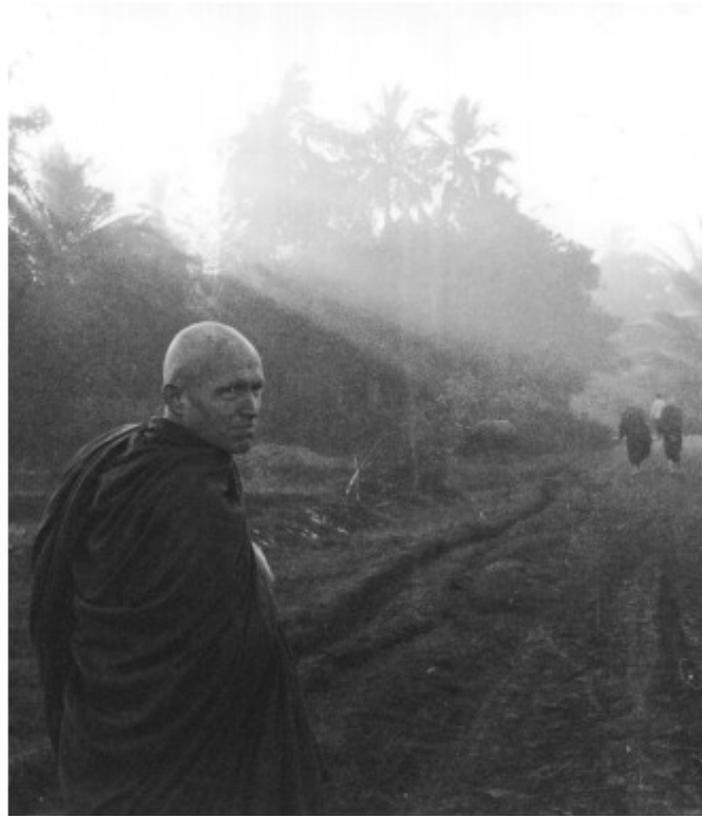


Twain Shall Meet

*A Short History of how Western Monks
came to Ajahn Chah
by Ajahn Jayasāro*



Introduction

From the mid-fourteenth century until its sack by the Burmese in 2310 (1767), Ayudhya was the capital of the Thai nation. Established on an island in the Jow Phya River it was ideally situated to act as an entrepot port at a time when land routes were safer than sea, and merchants in the Orient sought to avoid the Straits of Malacca. Within two hundred years

Ayudhya had become one of the most thriving cosmopolitan cities in Asia. Its population at a million exceeded that of London. Around five hundred temples, many with pagodas covered in gold leaf, lent the city a magical, heaven-like aura that dazzled visiting traders. By the mid-seventeenth century the inhabitants of Ayudhya were accustomed to the sight of *farang*¹. Communities of traders from France, Holland, Portugal and England were housed outside the city wall. The kings of Ayudhya often employed foreign mercenaries as bodyguards. To the Thais these strange white beings seemed like a species of ogre: hairy, ill-smelling, quarrelsome and coarse; lovers of meat and strong spirits, but possessors of admirable technical skills, particularly in the arts of war.

The ogres had a religion — priests and monks accompanied them but it was unappealing to the Thais who were content with their own traditions. Having long equated spirituality with renunciation of sensual pleasures they perceived the Western religious to live luxurious lives. They found the way the missionaries slandered each other in their competition for converts undignified; they saw little agreement between their actions and words. The Ayudhyan Thais gently rebuffed what they saw as an alien faith with politeness and smiles. But the legendary Siamese tolerance was stretched to the limit during the reign of King Narai (1656–88), when a Greek adventurer, Constantine Faulkon, became Mahatthai, minister for trade and foreign affairs, second in influence to the king himself. After his conversion to Catholicism Faulkon became involved with the French in plots to put a Christian prince on the throne, and thus win the whole country for God and Louis XIV. At the old king's death in 1688, however, conservative forces prevailed, French hopes were dashed and Faulkon was executed. For the next 150 years the Siamese looked on Westerners with fear, aversion and suspicion.

But as French and British power and prestige spread throughout the region in the nineteenth century, the image of the Westerner changed. He came to represent authority and modernity, the new world order that had to be accommodated. As all the rest of the region fell into European hands, Siam's independence became increasingly fragile. King Mongkut (1851–68) reversed policies of previous monarchs and cultivated friendships with Western scholars and missionaries. He believed that the only way for a small country to survive in the colonial era was to earn the respect of the Western powers by becoming like them. He introduced Western styles of dress and uniform. He predicted eclipses by scientific means, undermining the hitherto unshakeable prestige of the astrologers. He sought to reform popular Buddhism along more rational 'scientific' lines to protect it from the missionaries' disdain. After King Mongkut's death, his son, King Chulalongkorn sought to create a modern centralized state and administration, relying heavily on Western expertise. Members of the royal family and aristocracy were sent to study in the West, particularly England. The humiliation inflicted upon the Thais by the French annexation of their eastern territories confirmed the superiority of the West in things worldly.

By the time that Ajahn Chah reached manhood Western culture had already attained its pre-eminent position. Amongst the wealthy elite, expensive imported clothes, motor vehicles, gadgets and foods were the sought-after status symbols. The absolute monarchy was overthrown in 1932 in favour of a Western style democracy that was soon displaced by a more potent import: military dictatorship. Fascism was the new vogue — far more appealing to the military men running the country than the messiness of political debate, far more - accommodating to the Thai penchant for uniforms. Field Marshall Pibulsongkram passed

¹ Derived from 'Frank' or 'French', the first Westerners known to the Thais.

laws making it compulsory for men to wear hats and kiss their wives on the cheek before leaving for work in the morning. The country's name was changed to Thailand. Chauvinism was promoted in the guise of patriotism. The marginalization of Buddhist goals and ideals, coupled with official support for Buddhist forms and rituals, became a feature of future development.

In the hamlets of Ubon, images of the West came from Hollywood. Travelling movie companies set up their screens and loud speakers in village monasteries; Clark Gable and Greta Garbo enchanted their audiences in homely Lao, dubbed live from behind the screen. Thus, the first flesh-and-blood glimpse of farangs in Ubon, exciting though it was, came as a shock. While the newly-ordained Ajahn Chah was studying in local village monasteries, a group of gaunt ragged P.O.W.s, was gaoled in the centre of town. They were prisoners of the occupying Japanese forces, hostages against allied bombing raids. The local people smuggled them bananas.

Then in the nineteen sixties came the Vietnam War. Ubon, closer to Hanoi than to Bangkok, attained a strategic importance once more. By the end of the decade twenty thousand young Americans were stationed on a sprawling airbase to the north of the town. Huge uniformed men, black, brown and white, strode along the streets hand-in-hand with mini-skirted prostitutes, caroused in tacky nightclubs with names like 'Playboy', took their minds on vacation with 'Buddha sticks'. Overhead, every few minutes, came the deafening sound of F4 fighters and heavily-laden bombers taking off on missions over Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam.

American military personnel were not, however, the only young Westerners in Thailand at that time. It was during this period that villagers working in the fields to the east of Wat Pah Pong became used to a strange new sight. Tall, fair-skinned young men with long hair, T-shirt and faded blue jeans would often be seen walking along the ox-track with a dogged diffident stride, large grubby backpack like a malignant growth behind them. These young men were the first trickles of the steady stream of Westerners that was to find its way to Ajahn Chah. They were to become the senior members of a Western Sangha that now numbers around a hundred monks and nuns.

More than words

“Luang Por, only a few of your Western disciples speak Thai and you can't speak their language. How do you teach them?” This was one of the most common questions that Ajahn Chah faced from the early seventies onwards as the number of his Western disciples rapidly increased. He would explain that he was teaching Buddhism not as a philosophy but as a way of liberation; pointing directly to the experience of suffering and its cause was more important than finding words to describe the process. Sometimes, to clarify this point, he would pour from the thermos flask on the table beside him into a cup:

“In Thai we call this *namrawn*, in Lao it is *namhawn* and in English they call it *hot water*. These are just names. If you dip your finger into it there is no language that can convey what that feels like; but, even so, people of all nationalities know it for themselves.”

On another occasion, a visitor seeing all the foreign bhikkhus, asked Ajahn Chah whether he

spoke English or French or German or Japanese, to which, in every case, Ajahn Chah replied that no, he could not. The questioner looked confused: how did the foreign bhikkhus learn anything then? Ajahn Chah replied, characteristically, with a question:

“At your home do you keep any animals? Have you got cats and dogs? Have you got any oxen or buffalo? Yes? Well can you speak Cat language? Can you speak Dog? Can you speak Buffalo? No? Then how do they know what you want them to do?”

He summarized:

“It’s not difficult. It’s like training water buffaloes. If you just keep tugging the rope, they soon catch on.”



To Thais, water buffaloes are the epitome of dullness and stupidity. Comparing a human being to a buffalo would normally be considered offensive; someone who calls anyone a *kwai* to their face is either very angry or is spoiling for a fight. Given the exaggerated respect for the intelligence of Westerners common in Thailand, Ajahn Chah’s audience would always find the buffalo comparison hilarious.

The sight of the Western bhikkhus was a powerful one. At a time when Western technology, material advances, expertise were being so touted, here were to be found educated young men who had voluntarily renounced the things that people were being encouraged to aspire to; men who had chosen to live austere lives in the forest as bhikkhus: not understanding the language, eating coarse food, striving for peace and wisdom in the same way that Thai bhikkhus had been doing for hundreds of years. It was baffling, fascinating, and, above all else, inspiring. Many visitors would leave Wat Pah Pong thinking that perhaps there was more to Buddhism than they had thought. If the Westerners had so much faith in it, how could it be outdated?

Luang Por’s basic technique was not, he insisted, particularly mysterious; he led his Western disciples, he showed them what to do, he was an example. It wasn’t necessary to

impart a great deal of information.

“Even though I have a lot of Western disciples living with me, I don’t give them so much formal instruction. I lead them in the practice. If you do good, you get good results; if you do bad, you get bad results. I give them the opportunity to see that. When they practise sincerely, they get good results and so they develop conviction in what they’re doing. They don’t just come here to read books. They really do the practice. They abandon whatever is bad in their hearts and goodness arises in its place.”

The Westerners came to Buddhist teachings and monastic life without the cultural conditioning of the Thais. In one sense they had ‘beginners mind’. Their open, questioning attitude Ajahn Chah found refreshing and stimulating. As students they were free of the complacency that he considered such a serious obstacle for his Thai disciples. But their openness was not without drawbacks: the Westerners were often dragged into the quagmires of doubt. Whereas the Thai bhikkhus could usually give themselves to the training in a wholehearted way, fired by an unquestioning faith in the teacher and the tradition, the Westerners were often fettered by doubts. Ajahn Chah said:

“Once you’ve got them to stop, these Westerners see clearly exactly how they’ve done it, but in the beginning it’s a bit wearing on the teacher. Wherever they are, whoever they’re with, they ask questions all the time. Well, why not, if they don’t know the answers? They have to keep asking until they run out of questions, until there’s nothing more to ask. Otherwise they’d just keep running — they’re hot.”

The first disciple — Ajahn Sumedho

In 1967 a Wat Pah Pong bhikkhu called Tan Sommai returned from a thudong trip to the north of Isan with an old friend who literally stood head and shoulders above him. Even the most restrained bhikkhus in Wat Pah Pong were unable to resist at least a surreptitious glance. The new bhikkhu was 6 foot 3 inches tall, had blonde hair, an angular nose and bright blue eyes. His name was Sumedho.

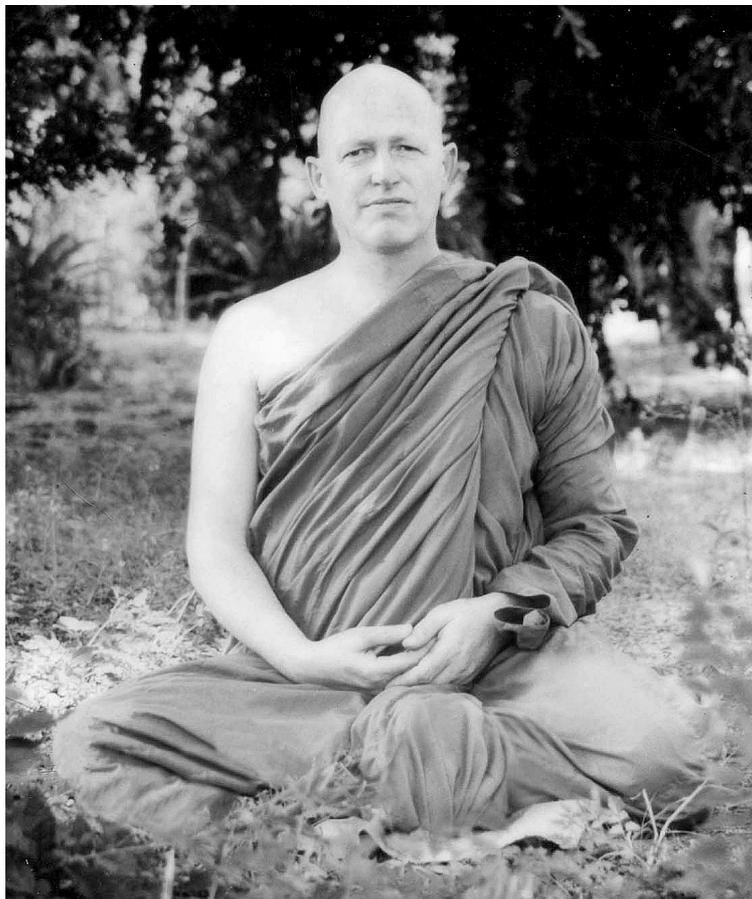
The two men had run into each other for the first time in Korea more than ten years before, dressed in the creased white uniforms of their nation’s navies. And now a second time, by coincidence, dressed in the yellow robe of the bhikkhu, they had met in the meditation monastery on the banks of the Mekhong River, where Sumedho had recently been ordained. They exchanged their stories. Sumedho told Sommai how he had returned to college after the Korean War and gained a Masters degree in Asian Studies from Berkeley. After graduation he had joined the Peace Corps and taught English in Borneo before moving on to a spell at Thammasat University in Bangkok; that it was after receiving meditation instruction at the nearby Wat Mahadhatu that his interest in Buddhism, born in Korea, had ripened into the decision to become a bhikkhu. Now, though, after some months of solitary meditation in a small hut, Sumedho was beginning to feel some frustration about the form of his monastic life, and was feeling the need for a more rounded way of practice. Tan Sommai’s descriptions of Wat Pah Pong were opportune and inspired him. His preceptor kindly gave permission for him to leave and the two bhikkhus set off to walk down to Ubon, Sumedho feeling ‘as if I was being pulled by a magnet’.

The attractive force held. Eventually Sumedho would stay for ten years, form the nucleus

around which the Western community of bhikkhus would coalesce, establish Wat Pah Nanachat, before moving to England to begin at Chithurst in Southern England, the first of more than a dozen overseas branch monasteries.

Someone once asked Luang Por whether he had any special connection with Westerners that led to so many becoming his disciples. He replied that his acquaintance was restricted to cowboy movies he had watched before he ordained.

“It was deja vu — when I was a small child I went to see a cowboy movie with my friends and one of the characters was this big man smoking cigarettes. He was so tall it fascinated me. What kind of human being could have such a huge body? The image has stuck in my mind until now. And so a lot of Westerners have come. If you’re talking about causes, there was that.



“When Sumedho arrived, he was just like the cowboy in the movie. What a long nose! As soon as I saw him, I thought to myself, “This bhikkhu is a Westerner”, and I told him that I’d seen him before in a movie. So there were supporting causes and conditions. That’s why I’ve come to have a lot of Western kith and kin. They come even though I can’t speak English. I’ve tried to train them to know the Dhamma as I see it. It doesn’t matter that they don’t know Thai customs. I don’t make anything of it, that’s the way things are. I just keep helping them out — that’s the gist of it.”

When Ajahn Sumedho asked to be accepted as a student, Luang Por agreed but made one condition, that he fitted in with the Thai bhikkhus and didn't expect any special considerations.

“At the other monasteries in Thailand where I'd lived, the fact that I'd been a Westerner had meant that I could expect to have the best of everything. I could also get out of the work and other mundane things that the other bhikkhus were expected to do: 'I'm busy meditating now. I don't have time to sweep the floor. Let someone else sweep it. I'm a serious meditator'. But when I arrived at Wat Pah Pong and people said, 'He's an American; he can't eat the kind of food we eat'. Luang Por said, 'He'll have to learn'. And when I didn't like the meditation hut I was given and asked for another that I liked better, Luang Por said, 'No'. The whole way of training was that you had to conform to the schedule. When I asked Luang Por if I could be excused from the long Dhamma talks, which I didn't understand, he just laughed and said you have to do what everyone else does.”

Wat Pah Pong provided a very different monastic environment to the one Ajahn Sumedho was familiar with. In his previous wat he had been living in solitude, sitting and walking at his hut, single-mindedly devoted to the development of a meditation technique. The only human contact of the day had been a daily interview with his teacher. It had been a beneficial period for him, but he had become unsure how sustainable such a kind of monastic life would be in the long term. What he felt he lacked was *Vinaya* training.

“At Wat Pah Pong the emphasis was on communal activities, working together, eating together, etc., with all its rules. I knew that if I was going to live as a bhikkhu I needed the bhikkhu's training and I hadn't been getting that at the meditation centre that I had been in before. What Luang Por gave me was a living situation to contemplate. You developed an awareness around the monastic tradition and it was something that I knew I needed. I needed restraint and containment. I was a very impulsive person with a tremendous resistance to any kind of authority. I had been in the navy for four years and had developed an aversion to authority and rank. And then before I went to Thailand I had spent a few years at Berkeley, California, where it was pretty much a case of 'doing your own thing'. There was no sense of having to obey anybody, or live under a discipline of any sort. But at Wat Pah Pong I had to live following a tradition that I did not always like or approve of, in a situation where I had no authority whatsoever. I had a strong sense of my own freedom and rights and asserting them, but I had no idea of serving anyone else: being a servant was like admitting you were somehow inferior. So I found monastic life very useful for developing a sense for serving and supporting the monastic community.

“What impressed me so much about Luang Por was that although he seemed such a free spirit, an ebullient character, at the same time he was very strict with the *Vinaya*. It was a fascinating contrast. In California the idea of freedom was being spontaneous and doing what you felt like; and the idea of moral restraint and discipline in my cultural background was like this big ogre that's coming to squash you, with all these rules and traditions — you can't do this and you can't do that — and pressing down on you so much.

“So my immediate reaction in a strict monastery like Wat Pah Pong was to feel oppressed. And yet my feeling about Luang Por was that although his actions were always within the margins of the *Vinaya*, he was a free being. He wasn't coming from ideas of doing what he liked but from inner freedom. So in contemplating him I began to look at the *Vinaya* so as to use it, not just to cut yourself off or to oppress yourself, but for freedom. It was like a conundrum: how do you take a restrictive and renunciant convention and liberate your mind through those conventions? I could see that there were no limits to Luang Por's mind.

Oftentimes attachment to rules makes you worry a lot and lack confidence, but Luang Por was radiant. He was obviously not just someone just keeping a lot of rules, anxious about his purity. He was a living example of the freedom that comes from practice.”

Ajahn Sumedho was impressed and reassured by Ajahn Chah’s inquiries about his meditation practice. Ajahn Chah merely acknowledged the method Ajahn Sumedho was using as valid with a grunt, and gave him permission to carry on with it if he found it useful. It did not seem to be a crucial issue. It was clear that what Ajahn Chah was teaching was not confined to a particular meditation technique but consisted of a comprehensive training, the creation of a context or environment in which any legitimate technique would bear fruit. This was exactly what Ajahn Sumedho felt he needed.

“You have to find someone you resonate with. I’d been in other places and nothing had really clicked. I didn’t have a fixed idea of having a teacher either, I had a strong sense of independence. But with Luang Por I felt a very strong gut reaction. Something worked for me with him.

“The training at Wat Pah Pong was one of putting you in situations where you could reflect on your reactions, objections, etc.; so that you began to see the opinions, views and prejudices and attachments that come up naturally in those situations. Luang Por was always emphasizing the need to reflect on the way things are. That is what I found most helpful because when you’re as self-centred and opinionated as I was then, you really need to open your mind, and so I found Luang Por’s way much more clear and direct. As I was very suppressed already, I really needed a way of looking at myself honestly and clearly, rather than just trying to suppress my feelings and force my mind into more refined states. He was also very aware of the individual needs of the bhikkhus, so it wasn’t like there was a blanket technique. He realized that you really have to figure it out for yourself and so how I saw him, how he affected me, was that he seemed to provide a backdrop for my life from which I could reflect.”

Even with this kind of appreciation of the way of practice at Wat Pah Pong, Ajahn Sumedho did not find it easy. Apart from the easily foreseen difficulties and frustrations he experienced with the language, culture, climate, diet and so on, he began, ironically, to harbor misgivings about the Vinaya. His personality had always been an idealistic one, he was drawn to the big picture, the unifying vision, and tended to get impatient with the nuts and bolts of everyday life. He felt a natural antipathy to the nit-picking and caviling over trivial matters that seemed to him to characterize Vinaya instruction.

“Even when I could understand the language, the Vinaya readings were excruciatingly boring to listen to. You’d hear about how a bhikkhu who has a rent in his robe so many inches above the hem must have it sewn up before dawn and I kept thinking, “This isn’t what I ordained for!” I was caught up in these meticulous rules, trying to figure out whether the hole in my robe was four inches above the hem or not and whether I should have to sew it up before dawn. Bhikkhus would even become argumentative about the borders of sitting cloths! When it came to the pettiness of everyday life and of living with people of many different temperaments, problems and characters, whose minds were not necessarily as inspired as mine seemed to be at the time, I felt a great depression.”

The Vinaya texts prescribe various duties to be performed towards a teacher by his students. One of them is to wash the teacher’s feet on his return from almsround. At Wat Pah Pong as many as twenty or thirty bhikkhus would be waiting for Ajahn Chah at the dining hall footbath, eager for the honour of cleaning the dirt from his feet or of having a hand on the towel that wiped them dry. At first Ajahn Sumedho found the whole thing ridiculous. Every

day he would begin to fume as bhikkhus started to make their way out to the footbath. It was the kind of ritual that made him feel alienated from the rest of the community. He would feel angry and critical.

“But then I started listening to myself and I thought, ‘This is really an unpleasant frame of mind to be in. Is it anything to get so upset about? They haven’t made me do it. It’s all right; there’s nothing wrong with thirty men washing one man’s feet. It’s not immoral or bad behaviour and maybe they enjoy it; maybe they want to do it — maybe it’s all right to do that. Perhaps I should do it.’ So the next morning thirty-one bhikkhus ran out and washed Luang Por’s feet. There was no problem after that. It felt really good: that nasty thing in me had stopped.”

Although the Buddha called praise and blame ‘worldly dhammas’, not even the most dedicated and unworldly spiritual seekers can avoid them. Throughout his early days at Wat Pah Pong, Ajahn Sumedho received generous praise. In Buddhist cultures the voluntary renunciation of sensual pleasures for spiritual training is an esteemed virtue. The sacrifices Ajahn Sumedho had made to become a bhikkhu inspired both his fellow monastics and the monastery’s lay supporters. In leaving America, and donning the yellow robe, not only had he given up a standard of living that Isan peasant farmers could only dream about, but he had done so in exchange for a life in one of the strictest and most austere forest wats in the country. The conservative Isan people—their sense of security and well-being so bound up with the maintenance of their traditions—were impressed at how well Ajahn Sumedho could live in exile from the conditions he was used to, how readily he adapted to a new climate, language and (especially) diet. They were inspired at how diligent and dedicated he was in his practice. As the only Westerner he stood out and was a centre of attention wherever he went, second only to Ajahn Chah himself.



On the other hand the Thais have a natural, apparently almost effortless physical grace and the monastic techniques of developing mindfulness by close attention to detail enhances it. For them to see Ajahn Sumedho — physically intimidating and with an obvious zeal for the practice — at the same time, by their standards, so awkward and ungainly, confused them. In most it provoked a quiet but affectionate amusement; for some that amusement was soured with a hint of fear, jealousy and resentment. Ajahn Sumedho, both a little paranoid at the attention and also enjoying it, could not help but feel self-conscious.

“They would ask, ‘How old are you?’ I’d say, ‘thirty-three’. And they’d say, ‘Really? We thought you were at least sixty.’ Then they would criticize the way I walked, and say, ‘You don’t walk right. You are not very mindful when you walk’. And I’d take this *yarm* and I’d just dump it down, without giving it any importance. And they’d say, ‘Put your bag down right. You take it like this, fold it over, and then you set it down beside you like that’. The way I ate, the way I walked, the way I talked — everything was criticized and made fun of; but something made me stay on and endure through it. I actually learnt how to conform to a tradition and a discipline — and that took a number of years, really, because there was always strong resistance. But I began to understand the wisdom of the Vinaya and over the years, my equanimity grew.”

Pushed

Ajahn Chah’s attitude to Ajahn Sumedho changed after a few years. Seeing his disciple’s growth in confidence and the praise he was receiving, he began to treat him more robustly. Ajahn Sumedho remembers:

“For the first couple of years Luang Por would compliment me a lot, and boost up my ego, which I appreciated, because I tended to be self-disparaging, and to have this constant very positive attitude towards me was very helpful. Because I felt so respected and appreciated by him I put a lot of effort into the practice. After a few years it started to change, he saw I was stronger and he began to be more critical. Sometimes he would insult me and humiliate me in public — but by then I was able to reflect on it.

There were times that Luang Por would tell the whole sala-full of laypeople about things I’d done that were uncouth, like my clumsy attempts to eat with my hands. He would imitate me making a ball of sticky rice and then making a complete mess, pushing it into my mouth and nose. The whole sala, bhikkhus and laypeople would be roaring with laughter. I’d just sit there feeling angry and embarrassed. One time a novice picked up my outer robe by mistake and gave it to him. Luang Por laughed and said he knew immediately whose it was because of the bad smell, ‘the farang stink’. When I heard Luang Por say that of course I felt pretty indignant; but I could endure it, and because of the respect I felt for him I didn’t show any reaction. He asked me if I was feeling all right and I said yes, but he could see that my ears were bright red.

“He had a wonderful sense of timing and so I could work with it, and I benefited from being able to observe my own emotional reactions to being insulted or humiliated. If he’d done that at the beginning I would never have stayed. There was no real system that I could see; you just felt that he was just trying to help you — forcing you to look at your own emotional

reactions — and I always trusted him. He had such a great sense of humour, there was always a twinkle in his eye, always a bit of mischief, and so I just went along with it.”

Many of Ajahn Sumedho’s most potent memories of his early years at Wat Pah Pong are of occasions in which some dark cloud or other in his mind dissolved through a sudden insight into the desires and attachments that conditioned it. Ajahn Chah’s genius as a teacher seemed to him to lie in creating the situations in which this process could take place — bringing a crisis to a head, or drawing his attention most skillfully to what was really going on in his mind. His faith in Ajahn Chah made him open. A smile from his teacher or words of encouragement at the right time could make hours of frustration and irritation seem ridiculous and insubstantial; a sharp question or a rebuke could wake him up from a long bout of self-indulgence.

“He was a very practical man and so he was using the nitty-gritty of daily life for insight. He wasn’t so keen on using the special event or extreme practices as getting you to wake up in the ordinary flow of monastic life and he was very good at that. He knew that any convention can become perfunctory and deadening after a while if you just get used to it. He was aware of that so there was always this kind of sharpness that would startle and jolt you.”

In the early days anger was the major fuel of Ajahn Sumedho’s suffering. He relates how exhausting the afternoon leaf-sweeping periods could be in the hot season. One day as he toiled in the sun, his body running with sweat, he remembers his mindfulness becoming consumed by aversion and self-righteousness: “I don’t want to do this. I came here to get enlightened, not to sweep leaves off the ground”. Just then Ajahn Chah had approached him and said, “Where’s the suffering? Is Wat Pah Pong the suffering?”



“I suddenly realized something in me which was always complaining and criticizing and which was preventing me from ever giving myself or offering myself to any situation.

“Another time I had this really negative reaction to having to sit up and practise all through the night and I must have let it show. After the evening chanting Luang Por reminded everyone that they should stay and meditate right through to dawn. “Except”, he said, “for Sumedho, he can go and have a rest”. He gave me a nice smile and I just felt so stupid. Of course, I stayed all night.

“There were so many moments when you were caught up in some kind of personal thing and he could sense that. He had the timing to reach you in that moment when you were just ripe so that you could suddenly realize your attachment. One night we were in the little sala, where we did the *Pātimokkha* and his friend Ajahn Chaluay came to visit. Usually, after the *Pātimokkha* was over we would go and have a hot drink and then join the laypeople in the main sala. But on that night he and Ajahn Chaluay sat there telling jokes to each other for hours, and we had to sit there and listen. I couldn’t understand what they were talking about and I got very irritated. I was waiting for him to tell us to go to the hall but he just carried on. He kept looking at me. Well I had a stubborn streak and I wasn’t going to give up. I just got more and more angry and irritated. It got to about midnight and they were still going strong, laughing like schoolboys. I got very self righteous; they weren’t even talking seriously about practice or Vinaya or anything! My mind kept saying, ‘What a waste of time. They should know better’. I was full of my anger and resentment. He knew that I had this stubborn, tenacious streak and so he kept going until two in the morning, three in the morning. At that time I just gave up to the whole thing, let go of all the anger and resistance and felt a wave of bliss and relaxation; I felt all the pain had gone. I was in a state of bliss. I felt I’d be happy if he went on forever. He noticed that and told everyone we could leave.”

Dhamma Talks

Given Ajahn Sumedho’s celebrity, and his steadily growing proficiency in Thai, it was natural that Wat Pah Pong’s lay supporters would be eager to hear him give a Dhamma talk. Four years after Ajahn Sumedho’s arrival, Ajahn Chah decided that the time was ripe for his first Western disciple to begin a new kind of training: that of expressing the Dhamma in words.

One night, during a visit to another monastery, Ajahn Chah caught Ajahn Sumedho by surprise. With no prior warning, he asked him to talk to the lay supporters that had gathered in honour of their visit. The prospect of ascending the monastery’s Dhamma seat and struggling to give an extempore address to a large audience in a language in which he was not particularly fluent, was overwhelming. Ajahn Sumedho froze and declined as politely but firmly as he could. But strong in his trust in Ajahn Chah and the realization that he was merely postponing the inevitable, he began to reconcile himself to the idea. When Ajahn Chah ‘invited’ him to give a talk on the next Wan Pra, he acquiesced in silence. Ajahn Sumedho was well aware of Ajahn Chah’s view that Dhamma talks should not be planned in advance but he felt insecure. At the time he was reading a book on Buddhist cosmology and reflecting on the relationship between different realms of existence and psychological states. He made some notes for the coming talk.

Wan Pra soon came and Ajahn Sumedho gave the talk. Although his vocabulary was still quite rudimentary and his accent shaky, it seemed to go down well. He felt relieved and proud of himself. Throughout the next day laypeople and bhikkhus came up to him to express their appreciation of a fine talk and he looked forward to basking in the sun of his teacher's praise. But on paying respects to Ajahn Chah beneath his hut, he met a stony frown. It sent a chill through his heart. In a quiet voice, Ajahn Chah said, "Don't ever do that again". Ajahn Sumedho realized that Ajahn Chah knew that he had thought the talk out beforehand and that in his eyes, although it had been an intelligent, interesting and informative discourse, it was not the Dhamma speaking, it was merely thoughts and cleverness. The fact that it was a 'good talk' was not the point.

In order to develop the right attitude in giving Dhamma talks a bhikkhu needs a thick skin. One night Ajahn Chah told Ajahn Sumedho to talk for three hours. After about an hour Ajahn Sumedho had exhausted his initial subject and then began to ramble about, hunting for things to talk about. He paused, repeated himself and embarked on long meandering asides. He watched as members of his audience, got bored and restless, dozed, walked out. Just a few dedicated old ladies sat there throughout — eyes closed — like gnarled trees on a blasted plain. Ajahn Sumedho reflected after it was all over:

"It was a valuable experience for me. I began to realize that what Luang Por wanted me to do was to be able to look at this self-consciousness, the posing, the pride, the conceit, the grumbling, the laziness, the not-wanting-to-be-bothered, the wanting to please, the wanting to entertain, the wanting to get approval."

Ajahn Sumedho was the only Western bhikkhu at Wat Pah Pong for four years before, in 1971, two more American bhikkhus arrived to spend the Rains Retreat. One of them, Dr. Douglas Burns, was a psychologist based in Bangkok who intended to be a monk for the duration of the retreat; the other was Jack Kornfield, (Pra Suñño) who after practising in monasteries throughout Thailand and Burma, was to return to laylife and become one of the most influential teachers in the American *Vipassanā* movement. Neither bhikkhu stayed at Wat Pah Pong very long but both exerted a strong influence on future developments. At the end of his short period in the robes, Dr. Burns returned to Bangkok where he would recommend any Westerners interested in ordaining to go to live with Ajahn Chah. A number of the first generation of bhikkhus came to Ubon after such a referral. In the months that Jack Kornfield was with Ajahn Chah he made assiduous notes of the teachings that he received and later printed them as the extremely popular *Fragments of a teaching and Notes from a Session of Questions and Answers*. Subsequently, as Kornfield's own reputation spread in America, his frequent references to Ajahn Chah, introduced him to a Western audience. This acquaintance was strengthened by *Still Forest Pool*, a collection of Ajahn Chah's teaching which Kornfield co-authored with Paul Breiter, another ex-bhikkhu (formerly Venerable Varapañño).



Ajahn Chah's charisma and his ability to move and inspire his Western disciples soon became well known. But if Ajahn Chah was the main reason why Wat Pah Pong became the most popular Thai forest monastery for Westerners seeking to make a long-term commitment to monastic life, Ajahn Sumedho's presence may often have been a deciding factor. Here was someone who had proved it could be done, who had lived a number of years in austere conditions with no other Western companions, and had obviously gained much from the practice. He was both a translator, elder brother and, more and more, although he resisted the evolution, a teacher in his own right. Pra Varapañño arrived in Wat Pah Pong at a time when Ajahn Chah was away for a few days. His meeting with Ajahn Sumedho was crucial to his decision to stay.

“Sitting up there on the porch in the peace of the forest night, I felt that here was a place beyond the suffering and confusion of the world — the Vietnam war, the meaninglessness of life in America and everywhere else, the pain and desperation of those I had met on the road in Europe and Asia who were so sincerely looking for a better way of life but not finding it. This man, in this place, seemed to have found it, and it seemed entirely possible that others could as well.”

In 1972, the Western Sangha of monks and novices numbered six and Ajahn Chah decided that they should spend the rains retreat at Tam Saeng Pet, a branch monastery perched on a steep-sided hill overlooking the flat Isan countryside, about 100 kilometers away to the north. Personality conflicts festered, away from the guiding influence of Ajahn Chah and Ajahn Sumedho felt burned.

“To begin with I felt a lot of resentment about taking responsibility. On a personal level, the last thing I wanted to do was be with other Western bhikkhus — I was adjusted to living with Thai bhikkhus and to feel at ease within this structure and culture, but there was an increasing number of Westerners coming through. Dr. Burns and Jack Kornfield had been

encouraging people to come. But after the Western Sangha had this horrendous rainy season at Tam Saeng Pet I ran away, spent the rains in a monastery in the South-East and then went to India.

“But while I was there I had a really powerful heart-opening experience. I kept thinking of Luang Por and how I’d run away, and I felt a great feeling of gratitude to him, and I decided that I would go back and serve. It was very idealistic. ‘I’ll just give myself to Luang Por. Anything he wants me to do.’ We’d just opened this horrible branch monastery at Suan Gluay down on the Cambodian border, and nobody wanted to go and stay there. I’d gone down there for a Kathina ceremony and been taller than all the trees. So in India I thought I’d volunteer to go and take over Suan Gluay. I had this romantic image of myself. But of course, when I got back Luang Por refused to send me there and by the end of the year there were so many Westerners at Wat Pah Pong that he asked me to come back to translate for them. Basically I trusted him because he was the one pushing me into things that I wouldn’t have done by myself.”

