *Vihāra* again briefly, he passed away in the early 1970s

The first known visit to the West of a monk from the Thai Forest Tradition was that of Ajahn Maha-Boowa, who was invited by the English Sangha Trust to teach in London, in 1974. Ven. Paññāvaddho came with him and, despite the hope that he might be persuaded to resume his residency at the Hampstead *Vihāra*, the two of them returned to Thailand as planned. Apparently, as they were departing, Ajahn Maha-Boowa commented somewhat cryptically that, 'This is not my place but the rightful owner will come along soon.'

## BUDDHIST MEDITATION IN THE WEST AND THE EAST

After its first murmurings in the 1950s and 1960s, (the English Sangha Trust had briefly maintained Biddulph Hall in Staffordshire as a rural retreat centre during those years), by the 1970s interest in Buddhist meditation was expanding rapidly in the West. There were Zen and Tibetan movements developing with great strength, while on the Theravadan front there were communities coming into being on several continents. The Insight Meditation Society was founded in 1975, in the USA, and the senior English bhikkhu, Ajahn Khantipalo, established Wat Buddharingsee in Sydney, Australia, in 1973, followed by the forest monastery, Wat Buddha Dhamma, in 1978 at Wisemans Ferry. This was the very first Buddhist forest monastery to be established outside of Asia.

In Britain the Samatha Association, a group of students of the Thai meditation teacher Nai Boonman, was founded in 1973. Meditators following the teachings of U Ba Khin, and his students John Coleman, Goenka-ji and Mother Sayama, started a community at Oak Tree House, in Amberley, Sussex, and Oakenholt Buddhist Centre began to host retreats in Oxfordshire.

Interestingly enough, through this same period in Southeast Asia, meditation was becoming more and more widely practised, particularly amongst the lay community. This was a new phenomenon as, in the past, meditation had been regarded as being exclusively for monastics. Mahasi Sayadaw was enormously



LIGHT OF ASIA  
BY SIR EDWIN ARNOLD  
PUBLISHED JULY 1879

influential in popularizing vipassana meditation in Burma and, following his method, this enthusiasm had started to spread to Bangkok as well.

In the early 1970s the Thai royal family discovered the forest-dwelling ajahns of the Northeast of the country. Some of these, such as Ajahn Fun, were invited to Bangkok to instruct the King and Queen in meditation. Their patronage of those forest monasteries catalyzed a rapid upswelling of interest in those teachings and practices. The people of central Thailand, particularly the aristocracy and the intelligentsia, began to take notice. So forming an interest in meditation and, moreover, making the trek up to the remote forest monasteries of the Northeast, became a common feature of Thai culture.

Prior to this time such non-academic monks, living in remote places, had been of no interest and had had no influence on society beyond their local areas. So what was there about them, their teachings and their way of life, that now inspired such a change?

## THE ORIGINS AND KEY TEACHINGS OF THE THAI FOREST TRADITION

In describing the growth and flourishing of what is now known as the Thai Forest Tradition, there is one individual who outshines all others by several orders of magnitude. This is Ven. Ajahn Mun, who is the spiritual grandfather

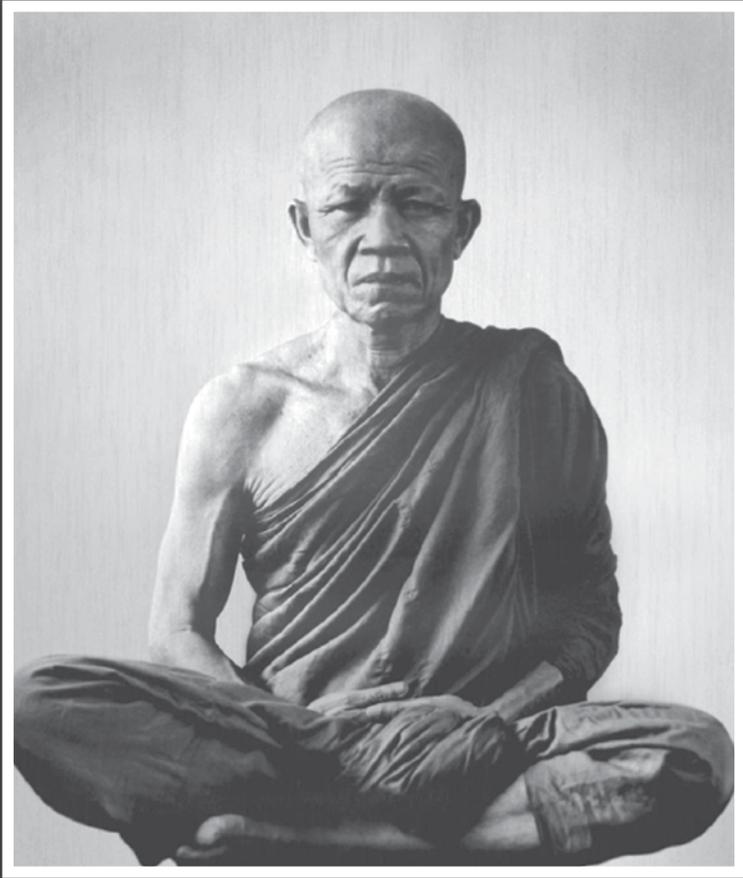
or great-grandfather of the vast majority of those practising the forest monastic life in Thailand today.

His direct students include such figures as Ajahn Maha-Boowa, Ajahn Chah, Ajahn Tate, Mae Chee Gaew, Ajahn Kau and Ajahn Fun, and their students in turn now constitute the main body of great meditation masters in Thailand, and in this Forest Tradition around the world.

Ajahn Mun was born in 1870, in Ubon province, Northeast Thailand. As a young monk he wanted to learn how to practise in the way described in the Pali scriptures – living in the forest, meditating, keeping the Vinaya strictly as well as following the allowable ascetic practices, the *dhutangas* – but at that time it was very hard to find any other monks who lived that way. Meditation in particular was almost unheard of, while those few who did practise it were popularly considered to be dangerous black magicians or at least likely to go mad.

Undeterred, he sought out Ajahn Sao and found him (rather than mad or bad) to be a fine and pure-hearted monk, accomplished at meditation, and one who lived in exactly the way he aspired to. Ajahn Mun thus became his student and adopted the life of the wandering ascetic, or *tudong*, monk.

He lived this way for the next 50 years and, during that time, both realized full enlightenment and drew to him a circle of dedicated students. He avoided staying in the same place two years in a row and kept to this standard up until



AJAHN  
MAHA BOOWA

the last five years of his life. His students often had to wander for months trying to find him to seek instruction.

He passed away in 1949, in Sakhon Nakhorn Province, Northeast Thailand. He never wrote a book or had any of his talks recorded; the most we have in this regard is *A Heart Released*, being a small collection of extracts from his talks, and one hand-written Dhamma poem entitled *The Ballad of Liberation from the Khandhas*. However, his oral teachings, his embodiment of Dhamma-Vinaya and the power of his presence left a spiritual legacy unsurpassed in modern times.

There are many elements of the forest monastic life in Thailand that set it apart from the more common, urban- or village-based monastic traditions: firstly, it is explicitly non-academic, favouring the mode of receiving oral instruction from an experienced teacher rather than from studying and memorizing scriptures. Secondly, the monastic rule is very strictly observed, particularly the precepts of not using money in any way shape or form. Thirdly, the practice of going wandering in remote and wild regions, to meditate alone in the woods, moors and mountains, is a key part of the life.

In the forest monasteries, the way of life is strictly supported by what has been called ‘an economy of gifts’, everything is offered freely – accommodation, teachings, blessings, literature – with no thought of monetary return. It is a life based completely on faith and generosity. This pattern, emphasised so strongly in the land of its origin, has been carried on in the West. In all the Thai Forest

Tradition monasteries around the world nothing will be found for sale and the teachings are available free to all who are interested.

Nowadays advances in technology and the internet have been found to be highly suited to the ‘open source’ ethic of Buddhism in general and the Thai Forest Tradition in particular. Huge quantities of Dhamma teachings are freely available online. Thousands of Dhamma talks, audio and video, are now available given by various teachers, as well as hundreds of volumes of e-books. In terms of meditation practices and teachings, there are a few that stand out as signature items, that were stressed by Ajahn Mun and are still central to this lineage today:

Firstly, the understanding that taking refuge in the Buddha essentially means abiding in Awareness or Knowing, or being that Awareness itself. In Thai the words ‘*poo roo*’ mean ‘the one who knows’ and they can refer both to quality of Awareness and to the Buddha himself. The most highly esteemed woman teacher in recent times, Upasika Kee Nanayon, refers to this quality as ‘an unentangled knowing.’

Secondly, one of the passages from the *suttas* most frequently quoted by the forest Ajahns is: ‘Bhikkhus, this mind is radiant, but it doesn’t show its radiance because passing defilements come and obscure it.’ (A 1.61) This is used to point to what might be referred to as the ‘original purity.’ As Ajahn Mun put it in *Muttodaya – A Heart Released*:

‘The mind is something more radiant than anything else can be, but because counterfeits – passing defilements – come and obscure it, it loses its radiance, like the sun when obscured by clouds. Don’t go thinking that the sun goes after the clouds. Instead, the clouds come drifting along and obscure the sun. So meditators, when they know in this manner, should do away with these counterfeits by analyzing them shrewdly... When they develop the mind to the stage of the primal mind, this will mean that all counterfeits are destroyed, or rather, counterfeit things won’t be able to reach into the primal mind, because the bridge making the connection will have been destroyed. Even though the mind may then still have to come into contact with the preoccupations of the world, its contact will be like that of a bead of water rolling over a lotus leaf.’ (Ajahn Mun, *A Heart Released*, p 23)

Thirdly, another way this principle is expressed is to describe the quality of liberated Awareness as being intrinsically separate from and transcendent of the conditioned world of perceptions and thoughts. This is why liberation is possible. As Ajahn Chah put it: ‘Our thoughts and feelings will be on one side and our heart will be on the other. Just like oil and water they are in the same bottle but they are separate.’

Lastly, although the development of deep states of absorption, the *jhānas*, is widely encouraged in the Thai Forest Tradition, the emphasis is to use this skill to support the practice of insight. Ajahn Mun encouraged the understanding



HAMPSTEAD, 1977



the most fertile ground for insight is to sustain just enough concentration to be able to watch the rising and passing of the five *khandhas*: the body, feelings, perceptions, mental formations and consciousness. Like the littoral zone between the land and the sea which produces the warm tide-pools of fertile and varied life-forms, so too what is known as ‘access concentration’ – the littoral between ordinary consciousness and deep absorption – provides the most fertile ground for insight to arise.

## EVOLUTION & SPREAD

Both for the urbanized, intellectual and increasingly stressed Thai population, as well as for some of those becoming interested in Buddhism in the West, it was the mixture of meditation, practicality, contemporary relevance and discipline that drew their attention to the Forest Tradition monasteries.

In the late 1970s and 1980s, the places offering this particular brand of teaching and practice began to spring up all over the planet. In Europe, in 1977, Ajahn Nyanadharo opened Bodhinyanarama Monastery in France. In 1979, having accepted the generous offer of a forest in West Sussex, Ajahn Sumedho moved out of London to the village of Chithurst and established Cittaviveka Monastery. Ajahn Khemadhammo opened a hermitage on the Isle of Wight in 1980, later moving to the Forest Hermitage in Warwickshire in 1985. Meanwhile, on the other side of the world, in 1981, Ajahn Jagaro moved to Western Australia to found Bodhinyana Monastery with Ajahn Brahmavamso. Also notably, although from a Sri Lankan rather than from a Thai background, Bhante Gunaratana

moved out of the Washington DC *vihāra* to found the Bhavana Society in 1983. This was the first Buddhist monastery in the Forest Tradition to be established on the American continent.

Ajahn Sumedho's particular gifts as a teacher, coupled with the welcoming environment of a forest in the Sussex countryside, produced a rapid mushrooming of interest. The new monastery at Chithurst provided aspirants to the monastic life with an opportunity to Go Forth and practise in their own culture and to hear the teachings in their own language. It struck a balance of both maintaining a relevance to Western-born, non-traditional Buddhists (and non-Buddhists), as well as serving the needs of the Asian immigrant community in connecting with their heritage.

The teachings were abundant; Ajahn Sumedho gave talks every day in that era, as well as travelling widely to teach on invitation. Requests soon arose from near and far as people who attended retreats and teachings wanted to know if they could have a monastery near them. For a while they were popping up all over: Aruna Ratanagiri Monastery began in Harnham, Northumberland in 1981; the Devon *Vihāra* in 1983; Amaravati in 1984; Bodhinyanarama in New Zealand in 1985; Dhammapala in Switzerland in 1988; Santacittarama in Italy in 1990 and finally Abhayagiri in California in 1996. These are the eight monasteries directly founded by Ajahn Sumedho. Along the way he also founded a Ten-Precept training for women monastics. This was a radical innovation, at least in the context of the Thai religious community, and this form was given the name





AJAHN CHAH AND AJAHN SUMEDHO IN OXFORD, 1977

During these last thirty-odd years, the spread of the Thai Forest Tradition has steadily continued worldwide: In the antipodes, in Melbourne, Australia, the Vimokkharama hermitage opened in 1998 and Buddha Bodhivana Monastery in 2000; while in Brisbane, Dhammagiri Hermitage was founded in '07. Vimutti Monastery, near Auckland, New Zealand, was founded in '04. In Canada, Ajahn Sona launched Birken Forest Monastery in 1994, while Ajahn Punnadhammo established the retreat centre begun by his teacher Kema Ananda in 1975 as Arrow River Forest Hermitage in 1995 in '06 Ajahn Viradhammo opened Tisarana Monastery near Ottawa, and in '09 Ayya Medhanandi founded the Sati Saraniya Hermitage in the same area.

In the USA, Metta Forest Monastery was founded in California by Ajahn Suwat in 1991 with Ajahn Thanissaro, an American monk and author of literally dozens of Dhamma books, becoming its abbot in 1993. Ajahn Khemasanto began Dhammasala Monastery in Michigan in '01 and, also in the Mid-west, Santikaro, a student of Ajahn Buddhadasa, started Liberation Park in '06. More recently Abhayagiri opened its first branch, the Pacific Hermitage, in Washington State in '10. Monasteries for nuns have also been established in California – Dhammadharini in '05, Saranaloka in '09 and Aranya Bodhi Hermitage in '10. Finally, in Europe, Ajahn Cattamalo started Muttodaya Monastery in Germany in '07, Ajahn Candasiri has just launched a hermitage for nuns in Milntuim, Scotland and, if all goes according to plan, a new branch will open in Portugal in July of 2012.

Over the same period in Thailand, the community of Western monks has continued to flourish at Wat Pah Nanachat, with four other branches opening up (Poo Jom Gom, Dao Dum, Ratanawan and Anandagiri). There is the long-established Sangha of Western monks residing at Ajahn Maha-Boowa's monastery and growing community of them studying with Ajahn Anan at Wat Marp Jan, near Rayong. Ajahn Buddhadasa's monastery, Wat Suan Mokkh, offers ten-day silent meditation retreats every month, taught in English, as it has done since the early 1980s.

## GROWING PAINS & TRIBULATIONS

It goes without saying that, as a part of the growth and expansion, there have been numerous disappointments and crises along the way – these are a natural aspect of the process. Many senior monks have disrobed, many nuns have left owing to disaffection due to gender inequalities. If one thinks these events shouldn't happen, or that they mean it's all been a waste of time, one is missing a crucial teaching.

Back in the summer of 1981, just before his health collapsed, Ajahn Chah's sent a letter to Ajahn Sumedho. This was a rare if not unique occurrence. Shortly after this was received at Chithurst Forest Monastery, Ajahn Chah suffered the stroke that left him paralyzed and mute for the last ten years of his life.

‘Whenever you have feelings of love or hate for anything whatsoever, these will be your aides and partners in building *parami* [spiritual virtues].

The Buddha-Dhamma is not to be found in moving forwards, nor in moving backwards, nor in standing still. This, Sumedho, is your place of non-abiding.’

Great strength comes from digesting and incorporating the difficulties encountered. They help us to raise our game. Furthermore, if we dwell in habitual conceptions of progress or degeneration, or indeed stasis, we will miss the reality of the present and thereby not to be able to awaken to it.

## AND NOW...

The roots of this Forest Tradition are steadily reaching down, its branches spreading. Women and men go forth into the monastic life, following the Dhamma-Vinaya in the way that it was established at the very beginning of the Buddha’s dispensation.

Invitations and offers continue to be received to open new centres around the world: Spain, Hungary, Ireland, Brazil, France and Sweden – groups in all these countries are eager to have forest monasteries nearby.

Buddhist monastics are becoming almost normal in the West. No longer are eyebrows raised quite so high. Often we called upon to be giving meditation instruction in public schools, such as Bedales, or at management colleges such as Ashridge Business School, a few miles from Amaravati.

Nowadays parents of young Westerners are not so alarmed or outraged by their kids wanting to enter a monastery. Since today's fifty-somethings grew up with the counterculture happening around them, it can seem very normal. And, judging by a conversation at a recent Diamond Jubilee event, even the Duke of Edinburgh seems to know Ajahn Sumedho's monasteries well. He was concerned that the monks at our Northumberland branch were allowed to wear adequate warm clothing in the winter...

For an imported tree to flourish and be fruitful it needs to adapt to its new surroundings and find partners to cross-pollinate with in order to bear the fruit which will be the next generation. If it doesn't do this it will be like a lone and sad botanical specimen, or much worse, a museum piece.

The challenges of introducing an ancient and foreign spiritual tradition into the West include both the need for developing such adaptability to new circumstances as well as maintaining a connection with ancestral and compatible partners. If it can't acclimatize to the new conditions, it will soon wither and die, if it produces no family, it will have its day and then be gone.

This might seem sad but, rather, it should be seen as a part of the natural process. One of the sources of vitality in Buddhism world-wide is the range of options open to all who are interested and the absence of any central control. The principle is: if it works and is useful it will survive, if not, let it fade. There is

no organizational and financial source to prop things up. It can be seen as a Darwinian process, so that should be taken into account.

The long view requires us to think of those who are yet to come – the grandchildren of those who are being born today. Just as the Buddha laid out the Dhamma-Vinaya with the longevity of the teaching, and thereby the ‘long-lasting welfare and happiness’ of living beings in mind. Without this kind of ‘seventh generation’ thinking, if we only consider the expedencies needed to make our own life pleasing and convenient, this particular stream of Dhamma will dry up and disappear.

For those practising within the Thai Forest Tradition in the West then, these are the tasks we daily meet; the need to maintain our authentic connections with our spiritual ancestors, to be faithful to our family of old, and simultaneously to adapt to the climate and ways of these green and pleasant lands.

## AND WHY DID AJAHN SUMEDHO RETURN TO THE EAST?

Well, he did not die and leave a single shoe in his otherwise empty coffin, as did Bodhidharma. Rather he saw that, having taught unceasingly since 1975, it was suitable now to step back and leave the task to the next generation.

So, this time *like* Bodhidharma, who said in that famous post-mortem encounter, ‘I am going home,’ he decided to settle Thailand, his spiritual birthplace.

In November of 2010 he thus took his leave of the communities that he had established in Europe, having given ordination to 95% of the monastics around him, and set off for a life of blissfully unstructured retirement. When asked, in January 2012 what he had planned for the coming year, he smiled broadly, eyes twinkling and said, 'My calendar is completely empty – every page is blank.'



## 4

# HOW DOES THE SANGHA DECIDE?<sup>7</sup>

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE ELDERS' COUNCIL & ITS MEETINGS

When people come to visit a monastery, one of the things which immediately strikes them is the quality of order. Everything is done in a certain way, often in a way that varies from common custom, and the nuns and monks dress differently, eat differently, interact differently. All these varied aspects of monastery life and many others have a precisely patterned feel to them. The question which thus arises is how and why the monastics choose to follow this particular form. Is it because of the Vinaya, the monastic rule, or Thai custom, or did they decide on it for themselves? And many members of the lay community who have a longer-term association with the monasteries wonder: 'How do you decide who goes where? And how did you come to agree on making such and such a change ... to start using those jackets ... to construct that new building? Who decided, and how?'

7 Originally published in *Forest Sangha Newsletter* No.77, Oct 2006

The Vinaya was established in the time of the Buddha and has been used as the fundamental guide for ordering the affairs of the Sangha ever since. Nevertheless, despite its comprehensiveness, new situations arise in new times and new countries, and decisions have to be made as whether or not to adapt and how, and how to support and benefit people in the best way, given the current circumstances.

The monastic Sangha is a communal animal, and from the earliest times the community has met and conducted its business together as an integrated unit. Although the Buddha was held in the highest esteem and respected as the Giver of the Dhamma and originator of the Sangha's rules, he did not take an autocratic position within it; rather, he established an egalitarian model for the group to conduct its formal acts (*saṅghakamma*) and for the purpose of coming to decisions, with each monk or nun having the right to participate. As the community of monastic disciples of Luang Por Chah and Luang Por Sumedho grew in the West, a similar communal sharing of responsibility evolved with regard to deciding on matters that affected everybody. This is how the Elders' Council of today serves the wider monastic community, and this chapter aims to describe how that body has evolved and how it functions.

At first, from the community's arrival in England in 1977 until 1981, most of the Western monastic group lived in a single place, initially at the Hampstead Vihara and then at Chithurst Buddhist Monastery, which opened in 1979. The

model used to decide matters in those days was the most common one among forest monasteries in Thailand, i.e. *laow dtaer Tan Ajahn* – ‘whatever the Ajahn wants.’ Luang Por Sumedho was the only *thera* in the group; he was the teacher and natural leader, so this mode of looking after the welfare of the community seemed obviously right and appropriate.

By 1981, though, the group had started to spread. In Northumberland people had gathered their resources and the Harnham Vihara was opened up; further south, a number of lay supporters were actively seeking a place to start a branch in Devon. The community was burgeoning. Within another two or three years Chithurst was full, the first group of nuns had taken the Ten Precepts and launched the *Sīladharā* Order, and retreats led by Luang Por Sumedho for the laity, both in the UK and abroad, were bursting at the seams. In the Southern hemisphere a monastery had opened up in Perth, Western Australia and a new establishment was mooted for Wellington, in New Zealand.

This rapid expansion led to two key developments in the growth of the community of Luang Por Sumedho’s monastic disciples: firstly, the foundation of Amaravati, first occupied in August 1994 and officially opened in May 1995; secondly, the establishment in February 1995 of a procedure of Sangha meetings to help support the sharing of responsibility. At that initial gathering, in the chilly halls of the as yet uninsulated Amaravati during one of the iciest winters in recent history, Luang Por Sumedho opened the meeting by stating its purpose:

‘The Sangha is now spread over a wide area geographically. The coming together as a group gives the occasion for communication between members. This brings about a feeling of trust and avoids misunderstanding.’

He also took the opportunity to introduce his vision for Amaravati, expressing his feeling that the size of the undertaking was reasonable, given that it could serve as a focal point for Buddhists in England and Europe.

‘It is to bring people together. This is especially important now when in Western thought everything emphasizes the division, the differences. All people have the same goal in their religion – although differences in conventional expression can be recognized.’ (Sangha Meeting, February 1995).

All members of the bhikkhu-sangha associated with Luang Por Sumedho were gathered at this meeting. Soon after, other meetings involving Theravadan elders of other monasteries in the UK were held, with monks such as Ven. Dr Saddhatissa, Ven. Dr. Rewatadhamma and Ven. Ajahn Khemadhammo, and there were efforts to establish a ‘Theravada Sangha Council of the UK’, but little came of these pan-lineage enterprises.

In January 1986 the whole of Luang Por Sumedho’s monastic community came together: there were twenty-two bhikkhus, eight *śīladharā* and thirty-three *anāgārikas*, male and female, plus another ten laypeople who were helping out with the winter retreat. It was a grand occasion, but unwieldy when it came

to discussions and decision-making. By the summer of that year there had emerged a core group of the senior monks, the elders at Amaravati and the heads of the various branches in the UK, who formed the decision-making body that soon became known as the Theras' Council. All bhikkhus of ten Rains or more were eligible to participate in it. This body then began to meet four or five times a year on average, and from late 1986 until the end of 1992 all the major matters of community concern were processed through it. They handled a broad range of subjects, including the details of the nuns' training, which was being crafted and refined during those years; what should and should not be considered as allowable 'medicines and tonics'; appropriate clothing for the anagārikas; the relationship of the Theras' Council to the English Sangha Trust and other steward bodies; 'living wills'; the allowability or otherwise of reciting the monastic rule in English; who was being suggested for ordination or to travel to different monasteries; and many more matters.

Numerous discussions took place around the keeping and circulating of minutes, as it soon became clear that if the Council's discussions and decisions were to carry weight and maintain their meaning over time, they would need to be accurately recorded. It was also decided that those minutes should be confidential, accessible only to those who were regular attendees at the meetings, since:

The minutes are primarily an aid for the memory of those involved in the meeting. They also serve as a record of the decisions made on matters affecting the training of bhikkhus in the UK.

The summary of the matters effecting the training of bhikkhus is kept in a book in the back of the bhikkhus' meeting hall at Amaravati Buddhist Centre and this should be consulted by all bhikkhus.

For the remainder:

- i) Skilful dissemination is not secrecy.
- ii) The written word can be deceptive, it does not necessarily convey the feeling of the discussion recorded.
- iii) some matters are not suitable for general knowledge.
- iv) It was suggested that the minutes could be used as an aid while a verbal summary of the matters raised at the meeting may be given to the members of the community. (Theras' Council Meeting, March 1990)

From early on an archive of past minutes was maintained, to act as a reference for all future generations of Sangha members. Efforts also needed to be made to keep this process of recording both accurate and effective, eventually employing such standards as:

The minutes of the Elders' Council Meeting should note only the salient points of the discussion and any agreement come to by the Elders. The minute taker and the Chairperson should sit next to each other in meetings, and the Chairperson should summarize at the end of each discussion topic what agreement the minute taker should record. (Elders' Council Meeting, November 1996)

As part of the general democratizing of the decision-making process, it also became customary to dispense with the use of titles when recording the minutes:

Sumedho Bhikkhu stressed that the important reflection is the term 'bhikkhu'; titles such as ajahn, thera, Dalai Lama, need not be made much of, they can be deluding. Titles such as ajahn may be used by laity, for official procedure; however, the term 'bhikkhu' is to be preferred. (Thera Council Meeting, October 1987)

By late 1992 the Council's meetings had become unwieldy; there were several visiting elders who were resident but not involved in community organization, and others without leadership roles. It was clear that a change was needed. A natural opportunity to effect such a change came with the first gathering of the heads of all the branch monasteries around the globe at Wat Pah Nanachat, on the occasion of Luang Por Chah's funeral in January 1993. This was effectively the first of the World Abbots' Meetings (WAM) also known as the International Elders' Meeting (IEM).





AMARAVATI SALA, MĀGHA PŪJĀ  
SANGHA GATHERING, 1986

Around the time of that large and wide-ranging meeting, a smaller group, the Abbots' Meeting, was proposed and agreed. This group was to consist of the abbots from the whole of Europe, with such theras or therīs as might be invited. It was to meet more frequently than the WAM, roughly every two months, with some people who were not abbots attending in order to give the group continuity when there were changes.

Also at this time the most senior of the *śīladharā* were approaching their tenth Rains. At one of the meetings it was stated:

'Sumedho Bhikkhu would like the *śīladharā* to grow in confidence and be able to be part of the body which makes the decisions for the community. The meetings are open to any bhikkhu or *śīladharā* who has more than ten vassas.

If there are any issues that may be private to the bhikkhu-*sangha* the *śīladharā* could be requested to leave the meeting for the period when the matter is discussed.' (Theras' Meeting, July 1991)

Then, four years later:

'The principle for the Abbots' meeting had been the attendance of the abbot of each monastery plus one invited Thera. It had been decided at a meeting in October 1992 that theras and therīs were eligible to attend. Sumedho Bhikkhu reiterated his support for such a meeting including senior

nuns. It would be good that the nuns be present to participate in decision-making processes that affect them and also be able to appreciate first-hand the bhikkhu-sangha's perspective on various issues.' (Abbots' Meeting, August 1995)

Consequently, from November 1995, the siladharā were present at all the Abbots' Meetings. Furthermore, in March of the following year it was decided that:

Siladharā with 10 or more Vassas [are] to be addressed as Ajahn, subject to the agreement of the absent elders.

There were no objections.

During these years, along with the increasing inclusion of the nuns in communal decisions, there was also a shift in the role of the English Sangha Trust and the other trusts associated with the different monasteries. This change can best be described as a movement away from the role of 'patron' to that of 'steward.' One factor resulting from it was an increased responsibility for monastics in the role of guiding the activity of the trust bodies. Many of the discussion items at Theras' and Abbots' meetings involved the nuances of this monastic community/steward relationship; it has been looked at and adjusted numerous times over the years:

Currently three bhikkhus speak on behalf of the Thera Council on the board of the English Sangha Trust. The Thera Council has a duty to learn to act as

an advisory body, to find a way of working with the lay directors, and look to lay people as advisors. There is a shift in emphasis from Sumedho Bhikkhu to the Council. (Theras' Meeting, October 1987)

The matter was discussed of involving people in decision making so that they will feel supportive of the process. An example given of this was the consultation with the community about design issues regarding the Dhamma Hall. Lines of communication need to be clarified so that people in the community know whom to consult, so that their input will be considered at the appropriate level. Rather than informing people after the event, to seek out ideas and consensus before *the decision is made*. This may be conducive to greater harmony and a maturing of Sangha members – especially important for the proper functioning of the [proposed] Sangha Company. So the Abbots (or their equivalents) would go to a meeting with an outline of the feelings of the community on matters to be discussed. This proposal ties in with the admission of nuns to the 'Abbots Meeting.' (Abbots Meeting, August 1995)

By this time, in the mid-1990's, several participants in the meetings were not abbots, and as the general numbers of theras and therīs were steadily growing, the 'Elders' Council' was officially formed in March 1996 and held its first meeting in April that year. A parallel set of meetings, the Theras' Meetings, was launched for the complete group of elders, to serve the needs of those theras and therīs

who were not in the Elders' Council. The structure which was established then is still largely the one employed today:

'i) AGREED: The title of the meeting will be the 'Elders Council' subject to the agreement of those elders not present at this meeting.

ii) AGREED: For future Meetings, the same person will chair two Meetings in a row, unless they express a wish not to do so.' (Abbots' Meeting March 1996).

'(i) Who is automatically entitled to attend this meeting? Sumedho Bhikkhu, the abbots and vice-abbots of the seven monasteries in Europe and the USA, two elder nuns and invited guests. Invitations to attend should be cleared if possible at a meeting of the Elders' Council. If not possible, it should be cleared with the chairperson of the meeting to which the invitation is extended.

(ii) What constitutes a quorum?

When the Elders' Council becomes a 'legal body' under the terms of the [proposed] CLG revision, the exact details of what constitutes a quorum will be spelt out. At present however, the general principle of consensus applies, so that if some members of the council are absent when an important decision is made, the implementation of that decision is deferred until all Elders have been consulted and have agreed. Recent examples include decisions on

the title of ‘ajahn’ for senior nuns, the *garudhammas*, etc.’ (Elders’ Council Meeting (ECM), July 1996)

From April 1996 until now, April 2006, Elders’ Council Meetings and their parallel Theras’ Meetings which are not decision-making, have continued to take place. They are now generally held twice a year. Alongside them, in the sphere of the wider community of Luang Por Chah’s monastic disciples, there are the meetings in Thailand of the abbots of all the branch monasteries, plus some of the foreign ones, at Wat Nong Pah Pong on Luang Por Chah’s birth and death anniversaries, in June and January respectively. In addition, two other World Abbots’ Meetings have been held, in October 2001 at Amaravati and January 2006 at Wat Pah Nanachat; and although intended more for open discussion rather than decision-making, they were occasions for extensive community-building and the reiteration of mutually respected standards.<sup>8</sup>

Although the framework of the ECM has been established since 1996, it should not be assumed that it has maintained a static form – far from it. Among the most common discussion items in the archive of minutes are such topics as:

- Elders’ Council Procedure of Discussion and Decisions
- ‘What is the Elders’ Council for? (areas included issues of remit, training, consultation, feedback, support, etc.)

8 Since this article was written, other such meetings have been held at Wat Pah Nanachat in 2009 and 2012, and most recently at Amaravati in 2014.

- Who is on the Elders' Council?
- What are the parameters of the community it serves?
- How do we recognize and support the channels feeding into and out of the Elders' Council?
- Where does the authority of the Elders' Council come from and how is it exercised?
- What assumptions are there regarding the Elders' Council in all these areas, both from within and from without?
- How do we manage the human side of our business meetings?
- How do Elders receive advice, feedback, support and other resources from a peer body?

In short, there is a high degree of self-examination and wise reflection upon how the group operates, and concern that it should function at a maximal state of health. The guiding spirit for all the various bodies described above has been to establish decision-making procedures that support the whole monastic and, thereby, the lay community.

For example:

Procedure for changes in convention

The Sangha should abide by decisions made at meetings such as this one, at least until a subsequent Sangha meeting can give room for ‘feed-back.’  
(Sangha Meeting, July 1986)

Decision-making and Discussion

Suggested:

The emphasis should be on full and open discussion, and we should aim to recognize and avoid being pressured into decision-making. Better decisions usually emerge after there has been time for gestation. For example, emotional overlays can be filtered out given time and space. If there is discussion spread over more than one meeting there is an opportunity for more behind-the-scenes canvassing, discussion and reflection etc. which can reduce time needed in the meeting;

There is a model recognizing when decisions are being made and agreed – *saṅghakamma*;

Summaries of the discussion at the conclusion of each topic and/or the end of the meeting. The chair and/or minute-taker can be encouraged to take responsibility for this;

Good agendas help. They can include, for each topic: name of proposer; reasons for proposal, hoped result. Is the topic for discussion or is a decision needed?;

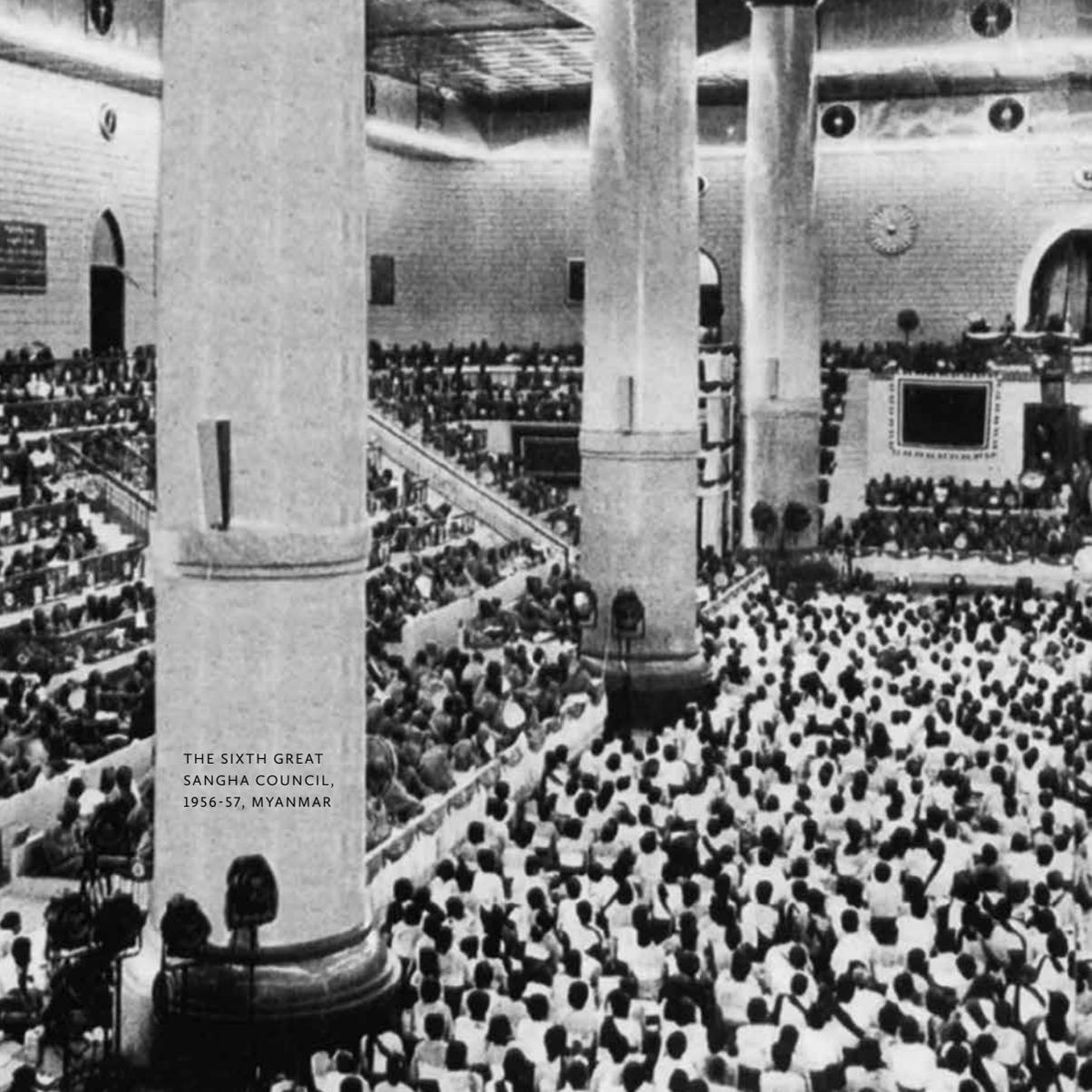
Noted: Unspoken or underlying issues can hamper both discussion and decision-making on the given topic. If the meeting can recognize that this is happening then the underlying tension needs to be addressed. This can require skill from the chair to 'switch gears'. Generally, the right balance of sensitive and decisive chairing is enormously helpful. However, there is also a collective responsibility for the facilitation of the meeting.

There might be advantages to having one person chair meetings for, say, a year – continuity gives skills and confidence a chance to develop;

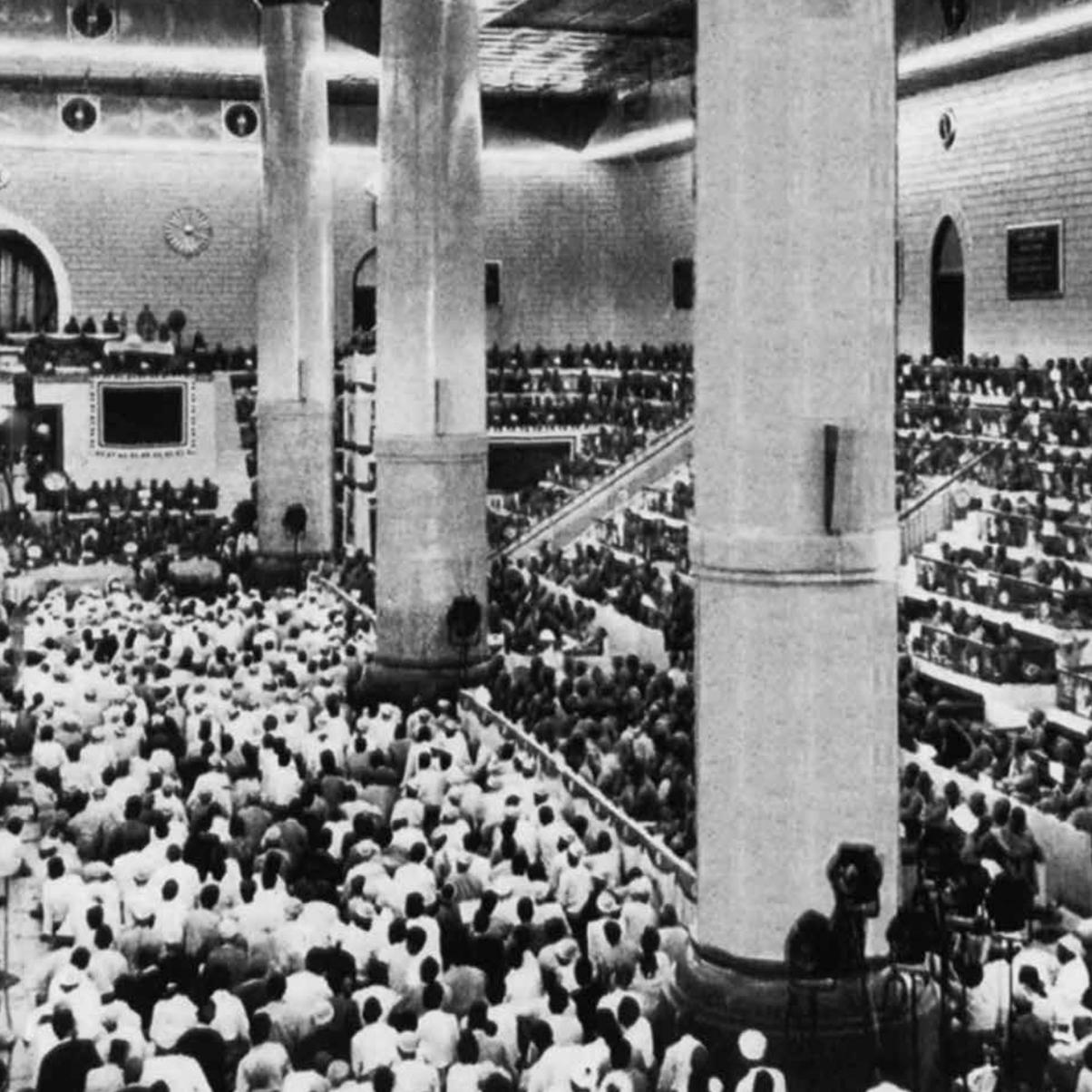
Suggested: Needs more than consent by silence if silence is ambiguous – an active 'yes' would be better.

Noted: Absent members of the meeting may have an important contribution to make on some topics. When it is felt that their views have not been adequately canvassed or represented then any decisions should be tentative or conditional.

Suggested: That part of any summary of a topic include issues such as who else to inform etc.



THE SIXTH GREAT  
SANGHA COUNCIL,  
1956-57, MYANMAR



Discussed: That if those present are not courageous enough to express their views honestly, then the meeting will not work well. We can all pay attention and reflect on how we affect and are affected by each other. For example, it is not helpful to be in fear or awe of Luang Por [Sumedho].

Agreed: A clear statement of the proposal should be made, so that the meeting knows that it is making a decision.

Agreed: Decision-making should be by consensus, understood as, ‘everyone is willing to go along actively with the decision’ or a ‘full, willing consensus’. Consensus implies a willingness to compromise, because unanimous is rarely possible.

Agreed: Decisions should be clearly shown in the minutes.

Agreed: Action points should include who, what, when etc.’ (Abbots’ Meeting, December 1995)

Eventually, specifically informed and inspired by *Beyond Majority Rule-Voteless Decisions in the Religious Society of Friends* by Michael J. Sheeran,<sup>9</sup> the Elders’ Council adopted the following pattern for coming to agreements once a full discussion had been held:

9 Philadelphia Yearly Meeting of Religious Society of Friends; new edition, Dec 1983.

‘The meeting formally AGREED that agreements should be reached by the Chair using the threefold structure outlined in May’s meeting: ‘Are there any objections to this proposal?’ ‘Does anyone not support this proposal?’ and ‘So can we take it that the meeting agrees to this proposal?’ If these three questions are followed by silence then the proposal can be taken to be agreed.’ (ECM, October 2003)

In addition to this procedure, a thorough process was developed whereby the minutes were checked and agreed upon by one and all as a fair and accurate record:

‘[I]t was agreed that the procedure would be as follows:

Note taker to prepare first draft, to be seen and corrected by the chair of the meeting.

i) Note taker [then] to prepare second draft for circulation to those who had attended the meeting for comment and correction (this should be returned to the minute taker within one week).

ii) Note taker [then] to prepare third draft for circulation to those who regularly attend Elders’ Council meetings.

iii) At the following meeting, third draft to be agreed and signed by the person who had chaired the relevant meeting: at this point they become

‘Minutes’, and are filed as such – copies can then be sent to anyone else who had made such a request.’ (ECM, November 1999)

This kind of thoroughness might seem to suggest that all Sangha discussions conclude with neat and tidy resolutions. However, when surveying the whole twenty-year archive of minutes and noting concrete decisions, it becomes apparent that the decidability of an issue is usually inversely proportional to its importance: i.e. simple issues receive firm decisions, whereas major, emotionally loaded issues are often minuted surrounded by conditionals, are revisited apparently fruitlessly for a few meetings before they reach resolution, or are deferred and simply hover uncomfortably in the wings; or, occasionally, are decided by default outside the face-to-face rationality of a formal meeting.

For example, after the nuns had attended the ECMs for some four years:

‘The question of whether a nun would be a suitable Chairperson was discussed. One elder objected to a nun chairing the meeting; this view was questioned, and concerns about Vinaya, leadership and power were expressed. These were neither validated nor dismissed. Others pointed to the fact that nuns chair mixed meetings in mixed communities; that a junior elder would have to, and did comply to, the same requirement for respectful speech that would be binding on a nun as Chair. There was a suggestion that the bhikkhus-only format be refreshed for topics that are bhikkhus-only concerns.’ (ECM November 1999]

This is the entire minute. Does it mean yes? No? Maybe? Not until May 2002 is there a record of a nun chairing an ECM, and the issue does not seem to have arisen at any meeting in between times.

This is not to say that the meetings are dysfunctional or ineffective; it is merely pointing out that there are natural limitations on the ease with which difficult matters can be encompassed in such formal and structured circumstances. At the very least a meeting provides an opportunity for the group to explore the matter; and sometimes, despite appearances, it is just this repeated group chewing over of a knotty problem that is the resolving agent – it needs to be unresolved for a few sessions so that the whole group can find a way to make room for each other’s points of view. The value of harmony in the Sangha is so great that major differences of opinion are naturally handled with intense care, hence the aura of great caution when a significant issue arises. And some matters are recognized as being plain undecidable – intensely important but fundamentally resistant to order.

One last consideration regarding this issue is to bear in mind that this is not only a modern problem. The Buddha prescribed a series of seven *adhikaraṇa-samathā dhammā*, ways of settling legal processes. These include as the final option ‘covering over with grass’ (*adhikaraṇa-samathā dhammā*) that is to say, for the sake of communal harmony, just letting certain insoluble issues be laid aside.

A final area to look at in this overview of the Elders' Council is the domain of authority, specifically where the authority of the Elders' Council comes from and how it is exercised. In Sangha life there are often two parallel and interpenetrating paradigms: on the one hand the archetypal centrality of, and spiritual leadership provided by, the teacher of a community; and on the other, the equal voice given to all members of the monastic Sangha. The interrelation of these qualities, the teacher as the natural focal point of the community, and the shared nature of decision-making, has persisted as a characteristic of the *Buddhasāsana* down the ages.

At Wat Nong Pah Pong Luang Por Chah actively cultivated the quality of community, both in monastic training and in decision-making; yet he was at the same time a unique figure and highly central as the teacher and mentor of the whole community. Among the monasteries founded and guided by Luang Por Sumedho in the West the same kind of interrelation can be found. Even though the democratized process of the Elders' Council had long been established, and since 1987 (at least) Luang Por Sumedho had insisted that the Council and not he should be the decision-making element in community life, people still often wished to see him as the one who made the decisions. This mixture of paradigms, the overlapping of these parallel universes, could cause confusion and difficulties. Thus from time to time there was a need to clarify these roles:

‘[A]lthough Sumedho Bhikkhu has on various occasions let it be known that he does not wish to be seen as one who can make major decisions without consulting the EC, there has been no formalized minuted statement of this. Without such clarity there are sometimes misunderstandings about where true authority lies, especially in the light of the fact that in some cases a trust deed specifically states that the trustees are to look to Ajahn Sumedho for guidance and as a spiritual director. The MBT has added a memorandum of understanding to its deed which clarifies this issue, the DVT has nothing official but it is understood by them that the EC is the decision making body.

Sumedho Bhikkhu therefore stated that he sees the EC as the decision-making body for the sangha here in the UK. He himself should be regarded as a member, but the EC itself has the authority to make decisions rather than him as an individual. If requests come for him to make decisions, he in turn will refer to the EC decision making body. He wished for this to be minuted.

In regards to this, Sumedho Bhikkhu said he would write a letter to the relevant trust bodies clarifying the matter of his authority.’ (ECM, October 2000)

The intention, therefore, is to place the egalitarian spirit of shared responsibility clearly at the centre, and for that to be the fundamental source of the decision-making process. Nevertheless, the archetype of love, respect and deference

toward the spiritual parent, the teacher, cannot be ignored or militated against, but rather needs to be accommodated within the egalitarian framework.

Although all bhikkhus have an equal voice in *saṅghakamma*, whether ordained for one day or a hundred years, there is always a deference to seniors: there is perfect equality and there is a hierarchy. The spirit of the Elders' Council is an emulation of these same values – the voices of all the Council members are given equal weight and form the substance of the community decisions, while the natural, monastic and social hierarchies are respected.





EARLY DRAWING FOR THE EAST  
ELEVATION OF THE TEMPLE

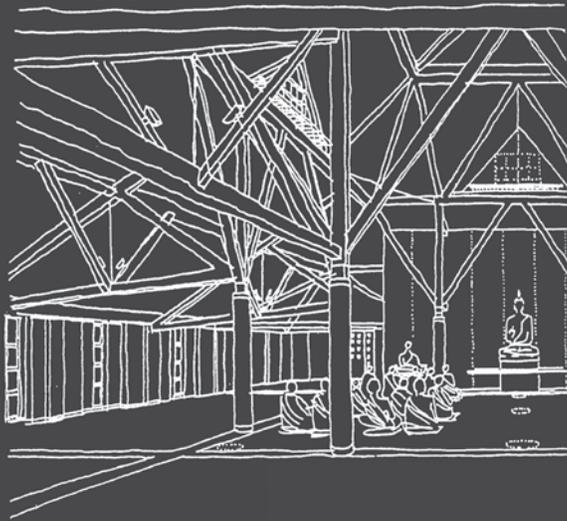
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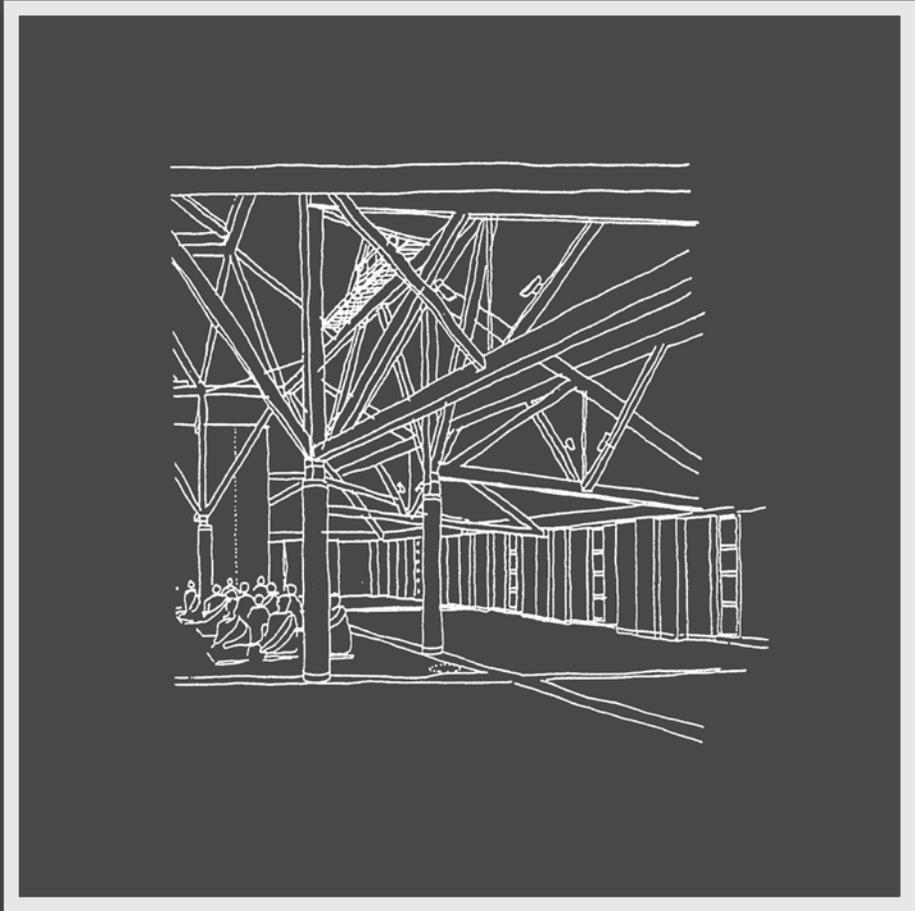
### A TEMPLE ARISES<sup>10</sup>

For many years many people coming up the drive to Amaravati for the first time met with a strange experience. ‘Are we in the right place?’ they wondered. ‘This looks more like an army barracks, but it said AMARAVATI at the gate.’ Until a *stūpa* was constructed in the middle of the courtyard, only the peaceful atmosphere and the sight of the graceful standing Buddha by the bell-tower brought the reassurance that this was indeed a Buddhist monastery.

In a mendicant tradition, though, things always start out by being somewhat rough and ready, austere, yet uncomplicated. So even though the monastery had an oddly military aura, the standard for our way of life is to be grateful for whatever is offered, however rudimentary it may be as a form of shelter, food or clothing, and we have always been joyfully content to make do with

<sup>10</sup> Previously published in *Forest Sangha Newsletter*, No.33, 1995





INTERIORS OF THE TEMPLE FROM THE EAST ENTRANCE

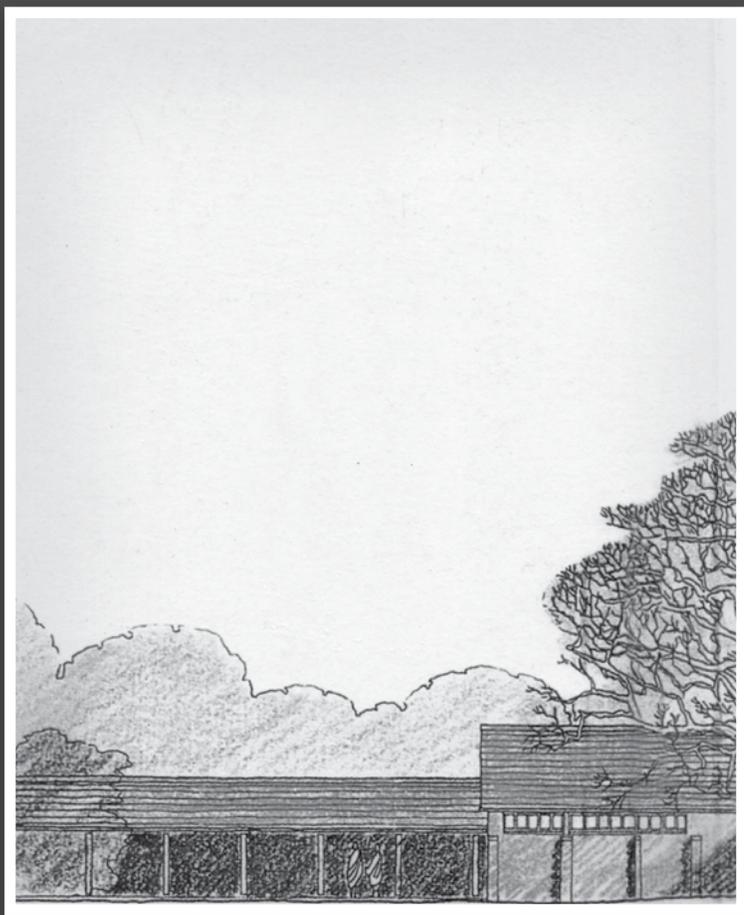
whatever was here. This was the standard established by the Lord Buddha in the earliest days of the *sāsana* and it applies as much today as it did then. As time goes by, however, a natural evolution occurs, occasioned usually by the interest of people in hearing and practising the Dhamma. For example, by the end of the Buddha's life he and his disciples had gone from being a small cluster of itinerant *samaṇas* to a vast and well-developed community, with large monasteries dotted around the Middle Country of India. Some of them, like the Jetavana at Savatthi and the Gabled Hall in the Great Wood at Vesāli, comprised large complexes of buildings.

I have seen this same pattern unfold many times in my own experience as a monk. Ven. Ajahn Chah's monastery, Wat Nong Pah Pong, grew from its inception, when there was just Ven. Ajahn Chah with his robes and bowl staying under his *glot* in a forest, to a great spiritual centre used by many thousands of people as a place of meditation and inspiration. And from that same nucleus have sprung well over a hundred<sup>11</sup> other branch monasteries in Thailand, as well as all those that have been established around the world. Many of these centres house large numbers of monastics, serve groups of hundreds of people and also act as a force for goodness in the world around them, all from the very humblest of beginnings.

11 Now over three hundred, in 2015.

Hopefully, to speak in this way is not to give the impression that we are some sort of missionary society, or a spiritual property development corporation. Rather, it is to indicate the natural efflorescence of the Triple Gem once it finds and starts to settle on fertile ground somewhere. In the religious world there always seems to have been a dialogue between the call to simplicity of living on the one hand, and the benefits of settlement and the provision of ample access to spiritual teachings, with places to learn and practise meditation, on the other. When a healthy balance is struck neither of these two qualities need be compromised; in fact, they can benefit each other. If they become out of balance they can veer off into either a fixation on austerity and hardship or, at the other extreme, aiming towards grandiose structures and expansionism as ends in themselves. The Middle Way above and between these two is what we have endeavoured to follow in our nurturing of Amāravatī over the years, in particular with regard to the foundation of the Temple. Our effort has always been to provide an environment for residents and visitors that is both inspiring and refreshing to be in, without being wasteful with resources, and to make the place somewhere which is a calm and fertile haven for all.

The essence of our life is the Path, *sīla*, *samādhi* and *paññā*, but it has both an inner and an outer aspect to it. A good illustration of these inner and outer qualities that comes to mind is the origin of the word ‘temple’ itself, and the word ‘contemplation’ which is derived from it. ‘Temple’ comes from the Latin *templum*, meaning a place for the divination of spiritual insights. The verb

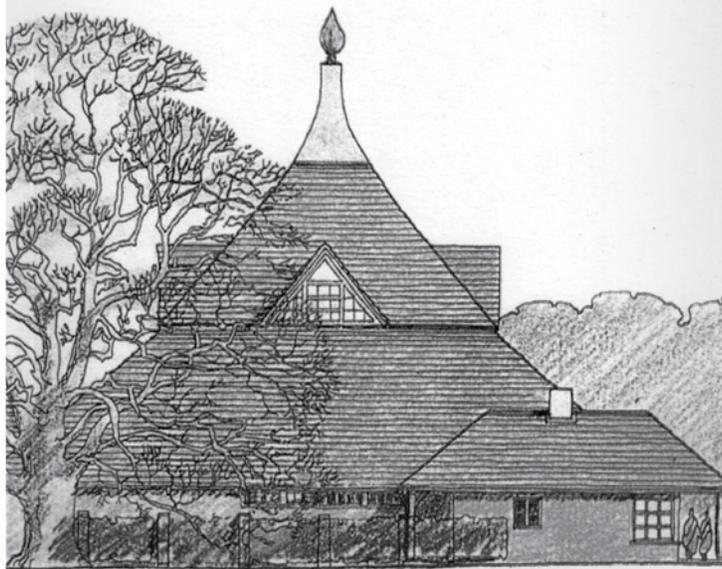




วัดอมราวดี  
AMARAVATI MONASTERY

# ศูนย์เมธาธรรม

พระราชศุภเมธาธรรม



A SCHEMATIC  
ELEVATION OF THE  
TEMPLE, USED AS  
THE COVER FOR A  
COMMEMORATIVE  
BOOK ABOUT THE  
TEMPLE OPENING, 1999,  
IN THAI. PAINTING BY  
GEORGE SHARP

*contemplare*, the source of the word ‘contemplation’, means ‘to clearly mark out’ such an area. Nowadays in English, to contemplate a subject means to clearly mark it out for consideration and reflection. The stability of heart provided by virtue and self-discipline generates the inner *templum*, the environment within which *pāññā*, reflective wisdom, can develop and be used. This same environment is sustained externally by the protective values and life-style of the Buddhist community as a whole; and is particularly exemplified by the monastic enclosure and the spiritual well-being of its community, derived from the practices of devotion and meditation centred round its main shrine and meditation hall, the Temple. The inner and the outer thus reflect each other. As the inner refuge of the Triple Gem is cultivated, its development is supported by and reflected in the environment around it. If purity, radiance and peacefulness are being nurtured within us, it helps to be in surroundings which support them. And if those qualities are indeed our guiding spirit, the way in which we choose to build and maintain our environment will be informed by that same essence.

Just as the Triple Gem is a refuge for everyone who wishes to make use of it, Amāravatī is also a place for everyone who sees a value in the qualities it maintains. Many people pass through here, and our aim is for the Temple to be a sanctuary which symbolizes for us all the characteristics of the human heart that are most worthy of cultivating. It is a place of purity, radiance and peacefulness, a place which will inspire and encourage the spiritual life, and whose spaciousness and dignity will be supportive of all types of spiritual

practice. A temple of this nature is a crucible in which contemplation, serenity and recollection are crystallized and given the chance to realize their full potential in our lives. In short, it is an outward manifestation of the beauty and strength of the Triple Gem.

In Buddhist tradition the monastery is the nucleus of the spiritual life of the whole ‘four-fold assembly’, laypeople and monastics, both male and female; it is everybody’s place. Accordingly, we very much hope that all those who value Amāravatī will find some way of joining in and helping to maintain this sanctuary for us all. When we each play a part in caring for something, an enduring quality becomes invested in the structure itself; it becomes an expression of our own aspiration and commitment and resonates them back to us. To develop that which is wholesome and maintain it in being is a naturally joyous activity, again both in the action itself and the recollection of it.

The Temple at Amāravatī aims to be a blending of all our best efforts and energies, roused with these same wise intentions. Over the decades and centuries to come it will also reflect the harmony of the elements we all bring to it. In a similar way, the design of the Temple and its cloister aims to bring together a well-balanced blend of styles which respect both their location in the English countryside and also the Asian ancestry of our Buddhist heritage. The Temple and the courtyard before it are constructed principally of wood and brick, with tile roofs throughout. The spire of the main building, the lineaments





Overall Extent of Construction of Stage 1  
as of April 1996

of the shrine and also the interior space, however, bear more of the serene mark of our Thai architectural heritage.

It is a beautiful and noble structure, but it is also always helpful to bear in mind that from the Buddhist point of view, the means and the end of any endeavour are unified; i.e. the way in which we go about doing something will dictate the nature of the results. If we wish to have a true temple, a sacred space of serenity and joy, it is up to us to bring these qualities to the process of constructing and maintaining it. If we determine to go about tending the building with clarity and calm, and take the trouble to delight in the efforts we make and what is given to it, we will truly ‘en-joy’ the whole process, literally ‘filling it with joy.’ The Temple will then be able to echo this joyful effort to us and to all generations down the years.





## INTO THE BUDDHA'S FLAME<sup>12</sup>

One of the most compelling and inspiring sights I have ever seen during my life as a monk was at the pouring of the Buddha image, Phra Buddha Dhammacakramāravatī, which occupies the central position in the temple at Amāravatī Monastery. The ceremony took place late in 1995 in Thailand, a few years before the Temple was even built. I had somehow landed the good fortune of travelling with Ajahn Sumedho for five months, acting as a partly fluent secretary-cum-factotum as he went to teach in Thailand and Indonesia, and attend a conference with HH the Dalai Lama in India.

Until the day of the ceremony I had merely registered it as another of the ever-changing list of events for which I had to liaise to make sure we had transport to it and would arrive somewhere near on time. At the back of my mind I had

12 Originally published in *Fearless Mountain* Vol.8, No.2, Autumn 2003

registered that it was due to be more than just a visit to the foundry when they poured the molten metal into the mould, but I was not at all prepared for the true scale of the occasion. The master founder, Khun Pyrote, had built a whole sacramental area into the factory compound, so that as you entered the drive, past huge half-finished Buddha-rūpas and Kuan Yin statues, and took a turn to the left, you entered a courtyard framed by white flagpoles, and bordered on two sides by a meditation and ceremonial hall and a monastic residence. At the centre of the courtyard the inverted mould for the new rūpa was already in place, and white blessing cords were strung from the mould around the four corner-posts and across to the front of the ceremonial hall, where a slowly expanding number of monks were gathering.

It was another world.

As the elders from Wat Nong Pah Pong and other monastic dignitaries gathered, the air in that zone of blessing became both more charged and yet more serene. Large numbers of lay friends and supporters were also arriving by now, assembling before the monks gathered across the front of the pavilion and spread round the other sides of the square enclosed by the flagpoles.

At some unsignalled moment the entire crew of foundry workers appeared on the scene and entered the central area. And they were not smoke-smearing and tarry rough-necks, at least, not that day; all these young men were clad in

the classic Thai costume of pure white kurtas<sup>13</sup> and wrapped pantaloons, their heads crowned with neat white bandanas. The team of thirty or so workers paid their respects to Tan Chao Khun Paññānanda, the *phratahn* or senior elder presiding over the ceremony, and swung into action to prepare the ingots and the fires and ensure that all was well with the mould, which sat like a shining white inverted pyramid at the centre of all our attention.

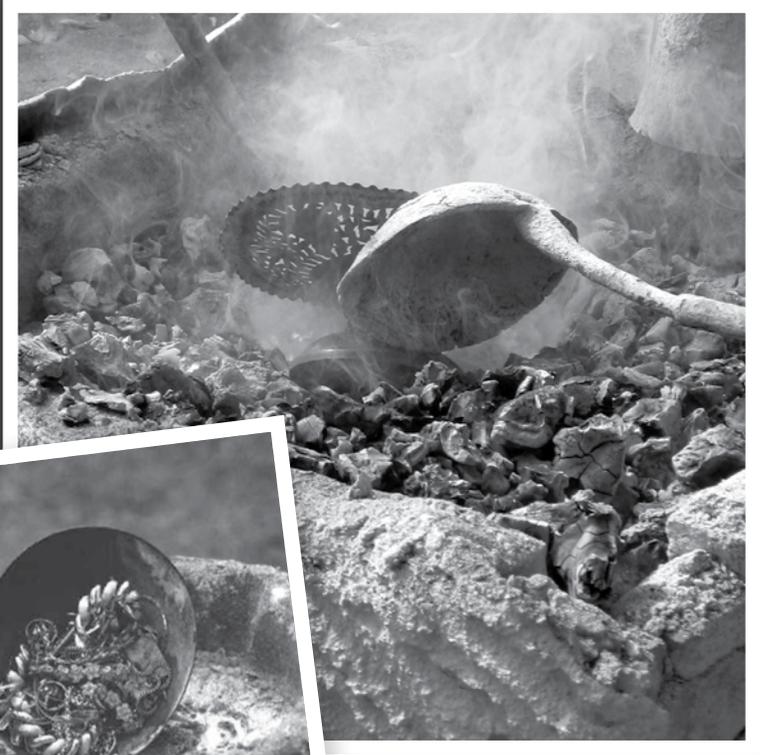
The blessing cord was brought across to Tan Chao Khun Paññānanda, with Ajahn Sumedho and Ajahn Liem<sup>14</sup> beside him, and the ceremony seemed ready to begin. But one more element of the alchemy had yet to be introduced.

All those intending to be at the ceremony had assembled by now, probably twenty-five monastics and two hundred laypeople. As we sat there in the slowly rising heat of the day, I noticed that Mr. Tan Nahm was the only person standing, and he was slowly moving through the crowd. He was a Cambodian man who in pre-Khmer Rouge days used to organize all the religious ceremonies in the Royal Palace in Phnom Penh. In that terrible reign of death he had lost everything but his immediate family and his faith in the Triple Gem, but he had made a new life in England and was currently travelling with us as our steward.

13 A long tunic worn by both men and women, reaching to the knees and often slightly shaped at the waist, with long sleeves and a v-neck.

14 Ajahn Liem succeeded Ajahn Chah as Abbot of Wat Pah Pong, a position he still holds.





MELTING DOWN JEWELRY DONATED  
BY ABHAYAGIRI LAY SUPPORTERS

As he gently picked his way among the people seated on mats all around the square, I saw women and men seeming to unhook necklaces, pull off rings, fish into their bags, draw amulets over their heads and, usually reciting a short prayer, tenderly place the sacred objects and jewellery into a zippered bag carried by Tan Nahm. There was a palpable excitement as he made his way round and the devotees divested themselves more and more eagerly of their valuables (they were not all rich people by any means), and with wide grins cast their treasures into the collection of offerings. The bag began to swell as inestimable treasures of gold and jewels, silver and sacred amulets given by great masters, fell into it like hearts resplendent with effusive joy.

‘I have been collecting offerings for this Buddha image for years,’ said Ajahn Sumedho, ‘all sorts of rare amulets that people have given me, precious stones of one kind or another – rubies, sapphires, diamonds and emeralds – golden heirlooms that people have wanted to offer up; I have even ended up with four wedding rings.’

‘Wedding rings?’ I was puzzled.

‘Well, when a marriage is over, what better to do with the symbol of its joys and sorrows than to transform it into a Buddha? Quite independently, over the years four different people have given me their rings – their marriages were finished, but they weren’t quite certain what to do with the ring, so they each thought to bring it to the monastery. Now that we are casting this Buddha image,

I thought it would be the ideal time to melt them down and let their material be transformed from a symbol of worldly attachment, and then division, into a symbol of Awakening; the Buddha image at the heart of Amāravatī, the Deathless Realm.'

He went on to explain that the very top section of the rūpa, the 'flame of enlightenment' (*ketu*) and the 'mound of wisdom' (*unhisa*), is always poured separately from the rest of the image. All the precious items that were now being collected, the amulets, rings, jewels, bracelets and brooches, together with all that Ajahn Sumedho and the other elder monastics had been given beforehand, would be put into a single small crucible and melted down. Once all the separate elements had liquefied and commingled, the mixture would be poured into the form of the Buddha's crown of wisdom and its curling pointed flame. It would be perfect alchemy: the base metal of everyone's vanity – materialism, superstition, faith in protection by external powers, loves and hates and broken hearts – all would be transmogrified into the pure 'gold' of the joy of renunciation, a joy the Buddha said 'should be pursued, developed and cultivated.' (M 66.21)

Tan Nahm continued to tread his careful path through the assembly; he was now reaching the last few laypeople gathered on the mats before us. The cloth bag he gingerly held in both hands was by this time literally dripping with gold and jewels. It was filled to bursting and it was obviously quite a task to keep all the precious items from dropping out, while also being careful not to tread on anyone's toes



FOUNDRY WORKERS IN TRADITIONAL COSTUMES  
POURING THE NEW BUDDHARUPA





and alert to the fresh offerings being made from all around him. The brimming bag of treasure was a picture of abundant and heartfelt splendour, yet still more was added as someone plucked off the earrings she had just remembered she was wearing, and someone else unfastened the thick gold bracelet he had worn for years. Faces were wreathed in smiles and the infectious delight of unbridled generosity, against all reason and for the benefit of all good, now filled the arena of the blessing ceremony like a gentle golden light.

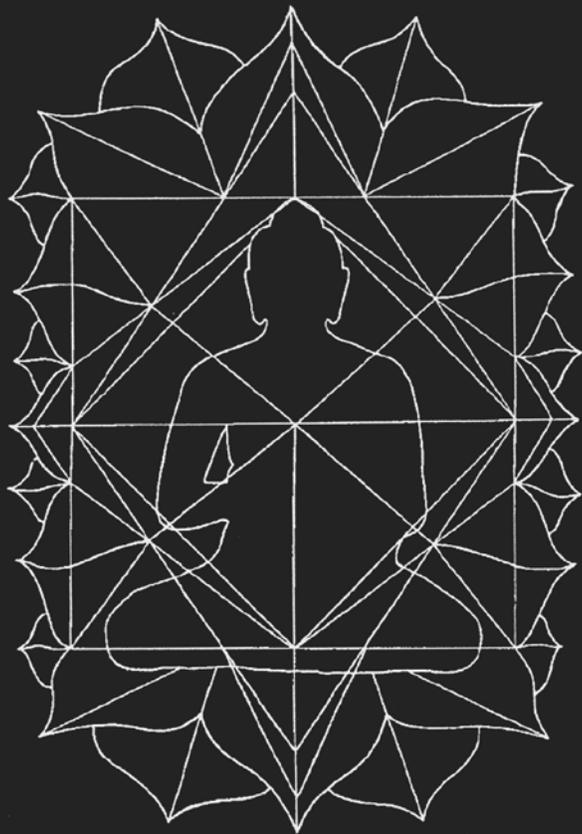
All was silent as the bulging purse of precious gifts was emptied into the crucible; within moments the fearsome heat of the furnace had dissolved it all. The chalice glowed orange at its brim and the air above swerved and bent the midday light. The ceremony was ready to begin.

It was some weeks later that the Buddha-*rūpa* was actually finished and ready to be shipped to Amaravati. When we paid a visit to the foundry, Khun Pyrote made a point of giving the crown-piece, the mound of wisdom and the flame, directly into Ajahn Sumedho's hands. It was very heavy.

'When you make one like this, when so many, many people have given their blessings and made rich offerings to be put into the crown, you have to keep your eyes open. In the past there have been crooks who made a very good copy, weighted with lead to make it heavy like it was gold, and then switched it with the real one. So I have had this one locked in my room since the day we made it! About two and a half kilos of gold went into it, so keep

it with you at all times.’ He grinned broadly, happy and honoured to have been able to participate in the joyful and wholesome task of making the *rūpa*, and glad to have had this possibility to be in the aura of the karmic potency of the noble life of Ven. Ajahn Chah and his Dhamma family. As Ajahn Sumedho headed for the airport on his way back to England, the golden Buddha-flame packed securely in its own little case, I observed: ‘I hope that they don’t ask you to pay duty on this, Luang Por, it’s worth about £20,000.’

‘It’s a priceless religious artefact,’ he replied, smiling with patent delight, ‘therefore there is nothing to pay.’



# 7

## VANISHING POINT<sup>15</sup>

REFLECTIONS ON THE BUDDHIST WAY OF LIFE  
AND THE PROSPECT OF OPENING A MONASTERY  
IN SAN FRANCISCO IN MAY 1992

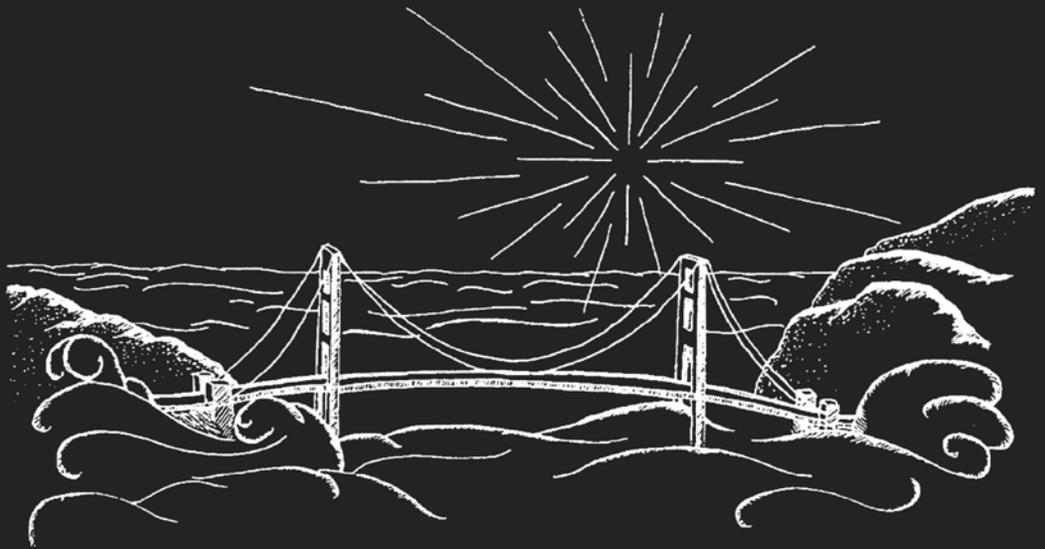
### DHAMMA IS NATURE

The Buddha's teaching is an aspect of nature, and living with an attentive and reflective mind centred within the rhythms of the natural order is the very heart of spiritual practice. The Dhamma is timeless, but it is also dynamic through and through. The spreading of the Buddha's teaching is part of this dynamism, and as with all organic processes, things propagate and take root when the time is ripe.

<sup>15</sup> Previously unpublished. The 'time' turned out not to be 'ripe' in 1992 so the opening of our monastery in California did not take place until June 1996, four years after this article was written. The laws of unpredictability also led to it being started in Mendocino County, 120 miles north of San Francisco, and to Ajahn Subbato not being involved in the project at all. The article is included here for historical interest and as a good demonstration of the uncertainty of all things.

For many years there has been growing interest in the possibility of our establishing a permanent presence in the USA, and now it seems that everything is ready. Over these last few months Sanghapala, a committee of people in the San Francisco Bay area, has been making all the necessary preparations and a small monastery will soon be starting there. The opening of this centre signifies the arrival of another seedling in the colourful spiritual garden of the US West Coast. There is a lot there already, but Western Buddhist monastics with some years of training in the meditative traditions are quite rare. It might also be quite a task to transplant traditional forest monasticism into late twentieth-century Californian life, but often, if one goes forth with an open heart, ample supplies of mindfulness and wisdom and an absence of preconceptions, things have a way of unfolding in perfect order.

Despite its central themes of unpredictability, selflessness and the emptiness of things, the way of practice employed within the traditional forms of Buddhism is characterized by a strong faithfulness to the conventions of the lineage. The form is a powerful one which has managed to maintain itself largely unchanged since the time of the Buddha. Of course, many cultural accretions and superstitions have encrusted the heart of the Teaching, but despite that, purer forms of the practice have managed to maintain themselves over the years. The forest meditation monasteries are a prominent example among the many strands of Buddhism to have achieved this. The interest here is to maintain a clear focus upon the heart of the teaching and a dedication to its



actualization through strict discipline, community harmony, simplicity of living and meditation practice. In all the Theravadan Buddhist countries (Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Cambodia and Laos) such places have existed, but at present it is probably in Thailand that they are most fully developed. The rising interest in Asian religion in the West, together with the openness of Thailand to foreign visitors, have led a sizeable number of Westerners to enter the monastic life there. The largest community of Western monks in Thailand is at Wat Pah Nanachat.

On the other side of the world, the English Sangha Trust was established in London in 1956 with the hope that a community of practising Western monks could be established in the UK. The founders knew that to be of most use to society in the UK, a place of practice was needed, not an academic institution or a gentlemen's club of 'armchair Buddhists.' In establishing the Trust they sensed that somehow the spirit of the forest monasteries had to be transplanted into British soil. It took a while, but over the last fifteen years this has largely come about. Since the first contact between Ajahn Sumedho and the Trust in 1976 and the Trust's subsequent invitation to him to establish a community in Britain, four monasteries have sprung up in the English countryside, plus two more on the continent (in Switzerland and Italy) and others in Australia and New Zealand, with an overall population (including those in Thailand) of some 135 Western women and men, living according to the standards of the meditative forest monastic tradition. And of course, owing to the presence of

the monasteries, many hundreds of other people have drawn close to them and benefited from the teachings.<sup>16</sup>

Developing the forest tradition in the West and making it accessible to Westerners has not been easy. Cultural differences, the change of climate, local religious environments and many other factors have demanded a degree of adaptability and diplomatic skill rarely needed in Asia. In the initial stages in Thailand the Western monks tried to adapt to Thai ways as fully as possible, playing down their own conditioning and style. In the West the story has, of necessity, been somewhat different. In England the people interacting with the monastery – coming to attend retreats, listen to Dhamma talks, etc. – had largely the same Western cultural conditioning as the monastics, and so did not expect a precise enactment of all things Buddhist according to Thai custom. In fact, doing things with meticulous attention to the ‘traditional’ way, something that would give rise to faith in Thailand, would occasionally draw sharp criticism here. So right from the beginning, when Ajahn Sumedho and his fellow monks arrived in London in 1977, they knew they needed a different approach. Using the way in which Buddhism has historically adapted to new environments, they started out with faithfulness to the original form, and changed things only as and when it was very obvious that change was needed.

16 The figures given in this paragraph are substantially out of date; the Western Forest Sangha has greatly expanded in establishments and monastics since 1992, as described above in Chapter 3, in the section ‘Evolution and Spread’.

A number of adaptations have of course been made, both great and small. The most prominent of these has been the establishment of a training system for nuns. This system, which is a modification of the discipline used by the original order of nuns, is more refined than that which is available in the Theravadan countries of the East. One reason behind the foundation of Amaravati was to provide a place where the women's community could develop; the other reason, also a departure from the classic forest monastery form, was to create a retreat centre which gives much more opportunity for the general public to practise meditation in an environment of seclusion.

Originally the seeds of the Buddha's teaching were scattered in the US by a mixture of serious practitioners and non-traditionalists, and popularized largely by a free-wheeling crew such as Alan Watts, Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac. It was a group with much the same character as many of own early spiritual mentors, Carlos Castaneda, James Joyce, William Burroughs and the Renaissance figure Giordano Bruno:

'... Penny philosopher and one-time priest,  
 Magician by repute and heretic  
 By imputation, fomenter of sedition,  
 Boozer, braggart, fraud and merry-andrew,  
 Dancing his jig upon the mountain top,  
 Waiting for star-fire ...

(from *The Heretic*, by Morris L West, 1969)

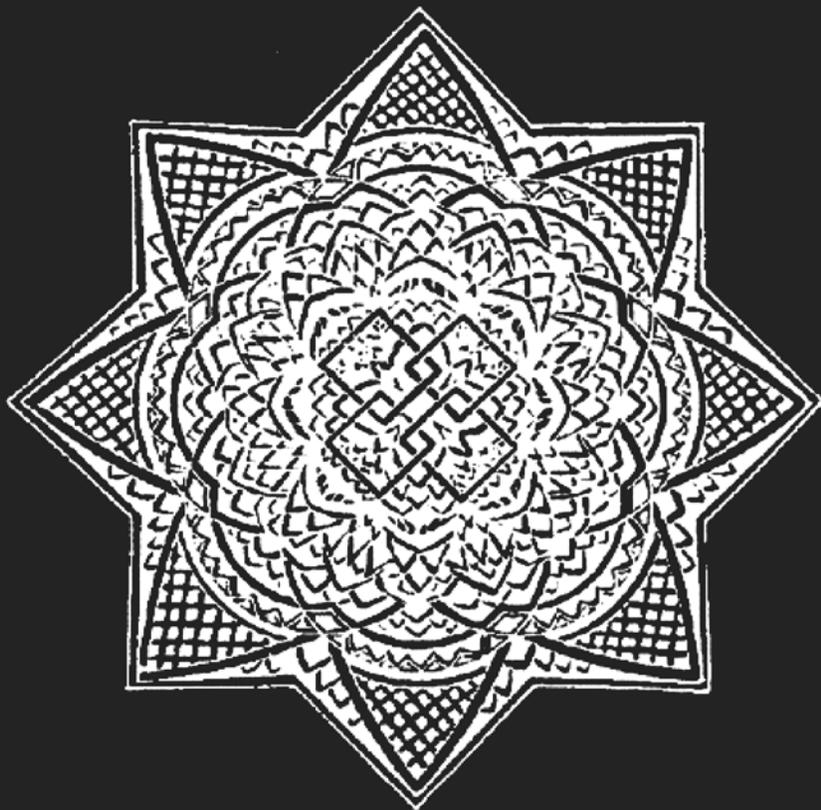
A somewhat rowdy collection, longing for Truth, strong on artistic integrity, but with a number of errant views mingled in as well. Out of interest in this group and my prolonged contact with Trevor Ravenscroft, a renegade occultist from the Rudolf Steiner stable, I was attracted towards such unorthodox monastic havens as the Random Order of Avalon in Glastonbury and the Guardians of the Amethystine Flame on the shores of Lake Titicaca. But as it turned out, my feet carried me to the more sober enclaves of Ajahn Chah and Ajahn Sumedho, where it became vividly clear that more spiritual entertainment and chemically-assisted experiences would not be much help. What was needed was to live honourably and simply and to be grounded, qualities which are the essence of Sangha life and as such are the heart of the human spiritual process.

In some ways these changes in my own attitudes are now being mirrored more and more in the USA: there is increasing interest in and respect for traditional Buddhist form and, generally, ways of life built around simplicity and social responsibility. In most meditative spiritual circles, particularly in the Buddhist world, self-restraint has gained some fresh credibility; it has changed from being seen as a moralism imposed by the laws of a dead God to being viewed as a respectful and responsible way to live, deriving from both common sense and having seen the results of following fear and desire. These shifts in attitude are largely responsible for the foundation of this new monastery. There seems to be a direct relationship between the growing appreciation of these qualities and the interest in the presence of a community which encourages them. If there

was not a sense of the place of renunciation, tradition and moral integrity in the spiritual life, there would not have been the amount of enthusiasm that has been shown for this project during the last few years.

On hearing of our plans to open a monastery in San Francisco, there quickly came generous offers of assistance. A large proportion of the Seattle/Vancouver group asked if they could pledge regular donations to the monastery. Jack Kornfield and James Baraz offered the use of the Spirit Rock newsletter and mailing list, as well as offering, along with other Spirit Rock Board members, to help out in any other way they could. The City of Ten Thousand Buddhas undertook to help us search for property in San Francisco and offered their premises for retreats and teaching purposes. The Thai community in Los Angeles is setting about raising funds, and in a deeply touching gesture the Abbot of the monastery in Fremont said he would actively encourage his supporters to help us, even though they have a huge building project in the pipeline themselves. He said: 'We can't really help the Americans very much – they feel out of place here – but you can, you can help them. So I want to help you to build your place – you must make a meditation centre. I will encourage our supporters to donate to you.'

So a whole network of helpful and supportive energy is already emerging to bring this monastery into being, and enable it to grow. How it will all turn out is obviously unknown, but the signs so far presage an establishment with a fine harmonic, ecumenical tone surrounding it.



## DEVELOPING A HEART

A Buddhist monastery acts as a catalyst for inner transformation, its chief role being simply to preserve an environment which encourages the practice of becoming enlightened. It is also a place for everyone, not just a residence for the monastics. Ideally, such a centre is the heart of a Buddhist community and acts as a spiritual oasis; all who cherish virtue and liberation are welcome to it. Even if the contact is brief or sporadic, people can dip into the refuge that is created there, and through using its environment, allow it to become a source of joy and fulfilment.

A monastery is a place of sanctuary, but it is also a place where help is needed. As with developing the qualities of our own heart, if we put the right kind of energy into it, it will blossom; if we don't, it is likely to wither. In the monastic discipline, the Buddha carefully specified that his monastics were not allowed to be self-sufficient. This was done in order to ensure that the monastic and lay communities maintained interdependence, and means that we rely for all our material needs on the faith and generosity of the general public. This may seem a strange system; however, its logic lies in the fact that the monastics will only be supported as long as they are of use to laypeople. As soon as we start to behave in ways that are blameworthy, the support will fall away and we will go hungry – so it's an ideal self-regulating process. Also, it cements the need for daily contact between the lay and monastic communities, thus engendering a free exchange between the two sides, with the monastics providing spiritual support for the laity and

the laypeople helping to take care of the physical needs of the monastics. This may be a somewhat simplistic description, but it portrays the symbiotic nature of the relationship: both sides have their part to play, and through this mutual assistance and camaraderie we help each other towards liberation.

When we first came to the West, concerned friends often declared that we shouldn't keep to the traditional ways: we should carry our own money, make artefacts to support ourselves, etc. etc. Instead we chose to continue in the way we were used to, keeping to the lowest standard of living for ourselves and being grateful to make do with whatever came to us. As it has turned out, we have never had any serious problems, either by over-taxing reluctant supporters or by ending up as a starving cluster of shivering shavelings. Instead it has been shown that these ways bring out the loveliest of attributes in both sides; laying aside personal concerns and opening our hearts to the presence of others gives rise to that unity of spirit which the quality of 'Sangha' is all about. Spiritual friendship was once extolled by the Buddha as being 'not the half but the whole of the Holy Life', and in many ways this relationship is emblematic of the profound quality of care and support which is the life-force of the Buddhist community at large.

It is because of the importance of these principles that when the monastery opens, the intention is to develop it as such a place. To have it as just a dormitory for the monks as itinerant Dhamma teachers would be to miss most of the point

of its existence. We will, of course, be happy to take up invitations to teach, but our main intention is to be a continuing daily presence.

After weighing up several options, it has been decided that there are two reasonable possibilities with regard to finding suitable premises. Firstly, in the short term, renting a place in the city to serve as a *vihāra*, either as one monastic residence with its own meeting room, or as a small residence with a leased meeting-space to be used a few times a week only; secondly, in the long term, purchasing an appropriate monastic property in the San Francisco area, preferably in a rural setting.

The model of setting up in a small urban *vihāra* first, to maximize ease of contact with interested people, is one which has worked well in New Zealand, Australia, Switzerland and the UK. In most of these cases enough support has grown over just a couple of years to allow the monastery to move out of the city into quieter surroundings. The latter situation is more in keeping with the contemplative life-style of the monastics, but for the time being a small place in the city will be fine for our purposes: we will see how things unfold from there. It has been stipulated that we should obtain a place which fulfils the majority of the following criteria: close to public transport; wheel-chair accessible; in a reasonably safe area; with adequate parking and; in a part of the city that is not too noisy. If this is impossible to find, something with at least a few of these features will be good enough.

To begin with there will be just two monks living at the *vihāra*, myself and Ven. Subbato. He is a New Zealander by birth and has been a monk for close to ten years. I first met him in 1981 at Chithurst Monastery, while I was sitting out in front of a Sioux tepee which we had recently been given. It was pitched in the garden and I was in charge of learning how to set it up, as we were going to use it as a place for our fortnightly monks' meetings. I was just whittling the last of the pegs to pin the front together when up strode a tall young man with a beaming face. He had come on his bicycle from doing some retreats in the west of England and wished to stay for a while. It so happened that we were about to start the finishing work on the carpentry in the new shrine room, and none of us really had the skills to do it. 'I've done a bit of carpentry,' he said. The weeks and months went by, and so began his career as a monk. As a harmonious and noble friend, I could not ask for anyone better. The Sangha in England felt unanimously that he would be the ideal person to help out, and I was very glad when he accepted the invitation to come. Going to California to set up a monastery can be quite a daunting thought; however, when you lay aside the habitual self-criticisms and opinions, 'the feelings of positive excitement and reluctant dismay,' what emerges is the presence of a serious challenge and a sense of delight at the prospect of being able to offer up the next five/ten/twenty-plus years of your life to serving others and helping the Dhamma to flourish in America.



MASTER HSUAN HUA

I feel that in some ways our presence is already well established in the US. Ajahn Sumedho has visited and taught retreats there for years and is well acquainted with many US Dhamma teachers and students: Ven. Master Hsüan Hua, Ruth Denison, Jack Kornfield, Sharon Salzberg and others count him as a spiritual comrade and respected mentor. Over the last couple of years I too have had the chance to form many close associations with different people and spiritual groups on the West Coast, and acknowledge a firm bond of friendship and a unity of purpose that cut through barriers of time and space. A few of these groups stand out, but of them all our closest affinities probably lie with Ven. Master Hsüan Hua, the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas and its associated communities. The quality of respect for the lineage which is shown in these communities, together with their commitment to practice, are an inspiring example indeed. Our continued contact with them brings a strong sense of being reunited with long-lost relatives, both in our unity of attitude toward the Teaching and also in the way that our communities embody it. Both groups stress the importance of individual discipline, a strong sense of community consciousness and a willingness to serve the general public by way of teaching and providing opportunities to practise.

The visits we have made to Spirit Rock and the groups associated with it in Berkeley, Santa Cruz, Palo Alto, etc. have elicited the same kind of warmth and friendliness. A genuine sense of spiritual accord with these groups has arisen because of our close affinity in terms of the teachings we follow, and

a mutual respect for the great teachers of our times. There is also a common and growing appreciation of the need to apply oneself whole-heartedly to the most essential and transformative aspects of Buddhist practice. These groups too invited us to establish a closer relationship with them and be available to teach more regularly once a monastery is established. This same theme was reiterated by the Esalen Institute, Green Gulch Zen Center, various monasteries run by Thai and Cambodian monks in the Bay Area and Los Angeles, and sitting groups in Portland, Fort Bragg, Seattle and Vancouver. A number of teaching engagements have already been arranged for the coming year.

## THE WHEEL AND THE ZERO

To inaugurate the presence of the monastery in San Francisco and the arrival of the monks, it has been decided to print an illuminated manuscript of the Buddha's first discourse: the *Dhamma-cakkappavattana Sutta*, 'The Discourse on Setting Rolling the Wheel of Truth.' The book's illustrations alone took Ven. Sucitto, one of the senior bhikkhus of our community in the UK, over four years to complete. Hopefully the finished text will be ready for distribution on the day the monastery is officially opened. This *sutta* is a very suitable theme upon which to launch this enterprise: it contains the quintessence of the Buddha's teaching, the Middle Way and the Four Noble Truths, and is the pivot around which all his subsequent teaching turns. It is true that this is not everybody's



view – many look upon the text as ‘page 1, lesson 1’ (‘the cat sat on the mat’) and regard it as having been superseded by volumes of superior teachings later on. Even within the Theravadan world many academic monks respond as though you were expounding to them on model trains when you tell them that the *Dhamma-cakkappavattana Sutta*, is your key scripture for meditation. Be that as it may, for Ajahn Chah, Ajahn Sumedho and most of the school of Forest meditation monastics, together with the laypeople who have practised with them, this *sutta* contains the essence of the entire teaching. The Path will be accomplished if only this much is truly understood. The Buddha says himself:

As long as my knowledge and vision, with respect to the different aspects of these Four Noble Truths, were not quite purified, I did not claim to have discovered the full enlightenment that is supreme in the world ... But as soon as my knowledge and vision ... were quite purified, then I indeed claimed to have discovered full enlightenment. ... This knowledge and vision were in me: ‘My heart’s deliverance is unassailable’. (S 56.11)

Humble and plain fare as the Four Noble Truths may seem to be, this statement suggests that complete enlightenment is principally dependent upon a total mastery of them. Like venturing into the Mandelbrot Set, – or, indeed, into the microscopic/molecular/sub-atomic structures of any natural thing – there are levels within levels, meanings within meanings, insights within insights. When the Four Noble Truths are used as a map for one’s interior landscape, practice

demonstrates that they are the trustiest and most profitable guide at every level; they never cease to apply. Rather like the whole ambience of the form found within the Theravadan forest tradition, they are simple and plain but dependable, and if used skilfully they will take you to freedom.

It is also significant that within the style of his presentation, Ajahn Sucitto's illuminations contain strong resonances from the orchestra of influences at work in our lives today. Looking at the intricate, elegant and colour-bedecked pages, together with the transcript of his commentaries, one picks up the bright, gentle tones of the ancient Irish calligraphies of the Book of Kells, the brash exclamations of Stan Lee, the quirkiness of Robert Crumb, echoes of the halls of English academe and Lit. Crit. 109 and, underlying it all, one finds the stately, inexorable rhythms of the Lord Buddha and the Pali Canon.<sup>17</sup>

Just as the words and pictures of Ajahn Sucitto's book endeavour to reflect the spirit of the age, great pains have been taken to adapt our monastic form sensitively to fit the time and situation in the West. Ultimately, however, we are not trying to create perfection in the material world, to find a convention that satisfies everyone's personal wishes or play the idealized role of the forest meditator. That would be to be enmeshed in the webs of time, selfhood and 'becoming.' The purpose of our monastic life is not to perfect the conventional

17 As it turned out the book, *The Dawn of the Dhamma*, was not published until 1995 and the monastery, Abhayagiri, did not open until 1996.

forms and be obedient to them; that would miss the whole point. The Dhamma and Vinaya are there simply as tools to help us reflect on our experience. Our effort is used most skilfully to create an environment conducive to seeing the truth of the way the things are; using such an environment wisely can help us toward enlightenment.

This is the interplay of what the Buddha called *samutti* and *vimutti*, convention and liberation; by knowing and understanding conventions thoroughly, we come to know liberation. Both Ajahn Chah and Ajahn Sumedho have stressed this point repeatedly. It is so easy to become caught up either in resenting ‘the form’ and feeling trapped by it, or identifying with the form and becoming obsessed with it. This flexible perspective is not used in order to denigrate the rules and ascetic standards – in fact, one is encouraged to respect them wholeheartedly. The point is not to let them become an end in themselves; otherwise they devour us and take us to misery. So we look at the process of the spiritual life as principally a letting go of self, allowing the changes, developments and adaptations to flow from a place of wisdom and sensitivity according to what is needed, rather than in terms of grand plans, fixed forms and ideologies.

We can look at the prospect of opening a monastery in California as transposing the ancient forest lineage of the Buddha to a unique new environment, and therefore that we should do this, provide that, avoid x, maximize y; but to make this the sole aim would be to utterly miss the spirit of the Way. Even if the

monastery in California turns out to be acclaimed far and wide, that kind of success is not our object. As Ajahn Sumedho once put it: ‘Even if you became the most accomplished and influential monk in two hundred years, it would still be a failure if you identified with it. If it was your mission, it would be *dukkha*.’ So the Dhamma position is more like: ‘Now we go to practise in the USA; I wonder how things will unfold there?’ or, ‘Now some experiences labelled ‘USA’, ‘a new monastery’ and ‘abbot’ start to come through the mind. Experiences change.’ And magically, when one abides in such stillness, the potential for goodness and wonderful developments is maximized.

Though my role will be changing, from being in supportive positions to taking a place more centre-stage, the practice is still the same. Whether as a side-man or responding to the perception of being an abbot, the Path always arises from the place of non-duality. Bearing this in mind, I begin to look at it all less as ‘progress’ for American Buddhists or Amaro Bhikkhu – that would just be a conceit – but see it instead as a vanishing point, an opportunity for the relinquishment of self-centredness. With this understanding, a great sense of ease and joy comes forth: there is a confidence that all that will need to be said/obtained/built/demolished will be so done, and that there is no need to carry it all around beforehand. As an onlooker, the world can call it a new development or a dream come true, a potential disaster or whatever; but within, from that still point of pure awareness, there is the realization of the perfect interpenetration of emptiness and the phenomenal world:

‘Life is truly a dream,  
all of its troubles I alone create,  
when I stop creating  
the trouble stops.  
With a single mind,  
with an unbounded heart  
we can wake up to the Wonderful Existence  
within True Emptiness  
that we are in the middle of right now.  
When all the world ceases to exist  
only the Wonderful remains.’

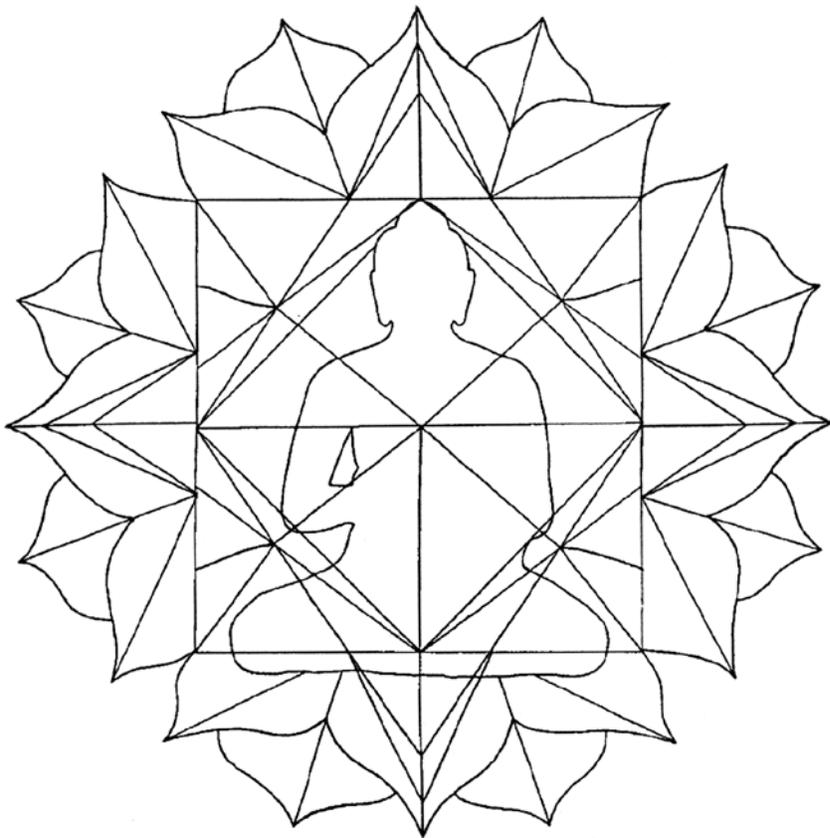
Heng Chau

Not grasping, non-attachment, is a way of talking about stepping outside the realm of time and self altogether: not as ‘me beginning again’ (a new breath, a new part of my life), but as complete freedom within the temporal sensory plane. The world and the self are still there, but when the owner of them vanishes, what do we find? Who am I when there is no identification with the body, thought, feeling, memory, sensation or emotion, even though they are all still being perceived?



Out of time and self-hood  
the mind dissolves in identification with the ground of its own being,  
limitless, timeless, space point-zero,  
a realization of Ultimate Truth, Nibbāna.  
A penetration inward to a core of all cores,  
and yet the further in we go, the more sky-like we realize we are.  
Filled with richness  
The sea of absolute potential  
Well of Being  
The Source  
The End  
THIS, empty of other – THAT, empty of self.  
A timeless, self-giving of the perfect...

Spiritual practice is simply about remembering this Zero. If we obsess over the manifest aspects of ourselves and the world, the result will always be disaster; the Zero keeps it all in perspective. To always rest at the beginning, the Source, is the Path, and also the End.





AJAHN PASANNO  
SHOWING THE  
ABHAYAGIRI MODEL  
TO AJAHN DTUN AND  
OTHER VISITORS  
IN MAY 2013

## 8

### ABHAYAGIRI WHAT'S IN A NAME?<sup>18</sup>

How we name things is important. When contemplating what to call the monastery in Redwood Valley, Mendocino County, California, a number of different possibilities were considered. Since we were the fortunate beneficiaries of the generosity of Ven. Master Hsüan Hua in receiving the initial gift of 120 acres of land in Redwood Valley, it was obvious that it would be appropriate to somehow reflect the kindness of this offering and the spirit in which it was intended. It also seemed important to choose a name in the Pali language, to confirm our sense of allegiance to the Theravada tradition and reflect the 'classical' style of Forest monastic life embodied in the monastery.

18 Originally published in *Fearless Mountain Newsletter*, Vol.1, No.4, Autumn 1996

The name finally settled upon, Abhayagiri, means ‘the mountain of fearlessness’ or ‘fearless mountain’ (‘A’ = ‘not’ or ‘without’; *bhaya* = ‘fear’; *giri* = ‘mountain’). It seemed appropriate for a variety of reasons, the most important being the way in which it reflected the intention behind Ven. Master Hua’s gift. On several occasions when our communities met together, he had made a point of stating that it had been the dream of his life ‘to bring the Northern and Southern traditions of Buddhism back together again.’ Master Hua was someone who acted upon his words, so when we received the news a few days before he passed away that he had offered us 120 acres of forest fifty miles north of the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas in Ukiah, Mendocino County, California, we were surprised but not surprised; such open-hearted gestures of ecumenical friendship were just his style. It was also in keeping with this same openness and trust that the gift was made with no strings attached; it was a pure offering, enabling our communities to be physically close and relate in an atmosphere of mutual respect and harmony.

The original Abhayagiri monastery was at Anuradhapura in ancient Sri Lanka. It was founded around 25 BCE by King Vattagamani and lasted until the decline and fall of Anuradhapura some six centuries later. All that remains there today is the Abhayuttara Stūpa. The monastery was most notable for the fact that it welcomed practitioners and teachers from many different Buddhist traditions; they lived amicably alongside one another, distinct in their particular practices but not separate as communities. It was also notable for its emphasis on

meditation practice and the direct realization of the Buddha's Teachings. Fa-Hsien, the Chinese fourth century pilgrim, evidently spent the two years of his stay in Sri Lanka at Abhayagiri; according to him at that time 5,000 monks were in residence there.

Another interesting fact, and one that again links the name of Abhayagiri to the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas community, is that the origins of the *bhikshuni* (nuns') order in China apparently stem from this same centre. Around the year 430 CE the abbot of a monastery in China took it upon himself to give the full ordination to a group of women disciples, claiming that as there were no nuns in China at that time, he was justified in following the example of Gotama Buddha, who had ordained the first women on his own. A visiting Vinaya master subsequently pointed out that this was an inappropriate course of action, particularly since there was at that time a flourishing bhikkhuni community in Sri Lanka. A request was then sent to the king of Sri Lanka for some nuns to be sent to China to establish the full ordination for women there. This request was received favourably and a party of nuns, including several therīs (elders), set out from Abhayagiri, eventually reaching the monastery which had made the request and giving the full ordination according to proper procedure to the community of women there. Thus the nuns' order in China was established and has continued, as far as can be ascertained, in an unbroken stream since then. The great majority of members of the monastic community of the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas and its branch monasteries are women, *bhikshuni*

and *shramanerika* (novices). So the name ‘Abhayagiri’ reflects the home of this lineage, and after all these years, in some ways the circle has come round and closed itself again.

One final point worth noting on this subject is that in Thai the word *abhaya* has changed its meaning over the centuries; it no longer means ‘fearlessness’ but ‘forgiveness’ – a rare and sorely needed commodity in the world, and one of which it is always good to be reminded.





# 9

## A THOUSAND MOONS<sup>19</sup>

CELEBRATING THE 80<sup>TH</sup> BIRTHDAY OF LUANG POR SUMEDHO

Luang Por Sumedho was born on 27<sup>th</sup> July, 1934, a day which also happened to be the Āsāḷhā Pūjā of that year – this is the full moon day that is considered to be the anniversary of the Buddha’s first teaching, on the Middle Way and the Four Noble Truths. More than eighty years have now passed since that auspicious day. During Luang Por Sumedho’s visits to the UK this year (in May for the International Elders’ Meeting and in July for his birthday) he commented that as that chronological landmark approached, his mind turned to reflect upon the Buddha’s own reaching of eighty years. He said, ‘The reclining Buddha is now my *Buddha-rūpa* of choice,’ as the eighty-year mark was also the time of the Buddha’s *Parinibbāna*, his final passing away.

19 Originally published in *Forest Sangha Newsletter*, No.94, 2015

According to some traditions this ‘time of a thousand moons’ when a person has lived for a thousand lunar months is of unique significance, because those of that age have definitely reached the final chapters of their lives. It is a time for recollection and reflection upon the life that has gone by; it is a time to recognize achievements and to celebrate them, and to receive the heartfelt gratitude of those one has benefited; and it is a time for consciously letting go of all burdens.

## HISTORY AND TEACHING

After attending the Universities of Washington and California, and stints in the US Navy and the Peace Corps, Luang Por Sumedho entered monastic life in 1966 at the age of 31. He became a *sāmanera* in the Northeast Thai town of Nong Khai and received acceptance as a bhikkhu there in 1967. Soon after becoming a bhikkhu he went to study and practise with Venerable Ajahn Chah, in a province to the south of Nong Khai called Ubon. He committed himself eagerly to the training, and since he was the first Western monk at that monastery, at Ajahn Chah’s request he started teaching other newly-arrived Western monastics in 1973.

As it turned out, Luang Por Sumedho was discovered to have a great gift for communication and leadership. He was invited to establish a monastery for Westerners near the local village of Bung Wai, and since that place (Wat Pah Nanachat) opened he has never stopped teaching, first in Thailand and then, once invited to settle in the West, all round the world. Cittaviveka Monastery was the first forest

monastery that he established in England. In subsequent years a further seven monasteries have been founded under his guidance – in the UK, Switzerland, New Zealand and the USA – with other off-shoots from these, such as those in Portugal and in New Hampshire, having sprung up since his retirement.

After some twenty-five years at the helm of Amaravati Monastery, his last place of residence in England, Luang Por Sumedho decided it was time to step down. In late 2010 he handed on the abbotship and became a ‘free agent,’ currently spending most of his time in Thailand. He lives quite independent of any formal responsibilities, yet still teaches on a regular basis. Thus for half his long life he has been expounding and explaining the Dhamma.

## PREPARATIONS AND OFFERINGS

On account of these decades of instructing and inspiring others, and the worldwide recognition this has brought him, when it was being considered how best to honour the occasion of Luang Por Sumedho’s eightieth birthday, the idea of creating an anthology of his collected teachings was hatched.

The plan met with approval, so Ajahn Sucitto and I began compiling material in the summer of 2012, two years in advance of the planned release date. We gathered the most well-known books (such as *Cittaviveka*, *Mindfulness: The Path to the Deathless*, *The Four Noble Truths*, *Now is the Knowing*, *The Mind and the Way*, *The Way It Is* and *The Sound of Silence*), and combed journals such as *The Middle Way*,

*The Forest Sangha Newsletter* and *Fearless Mountain* for other teachings given by him. In addition there were old typed manuscripts tucked away in drawers, little long-forgotten pamphlets hidden away on bookshelves, interviews rendered by typewriter and dot-matrix printer, together with edited and unedited transcripts provided by the Buddhist Publishing Group and others which had sat on various ‘to be used one day’ lists for years. There was indeed a treasure-trove of material. When it was all added up there was a grand total of eighty-five separate books, articles and transcripts, about fifteen percent of which had never before been published.

Over the ensuing months many hands and critical faculties were put to the task, with the final five-volume set being designed and crafted by Nick Halliday, and put into print and delivered in good time by the generous donors in the Kataññuta Group of Southeast Asia. That same group of supporters, having seen *Eight Monasteries* (a very limited edition coffee-table book that had been produced to describe the monasteries in the West established by Luang Por Sumedho), asked permission to print more copies so it could be distributed widely. Furthermore, they suggested that Wat Pah Nanachat could be added to the book. So several thousand copies of *Nine Monasteries* were included in the shipment from Malaysia.

A third book, a reprint of *The Four Noble Truths*, was sponsored by a grateful student of Luang Por Sumedho, Evan Hirsch of Pasadena, California. He had had the book reprinted in England (again with Nick Halliday nursing and midwifing the process), but although the delivery only had to come from Watford rather than Kuala Lumpur, it squeaked through the gate with only a couple of days to spare before the 27<sup>th</sup> of July.

To add to the array of items dedicated for this occasion, Luang Por Sumedho requested that a portrait be painted of Tan Ajahn Paññāvaddho (the late senior Western student of Luang Ta Maha-Boowa), to be hung in the Temple at Amaravati. He proposed this because Ajahn Paññāvaddho had played a very significant role in establishing the Theravada teachings in the UK and had been personally very supportive of Luang Por Sumedho's development of Forest monasteries in the West. A biography of Ajahn Paññāvaddho, *Uncommon Wisdom*, had been written by his brother monk Ajahn Dick Silaratano (another Western student of Luang Ta Maha-Boowa), and the Kataññuta Group of Malaysia and Singapore had kindly printed this one too.

The final offering created especially for this occasion was *Talks from Thailand*, a CD of forty-three Dhamma talks by Luang Por Sumedho. Wat Pah Nanachat organized this and produced many copies, which were on hand as well to pass out to everyone on the big day.

## THE EVENT

Just before the *Parinibbāna* of the Buddha, as he lay in the forest outside Kusināra, he said:

‘Ānanda, the twin *sala* trees are in full bloom, though it is not their season of flowering, and their blossoms rain upon the body of the Tathāgata in worship, so too celestial coral flowers and heavenly sandalwood powder. The sound of divine songs and music fills the air out of reverence for the Tathāgata. Never before has the Tathāgata been so honoured, revered and worshipped. Yet it is not thus, Ānanda, that the Tathāgata is paid the supreme homage.

‘Rather, Ānanda, whatever monk or nun, layman or laywoman, dwells practising the Dhamma properly, and perfectly fulfils the Dhamma way, it is in such a manner that the Tathāgata is payed the supreme homage. Therefore, Ānanda, your watchword should be: ‘Let us dwell practising the Dhamma properly and perfectly fulfil the Dhamma way’.’ (D 16.5.3, abridged)

It was with this injunction in mind that it was decided to craft an event to honour Luang Por Sumedho which would bring the broader community together for a number of days, but would create an opportunity and an encouragement to listen to the teachings and meditate together rather than just having one single day of ceremonies and allowing the rest of the time to drift towards less useful forms of socializing.

Luang Por Sumedho had been at Amaravati for a month, from mid-May to mid-June, attending the International Elders' Meeting. Following that event, which was grand and rich in many ways, Luang Por had been to Canada and the USA to visit the branch monasteries of Tisarana and Abhayagiri and the Pacific Hermitage, and especially to spend time with his sister Virginia, now aged 83, in Vancouver, Washington. On his return to England in late July he had a few days to rest after these extensive travels. During those days many sangha members and laypeople from around the UK and Europe, and even Southeast Asia and the USA, gathered at Amaravati to be part of the celebrations. The *vihāras* and the Retreat Centre were filled to capacity, with dozens of the lay visitors and a number of monks camping out in appointed areas of the grounds. The kitchens were abuzz with activity by the many who spent huge amounts of time and money to provide sustenance for the assembly, while car-parking monitors did their best to keep the flow of traffic in and out of the monastery smooth and safe for everyone.

## CONVIVIALITY AND CONTEMPLATION

The intention to encourage a contemplative environment for the festive period was brought into being through creating a semi-formal retreat mode for Amaravati. Thus for three days during the mid-week period Luang Por Sumedho offered reflections every morning at 9:00 in the Temple, while the afternoon schedule was open and *pūjjās* were held every evening. Luang Por

was in residence throughout this time and made himself available for informal meetings almost every day.

Though we tried to avoid people engaging in a lot of pointless chatter there was nevertheless an atmosphere of conviviality, as Luang Por Sumedho has encouraged in the past (for example, see ‘Trusting in Simplicity’ in *The Sound of Silence*, pp 292-302). The warmth of spiritual friendship between those who had been Dhamma practitioners with Luang Por for decades, those who were new visitors and those who had not seen each other for thirty years was an ongoing, joy-filled presence.

Saturday 26 July was a New Moon day and Ajahn Sucitto was invited to give the evening talk. This was both because we wished to give Luang Por Sumedho as much of a break as possible before the big day, and because Ajahn Sucitto has been Luang Por Sumedho’s longest-standing and closest student in the UK over the past thirty-six years. It was a profoundly moving and inspiring offering, embodying the depth of Ajahn Sucitto’s gratitude for Luang Por Sumedho’s presence in his life, and almost unique in the number of anecdotes he used to illustrate the lessons he had learned, and how.

## CELEBRATION DAY

On the morning of Sunday the 27<sup>th</sup> Luang Por Sumedho, together with about 200 monastics and laypeople, gathered in the Amaravati *sālā*. The lavish breakfast offerings included several substantial cakes, causing Luang Por to remark, ‘This

is what I dreamed of for my birthday when I was ten years old.’ Along with the table-straining amount of food available that morning, this was also the time for the books that had been especially printed to be distributed. Piles of the five-volume boxed set were made ready, along with *Nine Monasteries*, *The Four Noble Truths* and *Uncommon Wisdom*; there were also the *Talks from Thailand* CDs and some small individual portrait pictures of Luang Por to distribute. Once he started to hand out the collection of gifts to each person, a long queue rapidly formed. It was a lot of work, each little pile weighing about three kilos, but Luang Por was obviously enjoying himself. Whereas in the West we usually think about birthdays as a time to receive presents, in Thailand it is a custom to give to others on such occasions, and Luang Por made a point of saying how delightful it was to have so much to give away on his birthday. As he often phrased it in the past, ‘Happiness is getting what you want, but joy comes from giving.’

The main ceremonies for the day began later in the morning in the Temple, with the recitation of the protective and blessing chants, the *parittā*, to express our wishes for long life and continued well-being for Luang Por Sumedho. This was followed by his giving a brief account of the life and influence of Tan Ajahn Paññāvaddho, and how he had been quietly significant in the establishment of the Sangha in the West. The very fine portrait, painted by Khun Metta in Chiang Mai, was unveiled by Luang Por and now hangs beside the shrine dedicated to Luang Bhoo Mun Bhuridatto, our spiritual grandfather, and Luang Ta Maha-Boowa, Tan Ajahn Paññāvaddho’s teacher.





The ceremony of *ācariya-pūjā* followed the unveiling. The sangha, led by Ajahn Tiradhammo, bowed and joined together to formally ask for forgiveness, as is the ancient custom in the Theravada tradition. This is a way to honour and revere an Elder by expressing gratitude and respect. The request is accompanied by the offering of candles, flowers and incense, on this occasion these were in the form of a magnificent, hand-crafted *bai-see*, made in Ubon on the commission of a different Khun Metta, who is a regular supporter of Wat Pah Nanachat. By this time many more people had gathered in the Temple to participate in the paying of respects, with about 800 being counted by the end of the day.

In the afternoon Luang Por contributed to the series of Sunday talks with his reflections on ‘The Way It Is’, a theme we had taken the liberty of assuming he’d be happy to speak on. Just as the talks he gave earlier in the week had been, his teaching that afternoon was alight with Dhamma, both inspired and inspiring; it was so spirited it was hard to believe that the speaker had just reached his eightieth birthday and had been on this world for those thousand moons.

The celebrations drew to a close with a final batch of book distribution, a formidable queue stretching down the centre of the Temple, but we managed to free Luang Por to enjoy some well-earned solitude by around five o’clock. It had been a glorious day, with many people contributing to its smooth function as well as enjoying the delights of noble company, and Luang Por’s life and incalculable offerings to the world had been suitably honoured, but now it was

time to put it all down and to let it end: *Tesam vupasamo sukho*, ‘and in its passing, there is peace.’

## AMARAVATI’S 30<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY

As the sangha had first moved to this site and Amaravati had begun its life on 1<sup>st</sup> August 1984, just a few days after Luang Por Sumedho’s fiftieth birthday, it seemed appropriate to mark that day in some suitable fashion as well. There had already been plenty of grand aspects to Luang Por’s current time in England, so it was felt that it would be best to keep the recognition of the day somewhat informal and low-key.

It was an occasion that bade looking back to the past, so we invited Luang Por to have a public dialogue with George Sharp, the former Chairman of the English Sangha Trust, to spend a couple of hours sharing recollections and reflections on Amaravati’s origins. It was George who had invited Luang Por Chah and Luang Por Sumedho to visit England in 1977 and he had had an intimate involvement with the establishment of this community in the UK from 1977 until 1995, when he stepped down from chairing the EST.

On that day we set up a small projector in the *sālā* so that during the morning and the meal-time a number of photographs of the ‘old days’ of Amaravati, including its opening ceremonies, cycled through on a loop. The worn lino tiles and bleak playground of the projected photos were in stark contrast to the comfy and

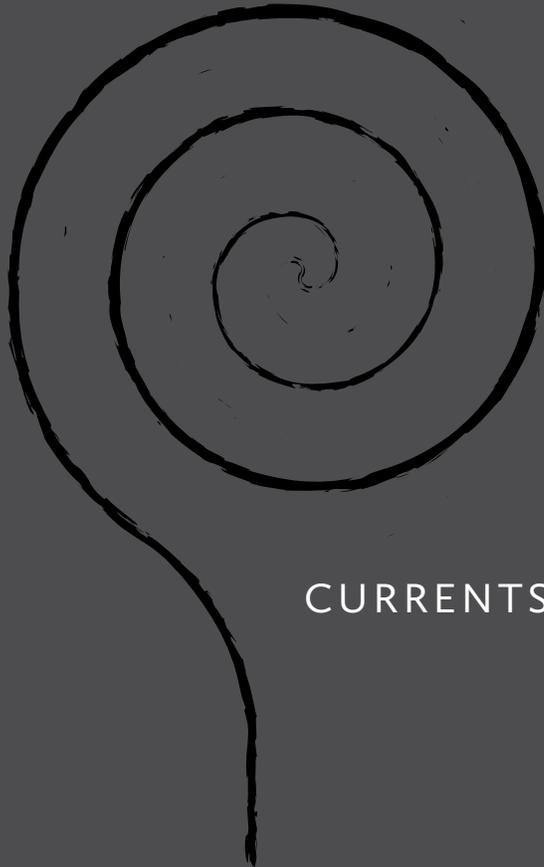
well-kept monastery of today. Those who had been around Amaravati from its beginnings could spot themselves ('I was so young!') and old friends ('Is that really *them?*'), as small clusters of interested viewers came and went. By the time the afternoon had arrived a couple of hundred people had collected in the *sālā*. Luang Por and George sat on chairs beneath the iconic portrait of Luang Por Chah, painted by Gerry Rollason between 1977 and 1979. The discussion was seeded with the question, 'What was the cause, what was the reason, Luang Por, why you decided to open a huge and complex place like Amaravati – this less than five years after Chithurst had been founded?' The conversation that ensued was rich and revealing (George admitted he had thought Luang Por was crazy at the time), and it was a beautiful way to acknowledge what has evolved here at Amaravati and where it all came from in the first place.



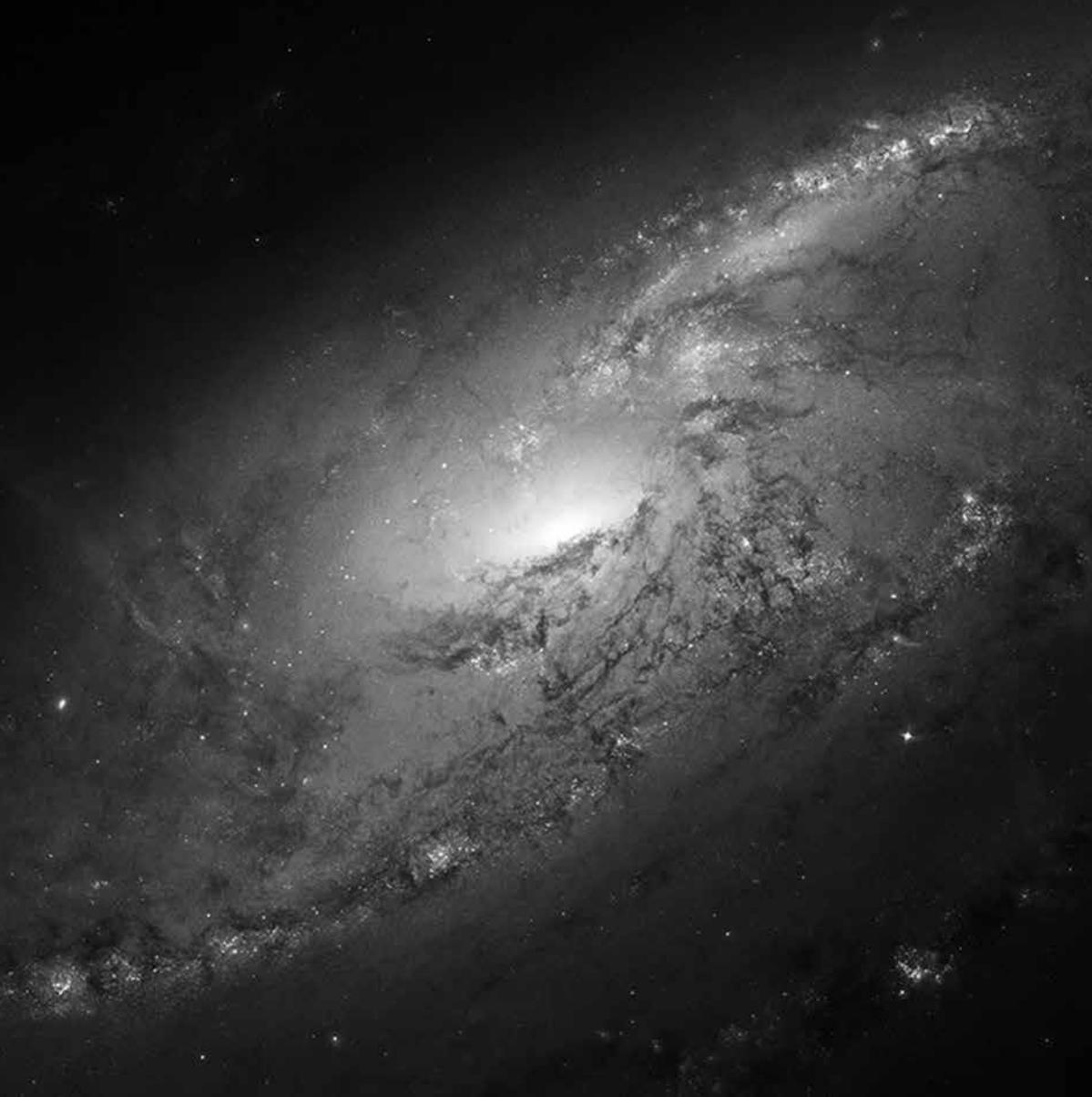
## AND NOW...

At the end of this year Luang Por Sumedho plans to continue his joyful giving by leading a group of laypeople who have asked to sponsor this year's Kaṭhina ceremony, on 2<sup>nd</sup> November. This gesture looks towards the next thirty years, since the Kaṭhina offerings are being dedicated to supporting the Amaravati Long-Term Plan, involving the replacement of all the old wooden buildings with redesigned and energy-efficient structures. This generous gesture was Luang Por Sumedho's own initiative, for which we are extremely grateful, and it will go a long way towards helping his legacy to be preserved over the decades to come.

After his visit here for the Kaṭhina festival, Luang Por intends to further his reflections on his eightieth year by going on pilgrimage to Kusināra. He promises he has no intimations of his imminent demise, rather, his interest is out of gratitude for the Buddha's own legacy and an empathy with the Buddha at that age. The time of a thousand moons is the time of unburdening, so what better spot to contemplate such liberation than the place of the Buddha's realization of Final Nibbāna?



CURRENTS PART TWO



## THE BODY OF TRUTH AND THE BODY OF FEAR<sup>20</sup>

*(Young Monk): I am a monk myself, and the one question I really wanted to ask was, 'What is a monk?' Well I finally did – but for an answer I got the most peculiar question. (Old Monk) 'Do you mean in daytime, or at night?' When I didn't answer, he picked it up again. 'A monk, like everyone else, is a creature of contraction and expansion. During the day he's contracted behind the cloister walls, dressed in a habit like all others, doing routine things you'd expect a monk to do. At night, he expands. The walls cannot contain him. He moves throughout the world and touches the stars. 'Ah,' I thought. 'Poetry.' To bring him down to earth, I began to ask, 'Well, during the day in his real body –' 'Wait, that's the difference between us and you. You people regularly assume that the contracted state is the real body ... It is real in a sense. But here we tend to start from the other end, the expanded state. The daytime state we refer to as the 'body of fear', and whereas you tend to judge a monk by his decorum during the day, we tend to measure a monk by the number of persons he touches at night, and the number of stars.'*

Father Theophane, *Tales of a Magic Monastery* (Crossroad Publishing, 1981).

<sup>20</sup> Previously published in a more extensive version as a chapter in *Freeing the Body, Freeing the Mind*, edited by Michael Stone, Shambhala Publications, 2010.

A striking aspect of Buddhist philosophy when first encountered by the Western mind is that the four standard patterns the Buddha used to describe the fabric of the human condition within the natural order of things do not distinguish the mental and physical dimensions from each other in any radical sense. Their roles in an integrated spectrum of qualities are assumed and pass without discussion.

## DIMENSIONS OF NATURE

The first of these patterns is the simplest of all the four expressions: *nāmarūpa*, variously translated as ‘materiality-mentality’ or ‘mind and-body.’ The expression is frequently used in the Pali Canon to refer to the mind/body complex, the material and non-material aspects of all living beings.

The second of these standard formats, one which teases out the qualities of *nāmarūpa* in more detail, is most commonly known as the Five Aggregates. This term, a translation of the Pali *khandha*, might seem odd but has no convenient and all-purpose rendering in English. The word essentially means ‘group’ or ‘heap’, but the Buddha seems to have chosen it for practical purposes owing to its very indistinctness. It is used to express the idea that the mental and physical complex we call a person can be roughly divided into five interrelated categories: the body or physical form (*rūpa*); feeling or physical sensation (*vedanā*); perception, (*saññā*); mental formations, including thoughts, emotions and intentions (*saṅkhārā*); and consciousness, the faculty of cognition itself

(*viññāna*). They are all seen as intrinsically interrelated because everything that is experienced and known about the body is apprehended via the agency of the mind, through feeling, perception and consciousness; similarly, (at least in this world!) without the physical basis of the body, the four mental factors of the *nāma-khandhas* have no vehicle and life-source. The scriptures add: ‘Feeling, perception and consciousness are conjoined, not disjoined, and it is impossible to separate each of them from the others in order to specify the differences between them.’ (M 43.9)

The third pattern the Buddha used in his teachings, possibly the most frequently of all, is that of the six senses, *āyatana* in Pali. They consist of the five senses we usually refer to in the West, eye, ear, nose, tongue and body, plus the mind (*mano*), whose inclusion is totally matter-of-fact with no qualification felt to be needed. This pattern is seen as a natural succession of attributes: the eye perceives light; the ear, sound; the nose, odours; the tongue, flavours; the body, sensations; the mind, mental objects (*dhamma*). This latter quality denotes the entire array of mental events, including thoughts, memories, dreams, emotions and decisions.

The one unique attribute ascribed to the mind-sense (*man-āyatana*) in the Buddhist scheme of things is that unlike the other senses, which receive their stimulation from outside (e.g. light comes from an external object detected by the eye), the mind-sense is both the producer and the perceiver of its objects. It is both the thought-creator and the thought-knower. It is also seen to function as the coordinator of the six senses; it draws all the threads together and weaves

a coherent picture of the world from them. Interestingly, this role is largely corroborated by the findings of modern neuroscience.

The last of the principal formats the Buddha employed to portray the human condition is known as the elements, *dhātu* in Pali. Generally this term is used to refer to the four attributes of the material world: earth (*pathavi*), water (*āpo*), fire (*tejo*) and wind (*vāyo*), which in turn embody the qualities of solidity, cohesion, temperature and the life force, and vibration. However, in a number of significant teachings, for example the *Dhātuvibhaṅga Sutta* (the Exposition on the Elements, M 140), the term *dhātu* is used to refer to the whole mind/body complex and the elements are increased to six; along with the standard first four the Buddha includes the space element (*ākāsa-dhātu*), and the consciousness element' (*viññāna-dhātu*).

In a sense these four patterns can be seen simply as different ways of slicing the pie of the natural order:

Calling it all 'materiality/mentality' divides the pie in two, with the material qualities in one slice and the non-material in the other.

The five aggregates structure slices the non-material side into four rough chunks, leaving the material side alone.

The six senses arrangement gives five different slices on the material side and one extra-rich one on the non-material side.

Lastly, the six elements approach gives the same number of slices, but cut in a form similar to the five aggregates. This time, however, the material qualities are subdivided into four, with consciousness serving to encompass the entire mental realm. The class to which the space element properly belongs can often be a cause of dissent.

Reflecting on these varying configurations should make it clear that in the Buddhist view of things, the idea of a substantial division between body and mind is an absurdity.

## MIND FULL OF THE BODY

The Buddha saw the deeply interrelated and interpenetrating relationship between the physical and mental aspects of our being as so significant that he repeatedly underscored it, and developed meditation practices around it to assist his students in fully realizing their spiritual potential. This emphasis was most regularly phrased in terms of ‘mindfulness of the body.’ A couple of quotations from the Pali scriptures illustrate this clearly:

Anyone who has developed and cultivated mindfulness of the body has included within themselves whatever wholesome states there are that play a part in true knowledge, just as anyone who has extended their mind over the great ocean has included within that whatever streams there are that flow into the ocean. (M 119.22).

‘What, monks, is the path leading to the Unconditioned [the realization of enlightenment]? Mindfulness directed to the body: this is called the path leading to the Unconditioned.’ (S 43.1)

The latter passage appears in the first in a collection of forty-four discourses by the Buddha on the Unconditioned and the pathway to it, which indicates the centrality and importance he gave to this kind of practice.

In a similar vein, in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, the Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness, which is universally regarded as the cornerstone of meditation in the Theravada tradition, the practice of mindfulness of the body is given an identical opening role.

Monks, this is the direct path for the purification of beings, for the overcoming of sorrow and distress, for the dissolution of pain and grief, for the reaching of the true way, for the realization of Nibbāna – namely, the four foundations of mindfulness. What are the four? Here one abides contemplating the body as a body, ardent, fully aware and mindful, having put aside hankering and fretting about the world ... feelings as feelings ... mind as mind ... mind objects as mind objects ...’. (M 10.2-3, D 22.1)

In this discourse the Buddha goes on to give further details about the various aspects of mindfulness of the body. These aspects include such essential meditation practices as mindfulness of breathing, particularly as a concentration exercise, but they also cover what are generally considered ordinary attributes of everyday life. Who would consider simply noting the body’s posture as a

significant spiritual practice? Yet the Buddha explicitly recommended it: just to be aware that ‘I’m walking’, ‘I’m standing’, ‘I’m sitting’ or ‘I’m lying down’ can be enough to key the attention into the reality of the present moment and help to attune to the state of both body and mind. Then through that attuning, an integration, a harmonization, can more easily occur.

Another everyday practice this teaching recommends is the development of ‘acting in full awareness’, termed *sati-sampajañña* in Pali. This means being fully attentive to ordinary activities such as going somewhere and returning, looking ahead and looking away, dressing and undressing, eating, drinking, tasting, going to the toilet, falling asleep and waking up, talking and keeping silent; in short, throughout the absolutely ordinary flow of our days. Again, this might look oddly unspiritual as a discipline on paper, but it is encouraged with the same heartfilled vigour as the Buddha gives to the development of profound states of meditation and liberating insights.

So why should such a weight of significance be given to these aspects of our life. Isn’t enlightenment in the Buddhist view about an exalted, transcendent state of mind? If so, why bother paying so much attention to the body? Well, if we labour under the view that enlightenment or liberation is solely a mental event, not involving the material dimension of the natural order, we find sooner or

later that the material realm seems to be doing its very best to intrude upon our would-be transcendent state. That damned howling dog next door which keeps ruining my concentration! That bad knee which won't let me sit in meditation for more than twenty minutes without screaming for relief!

What about the kind of withdrawal of the senses advocated in certain Vedic and Buddhist practices, where the mind disengages completely from the sense realm; isn't that to be regarded as a state of liberation? Well, these kinds of states can certainly be realized through intense application and effort, but it is very noticeable, at least within the Buddhist tradition, that they are always stressed as being wholesome but temporary. In terms of spiritual training and the development of the attributes which genuinely liberate, the central place is given over and over again to our earthy, mundane friend 'mindfulness of the body.'

## THE PRESENT FULL OF USEFUL POSSIBILITIES

So long as their physical safety is not being threatened, human beings commonly tend to drift off into their favoured mental realms of fantasy, nostalgia, regret, resentment, anxiety or future planning. If we happen to be adept meditators, we might add deep states of concentration and blissful, radiant zones of consciousness to that list. Because of this tendency, the Buddha saw it as crucial for a genuine understanding of the way life works, and for developing a spiritual

path which could lead to well-being, to awaken to the interrelated nature of mind and body. In other words, he saw that an enlightenment which tried to ignore the physical dimension could never be real enlightenment. He thus encouraged the kinds of practices which would keep the body in view at all times, which would keep the mind full of the body.

This effort serves several related functions. Firstly, it helps sustain continuity of spiritual effort. This is very useful because it helps us to recognize early on that the more mindful we are, the less we tend to make problems about the way things are. Sadly, the reverse is true too; the more heedless we are, the more complicated and struggle-filled we make life for ourselves. Thus the more unbroken the quality of mindfulness is, the more harmoniously we are able to live.

Secondly, the body only exists in the present moment; it doesn't wander off into the past and future. This might seem like an insignificant truism, but when we start to look at our lives closely we find that much of our difficulty and distress arises from dwelling on re-creations of the past, either positive or negative, or on hopes and worries about the future. To the mind the past and future seem like vast and solid realities, stretching out evenly before and after the insignificant little present, but the more closely we look at the experience of our life as it actually is, the more the past and future appear as hollow fabrications. They are mere memories and anticipations; rather, it is the present which is vast and



SWEEPING AROUND AJAHN SUMEDHO'S  
FIRST KUTI, IN WAT PAH NANACHAT, 1976

all-encompassing, and full of useful possibilities. How strange – has something changed, or was it always this way but we just did not notice?

Either way, since the body is always in the present, the simple recollection of its presence is a sure-fire way to key the attention into the reality of the way things actually are. If we are off trying to inhabit an imagined future or a reconstituted past, how can we possibly attune to the orchestra of life in the here and now? Our common sense tells us it can't be done. What is more, when we use the body to help us to wake up to the present, we experience a completely natural quality of easeful delight, like coming out of the realm of sleep in the early morning: 'Oh, that was only a dream, now I'm back to reality...'

## LIFE IN THE FOREST

The style of Buddhist practice which I have followed for over 30 years is generally known as the Thai Forest Tradition.

The Thai Forest lineage tries to live in the spirit of the way espoused by the Buddha himself, and to practise according to the same standards he encouraged during his lifetime. As well as a number of hours in the day dedicated to the more familiar disciplines of formal meditation, such as mindfulness of breathing and the development of wisdom through insight meditation (*vipassanā*), the style of spiritual training in the Thai Forest Tradition encompasses many of the approaches to cultivating mindfulness of the body outlined above. Almost

all those who live within this form or have been associated with its teachings would say that it is the lynchpin of their practice.

My own teacher Ajahn Chah made strenuous efforts during his thirty years of actively guiding others to stress the importance of sustaining a continuity of mindfulness and paying heedful attention to even the most mundane practicalities of everyday living. When I encountered him for the first time in early 1978, he was in the process of building a monastery toilet, cement trowel in hand. It was clear at once that the finishing work was being executed to a meticulous standard of smoothness, and that the Ajahn was keenly attentive to not doing things in a slapdash or haphazard way. Over the years he repeatedly encouraged the development of this quality of mindfulness and full awareness, whether through sitting meditation, during construction work or the morning walk through the villages to receive alms-food, in the process of giving teachings or when cleaning and maintaining the monastery buildings. Indeed, he often said that you could tell how accomplished the teacher at a monastery was by how well or badly the community looked after its toilets.

## WALKING MEDITATION

Among the various aspects of spiritual training in the Thai Forest Tradition, notably those which emphasize the physical dimension, two particularly stand out. The first is not well known as a meditation training outside certain



MONK ON WALKING PATH,  
ABHAYAGIRI MONASTERY

Buddhist circles; the second is often seen as an unnecessary corollary to the spiritual path.

For most people the word ‘meditation’ immediately brings to mind an image of someone seated in the lotus posture with eyes gently closed, back erect and countenance serene. When even the most materialistic of corporations, such as car manufacturers, credit card companies or life assurance dealers, want to convey a spiritual element to their promises, this is the archetypal image that they use. But in many systems of Buddhist meditation, notably the Thai Forest Tradition, it is customary and considered highly beneficial to intersperse the periods of sitting meditation (usually for about an hour) with corresponding hour-long periods of walking meditation. This was a practice which the Buddha developed and maintained throughout his life.

The method is very simple. You establish a path on as flat a piece of ground as you can find, ideally about 20–25 paces long, and determine what your two end points will be, say between a certain rock at one end and a large tree at the other. Before beginning the walking practice you stand still at one end of the path and sweep the attention up and down through your body, so as to establish an awareness of the body’s presence and relax before beginning. When mindful awareness of the body has been made firm, you start walking. Just as for sitting meditation, a variety of different objects of focus can be used for walking meditation, but generally the most accessible one is simply the feeling

of the feet touching the ground as you walk along at an easy natural pace. As the mind wanders into memories and plans or is distracted by the varying sights and sounds, you just keep letting go and returning the attention to the present moment, to the rhythm of the feet along the path. In this way the body and its motions, oscillating between the two ends of the path, become like the feeling of the breath oscillating between inhalation and exhalation. This natural cycle thus serves as a focal point, bringing the attention to the reality of the present, and is a calming influence for the many kinds of distracting thought.

When walking meditation is well-developed, it can lead to a stillness of being, a spiritual restfulness, which are easily equal to those found in the more static sitting meditation. You find there is a clear awareness of the movements of the body, but as awareness is always 'here,' there is a motionlessness which forms the environment of the motion. This is what Ajahn Chah would call being like 'still, flowing water.'

## SILA AS A BASIS OF PRACTICE

The other aspect of the forest monastic life which justifies emphasis but might not come to mind as a physical discipline, though I suggest it most assuredly is, is wholesome personal conduct, or *sīla* in Pali.

Though Buddhist monastic life it has the single aim of spiritual freedom, it is very far from free and easy, at least in the way those words are usually used.

A black and white photograph of a wooden plank, possibly a piece of a fence or a sign, set against a dark background. The plank is tilted and has two lines of text carved into it. The top line is in Thai script, and the bottom line is in English. The text is white and stands out against the dark wood. The photograph has a white border.

จิต คือ ใคร?  
Who is the mind?

There are a lot of rules! But the multitude of rules have a single purpose, which is to help keep life as simple as we know in our heart of hearts that it can be. We have rules for every aspect of life, whether it be not killing any animals or engaging in sexual activity of any kind, or repairing a hole in our robe before dawn of the next day if it is big enough for a bed-bug to crawl through. If you add up all the rules in the book for fully-ordained monastics, they come to a total of something like Ten Thousand. This might sound unnecessarily daunting, but in fact, once you are familiar with the style of life, most of the rules just keep themselves and the process of living by them makes life extraordinarily straightforward: no more worries about what to do with your hair or what to wear today. Their main role then becomes to help keep us mindful of our numerous potential digressions and sublimated urges: when we want to bend the truth for the sake of a good story, when we want to help ourselves from the refrigerator because of a flash of restless hunger. The existence of distinct guidelines helps us to see those impulses before acting upon them.

Fortunately, the Buddha was a great pragmatist, and he only set out such a detailed pattern of training for those who wished to commit themselves to a monastic style of life. For the vast majority of his students in his own lifetime, and similarly today, he recommended the standard of what is known as The Five Precepts. These are:

- 1) To refrain from taking the life of any living creature.
- 2) To refrain from taking that which is not given.
- 3) To refrain from sexual misconduct.
- 4) To refrain from false and harmful speech.
- 5) To refrain from intoxicating drink and drugs which lead to carelessness.

When people visit monasteries in Theravada countries, it is customary for them to re-commit to these Precepts as a simple and regular reminder. In the West they are taken at the beginning and ending of retreats, at day-long sittings and even before Sangha meetings. Many lay Buddhists try to keep them as a matter of course.

In a certain sense these Five Precepts were not just conjured up by the Buddha. They are part of the natural order. They aren't imposed as a Buddhist idea, nor are they unique to the Buddhist tradition. Every country in the world has laws which enable human beings to function freely and harmoniously. These laws relate to respect for human life, to property, to the appropriate use of sexuality and to honesty. The Buddha pointed out that they are intrinsic to the human condition. If we take life; if we misappropriate things; if we take advantage of others, through our sexuality or by living indulgently; if we are deceitful or aggressive, harmful with our speech, then pain will inevitably follow. The opening verse of the Dhammapāda says: 'If you speak or act with

a corrupt mind, pain will follow as the wheels of the cart follow the ox that pulls it' (Dhp 1, 3-4).

The Buddha referred to these Precepts as *pakati-sīla*, natural or genuine virtue. They are contrasted with *paññatti-sīla*, prescribed ethics, which are the product of local customs and religions or rules peculiar to certain professions, like the vast majority of the monastic rules mentioned earlier. I like to compare them to road signs such as 'Dangerous Bend', 'Do Not Enter', 'One Way' or 'Slow.' They are road signs for our life as human beings. They help us look and see that life is really this way, not that way. These signs protect us from danger. They warn us where the obstacles are and help the heart to stay on track. If we don't follow road signs we tend to get lost, problems start to multiply and there is usually a lot of tension and frustration. But when we pay attention and follow the laws and road signs, there's flexibility, sensitivity to time and place – and we usually get where we want to go. The Precepts should be understood in exactly the same way. We take them to use as helpful guides through the areas of life where we lose our way most easily, where there is the greatest emotional charge: concerning issues of life and death, property and ownership, sexuality, honesty and deceit, speech and communication.

As with monastic training, the Five Precepts are not only about morality; they are also a great mindfulness tool. We don't get a signal when we start to drift from clear awareness to heedlessness. It's not as though a little warning light

appears when an aversion or a deluded state arises. It is not like when we create a document on a computer and the machine prints the file name and path, the date it was created and so forth: 'This is a greed condition, third degree, generated at 15:41, 1-6-08.' 'This is a self-based deluded condition...' Those conditions are not tagged like that. But when we employ such tools as the Five Precepts, they let us know, they give a warning. As the heart drifts unwittingly into unawareness, deluded attractions and negativities, there's a warning buzz in the system. It enables the heart to wake up before we lose sight of our innate purity, before the negative states have been compounded and before we create major disharmonies. To go back to the driving analogy, the Precepts are like the serrated strip at the side of the highway which makes the wheels vibrate when we drift too far toward the hard shoulder.

This set of guidelines for our behaviour relates to the discipline of action and the way we work, the way our body and mind interact with the material world and other beings. The guidelines are also about how to be happy, and through employing them we can see for ourselves that happiness is a result of tuning our conduct to respect the lives and nature of others.

## THE BODY OF THE FOREST TEACHES US

Not surprisingly, a final aspect of forest monastic life worth mentioning is the forest itself. There is a profound physicality involved in living in a wild



DTAO DTUM MONASTERY

environment (especially if, as when I lived at Abhayagiri Monastery, there is a half-mile walk and a 500-foot climb between the meditation hall and one's *kuti*).

Furthermore, when we are surrounded by landscape that has not been crafted by human hands, when we are not caused to refer incessantly to our name or social role among other humans, when we can be just another creature in the forest, that changes our perspective on things.

The forest, even the great earth itself, is recognized as our body. Its cycle of seasons, its moods of weather reflect our own moods back to us, and all that we habitually think that we are, this body and mind separated from the world, is revealed as simply dynamic patterns of Nature, irrespective of whether they are conventionally called 'inside' or 'outside', 'me' or 'the world.' The very changeability and uncertain nature of forest life – when will those foxes come to visit again? – becomes the most profound of wisdom teachings. When the heart relaxes and opens to such uncertainty, it is recognized that the search for predictability in the naturally unpredictable can only produce disappointment. When instead we let go, recognizing that the uncertainty is part of the intrinsic nature of all things, mysteriously we find a quality of attuning in our entire being. Body and mind resonate with that primal harmonious chord the Buddha called the Middle Way. We realize that everything we are is an attribute of Nature, of Ultimate Truth itself – how, we wonder, could it not be?

## THE BODY OF TRUTH AND THE BODY OF FEAR

This sounds great on paper, but it is by no means easy to feel this way all the time, or even occasionally. Why is that so?

One aspect of all our lives which causes discordance is our routine identification with emotional states. Given a little practice with concentration exercises, before long most people can recognize that a passing thought is just like that car passing along the street or that howling dog next door. At first we can only do this once in a while, but soon we can see and let them go as being insubstantial on a fairly consistent basis. But if the thought is emotionally charged: 'They're not supposed to drive cars up here when the meditation is going on, but I forgot to put out the sign. Everyone is going to hate me!' or 'That damned dog, they promised to keep it quiet!'; it's a very different story.

Our society reveres clear thinking, but emotionally most of us are very muddy. We easily get lost in feelings of resentment or guilt, excitement or anxiety, depression or elation and so forth. In addition, we tend to relate to these states as what we are rather than just as something we're experiencing: 'I am happy', 'I am lonely', 'I am distraught!' 'I am afraid', rather than 'I feel happy/lonely/distraught/afraid' or, even more realistically, 'There is the feeling of happiness/loneliness/distress/fear.' Thus many people may find it reasonably easy to put random chattering thoughts aside in meditation, but rapidly get lost in thoughts which are emotionally charged: the Ten Thousand tales of what I should have

done, what she might do, what he did to hurt me, what I should have said to her and so on, *ad infinitum*. Before we know it we're tangled in a suffocating web of self-created imaginings.

There are a great variety of practices which contribute to mindfulness of the body. One of the most valuable of these might be most accurately referred to as 'feeling and knowing the mind in the body' or 'embodying the mind.' We can use this practice as one way to help us establish much greater clarity in this area of our lives, not through any kind of suppression or distraction, but rather through the realm of feeling and a mindful, radical acceptance. This meditation is usually first developed as a practice in the sitting posture, but when it is more deeply established it can be applied in all situations. To begin with it requires a certain level of mental tranquillity, so unfortunately it is not a method for total newcomers to meditation. Having said that, once someone is able to establish an average degree of calm, to keep the mind reasonably focused in the present moment, it can be used quite effectively.

## EMBODYING THE MIND: THE CASE OF FEAR

Say for example that you feel you have a particular problem with fear, that your basic relationship with life is: if it exists, worry about it. You habitually think in terms of: 'I have a fear problem. I am a very anxious person. How can I get rid of my fear? If I could get rid of it there would be me without the fear, and then I

would be happy.’ That all sounds reasonable enough, so you wish to investigate this quality of fear and understand it.

When you next sit and meditate, begin by simply relaxing the body as much as possible around the spine, which is upright but not tense. Take the first ten minutes or so to sweep the attention up and down through the body, relaxing it completely, then focusing finally upon the natural rhythm of the breath. Let the whole system settle as much as possible, to establish the qualities of calm and clarity. When you feel that there is a full sense of tranquillity and the mind is undistracted from the present, deliberately bring into consciousness a memory of a frightening event, the thought or image of a person who customarily intimidates you or the prospect of a future event that is worrying; the stronger the better.

As soon as you have triggered the fear reaction by recalling that face or that terrible event, very consciously let go of all the verbiage, the conceptual thought that wants to take hold of the story and run. This takes considerable determination, but it’s a crucial piece of the practice. Our habit is to leap immediately into the stories we tell ourselves and not notice what we’re actually feeling. We thus need to let go very deliberately of the verbals, and to seek where in the body we feel the feeling of fear itself. Is it in the jaw, with the teeth clenched tight? Is it in the shoulders, hunched up around your ears? Is it in the belly, the solar plexus knotted into a dense wad? Where is it? How does

it feel? Is hot? Is it shaking? Is it dead and cold? Can you tell? Different people have different emotional maps written through their bodies, so each of us will have our own variations. There are a few general patterns, though, and in this example fear is most often felt as a tightness in the abdomen, a knotting of the diaphragm and the solar plexus area.

If this is where you feel the sensation of fear located, bring your attention to settle at that spot. If you hear the mind starting up with thoughts such as: 'I have a fear problem. I've got to get rid of this!' say gently but firmly to yourself: 'No, right now there's simply this feeling of fear – it's a presumption to call it "my problem".' To the best of your ability just keep the attention on the physical sensation in the belly and don't let the mind verbalize around it. Explore it and be interested in it. What you will soon find, probably to your surprise, is that the feeling is not that uncomfortable. It's certainly not pleasant, it's not supposed to be, but it is far less irksome or painful than, say, a toothache, let alone a migraine.

Witness and allow yourself to fully know that sensation in the belly; open the heart to it and accept it as it is. Recognize that it is simply one of the many feelings which can be experienced within this body and mind. It is part of the natural order. It is very important to recognize that you are not trying to make yourself like this feeling or to call it good. In fact, it's best if possible to refrain from any judgement of it other than 'here it is.' No story; you are simply feeling

the body of fear, the fear-filled body. The more radically, simply and mindfully you can accept this sensation in your belly, the more completely the process will help to clarify things for you.

Once there is clear and mindful openness to the raw sensation of the fear, let yourself know this consciously and stay with that knowing for a substantial period of time, at least five or ten minutes if possible. If the chosen catalyst was a potent one, while it might only take ten seconds to trigger the reaction, once it has been sustained consciously like this for a few minutes, it might take another thirty minutes to let the system wind down, but this is what you need to do next. It should not be pushed.

At the ending of that conscious holding period, set the intention to relax the belly and release all vestiges of the memory or mental image that was used to launch the process. The breath can be used very helpfully here, focusing particularly on the exhalation employed to support the letting go, relinquishing attribute of the progression. Be very careful that you don't get into a rush, even surreptitiously, to get rid of the feeling. Let it fade in its own time. If there is any reflexive tightening of the solar plexus area, keep softening it and using the natural flow of the breath to sustain the dissolution of the effects of the fear reaction. Stay patiently with this decompression-relaxation part of the cycle until you realize that the system has returned to the state of clarity and calm with which you began. Once you



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are ‘back there’, at ease at the still point of the present, stay with it for a few minutes before ending the meditation. Of course, if you feel another round would be valuable and your knees can cope with it, you can drop another seed-crystal into the mind and launch the whole process again – and follow it through accordingly.

Not only does the development of this process have a beneficial effect on us mentally; according to current research it also changes the neurological pathways. We are literally re-wiring our whole being, both physical and mental.

## RESPONDING RATHER THAN REACTING

There is a passage in the *Brihadarañyaka Upanishad* which aptly illustrates this relationship between ego-centredness and fear. It describes how to begin with there was only the Self; but the Self said ‘I’ (Sanskrit *aham*), and at once felt fear and then desire. In the pattern of experience that is being witnessed here, we are watching the fear feeling being born from the empty mind, bursting into being and evolving; in its characteristics it is one embodiment of the isolated self-feeling. It is then seen, felt and known as having come from nothing, doing its piece and then dissolving back into nothing once again. Moreover, the whole cycle was known and accepted throughout as simply Nature in action, the truth of the way things are. It is thus seen and known as an embodiment of Truth. The key transforming element in this entire process is the heartfelt, mindful

quality of acceptance. In that open-hearted acceptance and knowing there is a profound, non-conceptual recognition that the fear feeling is ‘all right,’ in the most literal sense of the words – it’s all part of the same natural order – and that there is in fact no thing to be afraid of. The fear is part of Nature; it’s uncomfortable when it’s present, but it is not fundamentally a problem – how could it be?

Another aspect of the transforming quality of this kind of practice is that once we have wholeheartedly accepted the simple monosyllabic message of the feeling, we have to some extent also accepted where it came from. Having drunk from the stream, we have also drunk from the source of the stream. That is to say, in some small way we have accepted and attuned ourselves to a quality to which we were previously blind and out of harmony, the thing which caused the imbalance in the first place. Unconscious fearful attitudes, for example, produce stressful self-preserving reactions. To attune to some degree with that which ignites the fear reaction is to recognize it as belonging to Nature, and thus to us as well. It was frightening because it was seen as alien; when its relatedness to us is recognized, the heart relaxes.

This aspect of the practice becomes particularly significant as we go about our daily lives and experience fresh memories or encounters with things that formerly frightened us or evoked another habitual emotional reaction. We find that whereas in the past the attention would immediately go into telling

ourselves the familiar stories and believing them, or reacting emotionally to conditioned sensory triggers – ‘I can’t believe he said that!’ ‘That’s sooo beautiful, I’ve gotta have it! – we notice: ‘Here’s the feeling of desire; here’s the feeling of fear... that’s all.’ And if there is a little space around the feeling, we realize we don’t have to follow it blindly.

With practice we also find that once we’re able to cultivate some clarity around emotional states, we can develop mindfulness of the body to sustain it. When something causes an emotional reaction of any kind to be launched, we can bring the attention into the body and notice where we’re feeling it. Where is this anger lodged? This is anticipation, where is it felt? Here’s nostalgia, is it hot or cool? Rather than suppressing the experience or dissociating from it in an unskilful way, we feel and receive it fully, but we take the option of not blindly buying into it. The body is thus our means of attuning to the moment, and through its medium we cultivate responsiveness rather than reacting blindly to the way things are. This also gradually allows us to ‘hear’ the body’s signals before they become screams.

## NATURE’S VALIUM

There is a final element of this practice which again derives from the deeply interrelated nature of the physical and mental dimensions of our being. Continuing the example of fear, say that you enter a room where there is

someone with whom you have recently had an argument. On seeing them a feeling of anxiety arises, accompanied by the thought, 'Oh no, they're here. What am going to say to them?'

But you have already been working with this kind of reaction for some time, so the mind does not follow with its usual line of thinking: 'It's my fear problem again! When am I ever going to be rid of it?' Instead there arises the mindful reflection: 'Rather than the 'I have a fear problem', what's really happening here is simply the experience of anxiety arising. It feels like this.' You then consciously bring your attention into your solar plexus area as you walk into the room, and notice what physical sensations are there. Immediately you are aware that your belly has tightened up. You note this and accept it, and then you allow the next natural outbreath to be accompanied by a deliberate softening of the area. There is a tangible relaxation as you let the muscles loosen. Once that relaxation has been effected, you take a moment to ask yourself, 'Now, what was I worried about?' To your surprise, the thinking mind stumbles and gropes for a moment to recall what the big issue was. This is the clue to the true source of worry; it's almost impossible to sustain a good fret if your belly is not tight. When the memory of the argument resurfaces and those old messages begin to replay in your thoughts, you bring attention to your solar plexus once again; and lo and behold, it's as tight as a drum. So you relax again...

As you continue into the room and engage with the various people there, particularly when you interact with the person who sparked the anxiety, you keep part of your attention focused on your body and respond again and again by releasing any revival of a state of tension. This serves to keep the heart open and allows the space to be responsive to the moment. To your surprise, the exchanges with the person you were anxious about are open and uncomplicated, honest and without residue. The argument is consigned to the ‘forgive and forget’ file.

The body and mind work like a pair of cisterns connected by a pipe at their base; what happens to the water in one affects the levels in the other. Most of us are blithely unaware of the extent to which our moods are affected by our physical habits and vice versa; we do not realize that the two are connected. The kind of practice just described shows us how anxiety, for example, is sustained by tension in the body. When that physical tension is relaxed, it’s hard to stay anxious. This is not a new discovery. In fact as well as being ancient wisdom, it is the basis of pharmaceuticals like valium. Apparently this drug works through being a muscle relaxant, rather than by having any mood-altering effect on the central nervous system. By developing this dimension of body awareness and responsiveness, we are employing Nature’s valium; the advantage is that this spiritual version is non-addictive and free of charge.

## A SELF-ADJUSTING UNIVERSE

Hopefully the practices described here will be of some use, but there's an issue which always arises when we attempt to apply such things in our lives. In any kind of spiritual discipline, be it Buddhist meditation, hatha yoga, Christian prayer, Sufi dancing or whatever, a perennial problem is that of getting caught in the doing-ness and thing-ness of a tradition or a practice.

We might faithfully follow the formula, putting forth great effort with sincerity, but disappointingly, being guided by the paradigm of 'me doing it how it *should* be done' only leads us to depression. We become confused by this and decide we're just not sincere enough, not trying hard enough, so we pile on more of the 'right' thing. We might carry on in this vein for a while, but after some years it can become seriously disheartening. We then either cave in completely and go back to the bottle, the TV or the Internet; or, as a more promising option, we might hunt around and find ourselves a new brand of Buddhism or a new yoga teacher, or go back to Christianity or convert to Judaism. But after another stint that starts to pale too. We grasp it all too tightly or we throw it all away.

So it goes. We want to change something in us; all spiritual disciplines are based upon this fact, so that is not the issue. It is more to do with the attitude with which we pick up a practice or a tradition than with the particular factors which comprise it. What matters is finding a skillful way of holding to it.

## UNENTANGLED PARTICIPATION

The two areas of mishandling in the above paradigm are ‘*me* doing it’ and ‘how it *should* be done.’ We unconsciously create a solid sense of me-ness (*ahamkara* in Pali) along with creating an equally solid thing that we’re trying to do, i.e. ‘my practice’ (in Pali this quality of ‘mine-ness’ is *mamamkara*). The tighter we grasp the ‘me’ and the sense of doing, together with the perceived substantiality and goodness of our ‘thing’, be it a yoga *asana*, a meditation practice or our Jewish faith, the more prone we make ourselves to disappointment. There is a direct relationship of cause and effect.

So what to do? We seem to find ourselves straddled between the wisdom of the Third Zen Patriarch, who said, ‘The faster they hurry, the slower they go’, and the wisdom of the Red Queen, who said, ‘It takes all the running you can do to keep in the same place.’ A way forward is suggested by some of the principles already described here. It is by turning gently away from the habits of either grasping the way things are or rejecting the way things are. Instead, being mindful of the natural order of things, the heart attunes itself to the present and then, though the intrinsic participation of our bodies and minds in the way things are, ways of working fruitfully with the present reality arise spontaneously. We work with the way things are. As the Buddha expressed it in the very first *sutta* of the ‘Connected Discourses’:

A devata asked the Buddha: ‘How, dear sir, did you cross the flood?’

‘By not halting, friend, and by not straining I crossed the flood.’

‘But how is it, dear sir, that by not halting and by not straining you crossed the flood?’

‘When I came to a standstill, friend, then I sank; but when I struggled, then I got swept away. It is in this way, friend, that by not halting and by not straining I crossed the flood.’ (S 1.1, Bhikkhu Bodhi trans.)

It is interesting that the Pali word for ‘truth’ is Dhamma, which can also mean ‘duty’ or ‘work, job’, and can also be validly rendered as ‘nature.’ This implies that not only are all our physical and mental attributes part of the entire natural order, but also, most significantly, that participation is an active, initiative-filled role. We are not disturbing the universe (as T.S. Eliot put it) by responding and choosing. Our free-willed choices are part of the way things are, and when these choices come not from a self-centred viewpoint but from mindfulness, wisdom and kindness, the result is joyful and liberating. It is an unentangled participation which leads to peace.

There is a very simple method of viewing this process of unentangled participation in action. Take an occasion when are by yourself. You don’t have to be sitting in meditation; you could also be standing still or just sitting on a chair. The important thing is that you have a few minutes to yourself and can freely turn the attention inward. Let your mind relax and do not focus on any

particular thing; in fact, for this exercise it will help to let your mind wander for a while. After a few minutes, bring the attention into the body and sweep through it. You will be sure to notice areas in the body that now seem tight, twisted, slumped or stressed. Choose the most prominent of these to focus on, for instance your spine. Notice any impulses to straighten the kinks out of your back, but do not act on them. Don't do anything. This is a practice of non-doing, a diligent effortlessness, non-meditation.

Let the attention settle fully on that crooked feeling in your back and hold it in awareness. Let that holding be as impartial and open as possible: you are not tensing up against it, you are not waiting for it to go away or straighten out, you are not freezing in position; there is just a simple and radical acceptance of how it is. You are not wanting it to change. You are not wanting it not to change. You have no agenda but awareness. As you relax into this open-hearted awareness, let go of all subtle holdings and controls. Let go of control of the body, so that if it wants to move it can do so. Soon you notice the body starting to make little adjustments, – first maybe to one side, then still, then over to the other side. Don't try to influence these little movements as they occur; just leave them alone. Don't try to make them happen. Don't try to make them not happen. Trust in awareness. Sustain the environment of awareness and simply watch, feel the body changing. Surrender, with faith in the body's own wisdom. Get out of the way. Let the universe adjust itself. Within a few minutes you find that the body has straightened and the spine is as perfectly aligned as it has ever been.

But you didn't do any thing.

If thoughts arise such as, 'This is great! Now I'm sitting perfectly', let them pass. Or you can try grasping them and identifying with the process: 'Now I know the trick I'll really impress everyone in the yoga class'; and see what happens to that exquisite balance, that perfect natural posture. You'll find that it has changed again...

I often describe this process as 'the heat-lamp effect.' The combination of awareness and radical acceptance (otherwise known as loving-kindness, *mettā* in Pali) acts like a heat-lamp on a knotted muscle; under the influence of those rays all resistance is futile and the knot surrenders; the muscle returns to its natural state in the order of things. You just lie there while it happens; all you have to do is receive the heat and let nature take its course. This method of holding in awareness is analogous, although these 'rays' are coming from inside. In Sanskrit 'surrender' is *pranidhāna* and it is recognized as being a spiritual quality of prime importance. It is the relinquishment of the self-centred perspective. Though at first glance it might seem to have the opposite meaning, ironically it can be said to be related to the Buddhist concept of faith (*saddhā* in Pali). For isn't it the case that when the ego surrenders, when we let go of the self-centred view of things, we are in the same breath expressing a trust in the fundamental orderliness of nature? We can

surrender the urge for control by ‘me’ as we have faith in the infinitely more trustworthy self-adjusting universe. The result is the ineffable beauty of full expression.

## THE SUCHNESS OF THE BODY

Another curious characteristic of the word ‘Dhamma’ is the adjective deriving from it, *dharmatā*, meaning ‘natural’ or ‘of the nature of Ultimate Reality.’ In Thai, many of whose words derive directly from Pali terms, this has been transmuted into the word ‘*tammadah*’ which always means ‘ordinary’, ‘unremarkable’ or ‘mundane.’ This confluence of meanings, ‘Ultimate Reality’ and ‘ordinary’, echoes a comparable if not identical confluence in the word that the Buddha chose to refer to himself, *Tathāgata*.

*Tathāgata* is made up of two well-known parts, yet scholars have debated for centuries as to what it is really supposed to mean. Is it ‘*Tath-āgata*’, ‘thus come’, or ‘*Tathā-gata*’, ‘thus gone’? ‘Come to suchness’ or ‘gone to suchness’; which is the real meaning? The Buddha was very fond of word-play, however, and I suspect that he coined the word ‘*Tathāgata*’ precisely because it implied both attributes. Is that Buddha quality completely transcendent, utterly gone? Or is it immanent in the physical world, completely here, present now? The term is perfect in that it carries both these meanings and indicates that embodiment and transcendence do not exclude each other in any way. Thus this attribute of suchness carries with it the spirit of inclusivity, being the point of intersection



of the embodied and the transcendent, of time with the timeless. It directs us toward finding spiritual fulfilment in the suchness of the embodied mind, here and now, rather than in some abstracted, idealized ‘me’, some other place and time, or in a special über-heavenly state which we might reach through withdrawal from the senses.

In this world of Suchness  
there is neither self, nor other-than-self.

(Seng T’san, *The Third Zen Patriarch: Verses on the Faith Mind*<sup>21</sup>)

Men’s curiosity searches past and future  
And clings to that dimension. But to apprehend  
The point of intersection of the timeless  
With time, is an occupation for the saint –  
No occupation either, but something given  
And taken, in a lifetime’s death in love,  
Ardour and selflessness and self surrender.

(T.S. Eliot: *Four Quartets, The Dry Salvages*)

21 Richard B. Clark trans.



# 11

## WAR AND PEACE<sup>22</sup>

OR NON-CONTENTION WITH MARA

Under the Bodhi tree the Buddha's response to death, i.e. Māra's threats, cajolings, temptations and attempts to cause doubts, was not life-affirmation; nor did he go into deep *jhāna* and evade Māra, blast him with a *vajra* bolt, try to be reasonable and negotiate on Māra's terms or justify himself. Instead his response was a fearless wakefulness. Almost invariably, throughout the accounts of the Buddha's meetings with Māra, as soon as he is aware of the malefactor's presence he says: 'I know you, Māra.' And the game is over.

This is a myth, but such tales maintain their power through their congruity with truth as we experience it. When Māra knows that the Buddha has seen the trick, the hook inside the bait, he knows his victim is not going to bite. Māra is

<sup>22</sup> Previously published in a shorter version, in *Buddhadharma*, Spring, 2003, and in *The Middle Way*, Vol.86, No.1, 2011

defeated in that gesture of knowing. This suggests that the opposite to death is not birth, life-affirmation or destruction of death, but wakefulness.

Perhaps the most meaningful way of considering the encounters between the Buddha and Māra is to regard them as depicting the arising of unwholesome, ego-based states in the mind of the Buddha; they portray the instinctive fears, doubts and desires which arise in his mind but find no place to land there. Using the myth as a map of our own psyches, Māra also represents our own ego-death experiences (loneliness, anger, obsessiveness, greed, doubt, etc.), and the Buddha's example points the way for the wisdom of our hearts to respond most skilfully to them: by wakeful and radical non-contention. For as soon as we contend against death, we've bought into the value system and swallowed the hook; when we hate and fear death or want to swamp it with what we take to be life, Māra has won: 'Such a one has gone over to Māra's side and the Evil One can do with him as he likes' (S 35.115). We can perhaps run with the line for a while, but sooner or later...

Non-contention is not passivity, denial or switching off, dumbly suffering the slings and arrows as they thump into us, but a full awareness. The Buddha doesn't say: 'It's all yours, Māra.' Defeating Māra is the point, but he is defeated by not contending against him. One of the most often quoted passages of the Dhammapada states:

Hatred is never conquered by hatred.

Only by love is it conquered.

This is a law  
ancient and inexhaustible. (Dhp 5)

Also in such passages as:

Whatever states of being there are,  
of any kind, anywhere,  
all are impermanent, pain-haunted  
and subject to change.

One who sees this as it is  
thus abandons craving for existence,  
without relishing non-existence.

The remainderless fading, cessation, Nibbāna,  
comes with the utter ending of all craving.

When a bhikkhu reaches Nibbāna thus, through not clinging,  
Then he will have no renewal of being;

Māra has been vanquished and the battle gained,  
Since one such as he has outstripped all being. (Ud 3.10)

So there is a conundrum: how can conquest be the aim if the fundamental attitude is non-contentious?

The Buddha was a warrior noble, a *khattiya*, by birth, and like Gandhi he was definitely aiming at victory, but by non-argument. As he states in the opening passages of the *Madhu-piṇḍika Sutta*, when challenged by a cocky brahmin who is looking for a doctrinal fight: ‘I proclaim such a teaching that advocates not quarrelling with anyone in the world.’ (M 18.4)

At this his hapless antagonist Daṇḍapāni could only shake his head, wag his tongue, pucker his brow and walk off. It is through the Buddha’s refusal to argue with Daṇḍapāni or fight Māra on his own terms that they are defeated.

Martial language and symbolism are often used in relationship to the Buddha, including such epithets for him as *Jina* (‘conqueror’), but it is important to recognize that ‘conquest’ here does not entail a fight; more accurately, it means that ultimately reality has to outweigh illusion. As Māra once expressed himself after another frustrating encounter: ‘You might as well poke a rock with lily stems’ (S 4.25). Māra is frustrated even though the rock is not doing any contending.

In another encounter, between the Buddha and Bhāradvāja the Abusive, after the latter has fiercely criticized the Buddha for disgracing his clan and begging in the streets, the Buddha asks him: ‘If visitors come to your home and you offer them some refreshments, but they decline the offer, to whom do that food and drink belong?’ ‘To me, of course’, the aggressor replies. ‘Similarly’, responds the Buddha, ‘you offer me your anger but I decline to accept it; therefore it still

belongs to you.’ (S 7.2) He is not going to pick up the gauntlet: ‘It’s your glove, friend; you threw it down, you can pick it up – it’s nothing to do with me, it’s your business.’ Wakefulness and a refusal to contend lead to conquest.

All these points are of crucial importance and provide clear moral guidance in these times of escalating conflicts worldwide. The Buddha was no stranger to war and interpersonal disputes, and his wise advice relates to those domains as much as to our internal worlds. Whether it be ‘a reasonable hatred’ of the chattering mind, restlessness, doubts and sordid passions (backed up by quoting the ‘Dhamma book’ that says: ‘Destroy greed, hatred and delusion’), or of ex-partners who have betrayed us, wielders of painful influence in our world about whom we are absolutely justified to be negative, or political leaders we love to decry – when there is commitment to any such urges, the hook has sunk right in.

In his famous ‘Simile of the Saw’ (M 21.20) the Buddha states: ‘Even if bandits were severing you limb from limb with a two-handed saw, if you gave rise to an attitude of hatred towards them, you would not be following my teaching.’ Instead he advocates being compassionate and wishing for the welfare of the abusers. The bar is thus set dauntingly high, but the Buddha perhaps uses this deliberately extreme example to indicate that all hatred is intrinsically non-Dhammic, and that loving-kindness, *mettā*, is always possible. In this respect it’s also important to recognize that *mettā* does not mean liking everything, rather,

it means recognizing that everything has its place in nature; it all belongs, the beautiful and the ugly. True benevolence is not dwelling in aversion, radical non-contention with all nature. It is natural enough to confuse the two, but mistakenly taking ‘loving’ to also mean ‘liking’ can cause a lot of problems. An ancient Indian tale speaks of a cobra who becomes the disciple of a forest-dwelling rishi. Newly sworn to vegetarianism and pacifism, the cobra is having a rough time, especially when the village boys find out that she will no longer strike or fight back when tormented. One day, with rumpled scales and broken fang, she comes for an audience with the holy one:

‘I have tried my very best to follow your teachings faithfully, but this is too much – one of those boys just picked me up by the tail, swung me round and tossed me up in a tree. This is the last straw. I take your teachings on non-violence very seriously, but one more incident like this and there’s going to be trouble.’

‘I deeply admire your commitment to the Path, dear one, and it’s true that I require non-violence of all my disciples, but I never told you that you couldn’t hiss.’

Thus fierceness is not necessarily equivalent to anger, and civil disobedience is not the same as being enraged. Similarly, we can have true kindness, acceptance of the way things are, yet not condone the attitudes expressed, as if to say: ‘I love you completely, but your opinions are poisonous and deranged.’ In the cultural language of the West, ‘not hating’ often implies tacit approval. The eminent

professor of linguistics at MIT, Noam Chomsky, once vigorously defended the right of a fascist politician to speak on campus. Though he had no sympathy for the man's views, he also saw that to ban him from speaking was to show the same quality of prejudice as that attributed to fascists. To 'Serve truth, defy the lie', as is proclaimed on the hooded sweatshirts of various Dharma Punx, is to allow the Dhamma to speak, not to start a fight.

As soon as we nibble and get the hook in, even our efforts at practising the spiritual life can pull the heart away in the opposite direction. We want to do good, but we just seem to create more trouble. As Ajahn Mun's *Ballad of Liberation from the Five Khandhas* says:

'Wanting what's good, without stop:  
That's the cause of suffering.  
It's a great fault: the strong fear of bad.  
'Good' and 'bad' are poisons to the mind,  
like foods that inflame a high fever.  
The Dhamma isn't clear  
because of our basic desire for good.  
Desire for good, when it's great,  
drags the mind into turbulent thought  
until the mind gets inflated with evil,  
and all its defilements proliferate.

The greater the error, the more they flourish,  
 taking one further and further away  
 from the genuine Dhamma.’<sup>23</sup>

Also, in the Verses of the Third Zen Patriarch:

‘When you try to stop activity to achieve passivity  
 your very effort fills you with activity.’<sup>24</sup>

The tragedy is that we make all these noble efforts: going on retreats, keeping Precepts, serving the Dhamma, etc., but if we handle it wrongly, our very religiosity becomes an obstruction; just as in Buddhist tradition, where over time the elder bhikkhus became the corpulent religious aristocracy and privileged priesthood the Buddha was so determinedly trying to counter. This initial drift, which occurred some 2,000 years ago, contributed to the Mahāyāna revolution and later to the cascade of other reforms and renewals that have occurred in the Buddhist world.

Our eagerness to destroy the ‘wrong’ in our minds creates more of the same pain and darkness. Just as the attitude of wanting to destroy evil in the world, that righteous indignation which says: ‘I’m right, you’re wrong’, results in the aberrations illustrated in *Animal Farm*, we become the very thing we are opposing. Another example is found in the story of the Grand Inquisitor in Dostoevsky *The Brothers Karamazov*; when the Messiah returns to mediaeval Spain, the Inquisitor ends by condemning him so that he won’t disturb the progress of the Christian

23 Thānissaro trans.

24 Richard B. Clark trans.

religion. We end by suppressing the very thing that we're trying to further. The Inquisitor thought he was doing the right thing. That's the painful irony: there are good intentions and fidelity to a system, but that contention against 'bad, wrong, shouldn't be' is tragically destructive to the system's originating spirit.

As Solzhenitsyn once mused, it would be so easy if evil was an absolute and we could just isolate it and wipe it out, but as the Buddha also pointed out, there is no such thing as absolute evil. According to Buddhist myth, Mahā-Moggallāna was Māra in at least one of his previous lives (M 50.8); that great saint, both fully enlightened and a chief disciple of the Buddha, had at one point been Satan, the Lord of Lies. Or there is the example of Aṅgulimāla, a mass murderer who became a disciple of the Buddha and an arahant; and not only an arahant, but also protector of expectant mothers and their babies. It is a beautiful irony that 2,500 years later, his verses are still chanted to impart blessings to pregnant women.

All this shows that we can never be irremediably lost. Even if we think these examples are all just fairy stories, their symbolism alone is immensely powerful; it hints that not only is the situation resolvable, but anyone may end up as a saint, a benevolent, radiant presence in the universe, helping to liberate many other beings. When we line up our concerns about 'my mind with its fears, insecurities and lusts', against being Māra and thus the embodiment of unwholesomeness in the universe, the degree of unskillfulness is incomparable. It therefore implies that no karmic entanglement is inescapable, so there's hope for all of us!

But what are we to do when things are wrong? At any time many wars are being fought around the world. In many countries hundreds of thousands of people take to the streets in protest against oppressive regimes.

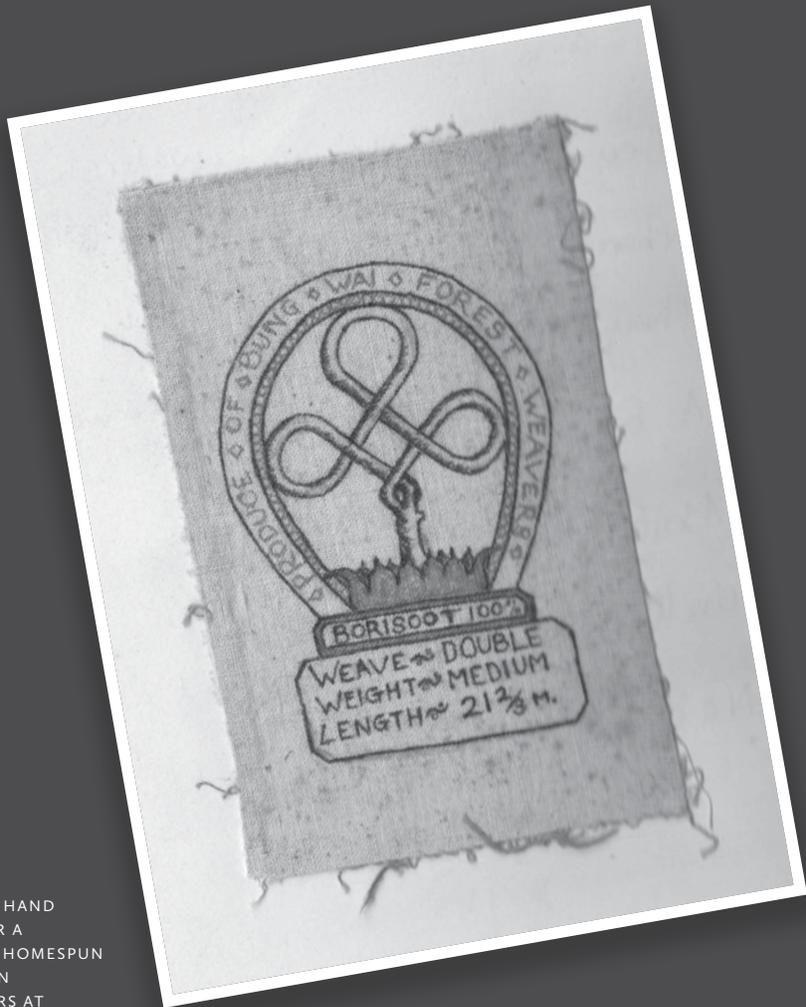
Non-violent protest, civil disobedience and other kinds of useful mischief are fully valid means of expressing one's commitment to Truth. Non-contention is not submissiveness, capitulation or passivity; remember that the Buddha is famous for having taken the initiative to forestall a war between the Koliyans and the Sākyans over water rights to the Rohiṇī River. (SN 935-954; Jat 475)

So how to encounter Māra without being swept along by those forces or fighting against them? Firstly, we can use the principle of non-contention as a flag to indicate the arising of habits of contention ('It shouldn't be this way...') and reflect instead: 'Oh, contention, look at that.' Thus we respond by waking up, knowing and transcending. It is as if we invite the Buddha into the picture. And when Buddha wisdom knows that state, what do we do? Move forwards? Back away? Be still? In each moment intuitive wisdom guides the heart: 'Act now'; 'Be quiet'; 'Do not enter, wrong way'; the heart knows what to do. Sometimes Māra screams, demands reaction; the bait is very tasty, compelling, but with that same cool ease the Buddha never picks it up. There is utter poise: 'I know what this is. I know you, Māra.' Passion is there, but we're not sucked in; the motive to be mindful is there but we don't identify with it. This means a complete acceptance of the way things are, while in the same breath making efforts to cultivate wholesomeness and restrain unwholesomeness; i.e. right efforts are

being made, but not with a dualistic attitude based on self-view. Our initiative to act compassionately is part of the way things are. Thus we work to establish wholesome objects of concentration, let go of anger, cultivate *mettā*, *karunā*, etc. but all embraced in an environment of non-grasping and non-contention.

All it takes is the gesture of waking up. We respond to the death clamp on the heart, to ego-death, with wakefulness, and in that moment the heart is freed. This is the gesture of the Buddha. When the heart meets with unwholesomeness, we don't allow it to impute to that unwholesome-ness an otherness which then needs to be destroyed. Indeed, rather than just tolerating negative qualities by observing them from a remote pseudo-supramundane vantage point, the Buddha advocates sharing blessings with the evil as well as the good: 'May all beings receive the blessings of my life, may they soon attain the threefold bliss and realize the Deathless.' Yes, all abhorred world leaders and public figures, as well as our miscreant ex-partners and poisonous mind-states; piling so-called 'reasonable hatred' upon them only multiplies the causes of pain and confusion.

The fundamental gesture of the Buddha is that of being faithful to Reality: pure presence and absolute non-contention. That gesture can produce a miraculous responsive effect – when the Buddha breaks back into the void the universe bursts into bloom, as Joseph Campbell beautifully phrased it; the response and the Way are entwined mysteriously – and beautifully, delightfully, the action or stillness that springs forth from that gesture will intrinsically embody the very best that can be.



AJAHN AMARO'S HAND  
MADE LABEL FOR A  
BOLT OF THICK, HOMESPUN  
COTTON; WOVEN  
BY THE VILLAGERS AT  
WAT PAH NANACHAT  
FOR THE SANGHA IN  
THE WEST, 1979

# 12

## SIMPLICITY<sup>25</sup>

At the time of their ordination ceremony, those who ask to undertake the life of a Buddhist monastic make an agreement with their preceptor, the elder who is their mentor and undertakes the responsibility for their training. This elder says to the candidate: ‘One who has gone forth from the household life should be prepared to robe themselves in scraps of thrown-away cloth, to eat whatever food is given to them as alms, to live at the root of a tree as their only shelter and to use naturally occurring remedies as medicine for sickness – do you agree to live by this standard for as long as you are a monastic?’ The candidate, naturally enough, answers: ‘Yes, I do.’

25 A Chapter from *Hooked!: Buddhist Writings on Greed, Desire, and the Urge to Consume*, ed. by Stephanie Kaza (Shambhala Publications 2005).

Thus with the very dawn of the commitment to an intensely focused spiritual training comes the matching commitment to train the heart to be content with the simplest standard of living. Of course, life often provides food, clothing, shelter etc. of a considerably higher standard, and one can be very glad of that, but it is highly significant that there is an explicit bonding between the spiritual life and contentment with little. This shows that contentment is a natural expression of the spiritual life. Furthermore, this is not just an agreement that is made once and then quietly shelved and forgotten. Monastics are encouraged to reflect daily on how they are relating to the use of their dwelling-place, clothing, food and medical concerns, so one is constantly refreshing one's attention to these matters: 'What am I taking for granted?' 'Do I feel hard done by if someone else gets better food?' 'Am I fussy about which dentist I see?' 'Do I choose to wear patchy robes so that I can look more like a genuine ascetic than the others?'

The daily reflections are as follows:

Wisely reflecting, I use the robes only to ward off cold, to ward off heat, to ward off the touch of flies, mosquitoes, wind, burning and creeping things, only for the sake of modesty.

Wisely reflecting, I use alms-food not for distraction or for vanity ... only for the maintenance and nourishment of this body, for keeping it healthy, for helping with the spiritual life; thinking thus, 'I will allay hunger without overeating, so that I may continue to live blamelessly and at ease.'

Wisely reflecting, I use the lodging only to ward off cold, to ward off heat, to ward off the touch of flies, mosquitoes, wind, burning and creeping things, only to remove the danger from weather and for living in seclusion.

Wisely reflecting, I use supports for the sick and medicinal requisites only to ward off painful feelings that have arisen, for the maximum freedom from disease.’ Sabbāsava Sutta, The Discourse on All the Outflows’. (M 2.13-6)

Also, some limits are placed on the quantity or quality of the material possessions owned by Buddhist monastics. In the origin story for the first rule in the section of the Vinaya which deals with relinquishing inappropriate possessions, the Buddha recounts how he was inspired to set such a limit:

As I was walking on the road from Rājagaha to Vesāli, I saw many monks coming along buried in robe cloth, with great wads of extra cloth piled on their heads, on their backs and on their hips. Seeing them I thought: ‘All too soon these foolish men have come under the spell of over-indulgence with respect to robe-cloth. What if I were to set a limit, lay down a restriction on how much in the way of robes a monk should have?’

Then travelling by stages I came to Vesāli. There I stayed at the Gotamaka Temple. Now that time was the coldest part of the winter, and I sat outside wearing one robe and was not cold. Towards the end of the first watch I became cold, so I put on a second robe and the cold feeling abated. Towards

the end of the middle watch I became cold, so I put on a third robe and the cold feeling abated. Towards the end of the final watch, as dawn arose, putting joy on the face of the night, I became cold, so I put on a fourth robe and the cold feeling abated.

I thought: ‘Those who have gone forth as monastics, even those delicately brought up who might be afraid of the cold, are certainly able to get by with this amount in the way of robes. Suppose I were to set a limit and were to allow just three robes.’ So, monks, I allow you three robes: a double-layered outer robe, a single-layer upper robe and a single-layer inner robe – thus four layers of cloth.

(Vin., Nis. Pac.1)

In addition to these basic standards of renunciation, simplicity and frugality, which are contained in the code of conduct for all Buddhist monastics, the Buddha also allowed the possibility of refining this element of spiritual training even further for those who wished, and for whom such greater austerities might actually be useful. This refinement is embodied in the thirteen optional *dhutanga* or ascetic practices which the Buddha considered appropriate for his students.

As most people are probably aware, India was then as now teeming with yogis engaging in all kinds of austerities: standing on one leg for forty years, eating

only cow-dung, letting the fingernails grow until they pierced the flesh; the list is endless and gruesome. Having once been just such an ascetic himself, the Buddha criticized self-mortification as an end in itself. So when he allowed his disciples to employ a more austere standard, he was very specific as to what was suitable and what was not. The list of things he allowed includes eating only once a day; not lying down to sleep; living only on the food offered on the morning alms-round and refusing extra food prepared in the monastery kitchen; and living at the foot of a tree rather than in a hut. This small sample shows that these undertakings are certainly designed to challenge some instinctive urges relating to food, sleep and shelter, but they are not physically damaging or repulsive by the standards of society in general.

Perhaps the most significant attribute of the use of these austere practices is the stipulations the Buddha placed around their use. He said that there are basically five reasons why people might engage in such forms of spiritual training: 1) in the belief that by experiencing pain and difficulty they are burning up bad *kamma*; 2) in the belief that by experiencing pain and difficulty they are creating good *kamma*; 3) because everyone else does them and one doesn't want to be seen as a weakling; 4) because people praise those who follow such practices and one wants the praise; 5) for the sake of simplicity of living. The Buddha said that only the fifth of these reasons was noble and worthy; the other four were based on either superstition, wrong view or foolishness.

## SIMPLICITY, MODERATION AND CONTENTMENT

This point brings us to the essence of the subject. It is certainly not the case that the Buddha's teachings are only relevant for monastics, for although the examples cited so far mostly derive from the traditions of monastic training and lifestyle, the broader Buddhist community of lay practitioners has always taken its lead from and followed the spirit of the example set by the monastics. Austere practices and renunciation might seem themes far removed from the lives of ordinary folk who are holding down jobs, raising children and engaging in the ten thousand dimensions of worldly responsibility, but they embody a spirit of contentment and voluntary simplicity that is of inestimable worth to all. Two of the most well-known and frequently recited teachings of the Theravadan Buddhist scriptures, verses which every child in Southeast Asia learns from an early age and which have guided the lives and cultures of Buddhist nations for centuries, explicitly extol the virtue of *santuṭṭhitā*, contentment:

Avoiding those of foolish ways;  
 Associating with the wise  
 And honouring those worthy of honour

...

Providing for mother and father's support  
 And cherishing spouse and child  
 And ways of work that harm no being



...

Respectfulness and being of humble ways,  
Contentment and gratitude

...

These are the highest blessings.  
(*Mangala Sutta*, SN 2.4)

This is what should be done  
By one who is skilled in goodness,  
And who knows the path of peace:  
Let them be able and upright,  
Straightforward and gentle in speech.  
Humble and not conceited,  
Contented and easily satisfied,  
Unburdened with duties and frugal in their ways.  
Peaceful and calm, and wise and skilful,  
Not proud and demanding in nature.  
Let them not do the slightest thing  
That the wise would later reprove.  
Wishing: in gladness and in safety,  
May all beings be at ease!  
(*Mettā Sutta*, The Buddha's Words on Loving-Kindness, SN 1.8)

These words carry a gentleness of spirit, an encouragement to live lightly and respectfully with all beings, and central to these qualities is the principle of the Middle Way. This is the way of balance: neither neglecting one's own needs nor over-inflating them, measuring the way we function by the environment we live in and the needs of our fellow beings around us as much as by our own immediate concerns.

Another term used frequently in the Buddhist teachings in reference to this principle is *mataññuta*, moderation or knowing the right amount. In his illuminating text *Buddhist Economics* the contemporary Thai philosopher and social commentator Ven. P.A. Payutto has this to say on the subject:

Mataññuta is the defining characteristic of Buddhist economics. Knowing moderation means knowing the optimum amount, how much is 'just right'. It is an awareness of that optimum point where the enhancement of true well-being coincides with the experience of satisfaction. The optimum point, or point of balance, is attained when we experience satisfaction at having answered the need for quality of life or well-being. Consumption, for example, which is attuned to the Middle Way, must be balanced to an amount appropriate to the attainment of well-being rather than to the satisfaction of desires. Thus, in contrast to the classical economic equation of maximum consumption leading to maximum satisfaction, we have moderate, or wise consumption, leading to well-being.

A further meaning of the term ‘just the right amount’ is of not harming oneself or others. This is another important principle and one that is used in Buddhism as the basic criterion of human action, not only in relation to consumption but for all human activity. Here it may be noted that in Buddhism ‘not harming others’ applies not only to human beings but to all that lives.

From a Buddhist perspective, economic principles are related to three interconnected aspects of human existence: human beings, society and the natural environment. Buddhist economics must be in concord with the whole causal process and to do that it must have a proper relationship with all three of those areas, and they in turn must be in harmony and mutually supportive. Economic activity must take place in such a way that it doesn’t harm oneself (by causing a decline in the quality of life) and does not harm others (by causing problems in society or imbalance in the environment.)

At the present time [1992] there is a growing awareness in developing countries of environmental issues. People are anxious about economic activities that entail the use of toxic chemicals and fossil fuels. Such activities are harmful to the health of individuals and to the welfare of society and the environment. They may be included in the phrase ‘harming oneself and harming others,’ and are a major problem for mankind.<sup>26</sup>

26 Ven. P.A. Payutto, *Buddhist Economics*, pp 69-70 (Buddhadhamma Fdn., 1992)

This principle of ‘knowing the right amount’ seems very simple, but as Ven. Payutto points out, it is very broad and deep in its application to our lives; it is as relevant to the marketplace and the world of householders as it is in the life of the monastic community. Furthermore, our need as humans to give our hearts fully to the development of this quality was outlined by the Buddha in the very first instructions he ever gave on monastic discipline, the *Ovada Pātimokkha*. The Buddha gave this discourse shortly after his enlightenment; his monastic community was growing and there was a need to establish some guidelines.

Patient endurance is the supreme practice  
 for burning up unwholesome states ...  
 Restraining all harmful speech, hurting none,  
 Being self-possessed in the way of virtue,  
 Knowing the right amount in taking food,  
 Having a secluded place for sleeping and meditation,  
 Making efforts to practise with a pure heart:  
 These are the teachings of all the Buddhas. (Dhp 183-5)

Perhaps the most significant of all the aspects of this teaching is that the Buddha knew that every single person listening to the discourse was already fully enlightened. So it is a measure of the depth of habit, of not being able to know that subtle, perfect balancing point, that the Buddha felt it necessary to pass on



MONK ON PINDAPAT (ALMS-ROUND)

this advice. It is as if to say: ‘Just because you are fully enlightened, that doesn’t preclude the possibility of your over- or under-estimating your needs and what might be appropriate to time and place.’ This might be a little daunting, but it is always helpful to know the full measure of the task at hand; if it’s difficult for even an arahant not to over-eat occasionally, it should come as no surprise that we also miss our mark from time to time.

As a final note on the qualities of moderation and contentment: it is fitting that the lucid passage on Buddhist economics quoted above comes from a Thai commentator. In the late 1950’s and ‘60’s, as Thailand launched itself in the international marketplace and sought to boost its economy, the government of the time made the extraordinary move of specifically requesting the leading abbots and teachers of the Thai Buddhist community not to encourage *santuṭṭhitā* and *mataññuta*, moderation and contentment, in the population.

The political powers felt the need to encourage productivity and consumerism, and so regarded these particular virtues as obstacles to their programme. Sad to say, the majority of the monastic community acquiesced in this, being culturally conditioned not to contend and to maintain the status quo.

However, there was one prominent teacher, Ajahn Buddhādāsa, who had no fear of those in power, and although he had official ranks and titles he was not at all worried about losing them if he spoke up. In fact he openly challenged the politicians, asking them if they felt they were wiser than the Buddha: surely the

Buddha would never have extolled qualities so highly and universally if they were something that could possibly be harmful? He pointed out that the Buddha had stressed that greed, selfishness and wastefulness are actually harmful qualities, and that a healthy economy would necessarily be based on wholesome principles rather than their opposites; he referred to this as ‘Dhammic Socialism.’ He showed how the Buddhist scriptures contain a number of teachings directly related to this area, and that, while fully aware of what brought well-being to a society, the Buddha had nevertheless encouraged the very qualities the government was trying to quash. Ajahn Buddhādāsa also warned that if in fact it pursued its chosen policies, those policies were likely to do more harm than good in the long run. Needless to say, he was heavily criticized for getting involved with politics and rocking the boat, but it was hard for anyone to fault him on his scholarship, his reasoning or his straightforwardness. His voice was heard and eventually the government ban on contentment was lifted.<sup>27</sup>

## RENUNCIATION IN THE WORLD

Although many of the teachings quoted here come from the distant past, and even in their more recent translations can still carry an aura of remoteness and antiquated religiosity, they nonetheless talk about timeless qualities of

<sup>27</sup> A number of Ajahn Buddhādāsa’s teachings on this subject can be found in his book *Dhammic Socialism*, and also in Ajahn Santikaro’s article in Chris King and Sallie Queen’s *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia* (NY, Albany State University Press 1996).

the human heart. The greed, love and wisdom of today are indistinguishable from those qualities as they existed at the time of the Buddha. We might not habitually think in the language of ‘seeking sense pleasures’ or ‘renunciation’, but try replacing them with ‘material dependence’, ‘addictions’ and ‘voluntary simplicity’, and we suddenly find ourselves back in familiar terrain. Perhaps we can see that the spirit of renunciation and letting go of the compulsive pursuit of sense pleasure and material gain are identical with the aspiration to break free from the dictates of the consumer culture, and to lose the anxieties stemming from dependence generated by advertising, peer pressure and complacency. Thus these teachings can carry very useful messages for us here and now.

In his fine book *Blessed Simplicity*<sup>28</sup> Raimundo Panikkar stated: ‘Not everyone has the inclination to take up the vocation of monasticism, but all of us have some part of us which is a monk or a nun, and that should be cultivated.’ This ‘inner monastic’ is one way of describing that dimension of our being which is already utterly free, independent, whole, which does not need anything to complete it or be subtracted from it, and which is full of a radiant love for all beings. The formal outer life of a monastic – peaceful, respectful, unselfish, humble, non-personal, non-sexual, non-violent – is designed to resonate with and support the realization and fulfilment of these inner qualities. Outward forms

25 Raimundo Panikkar, *Blessed Simplicity: The Monk as a Universal Archetype* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1984).

of renunciation simply aim to sustain the realization of this inner wholeness and self-sufficiency. As Martin Heidegger wrote:

Renunciation doesn't take;  
renunciation gives;  
it gives the inexhaustible  
strength of simplicity.

And to quote another contemporary European on the subject, here are the words of Simone Weil, the highly regarded Christian philosopher: 'We only possess what we renounce; what we do not renounce escapes us ... In general we must not wish for the disappearance of any of our troubles, but instead for the grace to transform them.'

Renunciation and contentment are widely extolled in the Buddha's teachings, since he realized that though the majority of his students had no desire to pursue a lifelong monastic vocation, nevertheless the regular employment of renunciant principles would certainly help everyone to overcome the burdens of fussiness and neediness which conspire to exhaust so much of our energy and financial resources. Along with the basic moral standard that he encouraged, as encapsulated in the Five Precepts, he was also inspired to institute a kind of 'one-day-a-week-ordination' on the lunar quarter-days for those who felt a particular commitment to his teaching and desired to deepen their insight and

broaden their freedom of heart. This is how he described his train of thought in forming this practice for the lay community.

When the Uposatha observance is complete in eight factors, it is of great fruit and benefit, radiant and pervasive.

Here a noble disciple reflects thus: ‘As long as they live, the enlightened ones abandon the destruction of life and abstain from it; with club and weapon laid aside, they are conscientious and kindly, and dwell compassionate towards all living beings. Today I too, for this day and night, will do likewise. I will imitate the arahants in this respect, and the Uposatha observance will be fulfilled by me. As long as they live, the enlightened ones abandon the taking of what is not given and abstain from it; they accept only what is given, expect only what is given, and dwell with honest hearts devoid of the inclination towards theft. Today I too, for this day and night, will do likewise.’

‘As long as they live, the enlightened ones abandon sexual activity and live the celibate life, remote from sexuality, refraining from the practice of sexual intercourse. Today I too, for this day and night, will do likewise. ‘As long as they live, the enlightened ones abandon false speech and abstain from it; they are speakers of truth, adherents to truth, trustworthy and reliable, no deceivers of the world. Today I too, for this day and night, will do likewise. ‘As long as they live, the enlightened ones abandon wines,

liquors and intoxicants, which are the basis of negligence, and abstain from them. Today I too, for this day and night, will do likewise ... As long as they live, the enlightened ones eat only once a day and refrain from eating at night, from untimely meals. Today I too, for this day and night, will do likewise ... As long as they live, the enlightened ones abstain from dancing, singing, musical performances and unsuitable shows, and from adorning themselves by wearing jewellery and applying scents and make-up. Today I too, for this day and night, will do likewise ... As long as they live, the enlightened ones abandon the use of high and luxurious beds and seats and abstain from them; they make use of a low resting place, either a small bed or a straw mat. Today I too, for this day and night, will do likewise.'

When, monks, the Uposatha observance is complete in these eight factors, it is of great fruit and benefit, radiant and pervasive. (*Uposatha Sutta*, A 8.41)

The advice he gave to his aunt and step-mother, Mahāpajāpati Gotami, the former Queen of the Sakyan people, shortly after her ordination as the very first of his female monastic disciples, is also very pertinent. Many of the items that the Buddha lists here point to counteracting a life-style based on material comfort, status and wealth, and are thus very apposite for this topic.

When, Gotami, you know of certain things: these things lead : 1) to passion, not to dispassion; 2) to bondage, not to detachment; 3) to accumulation,

not to diminution; 4) to having many wishes, not to having few wishes; 5) to discontent, not to contentment; 6) to gregariousness, not to seclusion; 7) to indolence, not to the arousing of energy; 8) to luxurious living, not to frugality – of such things you can be certain: this is not the Dhamma; this is not the Discipline; this is not the Buddha’s Teaching. But, Gotami, when you know of certain things: these things lead to dispassion, to detachment, to diminution, to having few wishes, to contentment, to seclusion, to the arousing of energy and to frugality – of such things you can be certain: this is the Dhamma; this is the Discipline; this is the Buddha’s Teaching. (‘The Dhamma in Brief’, A 8.53)

In a teaching closely related to this called ‘The Eight Thoughts of a Great Person’, which the Buddha gave to his cousin Anuruddha shortly after he began his spiritual training, he points out that the effect of cultivating such qualities as these is to render the heart supremely content with whatever the world has to offer:

When you reflect upon those eight thoughts of a great person, then, Anuruddha, your rag-robe will seem to you as a chest full of coloured garments seems to a householder or their child ...

Then, Anuruddha, your scraps of alms-food will seem to you as a dish of rice, cleaned of lack grains and served with many sauces and curries ...

Then, Anuruddha, your abode under a tree will seem to you as a gabled mansion, plastered inside and out, draught-free, with bolts fastened and shutters closed ...

Then, Anuruddha, your bed and seat made of straw will seem to you as a couch covered with a long-fleeced and black-woollen rug or a bedspread of white wool, a coverlet decorated with flowers, spread over with an exquisite antelope skin, having a canopy overhead and scarlet cushions at both ends ...

Then, Anuruddha, your medicine of fermented cow's urine will seem to you as to a householder or their child seem the various remedies of butter, ghee, oil, honey and cane sugar; and for you who live contentedly, your rag-robe, alms-food, abode under a tree, bed and seat made of straw and medicine will serve for your joy, for your unperturbed life, for your well-being and as an aid for realizing Nirvana.' ('The Eight Thoughts of a Great Person', abridged, A 8.30)

He becomes content with robes to protect his body and with alms-food to maintain his stomach, and wherever he goes he sets out taking only these with him. Just as a bird, wherever it goes, flies with its wings as its only burden ... possessing this quality of noble virtue he experiences within himself a bliss that is blameless. '(Cūḷahatthi-padopama Sutta, The Simile of the Elephant's Footprint (shorter), M 27.14)

## GENEROSITY, WEALTH AND FRUGALITY

As can be seen from some of the passages quoted above, as a counterpoint to his criticisms of greed and materialism the Buddha highly praised the qualities of unselfishness, generosity and frugality. The first two of these feature in a notable exposition he gave on qualities conducive to harmonious communal living:

As long as you show loving-kindness to your fellows in the spiritual life, openly and in private, in acts of body, speech and mind; ... share with your virtuous companions whatever you have received as a rightful gift, even down to the food you are eating; ... you may be expected to prosper and not to decline.’ (*Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*, The Discourse on the Buddha’s Last Days, D 16.1.11)

To follow are more passages from *Buddhist Economics* which might also help to illuminate this domain.

A favourable birth is said to be a good capital foundation which affords some people better opportunities than others ... a good ‘capital foundation’ can easily degenerate. If it is used with care and intelligence it will lead to benefit for all concerned, but if one is deluded by one’s capital foundation or favourable situation, one will use it in a way that not only wastes one’s valuable opportunities, but leads to harm for all concerned. The important question for Buddhism is how people use their initial capital. The Buddha



BOUNDARY STONES' INSTALLATION  
AT WAT PAH NANACHAT 2014

According to the Buddhist teachings, wealth should be used for the purpose of helping others; it should support a life of good conduct and human development. According to this principle, when wealth arises for one person, the whole society benefits, and although it belongs to one person, it is just as if it belonged to the whole community. A wealthy person who uses wealth in this manner is likened to a fertile field in which rice grows abundantly for the benefit of all. Such people generate great benefit for all those around them. Without them the wealth they create would not come to be, and neither would the benefit resulting from it ...

The Buddha taught that the householder who shares their wealth with others is following the path of the Noble Ones: ‘If you have little, give a little; if you have a middling amount, give a middling amount; if you have much, give much. It is not fitting not to give at all. Kosiya, I say to you, Share your wealth, use it. Tread the path of the Noble Ones. One who eats alone eats not happily. (*Sudhābhojana Jātaka*, Jat 535)

Some people adhere to the daily practice of not eating until they have given something to others. This practice was adopted by a reformed miser in the time of the Buddha, who said, ‘As long as I have not first given to others each day, I will not even drink water.’ (*Sudhābhojana Jātaka*, Jat 535)

When the wealth of a virtuous person grows, other people stand to gain. But the wealth of a mean person grows at the expense of misery for those

around them. People who get richer and richer while society degenerates and poverty spreads are using their wealth wrongly. Such wealth does not fulfil its true function. It is only a matter of time before something breaks down – either the rich, or the society, or both, must go. The community may strip the wealthy of their privileges and redistribute the wealth in the hands of new ‘stewards’, for better or for worse. If people use wealth wrongly, it ceases to be a benefit and becomes a bane, destroying human dignity, individual welfare and the community.

Buddhism stresses that our relationship with wealth be guided by wisdom and a clear understanding of its true value and limitations. We should not be burdened or enslaved by it. Rather, we should be the masters of our wealth and use it in ways that are beneficial to others. (*Buddhist Economics*, pp 76-78)

Wealth destroys the foolish, but not those who pursue the Goal.’ (Dhp 355)

The Buddha outlined four kinds of wholesome happiness that come from wealth:

- 1) the happiness of ownership, so that one can reflect: ‘This wealth has been rightly acquired through my own honest efforts’;
- 2) the happiness of enjoyment, so one can reflect: ‘I have derived benefit from this wealth and have been able to perform good works’;
- 3) the happiness of freedom from debt, so one can reflect: ‘I experience pleasure and happiness as

I owe no debts, large or small, to anyone at all'; and 4) the happiness of blamelessness, so one can reflect: 'My actions of body, speech and mind have all been innocent and blameless.'

He also said:

When one reflects on the happiness of freedom from debt, one is in a position of being able to appreciate the happiness of ownership. As one uses one's possessions, one experiences the happiness of enjoyment. Clearly seeing this, the wise person, comparing the first three kinds of happiness with the last, sees that they are not worth a sixteenth part of the happiness that arises from blameless behaviour. (A 5.41, abridged)

In another passage he listed the benefits of wealth as:

1) The capacity to support one's spouse, parents and children comfortably; 2) the capacity to support friends and associates; 3) one can see to one's own security and protect one's possessions from theft, confiscation by the government, fire or flood and appropriation by unfavoured relatives; 4) the capacity to support religious causes; 5) the capacity to support individual religious seekers. (A 4.62, abridged)

As one might easily deduce from the above passages, the Buddha was critical of miserliness, mostly as being a waste of resources for the community, but also out of compassion for the misers who were making a miserable existence for

themselves when they had the possibility of bringing much joy into their lives. Once again we quote from *Buddhist Economics* (pp 64-5):

At one time King Pasenadi of Kosala visited the Buddha. The King told the Buddha that a rich old miser had recently died, leaving no heir to his huge fortune, and the King had gone to oversee the transfer of the miser's wealth into the kingdom's treasury.

Eight million gold coins and innumerable silver ones had been hauled away that day. And yet, the King recounted, when the old miser was alive he had lived on broken rice and vinegar, had worn the coarsest of simple clothes and had used a sunshade made of leaves.

The Buddha remarked: 'That is how it is, Your Majesty. The foolish man ... supports neither himself nor his dependants ... He does not make offerings ... His wealth, accumulated but not used, disappears to no purpose. His wealth is like a forest pool, clear, cool and fresh, with good approaches and shady setting, in a forest of ogres. No one can drink, bathe in or make use of that water. (S 3.19).

Although the Buddha criticized miserliness, he praised its wholesome relative, frugality, highly; once again, the attitude behind what we do is considered vastly more important than precisely what we do. One of the best illustrations of the skilful employment of frugality comes from an incident that occurred shortly

after the Buddha passed away. The great council to set down and formalize the Buddha's teachings was over, and Ānanda, formerly his attendant for twenty-five years, went to the city of Kosambi, disembarking from a boat near the pleasure garden of the local monarch, King Udena, a lay disciple of the Buddha. The King happened to be amusing himself with a large group of his concubines in that same pleasure grove. Once the palace women heard that Ānanda, a beloved teacher of theirs, was nearby, they quickly asked to go and join him. They went over and paid their respects, and he gladdened and delighted them all with spiritual teachings. They were so inspired, in fact, that then and there they donated a huge quantity of cloth, enough for 500 robes, to their venerable teacher. When they returned to the somewhat disgruntled King, they told him they had given Ānanda the cloth.

‘What! How could the Ven. Ānanda accept so much cloth? Will he set up trade in woven cloth or offer them for sale in a shop?’

Wishing to follow the matter up a little further, His indignant Majesty walked across to where the monk was sitting. He asked him: ‘Honourable Ānanda, did my concubines come here to see you and did they give anything to you?’

‘They did indeed, Your Majesty, they gave me cloth for 500 robes.’

‘But what can you, Honourable Ānanda, do with so many robes?’



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WAT PAH NANACHAT, 1978

‘I will share them with those monks whose robes are worn thin.’

‘But what will you do with those old robes that are worn thin?’

‘We will make them into dust cloths, to line thatched roofs with.’

‘But what will you do with those dust cloths that are old?’

‘We will make them into mattress coverings.’

‘But what will you do with those mattress coverings that are old?’

‘We will make them into ground coverings.’

‘But what will you do with those ground coverings that are old?’

‘We will make them into foot wipers.’

‘But what will you do with those foot wipers that are old?’

‘We will make them into dusters.’

‘But what will you do with those dusters that are old?’

‘Having torn them into shreds, Your Majesty, having kneaded them with mud, we will use them to patch any cracks there might be in the plastering.’

Then King Udena thought: ‘These disciples of the Buddha use everything in a very proper, frugal way, they do not let things go to waste.’ And with that he bestowed yet another 500 lengths of robe cloth on the Venerable Ānanda. (CV 11.13-4)

So in contradistinction to miserliness, even though we might not be endeavouring to be acquisitive, our skilful relationship with the material world can end up attracting more abundance to us and its result may be joyfulness rather than misery.

There are many ways in which the values outlined in all these teachings can usefully be transposed into the lives of people in this age. They describe general principles, but they also point to specific ways in which we can guide our actions and attitudes to lead to the welfare and happiness of ourselves and the world.

Firstly, whatever may be the means by which we earn our living, whether by farming, business, practising therapy, teaching or in some other way, we need to be skilful and diligent, and to investigate the appropriate means to succeed at our work.

Secondly, we need to guard the wealth acquired by the strength of our faculties, righteous wealth righteously gained. It is wise to consider how we can invest or save our resources so that neither thieves nor the government can unjustly rob us of it, unloved heirs cannot claim it and the vagaries of the stock market cannot wipe it easily away.

Thirdly, we should learn the value of good friendship, associating with people who are of mature virtue, accomplished in faith, virtue, generosity and wisdom.

Fourthly, it is wise to lead a balanced life, neither extravagant nor miserly, and so that our income exceeds our expenditures rather than the reverse (as realized by Mr Micawber).

Fifthly, the cultivation of faith, confidence in the worth of a spiritual practice, is of inestimable value. For a Buddhist, naturally, this is articulated in terms of faith in the enlightenment of the Buddha, but in more general terms it means trusting in the worth of teachings and practices that point beyond pursuing self-centred needs as the main purpose in life.

Sixthly, establishing a standard of beautiful conduct, moral integrity, is a great source of peace and happiness for us as individuals, as well as giving a helpful example to those around us. The basic standard of conduct for all practising Buddhists is the Five Precepts.

Seventh, the practice of generosity, the heart devoid of the stain of stinginess, freely generous, open-handed, delighting in giving and sharing, always brings great joy.

Eighth, making conscious efforts to calm the mind and develop wisdom through meditation will also bring great benefits. ‘Wisdom’ here means seeing into the transience of experience; this brings about an insight that is noble and liberating.

And finally, on an extremely practical note, in one of his discourses giving advice to the lay community, the Buddha offers a suggestion on the wise apportioning of one’s resources:

They should divide their wealth in four  
 (This will most advantage bring):  
 One part they may enjoy at will,  
 Two parts they should put to work, [i.e. invest in the hope of profit]  
 The fourth part they should set aside  
 As reserve in times of need.'  
 (*Sigāḷaka Sutta*, Advice to Lay People, D 31.26)

As can be seen from the many scriptural passages quoted in this chapter, the Buddha did not avoid the world of economics and the use of wealth, but he drew a clear line down the Middle Way between need and greed. Hopefully the advice he gave will be of some benefit to those who read this, particularly in the spirit of understanding that although the appropriate use of the material world is significant as a skilful means to a well-balanced life, true happiness cannot come from any outside source, but ultimately only from within our own hearts. A simple and wholesome life-style will certainly conduce to personal happiness, but it always needs to be backed up by the genuine attunement of our hearts to Nature.

Perhaps this point is best illustrated by the verse that is traditionally recited after one renews the commitment to the core practice of *sīla*, beautiful, wholesome conduct as summarized in the Five Precepts. It speaks not just of the rules that are being outwardly observed, but also, and more importantly, says that those modes of conduct are simply the natural disposition of the pure heart:

Sīla, the pure heart, is the source of happiness,  
Sīla is the source of true wealth,  
Sīla is the cause of peacefulness –  
Therefore, let sīla be perfected.

For if our hearts are truly attuned to the way things are, then from moment to moment we experience a deep contentment: we lack nothing whatsoever. An apocryphal tale that circulates in the business world is that when the then richest man in the world, John D. Rockefeller, was asked by a reporter, ‘Mr. Rockefeller, just exactly how much money is enough?’ the aged tycoon pondered for a moment and then replied, ‘Just a little bit more.’ In contrast to this, here is a monastic example for our final quotation:

At this time, whenever the Venerable Bhaddiya went into the forest to meditate or into his hut, he was constantly exclaiming, ‘Oh bliss! Oh bliss!’ A number of monks went to the Buddha and told him about this, adding: ‘There seems no doubt that Bhaddiya is dissatisfied with monastic life and is lost in recollections of his former life of luxury, when he was a member of the Sakyan royal family.’

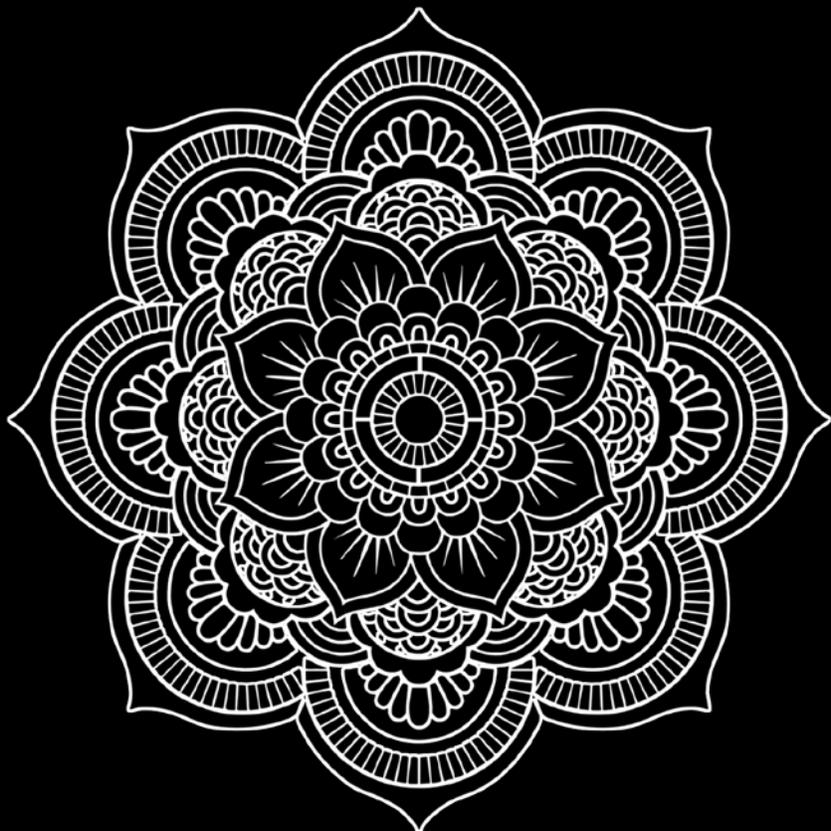
The Buddha sent for him and asked if the stories were true. ‘It is true, Venerable Sir.’

‘But, Bhaddiya, what is behind these exclamations of yours?’

‘Formerly, when I had royal status, I had guards posted inside and outside the palace, inside and outside the city, and inside and outside the district. Even though I was so well guarded and protected, I was fearful, anxious, suspicious and worried. But now, when I go into the forest to meditate or into my hut I am not fearful, anxious, suspicious or worried. I live at ease, in quiet, nourished only by what is freely offered, with a mind like a wild deer. This is the reason why I have expressed feelings of bliss as I have done.’

Knowing the truth of this, the Buddha then uttered this exclamation: ‘One whose heart is free of incompleteness has escaped from all the snares of being; they’re fearless, blissful, free from sorrow – their hearts transcend the range of worldly vision.’ (Ud 2.10, CV 7.1)





## THE VIEW FROM THE CENTRE<sup>29</sup>

*'Don't be an arahant, don't be a bodhisattva, don't be anything at all – if you are anything at all you will suffer' (Ajahn Chah).*

*A student of Buddhism asked: 'Which do you think is the best path: that of the arahant or that of the bodhisattva?' Ajahn Sumedho replied: 'That kind of question is asked by people who understand absolutely nothing about Buddhism!'*

One of the larger and more significant elephants in the living-room of Buddhism in the West is the uneasy and often unexpressed disparity between the classically stated goals of the Northern and Southern schools. These goals can be expressed in various ways. For the Northern Tradition the goal is most

29 Originally published in a shorter version by Buddhadharmā, 'Between Arhat and Bodhisattva' – June 2008.

often formulated as the cultivation of the bodhisattva path for the benefit of all beings, developed over many lifetimes and culminating in Buddhahood. For the Southern Tradition the goal is the realization of arahantship, ideally in this very life.

The main reason for delving into this thorny disparity is that questions akin to the one asked of Ajahn Sumedho, quoted above, come up so often. This chapter therefore aims to shed a little more light on the landscape of the goal of Buddhist practice, recount some of what the scriptures and traditions have said over the centuries and outline some of the questions that have been asked. Hopefully this multi-faceted aim will enable the reader's intuitive wisdom to integrate these elements into a clearer quality of understanding of how these various points might fit together and balance with each other. It is explicitly not the intention here to argue towards some particular position and then defend it.

## VIEWS FROM THE NORTH, VIEWS FROM THE SOUTH

For those who live, study and practise in the style of the Northern School (aka Mahāyāna/Vajrayāna), it is totally normal and expected to take bodhisattva vows and precepts. The scriptures and liturgies of that lineage are thickly populated with the bodhisattva principle, both in the presence of bodhisattvas as great spiritual beings and in the bodhisattva ideal as the informing spirit of much of the teachings and the texts. For those who practise in the style of the Southern School, the spiritual ideal that is extolled with equal regularity

and vigour is that of the arahant, and the bodhisattva principle is hardly ever spoken of outside the Jātaka stories of the previous lives of Gotama Buddha. If it is discussed at all, it is usually only with reference to the emphasis of the later Mahāyāna schools.

Nowadays these two views and practices often have occasion to meet, particularly in the West. A wide spectrum of Buddhist teachings is available and many people have practised in several different traditions, or at least been inspired by teachings from accomplished masters of widely different lineages. We read a book which encourages us to free our heart from greed, hatred and delusion, to see escape from the endless cycles of rebirth as the finest thing we can achieve in our life, and the heart sings, ‘Yes, that’s it!’ Then we read of the compassionate heart which is so vast and unselfish that its chief concern is to stay in the world to relieve the suffering of other beings, and again the heart leaps, ‘That’s wonderful!’ So questions arise: are these two ways opposed or compatible? Are they parallel tracks, equally good but leading to different goals, or is their goal maybe the same? Are they actually the same track but simply called by different names?

Over the centuries the Southern and Northern lineages have developed critiques of each other’s way of practice which have been passed on and adopted as received knowledge. When we can only base our own ideas on information from books or the established outlook portrayed by particular lineages, these critiques

seem to be reasonable. Some of the most common Southern points of view argue that the Mahāyāna schools are not real Buddhism; they developed their own scriptures and have wandered from the Buddha's true way, i.e. practising the Eightfold Path to realize Nibbāna and end rebirth. The voices from the North argue that the Southern Theravadans are the 'Small Vehicle', Hīnayānists who only practise according to the Buddha's most basic teachings, and are narrow-minded and selfishly concerned only with winning the peace of Nirvāna for themselves. The Buddha gave far superior and more refined teachings, those of the Great and Supreme Vehicles, and it is they which should be held in the highest esteem. It is most noble and altruistic to vow to stay in the world as a bodhisattva, developing the pāramitās until full Buddhahood is reached. Both sets of practitioners often struggle over these apparent differences, and wrestle with such issues as whether they're conceiving a deeply obstructive wrong view by believing the criticisms of arahants, or pointlessly tying their hearts to an erroneous ideal if they don't take the bodhisattva vows.

In addition to this type of issue, which is concerned more with personal dilemmas and one's gut response to the perceived differences in ideals, the plot thickens when we look at the scriptures on a more scholarly level. On examination, we find some curious and significant anomalies in the teachings of both the Northern and Southern schools.

Firstly, for followers of the Southern school, there is the roaring silence

regarding the concept of the bodhisattva path in the Pali Canon, except for the Jātakas. It seems impossible that in the Buddha's forty-five years of teaching thousands of disciples, the subject of his bodhisattva training never came up. If someone is studying with a spiritual teacher such as the Buddha, it is the most natural thing in the world to want to emulate that person. However, there is no record of anyone even asking him about the bodhisattva path.<sup>30</sup> This absence is almost comparable to writing an extensive biography of Winston Churchill but omitting to mention his periods as Prime Minister. In the entire Pali Canon there is no instance where anyone asks the Buddha such questions as: 'What made you choose to become a Buddha' 'Could an ordinary person like me undertake the effort to become a Buddha too?' 'How does one train as a bodhisatta?' 'Should I aim for Buddhahood or the more accessible goal of arahantship?'

Equally interestingly, not once does the Buddha proffer any comment on this part of his own background and how it might apply to others. He never says: 'It is good to strive for Buddhahood', or 'I set this intention and pursued it, but it's not an appropriate undertaking for everyone.' Nothing. Not a syllable. Even if the Buddha's silence was based upon the reflection that saying anything

27 Admittedly the first chapter of the *Buddhavaṃsa* begins with Ven. Sāriputta asking the Buddha: 'Of what kind, great hero, supreme among men, was your resolve? At what time, wise one, was supreme Awakening aspired to by you? ... Of what kind, wise one, leader of the world, were your ten perfections? How were the higher perfections fulfilled, how the ultimate perfections?' However, this text is widely regarded as having been composed (like the *Apadāna* and the *Cariyāpīṭaka*) in the 1st or 2nd Century BCE, that is, just around the time the Mahayana teachings were being formulated.

would only confuse people: just let them practise the Dhamma, and when they awakened to the Path they would see for themselves what the proper course was; still, someone would surely have been curious. Furthermore, it's not as though such questions were considered as too stupid to have been included in the Canon, which contains numerous accounts of brahmins being confuted or bhikkhus disabused of their wrong views. But on this subject there is an eerie rather than a noble silence; no directions or recommendations ever come from the Buddha on what would seem to be an axiomatic issue of spiritual training. This inevitably raises the question of why the issue is never mentioned.

Secondly, for followers of the Northern Tradition there is an equally mysterious anomaly. Immediately following his enlightenment, the Buddha's first inclination was not to try to teach other living beings. He saw the ubiquity and degree of attachment as so great, and the subtlety of his newly discovered insight as so refined and counter-intuitive, that should he try to teach others would not understand, and it would be 'a trouble and a weariness' to him. It might seem strange that if compassion for the welfare of other beings was his prime motivation in developing the *pāramitās* for so many lifetimes (over a span of 'four incalculable periods and a hundred thousand aeons' according to one scripture), he should feel there was no point in even trying to teach others. Very mysterious...

According to the scriptures of both the Northern and Southern schools, a high deity discerns this train of thought in the mind of the newly-awakened Buddha and is moved to appeal to him. He asks the Buddha to make the effort to share his profound new understanding ‘out of compassion for the world and for the sake of those with only a little dust in their eyes.’ The Buddha then casts his vision over the world and, seeing that the deity has spoken truly, agrees to ‘beat the drum of Deathlessness’ for the sake of the few who might understand. Interestingly, to this day this exchange is re-enacted in monasteries and temples of both Northern and Southern Buddhists when requesting Dhamma teachings.

Given that these incongruities manifest within both traditions, one might imagine that they would lead people to investigate their own preferred beliefs a little more closely, and to wonder whether the standard views of their own and other traditions are reliable. Unfortunately, this is not the usual result; more often these anomalous elements are ignored or dismissed, and the familiar and preferred version of reality re-established.

## THE TROUBLE WITH TRIBALISM

This chapter aims to look into some of the core principles raised by these problems and explore ways of resolving them. Perhaps the first question is: what’s the problem?

When one looks directly at the source texts extolling the virtues of the arahant and the bodhisattva, they both appear as extraordinarily fine and noble human aspirations. How wonderful and marvellous that we can develop the heart to such degrees of purity and wisdom! Clearly it is not the ideals themselves which are the root cause of any conflict; rather, the cause of the apparent problem is people, more specifically, the issue of tribalism.

That's the great mine-field; it's through a tragically misguided sense of faithfulness to our group – this is my team, my tribe, my lineage – that we bring the intricacies of intellect to defend it, even to the point of bending the facts and the philosophy for the sake of winning the argument. Whether the area of dispute involves football teams, family feuds or Buddhist philosophy, the dynamics are identical. First we seize on a few features of the opposition to criticize and make fun of; then we lose ourselves in the overheated labyrinth of position-taking; and finally, we miss the reality of the bone of contention. The intention behind an exchange or relationship might be very noble or refined, but the emotional tone permeating it can in contrast be deeply instinctive, territorial and viscerally aggressive. So we argue about the best way to build a free clinic, the true nature of Christ in relationship to God, the best way to bow or even to chop carrots. We might observe proper standards of etiquette, but the heart has been taken over by the reptile brain.

Most often the real issue is not philosophy, it's hurt feelings. An amicable spiritual discussion which began around 100 BCE about different approaches to the Buddha's path of practice somehow evolved into bitter rivalry a few centuries later. Mutually critical comments were bandied back and forth and degenerated into insults, until the various factions were 'stabbing each other with verbal daggers' (to use the Pali Canon's own phrase), and the stereotyping of the opposing group became a fixed view: anyone who aspired to arahantship must be a selfish nihilist, while all those who took the bodhisattva vows were obviously heretical eternalists.

Many different spiritual traditions tell the tale of the blind men and the elephant (it's found in the Pali Canon at Ud. 6.4). Several blind men are each allowed to touch just one part of an elephant's anatomy, and each describes the whole elephant in terms of that part. Because they don't agree, they then begin to fight. Isn't it revealing that when we read the story we rarely think of ourselves as one of the blind? We prefer to see ourselves as the monarch watching the sorry squabbling of the sightless. It's humbling how easily the heart is pulled into exactly this kind of position-taking and deluded certainty, based on our attachment to views and opinions. This is especially true when the heart asserts, 'This is not an opinion, it's a fact!' But even if the 'fact' is 100% valid in conventional terms, if we use it as a point of contention with others it becomes, as Ajahn Chah would say, 'Right in fact, but wrong in Dhamma.'

Sometimes it is devout faithfulness rather than criticism or condemnation which drives us into such dualism. When Ajahn Chah was visiting England, a woman who had had a long involvement with the Thai Forest Tradition came to see him. She was very humble and sincere, but also very concerned: ‘I respect your wisdom and your practice as a monk immensely, but I feel uncomfortable receiving your teachings and taking Refuge and Precepts with you; it makes me feel as though I’m being unfaithful to my teacher, Ajahn Mahā-Boowa.’ Ajahn Chah replied: ‘I don’t really see what the problem is – Ajahn Mahā-Boowa and I are both disciples of the Buddha.’ It is in this spirit that I will now endeavour to explore these teachings and traditions, so that we can fully appreciate the broad landscape of the Way of the Buddha through eyes that are ‘right in Dhamma.’

## NOT CLINGING TO ANY VIEW

As soon as we select one element of the elephant and blindly cling to it, contention is born. A notable instance of this is recounted in the *Bahuvedanīya Sutta*, ‘The Many Kinds of Feeling’ (M 59.5). Pañcakanga the carpenter and the monk Udāyin are having a dispute about whether the Buddha teaches in terms of two or three kinds of feeling. Neither can convince the other. Ven. Ānanda overhears this and takes the question to the Buddha, who responds by saying that both Pañcakanga and Udāyin are correct:

I have talked in terms of two kinds of feeling in one presentation; I have talked in terms of three ... five ... six ... eighteen ... thirty-six ... 108 kinds of feeling in another presentation. That is how the Dhamma has been shown by me in different presentations.

The realm of string theory in sub-atomic physics offers a similar analogy. Although there are something like five distinct brands of string theory, until the mid-nineties it seemed that like the elephant to its blind handlers, all five were separate and unconnected. Now things have begun to look a little different:

... there is a web of unexpected relationships, called dualities, between the models. These dualities show that the models are all essentially equivalent; that is they are just different aspects of the same underlying theory, which has been given the name M-theory ...

These dualities show that the five superstring theories all describe the same physics ... they are all expressions of the same underlying theory, each useful for calculations in different kinds of situations.

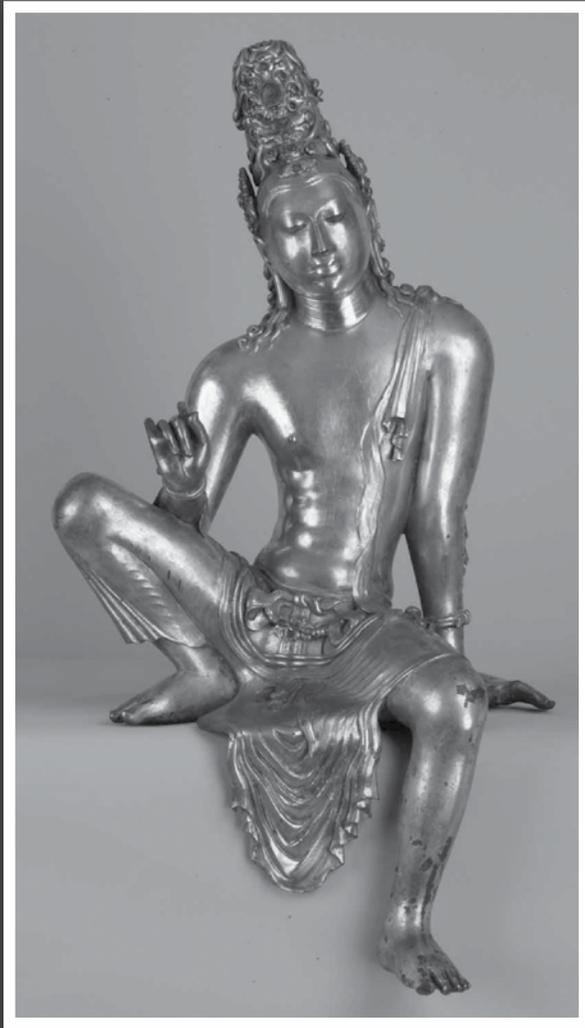
Stephen Hawking, *The Universe in a Nutshell* (Bantam Press, 2001), p 57

If one simply substitutes ‘underlying reality’ for ‘underlying theory’ the description could also accurately describe our contending religious philosophies. The question then arises: how exactly do we find this mysterious Middle, the place of non-abiding, the place of non-contention?

‘When a bhikkhu has heard that ‘nothing whatsoever should be clung to’, he directly knows everything; having directly known everything, he fully understands everything; having fully understood everything, whatever feeling he feels, whether pleasant or painful or neutral, he abides contemplating impermanence in those feelings, contemplating fading away, contemplating cessation, contemplating relinquishment. Contemplating thus, he does not cling to anything in the world. When he does not cling, he is not agitated. When he is not agitated, he personally attains Nibbāna ... Briefly, it is in this way, ruler of gods, that a bhikkhu is liberated by the destruction of craving, one who has reached the ultimate end, the ultimate security from bondage, the ultimate holy life, the ultimate goal, one who is foremost among gods and humans.’ (M 37.3)

Perhaps the heart of the *sutta* quoted above, ‘nothing whatsoever should be clung to’, is the best place to begin our investigation. For just as the difficulty which has arisen in this area over the centuries can be attributed to contentious position-taking, so its solution, or at least the way to its reduction, can be through the sublime quality of non-contention.

‘Bhikkhus, I do not dispute with the world, it is the world that disputes with me. A speaker of Dhamma does not dispute with anyone in the world.’ (S 22.94)



'RAJA-LILA' POSTURE  
AVALOKITESHVARA,  
SRI LANKA

Dandapānī the Sakyan, while walking and wandering for exercise, went to the Great Wood ... he went to the young *bilva* tree where the Blessed One was and exchanged greetings with him. When this courteous and amiable talk was finished, he stood at one side leaning on his stick and asked the Blessed One, ‘So, what does the *samaṇa* assert? What does he proclaim?’

‘Friend, I assert and proclaim such a teaching wherein one does not contend with anyone in the world ...’

When this was said, Dandapānī the Sakyan shook his head, wagged his tongue and raised his eyebrows until his forehead was puckered into three lines. Then he departed, leaning on his stick.’ (M 18.3–5)

‘Does Master Gotama have any field of view at all?’

‘Vaccha, “field of view” is a term with which a Tathāgata has nothing whatsoever to do. What is seen by a Tathāgata is this: such is form, such its origin, such its disappearance; such is feeling, such its origin, such its disappearance; such is perception, such its origin, such its disappearance; such are formations, such their origin, such their disappearance; such is consciousness, such its origin, such its disappearance. Because of that, I say, a Tathāgata is liberated, with the exhaustion, fading out, cessation, giving up and relinquishment of all conceits, all excogitations, all ‘I’-making and ‘my’-making and tendencies to conceit, without clinging to any of them.’ (M 72.15)

Such a spirit of non-contention and non-clinging approaches the core principle of the Middle Way. The skilful refusal to pick one particular viewpoint and cling to it reflects right view; it also expresses the effort that is essential to arrive at resolution.

## THE MIDDLE WAY

The following seminal exchange between the Buddha and Mahā-Kaccāna, one of his enlightened disciples, elaborates on this expression:

At Sāvatti. Then the Venerable Kaccānagotta approached the Blessed One, paid respects to him, sat down to one side, and said to him, ‘Venerable sir, it is said, ‘Right View, Right View.’ In what way, Venerable sir, is there Right View?

‘This world, Kaccāyana, for the most part depends upon the dualism of the notions of existence and non-existence. But for one who sees the origin of the world as it really is with right understanding, there is no notion of non-existence with regard to the world. And for one who sees the cessation of the world as it really is with right understanding, there is no notion of existence with regard to the world.

‘This world, Kaccāyana, is for the most part shackled by bias, clinging and insistence. But one such as this [with Right View], instead of becoming

engaged, instead of clinging – instead of taking a stand about ‘my self’ through such a bias, clinging, mental standpoint, adherence and underlying tendency – such a one has no perplexity or doubt that what arises is only *dukkha* arising, and what ceases is only *dukkha* ceasing. In this their knowledge is independent of others. It is in this way, Kaccāyana, that there is Right View.

‘All exists, Kaccāyana, this is one extreme. All does not exist; this is the other extreme. Without veering towards either of these extremes, the Tathāgata teaches the Dhamma by the Middle Way: with ignorance as condition, volitional formations come to be; with volitional formations as condition, consciousness comes to be ... Such is the origin of this whole mass of suffering.

‘But with the remainderless fading away, cessation and non-arising of ignorance there comes the cessation of volitional formations; with the cessation of volitional formations, when there are no volitional formations, there is the cessation of consciousness, consciousness does not come to be ... Such is the cessation of this whole mass of suffering.’ (S 12.15)

Interestingly, there seems to be a very close connection between the principles embodied in this discourse to Ven. Mahā-Kaccāna and the words of Ācārya Nāgārjuna in his *Mūlamadyama-kakārika*, ‘The Treatise on the Root of the Middle Way.’ This text is considered as a cornerstone of the Mahāyāna movement and has informed the philosophy and practice of the Northern School for around

1,800 years. Ironically, it makes no mention at all of such characteristic Northern elements as bodhisattvas and *bodhicitta*. Furthermore, it clearly extols Nirvāna as the goal of the spiritual life and does not distinguish it from *bodhi* in the way other Northern texts tend to do. In fact, Nāgārjuna's chapter on Nirvāna immediately follows his chapter on *bodhi*.

No letting go, no attainment, no annihilation, no permanence, no cessation, no birth: that is spoken of as nirvāna. (*Mūlamadyamakakārika*, 22.3)<sup>31</sup>

So even though Nāgārjuna is taken as a standard-bearer for the Mahāyāna, scholars such as Kalupahana and Warder have pointed out that actually there's nothing particularly 'Mahāyāna' in what he says. Significantly, his teachings about self and the Middle Way seem to be informed directly by the Pali Canon. Both teachings point out how to understand the feeling of self, how to recognize what it is and learn to see through it and, ultimately, break free from the tyrant. They both indicate that clinging to the sense of self is what obstructs from knowing the Middle Way, the pure essence of the Buddha's teaching.

The discourse to Mahā-Kaccāna is the basis for Nāgārjuna's discussion on the error of clinging to beliefs in existence or in non-existence. In his 'Essence' chapter he writes:

31 Stephen Batchelor trans.

‘Existence’ is the grasping at permanence; ‘non-existence’ is the view of annihilation. Therefore, the wise do not dwell in existence or non-existence. (*Mūlamadyamakakārika*, 14.10)<sup>32</sup>

So although we might have had an insight into selflessness, realizing that the ego is transparent and insubstantial, still questions can arise. Do I not exist? Is this whole thing just a dream, an illusion? And if it is, then who or what is experiencing the illusion? Something definitely seems to be happening here, wherever ‘here’ is. Whether we call it a self or not, there appears to be something going on, and it feels like some kind of a being. This is the knot that the Buddha and Nāgārjuna unpick using the awl of the Middle Way.

What these teachings point to is the fact that yes, there is the experience, the feeling of selfhood; but that feeling of the ‘I’ is dependently arisen. So emerges the insight that it’s not an absolute truth and it’s not a complete delusion. This leads us to ask what exactly is going on. There might be the feeling of ‘I’, but like all feelings it arises and then ceases. Along with its dependent arising there is also its dependent cessation. The experience of being, the experience of ‘I’, arises due to causes. These causes are habits rooted in ignorance and fired by the compulsions of craving. Furthermore, when the causes for the ego to come into existence are not created, it does not arise. It’s not a permanent ‘thing.’

32 Ibid.

Nāgārjuna's treatise is considered as a core teaching on emptiness in the Northern tradition, but while it's a brilliant piece of philosophical analysis, this teaching is really most significant as a meditation tool. It helps us to see that 'Do I exist?' or 'Do I not exist?' are irrelevant questions. Instead the perspective shifts to cultivating and maintaining a mindful awareness of the feeling of 'I' arising and ceasing. This is the essence of vipassanā, insight meditation. The blissful experience of seeing through the conceit of 'I am' was described by the Buddha as 'Nibbāna here and now'(Ud. 4.1); and most significantly, along with that blissful experience, abundant, exalted, immeasurable kindness and compassion for other beings naturally arise. Through unselfishness the heart attunes to caring for all beings. The direct knowing of the Middle Way thus resolves itself into two very simple qualities: emptiness and altruism.

### THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS: UNIVERSALITY AND TRANSPARENCY

It is often said that the Buddha's very first discourse, the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*, 'Setting in Motion the Wheel of Truth', contains the entirety of his teaching, that all subsequent teachings can be seen to derive from principles contained in it. This is stated not only by elders of the Southern School, but also by such esteemed Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna masters as HH the Dalai Lama. It was in this *sutta* that the Buddha first articulated the Middle Way and the Four Noble Truths.

In another *sutta* there is a famous simile called ‘the elephant’s footprint’ which also expresses the all-encompassing quality of these humble principles. Ven. Sāriputta is speaking:

Friends, just as the footprint of any living being that walks can be placed within an elephant’s footprint, and so the elephant’s footprint is declared to be the chief of them because of its great size; so too all wholesome states can be included in the Four Noble Truths.’ (*Mahāhatthipadopama Sutta*, The Greater Discourse on the Simile of the Elephant’s Footprint M 28.2)<sup>33</sup>

That both I and you have had to travel and trudge through this long round is owing to our not discovering, not penetrating, four truths. What four? They are: (I) the noble truth of suffering, (II) the noble truth of the origin of suffering, (III) the noble truth of the cessation of suffering, and (IV) the noble truth of the way leading to the cessation of suffering.’ (D 16.2.2)

The vast scope of these Truths is based on two essential insights: a) they are relative, not absolute truths; and b) they are not just personal but also universal. The first insight reveals that for example, the statement, ‘There is *dukkha*’ describes a relative, dependently arisen experience. It is not intended to be taken as a proclamation that *dukkha* has a real, absolute existence. This is one of the reasons why the Buddha referred to these Truths as ‘noble’ (*ariya*)

33 Bhikkhu Bodhi & Bhikkhu Ñānamoli trans.

rather than ‘ultimate’ (*paramattha*). The second insight refers to the fact that though we might feel, ‘I’m suffering’, the fact is that it’s not just me who is experiencing *dukkha*; thus the delusion that my experience of *dukkha* could be more significant than yours is shattered. All beings are in the same boat. The Truths are a universal natural law.

It seems that over time the understanding of these two principles shrank. *Dukkha* became regarded as an absolute reality, and thus, together with the perceived need to terminate that *dukkha*, a new and narrower diameter for the footprint was formed. And it appears that it was because of this shrinking footprint that the impulse for renewal arose, eventually forming what is now known as the Mahāyāna movement.

In the Pali scriptures the endlessly repeated implication is that the best thing we can do for the world and for all beings is to be totally enlightened. But if that’s grasped in the wrong way, though we might be faithfully trying to do the right thing, we may drift into seeing our own suffering as more significant and more real than anybody else’s, simply because it’s the suffering which we have the power to resolve completely. The Mahāyāna teachings arose to say, in contrast: ‘My suffering is felt ‘here’, yet I must remember that my suffering can’t possibly be any more important than anybody else’s. All beings are undergoing a similar experience.’

We have been looking at this question from a large-scale social viewpoint, but it is good to recollect that a movement is composed of human beings; and whether one is referring to matters on a broad level or a personal one, the development of the Path always involves identifying habits, supporting the useful ones and counteracting the destructive ones.

During his early years as a bhikkhu in Thailand, Ajahn Sumedho once declared to Ajahn Chah: ‘I’m totally committed to the practice. There is absolutely no turning back. I’m determined above all things to fully realize Nibbāna in this lifetime; I’m deeply weary of the human condition and I’m determined not to be born again.’ Given the classic Theravadan vernacular, that’s the ‘right attitude’, a worthy thing; it would have been reasonable to expect the teacher to respond, ‘*Sādhu!* Good for you, Sumedho – *anumodanā!*’ Ajahn Chah, however, replied: ‘What about the rest of us, Sumedho? Don’t you care about those who’ll be left behind?’ In one stroke he teased his disciple by suggesting that Ajahn Sumedho was the more spiritually advanced, while also alluding to the fact that there is a value in the ‘caring for all beings’ approach. And to cap it off he lovingly chided his disciple for his narrowness. Ajahn Chah could detect that there was a nihilistic aversion rather than a Dhammic detachment in Ajahn Sumedho’s ‘deeply weary of the human condition’ state, and as long as that kind of negativity was active, the delusion it implied guaranteed painful results. Ajahn Chah thus reflected that attitude back to him by reversing the balance, tilting the view in the other direction so he could see that self-centred nihilism.

When considering this encouragement towards a more expansive attitude, it is highly significant that the Four Bodhisattva Vows are actually an explicit extension of the Four Noble Truths. In the Chinese version of the *Brahmajāla Sutta* this is addressed quite directly. A contemporary elder of the Northern Tradition explains the connection:

Yesterday I explained the Sutra title, ‘The Buddha Speaks the Brahma Net Sutra’. Today I’ll go on to explain the title of the Chapter, which is ‘The Bodhisattva Mind Ground’. The full form of ‘Bodhisattva’ (*Pu Sa* in Chinese) in Sanskrit is *Mahābodhicittasattva*, which means ‘One with a Great Way Mind who brings living beings to accomplishment’. Another translation is ‘One who enlightens sentient’. It also translates as ‘great knight’ or ‘great scholar’ and ‘beginning scholar’. Why is he called by these names? It is because, relying on the Four Noble Truths, he brings forth the Four Great Vows of a Bodhisattva. The Four Noble Truths are:

*Suffering,*  
*Accumulation,*  
*Extinction, and*  
*The Way.*

‘The first Noble Truth is Suffering, and since all living beings are suffering, he brings forth the first Vast Vow, which is,

*Living beings are numberless;  
I vow to save them all.*

‘The second Vast Vow is based upon the second Noble Truth, Accumulation. Accumulation means accumulation of afflictions. The second Vast Vow is,

*Afflictions are endless;  
I vow to cut them off.*

The third Noble Truth is that of Extinction, and based upon this, the Bodhisattva brings forth the third Vast Vow,

The Buddha Way is unsurpassed;

*I vow to accomplish it.*

And the fourth Noble Truth is The Way, and based on that truth he brings forth the fourth Vast Vow, which is,

Dharma-doors are numberless;

*I vow to study them all.*

So, above he seeks the Buddha Way, and below he transforms living beings. This is a reciprocal function of compassion and wisdom. For the sake of simplification, the Sanskrit word *Mahābodhicittasattva* is condensed to

Bodhisattva (in Chinese, further condensed to Pu Sa).

(Ven. Master Hui Seng, *Commentary on The Brahma Net Sutra*, published by DRBA (1981) p 25<sup>34</sup>)

This expression of the Four Noble Truths thus explicitly spells out their natural extension into the realm of universal concern. With the promulgation of the bodhisattva vows there also arose, in the same epoch, a corresponding teaching that spelled out the strictly relative nature of the Four Noble Truths; this was the Heart of Prajñā Pāramita Sutra, or *Heart Sutra* for short. It is probably the most well-known teaching on emptiness in the Northern Canon, recited for centuries from India to Manchuria, and from Kyoto to Latvia, as well as, nowadays, at Buddhist centres throughout the world. It is the natural partner to the bodhisattva vows; indeed, the *Heart Sutra* and the four vows are often recited in the same devotional ceremonies each day.

The Heart Sutra embodies the natural extension of the Four Noble Truths in the reverse direction; it reminds us that the Four Noble Truths are essentially empty, transparent, not absolute truths. ‘Suffering’ is a relative truth, but it is noble because it leads to liberation. Sometimes people faithfully say, ‘Everything is suffering’ as if *dukkha* was an absolute truth, but that’s not what the Buddha was teaching. The Heart Sutra states:

34 Buddhist Text Translation Society trans.



Śāriputra!

Form is emptiness, emptiness is form.

Form is not separate from emptiness.

Emptiness is not separate from form.

So too feelings, perceptions, mental formations and consciousness ...

...

There is no suffering,

there is no origin of suffering,

there is no cessation of suffering,

there is no Way;

there is no understanding and no attaining

for there is nothing to attain.

The sutra thus takes the words of the Four Noble Truths and from the transcendent perspective empties them all out. Ultimately there is no *dukkha*. We think we're suffering, but in ultimate reality we're not – actually there isn't any *dukkha*.

The Pali tradition encapsulates both of these implications. On the one hand it extends out from the personal to include all beings; on the other hand the noble yet relative quality of *dukkha*, its cause, its end and the way to its end are just empty appearances, like all other conditioned phenomena. These Northern teachings of the Four Vast Vows of a Bodhisattva and the Heart Sutra endeavour

to give voice to those particular dimensions of emptiness and altruism which were implied in the Pali, but were being lost because *dukkha* and its partner becoming were being held in a narrow, personal and overly concrete way. The Mahāyāna movement was an effort to balance things out.

### SELF-VIEW, THE RELIABLE TROUBLEMAKER

It is the sense of self which primarily obscures the Middle Way. It is this same sense of self which ultimately drives the tribal and divisive politics that have been passed on to the present day. But ironically, though the reforming movement aimed at removing the encrustations of self which it perceived, the problem nevertheless persisted. These tribal politics are like family heirlooms of dubious worth, yet hard to discard because they are so much part of our collective histories.

The source of this conflict, along with the other ten thousand woes and struggles to which the human mind is prone, is conceiving the arahant and the bodhisattva in terms of self. When we no longer look at the issue through the lens of self-view, the picture changes radically.

Bhikkhus, held by two kinds of views, some devas and human beings hold back and some overreach; only those with vision see.

And how, bhikkhus, do some hold back? Some devas and humans enjoy being, delight in being, are satisfied with being. When the Dhamma is taught to them for the cessation of being, their minds do not enter into it or acquire confidence in it or settle upon it or become resolved upon it. Thus, bhikkhus, do some hold back.

How, bhikkhus, do some overreach? Now some are troubled, ashamed and disgusted by this very same quality of being and they rejoice in [the idea of] non-being, asserting, ‘Good sirs, when the body perishes at death, this self is annihilated and destroyed and does not exist any more – this is true peace, this is excellent, this is reality!’ Thus, bhikkhus, do some overreach.

How, bhikkhus, do those with vision see? Herein one sees what has come to be as having come to be. Having seen it thus, one practises the course for turning away, for dispassion, for the cessation of what has come to be. Thus, bhikkhus, do those with vision see. (Iti 49)

As long as self-view has not been penetrated in either its coarse form of *sakkāya-ditṭhi* (identification with the body and personality) or the more refined *asmimāna* (the conceit of ‘I am’), the mind will miss the Middle Way. The ‘no more coming into any state of being’ ideal will thus tend to be co-opted by the nihilist view (*uccheda-ditṭhi*), while the ‘endlessly returning for the sake of all beings’ ideal will tend to be pervaded with the eternalist view (*sassata-ditṭhi*). When the two extremes are abandoned and the sense of self is seen through, the Middle Way is realized. Whether we talk in terms of utter emptiness, the

arahant of the Pali Canon, or the absolute zero of the *Heart Sutra*, or in terms of the infinite view of the four bodhisattva vows, there is a direct realization that these expressions are merely modes of speech. They all derive from the same source, the Dhamma. They are simply expedient formulations which guide the heart of the aspirant to attunement with that reality of its own nature. That attunement is the Middle Way.

### THE VIEW FROM THE CENTRE

There are many teachings which illuminate this non-dualistic, selfless perspective. Firstly, some verses often quoted by the Dalai Lama:

With a wish to free all beings  
 I shall always go for refuge  
 To the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha,  
 Until I reach full enlightenment.  
 Filled with wisdom and compassion,  
 Today in the Buddha's presence  
 I generate the mind for full awakening,  
 For the benefit of all sentient beings.  
 As long as space remains,  
 As long as sentient beings remain,  
 Until then, may I too remain  
 And dispel the miseries of the world.

Śantideva: *Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*, Ch. 3.

In the light of our discussion, this last verse might cause some debate among Theravadans. Why? It appears to run completely counter to the principle of escaping from the burning house as soon as one can. We have our own idea of the best thing to do – practise and develop as much mindfulness as we can and realize enlightenment as soon as possible. That’s it – game over.

In the Pali scriptures the most we ever learn about what happens to an enlightened being after the death of the body is found in such comments as:

Such a one passes out of the sphere of knowledge of gods and humans.  
(D 1.3.73)

Or in the Buddha’s response to Upasīva:

One who has reached the end has no criterion by which they can be measured. That by which they could be talked of is no more. You cannot say, ‘They do not exist.’ But when all modes of being, all phenomena are removed, then all means of description have gone too. (SN 1076)

The Buddha thus leaves this mystery powerfully undefined.

So to the average Theravadan the verse of Śāntideva, ‘As long as space remains...’ might seem anathema. However, the practice of the Middle Way involves taking up these kinds of compassion teachings together with their partners, the emptiness teachings. These two elements are like the wings of a bird – they

can't function properly without each other. If we take a moment to reflect on the words of the verse, another layer of meaning opens up. As long as the mind sees the concepts of space and identity as having substantial reality, it hasn't realized enlightenment. Enlightened insight is based on recognizing that three-dimensional space, time, and being are all illusory; they are imputed realities, but without any absolute existence.

So if we're hanging onto the Southern idea of 'me going' but 'others being left behind', that idea by definition misses the mark. Similarly, if we cling to the Northern view and think, 'This individual being will persist through infinite time for the sake of all beings', that is also falling drastically into wrong view. Many subtle layers of clinging may be involved here too; the habits of overreaching and holding back die hard. No matter how subtly the heart might be identified with feelings of 'I actually do want to get out of *samsāra*' or 'I'd really love to stay and help', that pure chord of the Middle Way has not yet been struck.

The correct practice of the Middle Way therefore aims at breaking up that delusion whereby 'I' can 'go' and 'others' can 'stay', or vice versa. In fact, 'I' can't 'go' unless the concepts of being and space are radically reconfigured. So the aspiration may indeed validly be: 'As long as space remains, as long as sentient beings remain, until then, may I too remain...' But what if space no longer remains? What if living beings no longer remain? If their essential nature is recognized as conceptually contrived and dependent, what would that say about the supposed 'I' who would be staying behind?

Thus when we reflect on the deeper meaning of the verse, it has the ironic flip-side that as soon as there is the realization that time, space and beings have no substantial reality, the 'I' is 'gone' too: gone to Suchness, come to Suchness, *Tathāgata*.

Śri Ramana Maharshi also has a wise perspective on this subject:

People often say that a liberated Master should go out and preach his message to the people. How can anyone be a Master, they argue, as long as there is misery by his side? This is true. But who is a liberated Master? Does he see misery beside him? They want to determine the state of a Master without realizing the state themselves. From the standpoint of the Master, their contention amounts to this: a man dreams a dream in which he finds several people. On waking up he asks, 'Have the dream people also woken up?' How ridiculous. In the same way, a good man says, 'It doesn't matter if I never get liberation,' or 'Let me be the last man to get it, so that I may help all others to be liberated before I am.' Wonderful! Imagine a dreamer saying, 'May all these dream people wake up before I do.' The dreamer is no more absurd than this amiable philosopher.'

This analysis astutely captures the presumptions which are being made, for it's only when the heart is free that it can really, unequivocally attune itself to all things. One of the expressions of that attunement is 'caring for all beings', so a precise and exquisite balance is needed.

One of the scriptures that speaks skilfully on this topic is the Vajra Prajñā Pāramitā Sutra; here are a number of pertinent passages from that scripture.

The Buddha told Subhūti, ‘All Bodhisattvas, Mahāsattvas, should subdue their hearts with the vow, ‘I must cause all living beings... to enter Nirvāna without residue and be taken across to extinction. Yet of the immeasurable, boundless numbers of living beings thus taken across to extinction, there is actually no living being taken across to extinction. And why? Subhūti, if a Bodhisattva has a mark of self, a mark of others, a mark of living beings, or a mark of a life, then they are not a Bodhisattva. (Ch 3, ‘The Orthodox Doctrine of the Great Vehicle’)

The Buddha said, ‘Subhūti, they are neither living beings nor no living beings. And why? Subhūti, living beings, living beings, are spoken of by the Tathāgata as no living beings, therefore they are called living beings. (Ch 21, ‘Spoken yet not Spoken’)

Subhūti, what do you think? You should not maintain that the Tathāgata has this thought: ‘I shall take living beings across.’ Subhūti, do not have that thought. And why? There are actually no living beings taken across by the Tathāgata. If there were living beings taken across by the Tathāgata, then the Tathāgata would have the existence of a self, of others, of living beings, and of a life. Subhūti, the existence of a self spoken of by the Tathāgata is no existence of a self, but common people take it as the existence of a self. Subhūti, common people are spoken of by the Tathāgata as no common

people, therefore they are called common people. (Ch 25, ‘Transformations without what is Transformed’<sup>35</sup>)

The way we save all living beings is by realizing there are no beings. To establish the heart in true wisdom is to see this fact; ultimately there is no self, no other, no living beings, no arahant, no bodhisattva, no life, no death. Realizing emptiness is the seeing through of all that. It’s an intuitive process whereby, though the heart might be given to compassion, it is only when we also recognize and surrender to this wisdom element, and hold it simultaneously, that there will be true freedom.

We need to be careful not to make our traits into a religion of their own. Rather, we develop insight into them and train the heart in order to balance them out.

If we’re a wisdom type, intent on realizing Nibbāna, practising for our own benefit to get out of *saṃsāra* as quickly as possible, it’s necessary to train the heart to think in terms of altruism. We need to counteract the obsession that there’s nobody here, nothing to do, nowhere to go, and start moving towards people and things. If we’re more of a compassion type, determined to stick around and help all beings, we need to incline towards the emptiness of things. It is in the unutterable equipoise of the Middle Way that both these realities, the infinite and the void, are sustained. They complement and balance with each other.

35 Ibid.

## SHE KNOWS THAT SHE'S NOT REAL

The scene: a large Buddhist conference in Berlin. As well as the many dialogues, speeches and presentations, some teachers have come to give workshops and perform *pūjās*. One such teacher is an eminent Tibetan lama; he has been giving instruction on *The Praise to the Twenty-One Taras* to both his experienced students and a small crowd of other attendees. After a long *pūjā* and a series of visualizations and explanatory teachings, it is now time for questions and answers.

A young man with furrowed brow asks to speak. He asks in broken English: 'Rinpoche, for many years now I have been your student. I am committed to the practice, but I have the doubt. I am very willing to do the *pūjās*, the visualizations, the prostrations, but it is very hard to have the whole heart in it, because I have this doubt: Tara, is she really there? Sometimes you talk like she is a real person, but sometimes you say she is the wisdom of Buddha Amoghasiddhi, or just a skilful means. If I could know for sure, I would redouble my efforts. So, Rinpoche, Tara, does she really exist or does she not?'

For a few moments the lama rests his chin on his chest, then raises his sparkling eyes to meet those of his inquirer. A smile spreads across his broad wrinkled face. He responds, 'She knows that she's not real.'

When we bring our mind to that place of realization, we can see that conventionally speaking there's a reader here and a page out there, but we can also recognize that this is a complex web of sight, sound, taste, touch, images appearing/disappearing, sounds coming/going and changing. This is just the play of phenomena happening within awareness. They have no substantial reality. The more we practise and learn to hold the play of forms in that gentle way, the more attuned we become to what's going on. Then we begin to get the feel.

The Middle Way is appreciated as a finely felt sense. It's nothing to do with geography or splitting the difference, as when a piece of music moves us and the heart sighs, carried by the music. We can't describe what it is except to say, 'Oh, it's perfect!' But even in saying, 'It's perfect', once again we've almost lost the feeling. Equally, if the rational mind is still struggling to obtain some more precision, as Louis Armstrong responded when asked, 'What's jazz?' – 'Man, if you have to ask what it is, you'll never know.'

The Middle Way is that wordless quality of pure and vibrant harmony.



ABOVE: ARRIVAL AT HARNHAM AT THE END OF THE 1983 WALK

RIGHT: WRITING 'THE LONG ROAD NORTH' USING MODERN TECHNOLOGY, IN 1984



## A SHORTER LONG ROAD NORTH<sup>36</sup>

Heraclitus reflected that: 'You could not step twice into the same river; for other waters are ever flowing on to you.' It is similarly flawed to speak of going on the same walk twice; however, we can meet with traces of times past in people and in places, and be moved, encouraged and humbled by their flow and their quiet glory.

In the spring of 1983 I set out to walk the length of England, via a rambling, roundabout route, with a lay companion, Nick Scott. I had been inspired to do this by the heritage of wandering monks of the Thai Forest Tradition and, more pertinently, by the short journeys recently undertaken in England by two Western monks of our lineage. One, Ajahn Sucitto, had walked from Devon in

36 Previously published in *Fearless Mountain*, Vol.13, No.2, 2008. A fuller account of both these episodes of tudong may be found in *The Long Road Has Many A Turn* by Nick Scott (with Ajahn Amaro), 2013.

the far southwest of England to Chithurst Monastery in West Sussex, about 70 miles southwest of London. The other, Ajahn Viradhammo, had walked, also with Nick Scott, from the then Harnham Vihāra, about fifteen miles west of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, to Holy Island, Lindisfarne, on the northeast coast. The custom of *tudong*, journeying on foot by ascetic monastics, had thus begun in Britain and I was keen to try my hand, or perhaps that should be my feet...

This original walk took three full months and brought with it many vivid experiences and memorable encounters. A few of those we met we had already known for some time and they were staunch supporters of the monastery, familiar friends such as Noy Thomson, Carol (then) Winter and Winfred Poulton (aka Nanda). For some of the people we came across it was their first ever meeting with Buddhist monastics, and the contact brought these ancient teachings and practices irrevocably into their lives. Most in this group, like Dan Jones whom we met in Cambridge, subsequently chose a householder's path. Nevertheless, he intentionally crafted his family's life around Buddhist principles and, more specifically, brought his children every year to the Amāravatī Family Camp. Others, like the former Ajahn Siripaṅṅā whom we met at Chapter House in Wisbech, were inspired by this initial contact to enter into monastic life. Of course many of those we met were not particularly affected, or possibly were put off, but we were left with a general sense that the walk had had a positive and significant effect on many lives, including our own.



DAY 2  
WITH NOY THOMSON AT SQUIRES HILL

One other notable after-effect of the walk was the publication the following year of an illustrated account of the adventure entitled *Tudong - The Long Road North*. The creation of the book by the Tyneside Free Press was itself a colourful, lengthy and variegated saga, but once that had reached its own conclusion I settled into a more conventionally focused monastic life at Harnham Monastery, and Nick did his best to bring his Ph.D in ecology to a similar state of finality. Decades passed: people we had met on the walk came to visit occasionally and we crossed paths at Amāravatī or Chithurst Monasteries, or occasionally I passed through their own towns when visiting local Buddhist groups throughout England. A few came and received ordination, like Ajahn Siripaṇṇā, Tan Suviro, Ajahn Vimalo and Adrian Gibson; others vanished without a murmur. Through this trickle of sustained contacts and, of course, with the enduring presence of the English countryside and its pathways ever beckoning, the afterglow of that original walk was kept alive, albeit in a deeply quiescent state. It was a blend of the abrasion of the ageing processes with the natural reflectivity which arrives around the age of fifty that moved Nick at some point in 2005 to suggest that he and I find time to revisit some of the places and people we had met all those years ago.

In June 2005 I had just finished a much-appreciated year's sabbatical from my role as Abbot of Abhayagiri Monastery in California, and didn't think a suggestion of taking a few weeks off again the following year to go on a long jaunt through the byways of England's green and pleasant land would be met with much favour. We hummed and hawed a little and then inspiration alighted:

‘You know, 2008 will be the twenty-fifth anniversary of the first walk; perhaps if we left it for a couple of years you’ll then have had the chance to settle back into life at Abhayagiri, and the community will be likely to approve of a second walk, especially since it’ll be a way of celebrating the anniversary.’

This seemed to be an excellent fit all round, so thus it was. As 2008 approached emails began to flow back and forth between Abhayagiri and the Galway Peninsular, where Nick had moved in with his partner of many years, Micheline Sheehy Skeffington. Along with the wrinkling of features and the grizzling of beards, the years had also brought us more densely packed schedules, so as the plans took shape we found that we only had an eighteen-day period to play with. This was about 20% of the length of the original walk, so, reckoning an average of nine miles per day, we carefully pegged out a possible route that covered roughly 165 miles on paper.

In January 2008 Nick placed a modest notice in the Forest Sangha Newsletter<sup>37</sup> to let people know of our intention to visit some of the route we had followed in 1983. It also invited any of those whom we had met or who would like to meet up with us now to get in touch; and we’d craft our journey according to the

37 The notice read: ‘*Return to the Long Road*. Next year is the 25th anniversary of the walk made by Ajahn Amaro and Nick Scott from Chithurst to Harnham, an account of which was published in *A Long Road North*. Ajahn Amaro and Nick intend to repeat some of the walk next year and would like to revisit anyone they met on the original walk. They are also open to invitations from anyone living on the route who would like them to stop by. Please write to Nick Scott.’



DAY 3  
BREAKFAST AT  
GREYFRIARS



DAY 8  
MEETING AJAHN VIMALO & VEN. VINITA  
AT RAF LAKENHEATH WARREN

contacts that were made, just as we had done the first time when we set off on a route defined by the six people who had been in touch with us beforehand. Late April of that year brought me to Chithurst Monastery following a couple of weeks' teaching and travelling in Italy; it also brought Nick in at the last minute from a back-packing retreat he had been leading in Crete, as well as a thick blanket of rain-laden skies to taunt our powers of resolution. Rummaging in the attic stores of Chithurst House rendered up not only a fine little tent, a sturdy water-bottle and a sleeping bag and mat; it also, to my amazement, produced the self-same pack, albeit with some repairs, that I had used twenty-five years before. My astonishment was doubled when it turned out that Nick had also brought the pack that he had used back in 1983. Agreeably, it too had some modifications and repairs by now, but it was startling for any material object to have: a) stayed in Nick's possession that long (he's a habitual loser of items); and b) survived his countless forays into the wild (things easily break in his vicinity too). Just this small yet unbidden physical connection with the venture our two younger selves had undertaken brought a bright glow to the heart and that strange flush that accompanies miraculous trivia.

Nick had been doing his homework. He had us following the same route as in 1983, again with a few impromptu modifications, and had put in place a thoroughly worked-out array of stopping places and meal-offerings. Personally, being more inspired by those of our community who have gone on intentionally unstructured and 'unsupported' *tudongs*, I had hoped for a bit more in the monk-

who-travels-like-clouds-and-water spirit, with open days and less certainty about where or whether we would eat. However, that was not the way this particular undertaking was shaped, and to harmonize with the reasonable and wholesome attitudes and opinions of your travelling companions is the first rule of a fruitful life on the road.

The overall route was broken into four separate chunks, defined by: a) the wish to set out from the gates of Chithurst and end on Harnham Hill; b) those who had made invitations to us this second time around; and c) which were ‘the best bits’, as Nick habitually phrased it. After all the responses had come in, the four legs emerged as: Chithurst to my sister’s house in Twickenham, south-west London; Cambridge to Swaffham, where the late and beloved Nanda used to live; Ilkley to Kendal through Litton and the Yorkshire Dales; and lastly, from Hadrian’s Wall at Haltwhistle to Aruna Ratanagiri Monastery, as Harnham is called nowadays.

Along with the (almost) matching route, the same weather patterns as twenty-five years before accompanied us, also neatly in proportion: we had lavish downpours of rain for the first 10% (two days), then sun, or at least dry skies, for the latter 90%. We met many people along the way even on this briefer journey, and there will be other opportunities for more thorough accounts of all the fine and rich conversations that were held. For now, the pictures and these briefest of character sketches must suffice.





DAY 11  
IN THE VALLEY  
BELOW ARNCLIFFE

~Jane Hawkins, who built and has run her pottery near Chithurst for more than forty years; she has hosted and housed many friends of the Sangha.

~Noy Thomson, a most open-handed and generous supporter of Chithurst since the very early days; she and her home seemed almost untouched by the intervening years. As before, we covered all her numerous radiators with our sodden belongings.

~Julian and Suree, whom I had never met before. He had been on a walk with Nick in Crete a few years previously and she was born in Ubon. We met at St Martha-on-the-Hill and he walked with us for much of one day.

~Miranda and Slovenian Janis, a dedicated disciple of Nick's from his recent forays into Dhamma teaching in Eastern Europe, met us at the Patisserie, where we had not been allowed to eat food bought elsewhere by the formidable Doris, back in 1983. Miranda and Janis walked with us as far as the next train station.

~My sister Kate Horner had moved from Balham to her new and much-loved house near the Thames in Twickenham. We arrived after a long day's walk. I had hoped the short cut over the foot-ferry might still have been running, but it had stopped at 6:00 pm so we had to go the long way round. Nick, however, was beset by a fearsome cramp in his leg just after we crossed Richmond Bridge. As this was fairly known territory to me I was, unusually, leading the way; his problem thus arose at the one moment when he was not in control of the maps or distance. For once: 'How much

further?', 'You said it was only half a mile...' and 'I'm not sure I can go on...' emanated from Nick's *citta* rather than mine, or that of any of the others who have walked with Nick over the years. While never wishing to rejoice in the suffering of others, I nonetheless could not restrain a smile or two over this neatly formed karmic unfolding, or at least its poetic justice. A densely salt-filled brew fixed things on arrival.

~Dan Jones, a spry newly-hatched graduate of Pembroke College, Cambridge when we had first met him, was now a thoughtful and kindly middle-aged parent and therapist working for the National Health Service. He picked us up from my sister's place and drove us to his house in the university town. After an overnight stay we set off with a group for a day's walk along the River Cam. Nick's new-found role as a Dhamma teacher inclines him to hold forth regularly; in the past he would always hold back and, out of deference to the robe, let the monk do most of the talking. It is a treat to hear his perspective on things and to see his confidence in explaining many aspects of the Path.

We travelled the flat miles of East Anglia for a couple of days, eventually meeting up with Ajahn Vimalo *et al* outside Lakenheath Warren airbase, Suffolk. This was an attempt to resolve the karmic resonances of the one day we went hungry





DAY 11  
SETTING OUT INTO THE YORKSHIRE DALES,  
NORTH OF ILKLEY

on the 1983 walk: Ajahn Vimalo, then Paul Hendrick, had planned to offer us a meal, but we ended up waiting for each other in different places, the map references having been misinterpreted. So it goes. Nick had the idea of trying again, though Ajahn Vimalo had now been a bhikkhu for more than twenty years. With the aid of Anāgārika Janis (Latvian and another devoted disciple of Nick's) and Ven. Vinita, contact was achieved and a splendid picnic was offered under the screaming roars of the low-flying jet fighters – we were in the woods about 150' from the gates of the base.

~Carol Chiverton met us at the bridge in Santon Downham. Water-weeds undulated in the current of the Little Ouse, lanky iridescent locks of the local naiads. On the first walk Carol had been the one who spent most time with us, and it was the same again this year. Like Noy she seemed little changed by the passage of the years, although she had married (the brother of Ajahn Jayasaro) and had three children, as well as having dealt with several life-threatening illnesses. Like Nick's, her practice as a layperson had matured in a very rich way, and she too was beginning to teach Dhamma to a number of grateful students in her area. We met her again the next day after a vigorous stride into the market town of Swaffham.

As an aside: another aspect of the practice of cooperation with Nick was that, in his own words: 'Breakfast is my favourite meal of the day, but you usually don't have any.' Thus he was always keen to have something to

eat or at least some tea to start the day. I was often keen to get underway early to miss the heat of the day, whereas he did not wish to set off until refreshments had been consumed. Couple this principle with Nick's optimistic tendency to underestimate distances and the time taken to cover them, and you end up with me perennially asking: 'Exactly how many miles are we planning to cover today?' We would try to establish this accurately by using the String on our maps; nevertheless, despite our best efforts, things would often resolve into what I named 'the dawdle-dawdle-rush effect.' It was that way on the approach to Swaffham: it was 10:25 when we reached the village of Cockley Cley and Nick realized it was three and a half miles to our destination. 'At our speed we'll never make it there by noon', he said disconsolately. This set a fire under my feet: I stopped all thought, refused to look back and then let the road fly beneath me. We got to Swaffham by 11:20...

We were meeting Carol there to honour Nanda's memory and her generous support of Nick and I when we had passed through there before. She had been in her eighties when she re-encountered Buddhism, after growing up in Sri Lanka and then raising a family in England. She had made a chance visit to Chithurst in the early 1980s and had been immediately inspired by Ajahn Sumedho and the community there. She came and stayed many times, eventually becoming a 'nun-at-home' living on the Eight Precepts, as she was concerned that her (65-year-old!) son could not manage very well



DAY 13  
FINDING PRECIOUS SHADE ON  
TOP OF INGLEBOROUGH HILL



without her (despite the fact that he was headmaster of a local school...) The English are nothing if not eccentric.

Carol then provided the hop to the next leg, driving us a couple of hundred miles to the house of Cath and George Abramson in Ilkley. While Dan, Carol and Pip (another mutual Buddhist friend from nearby) could all commiserate about the difficulties and ironies of being good Buddhist families which had all produced a delinquent teenager, Cath and George were able to say that they had had no great difficulties so far with their four – although there was still a way to go as the youngest three were thirteen, ten and eight.

Nick and I set off into the hills, aiming for the village of Litton which we reached a day or so later. This place had played a major part in our first journey, being where we had been welcomed in by the Postmistress of the village, Janet Taylor; it had been a contact from which fond and lasting friendships had been formed. Although Janet's elder daughter had not been present when Nick and I originally visited, she had subsequently heard many of the stories and an interest in Buddhism had thus been ignited. It had since blossomed into a commitment to the Western Buddhist Order and her ordination under the name of Kalayanacitta, 'One with a wholesome heart.' There had been tentative plans for her to meet up with us when we passed through the tiny village of Litton on this occasion; however, she had responsibilities for leading a project to

refurbish a building for the Order in Wales and it would have meant a six-hour drive to meet us, as well as time away on her busy week-end. Nick had the bright idea of a phone call, so we rang Kalayanacitta from the very phone-box that her mother used to administer before she had retired and returned to her native New Zealand three years before. It was another of those strange and faintly miraculous connections, for as I stood in the little red phone-box, Kalayanacitta told me how, even though we had never met, she considered my visit to the Post Office to have been the *devaduta*, the fourth heavenly messenger in the form of a religious seeker who had triggered her involvement in Buddha-Dhamma. And here she was, again remotely, thanking me for my role in that event twenty-five years ago. Isn't it all very curious how karma works?

~Sarah Brimelow and Alan Tweedie had been a couple when they met us in the Yorkshire Dales in 1983. They had long since gone their separate ways, but when Sarah spotted Nick's notice in the Newsletter she'd been inspired to get in touch with Alan again, and the two of them met us further up the river in Littondale. Once again they had brought carnations and the four of us spent the day climbing over Pen-y-ghent. Near the top Sarah persuaded him to make a confession, or rather, she made the confession for him: 'He'd forgotten that he ever met up with you; it was only when I faxed him the page that said: 'Alan had taken six hours the previous night to drive down from Edinburgh through thick fog.' Alan was slightly abashed (but not that much) when she announced this; it's a guy thing...





DAY 15  
AT HADRIAN'S WALL,  
NEAR THE SCOTTISH BORDER

We crossed the great hill of Ingleborough the next day. As a result of Nick's new-found fear of lightning, we came down off the top earlier than most and found welcome shelter in the church at Chapel-le Dale. A long evening's walk with some 'non-crucial' climbing led to both of us taking a tumble in the slippery limestone scallops of Cluntering Ghyll: 'I made a pig's ear of getting us here, Ajahn, so I apologize for that.' In recognition of the lessons learned we decided to coin the neologism 'to clunter', to make a bad decision after a long and tiring day, resulting in an embarrassing or painful fall.

We came down off the hills into the small sunny town of Barbon, meeting the maker of what are possibly England's finest pickles and chutneys, as well as John Broadbent and his little daughter Anneka; he had walked the length of Britain the year after us and was a choirmaster of 'those who believe they cannot sing.' We crossed the Kirkby Lonsdale golf course, which had not existed when last we passed that way, and forded the River Lune, now ample and deep in its flow, following the downpour of the preceding day. Upāsikās Jayasili and Sumedha met us at the end of the day and whisked us off into the heart of Theravada Buddhist life in Kendal.

Trains took us the next day from Kendal to Haltwhistle on Hadrian's Wall. We made friends with the army, who were taking a break from Afghanistan, and

camped by Broomleigh Lough. By the end of the next day we had crossed the River Tyne at Wark and reached the house of Nick and Zoë Owen at Barrasford. We had stayed with them on our original walk, but at a place a mile or two away. While we were there Nick Owen told me how much a conversation we had then had influenced his life. Some time after we had stayed with them he had been laid off from his foresting job; it was work he had done for more than a decade, he was fond of it and, most significantly, it provided a cottage for him, Zoë and their four children. Abject disaster was felt to be looming. Nick reminded me of the advice I'd given him at the time; that this situation might in fact be a major opportunity to reshuffle things, and that if he adjusted his attitude and opened up to what was now possible rather than just obsessing on the losses, greatly beneficial prospects might open up. He said that receiving this advice had been a major turning-point in his life and had defined the way he dealt with problems ever since. It was a delight to know that one dialogue had had such a lasting positive effect. When he spoke of it a dim memory emerged from the mists, but it had certainly not crossed my mind for years. It brought to mind our passing contact with the lives of the Taylors in Littondale; tiny acorns of contact can flourish broadly and abundantly.

The final lessons of the walk revolved around reflections on ageing: twenty-six plus twenty-five equals fifty-one, not thirty-one... As Nick's leg had gone awry on day four, my left foot gave out or at least showed signs of severe complaint on day seventeen, just as we left the area of Barrasford and headed up to

Colt Crag Reservoir. It grumbled all the next morning over the last stretch to Kirkwhelpington. Nick spotted my limp after three miles and subsequently lent me his walking staff. The last half-mile into the village, where we had the faint hope of meeting two different sets of people, Virginia Scott and John and Ollie Rowland, announced very clearly that the walking was over.

John and Ollie's house was suitably named 'Wit's End.' They were not home, however, and had not received Nick's phone calls. I waited patiently on the bench in front of the old stone church. Soon the forces of kindness in the universe took the form of the gentleman who owned the big house at the edge of the village, with the pristine garden. He took us to Kirkharle Craft Centre, where we were able to have a meal that day, and then Susan Corbett, the Centre's marketing manager, offered to drive us the last six miles to Harnham. As we headed Southeast along the A696, all keeping our eyes peeled for the monastery entrance, she commented, 'I have been here once before, to a funeral; well, a sort of a funeral...'

Nick later said that at this comment he felt the arising of a strange, eerie feeling. He asked quietly, 'Do you remember who it was for?'

She replied, 'It was the kindergarten teacher of my children's school – I spoke on behalf of the mothers of Otterburn.'

'That was my mother,' Nick almost whispered. 'I thought you looked a bit familiar.'

The little car went very quiet as we all digested the mysterious loops of karma that had brought the three of us together in this small mechanical box: that Susan should have had an appointment cancelled and was thus free to drive us; that my foot had crumpled; that Nick's mother Dot, whom we had met along with his dad at Plankey Mill back in 1983, should have inspired Susan to speak at her funeral... Aren't the forces and patterns we call life very, very strange?

### A FINAL WORD

Memories can be tricky. Unwittingly they connive with each other to create convincing stories of things past, yet over and over again it is discovered that it never happened quite that way and – who'd've thought it? – we recall places shaped differently from the way our eyes now reveal that they have always been. Has my memory been modified by my familiarity with the illustrations that Nancy Sloane Stanley invented for the book? Or perhaps it's because the stories have been retold a hundred times and the tales have become the reality. So much of what I met along the way this time did not match the memory. St Martha's church was in the wrong place on her hill. The Patisserie in Stoke d'Abernon was at a radically different location, even though the address was the same. The Land of Nod was all wrong; Lakenheath Warren was nothing like that and neither was Santon Downham; the Post Office in Litton had moved (the old one, that is); the loughs in Northumberland were all different shapes; and Barbon in Lancashire had reconfigured itself completely. *Saññā aniccā, saṅkhārā aniccā* – perceptions and memories are unreliable, uncertain.

If there is wisdom, however, we actively develop this ‘*anicca-sañña*.’ We practise recognizing impermanence, unreliability in the world of things. The mind which knows that ‘all is uncertain’ provides a genuine refuge, if we can be open to what arises. Not only does this operate on an internal level, but as it is said, ‘The response and the Way are intertwined, inconceivably’<sup>38</sup>. A flexible, malleable, adaptable mind allows us to experience the ways in which the universe does in fact provide for us. Great blessings can result even when things don’t go ‘right’, just as this sequence of wonderful and mysterious encounters with compassionate strangers resulted in rides, first to the Craft Centre where we could receive some food, and later to Harnham, the end of the journey, where we arrived three hours early, long before the planned welcome was ready.

38 From *The Great Compassion Repentance Dharma* (Dharma Realm Buddhist Association, 1993) p 4



DAY 18  
ARRIVAL AT HARNHAM  
(NOTE WALKING STAFF)



OLD ST. MARY'S CATHEDRAL, SAN FRANCISCO

## WHAT DOES 'I AM THE WAY ...' MEAN?<sup>39</sup>

SOME BUDDHIST REFLECTIONS ON A FAMILIAR CHRISTIAN THEME

*I am the Way and the Truth and the Life;  
no one comes to the Father except through me. (John 14:6)*

A number of years ago I was invited to join with Father Laurence Freeman OSB to co-lead an evening of reflections at Old St Mary's Cathedral, San Francisco. This was something of a follow-up to the seminar entitled 'The Good Heart' which HH the Dalai Lama had led in London in 1994, when he was invited by the World Community for Christian Meditation to give commentaries on the Gospels. Father Laurence had hosted and chaired that event and I had also been honoured to take part in it.

36 Previously published on the Abhayagiri Monastery website, 2006.

Someone who had greatly appreciated the event and the richness of inter-religious dialogue that it had aroused was Janice Del Fiacco, a Bay Area resident. She was keen to encourage similar discussions in her hometown, so the gathering in San Francisco was arranged. Furthermore, just as HH the Dalai Lama had commented on the texts from the Gospels, she asked if I would do the same, and if Father Laurence would give reflections on something from the Buddhist scriptures.

I pointed out from the start that like HH the Dalai Lama, I was an amateur on Christianity and could not speak authoritatively from Latin or Greek sources. However, as Father Laurence pleaded the same ignorance of Pali and Sanskrit, and the spirit of the event was the reflections of contemplatives rather than textual analyses by scholars, we agreed that this lack of scholarship should not be an obstacle. We would just refer to received texts and offer reflections on that basis. Similarly, I can only refer here to derived sources and offer comments based on direct experience; readers are encouraged to bear that in mind as they proceed.

When we pondered what passages might be most interesting and useful for the group that would be gathering in the shadowy hallows of the cathedral, one quote from the Gospels immediately came to my mind. ‘How about: ‘I am the Way and the Truth and the Life; nobody comes unto the Father except through me?’ I suggested, a little brashly.

‘Really?’ queried Father Laurence, his face taking on an expression wrought of surprise, interest and a little anxiety. ‘Do you think that’s wise?’

‘I think it’s ideal’, I responded, ‘it’s the verse of the Bible that’s most often quoted to us when someone is speaking from a triumphalist or exclusionist position, trying to assert that whatever we Buddhists believe (or those of any faith other than Christian), it must be wrong. However, when you look at that verse reflectively, it is a very powerful meditation teaching.’

Since we only had enough time for one piece each, and perhaps in response to my idea to use John 14:6, he chose for himself to recount the *Kālāma Sutta*. This is the teaching where the Buddha encourages his listeners not to believe in scripture, logic, parental tradition, common custom or even the words of a trusted teacher like himself, but rather to weigh the efficacy of any spiritual teaching or practice by the real wealth of goodness that it brings to one’s life. If it leads to welfare for yourself and others, take it and use it; if it leads to difficulty and division, leave it aside.

Though my parents were not churchgoers, I was educated in Church of England schools, with a short service and Bible reading at the start of each day. From early childhood, the way that this verse from John came across to me was always somewhat off-putting. There was a harshness in the way it was always pronounced; Jesus was made to sound like an aggressive elder brother guarding the door to Dad’s study, or a bossy prefect proud of his privileged position. More

to the point, it was used to say: ‘Christianity is right – everybody else is wrong!’ Generally it doesn’t seem an exaggeration to say that this is most often how the words are used today, and almost certainly that was the reason for Father Laurence’s reticence at my commenting on it. In September 2006 it was on the placards of some ardent evangelists outside the Dalai Lama’s teachings in Pasadena, good-hearted folks eager to save us from the fiery pits.

From the earliest times when I began to think about such things, when I was six or seven years old, I wondered, ‘What makes them right? They say that, but can they prove it?’ So it was then that I abandoned Christianity, mostly because of the requirement to believe what was not credible or provable to me. Only in later years did I realize that if the words are taken on a personal level, understood only to support tribalist tendencies – ‘My team is better than yours!’ – we are missing a rich and liberating teaching.

My introduction to Buddhism, meditation and monastic life all occurred in Thailand. After living there for a couple of years I returned to England and to Cittaviveka, the monastery in West Sussex which had recently been opened by Ajahn Sumedho.

It was not so much that an interest in Christianity arose in me then; it was more that in a Buddhist monastery in England rather than Thailand, there was a steady trickle of visitors and encounters with Christians, some of whom were

committed believers and others who were questioning or straight-out averse to Christianity.

Suffice it to say that there was more talk of, and thus cause to reflect on, Christian teachings than I had been exposed to since leaving school some seven years previously.

I do not now recall what brought it to mind one day – perhaps a talk by Ajahn Sumedho or a chat with one of the monastery’s guests – but I have a clear memory of sitting in meditation one evening and remembering the verse from John: ‘I am the Way and the Truth and the Life...’ It then occurred to me: ‘I have been meditating for a few years now and I have a clear understanding of both what ‘the Way’ and ‘the Truth’ are, but neither of these have anything whatsoever to do with Jesus... Hmmm.’

I was not agonizing over any doubts in my mind; I was simply using the faculties of wise reflection (*yoniso manasikāra*) and investigation of reality (*dhammavicaya*) in order to explore this interesting theme. The topic then proceeded to unfold further: ‘Well, if I know what the Way and the Truth are, and they are this current experience of Reality, then Jesus Christ was obviously using the words ‘I am’ in a way very different from that put forth by the evangelical and triumphalist voices. Aha! Maybe that’s it.’

I then recollected that once when Ajahn Sumedho had been commenting on this passage he had said: ‘To me, that just means ‘Be mindful.’ These words immediately brought to mind the famous verse from the Dhammapada:

Mindfulness is the path to the Deathless,  
Heedlessness is the path to Death;  
The mindful never die,  
The heedless are as if dead already. (Dhp 21)

As these phrases formed in my memory, it became clear that mysteriously, these two passages from the Bible and the Buddhist scriptures seemed almost analogous, given a little flexibility with religious symbolism and terminology.

I am fully aware that it can be presumptuous, if not downright dangerous, to put words into the mouths of others, especially great seers and sages. However, it should be remembered that these reflections are offered here in the spirit of being for contemplation, rather than as categorical statements. In this way it is hoped that they will be a cause for fertile insights to arise and novel realizations to be sparked.

On one occasion a Catholic priest who had been staying at one of Ajahn Chah’s monasteries asked: ‘Do you think the goal of the spiritual life according to Christians and that according to Buddhists is the same goal?’ Ajahn Chah responded: ‘How could there be two Ultimate Realities? If there were, one of

them wouldn't be ultimate.' If we assume that Ajahn Chah's insight was correct, that means we are talking about a single Ultimate Reality which can be realized through many and various skilful means and symbolized in a variety of ways.

The term 'the Father' is used throughout the Gospels to refer to God as being the Ultimate Reality. Ajahn Buddhādāsa, a highly influential twentieth-century Buddhist master and one of Thailand's great philosopher monks, who translated the Bible into Thai, said that 'Dhamma' is the best translation in Thai for the word 'God', the two principles having many characteristics in common, such as immortality or deathlessness. The key difference is that 'Dhamma' cannot be personified in any way, i.e. it cannot be interpreted as some kind of separate being; rather, it is the transcendent Reality which is the source and fabric of all mental and physical realms. However, if we take the liberty of laying aside the personal element for the time being, the verse from John can be re-rendered: '... no one comes to the Deathless Reality except through me.'

By drawing these parallel passages together and equating their terms, if 'the Father' is equivalent to 'the Deathless', 'I am' has its counterpart in 'mindfulness.' The Pali word which is translated as 'mindfulness' here is *appamāda*, which can also be rendered as 'heedfulness' or 'awakened awareness'; it means a fully attuned, wholehearted knowing of the present moment, free from any delusory bias and embedded in a profound and genuine wisdom. Thus the implication of Jesus' statement: 'I am the Way and the Truth and the Life', when taken in this

way, is that mindful awareness is the embodiment of his nature, what some have called the Christ consciousness.

The use of the words ‘the Life’ in the verse from John is also echoed in the Buddha’s words: ‘The mindful never die.’ Interestingly, it is further borne out in other statements from the Gospel of John:

‘He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him.’ (John 3:36)

‘Jesus said unto her, I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live ... And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die.’ (John 11:25-26)

As with these words of Jesus, the Buddha’s phrase can obviously be understood in various ways. If taken at a superficial level, it sounds as though the Buddha is saying: ‘If you play your cards right and are careful enough, your body will never die.’ Since his own body ceased to live after eighty years, that’s a big clue that he’s not talking about bodies here.

Rather, he is saying that when there is full awakened awareness, there is no identification with the body or with conditioned factors of mind. The realization of the Dhamma is so complete that the life or death of the body is of as little consequence as the turning of the earth is to the sun. As the Buddhist scriptures reiterate so often, the body and mind are not-self, so the heart remains serene

through all life's ups and downs, its many psychological births and deaths, triumphs and failures, as well as the 'big death' of the body's ending. As St Teresa of Avila put it when expounding on this same theme: 'We die before we die so that when we die, we won't die.'

Though numerous Christian groups think in terms of the physical resurrection of all bodies of the faithful on Judgement Day, to the contemplative heart it seems highly likely that Jesus was intending his words to be understood in the same manner as the Buddha's, and as St Teresa captures the essence of it in her succinct aphorism.

Another point to emphasize here is that in Buddhist philosophy, mindfulness, *sati* or *appamāda*, holds a uniquely significant position. It is the first of the Seven Factors of Enlightenment and as such was said by the Buddha to be 'always useful.' The development of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness was said by the Buddha to be *ekāyana magga*, sometimes (also triumphalistically!) translated as 'the only way [to deliverance]', is more faithfully rendered as 'the direct path [for the purification of beings]' (M10.2); and *sati* is the pivotal member of the Five Spiritual Faculties.

Most importantly, this same quality of wakefulness is seen as being the very essence of the Buddha's nature. Indeed, this is why the word 'Buddha', meaning 'the one who is awakened' or 'the one who knows', has come to be used as the primary epithet of the great teacher.

At one time the Blessed One was travelling by the road between Ukkattha and Setavya; and the brahmin Dona was travelling by that road too. He saw in the Blessed One's footprints wheels with a thousand spokes, and with rims and hubs all complete. Then he thought: 'It is wonderful, it is marvellous! Surely this can never be the footprint of a human being.' Then the Blessed One left the road and sat down at the root of a tree, cross-legged, with his body held erect and mindfulness established before him. Then the brahmin Dona, who was following up the footprints, saw him sitting at the root of the tree. The Blessed One inspired trust and confidence, his faculties being stilled, his mind quiet and attained to supreme control and serenity: a royal tusker self-controlled and guarded by restraint of the sense faculties. The brahmin went up to him and asked:

'Sir, are you a god?'

'No, brahmin.'

'Sir, are you a heavenly angel?'

'No, brahmin.'

'Sir, are you a spirit?'

'No, brahmin.'

'Sir, are you a human being?'

'No, brahmin.'

"Then, sir, what indeed are you?"

'Brahmin, the defilements by means of which, through my not having abandoned them, I might be a god or a heavenly angel or a spirit or a human being have been abandoned by me, cut off at the root, made like a palm stump, done away with, and are no more subject to future arising. Just as a blue or red or white lotus is born in water, grows in water and stands up above the water untouched by it, so too I, who was born in the world and grew up in the world, have transcended the world, and I live untouched by the world. Remember me as one who is awakened [*buddho'smi*]' (A 4.36)

So mindful awareness is not just part of the Way, one prerequisite condition for realizing Ultimate Truth; it can also be said to be an embodiment of it. Furthermore, just as Jesus Christ equates himself with truth in the verse from John, the Buddhist scriptures also on occasions equate the physical manifestation of spiritual awakenedness with the Ultimate Reality. For example, when the bhikkhu Vakkali falls gravely ill, the Buddha comes from his dwelling at the squirrels' sanctuary in the Bamboo Grove near Rājagaha to pay him a visit. The Buddha asks Vakkali how he is, and after recounting to the Master that his sickness is worsening, Vakkali expresses the one regret remaining in his heart.

'For a long time, venerable sir, I have wanted to come and see the Blessed One, but I haven't been fit enough to do so.'

'Enough, Vakkali; why do you want to see this filthy body? One who sees the Dhamma sees me; one who sees me sees the Dhamma. For it is when one

sees the Dhamma that they see me; and it is when they see me that they see the Dhamma.’ (S 22.87)

On another occasion one of the enlightened disciples, Ven. Mahā-Kaccāna, extols the qualities of the Buddha’s nature:

For knowing, the Blessed One knows; seeing, he sees; he is vision, he is knowledge, he is the Dhamma; he is the holy one; he is the sayer, the proclaimer, the elucidator of meaning, the giver of the Deathless, the Lord of the Dhamma, the Tathāgata! (M 18.12)

However, all the instances where the Buddha is identified with the Truth by himself or his disciples, should be considered in the light of the emphasis he gave to the fact that ‘the Tathāgata is only one who points the way’ (*akkhataro Tathāgata*). Merely staying close to him or clinging to his teachings can never be enough to liberate the heart; we have to make the effort ourselves to go in the direction to which he is pointing.

If we now refer back to the verse from John and re-read it in a non-personal way, it too seems to encourage this same quality of self-reliance. If it is read as meaning: ‘Awakened awareness is the Way, the Truth and the Life; no one can realize the Deathless unless it is through this quality’, we are similarly thrown back onto our own resources. It’s up to us to rouse the energy, interest and resolve, and consider wisely how to let go of those attributes that obstruct the

heart, and cultivate and maintain those that clarify it. It implies that there needs to be an effort from within, known in Japanese as *jiriki*, as well as assistance from without, which we can helpfully derive from those who point the way and can embody the Truth for us, who are known in Japanese as *tariki*.

In offering these reflections, I am aware that depersonalizing the Christian teachings might be illuminating to some but off-putting, distressing or confusing to others. For many practising Christians the most important element of their faith is a personal relationship with God, and I have no intention of being dismissive towards that dimension of spiritual practice. It's simply that from the Buddhist perspective there are many and various ways of exploring the mystery of experience and arriving at a unified quality of peace, freedom and fulfilment, total spiritual emancipation.

Often at about this point in discussions a Christian will ask: 'What about love? Doesn't that come into it for you? The sacred heart of Jesus is more than just mindfulness! Surely...' Many Christians feel love coming from God the Father, Jesus or Mary as a tangible presence, like the love they extend to those beings in return. In response to this, just as one can enquire on being quoted John 14:6: 'What exactly do you mean by "I am"?', I often ask: 'What exactly do you mean by "love"?' Interestingly, both these kinds of questions are usually met with silence.

When you come to its core, the experience of loving totally or being loved totally is an experience of wholeness; at that moment, self and other, lover and loved have been lost in the presence of completeness.

Having an external object or person who is the focus of devotion is one way of arriving at the experience of the wholeness of Reality, but it is by no means the only one.

In the Theravada Buddhist tradition, though the Buddha is certainly described as embodying an all-encompassing love, substantial emphasis is also placed on the non-personalizing language of the scriptures. In Buddhist philosophy a phrase like ‘The Dhamma loves me’ is utterly meaningless, to be found in no Buddhist tradition whatsoever. More importantly, it is impossible to place the Dhamma outside yourself, even as some kind of non-personal element. Rather, it is seen as we see Nature, as something of which every aspect of ourselves is intrinsically a part.

To quote another famous passage from the Gospels which alludes somewhat to this same principle: ‘The kingdom of God is within you.’ (Luke 17:21)

The Northern Buddhist traditions have developed more in the way of devotional practices directed toward various deities and lofty spiritual beings, such as the recitation of the name of Amitabha Buddha or Kuan Yin Bodhisattva, or the various forms of deity yoga where a deliberate invocation of a divine ‘other’

is employed to open the heart to Reality. However, such practices are always seen in Buddhist tradition as merely skilful means (*upāya*) to help break through limited habits of vision. Thus there might be a profound, devoted relationship to Kuan Yin Bodhisattva in the heart of an aspirant; nevertheless, that devotion is recollected in the light of emptiness and the 'not-self' teachings. When asked whether Tara really existed, a Tibetan lama replied: 'She knows that she's not real.'

These two methodologies, deliberate self-reliance on the one hand, and conscious adherence to a revered being on the other, are both seen in Buddhist tradition as valid spiritual paths. However, the path of self-reliance, the *jiriki* track, is seen as the more direct and, understandably, the more demanding. It's the path straight up the mountain, whereas the *tariki* practices, although seen as effective, are more circuitous and can be compared to the winding lanes that ascend the mountain at a more gentle gradient.

Interestingly, some Christian contemplatives have also recognized these complementary qualities as part of the spiritual life. In his *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, St John of the Cross describes various spiritual practices, using this same simile of a spiritual peak that needs to be climbed as his central image. The most demanding and direct of all the approaches he outlines is referred to as 'the way of pure spirit', and in his analysis of its nature he summarizes it as: 'Nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing and even on the Mountain, nothing.' By

the use of this expression he seems to be pointing to an equivalent complete non-identification with, and letting go of, all things, internal and external, as the Way.

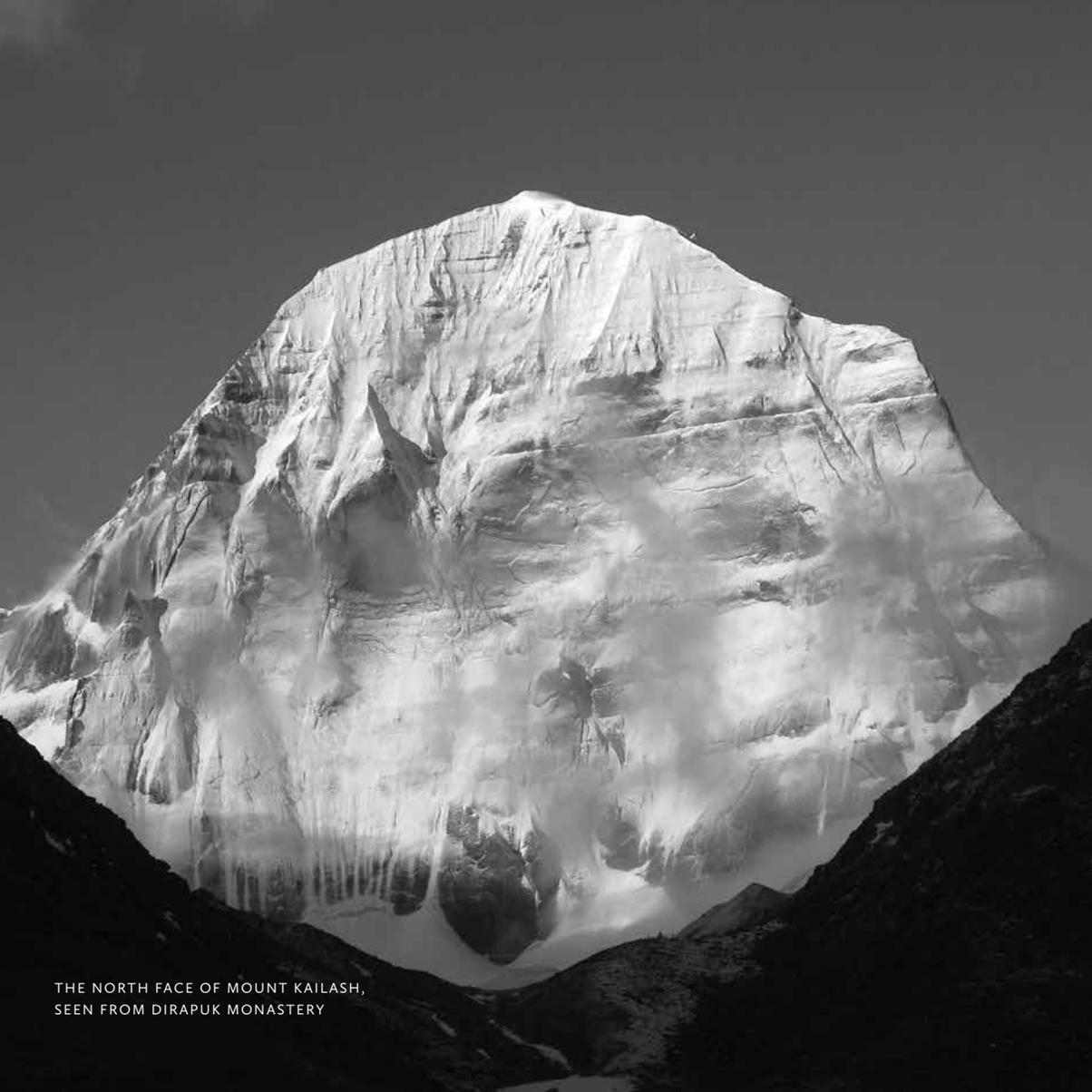
This is the same radical quality of non-clinging which is exemplified in the nature of the Buddha and borne out in verse 21 of the Dhammapada. The pure heart neither has anything, nor does it lack anything; it is simply Ultimate Reality aware of its own nature. This quality is evinced both in Jesus' words: 'I and the Father are one' (John 10:30) and the Buddha's words to Vakkali: 'One who sees the Dhamma sees me; one who sees me sees the Dhamma.'

As already emphasized, the reflections presented here are offered in the spirit of spiritual cross-fertilization and dialogue, just as similar themes were offered on that evening at Old St Mary's Cathedral. It is hoped that as a result the sayings of these wonderful teachers might be seen in a somewhat more universal way, which would only be a good thing.

Needless to say, if we want our team always to be seen as the best, and are clinging to our beliefs in a plaintive effort either to fill up the roaring vastness of the unknown, or because we are still carrying around our raft although we are already on the safe shore, these reflections will not be of much use. However it may be, let the reader take what is useful and illuminating here, and the rest can be gently laid aside.



AMARAVATI BUDDHA



THE NORTH FACE OF MOUNT KAILASH,  
SEEN FROM DIRAPUK MONASTERY

# JOURNEY TO THE CENTRE OF THE WORLD<sup>40</sup>

A CIRCLING OF MOUNT KAILASH

Here is the watch my mother gave my father on their wedding day, his initials engraved upon the back. Here is a dress that the daughter of Tan Dhammarakkho, Hannah Renshaw, wore before she died at the age of two, in a mysterious fire at Chithurst in 1983. Here is a thimble belonging to Chris Smith's great-grandmother... all precious relics, family treasures. Now we enshrine them on the slopes of Mount Kailash and walk away, climbing the final slope to the Dolma La pass, leaving family and the rest of our past behind.

40 Originally published in *Forest Sangha Newsletter*, Number 93, 2014

Breathe. Keep breathing deeply. Breathe as fully as possible, opening every cleft of lung.

Everything, the whole world, is gathered at this point. Here is the 'still point of the turning world',<sup>41</sup> the *axis mundi*, Mount Meru at the centre of the cosmos. 'At the still point, there the dance is', the dance of motion and pause, one foot in front of the other, and then not. Water, rock, both still and flowing.

Steadily, going nowhere, the mountain falls away beneath the feet until the heights of Dolma La are reached: 'still and still moving into another intensity ...' 'In my end is my beginning.' 'In my beginning is my end.'

The news that I planned to go on a pilgrimage to Mount Kailash in the spring of 2013 was regularly met with a blank look. People would ask: 'Where is that?' or 'Why is that a special place?' 'Good question', was probably the most appropriate reply.

I knew that Mount Kailash was in Tibet and that it was considered to be a holy place by both Hindus and Tibetan Buddhists; these two groups seem to have been aware of the uniqueness of the mountain from ancient times. To Hindus it is the earthly embodiment of the axial mountain of the heavens, Meru, and is the abode of Lord Shiva. To Tibetans it is Sumeru, also the cosmic centre of the universe. Mount Kailash has thus been a magnet for pilgrims for millennia.

41 Quotations from *Four Quartets: Burnt Norton & East Coker*, by T.S. Eliot.

On looking up more of its history I found out that unlike the gneiss rock of most of the Himalayas, Mount Kailash was formed of ancient Tertiary gravel lifted up on granite, and had once been the highest island in the primordial Tethys Sea.

Its mystique is enhanced by the facts that it stands high, alone, is snow-peaked year-round and is mysteriously symmetrical, like a natural pyramid; – and because four of the great rivers of the Indian subcontinent all have their source in the region: the Sutlej, the Indus, the Brahmaputra and the Karnali, a tributary of the Ganges. It is for these reasons that it is almost certainly the origin of the Eastern myths of the World Mountain, the towering peak that is the axis of the universe.

I also knew that Luang Por Sumedho had made two attempts to go there, and had only been successful in making the journey and circumambulating the mountain on the second occasion. He had spoken often of the many spiritual blessings that had come from his pilgrimage, but in addition that it had been, ‘The hardest thing I have ever done.’ Other friends and Sangha members had also made the journey: Ajahn Sucitto, Kittisaro and Thanissara, and Sister Thitamedha; they too had all spoken of the sacred nature of the experience and the intensity of the physical challenges. At more than 15,000 feet the air is very thin, and a lowlander’s body is easily unready or unable to bear this.

So what was the reason I was now planning to go there?





LEFT: THE PILGRIMS: (STANDING, FROM LEFT)  
NICK SCOTT, TAN DHAMMARAKKHO,  
AJAHN AMARO AND TAN APPAMĀDO;  
(IN FRONT, FROM LEFT) RORY HODD  
AND CHRIS SMITH.

BELOW: THE APPROACH TO THE GATEWAY  
TO THE VALLEY OF THE GODS



The short answer is, ‘Nick Scott invited me.’ The longer version is that Nick, as a *tudong* companion of many Sangha members over more than thirty years, had reached the age of sixty and, due to visibly waning capacities, had come to the conclusion he had just ‘one more big adventure’ in him. Based on his friendship and past experiences with Luang Por Sumedho and Ajahn Sucitto, the thought of Mount Kailash as a destination immediately came to his mind, with me as a travelling companion. Other friends and Sangha members were polled, and soon there were plans for a group of three monks and three laymen to make the expedition.

I freely admit that at first I had no great inspiration to go; it would be an interesting jaunt in a unique environment and a good opportunity for a *tudong*-type journey in the wilderness, but until then the place had held little significance for me spiritually. It had no special place in the mythology of the Theravādin world, so it was not like visiting sites such as Bodhgaya or the Deer Park at Vārānaśī, holy places where the Buddha himself had walked and talked and dwelt.<sup>42</sup>

As the reality of the journey started to gel, more reflections on the symbolism of the *axis mundi* arose in my mind. This ancient and universal spiritual principle had been a frequent theme of Luang Por Sumedho’s Dhamma talks over the years. He often reflected on how the mythological centre of the world, whether

42 At this point I was not aware that Lake Manasarovar was widely reputed to be the Lake Anotatta of the Pali scriptures, which the Buddha was said to have visited several times.

embodied as Mount Sumeru, Olympus or Yggdrasil the World Tree, is a symbol of the immanent centrality of consciousness, how, ‘The heart of the universe is your heart.’

These reflections reminded me that with many spiritual principles there is a meeting of: a) the physical/historical reality; b) its mythological representation; and c) its psychological parallels. Thus the symbol of the *axis mundi* has its resonances in the physical reality of Mount Kailash, in its mythic reality as the centre of the cosmos and, lastly, in the awakened awareness of the here and now. On account of these reflections rippling through consciousness, the prospect of the journey gained appeal.

In addition, it had been five years since my previous *tudong* trip (also with Nick), so I was quite ready for another such excursion.

These backpacking trips, and the *tudong* principle in general, had always appealed to me. *Tudong* is an ancient monastic practice of journeying on foot through the countryside, often for weeks or months at a time, living simply and close to the elements, and often relying on the kindness of strangers to provide sustenance along the way.

The Thai word *tudong* comes from the Pali *dhutanga*. The term refers to a set of practices such as living on one meal a day, not sleeping in a building or not lying down to rest, which are designed to help us cut through complacency by

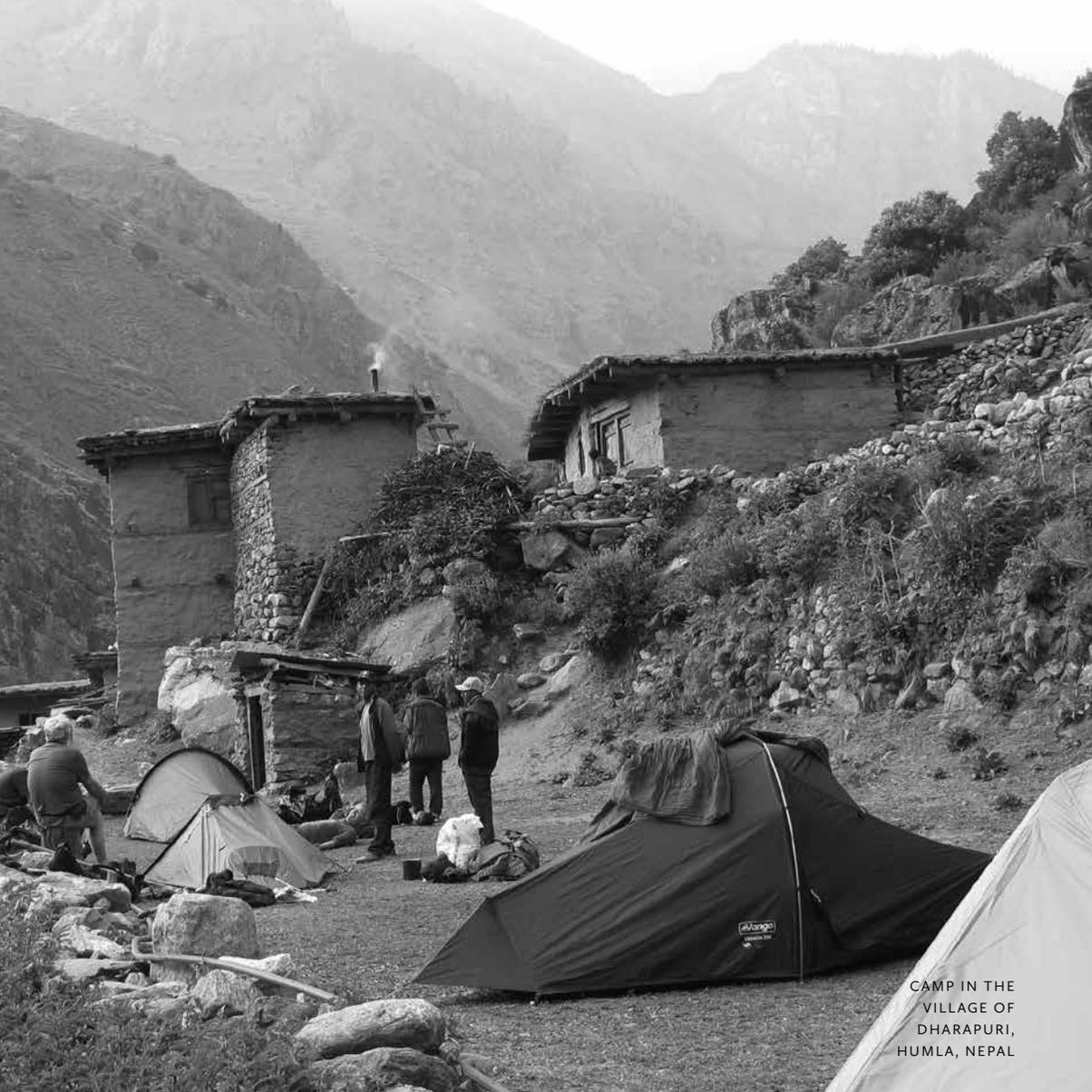
relinquishing our usual psychological escapes. By limiting access and control over food, sleep and physical comfort, the only escape from *dukkha*, the experience of unsatisfactoriness, is via attitude.

*Tudong* is thus designed to help us meet the customary ways in which we evade, negotiate, deny or weasel our way out of discontent and difficulty, and instead learn to be adaptable, spiritually robust. It is very easy to tweak the world in any way we can contrive or finagle, in order to get away from what we dislike and get what we want; if we are accomplished at such tweaking we never see how much we have made ourselves slaves to self-centred desire and aversion. The practice of *tudong* is one means of breaking free of that bondage and enjoying the bliss of contentment. Of course, lack of oxygen is not one of the traditional austerities, but it was a key element in the prospective journey. As it turned out, even though the need to stop regularly and breathe deeply was a novel experience for most of us, it was swiftly clear that just like the other discomforts or inconveniences *tudong* brings, 'If you make it a problem, it's a problem. If you don't, it isn't.'

In the autumn of 2012 Ajahn Sucitto kindly came to Amaravati and gave the group of us intended pilgrims a slide-show of pictures from his journey to Mount Kailash with Kittisaro and Thanissara, along with his reflections on the experience. This was a pivotal moment for me, as it revealed two hitherto unappreciated or unknown aspects of the undertaking.



STŪPA AT NAMKHA KYUNG DZONG MONASTERY,  
ABOVE THE HUMLA KARNALI RIVER, NEPAL



CAMP IN THE  
VILLAGE OF  
DHARAPURI,  
HUMLA, NEPAL

Firstly, his account of the physical and mental challenges of living in such thin air – how, for example, on one occasion his thinking faculties were so compromised that he held a cup of some hot drink in his hand for an hour, not knowing what to do with it – made it clear that physical fitness and acclimatization to altitude were of paramount importance. This aspect, as well as eliciting the question: ‘Why would anyone want to do that to themselves?’ impelled me to make great efforts to take exercise; weights and press-ups to help my lungs and heart along, and daily walks through the Hertfordshire countryside. This turned out to be a serendipitous source of blessings, in that along with toughening up the body, it also caused me to get to know many previously undiscovered nearby treasures in the way of woods and lanes, farms and open spaces, as well as lacing together an internal map of much-loved spots in the locality.

The second aspect was that I learned of the series of traditional contemplations and practices developed in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition which accompany the circumambulation of Mount Kailash. I had been given a few books to read on the subject and had heard some sketchy accounts in the past, but it was only on learning from Ajahn Sucitto how the circuit around the holy mountain was woven together with specific contemplations on karma and the processes of birth, death and rebirth, that the full meaning and value of the practice became clear.

On hearing the details of how various stations on the thirty-two mile path around Mount Kailash marked specific stages of a sequence of contemplations, it was as if the proverbial light came on: ‘Oh, *that’s* what it’s all about.’ The light came on, colour came into the world, and the prospect of the journey transmuted from: ‘interesting jaunt in a fascinating place’ to ‘pilgrimage to the holy mountain in order to awaken.’ It came alive.

The process of fitness training and acclimatization was helped along greatly by a ten-day trek through the Atlas Mountains of Morocco with Nick, his partner Micheline and Stephen Batchelor. The location had been chosen on the advice of Andrew Yeats, who was not only the architect of the Dhamma Hall at Chithurst, but also the guide who led Luang Por Sumedho’s first attempt to get to Mount Kailash, an attempt that was thwarted by the Chinese authorities at the border.

This journey through the Atlas Mountains and the experiences and conversations we had along the way might be the subject for a travelogue on its own. However, suffice it to say for now that it was a well-chosen environment in which to do some hiking and altitude training, and to be living in circumstances close to what we would experience in Asia.

The acclimatization process was further developed by our plan to enter Tibet on foot, following the Humla Karnali River from Simikot to the border town of Hilsa. This was precisely the route that Luang Por Sumedho had followed with

Andrew Yeats and their party in 1997. Nick had opted for this trail deliberately, not just because it was an ideal method of getting us fit and more used to the terrain (which it was), but more as a way of following in the master's footsteps.

Throughout these months of preparation, particularly up in the heights of the Atlas Mountains and over the passes in Humla, but also on the frosty paths of Hertfordshire, a few realizations dawned.

Firstly, when walking with a thirty or forty-pound pack, doing twenty-five or thirty miles in a day or crossing a pass at ten thousand feet or more, you realize that spreading loving-kindness through the body is essential. Naturally, one should spread loving-kindness at all times, and friendliness towards our own body is an intrinsic part of that. However, life in the lowlands and without physical challenges causes this to be easily forgotten, especially in the comfortable, convenient conditions of the West; we can forget the body altogether or think of it as a useless appendage that hangs off the bottom of our neck. The *tudong* life helps us to remember it. In these extreme conditions the body is being asked to do a lot more than in a so-called average day. Its limitations are thus more apparent, and therefore you cultivate a grateful respect and appreciation of it and its capacities. I would spread *mettā* to all my body parts, especially the lungs and heart, feet and ankles, legs, back and shoulders. To all appearances this seemed to have a good effect, and I remained without injury or illness throughout the entire time of training and right up until the end of the pilgrimage.





THE HIGH PASS BETWEEN MOUNT KAILASH  
AND THE KINGDOM OF GUGE

Secondly, at altitude in general but while climbing in particular, mindfulness of breathing is inescapable. It thus becomes a wonderfully supportive presence for a continuity of awareness.

Thirdly, owing to the shortness of breath, the body is unavoidably present; it is impossible to drift off into some mental abstraction. Yet ironically, the body is simultaneously realized as being totally 'other': as 'impermanent, unsatisfactory ... alien, as disintegrating, empty, as not self' (M 64.9). Moment by moment it is made clear that the body is neither owned nor under personal control. Certain habits of sense perception are also revealed because of this. The eye says one thing: 'I can do that. It's hardly any slope at all.' But the heart and lungs tell another story: 'Stop. You stop right here and you breathe as deep as you can. You don't move until there is enough oxygen in the blood once more. No debate.'

Lastly, a realization that is crucial for personal ease and communal harmony is that no one comes first or last in a pilgrimage. Old habits of judging and ranking; notions of: 'Being passed ... keeping up ... who's ahead? Don't want to be left behind ...'; these all have their power. If they are believed in they lead to great discontent and *dukkha*; if they are abandoned, everyone benefits.

By the time we reached the start of the circumambulation at the village of Tarchen, all six of our group, Vens. Dhammarakkho and Appamādo, Nick Scott, Chris Smith, Rory Hodd and myself, were as well-adapted to the environment as possible. Some had been experiencing more difficulty than others (Nick had

trouble sleeping and Tan Appamādo had almost continuous migraines while above 13,000 feet), but none of us had altitude sickness or anything more serious.

I felt immensely grateful for all the encouragement received to get ready for living at this height. Acclimatization is for the body like keeping the Precepts is for the mind and heart; it is the source of protection and security in all conditions. Without *sīla* we are vulnerable and likely to cause ourselves all sorts of harm. In a comparable way we found that many groups of Indian pilgrims, coaxed into the region by unscrupulous tour operators to pay homage to Lord Shiva, but unprepared for its physical demands, suffered greatly from their sudden arrival at more than 15,000 feet by plane and helicopter or coach. We heard from a member of 'Group B' of one such party that four people had died, from various causes that very day in their 'Group A.'

Tarchen was a once a hamlet of Tibetan houses but is now a grungy and dispiriting town, expanding rapidly under the influence of the Chinese government's development of the region for tourism. Huge free-standing billboards by the roadsides proclaim the presence of the holy mountain and advertise fun sightseeing opportunities as if it were a Tibetan Disneyland.

This mixture of wildly contrasting realities, as with the magnificent wonder-inducing presence of Mount Kailash and the sleaze-pit nature of Tarchen, is a theme throughout Tibet: the open barrenness of immense reaches of desert, a thousand shades of brown (umber, cream, rust and slate), with not a tree

in sight, yet in the temples, dense brocades of poppy-red, emerald, turquoise and sapphire, gold and shining yellows. Similarly, the character of the Tibetan people, nomadic, rough-hewn, centred on the spiritual, while the Chinese government under whose thumb they are held is orderly, humourless and fixated on the worldly. It is a realm of intense disparities.

Both the tour operator, Roger Pfister, whom we had met in Kathmandu, and Ajahn Sucitto in England had described in some detail the series of contemplations traditionally used by Tibetan pilgrims when circling Mount Kailash. These two descriptions did not entirely match each other, but as can be said about all such processes of contemplation, the principal ingredient is more what the contemplators themselves bring to the practice, rather than the details of the method. What I will describe here is the series of reflections that I used as we made our way around the mountain.

Tarchen – This is the southernmost point of the *kora* or pathway around Mount Kailash. The walk from here to the first ‘station’ symbolizes the time before our birth, from the beginningless past through to our coming into the world in this life. The pathway rises gently from the edge of Tarchen. I have to stop and breathe deeply from time to time. After an hour or so I reach the first place to pause. A few of the others of our group, including our Tibetan guide Tashi and our one porter Jigme, are already here. Nick is far behind.





ABOVE: INDIAN PILGRIMS  
AT SIMIKOT, AWAITING  
THEIR HELICOPTER  
FLIGHT TO MOUNT  
KAILASH

RIGHT: PILGRIMS BOWING  
AS THEY CIRCUMAMBULATE  
THE MOUNTAIN



Greeting the Mountain – This spot is the first place on the *kora* from which Mount Kailash itself can be seen. The cairn there is decked with prayer-flags streaming in the steady wind under cool grey skies. As I focus the mind to receive the full sanctity of the moment, on cue a Tibetan lad hauls up on his beribboned and chrome-studded motorbike, girlfriend on the pillion and loud Tibetan music blasting from its on-board PA. My first thought is: ‘How can he come and ruin the moment like this?’ But what makes this more my mountain than his? He takes out a cigarette and lights up, chatting with his girl, who smiles broadly. His blithe manner suggests he doesn’t even register our presence, let alone ask us: ‘You got a problem?’

What is that animal inside that says ‘My reality is more important than yours’? The Tibetan family settled nearby doesn’t blink either, but continues bowing to the mountain undisturbed. Theirs is the example to follow.

Gateway to the Valley of the Gods – The path from the place of greeting the mountain leads down a gentle slope and into a broad, level valley. Ahead there are tour buses parked, just beside a small scarp and in front of a red and white *stūpa*. As we draw closer a clutch of young Tibetan men race by on ponies caparisoned in jaunty colours. A hundred or so people mill about the buses, a mixture of Chinese sightseers come to look at the sky-burial up on top of the nearby plateau, Indian pilgrims negotiating for the ponies, Tibetan folk working to provide all the needful, and then

those Tibetan families and us, going through on foot. We are the only Westerners in sight.

This place is called The Gateway to the Valley of the Gods, and it symbolizes the beginning of this current life. The *stūpa* is exceptional as it has an archway through its centre. As one ducks beneath the bell and rings it, this signifies the birth moment. For me in this lifetime, that happened in Kent in 1956, so I rewind my thoughts and picture my mother at Kench Hill Hospital, Tenterden, and a small squalling presence, newly hatched.

We walk on. The long, straight, even surface is walled with endless stories of deities and spiritual warriors, demons battled and defeated, all marked in whorls of rock.

Snow flurries begin, but though I whip out my waterproof to 'be prepared', it is plain that for the locals this does not even register as weather. Cowboy-hatted roughnecks slurp pot-noodles with abandon in the rest-stop tent. Turquoise and corals bead their hatbands and *mālās*, as they do the earrings and plaits of the womenfolk.

Dirapuk Monastery – We come to the ancient monastery of Dirapuk, famed for its tiny cave where Guru Rimpoche (Padma Sambhava) once stayed. It's been a twelve-mile walk from Tarchen; we are weary and glad indeed to be given the finest guest-room to share. The walls are





MAKING OFFERINGS  
TO KHENPO  
LOBSANG JINPA, AT SHRI  
DARGHEY LING GOMPA

friezed with intricate and colourful strings of lotuses, Dharma wheels and other auspicious symbols; vermilion pillars are tricked out in orange, green and cobalt blue designs with golden flourishes. The grand window looks out onto the north face of Mount Kailash, now obscured by cloud.

The following day is our designated rest-day – fortunately, because the local gods decide to use it to deposit copious rain and snow upon the region. Undaunted, Chris and Rory explore the mountain’s foot and get as close as possible to its walls. Tan Dhammarakkho wanders up a side valley, meeting marmots galore.

The rain and snow pass, and next morning the mountain is revealed in all its glory, wearing the night’s white fall and shining brightly. Encouraged by Tashi, Nick sets off before the rest of us at dawn. He knows this will be the longest day for him.

The sky is a perfect blue as I pick my way along the trail. Indian pilgrims in puffy red jackets, some on foot but most on horse-back, form a long thread below us and ahead. Yaks bearing barrels pass me by.

The contemplation of this life has reached the present day and now addresses the run-up to the day of death. The slope gets steeper.

Shiva Tsal, the Graveyard of the Siddhas – This is the northernmost point of the *kora*. The contemplation assigned to this station is belied by the patches

of bright colour sprinkled over the rock-field, for this is the place of dying. It represents the death moment of this present life, the time of letting go, whether we wish to or not. This is the place and time for relinquishing.

I can walk only fifteen or twenty paces before having to stop, inhaling in the full-chested way I have developed to increase the intake of air. The splashes of red and blue, the stripes of yellow and pink that decorate the stones are from pieces of clothing, often of loved ones, left here as a gesture of releasing, letting go. Sometimes folk leave something that is more personal to them, perhaps their own pullover, a woollen hat or, more traditionally, some of their own hair or fingernails.

I knew of this place from Ajahn Sucitto's account and had pondered long on what to leave here. Had he still been alive, it would have been my father's hundredth birthday on 30<sup>th</sup> May, only a few days before. As a memorial to him, and recognizing his love of the outdoors, my sisters and I decided to offer up his watch and to enshrine it here.

They have built a small cairn by the time I arrive at the Shiva Tsal. Tan Dhammarakkho has brought with him tiny dresses that belonged to both his daughter Hannah, who died at the age of two, and to Rachel, her elder sister, from that same time. It was almost thirty years ago that Hannah died in the strange explosion of a car. Chris places his great-grandmother's thimble with these other offerings, and we add a picture of Hannah and one





VENS. DHAMMARAKKHO AND APPAMĀDO  
AT SHIPSHIP PASS, ALSO KNOWN  
AS NARA BHANJYANG LA

of Luang Por Chah. We chant and share our blessings, letting go of family; leaving it and all the world behind.

Beside me a young couple, gloved and aproned in sturdy leather, take three steps and bow, measuring their length on the rocks. They make a beeline up the slope, bowing every third step, ignoring the twists and turns that offer a more gentle rise to the path. Their intent, their faith, shimmer in the air around them.

The climb along and up beyond the place of death represents the journey though the *bardo*. These are the intermediary states that follow the death of the body, wherein we meet the unpaid debts and residues of former lives, incalculable in number.

I endeavour to meet the present at every step, breathing it in deeply – ever present, ever onward, up to the highest pass. Circling the mountain with devotion expresses the devotion to reality, the *axis mundi* of the here and now.

The bowing couple are much quicker up the slope than I am; they go face down into rock-shards or crusty snow regardless.

The Dolma La pass – Here is the highest point of the *kora*. The rough stone *stūpas* on the pass are buried in layers of devotion, the five colours of the prayer-flag offerings obliterating the dusty greys of the rock. I sit in the

bright sun next to Tashi. Tan Appamādo is cold and ready to move on; Tan Dhammarakkho has already gone. Rory gleefully takes pictures; Chris ponders, bright eyes open wide; Nick is far below and far behind.

Here is the place of karma's ending. Here, at the highest point and the end of climbing, is the contemplation of life once you have let go of the family, the Horners and the Goldsmiths, the Hayters and the Barratts; let go of past karma and debts to any others. Here is the letting go of being a Theravādin or a Buddhist, a man or a woman, of being a human; here is the letting go of past, future and present, and of location. Here is the end of here-ness, the end of all beginnings and endings. This is the centre of the world.

The stretch of the path descending from the Dolma La embodies the contemplation of the 'clear light nature of mind' or *pabhassara citta*, wherein all debts have been paid and all identity, all attachments finished – life with no 'I' and 'mine.' Here is the challenge of fusing practical engagement with utter emptiness.

My feet fly down the hill. Ultimately all things might be equal, but *descent* is a different universe from *ascent*. I never pause for breath. Before I know it I am ahead of all the others, my booted feet mercurial, sure-footed.

I follow a local Vajrayogini as a guide down through open rock-fields. Down, ever down to a 'gust'-house with a restaurant. It is just before noon



BEASTS OF BURDEN



but none of the laymen of our group are here yet, so I assume this will be a day without a meal offering, but to my surprise a young Chinese couple offer me some food, the miraculous unsearched for.

The ground levels out and there is a long easy run on to our resting-place for the night. This is the end of the arena of clear light. Nick makes it in after everyone, after dark. He hit the wall, he tells us, climbing to the pass, but he has come through alive and that's what matters.

Zutulpuk Monastery – Settled on the Southeastern edge of the *kora*, this is another ancient holy site, famous as a place where the yogi Milarepa lived in a small cave.

This station of the circumambulation signifies the conscious re-entry into the world of people and things, a new birth among beings but with the heart free of delusion. From the classical Theravādin point of view this might be seen as an impossibility, but the contemplative exercise in itself is very useful. In the Pali Canon the Buddha encourages the emulation of the enlightened by simply keeping the Eight Precepts (A 8.41), for 'in this way you will live as the arahants do ... and that will be of great and glorious benefit to you.' So at this point of the *kora* I reflect: 'How would the Buddha live in the world here, responding to this moment as it is?'

It is an easy, levellish run to the south, alongside a shining river. The road is wide and even, and there is an aura of conquest, completion in the air. Unshaven Indian pilgrims ask to have their pictures taken with us, arms thrown with carefree bonhomie round our shoulders; hats are swapped in an abandoned festive sweep. Given the many recent deaths on the *kora*, it is no surprise that a few are drunk on survival.

Back now to the world as if with no residues, with all debts paid. We debouch from the valley to a clutch of stone buildings and find the broad plain opening out before us, as well as some fifty-seater coaches waiting to take the Indian groups to their next place.

It's a long dusty road back into Tarchen, under the shadow of the foothills of Mount Kailash, so I tuck in behind our trusty porter Jigme and slip-stream him for the final miles home. For a while the grungy town seems to recede from me like a mirage, ever-retreating like a horizon. Again, ironically, its presence is now appealing, beckoning from afar.

At last even that eerie never-reachingness comes to its end and the circle is completed. We have come back to the world.

Where to go after such a journey and where to direct the attention?

Close to Mount Kailash is the sacred Lake Manasarovar, the Lake Anotatta of the Pali scriptures. It has been mythically paired with Mount Kailash from



PRECIOUS RELICS, FAMILY TREASURES -  
WE ENSHRINE THEM ON THE SLOPES OF  
MOUNT KAILASH AND WALK AWAY

time immemorial, and miraculously, even the Chinese government respects its traditions, so all boats and fishing are forbidden there.

It possesses a vast, placid and thunderous presence, and is the perfect place to rest after the physical rigours of the *kora*. Our group stayed there for three or four days, at the guest house of Chiu Gompa (the Monastery of the Birds) right at the water's edge – we could easily have stayed for a month. Still, limitless, bright, Lake Manasarovar embodied the rich roaring silence of *nirodha*. The infinite spaciousness of the lakeshore was the perfect environment in which to digest what had just been experienced; not to put the event into words or pictures, but rather to let its effects soak through the system.

And at this ending of the pilgrimage, how can those effects be described?

‘In my end is my beginning.’ Whatever the effects are, they are manifested in the mode of being at each moment, each fresh beginning. It is realized that it is possible to receive the present reality in the heart which is spacious, light and gracious. There is the possibility to be the awakened awareness that is the centre of the world.

*‘The heart of the universe is your heart.’*

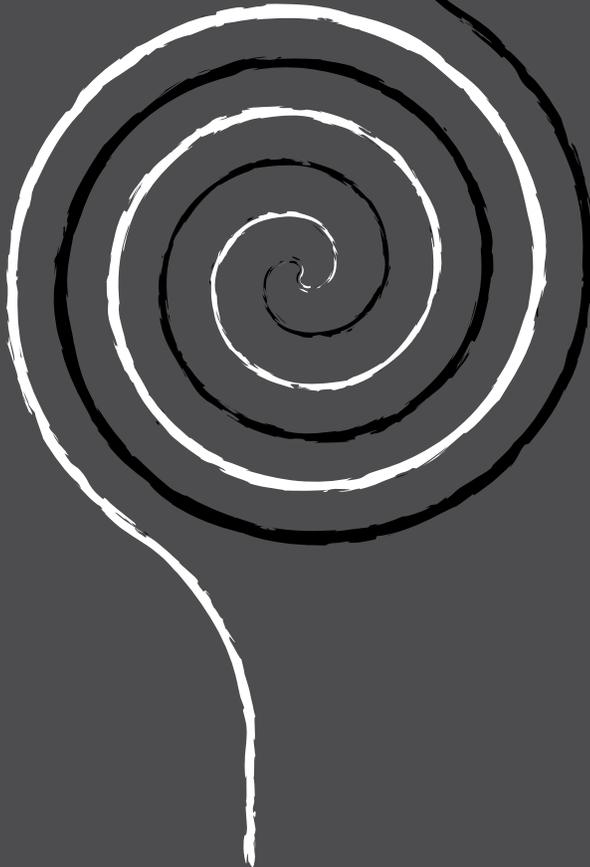
Luang Por Sumedho







# GLOSSARY





<i>ācariya-pūjā</i>	the ceremonial paying of respects to one's spiritual teacher
Ajahn (Thai)	teacher; from the Pali <i>ācariya</i> : in the Amaravati community, a bhikkhu or sīladharā who has completed ten rains retreats ( <i>vassa</i> )
<i>akkhataro Tathāgata</i>	'The Tathāgata only points the way' (Dhp 276)
<i>anagārikā(f) / anagārika(m)</i>	monastic trainee who lives on the Eight Precepts
<i>anattā</i>	literally 'not-self, non-self,' i.e. impersonal, without individual essence; neither a person nor belonging to a person; one of the three characteristics of conditioned phenomena
<i>anicca</i>	transient, impermanent, unstable, having the nature to arise and pass away; one of the three characteristics of conditioned phenomena
<i>anicca-saññā</i>	the reflective perception of impermanence
<i>anumodanā</i>	literally 'I rejoice in the good that has been done'; a blessing
Arahant	a fully enlightened person; according to the Pali Canon, the fourth and final stage on the Path

Arahantship	the state of complete liberation
<i>ariya</i>	noble
<i>attā</i> (Pali)/ <i>atman</i> (Skt.)	literally 'self' i.e. the ego, personality
<i>axis mundi</i>	literally 'axis of the world' (also cosmic axis, world axis, world pillar or world tree), in certain beliefs and philosophies it is the world centre or the connection between Heaven and Earth
<i>baht</i> (Thai)	unit of currency
<i>bardo</i> (Tibetan)	intermediary state between one life and another; plane of being; desire to become achieve or obtain something
<i>bhikkhu</i>	a fully ordained Buddhist monk
<i>bhikkhuni</i> (Pali)/ <i>bhikshuni</i> (Skt.)	a fully ordained Buddhist nun
<i>bodhi</i>	enlightenment
<i>bodhicitta</i>	a wish to attain enlightenment motivated by great compassion for all sentient beings.
Bodhisatta (Pali)/ Bodhisattva (Skt.)	literally 'one who is intent on Buddhahood'

Bodhi tree	the tree, near Bodh Gaya, India, under which the Buddha was sitting when he realized enlightenment; a <i>ficus religiosa</i>
Buddha-image/ <i>Buddha-rūpa</i>	a statue representing the Buddha
<i>Buddha-sāsana</i>	the Buddha's dispensation; the Buddhist religion
<i>citta</i>	mind, heart, psyche
<i>dāna</i>	generosity
<i>devata</i> / <i>deva</i>	heavenly being, angel
Dhamma	the teaching of the Buddha as contained in the scriptures, not dogmatic in character, but more like a raft or vehicle to convey the disciple to deliverance; also the truth and reality toward which that teaching points; that which is beyond words, concepts, or intellectual understanding.
<i>dhamma</i>	mental qualities, skilful or unskilful, that are pertinent to the process of awakening
<i>dhammatā</i>	natural; an aspect of reality
<i>dhutanga</i>	special renunciant observances, ascetic practices

<i>dukkha</i>	literally ‘hard to bear’. Dis-ease, discontent, or suffering, anguish, conflict, unsatisfactoriness; one of the three characteristics of conditioned phenomena
<i>dukkha-nirodha</i>	cessation of <i>dukkha</i>
Earth Mother, Dharāṇī	the goddess, in Buddhist mythology, who responds to the Buddha at the time of enlightenment and bears witness for him, washing away the Hordes of Māra with a flood issuing from her hair
<i>ekāyana magga</i>	literally ‘the one path’ or ‘the path that goes in one direction only’
<i>farang</i> (Thai)	foreigner, Westerner
<i>glot</i> (Thai)	large umbrella carried by forest monks and, when combined with a mosquito-net and hung from a string under the trees, used as a tent
<i>hīnayānist</i>	literally ‘one who employs an inferior vehicle’; derogatory term coined by Northern School (Mahayana) Buddhists for a group of earlier Buddhist communities; often used to refer to followers of the Southern (Theravada) School of Buddhism
<i>jhāna</i>	meditative absorptions; deep states of rapture, joy and one-pointedness

<i>Jina</i>	literally 'The Conqueror'; an epithet of the Buddha
<i>jiriki</i> (Japanese)	literally 'self-power'; contemplative practices of Buddhism, e.g. Zen meditation
<i>kamma/karma</i>	action or cause which is created by habitual impulses, volitions, intentions. In popular usage (karma) it often includes the result or effect of the action, although the proper term for this is <i>vipāka</i>
<i>karuṇā</i>	compassion; one of the Sublime Abidings
Kaṭhina ceremony	Buddhist festival based on the offering of cloth to a monastery, taking place during the last month of the Rainy Season (October/ November)
<i>ketu</i>	literally 'ray of light'; the 'flame of enlightenment', depicted as rising from the crown of the Buddha's head
<i>khandha</i>	group, aggregate, heap – the term the Buddha used to refer to each of the five components of human psycho-physical existence (form, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, consciousness)
<i>khattiya</i> (Pali)/ <i>kshatriya</i> (Skt.)	the Warrior Noble caste

<i>kora</i> (Tibetan)	the pathway around Mount Kailash
<i>kuṭī</i>	a secluded and simple dwelling for a monk or nun
Luang Por (Thai)	literally, ‘revered father’, a title of respect and affection for an elder monk and teacher
<i>Mahābodhicittasattva</i> (Skt.)	literally ‘great being whose heart is committed to enlightenment’; formal term for ‘ <i>bodhisattva</i> ’
<i>Mahāsattva</i> (Skt.)	literally ‘great being’
Mahayana	one of the three major Buddhist traditions; it lays particular emphasis on altruism, compassion, and the realization of ‘emptiness’ as essentials for full awakening
<i>mālā</i>	garland or rosary
Māra	Evil and temptation personified as a deity ruling over the highest heaven of the sensual sphere; personification of the defilements, the totality of worldly existence, and death
<i>mataññutā</i>	knowing ‘the right amount’
<i>mettā</i>	loving-kindness; one of the Sublime Abidings

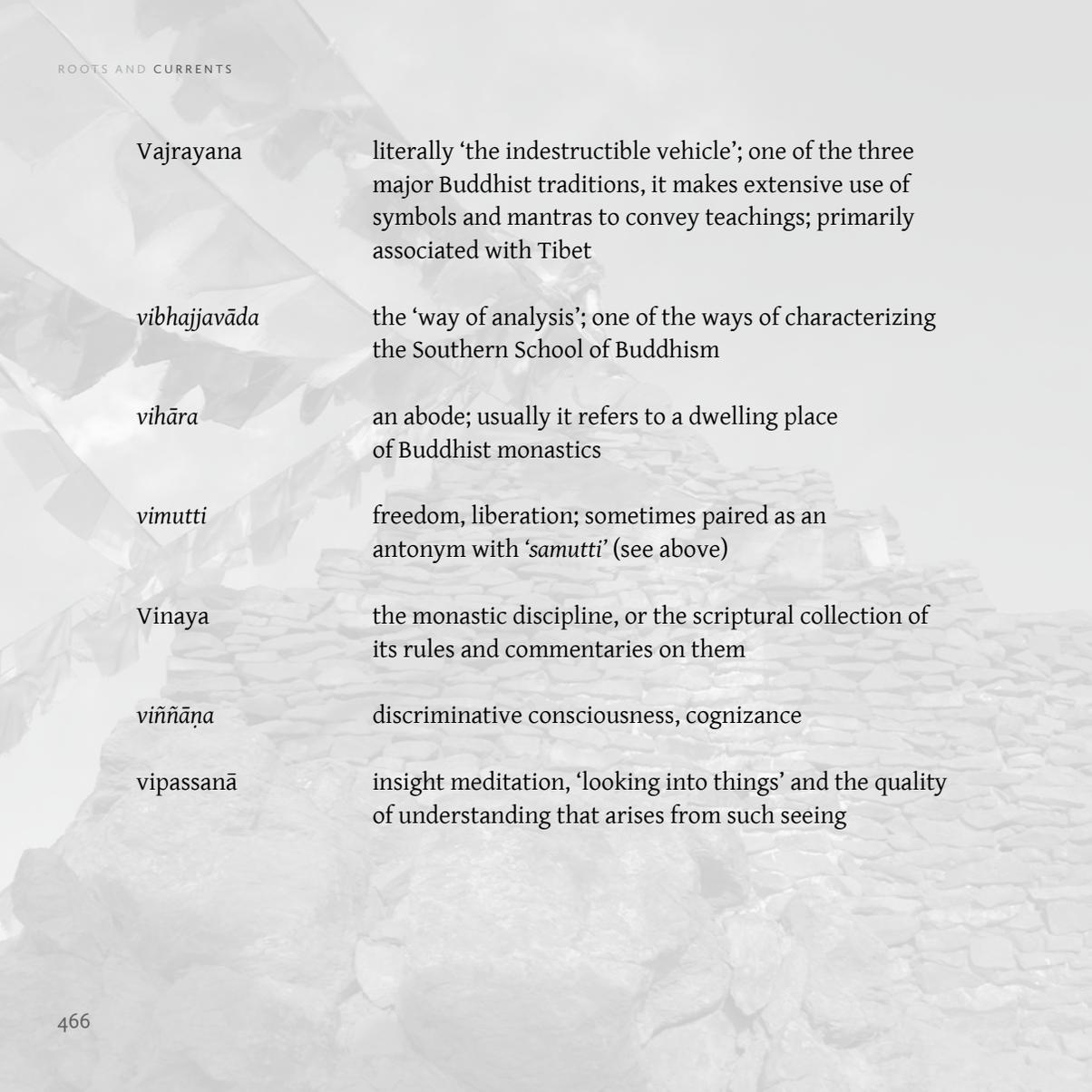
<i>mor lam</i> (Thai)	a type of energetic Northeast Thai folk music, involving spontaneous and competitive rhyming
<i>nak leng</i> (Thai)	tough guy; hard man
<i>nāma</i>	mind
<i>nāmarūpa</i>	mind-and-body or mentality-materiality; see ‘ <i>khandha</i> ’
Nibbāna	literally ‘coolness’; freedom from attachments, perfect peace
<i>nirodha</i>	literally ‘cessation’; often used as a shorthand for ‘ <i>dukkha-nirodha</i> ’ the ‘cessation of suffering’
<i>pabhassara citta</i>	the radiant mind
<i>pakati-sīla</i>	natural, intrinsic virtue or Precepts; morality based on natural law (as contrasted with <i>paññatti-sīla</i> , see below)
Pali/ <i>pālibhasa</i>	the ancient Indian language of the Pali Canon, akin to Sanskrit
<i>paññā</i> (Pali)/ <i>prajñā</i> (Skt.)	discriminative wisdom; discernment

<i>paññatti-sīla</i>	prescribed ethics or Precepts; ethical conduct based on human agreements; (as contrasted with <i>pakati-sīla</i> , see above)
<i>paramattha</i>	ultimate or transcendent; as in <i>paramattha sacca</i> , ‘ultimate truth’
<i>pāramī/ pāramitā</i>	literally ‘means of going across’, perfection. The ten perfections in Theravada Buddhism for realizing Buddhahood are giving, morality, renunciation, wisdom, energy, patience, truthfulness, determination, loving-kindness, and equanimity
<i>Parinibbāna</i>	complete or final Nibbāna; always applied to the cessation of the five <i>khandhas</i> at the passing away of an Arahant
<i>parittā</i>	literally ‘protection’; verses and passages from the scriptures that are recited to bestow blessings and to give spiritual protection
<i>Pāṭimokkha</i>	the Buddhist monastic Rule, recited every fortnight
<i>poo roo</i> (Thai)	literally ‘the one who knows’; awakened awareness
<i>pūjā</i>	a devotional offering, chanting, bowing, etc.
<i>saddhā</i>	faith

<i>sādhu</i>	‘It is well!’
<i>saha-dhammika</i>	‘fellow Dhamma-farer’, spiritual companion
<i>sakkāya-ditṭhi</i>	self-view; identification with the body and personality
<i>sālā</i>	a hall, usually where the monastics eat their food and other ceremonies are held
<i>sala tree</i>	<i>shorea robusta</i> , a tree native to southern Asia
<i>samādhi</i>	meditative concentration, collectedness
<i>sāmaṇera</i>	novice monk, living on a code of Ten Precepts
<i>saṃsāra</i>	endless wandering, unenlightened existence, the round of birth and death
<i>samutti</i>	conventional or provisional; as in <i>samuttisacca</i> , ‘conventional truth’
<i>saṅghakamma</i>	a formal, legal act of the Sangha
<i>saṅkhārā</i>	mental formations; conditioned phenomena in general
<i>saññā</i>	perception
<i>santutṭhitā</i>	contentment; being of few needs

<i>sāsana</i>	literally ‘message’; a religious dispensation or organized religion
<i>sati</i>	mindfulness, awareness
<i>sati-paññā</i>	literally ‘mindfulness and wisdom’
<i>sati-sampajañña</i>	literally ‘mindfulness and clear understanding’; also intuitive awareness, apperception
<i>sīla</i>	virtue, also used to refer to the precepts of moral conduct
<i>śīladharā</i>	‘one who upholds virtue,’ a term used for Buddhist nuns gone-forth under Ajahn Sumedho’s guidance
<i>stūpa</i>	literally ‘a heap’ is a round, mound-like or hemispherical structure, usually containing the remains of Buddhist monks or nuns after cremation; used as a place of meditation
<i>sutta</i> (Pali)/ <i>sūtra</i> (Skt.)	literally ‘a thread’; a discourse given by the Buddha or one of his disciples
<i>tamadah</i> (Thai)	ordinary

<i>tarik</i> (Japanese)	literally ‘other-power’; devotional practices of Buddhism, e.g. the mantra recitation of Pure Land Buddhism
Tathāgata	a term for the Buddha, ‘One thus come/gone’
Tāvatiṃsa Heaven	Heaven of the Thirty-Three Deities, one of the heavenly realms, according to Buddhist cosmology
thera (Pali)/ <i>sthavira</i> (Skt.)	elder monk, one who has been ordained ten or more years
Theravada	literally ‘The Way of the Elders’; the Buddhism of South Asia
therī	elder nun, one who has been ordained ten or more years
<i>tudong</i> (Thai, from Pali <i>dhutanga</i> )	the practice of walking for weeks or months in remote places with no guarantees of food or lodgings
<i>unhisa</i>	literally ‘turban’; the ‘mound of wisdom’ at the crown of a Buddha’s head
<i>upāya</i>	skilful means; a method of practice or instruction
<i>vajra</i>	diamond or thunderbolt; indestructible



Vajrayana	literally ‘the indestructible vehicle’; one of the three major Buddhist traditions, it makes extensive use of symbols and mantras to convey teachings; primarily associated with Tibet
<i>vibhajjavāda</i>	the ‘way of analysis’; one of the ways of characterizing the Southern School of Buddhism
<i>vihāra</i>	an abode; usually it refers to a dwelling place of Buddhist monastics
<i>vimutti</i>	freedom, liberation; sometimes paired as an antonym with ‘ <i>samutti</i> ’ (see above)
Vinaya	the monastic discipline, or the scriptural collection of its rules and commentaries on them
<i>viññāṇa</i>	discriminative consciousness, cognizance
<i>vipassanā</i>	insight meditation, ‘looking into things’ and the quality of understanding that arises from such seeing

- D: *Dīgha Nikāya*, The Long Discourses of the Buddha.
- M: *Majjhima Nikāya*, The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha.
- A: *Anguttara Nikāya*, The Discourses Related by Numbers.
- S: *Samyutta Nikāya*, The Discourses Related by Subject.
- SN: *Sutta Nipāta*, A collection of the Buddha's teachings, in verse form.
- Dhp: *Dhammapada*, A collection of the Buddha's teachings, in verse form.
- Iti: *Itivuttaka*, Sayings of the Buddha.
- Ud: *Udāna*, Inspired Utterances.
- MV: *Mahāvagga*, The Great Chapter, from the books of monastic discipline.
- CV: *Cūlavagga*, The Lesser Chapter, from the books of monastic discipline.
- Vib: *Vibhaṅga*, The Exposition, the main rules of the monastic discipline.
- Thig: *Therīgāthā*, The Verses of the Elder Nuns.
- Thag: *Theragāthā*, The Verses of the Elder Monks.
- Jat: *Jātaka*, The Stories of the Buddha's Previous Births.
- Vin: *Vinaya Piṭaka*, The Monastic Code of Conduct.
- Vsm: *Visuddhimagga*, The Path of Purification, a commentarial compendium.





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IN JUNE 1996 HE ESTABLISHED ABHAYAGIRI MONASTERY IN REDWOOD VALLEY, CALIFORNIA, WHERE HE WAS CO-ABBOT WITH AJAHN PASANNO UNTIL 2010. HE THEN RETURNED TO AMARAVATI TO BECOME ABBOT OF THIS LARGE MONASTIC COMMUNITY.

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