

THUNDER  
IN AN  
OPEN SKY

~

THE LIFE & TEACHING  
OF LUANG POR CHAH

~

Amaro Bhikkhu

*Sometimes there's thunder  
and there's no rain;  
sometimes there's rain  
and there's no thunder\*.*

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\* This is the complete “spiritual autobiography” that Ajahn Chah wrote for the ecclesiastical authorities when pressed repeatedly by them to provide one, so that the King of Thailand could award him an honorary title.

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 there is a pool of warm light, thrown from a pair of kerosene lanterns, illuminating the open area below a hut raised up on stilts. Beneath it, in the glow, a couple of dozen people are gathered around 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.

In some ways the group that is gathered here is a motley crew: close beside Ajahn Chah (or *Luang Por*, Venerable Father, as he is affectionately known to his students) are a cluster of *bhikkhus* (monks) and novices; most of them are Thai or Lao but there are a few pale-skinned figures among them – 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. A few of those here Luang Por played with as a child – catching frogs and climbing trees – others he helped and was helped by, in the years before he was 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 Dharma group to study Buddhism; an American nun has come over with her from the women’s section of the monastery, to guide her through the forest paths and to translate.

Beside them sit three or four other nuns, elder sisters from the nuns’ section, who decided to take the opportunity to come over as well, to ask advice from Luang Por about an issue in the women’s community and to request that he come over to their side of the forest and give a Dhamma talk to their whole group – it’s been several days now since he last paid them a visit. They’ve been there for a couple of hours already, so they pay their respects and take their leave, along with the other visitors from the nuns’ section – they need to 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 far 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 kid brother – who ran with his gang and with whom he'd been through a 1000 scrapes together – went down with cerebral malaria and was dead within days. Since then he has felt as if his heart had a spear through it and that everything in the world had lost its flavor. “If he had been killed in a knife fight at least I could take revenge – 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 stark 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; next thing the hard man has his head in Luang Por's hands and is weeping like a baby; next he is somehow laughing at his own arrogance and self-obsession – he realizes that he's not the first or only person ever to have lost a dear one – the 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 around the planet, they are all united at this one moment 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 that Ajahn Chah spent teaching. It is significant that, both in longer expositions on formal occasions as well as in such impromptu dialogues, the flow of teaching, and to whom in particular it was directed, was highly spontaneous and unpredictable. In many ways when Ajahn Chah was teaching he was like a master musician: both leading the flow of harmonious sound and yet 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.

In any kind of crowd gathered around him, he might use an example of the right and wrong ways to peel a mango one moment, then be describing the nature of Ultimate Reality the next – with identical matter-of-fact familiarity. In one moment he might be gruff and cold to the inflated then charming and gentle to the shy; he might crack a joke with an old friend from the village and, with the next turn, 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 find Luang Por's hand moving to remove his false teeth and then handing them to his attendant bhikkhu to be cleaned up a little. His interlocutor would then have to pass the test of the great master responding to his profound question through broad lips folded in over his gums, before his fresh set of teeth was installed...

Ajahn Chah most often gave teachings at such spontaneous gatherings, but he was also very generous with his wisdom on more prescribed occasions – such as after the recitation of the bhikkhus' rules, or to the whole assembly of laity and monastics on the weekly lunar observance night – however, whether they were of either the former or the latter kind, Ajahn Chah never planned anything. Not one syllable of anything he taught was ever plotted out before he started speaking. This was an extremely important principle, he felt, as the job of the teacher was to get out of the way and to let the Dhamma arise according to the needs of the moment – if it's not alive to the present, it's not 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 to have to speak to a couple of hundred people who were used to Ajahn Chah's high standard of wit and wisdom, but also to have to do it in Thai, a language he had only started learning three or four years before. The mind teemed with fears and ideas. He had been reading about the Six Realms of Buddhist cosmology and their correlation to psychological states (anger and the hell realms, sensual bliss and the heavenly realms etc.) He decided that this would be a good theme, and he thought through all his ideas and the right phrases for them. On the big night he gave, what he (Ajahn

Sumedho) felt 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 that espoused throughout what is known as the Thai Forest Tradition, and 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 has sprung.

### **THE FOREST TRADITION**

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

When the Bodhisattva left the life of the palace at the age of 29, it was to move into the forest and to train in the yogic disciplines that were available in his time. The story is well-known how he became dissatisfied with the teachings of his first instructors and left them to find his own way. 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 his whole life in a forest, and finally passed away in a forest. When choice was possible it was the environment he opted to live in 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 practice 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 "Theravāda."

As far as the sketchy historical accounts can tell us, 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 they had a second council, again to go over all the teachings, in the attempt to keep everyone in accord. However, as it transpired, it was at this time that the first major split in the Sangha occurred. The larger portion of the Sangha wanted to change some of the rules, including allowing the monastics to use money.

The smaller group was cautious about these proposed changes. Rather they felt: "Well, whether it makes sense or not, we want to do things the way the Buddha and his original disciples did." Those of the small group were known as the *Sthaviras* (in Sanskrit) or *Theras* (in Pali), meaning "Elders." After about another 130 years, they gave rise to the Theravāda school. "Theravāda" 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: "For better or for worse, 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 to it.

As with all religious traditions and 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 up to eighteen, maybe more, schools and lineages with diverging views of the *Buddha-sāsana*, the Buddha's dispensation. One lineage became established in Sri Lanka, somewhat at a remove 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. This 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, some were more philosophical and metaphysical, with a scholarly appeal. Out of all this, Theravāda Buddhism crystallized. And despite wars, famines and other cultural upheavals on the Indian sub-continent, the Theravādins have survived to the present day, largely because of originally having become well-established on the island of Sri Lanka – a safer haven than many others. Other Buddhist schools operated there;

however Theravāda Buddhism was continually restored and maintained as the main religion of the island.

The lineage eventually spread throughout South-east Asia as at different times missionaries were invited from Sri Lanka and India; they went out to Burma and later on to Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos – latterly from these countries to the West. Throughout this time of geographical dispersion of the Theravāda tradition, the theme of a continual looking back to the standards of the Pali Canon has been sustained. When being established in new countries, there has always been a strong sense of respectfulness and reverence for the original teachings, and also a respect for the style of life as embodied by the Buddha and the original Sangha, the forest-dwelling monastics of the earliest times. This is the model that was employed then and has thus been carried on.

Obviously in these many centuries, there have been lots of ups and downs, but this pattern is what has carried on. 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 out in Thailand, and some from Burma would boost it up – supporting each other over the centuries. Thus the religion has managed to keep itself afloat and still largely in its original form.

Another aspect of these cycles, along with degeneration, was the problem of success. Often, when the religion became well-developed, the monasteries would get rich, the whole system would become obese and corrupted, 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 would again return to those original standards of keeping the monastic rules, practicing meditation and studying the original Teachings.

It’s significant to note that this cycle of progress, overinflation, corruption and reform has taken place many times in many other Buddhist countries over the ages as well. It is striking how the lives and practices of such luminaries as Ven. Patrul Rimpoche in Tibet and Ven. Master Hsu Yün in China (both of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries) are totally in accord with the spirit of the Forest Tradition. Both of these great masters chose to live lives of great simplicity, kept the monastic discipline very strictly, were accomplished meditators and highly gifted teachers. They largely avoided the burdens of rank and official responsibility but inevitably came to positions of great influence through the sheer power of their wisdom and virtue. This is exactly the pattern of life as exemplified by the great forest ajahns of Thailand.

By the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century Buddhism in Thailand had a rich variety of regional traditions and practices but the general field of spiritual life had become somewhat corrupt, with lax monastic discipline, Dhamma Teachings mixed up with confused vestiges of tantra and animism, plus the fact that hardly anyone practiced meditation any more. In addition to this, 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 nor, in fact, even to attain *jhāna* (meditative absorption).

This was something that the revivers of the Forest Tradition refused to accept. It was also one of the reasons for which they were deemed mavericks and trouble-makers by the ecclesiastical hierarchy of the time, and it lies behind the obvious disdain many of them had (Ajahn Chah included) for the majority of study monks of their own Theravāda lineage – as well as their refrain that “you don't get wisdom from the books.”

It is necessary to spell this point out, otherwise it will be puzzling as to why Ajahn Chah was as down on study as he was – especially as Theravāda is supposed to have great reverence for the word of the Buddha. It is a crucial point that delineates the Thai Forest monastics: the determination to focus on the life style, and on personal experience, as against the books (especially the Commentaries). One might find such sentiments presumptuous or arrogant, or seeming to be expressing the jealousy of an unlearned mind for its betters, unless it is understood that the interpretations of scholars were leading Buddhism into a black hole. In short it was just the kind of situation that made the spiritual landscape ripe for renewal and it was out of 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. This was the Venerable Ajahn Mun Bhuridatta. He was born in the 1870s in Ubon Province, where Thailand meets with Laos and Cambodia. It was then, and still is, one of the poorer quarters of the country, but it is also one where the harshness of the land and the good-humored 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 – and also 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 also had recognized that a 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 vigor.

Even though both of these elements (i.e. meditation and strict discipline) might seem unremarkable from the vantage point of the present day, at that time monastic discipline had grown remarkably slipshod 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 also became an exemplar of a much higher standard of conduct for the monastic community. Furthermore, despite living in the remote provinces, he became the most highly regarded of spiritual teachers in his country. Almost all of the most accomplished and revered meditation masters of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century in Thailand were either his direct disciples or were deeply influenced by him. Ajahn Chah was amongst these.

#### **AJAHN CHAH**

Ajahn Chah was born into a large and comfortable family in a village in 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, on reaching the age of twenty took higher ordination. As a young bhikkhu he studied some basic Dhamma, the Discipline and other scriptures. Later, dissatisfied with the slack standard of conduct 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 practiced 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.

Here is a description of that most significant of encounters, from the as yet unpublished biography of Luang Por Chah, *Uppalamani* – a play on words meaning both “The Jewel of Ubon Province” and “The Jewel in the Lotus” – composed by Phra Ong Neung.

At the end of the retreat, Ajahn Chah, together with three other monks and novices and two laymen set off on the long walk back to Isahn (the North-east of Thailand). They broke the journey at Bahn Gor, and after a few days rest, began a 250 kilometer hike northwards. 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 that 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* (large umbrellas from which a mosquito net is hung) 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, minds fluctuating between keen anticipation and cold fear, made their way to the wooden *sālā* (meeting hall) to pay respects to Ajahn Mun. Crawling on his knees towards the great master, flanked on both sides by the resident monks, Ajahn Chah approached a slight and aged figure with an indomitable diamond-like presence. It is easy to imagine Ajahn Mun's bottomless eyes and his 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 up he would have noticed how prominently Ajahn Mun's collarbone jutted 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-honored custom amongst Buddhist monks, Ajahn Mun first asked the visitors how long they had been in the robes, the monasteries they had practiced 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 becoming stronger and faster as he proceeded, as if he was moving into a 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 enrapt. Ajahn Chah later said that although he had spent an exhausting day on the road, hearing Ajahn Mun's Dhamma talk made all of 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 second 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 this injunction to make himself *sītibhūto* i.e. a witness to the truth. But the most clarifying explanation, one that gave him the necessary context or basis for practice that he had been hitherto lacking, 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, to the mind itself. If you see that then you can stop, you can put things down. When conventional realities are seen for what they are then it'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 Luang Boo 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, he was invited to settle in a dense forest near the village of his birth, Bahn Gor. This grove was uninhabited, known as a place of cobras, tigers and ghosts, thus being as he said, the perfect location for a forest bhikkhu. Around Ajahn Chah a large monastery formed as more and more bhikkhus, nuns and lay-people came to hear his teachings and stay on to practice with him. Now there are disciples living, practicing meditation and teaching in more than 200 mountain and forest branch monasteries throughout Thailand and the West.

Although Ajahn Chah passed away in 1992, the training which 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 requisites 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 practice walking meditation on cleared paths under the trees.

In some of the monasteries in the West, and at a few in Thailand, the physical location of the center dictates that there might be some small variations to this style – for instance, the monastery in Switzerland is situated in a old wooden hotel building at the edge of a mountain village – however, regardless of such differences, the exact same spirit of simplicity, quietude and scrupulosity

sets the abiding tone. Discipline is maintained strictly, enabling one to lead a simple and pure life in a harmoniously regulated community where virtue, meditation and understanding may be skillfully and continuously cultivated.

Along with monastic life as it is 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. Even though the forests have been 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 sustained by his monks and nuns in many countries of the West 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 endeavored to preserve the simple monastic life-style in all its dimensions in order that people may study and practice 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 *kuti* (meditation cabin) in the forest. As the timbers that 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 as such structures are usually designed to be just enough space for one person to live in comfortably: customarily about eight feet by ten feet, with a roof peak at around seven feet.

"Don't worry, it's not being wasteful," he 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 let them adapt to the climate, food and culture as

best they could, and furthermore to use any discomfort that they might feel as food for the development of wisdom and patient endurance – two of the qualities that he recognized as central to any spiritual progress.

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 practice. 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. It so happened that many of the villagers were long-standing 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 approval from Ajahn Chah 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 come and establish a Theravādan 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 Vihara, a townhouse on a busy street in North London. Within 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. Other monasteries have grown up in France, Australia, New Zealand, Switzerland, Italy, Canada and the U.S. Ajahn Chah himself traveled twice to Europe and North America, in '77 and '79, and wholeheartedly supported these new foundations. He once said that Buddhism in Thailand was like an old tree that once been vigorous and abundant; now it was so aged that it could only produce a few fruits, and those were small and bitter. Buddhism in the West he likened in contrast 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, on his visit to the U.S. in 1979, he commented, "Britain is a good place for Buddhism to get established in the West but it too is an old

culture. The U.S., 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 up a Buddhist meditation center, he also 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 existent 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

Before describing the emphases of Ajahn Chah’s teachings, it might be helpful, particularly for those unfamiliar with Theravāda Buddhism in general, or with the Thai Forest Tradition in particular, to outline first some of the key terms, attitudes and concepts that are used in this connection<sup>[AP1]</sup>.

#### ❖ 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 *The Setting in Motion of the Wheel of Truth* – which he gave to five monastic companions in the deer park near Varanasi, 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 was always drawing on structures and forms that were familiar to people in 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, however there are times when 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 this comes under the heading of “dukkha.”

Sometimes people read this First Truth and misinterpret it as an absolute statement, that “Reality in every dimension is dukkha.” The statement gets taken as a value judgment of all and everything, but that’s not what is meant here. If it were, then that would mean that there was no hope of liberation for anyone, and to realize the truth of the way things are, the Dhamma, would not result in an abiding peace and happiness which, according to the insight of the Buddha, it does.

What is most significant, therefore, is that these are *noble* truths, not *absolute* truths. They are noble in the sense that they are relative truths, but when they are understood, they lead us to a realization of the Absolute or the Ultimate.

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

The Third Truth is that of *dukkha-nirodha* – this is the prognosis. Nirodha means “cessation.” This means that this 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 that the heart can be liberated from.

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

#### ❖ The law of karma

One of the crucial underpinnings of the Buddhist world-view is that of the inviolability of the law of cause and effect: every action 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 as well. The insight of the Buddha 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. It might be that the results come soon after

the act or at some very remote time, but the effect which matches the cause will necessarily follow.

The Buddha also made it clear that the key element of karma is intention – as it says in the opening words of the *Dhammapada*, the most famous and well-loved of all Theravādan 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)

This understanding, learned at an early age and taken for granted in much of Asia, resonates throughout most Dhamma teachings, in one form or another. However, even though it 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 being accepted 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 that they didn’t believe in karma as he described it, rather than criticizing them or dismissing them as having “wrong view,” or feeling like he had to make them see things his way, he was interested that someone could look at things in such a different manner – he would ask them to describe how they saw things working, and then take the conversation from there.

❖ Everything is uncertain

Another of the central, oft repeated teachings, is that of the Three Characteristics of Existence. From the second discourse that the Buddha gave (the *Anattālakkaṇa Sutta*, MV 1.6, S 22.59), and on through the rest of his teaching career, he outlined the fact that all phenomena, internal or external, mental or physical, have three invariable qualities: *anicca-dukkha-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. And when these three qualities have been seen and known through direct experience, then insight can truly be said to have dawned.

Anicca is the first member of the insight-forming triad and its contemplation was stressed constantly by Ajahn Chah over the years as being the primary gateway to wisdom. As he says in one of his talks, “Still, Flowing Water” – “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 annica, 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. Where "impermanence" can have a more abstract or technical tone to it, "uncertainty" better describes the feeling in the heart when that quality of change is met with.

❖ Choice of expression: "yes" or "no"

One of the most striking characteristics of the Theravāda 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 an "apophatic method" – talking about what God is not – as contrasted with a "kataphatic method" – talking about what God is. This apophatic style of approach, also known 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 his *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, his description of the most direct spiritual method (i.e. straight up the mountain) runs something like: "Nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing, and even on the Mountain, *nothing*."

The Pali Canon possesses much of the same *via negativa* flavor and because of this readers have often mistaken this for a nihilistic view on life – 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 practiced austerities before going off alone, to seek the Truth his own way. Along the road another ascetic wanderer, Upaka by name, saw him approaching and was greatly struck by the Buddha's 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 he 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 Varanasi 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 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 either, so, by the time he reached the Deer Park outside of Varanasi and had met up with his former companions, he had adopted a much more analytical method (*vibhajjāvada* 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...”

In the Buddha’s second discourse (again, the *Anattālakkhana Sutta*) which was also given in the Deer Park at Varanasi and was the teaching which caused the five companions to all realize enlightenment, this via negativa method is most clearly displayed. This is not the place to go into the *sutta* in detail, but in summary the Buddha uses the search for the self (*atta* in Pali, *atman* in Skt) 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; by thus demonstrating he then states: “the wise noble disciple becomes dispassionate towards 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.”

The lion's share of the Buddha's teaching, particularly in the Theravāda tradition, thus addresses the nature of the Path and how best to follow it, rather than waxing lyrically about the Goal. This was also true of Ajahn Chah's style in the most part. He avoided talking about levels of attainment and levels of meditative absorption as much as possible, both to counteract spiritual materialism (the gaining mind, competitiveness and jealousy) as well as to keep people's eyes 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 demand it – regardless of whether those gathered were young or old, lay people or monastics. If, however, he thought that a person's understanding was not yet ripe (similarly regardless of ordination status) yet they insisted on asking about transcendent qualities, he might well respond, as he once did when asked if there was something outside the conventional body-mind (the five *khandhas*): "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 Teaching, Ajahn Chah frequently responded that his experience had shown him that all spiritual progress depended upon Right View and on purity of conduct. Of Right View the Buddha once 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 karma – secondly it means that one sees experience in the light of the Four Noble Truths and is 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 these were the Five Precepts of the householder or the Eight, Ten or 227 of the various levels of the monastic community. Virtuous action and speech, *sīla*, directly brings the heart into accord 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, then certainly our actions are more likely to be harmonious and restrained; similarly, if our actions and speech are respectful, honest and non-violent, then we create the causes of peace within us and 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, which Ajahn Chah spoke of regularly, 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 try to defy them or negate them we find ourselves lost, conflicted and bewildered. He saw that, with the right attitude, both aspects could be respected and 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 – a fact perhaps ironic about 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 who was delighted by the fact that Wat Pah Pong had the reputation for “the worst food in the world.”

#### ❖ Methods of training

There were 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, however, the majority of the learning process occurred through what might best be described as situational teaching. Ajahn Chah realized that, in order for the heart to truly learn any aspect of the teaching and be transformed by it, the lesson had to be absorbed experientially, not intellectually alone. Thus he employed the 10,000 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 of these and more

were used as a forum 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 emphasise 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 more responded to where someone was coming from rather than answered 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 they had answered their own question. When asked how it was that 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 that he encouraged were, firstly, the need to cultivate a profound sense of urgency in meditation practice and, secondly (and again paradoxically), to use the training environment to develop patient endurance. This latter quality is not one that has received a great deal of attention in recent times, particularly in spiritual circles in the "quick fix" culture of the West, but in the forest life it is seen as almost synonymous with spiritual training.

When the Buddha was giving his very first instructions on monastic discipline, and this was to a spontaneous gathering of 1250 of his enlightened disciples at the Bamboo Grove, his first words were: "Patient endurance is the supreme practice for freeing the heart from unwholesome states." (Dhp 183–85, D 14.3.28) So when someone would come 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 neither 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, to understand its causes and let them go.

#### ❖ Teaching the laity and teaching monastics

There were certainly many occasions when Ajahn Chah's teachings were as applicable to lay people as to monastics but there were also many instances when

they were not. Such a distinction was not made because of certain teachings being “secret” or higher in some respect, rather it was through the need to speak in ways that would be appropriate and useful to particular audiences.

Lay practitioners would naturally have a different range of concerns and influences on their daily life – e.g. trying to find time for formal meditation practice, maintaining an income, living with a spouse – that a monastic would not. Also, most particularly, the lay community would not have undertaken vows of the renunciate life. An average lay student of Ajahn Chah would commit themselves to a standard of 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, the focus would be much more specifically on using the renunciant way of life as the key methodology of training; the instruction would therefore concern itself with the hurdles, pitfalls and glories that that way of life might bring. Since the average age of the monks’ community in a monastery in Thailand is usually around 25 to 30, and with the precepts around celibacy being kept extremely strictly, there was also a natural need for Ajahn Chah to guide skilfully the restless and sexual energy that his monks would often experience. When well-directed the individuals would be able to contain and employ that same energy, and transform it to help develop concentration and insight.

The tone of some of his talks to monastics would, in certain instances, also be seen to be considerably more fierce than those given to the lay community. This manner of expression represents something of the “take no prisoners” style which is characteristic of many of the teachers of the Thai Forest Tradition. It is a way of speaking that is intended to rouse the warrior heart – that attitude towards 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 could come across as overly forceful or combative in its tone; those listening to such teachings would, however, bear in mind that the spirit behind such language was always the endeavor to encourage them, 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 intense current of self-centered habits 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 to be especially for the monastics. If he felt a group of people was ready for the highest levels of teaching, he would impart that freely and openly: for example, in one of his talks to a group of lay people ("Still, Flowing Water") 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 knew nothing of the "teacher's closed fist," and made his choices of what to teach solely on the basis of what would be useful to his listeners, not on their number of precepts, their religious affiliation or lack of one.

❖ Counteracting superstition

One of the characteristics that Ajahn Chah was most well known for was his keenness to dispel superstition in relation to Buddhist practice in Thailand. He strongly criticized the magic charms, amulets and fortune-telling that pervade so much of that society. He rarely spoke about past or future lives, other realms, visions or psychic experiences. If anyone 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) they would generally get 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 samsāra.

Over and over he emphasized the usefulness and practicality of Buddhist practice – counteracting 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 were not 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, there was also an ironic twist of circumstance that accompanied his funeral, in 1993: he passed away on the 16<sup>th</sup> of January, 1992 and they held the funeral exactly a year later; the memorial stupa had 16 pillars, was 32 meters high, and had foundations 16 meters 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 16s had cleaned up and a couple of local bookmakers had even been bankrupted.

### ❖ Humor

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. Although he could be very cool and forbidding, or sensitive and gentle in his way of expression, he also used a high degree of humor 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 wit and skillful 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 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 45 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 he 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 being an example of the uncertain processes of life and by giving opportunity for his monks and novices 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 24-hour-a-day 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 is going on. Had Ajahn Chah been fully active, it would have been unthinkable that they would have got into such a spat in front of him.

As the words got 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 embarrassed and abrupt conclusion.

During the course of his illness the life of the monasteries continued much as before; the Master being both there yet not there served in a strange way to help the community to adapt to communal decision-making and to the concept of life without their beloved teacher at the center of everything. After such a great elder passes away it is not uncommon for things to dissipate rapidly and for all of their students to go their own way, the teacher's legacy vanishing within a generation or two. It is perhaps a testimony to how well Ajahn Chah trained people to be self-reliant that, whereas at the time of his falling sick there were about 75 branch monasteries, this increased to well over 100 by the time of his demise and has now grown to more than 200, in Thailand and around the world.

After he passed away, in 1992, his monastic community set about arranging his funeral. In keeping with the spirit of his life and teachings, this event was not to be just a ceremony but also a time for hearing and practicing Dhamma. It was held over ten days with several periods of group meditation and instructional talks each day, these being given by many of the most accomplished Dhamma teachers in the country. There were about 6,000 monks, 1,000 nuns and just over 10,000 lay people camped in the forest for the entire

session. Besides these, an estimated 1,000,000 people came through the monastery during the course of the practice period; 400,000, including the king and queen and the prime minister of Thailand, came on the day of the cremation itself.

In the spirit of the standards Ajahn Chah espoused during his whole teaching career, throughout this whole occasion not one cent 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 \$250,000 worth of free Dhamma books were passed out; bottled water was provided by the ton through a local firm, and the local bus company, and other nearby truck 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.

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March, 2007*