Forest Path

A collection of talks, essays, and accounts
from the community at Wat Pah Nanachat

Forest Path

For Free Distribution
Sabbadānaṃ dhammadānaṃ jināti
The gift of the Dhamma surpasses all other gifts.

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for bringing it into production.

Dedication to the first edition, 1999

In commemoration of Wat Pah Nanachat's twenty-fifth Rains Retreat, we offer this publication as a dedication to Luang Por Chah and to the first Abbot of Wat Pah Nanachat, Luang Por Sumedho.

"No them, no this."

Dedication to the second edition, 2013

We would like to offer the good kamma that arises from this publication to the editor of the first edition, Paññāvuddho Bhikkhu, our companion in the Holy Life, who passed away in 2005.

Abbots of Wat Pah Nanachat

Ajahn Sumedho	1975-1977
Ajahn Pabhākaro	1977-1979
Ajahn Jāgaro	1979-1982
Ajahn Pasanno	1982-1996
Ajahn Jayasāro	1996-2001
Ajahn Ñāṇadhammo	2001-2007
Ajahn Kevali	2007- present

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PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION, 2013

'Forest Path' was first printed in 1999 and originally planned as the first edition of a Wat Pah Nanachat newsletter. Over-enthusiasm and considerable proliferation resulted in a one-off book publication which more or less coincided with the monastery's twenty-fifth anniversary. Since then we have been surprised by the number of requests to reprint this collection of little essays, talks and anecdotes about life in Wat Pah Nanachat as it was at that time. Apart from the formal Dhamma talks the book contains, we were hesitant at first to reprint its other contents, the 'old stories' and personal accounts by then younger authors. But it was those other parts which in fact added much of the book's authentic flavour and made so many people find it beneficial and joyful to read.

Hence it appears that our hesitation over reprinting this book was due to a concern that the snapshots of life in the monastery offered by those individuals at that time had become dated. In fact, though, on recently going through the various contributions again, we found that many of those snapshots could still be written today – there would be a new cast of players, but the atmosphere experienced then, and communicated so vividly in the old 'outdated' accounts, is still very similar.

So we are happy to realize that when we take the wholehearted present-day Dhamma approach of genuinely experiencing what is

happening at a particular *saṃsāric* moment in life, we also embark on something timeless. Beyond the specific details, all our little hopes and sorrows around daily life in the monastery and the higher values and principles of our life – the Buddha's core teachings – become apparent in these snapshots. Better still, the details of an individual's unique experiences are in fact exemplary: they are transferable and thus pass the test of time. Thinking in these terms gives the monks and novices at Wat Pah Nanachat extra encouragement, as in many ways it makes the limitations and the suffering inevitably entailed by each one's specific experience worthwhile.

Once we became aware of all the 'good examples' already to be found in the original 'Forest Path', the option of rewriting some of the material in a 2012 setting as a 'Forest Path II' suddenly seemed pointless. With *saṃsāra* essentially repeating the same old drama endlessly anyway, we thought that simply revisiting the old setting once more with a simple reissue of the original would be a much more effective and honest choice than reworking the text and suggesting it was 'new'. It is also true tradition to go back a little into the past, with the hope of taking the opportunity to realize some timeless truths.

So the material in this new edition of 'Forest Path' is an almost exact reprint of the old 1999 version, although with editorial assistance we have taken the opportunity to correct some of the punctuation and grammar. We have also created a few links to the present-day situation (which seems fair enough, considering that a big impersonal monastic community only becomes a reality when it is embodied in some specific individuals). For us now, the present dwellers in the monastery, who in most cases did not arrive there in time to meet the great example Luang Por Chah in person, it seems most affirming that the principles of monastic life as his disciples still permeate the scenes that each new generation of monks, novices, *anāgārikas* and visitors has been continuously experiencing at Wat

Pah Nanachat during the past thirty-five years.

So please come and see our monastery for yourself, and get your free real-time update on our community by practising the present-moment Dhamma with us. In the meantime, we hope you will enjoy viewing these historical snapshots again.

Yours in the Dhamma,
On behalf of the Sangha of Wat Pah Nanachat,

Kevali Bhikkhu
Abbot, 2013

Note

Please be aware that the authors' monastic titles when the original essays were written have been kept (e.g. 'Sāmaṇera' or 'Tan'). You will see in the short summaries added after each essay, which explain what has happened since then, that almost all of them are now senior monks whom we would usually honour by calling them 'Ajahns', teachers.

Luang Por

You were a fountain of cool stream water
in the square of a dusty town,
and you were the source of that stream
on a high unseen peak.
You were, Luang Por, that mountain itself,
unmoved but variously seen.

Luang Por, you were never one person,
you were always the same.
You were the child laughing
at the Emperor's new clothes,
and ours.
You were a demand to be awake,
the mirror of our faults, ruthlessly kind.

Luang Por, you were the essence of our texts,
the leader of our practice,
the proof of its results.
You were a blazing bonfire
on a windy bone-chilled night,
how we miss you!

Luang Por, you were the sturdy stone bridge
we had dreamed of.
You were as at ease
in the present
as if it were your own ancestral land.

Luang Por, you were the bright full moon
that we sometimes obscured with clouds.
You were as kind as only you could be.
You were hard as granite,
as tough as nails,
as soft as butter
and as sharp as a razor.

Luang Por, you were a freshly dripping lotus
in a world of plastic flowers.
Not once did you lead us astray.
You were a lighthouse for our flimsy rafts
on the heaving sea.

Luang Por,
you are beyond my words of praise
and all description.
Humbly I place my head beneath your feet.

– Buang

1

TWAIN SHALL MEET

Ajahn Jayasāro

An excerpt from the biography of Ajahn Chah dealing with the arrival of Ajahn Sumedho at Wat Pah Pong.

From the mid-fourteenth century until its sack by the Burmese in 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 entrepôt port at a time when land routes were safer than the 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 of 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

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

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 as living 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 the 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 worldly matters.

At the time that Ajahn Chah reached manhood, Western culture had already attained its pre-eminent position. Among the wealthy elite, expensive imported clothes, motor vehicles, gadgets and foods were sought-after status symbols. The absolute monarchy was overthrown in 1932 in favour of a Western-style democracy, which 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, and far more accommodating to the Thai penchant for uniforms. Field Marshal Pibulsongkram passed 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, albeit 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 loudspeakers in village wats; 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 POWs were 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 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' and 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-shirts and faded blue jeans would often be seen walking along the ox-track with a dogged, diffident stride, a large grubby backpack like a malignant growth behind them. These young men were the first trickle of the steady stream of Westerners who were to find their way to Ajahn Chah. They were to become the senior members of a Western Sangha that now numbers over a hundred and fifty monks and nuns.

'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 philo-

sophy 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 *nam rawn*, in Lao it is *nam hawn* 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 monks, asked Ajahn Chah whether he spoke English, French, German or Japanese, to which in every case Ajahn Chah replied that no, he could not. The questioner looked confused: how did the foreign monks 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 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 monks was a powerful one. At a time when Western technology, material advances and expertise were being so touted, here were 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 monks,

not understanding the language, eating coarse food, striving for peace and wisdom in the same way that Thai monks had been doing for hundreds of years. It was baffling, fascinating and, above all else, inspiring. Many Thai 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 practice 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 'beginner's mind'. Ajahn Chah found their open, questioning attitude 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 monks 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 monk called Tan Sommai returned from a *tudong* trip to the north of Isan with an old friend who literally stood head and shoulders above him. Even the most restrained monks in Wat Pah Pong were unable to resist at least a surreptitious glance. The new monk was 6 foot 3 inches tall, with 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 nations' navies. And now, by coincidence, they had met a second time, dressed in the yellow robe of the monk, in the meditation monastery on the banks of the Mekong 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 Master's degree in Asian Studies from Berkeley. After graduation he had joined the Peace Corps and taught English in Borneo, before moving on for a spell at Thammasat University in Bangkok. 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 monk. Now, though, after 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 monks set off to walk down to Ubon, Sumedho feeling 'as if I was being pulled by a magnet'.

The force of attraction held. Eventually Sumedho would stay for

ten years, form the nucleus around which the Western community of monks would coalesce and establish Wat Pah Nanachat, before moving to England to begin the first of nine overseas branch monasteries at Chithurst in southern England.

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 *déjà 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 monk 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 should fit in with the Thai monks and not receive any special consideration.

'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 monks 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 from the one with which Ajahn Sumedho was familiar. In his previous wat he had been living in solitude, sitting and walking in and near his hut, single-mindedly devoted to the development of a meditation technique. The only human contact 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 monk I needed the monk's training, and I hadn't been getting that at the meditation centre 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 of 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 myself off or to oppress myself, but for freedom. It was like a conundrum: how do you take a restrictive and renunciant convention and liberate your mind through that convention? 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 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 with a grunt that the method Ajahn Sumedho was using was valid, 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 monks, 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 harbour 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

cavilling 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 monk 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 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 alms-round. At Wat Pah Pong as many as twenty or thirty monks 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 monks 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 monks 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 monk 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 by 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 enhance it. For them to see Ajahn Sumedho, physically intimidating and with an obvious zeal for the practice, but 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 by 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 his 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 when Luang Por would tell the whole *sāla*-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 *sāla*, monks 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 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 powerful memories of his early years at Wat Pah Pong are of occasions when some dark cloud or other in his mind dissolved through a sudden insight into the desires and attachments that conditioned it. To him Ajahn Chah's genius as a teacher seemed to lie in creating the situations in which this process could take place – bringing a crisis to a head, or drawing his attention most skilfully 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 special events or extreme practices as on 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 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 approached him and said, 'Where's the suffering? Is Wat Pah Pong the suffering?'

'I suddenly realized there was 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 practice 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 *sāla*, where we did the Pāṭimokkha, and his friend Ajahn Chaluay came to visit. Usually, after the Pāṭimokkha was over we would go and have a hot drink, and then join the laypeople in the main *sāla*. 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 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 who 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 Phra, 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 Phra 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 monks 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 *kuṭī*, 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 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 monk 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, 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 monk at Wat Pah Pong for four years, until in 1971 two more American monks 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 (Phra Suñño), who after practising in monasteries throughout Thailand and Burma was to return to lay life, and become one of the most influential teachers in the American *Vipassanā* movement.

Neither monk stayed at Wat Pah Pong very long, but both exercised 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 monks 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 teachings which Kornfield co-authored with Paul Breiter, another ex- monk (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.

Phra 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.'[1]

In 1972 the Western Sangha of monks and novices numbered six, and Ajahn Chah decided that they should spend the Rains Retreat at Tam Saang Pet, a branch monastery perched on a steep-sided hill overlooking the flat Isan countryside, about 100 kilometres 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 monks – I was adjusted to living with Thai monks and to feeling at ease within this structure and culture, but an increasing number of Westerners were coming through. Dr Burns and Jack Kornfield had been encouraging people to come. But after the Western Sangha had this horrendous Rains Retreat at Tam Saang 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

[1]Quoted from Paul Breiter's *Venerable Father: A Life with Ajahn Chah* (Cosimo Books, New York City 2004)

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 Glooay down on the Cambodian border, and nobody wanted to go and stay there. I'd gone down there for a *Kaṭhina* ceremony and been taller than all the trees. So in India I thought I'd volunteer to go and take over Suan Glooay. 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.'

The Author

Tan Ajahn Jayasāro stayed on as Abbot of Wat Pah Nanachat until 2002. During that time the monastery grew in terms of monastics and Thai laypeople keen to come and practice for short periods of time. Having completed his five-year commitment to guide the community in Bung Wai, he moved to the solitude of a hermitage offered to him in the Pak Chong district of Korat province, a couple of hours' drive north-east of Bangkok, where he has lived ever since. He currently divides his time between solitude at his hermitage, public teaching and an active role in the field of Buddhist-based education, both in Thailand and abroad. He is the spiritual director of the Panyaprateep Foundation, which is the umbrella organization for a secondary school of the same name.

Tan Ajahn Jayasāro has always maintained his close links with Wat Pah Nanachat, visiting the monastery frequently. He is always avail-

able for personal consultation with senior and junior monks alike. As the author of Luang Por Chah's exhaustive biography, and with his vast knowledge of Thai history and culture, he is also a precious source of knowledge of our tradition for the current generation of Wat Pah Nanachat residents.

2

DOUBT AND OTHER DEMONS

Ajahn Jayasāro

An excerpt from the biography of Ajahn Chah containing advice for meditators.

Doubt is of two main kinds. Firstly, there is the doubt born of a lack of sufficient information or knowledge to perform the task in hand. We may, for instance, doubt the Buddhist teachings on a particular subject. We may doubt which is the best route to take to a new destination.

The Buddha recognized such doubts as legitimate and did not consider them an obstacle to spiritual growth. On the contrary, he praised a healthy scepticism and a questioning mind: 'Good, O Kālāmas, you are doubting that which should be doubted.' The fifth hindrance to meditation, *vicikicchā*, usually rendered in English as 'sceptical doubt', is not the mere awareness of a lack of information, but rather unwillingness or hesitation to act upon it. The person afflicted by *vicikicchā* is paralyzed by his inability to be sure that he is following the best course of action. In other words, he must have proof of the truth of a proposition before seeking to verify it. The Buddha compared this to travelling in a wilderness. The commentary explains:

'A man travels through a desert, and being aware that travellers may be plundered or killed by robbers, he will, on the mere sound of a twig or a bird, get anxious and fearful, thinking "The robbers have come!" He will go a few steps, and then out of fear he will stop, and continue in such a manner on his way; or he may even turn back. Stopping more frequently than walking, only with toil and difficulty will he reach a place of safety. Or he may even not reach it.

'It is similar with those in whom doubt has arisen with regard to one of the eight objects of doubt. Doubting whether the Master is an Enlightened One, he cannot accept this as a matter of trust. Unable to do so, he does not attain to the Paths and Fruits of Sanctity. Thus, like the traveller in the desert who is uncertain whether robbers are there or not, he produces in his mind, again and again, a state of wavering and vacillation, a lack of decision, a state of anxiety; and thus he creates in himself an obstacle to reaching the safe ground of Sanctity. In that way sceptical doubt is like travelling in the desert.'

Modern education teaches us to think, to compare, to analyze, to use logic – 'left-brain' abilities of great value in our daily lives. A mind that is aware of many different ways of looking at things is also usually a tolerant one. But without a strong conviction in his chosen path, a meditator may often lack the ability to stick with that path when the going gets tough. On the purely rational level there are always reasonable objections to making the sacrifices that spiritual life demands, there are always more comfortable alternatives. When the emotional assent provided by faith is absent, reason can make Hamlets of us all. This hindrance of doubt particularly affects those meditators who have been successful in the conventional education system; it is the dark side of an enquiring mind. A lot of learning can also be a dangerous thing. The particular form of doubt varies. A practitioner may harbour doubts about the efficacy of the technique or its suitability to his character; he may be unsure of the teacher or agonize about his ability to practice. *Vicikicchā* is

the most disabling of the hindrances, because unlike lust or anger, for example, it is often not perceived as being a defilement. The element of indulgence tends to be concealed. In the early days of Wat Pah Pong, the majority of the monks and lay supporters had strong faith in Ajahn Chah and little formal education; crippling doubt was never a major problem. In later years, with more middle-class city dwellers arriving and a growing number of Western disciples, it became more of an issue. Ajahn Chah's response to the chronic doubters was always to point out that 'Doubts don't stop because of someone else's words. They come to an end through your own practice.'

A suppression of doubts through belief in the words of an authority figure must always be fragile. Blind faith makes the mind rigid and narrow. Ajahn Chah's view was that the only way to go beyond doubts was through understanding their nature as impermanent, conditioned mental states. On one occasion he explained why he didn't conduct daily interviews with the monks, as is the practice in many meditation centres:

'If I answer your every little question, you will never understand the process of doubt in your own mind. It is essential that you learn to examine yourself, to interview yourself. Listen carefully to the Dhamma talk every few days, then use the teaching to compare with your own practice. Is it the same? Is it different? How do doubts arise? Who is it that doubts? Only through self-examination will you understand. If you doubt everything, then you're going to be totally miserable, you won't be able to sleep and you'll be off your food, just chasing after this view and that the whole time. What you must remember is that your mind is a liar. Take hold of it and look. Mental states are just that way; they don't last. Don't run around with them. Just know them with equanimity. One doubt passes away and then a new one arises. Be aware of that process for what it is. Then you'll be at ease. If you run after your doubts, then you

won't just be unhappy, but your doubts will increase as well. That is why the Buddha said not to attach to things.'

Some practitioners reach a certain point in their practice and then doubt what they have attained, or what state they are in as they are meditating. Ajahn Chah would say there were no signposts in the mind like there are on highways: 'Suppose that you were to give me a fruit. I might be aware of the sweetness of the fruit and its fragrance, know everything about it except for one thing: its name. It's the same with meditation. It's not necessary to know what things are called. If you know the name of the fruit, that doesn't make it any sweeter. So be aware of the relevant causal conditions of that state, but if you don't know the name it doesn't matter. You know the flavour. You've grabbed both its legs, let it struggle all it wants. The name isn't so important. If someone tells you, then take note of it but if they don't there's no need to get upset.'

On another occasion Ajahn Chah comforted a Western disciple: 'Doubting is natural. Everyone starts out with doubts. You can learn a great deal from them. What is important is that you don't identify with your doubts; that is, don't get caught up in them. This will spin your mind in endless circles. Instead, watch the whole process of doubting, of wondering. See who it is that doubts. See how doubts come and go. Then you will no longer be victimized by your doubts. You will step outside them and your mind will be quiet. You can see how all things come and go. Just let go of what you are attached to. Let go of your doubts and simply watch. This is how to end doubting.'

Views and opinions

Concentration is that clear stable tranquillity which forms the basis for the wisdom that knows things 'as they are' and uproots the delusions that generate suffering. In other words, wisdom is both

the beginning and end of the path of practice. Initially the meditator must 'straighten his views', develop a sound understanding of the value and purpose of meditation. If he doesn't, much sincere effort may be wrongly directed and thus wasted. An important element of Ajahn Chah's meditation teaching involved pointing out the fallacy of wrong views and opinions held by his disciples, and giving authentic reasons for the practice of the correct path and encouragement in its practice.

Impatience

The untrained human attention span seems to get shorter and shorter. We have come to expect and often demand quick results at the press of a button or key. Our underlying assumption is usually that speed and convenience are good per se. But in spiritual life this does not always apply, as there are no shortcuts waiting to be discovered. It is, the Buddha declared, a gradual path, one that depends on gradual maturing. If we are in a hurry, our inability to speed things up can feel highly frustrating. Once Ajahn Chah taught an impatient disciple:

'Meditating in order to realize peace is not the same as pressing a switch or putting on an electric light and expecting everything to be immediately flooded with light. In the sentence of effort you can't miss out any words or phrases. All dhammas arise from causes. When causes cease, then so do their results. You must keep doing it steadily, practising steadily. You're not going to attain or see anything in one or two days.

The day before yesterday a university student came to consult me about his practice. When he meditates his mind is not at ease, it's not peaceful. He came to ask me to charge his batteries for him [laugh]. You must try to put forth a constant effort. You can't comprehend this through someone else's words. You have to

discover it for yourself. You don't have to meditate a lot, you can do just a little, but do it every day. And do walking meditation every day as well.

'Irrespective of whether you do a lot or a little, do it every day. Be sparing with your speech and watch your mind the whole time. Just refute whatever arises in your mind, whether it's pleasure or pain. None of it lasts; it's all deceptive. With some people who've never practised before, when a couple of days have passed and they're still not peaceful they start to think they can't do it. If that happens, you should ask yourself whether you received any teachings before you were born. In this life, have you ever tried to pacify your mind? You've just let it go its own way for a long time. You've never trained your mind. You come and practice for a certain time, wanting to be peaceful. But the causes are not sufficient and so the results fail to appear. It's inevitable. If you're going to be liberated, you must be patient. Patient endurance is the leading principle in practice. The Buddha taught us not to go too slowly and not to go too fast, but to make the mind "just right". There's no need to get worked up about it all. If you are, then you should reflect that practice is like planting a tree. You dig a hole and place the tree in it. After that it's your job to fill in the earth around it, to put fertilizer on it, to water the tree and to protect it from pests. That's your duty; it's what orchard owners have to do. But whether the tree grows fast or slow is its own business, it's nothing to do with you. If you don't know the limits of your own responsibilities, you'll end up trying to do the work of the tree as well and you'll suffer. All you have to do is see to the fertilizer, the watering and keeping the insects away. The speed of growth of the tree is the tree's business. If you know what is and what is not your responsibility, then your meditation will be smooth and relaxed, not stressed and fretful.

'When your sitting is calm, then watch the calmness. When it's not calm, then watch that – if there's calm, there's calm, if there's not,

there's not. You mustn't let yourself suffer when your mind's not calm. It's wrong practice to exult when your mind is calm or to mope when it's not. Would you let yourself suffer about a tree? About the sunshine or the rain? Things are what they are, and if you understand that, your meditation will go well. So keep travelling along the path, keep practising, keep attending to your duties, and meditating at the appropriate times. As for what you get from it, what you attain, what calmness you achieve, that will depend on the potency of the virtue you have accumulated. Just as the orchard owner who knows the extent of his responsibilities towards the tree keeps in good humour, so when the practitioner understands his duties in his practice, then "just-rightness" spontaneously establishes itself.'

Ambition

Ajahn Chah would constantly encourage his disciples to cultivate the spirit of renunciation, to see practice as a gradual process of letting go of attachments rather than as gaining attainments. Practice fuelled by the desire to get or become is more likely to lead to new realms of existence rather than liberation:

'Sometimes in meditation practice people make determinations that are too extreme. Sometimes they light incense, bow and make a vow: "While this incense has not burned down I will not get up from the sitting posture under any circumstances. Whether I faint or die, whatever happens, I'll die right here." As soon as they've made the solemn declaration they start to sit, and then within moments the Māras attack them from all sides. They open their eyes to glance at the incense sticks. "Oh dear! There's still loads left." They grit their teeth and start again. Their minds are hot and bothered and in turmoil. They're at their wit's end. They've had enough and they look at the incense sticks again, as surely they must be at an end. "Oh no, not even half-way!" This happens three or four times

and then they give up. They sit and blame themselves for being hopeless: "Oh, why am I such an idiot, it's so humiliating", and so on. They sit there suffering about being insincere and bad, all kinds of things, until they're in an utter mess, and then the hindrances arise. If this kind of effort doesn't lead to ill-will towards others, it leads to ill-will towards yourself. Why is that? Because of craving. Actually, you don't have to take resolutions that far ... You don't have to make the resolution to tie yourself up like that. Just make the resolution to let go.'

The desire to know and see

The goal of meditation is to understand the nature of all experience, rather than to attain any one particular experience, however exalted. Many who take up the practice of meditation are dismayed to discover just how much agitation and defilement there is in their minds, and may come to believe that the unpleasant things they see are caused by meditation rather than exposed by it. Many start to crave for some special kind of experience to validate their efforts. If a particular experience is agreed to be 'special', then its experiencer or owner must be even more so, and the feelings of rapture that accompany such experiences seem to confirm their significance. We tend to believe that the more intense an experience is, the more real it is. Ajahn Chah's unbending insistence that all experiences are ultimately of the same value, and equally able to cause suffering to one who delights in them, was often hard for his disciples to appreciate. Meditators want some return for all the work they put in. On one occasion a monk came to ask Ajahn Chah why it was that despite putting great efforts into his meditation, he had still never seen the lights and colours that others said they saw. Ajahn Chah replied:

'See light? What do you want to see light for? What good do you think it would do you? If you want to see light, go and look at that

fluorescent lamp. That's what light looks like.' After the laughter had died down, Ajahn Chah continued: 'The majority of meditators are like that. They want to see light and colours. They want to see deities, heaven and hell realms, all those kinds of things. Don't get caught up with that.'

Only the posture changes

A constantly recurring theme in Ajahn Chah's teachings is the emphasis on continuity of mindfulness. On one occasion he instructed the Sangha: 'Meditation isn't bound to either standing or walking or sitting or lying down, but as we can't live our lives completely motionless and inactive, we have to incorporate all these four postures into our practice. And the guiding principle to be relied on in each of them is the generation of wisdom and rightness. "Rightness" means right view and is another word for wisdom. Wisdom can arise at any time, in any one of the four postures. In each posture you can think evil thoughts or good thoughts, mistaken thoughts or correct thoughts. Disciples of the Buddha are capable of realizing the Dhamma whether standing, walking, sitting or lying down. So where does this practice which is carried out in the four postures find its focal point? It finds it in the generation of right view, because once there is right view, then there come to be right aspiration, right speech and the rest of the Eightfold Path.

'It would then be better to change our way of speaking. Instead of saying that we come out of *samādhi*, we should say merely that we change our posture. *Samādhi* means firmness of mind. When you emerge from *samādhi*, maintain that firmness in your mindfulness and self-awareness, in your object, in your actions, all of the time. It's incorrect to think that you've finished work at the end of a meditation session. Put forth a constant effort. It is through maintaining constancy of effort in your work, in your actions and in your mindfulness and self-awareness, that your meditation will

develop.'

Slightly better than a dog

At a certain stage in practice the 'defilements of insight' may arise. This means that such wholesome qualities as illumination, knowledge, rapture, bliss, strong mindfulness and equanimity arise and mislead the meditator into a belief that he or she is enlightened:

'Don't stick your nose up in the air because of your practice. Don't make too much out of your experiences. Let things proceed in peace. You don't have to be ambitious and want to get or to become anything at all. After they've been practising for a while, some people have a few experiences and take them to mean that they've really attained or become something. That's incorrect. Once at Luang Por Pow's monastery a nun went to see him and said, "Luang Por, I've become a stream-enterer!" He replied, "Errr. Bit better than a dog." As soon as he said that the "stream-enterer" screwed up her face and stormed out. That's what happens, you see: people go right off the track.

'In the practice, don't ever allow yourself to get puffed up. Whatever you become, don't make anything of it. If you become a stream-enterer, leave it at that. If you become an *arahant*, leave it at that. Live simply, keep performing beneficial deeds, and wherever you are you'll be able to live a normal life. There's no need to go boasting to anybody that you've attained this or become that. These days when people become *arahants* they can't sit still. They think, "I'm an *arahant*", and have to keep telling everyone else the good news. In the end there's nowhere they can live. In the Buddha's time *arahants* didn't make any problems. Not like the "*arahants*" today.'

The ability to distinguish between genuine insight and the more subtle kinds of delusion in another person is the prerogative of the enlightened. Ajahn Chah used to tell the story of the inexperienced

teacher who sanctioned the realization of a precocious novice, only to become aware when the novice's body was found hanging from a tree that he was in fact mentally disturbed, Even if, as in the case of Ajahn Chah, a teacher has the ability to tell someone's state of mind straightaway, this does not ensure that he will be believed. Powerful experiences in meditation can engender an unshakeable self-confidence in the meditator. The disciple will tend to interpret the teacher's refusal to accept the validity of his enlightenment as a misjudgement, or perhaps as jealousy. Strong measures may be needed in such a case, and a short, sharp shock is usually recommended. In the scriptures there are stories of enlightened monks disabusing others of their delusions by creating authentic hologram-like images of elephants in rut or alluring women. Caught by surprise, the monk who had thought himself free from fear and lust is suddenly made painfully aware that the defilements have only been suppressed and have merely been lying latent in his mind. On one occasion a nun at Wat Pah Pong also thought that she had attained a stage of enlightenment. She asked for permission to see Ajahn Chah and, doing her best to curb her excitement, informed him of her great realization. He listened to her silently and then, with his face a stern mask, his voice as cold as ice, said: 'Liar'.

3

KEEP IT SIMPLE

Ajahn Pasanno

An edited version of a Dhamma talk given at Wat Pah Nanachat on 18 November 1995.

When considering the Dhamma, if you look at it in one way it is quite complicated, quite complex; there is a lot to know, a lot to figure out, a lot of information to digest. Looked at another way, it is quite straightforward – it is just a matter of following it, of doing. There is a certain element, particularly, it seems, in the Western temperament, which makes us believe that the more information we have, the better we will get to know about something, and so the more information we have, the better we should be at practising the Dhamma. This is actually not true.

A lot of importance should be given to patience: to being able to be patient with one's experience, observing oneself, observing the world around one and learning to trust the observer, the watcher, the ability of the human mind to pay attention to itself. When we talk about liberation or enlightenment, we are actually just talking about paying attention, what the attention is directed towards. So it means learning to observe oneself, one's experience, to recognize the quality of the mind.

The Buddha particularly emphasized the quality of suffering, of unsatisfactoriness. The Four Noble Truths are based on observing this quality of unsatisfactoriness. It is something to be known. Understanding unsatisfactoriness is a duty to oneself. The problem is how we relate to the world around us. The way we relate to each other means that we tend either to create or experience unsatisfactoriness. Then we hold on to it, cling to it, judge it, try to avoid it; we create incredible scenarios around it, we look for someone to blame because of it, or we feel sorry for ourselves. So we create a whole range of reaction around *dukkha*. But the Buddha says that all we have to do is just know it. This quality of knowing is to be turned to, to be focused on our experience, and then we learn to recognize that this knowing is a point of balance: not affirmation or rejection, not wanting or not wanting. It is the balancing of the faculties of the mind. The body and the mind are the tools we have for experiencing the world. We revolve around the sense faculties of the body and the faculties of the mind: the ability to create and experience emotional tones of happiness, suffering or neutrality, the ability to remember, to conceptualize, to put labels on things through perception, the ability to act in a volitional way, to initiate thought processes and be conscious of the world around us. These are the tools we have. The practice of the Dhamma is learning the quality of knowing: knowing the world around us, both the material world of the physical body and the sense spheres of the mind, the faculties of the mind; just knowing, not reacting to the proliferation around them, but just being with the knowing.

But although this practice is just knowing, it seems complicated because the simplest things are difficult to sustain. So we need to develop certain tools, certain qualities. The Dhamma provides a theoretical framework that may look complicated but facilitates this knowing. It requires us to come back to the human heart, which is capable of knowing, capable of peace, capable of creating hell

round us and capable of creating celestial worlds. We have to see this point of clarity and stillness within us in order to stop creating worlds around us. Once Ajahn Chah and a group of his disciples went to visit a well-known disciple of Ajahn Mun, Luang Por Khao. Ajahn Sumedho was one of the group. They listened to a Dhamma teaching, and when they were leaving, Ajahn Sumedho as the most junior monk in the group was the last to leave the room. Just as he was leaving, Luang Por Khao rose quickly and came up to him, and since Ajahn Sumedho did not know much Thai at the time, Luang Por Khao pointed at his heart and said, 'It's all here, it's all here.' All the talking, the explanations, come back to the heart, we have to see this clearly and pay attention to the mind, to the heart.

This is the reason the Buddha gave the teaching of the Four Noble Truths, as it is the heart, the mind that motivates us. All sentient beings prefer happiness to suffering, so we are motivated to try to free ourselves from suffering. Often, however, our attempts to do so are either superficial or misguided, and only lead to a temporary appeasement of suffering. We put off really dealing with it to the immediate or distant future. The Buddha said that it should be dealt with by understanding its causes, because we can only understand something when we understand its cause. He pointed out that often our misapprehension of the truth, of reality, is due to *avijjā*, non-knowledge. *Avijjā* is often translated as ignorance, but it is really the lack of true knowledge. Through this lack of true knowledge, different kinds of desire are created: desire to seek out sensual gratification; desire for the affirmation of self, for becoming; desire for self-negation, for annihilation, the pushing away of experience – not wanting to experience things is also a desire. So this pushing and pulling, this grasping after experience is the real cause of our suffering.

And so it is the relinquishing of desire that brings about the cessation of suffering; we do not relinquish suffering itself. But if we

try to push away its immediate cause and find something more satisfactory, this is not dealing with the real causes, which have to be seen for what they are and relinquished. Letting go is something that one needs to feel consciously; letting go of holding in our hearts the emotional reactions to experiences and relationships and judgements, how things should or should not be. It is relinquishing the whole of this, letting go of all of it, that is summed up in a short teaching the Buddha gave when he said, 'All dhammas are not to be clung to.' This is like the core of his teaching – everything has to be relinquished, given up.

The nature of desire is to hoard, to cling, to attach to things, to hang on. We have to establish attention to this tendency in our practice and try to go against it, to let all of it go. When you actually see suffering, you want to let go of it. The more clearly you see suffering, the more willing you are to let go. It is somewhat similar to the method of trapping monkeys. A small hole is cut in a coconut; it should be just big enough for a monkey to put his paw in. A piece of some hard fruit is put inside the coconut. When a monkey comes, being very curious, he puts his paw in, and finding the fruit, he grabs it. Then he is stuck, as the hole is too small to get his fist out with the fruit in it. When the hunter comes, the monkey keeps pulling at his fist but will not let go of the fruit. His desire for gratification is stronger than the recognition of the suffering that will follow when the hunter grabs him by the scruff of his neck. If the monkey could really see the suffering, it would be easy for him to let go of the fruit and get away.

We do the same thing. Suffering is there all the time, but we do not relinquish it because we do not see it clearly enough. As soon as we see it, we should let it go. But we do not recognize suffering – aversion, ill-will, anger – and carry it around with us for long periods of time: minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, years, because we can justify it in some way. We are also able to suffer tremendously over

things which we perceive could give us pleasure – and which may even be pleasurable on a certain level, but suffering is inherent in them. The clear recognition of suffering is therefore related to the ability to let it go. And the ability to let go is clearly related to the degree of awareness and mindfulness, the stability of knowing. So we come back again to this quality of knowing: to the establishment of awareness, the establishment of mindfulness.

The purpose of this path, the whole point of our practice, is to facilitate this quality of clarity. Mindfulness or awareness is not passive; there is a sense of moral responsibility within it, a sense of patience and endurance, the ability to bring up effort. Our path lies in developing virtue or *sīla* to see our actions and speech clearly and take responsibility for them in a moral sense. And we need to develop the quality of renunciation and the quality of wisdom in our practice, to question, to investigate, to reflect.

At the level of mental training we train to bring forth effort, training to recognize ways of cultivating the wholesome and letting go of the unwholesome. This is developing stability of mind, concentration, steadiness of mind. The steadiness of mind that has to be developed is an emotional steadiness in the sense of the heart and mind, not in the sense of the analytical mind. It is the ability not to be drawn by our habitual preferences, our wanting and not wanting, but to establish stability. Concentration sometimes has a sense of focusing, of exclusion. Exclusion, the blinkering of the mind, does not lead to a really stable and still mind. There has to be an openness, not reacting to likes and dislikes, an ability to observe, staying with the knowing. So the steadiness pertains to the ability of recognition, the ability to observe without a sense of focusing in an exclusive way.

So we need to develop the qualities of investigation. And the Buddha has given the parameters, the boundaries of investigation, what to investigate and the tools for investigating experience. The struc-

tures of the Four Noble Truths, the five *khandhas* or aggregates of being and the six sense spheres are tools for the delineation of our experience. They enable us to recognize the patterns of our mind, the patterns of our experience.

So when we sit in meditation, it is very important to have a structure, a framework, to guide us in investigating our experience. If we just sit and watch the breath going in and out, pretty soon either the mind starts wandering and gets hooked to something or other, or else it becomes bored and collapses on itself, and you sit in a state of dullness. When the mind is in *samādhi* it is ready for work, the work of a meditator, which is to investigate one's experience, to investigate what it is that motivates one, what causes the mind to proliferate, what it is that creates suffering. What brings a point of balance to the mind? These are questions that need to be investigated when we are engaged in meditation. Sometimes we sit and wait for an illumination to descend upon us and free us from all confusion, but that's not how the mind works. In order to understand the mind and ourselves more clearly, we have to apply the mind to look at and investigate the actual problems we keep running up against in our experience. This is where we develop the exercise of coming back to the breath to encourage mindfulness, using the in-breath and the out-breath to clarify the movement of the mind. We use the breath as it keeps going in and out as a framework to see where the mind is moving, to clarify its movement. This close observation within the framework of the meditation object clarifies and makes us understand the nature of the mind.

Calmness of mind is not obtained by shutting things out or forcing the mind to a point of stillness. The more you force the mind, the more tense it becomes. What is needed is application of the mind, using the tools set out for us by the Buddha. With the application of effort the practice takes on all kinds of meanings, and one finds that gaps in one's understanding are filled in and doubts and misun-

derstandings overcome. So this aspect of wisdom is not just passive knowledge or a piece of information that you get from a book or a teacher. It is arrived at through applying one's mind, investigating one's mind honestly. Often our minds create distractions for themselves, creating stories around ourselves. Unless you see the mind for what it is, you will keep buying into these stories, into all that proliferation. So to let go we have to develop clear understanding, relinquish the mind's creations and proliferation, let it all cease.

As we become more and more familiar with knowing, we are able to find a quality of relinquishment, a point of stillness within that knowing. Ajahn Chah used a lovely image to describe the proliferations of the mind. He compares them to the wheels of an ox cart, which create deep tracks that seem to go on endlessly. The wheels are not all that big, but the tracks are very long. The purpose of our training and our practice is to stop that ox cart, to let it come to rest. And this is where our practice should be going, in the direction of a point of rest.

The Author

Tan Ajahn Pasanno was the Abbot of Wat Pah Nanachat for seventeen years, between 1980 and 1997. During that period the monastery's reputation as a training centre for monastics in the Ajahn Chah tradition grew both in Thailand and abroad. In 1996 plans for the beginnings of a new branch monastery were under way in California, under the guidance of Ajahn Amaro. When Ajahn Pasanno joined the project with a view to sharing the leadership of the new monastery as co-Abbot, wonderful as this news was for California, it meant that the Wat Pah Nanachat community and the Ubon laity would be saying goodbye to their much-loved teacher.

Ajahn Pasanno nevertheless left Thailand to begin Abhayagiri Buddhist Monastery in Mendecino County, California, which is now a thriving forest monastery with a recently-opened branch near Portland, Oregon. In 2010 Ajahn Amaro was invited to return to Amaravati Monastery in England to take up the post of Abbot there, leaving Ajahn Pasanno as the sole Abbot at Abhayagiri.

Luang Por Pasanno continues to inspire men and women to practice Dhamma and lead the holy life. He combines the many facets of the modern Western Buddhist monastic culture with maintaining close ties with the Thai Sangha. On his annual visits to Thailand he always finds time to stay for a while at Wat Pah Nanachat, where the whole community can still continue to benefit from his teachings.

4

FACETS OF LIFE AT WAT PAH NANACHAT

Ajahn Vipassi

The north-east of Thailand is flat – the once thick forests are long gone – and when one drives along the long straight roads one passes through mile after mile of flat, scrubby land given over to cultivation, mainly of rice. There are trees, but just here and there in the open spaces, occasionally providing a bit of shade; there's no hint of the majestic and almost impenetrable forest that once dominated the north-eastern region. Then villages would have been linked by rough jungle tracks, human beings cutting back the undergrowth here and there to grow their crops; and they would have had to keep cutting lest nature return to reclaim these clearings for herself. These days nature here is firmly under man's thumb.

Driving along the main Si Saket Road out of Warin, the first distant sight of Wat Pah Nanachat is a long, high white wall, behind which is a forest. The trees are tall and the growth is thick, a noticeable contrast to the surrounding terrain. Arriving at the wat on a hot afternoon, one's first impression on being put down at the gate is of being about to enter a different world. The view up the drive is like looking up a tunnel, a tunnel of trees. On venturing up the drive one

immediately feels the cool of the shade – the forest canopy is thick and the sun can only glint through the trees, finding an opening here and there down which to pour a pool of fierce light. The wide, swept concrete drive opens out after a hundred metres or so into a circle, as one comes to a long low building on the right, the kitchen, and further on the large unadorned *sāla*. In the centre of the circle, around which cars can turn but beyond which they cannot proceed, there is a strange rectangular brick structure, loosely covered with a few scraps of corrugated iron. In a few days there might be a large crowd of people gathered here, for this is the place where the villagers cremate their dead, something which was going on here long before Wat Pah Nanachat was ever thought of.

The wat came into being twenty-five years ago in a rather unlikely way. Ajahn Sumedho, who had already been training with Luang Por Chah at Wat Pah Pong for years, and a group of other Western monks were wanting to fire some alms-bowls. This is a process whereby a rustproof coating is baked onto an iron bowl, and it requires heating the bowls in an intense fire for several hours. In the forest at Wat Pah Pong it was difficult to come across sufficient quantities of firewood – there were so many monks and firewood was needed all the time for dyeing and washing robes. So Ajahn Sumedho was recommended to go with the other monks to the forest at the nearby village of Bung Wai, where there were plentiful supplies of fallen branches and dry bamboo. The group of monks came to the forest, put up their *glots* (large umbrellas) and mosquito nets and began their work. This soon attracted the attention of the local villagers, who were impressed that these *farang* monks had the courage to pitch their umbrellas and camp out there, for this was their cremation forest – a place haunted by ghosts and spirits, and so feared by the locals that it was left unused.

As often happens on such occasions, when the monks were ready to move on the local villagers begged them to stay. And it just so

happened that Luang Por Chah had already decided it would be good to start a branch of Wat Pah Pong specifically for the *farangs*. Ajahn Sumedho, who had been with Luang Por Chah for eight years, would be the teacher, and the *farangs* could train in their own language. So, as has happened so many times in Thailand, the simple act of a monk hanging his umbrella from a tree was the seed that sprouted and grew into a flourishing monastery.

During the twelve years of my monastic life in England I heard many things about Wat Pah Nanachat, and met and lived with many of the monks who began their monastic careers there. Several of the Wat Pah Nanachat monks who came to live with us in England ended up disrobing. Several of our monks who went out to stay there did the same. It appeared that each of our situations represented a last chance for the other: 'If it won't work in Thailand, at least try it in England before calling it quits', and vice versa. It was impossible not to form impressions based upon what I'd heard, but I knew from experience that things are never quite like you imagine – no matter how good somebody's description, the actuality is always far richer and more multifaceted than can be conveyed by words. So having spent more than ten years in a non-Buddhist country where one is part of a small group of monastics trying somehow to model Theravāda monasticism for the surrounding culture, and where there is often a feeling of learning to be a monk somewhat 'at second hand', I decided to go East and experience Theravāda Buddhism in some of its native settings. Wat Pah Nanachat seemed the natural terminus for my journey, but I was in no hurry.

I arrived one hot evening in July 1997, the journey having taken a year and a half, much of that spent staying in several different locations in Sri Lanka, followed by a stint in a Wat Pah Pong branch monastery in central Thailand, attempting to get a foothold in the Thai language. The first impression was of the size and scale of things, the large rather gloomy *sāla* and the numbers of people.

On my first morning I watched as two large coaches pulled up and disgorged their contents, a posse of faithful Thai people come to make offerings before the start of the Rains Retreat. The *sāla* was full – maybe 150 people gathered to hear Ajahn Jayasāro convey some words of wisdom. 'This is impossible!' I thought, 'How can the monks here survive if these kinds of numbers of people are descending upon the place?' However, I later realized that this impression lacked a context. I was just seeing things in terms of the situation in England, where people may often be coming to the monastery for the first time and have a full bag of questions to ask. They may also be carrying a large number of inaccurate preconceptions about Buddhist teachings – 'Is the Buddha a God?'; 'You Buddhists believe that life is suffering, don't you, and you're trying to take the easy way out' – which have to be slowly and patiently dismantled so that sufficient openness appears for the teaching to begin to penetrate. Not so here, where the people already have faith, where we are only one among thousands of monasteries and this group of monks is not solely responsible for presenting and modelling Buddhism for the culture.

In fact there are not so many tour bus parties, but things do build up just before the Rains Retreat period as people go off on pilgrimage for a few days, each day perhaps visiting six monasteries (and making two shopping trips). After they've been to Wat Pah Pong, they simply must come and have a look at where the *farangs* live. Receiving these visitors can be quite straightforward. Usually they have just come for a quick look and often don't expect much teaching to speak of; it can be enough to see foreigners with shaven heads and robes for them to be profoundly affected. However, this kind of superficial interest is changing somewhat as Thai laypeople seem to be getting more involved in practising the Dhamma. Although the conversations may begin with a few apparently innocent and superficial questions – 'How many monks are there here?' or 'Do

you eat once a day?' – it is more and more noticeable that the conversation will move on to questions about meditation and how to practice Dhamma in daily life.

On that first morning, as so often happens, the wave of visitors receded as quickly as it had flooded into the monastery, and there prevailed a humid stillness soaked with the high-pitched sounds of cicadas. So to pick up the question, how many monks do we have? These days it is getting on for twenty monks and novices of about twelve nationalities. The number of monks who began here and still live in Thailand is considerably greater. At any one time we will have four or five junior monks placed at some of the Wat Pah Pong branch monasteries, having been sent there to learn the ropes of living with a Thai community and speaking the language. After spending his first five years training under guidance at Wat Pah Nanachat, the monk is usually 'freed from dependence' and from then on it is up to him. Some monks go off walking on *tudong*, visiting other teachers and regions. Some settle in other places and some go abroad, but people still keep in touch and usually regard Wat Pah Nanachat as some kind of home base, coming back to check in once in a while. This means that at certain times of the year there is a lot of coming and going – in fact, the population of the monastery can sometimes fluctuate from week to week. Thai monks also happen by, usually on *tudong*, and more often than not when we really get down to it they are interested in learning English. This is not enough of a reason to stay beyond three nights, says the Abbot, and off they go. We usually do have two or three Thai monks here, but they already speak English and have some prior Dhamma connection with Ajahn Jayasāro or the community. For instance, one Thai monk here at the moment was working as a doctor in America when he met Ajahn Jayasāro, and his faith arose there upon hearing the Ajahn teach.[1]

The monastery serves several different and quite distinct groups

[1]He describes this event himself in 'No Thai, No Farang' on page 85.

of people, and for the Abbot this is quite a balancing act. There are the many guests from all over the world who, for many different reasons, spend time here developing their understanding and practice of Buddhism through experience of monastic life. Long-term and loyal support, of course, come from the local Bung Wai villagers, about a dozen of whom come every day to cook and help out, and many regular supporters come to the monastery from the local towns of Warin and Ubon. There is a sizeable following of Bangkok people who come and stay when they can – one group of air hostesses even arrange their schedules so that they can fly up to Ubon on the evening flight, spend all Wan Phra night meditating and then fly back down to Bangkok on the morning flight. In fact, on the weekly Wan Phra observance days it is common for some hundred people to be observing the Eight Precepts and staying to practice and hear the Dhamma in the monastery until the following dawn. On these observance days the Abbot and the second monk divide their attention between the various groups, talks being given simultaneously in Thai and English in different locations.

A steady stream of non-Thai visitors come and stay for varying lengths of time. Usually the initial period is limited to three days, but in most cases this can be extended, depending upon the availability of accommodation. We require people to write beforehand and will only take those who turn up unannounced if there is space. Demands on accommodation are getting tighter these days, so quite often we have to ask people to come back at a later date. Interest in the monastic life can be sparked off through coming to stay at the monastery. Men are asked to wear white and shave their heads after a week, while women wear a white blouse and black skirt but keep their hair. These gestures give them a chance to feel they are part of the monastic community for the time being, and indeed they are perceived as such by the local people. For many the level of renunciation required is quite demanding – living according to the

Eight Precepts, eating just one meal a day, following a routine which requires getting up at 3.00 a.m., and having many hours of the day with no form or structure. All this can be quite a challenge.

For men who wish to go further, the next step is to request to become an *anāgārika*, someone who formally joins the community in a ceremony where he is given the Eight Precepts in front of the Sangha. *Anāgārikas* wear a white sarong and white sash, and begin their training in the rudiments of monastic life under the guidance of the senior monks. There are no equivalent facilities for women to train here, but on occasions committed women who can manage to fit into what is undoubtedly a male-oriented atmosphere have been granted permission to stay for periods of time.

When people have been with us for some time as *anāgārikas* and wish to make a deeper commitment, we consider arranging for them to become *sāmaṇeras* (novices) – taking the brown robe and looking and behaving to all intents and purposes like the *bhikkhus*, except that their code of discipline is less demanding. The have alms-bowls and go on alms-round with the monks, are given a Pāli name and are expected to commit themselves to training for one year. The first letters of Pāli names are derived from the day of the week on which the individual is born, and their meaning usually provides an ideal to which to aspire. Those wishing to take higher ordination can request to do so, and on taking full ordination are expected to stay for five years as *bhikkhus* under the guidance of the Abbot.

Community members and, as far as is possible, lay guests are each assigned a *kuṭī*, a simple wooden hut on stilts, about thirty of which are scattered around in the forest (about 150 acres, 48 hectares or 300 *rai*). Accommodation is basic – there is no electricity in any but a few *kuṭīs*, and a trip to the toilet can mean a walk through the forest. At night it is not uncommon to encounter snakes and other creepy-crawlies. Life at Wat Pah Nanachat was once described to me as being 'total insect attack'; this is an exaggeration, but it does

convey something of the flavour of the experience. From time to time people are forced to evacuate their *kuṭī* as ants or termites invade their living space, which they have usually already had to reckon on sharing with Tokay geckos (lizards about 20 cm long which punctuate the stillness of the night with a loud 'gekk-kko' call), bats, spiders and sometimes the odd snake which decides to coil itself round the rafters. Rats also compete for the space and help themselves to anything which can be eaten.

The daily routine varies according to the season. Usually there is a period of morning chanting and meditation at 3.30 a.m. in a large open *sāla* on the edge of the forest, followed by a leaf-sweeping period for the lay guests while the monks go out at dawn on their alms-round. The meal is taken at 8.00 a.m. and is followed by a period of cleaning chores. From then until mid-afternoon there is free time, and besides spending that time in meditation people will make use of the well-equipped library to read and study. At 4.30 p.m. the community gathers for tea, which is an informal affair where questions can be raised and things discussed in a good-humoured spirit. A couple of days a week are kept as silent days, one when all formal meetings are cancelled and another on which the community follows a structured practice routine together. On these evenings a formal talk is given.

The atmosphere of the monastery also varies according to the season. During the three months of the Rains Retreat the community is quite stable, as Sangha members are not allowed to travel away for more than six days during this period. It is a time of focused practice and study; in particular, study of the monastic discipline (the Vinaya) is undertaken during these three months. At the end of the Rains Retreat comes the *Kaṭhina*, the ceremonial presentation by the laity of cloth which is collectively sewn into a robe by the members of the community who spent the Rains Retreat together. This is one of the biggest festivals of the year, and draws

the community together before monks move on to other monasteries or return from other places to live here. There is also a tradition amongst the branch monasteries of Wat Pah Pong to attend one another's *Kaṭhina* ceremonies, and so this is a month of travelling here and there, listening all through the night to Dhamma talks, and trying to stay awake and centred amid the swirling changes going on around. For new monks who are just starting to find their feet in their first Rains Retreat, this time can be quite disorienting.

When the wind swings round to blow from the north, the local people say that this marks the beginning of the cold season. As the rain stops and the weather turns cooler, people fly kites in the almost continuous breeze, flying them high over the rice fields. They attach a device to them which plays a low, melancholy kind of tune over and over, and this characterizes the atmosphere of the cold season. This is really the most pleasant time of the year here, and it is common for senior monks from England to come visiting during this period from late October until February. During the last cold season we had visits from Bhante Guṇaratana from Virginia in October, Ajahn Munindo in November, Ajahns Pasanno and Viradhammo in December and Ajahns Sumedho and Attapemo in January. Luang Por Sumedho comes to Thailand annually for the commemorative celebrations for Luang Por Chah, which are held at Wat Pah Pong in the week leading up to the anniversary of his death and cremation (which was one year later) on 16 January.

The cold season is also a time when frequent trips are made to the nearest of our small hermitages. Poo Jom Gom, which means 'little pointed hill', is situated on the Laotian border, about 150 km from here, and is set in a large area of national parkland. Four or five monks stay there most of the time, living spread out over an area of about two square miles, some in caves, others in simple thatched *kuṭīs*. Some of these dwellings look out over the great Mekong river that forms the border between Thailand and Laos and flows south

from China, touching Burma, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia, before reaching the sea in Southern Vietnam. It's one of the world's great rivers, comparable to the Amazon, the Nile and the Mississippi in length. At the moment just a few little motorized canoes ply back and forth linking the villages on either bank, which share a language and set of customs. In a few years this area will probably develop and be much like the rest of Thailand, but at present it is still quite remote and is touched only lightly by the hand of modern culture.

At the end of February almost the entire community travels across the country to our other hermitage, Dtao Dam, on the Burmese border in Saiyok National Park beyond Kanchanaburi. This leaves just a skeleton crew minding the monastery, and so things quieten down as the hot season begins. Wat Pah Nanachat remains quiet for two months, until the Sangha returns at the beginning of May. During the following months leading up to the Rains Retreat there are more comings and goings, people returning to Wat Pah Nanachat to spend the Rains Retreat here, and young monks being sent off to Thai branch monasteries to spend a year away. By the time when Luang Por Chah's birthday is celebrated at Wat Pah Pong on 17 June, it is usually clear who is going to be where for the next four months or so, and the monastery starts to take on a much more settled and stable atmosphere.

It was this situation I encountered when I first arrived here, and for the first few months the impressions I formed were based on this background feeling of stability in the community. It was some surprise to see what happened here in the months after the Rains Retreat, when all of a sudden there was a lot of coming and going. This is quite difficult and challenging for people who are still fairly young in training. As a young monk spending your first Rains Retreat here, you're just starting to get your bearings and settle into the training with the group of companions you've been living with over the last three months. Then suddenly the Rains Retreat

is over and two people have disrobed, three people have shown up from other places, three more have left for other monasteries and the character of the Sangha has completely changed. This is quite a contrast to monastic life in England, where there simply aren't the opportunities to leave and go elsewhere. You can go to Aruṇa Ratanagiri or Chithurst if you've been at Amaravati for a long time and are feeling in need of a change, but that's about it apart from going abroad. Hence the atmosphere in the communities there is often more stable, and I think it is easier there in some ways to stay put and endure the difficulties you might have. And from that you can learn and gain strength.

The wealth of different monastic opportunities here in Thailand is both a blessing and a curse. One is surrounded by a culture that still carries the monastic form with considerable confidence, and this can be tremendously uplifting for a monk who has grown up in the UK. For me, simply going on alms-round every day in the traditional way has felt like a shot in the arm after thirteen years of not having had the opportunity. The faith of the laypeople in Thailand is an unending source of support, and there are opportunities here to meet and live with monks of wide experience and great wisdom. On the negative side, it can be difficult to settle. There are always people coming and going with tales of this place or that, this Ajahn or that, and for someone who has a lot of restlessness or discontent, the temptation to go off and explore new pastures is indeed great.

Reflecting on this, I feel quite grateful to have spent my first thirteen years or so as a monk living in just three places. When you stick with one thing, you see how moods and atmospheres in a place change on their own. When things are difficult, uprooting and going somewhere else is not always the answer. As Luang Por Chah once said of a monk who was forever going off in search of a better place to practice: 'He's got dog-shit in his bag. He gets to a place and thinks, "Oh, this looks promising, nice and peaceful, good teacher,

good community, I should be OK here", and he puts his bag down and settles in. Then after a while, "Hmmm, what's that bad smell? I can't stand for that, the place seems to be full of it. Oh well, better try and find somewhere else", and he picks up his bag and off he goes.'

So when just staying put in one place, one has to be willing to roll with the changes, which can help to develop some internal stability. One has to investigate things, reflecting again and again that this and that is not going to last, and just letting go, letting go and not creating problems over how things change. It's a relief to realize that one does not have to fix things or try to hold them steady in order to feel at ease. The problem comes from being convinced that they should be otherwise, when, perennially, it is 'just this way'.

One factor that has brought an increased sense of stability to Wat Pah Nanachat is the decision by Ajahn Jayasāro to stay put here for five years as Abbot. In the past Ajahn Jayasāro and Ajahn Pasanno would take it in turns to administer the monastery for a year at a time, which allowed each of them to have a period of retreat every other year. Looking back, however, I think that Ajahn Jayasāro wonders how good this was for the community. An additional thing that has made being Abbot more workable is the new Abbot's *kuṭī*. The previous one was virtually open on all sides, like living on a platform, and only a stone's throw from the *sāla*, which meant that visitors could seek the Abbot out at any time of the day or night. No wonder it was stressful – the Abbot had very little privacy there. I thought it a healthy sign, then, when I saw that Ajahn Jayasāro was having a new Abbot's *kuṭī* built at quite a distance from the *sāla*, in a less conspicuous location and with a much greater feeling of privacy to it. 'That's significant', I remember thinking. 'If the Abbot knows how to look after himself, can take space and find some recuperative solitude here, he won't feel the need to escape to get some time on his own. That seems like a healthy direction.'

Ajahn Jayasāro has commented that there is a more harmonious atmosphere here these days than he can ever remember. Whereas in the old days monks used to look forward to getting past the five Rains Retreat mark so that they could go off on their own, there is less of this kind of talk now, and monks who have grown up here in the last five years seem to regard Wat Pah Nanachat as home. When the community is harmonious the Abbot is better supported, and he is more effective at what he does. So it becomes a more attractive prospect to stay here.

Here, then, are just a few fleeting impressions of this mysterious, multifaceted place. One of the things I've heard Ajahn Jayasāro comment upon more than once is how he feels when people talk about what Wat Pah Nanachat is – 'Oh, you don't want to go to Wat Pah Nanachat. It's like this or that', or 'Wat Pah Nanachat is a really great place.' He says that he's been around Wat Pah Nanachat for over twenty years and the place is constantly changing. You can't say for certain what it is, even though people try. They take away a snapshot of how it might have been at a particular time when they visited or lived there, and then they tell people, 'Wat Pah Nanachat is like this', grinding out the same old stale impressions year after year when in fact it has long since changed. Well, if the Abbot himself declares that he doesn't really know what Wat Pah Nanachat is like, who are the rest of us to presume to say?

The Author

Ajahn Vipassi left Thailand a short time after this piece was written. He stayed in various monasteries in Europe, then in 2000 decided to return to lay life. He has since returned to live in the UK and built up a computer support business.

5

THE BEAUTY OF SĪLA

Ajahn Jayasāro

An edited version of a Dhamma talk given to the Sangha during the 1998 Rains Retreat.

Ajahn Chah taught us to bear constantly in mind that we are *samaṇas*; we have left behind the household life for an existence single-mindedly devoted to peace and awakening. He would say that now we must die to our old worldly habits, behaviour and values, and surrender to a new higher standard.

But how exactly do we follow the way of the *samaṇa*? In the Ovāda Pāṭimokkha[1] the Buddha laid down the most basic and important guidelines for the *samaṇa*'s path, and there we find that harmlessness is the principle he most emphasized. Through our way of life as *samaṇas* we offer the gift of harmlessness to the world. People may be inspired by how we live our lives, they may be indifferent, or they may even be contemptuous of us, but whatever the various reactions people might have to a Buddhist monk, fear is highly unlikely to count among them. People see a Buddhist monk and they know that he is not dangerous to them. Animals see a Buddhist

[1] "Not to do evil / to do good / to purify the mind / this is the teaching of the Buddhas." (Dhp 183).

monk and they sense that he is no threat to them. This is a singular thing.

It's very unusual to be so scrupulous and so caring for even the smallest kind of creature – not just human beings, not just the cuddly lovable kinds of creatures like Shetland ponies and fluffy cats, but even poisonous centipedes, geckos and biting ants. You find that after you've been keeping the Vinaya precepts sincerely for a while, the idea of depriving even a venomous snake or a small poisonous insect of its life becomes almost inconceivable. With the cultivation of *sīla* and *mettā-bhāvanā* it's just no longer an option. Through our practice as *samaṇas* we are able to observe how closely the devotion to moral precepts is connected to being truly benevolent and altruistic. The best austerity is patient endurance. The Buddhas say *Nibbāna* is supreme. One who has gone forth does not harm others; one who harms others is not a *samaṇa.*

Not to revile, not to do any harm, to practice the Pāṭimokkha restraint, to be moderate in taking food, to dwell in a secluded place, to devote oneself to the higher mental training – this is the teaching of the Buddhas, benevolent and altruistic. If we continue to harm other beings by body and speech, our expressions of *mettā* remain hollow and cannot lead us to peace. At the same time, if we attempt to uphold a strict level of *sīla* without a spirit of goodwill and compassion, without a kind and forgiving heart, we can easily fall into the traps of self-righteousness, a false sense of superiority and contempt for the unvirtuous. This is what is called losing the plot.

Our practice of *sīla* and *mettā* starts to mature when we don't consider that our life and our comfort have any more ultimate significance than those of even a housefly or a mosquito. Why should our life be any more valuable than that of a malarial mosquito? I can't think of any logical reason myself. The Buddha said that as all living beings desire to be happy and fear pain just as we do, we should

abstain from all actions that deprive beings of happiness or increase their pain. *Sīla* is an offering of *dāna*, a gift of fearlessness and protection to all sentient beings. To live our lives within the boundaries defined by the Precepts, mindfulness of our commitment has to be constantly maintained; sensitivity and skill are continually called for. With wisdom and understanding of the law of *kamma*, we abstain from killing, harming, and hurting any sentient being through our actions and speech. Gradually, our good intentions unbetrayed by our actions, we are able to tame our unruly minds.

'Not-doing' or refraining is a kind of creativity. I very much admire Chinese brush paintings. In these works of art only a very small portion of the canvas is painted on; the effect and power of the picture are conveyed by the relationship between the painted form or the painted area, and that which is not painted. In fact, the large blank area of the white canvas is what gives the black brush strokes their power and beauty. So if you were to say to a Chinese landscape painter, 'What a waste of good paper, there's a big white area there that you haven't painted on at all', he would probably snort with derision. But where human behaviour is concerned, sometimes we don't see that. I think it's rarely appreciated that certain things we do have weight, beauty, integrity, nobility, precisely because of other things that we don't do. And that skilful abstention from actions, from certain kinds of speech, or from certain kinds of proliferation or imagination – that is the creativity.

Artists and writers mention this often. They tend to agree that the art lies in the editing – in what is left out. Many writers say that it is much more difficult to write in a simple style than in an ornate, complicated one. Simplicity is a skill to be learned; it does not come easily. And this is another aspect of our life; making simplicity a standard to return to. We must seek to refrain not only from the immoral but also from the needlessly disturbing. We can measure our practice by how simple our life is. We can ask ourselves, 'Is

my life getting more complicated?' If it is, maybe we need to re-establish our attention on the basics. Pictures need frames. We need wise limits for our actions. Otherwise our lives become cluttered and our energies dissipated.

Appreciating the austere beauty of the simple, taking joy in simplicity, leads the mind to peace. What could be more simple than the *samatha* object in meditation? Whether it is the breathing process or the word 'Buddho', the experience of unifying the mind in meditation goes against the whole tendency to mental and emotional proliferation (*papañca*). Through meditation we acquire the taste for simplicity in every aspect of our lives. In the external sphere, in our relationships with others and the physical world, we rely on certain abiding principles that support the simplicity we seek. The most important of these is non-oppression of oneself and others. As *samaṇas* we seek to imbue our actions with a reverence for life, a spirit of kind-heartedness, benevolence and altruism. And we learn to make that reverence for life unqualified. The sanctity of life, and the potential of all beings for awakening form the basis for the 227 precepts of the Pāṭimokkha.

When Ajahn Chah asked Ajahn Mun about the discipline and voiced his fears that there were just too many rules to make it a practical guide for conduct, Ajahn Mun pointed to *hiri*[1] and *ottappa*[2] as the heart of Vinaya. Develop these two things, he said, and your practice of the Vinaya will be impeccable. The commentaries state that these two dhammas are based respectively on self-respect and respect for others. Respect for life, our own and others, is the foundation of noble conduct. So we train to strengthen our devotion to harmlessness – harmlessness to others, harmlessness to oneself – always to bear the welfare of self and others in mind. The more you open up to the pervasive nature of suffering, the more compassion

[1] A sense of shame regarding unwholesome actions.
[2] An intelligent fear of the consequences of unwholesome actions.

arises and the more care you take about the quality of your actions. You realize that whenever you are not part of the solution, you're bound to be part of the problem.

In fact, the welfare of self and the welfare of others are complementary. If we truly understand what our own welfare is, we don't neglect the welfare of others, because in helping others we grow in virtue. If we really understand what the welfare of others is, we don't neglect our own welfare, because the more peaceful and wise we are, the more we are able truly to benefit others. When there seems to be a conflict between our welfare and that of others, it is usually a sign of confusion about the nature of welfare.

A second fundamental principle underlying our lives as *samaṇas* is that of contentment. We are taught to cultivate gratitude and appreciation for the robes, alms-food, lodgings and medicines that we receive, whatever their quality. We go against the worldly desire for the biggest, the finest and best. We're willing to make do with second best or third best. We find we can be happy with the worst, the things that nobody else wants. That is a wonderful discovery. Whatever we are given, we remind ourselves, is good enough – beggars should not be choosers. Even the coarsest requisites that we use have been offered freely with faith, and have been purified by the benevolence of the donor. It is our responsibility to make use of the requisites that are given to us with mindfulness and wisdom. The Buddha said that the merit gained by the donor is directly affected by the purity of mind with which we receive and make use of the gift. Thus, even in solitude, our life is always being affected by and affecting others.

To be content means that we don't waste our time scheming about getting things that we don't have or don't have a right to. It frees the body for more wholesome activities and frees the mind for more wholesome thoughts. As *samaṇas* we do not covet the *borikan* of other monks with narrow beady eyes. We don't even touch the

possessions of others unless we have been invited to do so.

The Vinaya lays down many detailed rules concerning our behaviour towards the material world. In the forest tradition we're taught that the second expulsion offence can be incurred by theft of even the smallest object, something the value of one baht. In the formal announcements which are part of the ordination ceremony, the preceptor instructs the new monk to take nothing whatsoever that does not belong to him, not even as much as a blade of grass.

To take on that standard – a single blade of grass – is the essence of 'leaving home'. It entails a radical shift of perspective from lay attitudes. Such a standard differs not only from that of criminals and thieves, but also from that of most 'law-abiding' citizens. There are few people who would not take advantage of some kind of little loophole in the law if they were absolutely sure they could get away with it – 'Everyone does it, I'd be a fool not to.' Moral rectitude is not unknown outside the walls of monasteries, of course – I'm not by any means suggesting we have the monopoly on honesty – but for a whole community to abide scrupulously by such principles is extremely rare.

The essence of our daily life as *samaṇas* consists of putting forth effort to abandon defilements and develop wholesome qualities through meditation practice. We spend hours a day sitting cross-legged and walking on our *jongrom* paths. Even if we may not always be satisfied with the results of our efforts, we can at least take heart from the fact that we've done something practical to purify our minds. By comparison, the training in *sīla* seems nondescript and its effects intangible.

To maintain our devotion to precepts and *kor wat*, we need to remember that spiritual life is not just about doing, it's also about not doing. Abstaining from things is neither immediately inspiring nor dramatic. We don't see sudden progress in non-harming or in

non-acquisitiveness, or in not coveting things which are not ours, in the same way as we might from a good meditation sitting or a good retreat. But there is movement, even if it is like that of the hour hand of a clock. And *sīla* is a treasure. It is merit, it is *pāramī*. How wonderful it is that through living this life sincerely, *sīla* is steadily accumulating and maturing in our heart. The Buddha said that *sīla* is the most beautiful adornment for a human being; it's the only fragrance that is all-pervasive. But the skill is to remember it, to recollect the beauty of virtue, bringing it up to refresh and give joy to your heart and mind.

The third principle underlying the life of a *samaṇa* deals with integrity, restraint and chastity in matters related to the sexual instincts of the body. That a group of young men – most monks here are young – are able to lead a completely celibate life is almost unbelievable to many people in the world. They assume that we have some kind of sexual release, that we must have homosexual relationships or else that we masturbate. They don't think it's possible to live this way. People these days can hardly credit the idea that a community of men can live in a completely chaste way and not be utterly screwed-up, repressed or misogynist. Maybe we are! – if we were repressed we wouldn't realize it, would we? But I don't think so. I think our community is living the 'Holy Life' in a resolute and intelligent way. And though it's not difficult all the time, for almost everyone there are periods when it is definitely challenging. It's a struggle, and it is fitting to feel a sense of wholesome pride in the fact that you can do it.

It's only through adopting this impeccable standard that we can begin to understand the whole nature of sexuality. We begin to see its conditioned nature, how it arises and passes away. We begin to see the suffering inherent in any attachment to it, how impersonal it is, what feeds it, what gives power to it – whether physical conditions, food, lack of sense restraint or indulgence in imagination. We

begin to see it as a conditioned phenomenon. But we can only have a distance from it, be able to reflect on it and see it for what it is by refraining from its physical and verbal expressions.

There is an important point about defilements here, that we have to pin them down on the mental level before we can let go of them. And the way we pin something down on the mental plane is by consciously refraining from, or enduring through, the intention to express it physically or verbally. This is where the relationship between *sīla*, *samādhi* and *paññā* becomes very clear. As long as we're still expressing sexual feelings physically or indulging in lascivious or careless speech about sexual matters, we can never isolate them. They're moving, They're still receiving energy. We're still keeping them in motion, we're still feeding the flames. So we seek to counter the stream of craving, and to do that successfully we must aspire to transcend sexuality altogether. It is that aspiration as much as the actual restraint which distinguishes the *samaṇa* from the layperson.

So as celibate monks we take a whole new stance toward our sexual feelings, towards women – half of the human race. We practice looking on women who are older than us as mothers, and as older sisters if they're just a few years older than us, or as younger sisters if they're a few years younger than us. We substitute wholesome perceptions of women for sensual ones. This is a beautiful gift that we can give women. An attractive woman comes into the monastery and we refrain from indulging in sexual perceptions, sexual thoughts about that woman, replacing them with wholesome reflections, whether by consciously trying to perceive the woman as a sister, or wishing her freedom from suffering. Practising *mettā*, we reflect, 'May she be well'. We offer women the gift of a wholesome response to them as human beings, rather than following the instinctive attraction to or obsession with their bodies or some aspect of their physical appearance. Through that intention we experience an immediate elevation from the blind, instinctive level

of our being to the uniquely human. It is a movement from the coarse to the refined. Indeed, the Pāli word *brahmacariya*, which we translate into English as 'the Holy Life' literally means 'the way of the gods'. In other words, within the human realm, a chaste life led voluntarily and with contentment is the most refined, sublime and happy form of existence.

As a fourth principle in the Dhamma, we have a love of truth. We endeavour to uphold integrity and honesty in every aspect of our life. Honesty includes non-deceit, non-trickiness, non-hypocrisy, not trying to appear in a way that is not a true reflection of how we are. This includes not trying to hide our faults or exaggerate our good points. The goal is to develop clarity and straightness. This may also be seen as a two-way process. The more honest we are with ourselves about what we're feeling and thinking, the easier we find it to be honest with other people. Similarly, the more we train ourselves to be honest in our external dealings, the easier it becomes to be honest about what's going on within us.

An important obstacle to honesty is the sense of self. We often attach to an idea of how we are or how we would like to be. We find it difficult to own up to those things that don't fit the picture of ourselves with which we identify, we feel resistance. We feel embarrassed, ashamed, we find good reasons to dissemble. Everybody likes to be liked and respected. Nobody likes to lose face. Integrity demands courage. An unflinching gaze and a devotion to truth – these are powers, strengths to be developed.

Truth is power. In many lifetimes the *Bodhisatta* harnesses the power of his speech through an *adhiṭṭhāna*, a resolute determination: 'I have never in my life done this or done that. By the power of these words may such and such happen.' And it happens. In some profound inexplicable way, the truth exerts a tangible impact on the physical world. It can affect events in the most marvellous kind of way. When one has built up that power of truth, one can draw on

that power of integrity with a sincere, solemn declaration.

So in the path of awakening we take a joy and wholesome pride in caring for the truth. We contemplate a word the Buddha would use, *saccanurak*, having fidelity to the truth, loving the truth, being devoted to truth, and being careful to be honest about what we really know. It means having the clarity, when we speak, only to utter words that we know to be accurate; being open to receiving others' viewpoints and not thinking that what we know now is timeless absolute truth; learning to distinguish between what we know, what we believe, what we think and what we perceive, and not confusing them. Often when people say they know something, they mean they believe it. Religious people may often consider their strong faith to be direct knowledge. The Buddha said that we care for the truth by being very scrupulous in distinguishing what we know as a direct experience from what we believe to be the truth.

Lastly, the fifth principle and precept is devotion to sobriety. The word 'sobriety' doesn't have such a pleasant ring to it. In my mind it used to bring up an image of thin pinched people in tight clothes, sitting on the edge of chairs in rooms with flowered wallpaper, sipping tea and talking about the weather. Carlos Castaneda's use of the word rescued it for me. Now I've come to like its hard edges. Here I am using sobriety to signify that clarity and sharpness of mind that is so infinitely superior to confused, dull or altered states of consciousness.

After my travels and adventures in the East as a layman, on my way back to England I stopped off to visit a friend in the mountains in Austria. She was away for a while and I was in her house by myself. Flicking through some of her books, I came across a pamphlet called *Questions and Answers with Lama Govinda*, a transcript of a session he'd had with some Westerners in Darjeeling. I was particularly taken by one of his replies. Somebody asked him, 'What do you think of mind-expanding drugs?' and he said, 'Well, if you've got an ignorant

mind, all you get is expanded ignorance'. That was it for me: game, set and match to sobriety.

Mind-expanding, mind-altering drugs and altered states of consciousness are all still within the sphere of darkness. This is still playing around with different modes of ignorance. Even if you experience different dimensions of reality, without the wisdom and discernment of *paññā* you can't benefit from them. You may transcend one particular room of ignorance, but you're still in the same building of unknowing. When you're not out of the building, you're still in the prison. So this sobriety means turning away from the whole razzmatazz of abnormal experiences, visions, and physiological and mental states that are available through liquids, fumes, powders and pills. It means grounding yourself in the simple down-to-earth clarity of awareness – of the eyes seeing forms, ears hearing sounds, nose contacting odours, tongue tasting flavours, body experiencing sensations and mind cognizing ideas. Seeing the true nature of these things. Being with these things as they are. And taking joy in that. Coming more and more to focus on 'the one who knows', the knower and the knowing. This is the great mystery of our life. We don't want to fuzz and confuse that. We want to clarify it. As we start to clear away all the garbage of the mind, the sense of knowing becomes clearer and sharper.

Ajahn Tate, one of Ajahn Mun's senior disciples, stresses the sense of knowing. He talks about the *jit* and the *jy*. By '*jy*' he means the sense of equanimity, the clarity of knowing; '*jit*' refers to thinking, feeling, perceiving. This is his way of talking. And he gives a very simple means of understanding what he's talking about. He advises holding your breath for a few moments. Your thinking stops. That's *jy*. You start breathing again, and as the thinking reappears, that's *jit*. And he talks about getting more and more in contact with *jy*, as the mind becomes calm in meditation. He doesn't talk about a *samādhi nimitta* or a mental counterpart to the breath, he talks about

turning towards the one who knows the breath. So as the breath becomes more and more refined, the sense of knowing the breath becomes more and more prominent. He says you should then turn away from the breath and go into the one who knows the breath. That will take you to *appaṇā-samādhi.*

So this is sharpening this sense of knowing, knowing the one who knows, and that's what will take you to peace. But this ability to go from obsession with the content of experience back to the state of experiencing and that which is experiencing is simplifying, bringing the mind more and more together. The mind becomes more and more composed, and more and more one-pointed.

So I invite you to contemplate these principles which give grace, beauty and meaning to life. Recognize the extent to which they are already a part of your life, and continue to cultivate them consciously: principles of harmlessness, honesty, integrity, chastity, love of and devotion to truth, sobriety and, above all, the constant clarification and sharpening of the sense of knowing.

6

MINDFULNESS WITH MOSQUITOES

Tan Saññamo

A young monk's reflections on working with discomfort.

I find it a challenge to be able to translate many of the Pāli words found in the *Suttas* into day-to-day experience. Sometimes even the most common words such as *sati* or *saddhā* can remain at best loosely defined concepts in our minds; how we personally experience these concepts is not clearly understood. Is it not worthwhile to take the time to investigate our use of these terms for ourselves? I have thought so, and at times have been surprised by what a little discursive thought can dredge up. When these terms are not clear I have noticed that doubt tends to infiltrate through this vagueness. By defining them more clearly and connecting them to our experience, not only do we patch up obscurities, but we can identify the presence of the qualities to which these terms refer and their nature of rising and falling. The following is an extract from my journal relating to an incident that has since redefined and clarified experientially what I take to be mindfulness in action.

Today, during our evening meeting at the outside meditation hall, clouds of bloodthirsty mosquitoes descended upon our vulnerable

and defenceless Sangha. Lately I have been struggling to understand how to work skilfully with the unpleasant situations that inevitably crop up in life. This was a fortuitous occasion to explore the possibilities. A Dhamma talk was offered this evening. When it ended I was feeling unusually content, with no real motivation to pursue a particular meditation object. Instead I was satisfied with watching the momentum of my thoughts naturally become still and settle. Inspired by such a peaceful mind-state, I generously offered my exposed right arm and shoulder to the mosquitoes. The response was overwhelming, so much so that my arm started twitching involuntarily from the strain of hosting such a banquet. Frustration began to grow, and the din in my mind that was telling me nothing was going on and everything was okay was not very convincing. Basically, I was being eaten alive. I didn't want to admit, 'This is unpleasant'. Instead, thoughts like, 'If you just get concentrated, you won't feel it' or, 'Develop compassion' arose in my mind.

In unpleasant situations I find I habitually try to convince myself of a solution, rather than looking directly at the matter at hand. The thoughts play the part of 'the one who knows' and supply answers for 'the one who doesn't'. Though these suggestions and advice are not necessarily wrong, they don't give space for a real understanding or acceptance of the situation to arise. Eventually, however, my capacity for abuse reached its limit. With patience and goodwill exhausted, I withdrew my offering back into the folds of my robe. Not a minute later, a mosquito landed on the back of my head. Because both my arms were bound beneath my robes, I was helpless. How exasperating! What happened, though, was interesting. I was being mindful of the sensations. I noted the mind and the object of the mind. From looking more deeply, their separate natures became increasingly distinct, as did their connections and the way they influence each other.

When pain arises in formal practice, I often can't bring myself to have an honest look at it. However, tonight the mind admitted, 'This body and mind are agitated! The entire sensory experience is unpleasant. Telling myself how I should feel only further obscures how I do feel.' I noticed that admitting these feelings did not increase the pain. Instead, a courage born of this detached acceptance began to strengthen, giving me confidence to look even more closely at what was going on.

The pain continued but no longer seemed to afflict the mind. At that point the sensations were more interesting than unpleasant; no aversion towards them was present, and so there was no desire to end the sitting. Mindfulness and concentration were growing together. This was a wonderful surprise; despite all the violent sensations, I found the mind to be quite concentrated. 'Interesting', I thought, 'even if the pain is stabbing and coarse, with enough courage and resolution to observe the sensations, one can just as well attend to them as to any other mind object.'

Perhaps, though, the more important insight which arose was on observing the relationship between mindfulness and concentration (at least as I experience them). What I noticed was that mindfulness indicates the object of our attention, while concentration is a measure of the purity of the mindfulness itself. When we speak in terms of concentration, we are really speaking about the quality of our attention. In this sense, mindfulness and concentration go hand in hand.

Suppose we look at a flower garden. A casual glance will probably give us general impressions, such as the variety of colours and the general layout, but we will probably not be able to identify any of the flowers. If we focus on a specific area we may see the flowers more clearly, and their petals and shapes may become distinctive. By looking closer still, their stamen, anther, and pollen may come into view. In this example, it can be seen how mindfulness responds

to an increased quality of attention. With more concentration, the object of which we are mindful comes more into focus.

In our day-to-day life, our attention is mostly diversified. The many sense impressions we receive in consciousness dilute the quality of our attention. When we accommodate this variety, the quality of our attention becomes spread out, less unified and less focused. Alternatively, the more unified our attention becomes, the greater the degree of discernment. The more capable of discernment we are, the more do increasingly subtle mind objects become accessible for investigation.

As concentration developed, I felt the rise and fall of sensations become clearer. I saw that the continuity of events we mechanically string together in everyday consciousness hides the immediate presence of a single point or object. For the unconcentrated mind, it is difficult to discern the constant rising and falling of phenomena. As the mind grew more concentrated, I was able to get closer to seeing things arise and cease. The series of events became more distinct. As a result, the illusion of continuity began to waver. I watched the process. It was then I felt I had a choice, to fix my attention on a single object or contemplate the continuous flux of change. However, being unable to sustain this concentration, I lapsed back into a more normal state of awareness. Once again, these sensations appeared to me as a continuity.

We all hold on to views and opinions about life and about meditation, and part of the task of meditation is learning how to let go of our views. As I reflected upon this evening, what struck me was that the night's struggle was not so much about how I related to the meditation object, but more about the difficulty of recognizing and addressing the personal views to which I attach. Letting go of views is difficult; they define our relationship to certain aspects of experience. Relinquishing them leaves us insecure, without a strategy for dealing with the unknown. When we do manage to

let go, this space provides the opportunity for wisdom to arise. With more clarity around the basic nature of the mind, I found that certain assumptions and tendencies I held about meditation began to surface. For instance, I observed how I had been sabotaging the more contemplative elements in meditation practice by attempting to force the process, rather than letting it unfold organically.

Contemplation involves a great deal of receptivity. When we attach and limit ourselves to our preconceived ideas, our receptivity is compromised. This is an obstacle. Sometimes I give undue attention to phenomena which may arise as a by-product of my concentration. By attending to these new and often fragile objects, I end up abandoning my original meditation object. As a result, everything falls apart. This approach has never been successful, but oddly enough, I had never seemed to notice...

The Author

Tan Saññamo, who at the time of writing the article was a newly-ordained monk, stayed on at Wat Pah Nanachat, completing his five-year training in Thailand. The following year he went to live with a much-respected disciple of Luang Por Chah living in Rayong Province, Ajahn Anan Akincano. Tan Saññamo trained under him at his monastery, Wat Marb Jan, for a further five years, before visiting home in Canada for a while. In 2011 Ajahn Saññamo moved to Abhayagiri Monastery in California to live with the community there and further his training under Tan Ajahn Pasanno.

7

PROGRESS WITHOUT MOVEMENT

Sāmaṇera Khemavāro

A novice considers the changes in his attitudes to life following ordination.

My first encounter with the Dhamma was about eight months ago, at the end of 1998. A friend of mine, Al, was undergoing short-term ordination as a monk in a temple near Bangkok, and invited me to come along to the ceremony and spend a week at the monastery. Al's teacher was an English monk, Phra Peter. When I first heard some of the Buddha's teachings from Phra Peter, even though the concepts were all new to me, something resonated in my head. It was as if he was expressing something deep inside but inchoate in my consciousness. The teachings on *kamma* and *sīla* – if you do good, then good things will happen to you, and your goodness will protect you from harm – these were teachings that I felt and had always tried to live by.

New experience, yet familiar

Though I believed in morality and ethics, I remained sceptical due to their association with Christian puritanism and self-righteousness. The Buddhist approach seemed to have a different tone. I found the

teachings on keeping precepts quite attractive. I was taught that this is something you offer to the world and not something that is demanded from above. Another appealing aspect of Buddhism for me is that we are responsible for our own enlightenment. The Buddha discovered the path to Nibbāna, but it is up to each one of us to make the effort and walk down that path. The first time Phra Peter told me about the goal of Buddhism, which is to do good, refrain from doing evil and purify oneself, it felt so natural and familiar that I thought to myself, 'If I were to verbalize the criteria or goal of my life, this would be it.'

That whole week at the monastery in Nakorn Sawan, I felt a bit odd. While everything was new to me, there was something vaguely familiar about the monastic setting. I felt really at ease. For example, the daily devotional chant, even though it was in Pāli and I couldn't understand a word, gave me great inspiration, and so I went to all morning and evening sessions. Phra Peter also introduced me to meditation. Growing up in Los Angeles, a place of never-ending New Age/spiritual fads and fashion, I was prejudiced against meditation. Rather hastily, I lumped it with all that trendy newfangled stuff. My initial impression of meditation and yoga was that they were something for bored corporate wives with little to do, the type who would only drink hyper-hygienic sparkling water with just a twist of lime, organically grown by a politically correct commune, and do some yoga or meditation before visiting their spiritual guru to have their auras examined.

Phra Peter felt my keen interest and offered to be my teacher if I wanted to pursue this religious path further. While I was grateful for the offer, I felt that a major component of being a monk was discipline, and, unfortunately this temple was a city temple which was somewhat lax in its interpretation of the Vinaya rules. For example, one monk owned a car and drove it around on the temple grounds. So Phra Peter told me about Wat Pah Nanachat – he had

spent some time at Amaravati, an affiliate branch monastery in England – and what he told me interested me, so I decided to visit it.

Past life, fast – work hard, play hard

I still remember the powerful surges of conflicting emotions during my first few days at Wat Pah Nanachat. The monastery is only an hour's flight away from Bangkok, but my lifestyle there as a stockbroker seemed worlds apart from the lifestyle of the monastery. As a stockbroker, my life revolved around information, a constant flow (sometimes a whirlwind) of information. A large part of the job is to be able to sift through the stream of information and determine which piece of news will have an impact on the stock market. Hence there is a relentless search for the most updated news and 'new' news. By nine o'clock in the morning I would have read four newspapers (two local, one regional, and one international); then I would continue to scan for further news updates from international news services (Reuters and Bloomberg) and check with the research department regarding recent developments regarding companies, as well as broad economic and political trends.

Working in such a fast-paced environment, one tends to maintain the momentum throughout the day. After work I would rush to the gym for a quick workout, then meet up with friends and colleagues for drinks and then dinner. I would be out until about 10:30 - 11:00 p.m. two or three times during the week. The weekends would be filled with brunches and lunches, dinners and clubs. Sometimes I would be literally running from one appointment to the next. Rarely would I be home before midnight. And then there would be weekend trips to Phuket, Chiang Mai, Hong Kong or Singapore. It would not be uncommon for me to go to the airport from work on Friday night and come back to the office on Monday morning straight from the airport, having spent the weekend in Hong Kong

or Singapore. I was brought up with the motto 'work hard, play hard'. Unfortunately, nobody told me about contentment. So in spite of all the sensory diversions and options available to me, during the past couple of years I had felt bored and disenchanted with life. Things started to slow down at work due to the economic recession. Regarding my personal life, I began to notice that no matter where I was or what I was doing, there was an undercurrent of boredom and existential anxiety. I would be at some 'fabulous party' or the 'in' club; and then such feelings would come over me. I would look around and realize that everybody looked as lost as I was, and seemed to be trying to fill up their lives with the same type of material possessions, clothes and cars; and sensory diversions like going to restaurants and clubs and travelling to strange and exotic places, or self-annihilation through drugs and alcohol.

Life in the monastery – paradoxes and parables

Coming from such a fast-pace and sensory-driven world to Wat Pah Nanachat, where it seemed that the only sounds were from the swaying bamboo bushes and leaves falling, was a bit of a shock. It was like running on the treadmill with headphones on, listening to music with the volume on high, and suddenly having someone come up and pull out the plug. Coming from such a sensual world, I remember feeling quite lost and ill at ease at times with the calm and stillness of monastery life. I can recall experiencing many mood swings during my first week. Yet overall I was quite attracted to the simple and peaceful life in the monastery, and the structured environment of having scheduled activities throughout the day really appealed to me.

In contrast to the myriad choices in the outside world, this structured and simple monastic lifestyle may seem stifling and monotonous. But nothing could be further from my experience so far. As a layperson I was rushing from one sensory experience to another,

constantly planning where I should be next, but never really being present wherever I was. If I was eating dinner, my mind would be planning where to go afterwards: 'Should I go to so and so's party or hit the bars, or both?' And then there was the dilemma of tomorrow: with whom should I go to lunch? And that would lead to where we should go for lunch, and the same for dinner, and then bars and clubs, and on and on. The irony in such a 'go-go' and glamorous life, was that everything ended in boredom or, worse, oblivion. Most of the time I could not remember what I did yesterday. I remember thinking: 'I got cheated somehow! I have done everything I am supposed to do. They all told me that if I worked hard, followed all the rules, and paid my dues, success would come, and with it everlasting happiness. By all accounts I am a poster-child of success. I am barely in my thirties, bringing home six-figure pay cheques, dining at the best restaurants, taking holidays anywhere in the world and buying whatever I want. Yet I feel so bored and discontented. This is utterly, utterly unfair!' In my fast-paced life there were endless variations, yet my habitual way of reacting limited my world.

A good image to illustrate this is a small circle flying through space: although the space surrounding the circle is infinite, my habitual way of responding and seeing things limited my vision to just that small circle. In a similar way, the Wat Pah Nanachat logo of a lotus in a square is for me a meaningful image for monastic life. Although the lotus is contained in the square, it has endless variety in terms of its positions. Here at the monastery the slight variations and nuances in monastic life fascinate me. Every day I am excited to wake up to the endless permutations of life in the monastery. How mindful will I be during the meal? Walking on alms-round? In my interactions with different members of the Sangha? The scenery of the sunrise over the rice fields outside the gate is a constant source of surprise and delight. Mundane things like the texture of the gravel road I walk on during the alms-round attract my interest. Is

it soft and muddy from the rain last night, or is it hard from being baked by the hot sun yesterday? What is the sensation on the soles of my feet? Why do they hurt more today than yesterday? Am I mindful of my steps or am I off somewhere plotting a revolution? And then there are my mind states in the morning. Am I happy and relaxed? Or a bit anxious and irritated? And what is the cause of these different feelings? And am I mindful of them as feelings, or do I get caught in them?

I am still quite mystified by the paradox of how rich and diverse life at the monastery can be. On one level it can seem quite repetitious and regimented. With few exceptions, the same things take place every day. We go on alms-round at 5:30 in the morning and have our one meal at about 8:00; after that an hour of chores, followed by more work or meditation, and then it is tea-time at 4:30 p.m. Yet within that regulated environment there are countless variations and permutations in the surroundings, and in myself as well.

It is through this repetitive and structured environment that I learn about myself, how I perceive and react to my surroundings. There are many levels to the practice. For example, at mealtime, how mindful am I when walking down the line to collect the alms-food? Did I exercise self-restraint and take only a few pieces of mango, and leave some for the people behind me in the line? Or did my defilements overwhelm me, so I filled half my bowl full of mangos? Am I exercising sense restraint in terms of keeping to myself, or am I anxiously looking at the front of the line to see which monk is taking more than his share of the mangos and feeling ill-will towards him?

The practice – walking the walk

Two areas of the monastic practice that I find interesting in its contrast to my lay life are the practice of meditating throughout the night on Observance Day (Wan Phra) and eating once a day.

Before being a stockbroker I was an investment analyst, which entailed writing research reports about companies listed on the stock market. Working for ING Barings, one of the top international brokerages in Thailand, I had a heavy workload and strict publishing deadlines. The company's mantra was 'Publish or Perish'; hence it was not uncommon to work through the night to meet a particular deadline. As a matter of fact, I had to 'pull an all-nighter' about once a month to get a certain report published by the deadline. During these all-night sessions we had lots of help to keep the adrenaline going. There would be a group of people at the office to help finish the report, and then there were TV and radio, and pizza and beer. There was much talking and running around to complete the final details.

Altered states, altered egos

At Wat Pah Nanachat we are encouraged to stay up all night and meditate on Wan Phra, which falls about once every week. But instead of all the sensory stimuli to help keep the adrenaline going and the body awake, the only help in that area is a cup of coffee at midnight. Other than that, one is supposed to meditate quietly by sitting or walking. Needless to say, staying awake all night is more challenging without the aid of external stimuli such as TV or radio, but working with my mind states from 2:00 to 4:00 a.m. has been quite revealing. One moment I can be feeling dull and sleepy, the next restless and resentful. The following is the type of internal chatter that took place during the last Wan Phra at 3:15 a.m.

'I should be in bed. This is a silly practice, staying up all night. It's a dead ritual without any rhyme or reason. What am I trying to prove, anyway? How much *samādhi* could I get in this current state of stupor? Where is everybody, especially the monks? Why aren't they up meditating? And why is that senior monk nodding off? He has been doing this for a while, you would think he'd have got over

this problem. He doesn't seem very developed anyway, and looks as if he hasn't much to show for all those years. Maybe it's not him, maybe it's the practice. Maybe it does not work after all. And why doesn't that stupid clock move any faster? My knees are sore, my back hurts, and I hate this place.'

This is hardly the picture I have of myself as a calm, collected and compassionate person. But the beauty of the teaching is that we are taught to accept things for what they are, being open to all the aspects of our personality, the good, the bad, and the ugly. The practice has been helpful for me in recognizing and dealing with my weaknesses and shortcomings. It is liberating to realize that I have these unwholesome mind states, but also that they are just mind states, and to be aware of them as such and not get caught in them or identify with them.

One of the biggest challenges I have faced so far has been not eating after noon. Part of the forest tradition discipline is that monastics only eat one meal a day. With few 'medicinal' exceptions such as dark chocolate, sugar and butter, no solid food should be consumed after midday. Before coming to Wat Pah Nanachat, food was not an issue for me. I have never had a weight problem and can eat pretty much whatever I want, but always in moderation. However, in the monastery, with so few outlets for my desires to express themselves, food has taken on a disproportionate role. I constantly think of things I can eat or reminisce about all the nice dining experiences I have had. As an *anāgārika*, one of my responsibilities is to prepare the afternoon drinks for the Sangha. This entails being in the kitchen and around food, which has been a challenge for keeping the food precept. Part of my problem in dealing with the food issue has been that I do not see the logic in being able to eat dark chocolate in the afternoon, but not a banana. However, after several discussions with senior monks, I am beginning to realize that the purpose of the ascetic practices of one meal a day and not

indulging in any worldly behaviours is to calm the mind, which is conducive to achieving *samādhi* in meditation.

As a beginner meditator, here again I had that feeling of *déjà vu*. Not that I was entering the *jhānas* in my first week of meditation, but at the end of most sessions I have a sense of calmness and centredness that I find quite refreshing. There is not so much restlessness, and the preoccupation with food is not so gripping. My perception of my surroundings seems to be enveloped in a mist of goodwill and gentility. The irony about just sitting is that in contrast to my blind pursuit of happiness and excitement in my lay life, which ended up in boredom and desperation, by just sitting in my *kuṭī* and counting my breaths, I am finding enthusiasm and contentment.

Conclusion

While I have had my share of frustrations and disappointments at Wat Pah Nanachat when dealing with my own defilements, overall I am finding the experience fascinating and delightful. And though my monastic life has been somewhat short, only six months, I am finding joy. There is excitement, but it is a different kind of excitement from what I found when working on the stock market.

I was ordained as a *sāmaṇera* before the Rains Retreat and plan to remain one for one year. I feel quite fortunate in having had the opportunity to be living as a monastic so soon after my introduction to the Dhamma, but I also realize that there is much work to be done. While I have a strong sense of responsibility to be diligent in putting forth the efforts required of a monastic, there is also a sense of thrill and anticipation on this journey of self-discovery.

The Author

Soon after this piece was published Sāmaṇera Khemavāro took monk ordination and spent a further couple of years in Thailand. He subsequently moved to Australia, taking up residence initially at Bodhiñāṇa Monastery, where he lived for seven years. For the last three years he has been the Abbot of Wat Buddha Dhamma, a very secluded forest monastery a couple of hours' drive from Sydney.

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NO THAI, NO FARANG

An interview with three Thai monks practising at Wat Pah Nanachat.

In addition to the monks from abroad, a number of Thai monks also come to Wat Pah Nanachat to live and practice. Tan Jayasiri, Tan Jotimanto and Tan Dhīrapañño are three such monks. Each has lived at Wat Pah Nanachat for a number of years and has served the community greatly by acting as secretary to the Abbot. This interview was conducted by Tan Paññāvuddho.

Tan Paññāvuddho: All three of you grew up in Thailand. I'd be curious to know what were the first impressions you can remember from your childhood when you saw Buddhist monks.

Tan Jayasiri: There was a branch of Wat Pah Pong (Ajahn Chah's main monastery) near my home in the countryside outside Si Saket. When I was a little boy I went to the monastery every day. It was clear to me from an early age that I wanted to become a monk in the future. I liked the way the monks shaved their heads and wore their robes, not dressing like laypeople. When I first went to the monastery I was four years old. I went to the 'Sunday school' there.

Tan Paññāvuddho: What do you remember about the first time that you saw the monks in meditation? What feelings arose for you?

Tan Jayasiri: I felt special. It was so different from what worldly people did. I thought I would like to be like them in the future. I also noticed that the monks did not live together, but in the forest in their own *kuṭīs*. That interested me. At the forest monastery I observed that each monk would put all his food in one alms bowl (curries and sweets together), and eat it at one sitting in the morning. When I was young I had the opportunity to eat the food left over from the monks' bowls, as is common for laypeople at the monastery. It smelled so different from normal food. I thought it smelled like the scent of heaven, very strange for me. While I went to school during the week, my grandmother went to the wat. At midday she would bring the monks' food back from the wat, so I would go home from school during the lunch break to eat it. If she didn't have any food that day, I felt upset. Years later, on the first day I became a monk, I tried to smell the food in my bowl during the meal. It smelled normal, nothing special at all. Maybe the smell was just bait to get me here!

Tan Paññāvuddho: When you were little, did you ever have the opportunity to meet any of the great *Kruba Ajahns* like Ajahn Chah?

Tan Jayasiri: Sure. When I was a young boy about seven years old, I went to see Luang Por Chah at Wat Pah Pong. At that time the monastery was still very simple. Although many monks lived there, after the meal the place looked deserted because all the monks went back to their *kuṭīs* to practice. Luang Por Chah, however, always received many visitors. He smiled all the time. When I looked at him I felt something very special.

Tan Paññāvuddho: Why do you think you had so much faith at an early age?

Tan Jayasiri: I don't know. It was just normal for me. When I was little and saw suffering in the world, I would think about the monks, their robes and their bowls. Ajahn Chah's smile is always in my memory,

it has never gone. Even today it is very clear. It is a very special feeling for me to be a monk in his tradition. I have never had any doubts about Luang Por Chah and the *Kruba Ajahns*.

Tan Paññāvuddho: Tan Jotimanto, can you recall your experience when you first became aware of Buddhist monks?

Tan Jotimanto: Actually, my grandmother was my main influence. When I was young I went to the monastery quite often with her. There was a forest monastery nearby where Luang Por Poot Thaniyo was the abbot. My family was very close to Luang Por Poot. From an early age I was taught to pay great respect to the monks. During the Rains Retreat my grandmother always went to the monastery on the Wan Phra days, spending all day and night observing the Eight Precepts. Sometimes I would go and stay with her.

Tan Paññāvuddho: When you observed the monks in the forest monastery environment, what did you experience?

Tan Jotimanto: At that time I thought the monks were very special people, and that they must have psychic powers because they taught us about heavens and hells. Actually, as is the case with many Thai children, I was afraid of ghosts and I thought the monks could help. I felt that since the monks had good *sīla*, the ghosts would be afraid of them.

Tan Paññāvuddho: Tan Dhīrapañño, how about yourself? What were your first impressions of the *Buddha-Sāsana*?

Tan Dhīrapañño: In my case they were similar to Tan Joti. When I was young I grew up with my grandmother in Chonburi, out in the countryside. She used to go and *sai baht*[1] every morning. On Wan Phra she would wake up extra early in the morning to make special food for the monks. You see, as a little boy I always slept in the same bed with my grandmother, so on the days when I woke up and did

[1] *sai baht* (Thai): to give alms-food (literally: to put food in a monk's bowl)

not see her beside me, I knew that day had to be Wan Phra.

Tan Paññāvuddho: Can you remember when you were young and your grandmother taught you to *sai baht*?

Tan Dhīrapañño: I remember her telling me to kneel down, put my hands in *añjalī*, be quiet and carefully put food into the monks' bowls without touching the brim. That was in the morning and it was not that difficult. On certain special days she would take my cousins and me to the monastery. That was the hardest part because I didn't understand most of what the monks were teaching, and I had to sit with my legs politely folded behind me in the *papiap* position. I would sit with my grandmother in the *sāla* while my younger cousins played loudly outside. Anyhow, my grandmother always seemed to be very happy on that day, and being around her, somehow I felt very happy too.

Tan Paññāvuddho: Tan Jayasiri, what gave you the inspiration to be ordained as a monk?

Tan Jayasiri: Actually, I always had a strong ambition to become a monk. I was thinking about it when I was very young,

Tan Paññāvuddho: Did you ever have any doubt, like when you had a girlfriend, maybe?

Tan Jayasiri: It wasn't my nature to think like that. I was fortunate to come from a happy home. Still, I saw that family life involved a lot of suffering. I valued the ideals of simplicity and renunciation, and I was always drawn to the monk's life, dedicated to contemplation and peace. From the time I turned fifteen, of course I would be around a lot of girls at school. But for some reason my mind would always turn to the monks. When it came to having a girlfriend, I wasn't averse to it, but I always thought that I should practice the path of the Buddha first. When I turned twenty I asked my mother's permission to become a monk immediately. I asked her several times, and finally she said 'OK.' She said she would be happy for me

to be a monk, but not for too long, maybe a few years. She felt that a short while would be enough for me and then I should return to her and the family.

Tan Paññāvuddho: What does she say now that you have been a monk for almost ten years?

Tan Jayasiri: She is quite happy now. Not like in the first few years, though, when she would always wish for me to go back to lay life.

Tan Paññāvuddho: Tan Joti, what gave you the inspiration to go forth as a monk?

Tan Jotimanto: It also happened when I was young. I had the chance to see Luang Por Poot frequently with my grandmother. Once at his monastery a senior monk from Luang Por Mun's monastery pointed to me and said, 'You should become a monk.' This statement stuck in my mind all through the years. When I was a teenager I went to Wat Pah Pong and had the chance to see Luang Por Chah. He was still healthy at that time. During those days I had heard Ajahn Chah was very strict and fierce, and you know, when you are young, you are not that interested in the strict monks.

Later my cousin introduced me to Wat Pah Nanachat. At that time I was working as a lawyer in the nearby city, Ubon. That was quite a stressful period in my life. When I visited Wat Pah Nanachat I was very impressed with the peaceful quietude of the forest, and the mindfulness and kindness of the monks. My mind started to calm down. Ajahn Pasanno and Ajahn Jayasāro were the senior monks at that time.

Tan Paññāvuddho: Was that before you went to live in New York City to help run a large restaurant?

Tan Jotimanto: Yes, it was. After my first visit, I came and went to and from Wat Pah Nanachat for two or three days at a time as a layman during one and a half years. Then I moved to the States. I worked

hard at the restaurant in Manhattan and earned enough money to support the family back home. I had the financial independence to have almost anything I wanted, but I was not happy. I did not know what the point was. One day I went shopping with my friends. They asked me what I wanted to buy and I stopped. I felt a profound sense of boredom with worldly things and experiences. I had had enough. It was a very free and liberating kind of feeling. Reflecting back on my life, I realized that what I really aspired to was to practice the Dhamma and be a monk. But I had to prepare for that and it took time.

Tan Paññāvuddho: How did your parents feel when you said you wanted to become a monk?

Tan Jotimanto: They were happy that I would become a monk for just one Rains Retreat. It is the tradition for Thai men to be ordained for one rainy season, and my two other brothers had already done so. But I did not want to ordain for only one Rains Retreat. I wanted to stay a monk as long as I felt it was meaningful, and disrobe if I did not like it. It was quite difficult for my parents at that time. They had to think about it, and finally they gave me permission. At that time both of my parents were elderly and not in good health. Even though it was very difficult for them to allow me to ordain, they wanted what was best for me and were generous enough to make the sacrifice. This willingness on their part showed me how much they really loved me. Once they saw me as a monk, especially as a forest monk, they liked it and were inspired themselves to practice. Through Dhamma practice they really changed the way they lived their lives. After I had been a monk for just one year, they said, 'Don't ever disrobe.' [Laughter]

Tan Paññāvuddho: That was quick.

Tan Jotimanto: They were very happy. I felt very lucky to have the chance to repay my debt of gratitude to my parents, who passed

away soon after, by helping to teach them more about the Dhamma. In the last few years of their life we discussed the Dhamma many times, and I shared with them some books and tapes of Luang Por Chah such as 'Our Real Home'. I noticed my parents became much more contented and at ease with life. They deepened their understanding of impermanence and reflected on the inevitable separation at death. They started to practice every day. My father died first, but my mother continued to be strong in spirit due to her Dhamma practice, despite her poor health. She died four months later, and at the time that she died she was about to make an offering to the Sangha. The day she died it was a blessing to know that she was happy and at peace.

Tan Paññāvuddho: Tan Dhīra, what about you? You also were working in America before coming to be ordained, weren't you? What made you change direction to become a monk?

Tan Dhīrapañño: After I finished medical school in Thailand, I had to decide what to do. First I wanted to be a pediatrician like my mother, and I wanted to do my internship in the West. In those days, however, it was difficult to train in America. Finally I was accepted for the programme in Michigan. During one of the first teaching rounds in the hospital, the attending doctor asked the residents where they came from originally. When the doctor found out that I came from Thailand, he smiled broadly and asked me, 'So you're from Thailand, are you? What is Nirvana?' I was shocked. I did not expect this kind of question in the West. I don't remember what I answered, but it made me think hard. I had gone all the way to America in search of knowledge, but I wondered if what I was looking for was in my own country.

Tan Paññāvuddho: So how did you end up at Wat Pah Nanachat?

Tan Dhīrapañño: In Detroit the local Thai community would have a pot-luck meal at my aunt's house every weekend. They would talk

and then sit in meditation together. I joined the group once in a while. The benefit of attending was the plentiful and delicious food, and my aunt always insisted that I take the leftover food, because she knew that I lived by myself and was not good at cooking. I have to admit that this was the original inspiration for my meditation practice. One day several years later I found a post on the Thai student internet that Ajahn Jayasāro was coming to teach a meditation retreat in Maine. This 'backpack retreat' took place in Acadia National Park, and it turned out to be a life-changing experience for me. In the morning and the evening we chanted a *pūjā* together in Pāli and Thai. My grandmother had taught me to chant every night before I went to bed, and I had been doing that since I was a child, but I knew very little about what it meant.

During the retreat I was very moved to learn the deep meaning of what I had been chanting all along. During the day we hiked on different trails. When we got tired we sat in meditation. During the questions and answers session each day, I was very impressed by Ajahn Jayasāro's wisdom. On the last day of the retreat we had the ceremony of asking for forgiveness from the Ajahn. It was a beautiful tradition. While we were walking to the park for this ceremony, Ajahn Jayasāro handed me his bowl. That was the first time that I had carried a monk's bowl and I felt very happy. I don't know how to describe it, but it was a special feeling that I will never forget. Tears filled my eyes. Time seemed to stand still. At that moment I felt that I too could become a monk and strive to be like the great *Arahants*. That was the moment I decided to become a monk.

Tan Paññāvuddho: Your family had put you through medical school and supported your training as a doctor in America – was this a shock to them?

Tan Dhīrapañño: I would say yes. The year that I met Ajahn Jayasāro and decided to become a monk, I told them of my decision, but they

did not believe it. They thought I was broken-hearted or something [laughter]. But I persisted. For the next two years, while I was waiting to finish my training, I tried to keep the Five Precepts on a regular basis and the Eight Precepts once a week. My friends started to think that I was weird, but I found I was more and more peaceful. I would spend more time on meditation retreats, where I felt very much at home. When I finished my fellowship I came back to Thailand and found my way to Wat Pah Nanachat. I asked Ajahn Jayasāro to ordain me so I could continue on the path. Of course, my parents had high expectations for me. But I think I did not let them down, although at the time they might have thought differently. For me, becoming a monk is more challenging. There are already many doctors in my family, but there is not a single monk. There are many meaningful and worthwhile things to develop and cultivate in this holy life.

Tan Paññāvuddho: Have they grown to accept your decision by now, or they still hoping that you will come back?

Tan Dhīrapañño: As time passes, they have begun to appreciate what I am doing as a monk. To be honest, my parents' generous, loving support throughout my life gave me the emotional strength to feel ready to go forth as a monk. For me the monastic life is not so much a rejection of the family life as a way to evolve one step further. If I weren't a monk in this life, I would feel in my heart that I had not fulfilled my responsibility to the family in a higher sense.

Tan Paññāvuddho: Tan Jayasiri, what was it that originally brought you to Wat Pah Nanachat? How did you decide to come here to train when there also are many other good Thai forest monasteries?

Tan Jayasiri: Just before I ordained I went to Wat Pah Pong and met Luang Por Sumedho and Ajahn Jayasāro. From that moment I wanted to be with them. I was ordained in Ayudhya, and after spending the first five years there I came to Wat Pah Nanachat.

Tan Paññāvuddho: What was it that attracted you to Luang Por Sumedho and Ajahn Jayasāro?

Tan Jayasiri: It's hard to put into words – I just wanted to be with them. Their presence was peaceful and inspiring. I felt that to practice under their guidance would be beneficial.

Tan Paññāvuddho: Did you feel that they were different from the Thai Ajahns?

Tan Jayasiri: No, similar.

Tan Paññāvuddho: Having come to practice at Wat Pah Nanachat, how do you find practising with Western monks, compared to the Thai Sangha?

Tan Jayasiri: Actually, in my practice, I never feel that I'm practising with special people. Everywhere I stay I always just keep Ajahn Chah's practice.

Tan Paññāvuddho: Which part of Luang Por Chah's teaching do you find most important in your practice?

Tan Jayasiri: To watch and investigate feelings and the mind. Seeing impermanence.

Tan Paññāvuddho: Why do you think that in Thailand, where there are many great *Kruba Ajahns*, so many of the *farang* monks have been ordained with Luang Por Chah or in his specific lineage?

Tan Jayasiri: Yes, there are many great *Kruba Ajahns* in Thailand, but Luang Por Chah was a special monk. He had his own style of explaining the Dhamma in a simple yet profound way. It was easy to understand his teachings. His presence made an impact. People were happy to see him. Everyone liked to be around him. He set up a style of training that is helpful and suitable for many different kinds of people.

Tan Paññāvuddho: Tan Joti, what made you decide to be ordained at Wat Pah Nanachat as opposed to another Thai forest monastery?

Tan Jotimanto: As I had known about Wat Pah Nanachat for some time, I knew that I liked the way of life and I felt the monks were very sincere and diligent in their practice. Still, I went to visit Tan Ajahn Dtun before ordination. I liked it there too, but the monastery was very close to my family's house in Chonburi. I wanted to ordain away from my home, so I came here to Ubon. Also, I felt inspired to ordain with Ajahn Jayasāro.

Tan Paññāvuddho: How would you compare living with Western monks to living with Thai monks?

Tan Jotimanto: In many ways things are the same, but there can be some cultural differences. People at Wat Pah Nanachat come from many different places. Although the community is usually very harmonious, from time to time difficulties or misunderstandings can arise. As Thais we are taught to keep things inside ourselves. We don't know how to express ourselves. But when I came here it seemed everybody knew how to express himself. I have been trying to learn to do this skilfully, but it is still difficult. I think that if people in a monastic community express their feelings too much, it can create some problems. For example, people will not learn to cultivate patience. On the other hand, I think that open communication is usually valuable because it increases understanding between people. For Thai people, if there are problems we just don't talk about them. The ideal is to find the middle way.

Tan Paññāvuddho: Tan Dhīra, how about you? Was it your connection with Ajahn Jayasāro that decided you to be ordained here as opposed to a Thai monastery?

Tan Dhīrapañño: At that time I didn't know much about other monasteries in Thailand. I did retreats at Ajahn Buddhadāsa's monastery, Suan Mokkh, and a couple of other places. But I thought my weak

point was the Vinaya, the discipline. So I tried to find a place where there was a strong sense of community and strict monastic training. I first came to Wat Pah Nanachat mainly because of my connection with Ajahn Jayasāro, and I liked it right away. I particularly loved the feeling of the forest. The paths were well swept and there was a good environment for meditation. And perhaps most importantly, I immediately connected with the Sangha. I felt at home here.

Tan Paññāvuddho: Now I have a question for any of you. Many people think that in Thailand today there is a crisis with the *sāsana*. There have been scandals with monks not keeping the Vinaya, and some Western-educated lay Buddhists are critical of a Sangha that they feel is stuck in old-fashioned ways. What do you see as the future of the *sāsana* in Thailand?

Tan Jotimanto: I think people are more interested in the *sāsana* now. They understand what is going on more. Before people held the *sāsana* in very high esteem, maybe too high and it became out of touch. Now lay Buddhists are freer to speak their views and to be heard.

Tan Paññāvuddho: Do you think this is due to Western influence?

Tan Jotimanto: It could be.

Tan Paññāvuddho: How do you think this new attitude will affect the monks' practice? Some contend that the more worldly orientation and values of lay life can be counter-productive when brought into the sphere of monasticism. Any opinions?

Tan Jayasiri, *Tan Jotimanto*, *Tan Dhīrapañño*: [Long pause, then laughter.] It is a difficult balance.

Tan Paññāvuddho: In the West there is a stress on the value of equality, but the Buddha noted that the view 'I am equal' is still a form of attachment to self-identity view. Some monks contend that is important not to sacrifice *samaṇa saññā* (the perception of being

a peaceful renunciant) at the expense of conforming to current worldly norms.

Tan Jotimanto: One example of this can be the way we use hierarchy. Thais maintain very high respect for the Ajahn. When Thais live in a Western community we still put the Ajahn in a high position. In effect there is a sense of formality and respectful distance. However, I've noticed that Westerners are more informal and relaxed around the teacher. For them, their relationship with the Ajahn can be like with a friend. For Thais this would be uncomfortable. I wouldn't allow myself to play the role of a friend to the Ajahn, even if I wanted to. Thai monks can be very close to the teacher, but there is always a formality in the relationship.

Tan Paññāvuddho: That's very interesting. It seems common in various Buddhist traditions to keep the teacher in a formal position, so as to maintain proper respect. If one doesn't have that respect it is very difficult to learn, to have pure communication from the teacher to the student. Do you think Westerners may miss out on learning something because of the casualness with which they can relate to the teacher?

Tan Jotimanto: Yes. In Thailand, even if the Ajahn is young or has about the same number of Rains Retreats, he still is accorded formal respect as a teacher. It may be natural to feel a level of friendship in this situation, or not to want to listen to the Ajahn as someone senior in the hierarchy. But in a Thai wat this would rarely happen, because the Ajahn is always placed so high.

Tan Dhīrapañño: Take Tan Jayasiri, for example. He will turn into an Ajahn very soon, and it will be difficult for us to relate to him. We used to be close to him and tell jokes around him. When he becomes an Ajahn we will have to change that perception. He will be put in the special position of a teacher soon. [Laughter]

Tan Jayasiri: I think there is a time and place for that. It's not always

the case that the Ajahn plays the role of the formal teacher. When a situation in which respect is appropriate arises, we act accordingly, like a young son with his father. The feeling of a close relationship makes it easier to talk with each other.

Tan Paññāvuddho: For Western monks it usually requires some effort to adapt to hierarchical social structures in a skilful way. For example, in Western culture one tends to relate to people directly, not in terms of a formal hierarchy. One shows respect through mutual friendship, openness and trust.

However, in the Buddhist tradition, respect and trust of one's teacher and fellow monks can be conveyed by selflessly and harmoniously acting in accordance with one's formal place in the relationship. This can be a subtle and refined thing, something many of us Westerners can learn to do better. It is a challenge to adopt a new cultural form naturally, without fabricating a new identity that isn't authentic.

When I live in Thai monasteries, however, it seems comfortable to fit into the hierarchy and relate to the Ajahn formally. Formal separation feels natural. It can also be useful. The Dhamma teachings flow much better this way. But when I am with many senior Western monks, it often feels appropriate not to overdo a formality that is unnatural in our culture. But the form of these relationships changes depending on the context, whether in Asia or the West, as individuals or in a group, inside the monastery or out in public. One has to be alert and sensitive in order to adapt.

Tan Dhīrapañño: I think there are both benefits and drawbacks to the 'equality' form. In Thailand the hierarchy system is so strong that when I was young I had very little idea about what monks do. The closest I came to the monks was offering alms-food or listening to a Dhamma talk. That was it. It never occurred to me that the monk's life was another lifestyle that I might choose. Today is different

from the old days, when the monastery was also the local school and a community centre, and good monks were role models for the whole community.

When I met a Western monk, however, somehow that rigid hierarchy was weakened. When I spent a week hiking in America, listening and talking to Ajahn Jayasāro, I felt very close to him. I felt that I could ask any question I liked and his answers touched me personally. Perhaps my Western education enabled me to understand the Dhamma better in Western terms. But I have to say that Ajahn Jayasāro is more Thai than many Thai people I know. Even when I first met him, during many talks we had, he'd always correct my use of Thai words. I also think the personality of the teacher is important. When we like the teacher, we like the subject too. I have much gratitude for that chance to have a close relationship to the Ajahn while in America, something I had not yet experienced in Thailand.

But there are also drawbacks to the 'equality' form that I can see more clearly now that I am in robes. In monastic life, identifying with being 'equal' can be detrimental. If everybody is the same, we may not listen to or show appropriate humility around a more senior monk, especially if our views tell us that we know more than him. It can seem natural for the mind to follow its own *kilesas*, but there will be no spiritual growth then.

Another way to put it is that I think it is best to recognize equality in terms of Dhamma, while realizing hierarchy is important when it comes to communal life and the Vinaya. Hierarchy can be a very skilful means if we use it correctly. Personally, as a monk, I feel that I want to keep the hierarchical relationship with the Ajahn, to keep him high, so I can do what he teaches with respect and not treat his teaching casually.

Tan Paññāvuddho: Very soon, Tan Jayasiri, you will be going to

Australia. What is it that interests you about practising in the West? Why would a Thai monk leave his own country and go to practice Dhamma in Australia?

Tan Jayasiri: The idea came from Ajahn Ñāṇadhammo. He spoke to me about this two and a half years ago. He said that the monastery there is a good place with an excellent teacher. At that time I wanted to continue to practice at Wat Pah Nanachat. Now the time is appropriate and I have decided to go. I think it will be valuable for me to be tested by a new experience. After working as the secretary at Wat Pah Nanachat, the opportunity for more solitude in Australia will be good. I can speed up my practice. There I will have more free time. I can set up my practice schedule the way I like.

Tan Paññāvuddho: In the West many people have been interested in Dhamma practice for decades, but not many people have become monks. Most people prefer to keep the lay practice. Conversely, young men in Thailand may have little exposure to Dhamma practice, but they still have an interest in going forth. Do you think that in the West in the future this pattern will change?

Tan Jayasiri: Yes, in the future it will change. But in becoming a monk, one has to give up so many things. When you become a monk, the important foundation is the discipline. Someone with many attachments might feel it is a narrow path and might not feel comfortable. They might think it is more convenient to practice with just the Five Precepts. To a Westerner the monastic precepts may seem like a lot at first. They go against our habit in the lay life of being preoccupied with making and acquiring things as the way to realize happiness. As monks we have few requisites. But even though we may be ordained, we can still have the same perceptions as when we were laymen. When a monk is ordained on the outside, it doesn't mean he is ordained on the inside. We can also feel there are too many precepts, because we still hold the views and attachments we had in the lay life. So we have to put a lot of effort

into the practice. After some years the results of the practice will appear. Perceptions and feelings from the lay life will transform naturally.

These days, with modern communications and international travel, it is more possible for people to be exposed to the possibility of practising the Dhamma through monastic life. In the West you can sometimes see monks out in society and leading retreats. People can see how a monk conducts himself and lives his life. With more exposure to this, some people may become interested in ordination.

Tan Paññāvuddho: Tan Joti, you will be going soon to our branch monastery in New Zealand. What do you think about the interest of Westerners in the monastic path?

Tan Jotimanto: In the West now people are interested in meditation, but without knowing much about the bigger picture of Dhamma practice. To become a monk is a very great step to take, because one has to relinquish a lot of attachments. But if Westerners are really interested, they can do it. Today they can even be ordained in the West, but in my opinion there are still advantages to training in the East. Because the *sāsana* is so rooted here, it can be very nourishing to the practice, especially in the early stages of monastic life. But whether or not to be ordained as a monk is something one needs to know for oneself.

Tan Dhīrapañño: For myself, I feel it is important to add that if someone is really seriously about the practice, I would strongly recommend the monastic life. It makes the foundation in *sīla* solid and firm. The Buddha laid down the three-fold training of *sīla, samādhi* and *paññā*, but the *samādhi* that has a strong foundation in *sīla* is more fruitful and leads more directly towards wisdom. In the lay life there is often a compromise. The monk, on the other hand, can go all the way to the highest goal. The only limitation is his inner effort, not the situation outside.

Tan Paññāvuddho: For me it is very uplifting to see so many people across Thailand who have a strong love for Dhamma. That can be a powerful inspirational and motivational force for a young monk like myself. Some people in the West have this love of the Dhamma, but most people don't know anything about the Dhamma at all. How do you feel about going to a place where many people don't know about Dhamma practice? They might not even know who Buddhist monks are. [Silence and smiles]

Tan Paññāvuddho: Tan Joti, you lived in Manhattan for five years. Can you imagine going for alms-round on Fifth Avenue?

Tan Jotimanto: No, I can't really imagine that. But if I were in that situation I would have to accept it if people didn't know what a Buddhist monk was, or if they looked at me strangely. But then again, many strange things happen in New York City. In any case, it is a good practice to uphold the tradition, and the sight of a simple monk walking for alms, practising mindfulness, might offer something to the people in their busy lives. These days, however, people tend to know more about monks. Still, if I were to go walking in New York, I would be sure to be prepared to answer any questions that I might receive from the people I met.

Tan Paññāvuddho: Tan Jayasiri, how would you respond to the question, 'Who are you?' which is sometimes asked of monks in the West, perhaps while they are on alms-round?

Tan Jayasiri: If someone asked who we were, I would probably smile and respond that we are alms-mendicant Buddhist monks. If he asked me to describe our practice, I would say that we try to live a simple life. We practice meditation to try to understand the true nature of things in this world. If we can practice the teachings of the Buddha and see things clearly as they truly are, we can help to lessen suffering. The aim is to have wisdom with the thoughts, emotions and feelings that arise: 'I like this' or 'I don't like this', 'I want this' or

'I don't want this' – we can let go of them. If we can keep our minds above the worldly feelings of happiness and unhappiness, we can begin to find a true freedom and happiness that do not change. This may be easy to believe, but it is difficult to do. The practice is not easy. If the person who asked me had some free time, they could try to practice mindfulness and meditation to investigate these things on their own.

Tan Paññāvuddho: Tan Joti, how would you respond?

Tan Jotimanto: I would try to explain to him that I am a Buddhist monk who does not handle or use money, and that it is our tradition each morning to walk for alms. It might take some time to explain the Buddha's teachings. What I would say would depend on the person's background and the situation. If the situation were right, I would say we practice to let go, not to attain something. We do this through training to develop virtue, meditation and wisdom. Higher teachings on non-self and emptiness would be difficult to explain. It would be more appropriate to start with teachings about *sīla* and *mettā*, and when a friendly relationship was established, then we could talk about something deeper. If he wanted to talk more, I could invite him to visit the monastery to learn more about Dhamma practice and try it out for himself.

The Interviewees

This previously unpublished interview is from the original material for the first edition of 'Forest Path'. It was not included in the original book, probably because of its length. On re-reading, it seemed a real pity not to include it this time. Tan Paññāvuddho (see page 192), the main editor of the first edition of *Forest Path*, conducted the interview. The three monks interviewed have all in

the meantime been abroad: Tan Jotimanto went to New Zealand, Tan Jayasiri to Australia, and Tan Dhīrapañño stayed with one of his former teachers in America, Bhante Guṇaratana. All have now returned to Thailand and are at present engaged in running their own little monasteries there, Tan Jayasiri in a remote hermitage called Mettāgiri Forest Monastery in Chayabhumi Province; Tan Jotimanto and Tan Dhīrapañño co-abboting Wat Pah Boon Lorm on the Moon River in Ubon Province, a half-hour drive from Wat Pah Nanachat and closely linked to it.

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TEN THOUSAND JOYS AND TEN THOUSAND SORROWS

Christine Lem

A lay meditator considers the challenges and benefits of practising at Wat Pah Nanachat.

When I was asked to write a piece for this Wat Pah Nanachat publication, I found it was an opportunity to reflect on and digest the challenges, experiences and insights that arose during my extended period of practising the Dhamma at the monastery. When I arrived at the monastery I was similar to many women who came with the hope of devoting focused energy to the practice. Admittedly, many times during my stay I questioned the benefits of living in a primarily male monastic environment, but I stayed on because I was open to experiencing the way of training in the community, and to learning more about the reality of life as taught by the Buddha. Over time I eventually gained insights into myself and the nature of life which astonished me. I continually found it fascinating to learn and understand more about myself through practising the Dhamma.

One of the first teachings which amazed me was related to anxiety. I remember that on four different occasions I asked completely different questions with different story lines. The same monk

began every response with, 'Well, anxiety is like this...' I could not understand why he was focusing on anxiety and not addressing my questions. It took me a month to figure out that I had anxiety and the story lines were meaningless. I thought it was not possible that anxiety could exist in my life. My lifestyle was on the nomadic side, so I had high coping mechanisms, and this should have meant that I was in tune with impermanence. But to my surprise, as I began to investigate more deeply, I uncovered areas of my life that needed to be reflected on. Spiritual urgency was ignited.

The practice situation for women at Wat Pah Nanachat presented the opportunity to embrace whatever arose in the present moment, whether it was a pleasant, unpleasant or neutral experience. Living in a monastic environment gave me the time and space to investigate deeply and examine what caused my mind to move. Was it due to external conditions or was it coming from a place inside? What seemed so real and solid in my mind one minute was not the same the next. During my stay at the monastery I considered all situations and incidents which moved my mind as valuable and as opportunities for potential insights. Having to be with things I didn't always find pleasant required a lot of work. It took energy to go against the grain. Mindfulness was needed to hold back views and opinions, and it took a lot of time to be able to see through the superficial story lines, in order to search internally for a path leading out of *dukkha*. Idealism, anxiety, views, opinions and perceptions, as well as joy, insights, understanding, compassion, respect, humility and inspiration were all part and parcel of the teaching of my life.

While living at Wat Pah Nanachat it was sometimes difficult to assess the progress in my practice, but after being away from the monastery for several months I realized that the positive fruits of the practice could be seen clearly. I have already experienced glimpses of insight that have had a profound effect on my life.

With the encouragement and support of the Wat Pah Nanachat community, my practice continues to gain momentum. So where did the experiences and challenges of Wat Pah Nanachat begin?

Relating to monks

The first evident challenge for lay visitors to Wat Pah Nanachat, especially women, is the question of how to fit into a monastic training centre for males. In particular, due to the monastic discipline and conventions, women might find that they don't fit into Wat Pah Nanachat as well as they might wish. For me this was an ongoing challenge, though I felt more at ease as the practice gained strength. The hierarchical system was a part of monastic training, which helped define how monastics interacted with each other as well as how they interacted with laypeople. In addition, the Thai culture has placed monks on a pedestal. In some respects it seemed as if they were no longer ordinary beings. An explanation given by a Thai lay supporter gave me insight into why monks received special treatment with which Westerners might not be familiar. She said, 'I'm a householder with many responsibilities and duties, that's my *kamma*. It gives me great joy that I can support the monks, because they can live and dedicate their lives fully to practising the Dhamma, which I can't do right now.' The generosity of the Thais affects not only the monastics, but also those laypeople who visit and live in the monastery. Often Westerners do not fully understand the inter-dependent relationship between lay Thai Buddhists and monastics. The laypeople support the monks with simple material requisites, and the monks support the laypeople by passing on and exemplifying the Buddha's teachings.

What strikes Western women at the monastery as surprising are the old traditional ways of behaviour. In Thai monasteries laypeople sit and eat after the monks, kneel down or stand lower when speaking with a monk, and fulfil the role of cooking and serving the

monks. Western women wonder, 'Where does equality fit in at Wat Pah Nanachat? This is the twentieth century, is it not? These are Western monks who surely must be aware of modern times.' Western women may suddenly find themselves in a position where they don't know how to act or relate to Western men in robes. The question of appropriate protocol, coupled with the need to be consistent with one's own familiar comfort zone, can produce heightened levels of anxiety. What is considered appropriate conduct and what is not? Anxiety increases, especially for those women who are unsure of themselves or are unfamiliar with the formalities of the monastery. Regardless of the fact that they might be new to Thai culture and monasticism, some women found they needed to know exactly what to do and how to act in every situation. I also went through this phase.

It was important to remember that the monks follow a code of discipline composed of 227 training rules; these were their rules, not mine. This was a good reminder to relax at Wat Pah Nanachat. I noticed that Westerners tended to worry about the monks' code of discipline more than necessary. It was not as though we had adopted the 227 precepts the moment we entered the monastery. There was a period when I thought Thai people knew best about the formalities of the monastery. The reality was that the monks knew best. They were the ones who lived and abided by the training rules. Sometimes, even when I was familiar with the protocol of the monastery, anxiety would still arise. I found the mind proliferated as follows: 'There are Thai monks and Western monks. Should I be formal with Thai monks and informal with Western monks? But then how do I act with the Westernized Thai monks, or the Malaysian or Japanese monks? Maybe I should be formal with all the monks at all times? But if I were a Western monk, perhaps I would think it was not necessary to be so formal? Should I continue to talk with the monks I was friends with when they were laymen?'

The thoughts proliferated on and on. After much anxiety, I learnt to relax a little and search for balance. I found that each situation and each person was different, and one acted appropriately according to the circumstances. There were no fixed rules. I found that if I was respectful and polite, and was sensitive to the cultural differences, I couldn't go wrong.

I went through other phases as well. In Thai society women have to maintain a certain physical distance from monks, as if women were dangerous. I would think, 'If I were in the West the distance between males and females would not be a big issue. This monastery is a bit odd. What am I doing here? I'm living in a male monastic community!' I questioned my stay in the monastery. Monastic life and Thai culture are interesting combinations for Western women. After making a commitment to the monastery for a period of time, I felt a rebellious rumble in my mind. I would express exactly what was on my mind. Once I admonished a bossy novice who rudely interrupted my conversation so that I could complete his duties. I used strong words and told him to tidy up his own mess and take responsibility for his actions. I thought I was speaking the truth, but harmful speech is not considered 'right speech' either. It was a good teaching for me, as I was beginning to understand that true and honest thoughts could be dangerous mind states. This was one of many insights which meant my stay at the monastery was challenging and fruitful. Although the monks tried to explain the situation at Wat Pah Nanachat, and how and why the rules and conventions exist as they do, Western women said it was difficult to listen to or even hear the words of these privileged monastics in robes, explaining the way things were in the monastery. Monks were explaining the reasons for their own privileges. Women found that it was easier to hear things when a Western female with Asian roots, living in the monastery for an extended period of time, explained matters there.

I once thought that monks at Wat Pah Nanachat were constantly

mindful and that they probably practised twenty-four hours each day. What else would monks do? I sometimes forgot that I only saw the monks four times a day, at morning meditation and chanting, the daily meal, teatime, and the evening meditation and chanting. Well, of course they were mindful all the time then! Monks were supposed to behave this way during formal meetings, and especially when sitting on the *āsana* before the meal with so many people looking in their direction. The brief moments when I saw the monks gave an impression of heightened mindfulness and awareness.

Wat Pah Nanachat can be an intense place for Western women when small and trivial matters are magnified. There were times when there was not enough tea, sweets, cushions or chanting books for the people sitting at the lower end of the hierarchy. Did this happen every time? Was it due to an inexperienced person setting up, or perhaps due to someone working with greed that day? Depending on my mind state I was sensitive to these things and sometimes took them personally, as if someone was directly trying to create *dukkha* for me. There were many different ways the mind could proliferate in response to a given situation.

I also experienced monks who were sensitive to the position of women in the monastery. I noticed gestures of kindness and concern. There was a novice who made a separate kettle of cocoa for women so that they wouldn't have to wait so long, and there were other novices who would personally pass on the spare sitting cushions to women. At other times monks would ask if there was enough food or tea for the women, or a monk would make a sincere apology for his lack of mindfulness towards women. All this took effort, energy, humility and awareness of the sensitivity of women living in the monastery, which was much appreciated. Honest mistakes and miscalculations do happen.

It takes at least a few visits and sometimes more to understand Wat Pah Nanachat. To understand the monastic training set-up more

deeply, I needed to take the time and energy to keep asking questions. At the same time, I had to be open to receive answers. I found it was important to dispel doubts by asking questions, in order to benefit from the new experiences gained from living in a Thai monastery. My doubts or misunderstandings arose because there were many ways of perceiving a given situation. I encountered one monk who did not use eye-contact during a Dhamma discussion with the lay residents. My judgemental mind said, 'He is a young monk and he must lack confidence, be insecure and have women issues to deal with in his practice.' It was part of my conditioning that not to make eye contact is odd or impolite, but in a monastery little or no eye-contact was appropriate for a 'good' monk. It was obvious he was a 'good' monk because his Dhamma responses were sharp and clear, with compassion and wisdom.

Timing and not taking everything too seriously are also important. I remember one occasion when someone asked me, 'How come all the monks are so young?' I said, 'It's all that meditation they do.' I'm not quite sure what role humour plays in monasticism, but it certainly helps to lower unnecessary barriers between people and allow space for new growth.

Language and cultural challenges

The position of women in a male monastic community can blind Western women to seeing the benefits of the opportunity to practice at Wat Pah Nanachat. Inability to communicate in the native language adds to the challenge of practice there. Female Western guests at Wat Pah Nanachat can find their anxiety level increase due to the lack of English-speaking Thai women. Thoughts about what to do, where to go and how to do things might be overwhelming when you cannot understand the answers, but the Thais will come to your assistance if you look lost. It is also important to smile. If I ever felt at a loss for words and did not know what to do, I just gave

a great big smile. It is the Thai way. Smiling is considered a higher realm of communication.

Not knowing the Thai language can also be a blessing. I found it was interesting to observe the movement around the community and the people in it. Not knowing the right words, and speaking little, I had an opportunity to experience the monastery on a different level. Many times the challenges and aversions that came with community living were limited to thoughts. At those times I saved myself from creating any unwholesome *kamma* which I would have regretted later – what a relief! It was also an advantage not to understand or become acquainted with kitchen gossip. Reduced mental proliferation was always conducive to my meditation practice.

In addition to the language barrier, unfamiliarity with Thai customs added to my anxiety. In general I found it was a good idea to follow in the footsteps of the Thais, literally and figuratively, especially when there were ceremonies at the monastery. The best policy was to go where they went, sit where they sat and do as they did. For me Thais were good means of gauging what was deemed appropriate in a monastic community, until I developed the confidence to know what was best based on my own experience. I remember one incident when I placed bananas randomly in a bowl that was going to be offered to the monks. They underwent a transformation when I briefly left the kitchen. They were wiped and cleaned with a wet cloth, both ends were snipped for a tidy appearance and then they were neatly arranged in a bowl. It was hard for me to believe, but the Thais staying at the monastery had even stronger perfectionist tendencies than I did. They were meticulous in everything they presented to the monks. I made a point of observing this in order to smooth out any future incidents. Most of the time, if I made a mistake, it was not actually a major error on my part. Interestingly, I learnt a lot when I made mistakes, and the memory was recorded in my mind to ensure the same mistake did not happen again. This

put me at ease on some levels. I felt as if someone was showing me insights into Thai culture, and protecting me from making any major blunders that might cause embarrassment to myself and others in the community.

I found the challenge in the kitchen was that I needed to keep paying attention to what was useful, and to take the initiative of performing tasks that were appreciated. The Thais expressed delight and encouraged me when I cooked Western food. The villagers inquired about what I was cooking and what kinds of ingredients I used. I took all this interest as a sign of Thai-style praise, which may have been a bit of projection on my part. It didn't seem to matter if the Western food looked, tasted or smelled pleasing to their eye, tongue or nose contact. The important thing was that it was Western food, and the pot came back fairly empty so the monks must have liked it.

One area that the Thais did not encourage me to emulate occurred when preparing fruits. They were skilled at carving and arranging fruit into beautiful shapes and designs. Thais cut with the hands in mid-air, rarely using a chopping board, so I did the same. Also, the Thai-style of using a knife was to cut away from the body, rather than towards the body as in Western style. I did try a few times to cut and design fruit in a manner pleasing to the eye, using the Thai method with a knife. The results were disastrous. I could not manage to carve a piece of fruit with a machete-like knife without the fruit turning into juice in my hands. I soon noticed that Thai people offered very subtle hints with regard to where my talents were most useful and beneficial in the community. I learnt to be alert to how I could be useful, especially in the kitchen where communication was in the form of body language. When preparing the meal, the Thais would rarely suggest what to do to Western women.

Overall, insights and challenges from my daily experiences and

interactions with Thai culture brought an enormous amount of joy. The Thais' kindness, generosity, respect and humble nature were qualities I continuously tried to rediscover in myself and aspire towards. These qualities, which the Thai community exemplified in their day-to-day lives, had a tremendous impact on my attitude towards life. The relaxed and easygoing style of Thai people influenced nearby Westerners. I examined my resistance to these wholesome qualities which the Thai community continuously expressed to others. I learnt a lot by simply noticing, listening, observing reactions, going against the grain of my cravings, using my favourite word, 'whatever', talking little and smiling a lot. I believe living for any period of time in a Thai monastic community might enable people to make great progress in their practice. I was able to let go of fears and anxieties related to my own cultural conditioning, and open up to a new set of heartfelt wholesome qualities. What a joy and relief it was to let down my barriers of resistance!

Another cultural difference that deeply affected me occurred during Thai Buddhist funerals, where the dead bodies were brought to the monastery to be cremated in the open air. I appreciated the increased contact with death, which reduced any fears I had about it. Watching a body being cremated was a powerful reminder that my body was of the same nature. It was interesting to witness that these funerals were ordinary, peaceful and simple, quite a contrast to my experience of Chinese funerals. The bodies were decaying naturally and not decorated to look beautiful or full of life. I felt for the first time that funerals were authentic. I noticed that less fuss and distraction regarding funeral arrangements made the death more real for those concerned. Anyone who wished was able to watch the body burn and melt from skin to bones to ashes. The heat element from the fire was raging and powerful. It had a life force of its own which felt natural and freeing. It felt as if life and death were coming together in harmony and balance. Burning a

body in the open air in the centre of a forest monastery seemed quite appropriately in tune with nature. I was very moved by these funerals. When I die I might consider Wat Pah Nanachat as an option for my cremation.

Through interacting with the Thais, I realized that being born in the West with Chinese roots, I perceived the world in a way that appeared to be a contrast to the reality of experience. It was an incredible experience to discover that I knew so little about the true meaning of life, which I felt was being revealed to me in the monastery.

Practice in communal life

I've spent a great deal of time in numerous communities, usually passing through them. At Wat Pah Nanachat I lived for the first time in a community for an extended period of time. This made a considerable difference to my practice. Making a commitment to a community meant there was no escape from confronting my habits of body, speech and mind. I learnt to live with the *kamma* created in the present and to resolve the *kamma* created from the past. Living in a community was intense and sensitive buttons were pushed. When practising with others I found that I was no longer dealing with just my own five *khandhas*: I had taken on board the entire community's *khandhas*. If there were twenty people in the community, there were one hundred *khandhas* to interact and deal with in a compassionate and skilful way.

I was also aware that in most communities there always seem to be one or two odd characters who test all those living in the monastery. They came in a variety of forms: monks and nuns, Western and Thai, men and women, young and old. I noted how these types of characters affected the entire community, even though I first thought I was the only person in the monastery who was experien-

cing major *dukkha* with that particular person. One Western layman who visited the monastery did not want to speak to or have any contact with any of the women. At the same time, he continued to frequent areas where women gathered, like the kitchen. These characters were challenging and could lead me to react unskilfully. I noticed that if I was in a good mood they did not move my mind; instead, compassion arose. My thoughts about this situation were: 'I wonder what it would feel like to be living in this person's shoes. Sounds like a lot of anger. I wonder where it comes from. His *dukkha* can't come from me. We don't know each other. We have never met before. I can't take this personally.' Confusion and *dukkha* arose as I reacted to his attitude towards women on the external level. I noticed my thoughts, and what immediately came to my mind was that he was not supposed to be acting that way or saying those absurd things: 'What is he doing here? This is a monastery!' But in reality it was not his comments that were causing the *dukkha*. It was my own internal struggle with idealism that created true *dukkha*. The scenario was all happening so fast that I could barely keep up with being mindful.

I reacted to external scenarios and blamed the external world for my *dukkha*, but the real *dukkha* was my own internal issues. Whenever mindfulness returned, the amount of confusion I could create for myself amazed me. Idealism was an ongoing struggle because it seemed so real and solid. I was absolutely positive beyond a shadow of a doubt that the *dukkha* was coming from the people or places who caused me to react with negative mind states. As I continued to experience scenario after scenario, I hoped to learn from each and every incident, rather than react to the endless incidents that were all integral parts of life.

As well as the odd men who came through Wat Pah Nanachat, there were also women who were challenging. One woman constantly complained about living at Wat Pah Nanachat, but she continued

to stay in the monastery for quite some time. We had a discussion, and slowly her personal history, perceptions and feelings began to unfold. I was startled to hear the amount of suffering she experienced. It was a strong and solid reality for her. It was difficult to relate or connect with this *dukkha* because it didn't affect me in the same way. After our meeting there was a shift in my attitude: I found space and compassion to allow this person to be who she was. To begin with I reacted negatively to her continuous stream of complaints. I felt they were unrealistic or exaggerated. Idealism affected my mind state. I would think, 'If she doesn't like the monastery, why continue living here?' I lacked the patience to accept what was happening in the present moment.

I noted how idealism took up a vast amount of my time and energy, so as to cover up the present reality and create the reality I wanted. I realized it would be wiser to bring up the effort to work with the issues occurring in the present moment. My ideal was that I loved everybody because that was the practice, but in reality I avoided those I didn't love, which made it easier to love everybody – what a delusion! It would be better to learn to be with people with whom I did not wish to be. Community living was like that. I was continuously learning and gaining insight about others and myself in the community. It was an opportunity to take on the challenge and work with what moved the mind. I didn't get overwhelmed with my *dukkha* or try to leave the monastery by the back door. If I was not going to practice with the difficulties that came from living in the monastery, what was I waiting for?

I had a tendency to wait for the right moment to really put in the effort to practice. I'd say things like, 'When I find the right teacher I'll practice; when I find the right community I'll practice; when I'm in a happy mood I'll practice; when I'm not so tired I'll practice; when I'm in solitude I'll practice.' The list goes on. The right moment is here and now, because I might die before the next

moment happens. Death does not wait for the right moment. It's known for bad timing. Imagine dying waiting for 'the right moment to practise'. To talk about the practice more than practising the practice sounds like hungry ghost-realm material. It was always good to remind myself that it was useful to take every opportunity to practice, and not waste one precious moment. The practice continues.

Wat Pah Nanachat was an inspiration because people were practising, living and working with reality, life as it was happening. I tried to spend my time being with whatever was in the present moment, and going against those old habits that continuously pushed me around. I examined exactly what was pushing my buttons. Did it ever really come from external conditions? I noticed a variety of incidents that caused my mind to move in different directions. Sometimes I let it go; other times I reacted because 'I was right and they were wrong'; and there were times when fire came flying out of my mouth with zero mindfulness. It was all about watching the mind, fully reaping the consequences and learning from these incidents. If I was not making the effort to practice and learn in a conducive and supportive environment like the monastery, where else was I going to do it? Would I ever find the perfect place so that I could have perfect meditations?

Investigating idealism

After I left Wat Pah Nanachat, a major insight revealed itself to me. These reflective periods outside the monastery offered an opportunity to step back and create some space for the challenging situations I had experienced when living in a community. The key issues that entered my mind were idealism, perfectionism and anxiety, which extended into honesty, trust and refuge. I noticed that I had difficulty in being honest with myself due to idealism, particularly in relation to feelings, opinions, thoughts and decision-

making. I had practically taken refuge in idealism; I had put my trust and faith in it because it wouldn't fail me. That perfectionist idealistic tendency invaded my mind. I continually denied the reality of where I was at, because I was not the ideal. I was not as honest as I could be in my practice because of fear that I was not living up to my idealism. This was a lot of *dukkha*.

I remember I was surprised and impressed by talks given by a visiting Ajahn. I noticed he was exceptionally honest about his past and present experiences. He openly admitted and discussed his challenges, difficulties and complaints. I had thought Ajahns would be above and beyond these mundane issues. He used personal experiences because he was not afraid to express his situation freely. He was not embarrassed because he didn't have anything to hide, while I was caught up in my own idealism and did not allow enough space for the practice to unfold naturally.

The influence of a highly respected senior monk who spoke in an alternative style helped me let go of my ideals about the practice. I suddenly felt I had a lighter load to carry. It was easy to forget that the Ajahns were just ordinary sentient beings. It was difficult to think they still had *dukkha* like anyone else. It was their approach, and how they responded to *dukkha* in a compassionate and wise way, which made the difference. The skilfulness, clarity and honesty of their body, speech and mind were beautiful to experience and inspiring to watch. The presence of senior monks was a powerful teaching.

I found Wat Pah Nanachat was conducive to deepening my practice. I felt the foundation of my practice shake and move, because it immediately reflected back to me the question of how honest I was with where I was in it. It was not as though I was going around lying to people about my practice – it was that my living, breathing reality consisted of thoughts related to incidents, such as irritation which arose due to loud and disrespectful lay visitors to Wat Pah

Nanachat. I thought, 'I should not be sinking into these low-level mind states! This is not how one trains the mind.' I would reflect on how wonderful it was that people had discovered the Dhamma, and how great it was that they had a chance to visit the monastery. That was the ideal – it was a pleasant thought, but the *dukkha* still wouldn't go away that easily.

Sometimes I couldn't clearly see the difference between reality and idealism. In community life the ideal was that people should be aware of what tasks needed to be done and then do them, but the reality was that some people didn't make the effort or didn't care. Then I usually went through a mind-spin and wondered what kind of practices they were doing. How could people use and abuse such a wonderful place? Didn't they hear the evening talk? It was so powerful. When the reality doesn't match idealism, *dukkha* escalates. How many times did this happen? I lost count. A monk once said something to me that had a powerful effect. He said, 'It's good to have you here, Christine, it's good to have someone we can trust.' He used the word 'trust' often with me, and I thought to myself, 'Well, of course you can trust me. I've got too much idealism, I would never ever think of doing anything intentionally harmful to the monastery.' With hindsight, however, I realized that he was trying to say, 'Christine, we trust you, therefore you should trust yourself.' For me this meant I needed to give myself some credit, and probably believe and trust that I was okay. I was fine most of the time, but I got thrown off course because sometimes my feelings, memories, opinions, views and criticisms all seemed accurate, justifiable and absolute truth. At other times I was very clear they were *dukkha*, *aniccā*, *anattā* and not worth holding on to. I needed to work on letting go of those absurd fixed ideas. Self-criticism arose, and I wondered how I could possibly trust myself when I made so many deluded mistakes. It was interesting to watch and notice the anxiety, idealism and perfectionist tendencies when

I could catch them. It was better than spinning in them – such a waste of my time and energy.

In the monastery I was a long-term female lay resident who lived and worked near the kitchen, spoke English and a little Thai, and had a shaved head, which led people to believe I was the local information source. Sometimes I felt I was engaged in idle conversations more than necessary, which meant less time to do the 101 things on my wish list. This increased my craving for solitude. I thought that if I had enough solitude my whole practice would come together. I was forever complaining that there was not enough time in the day to do all that I wished to do. If only I had more time, I would be happy. I would renounce tea or fast in order to increase the time leading to happiness.

One of the subjects for frequent recollection is: 'Do I delight in solitude or not? This should be reflected upon again and again by one who has gone forth.' For me the answer is, 'YES. Which mountain, cave or jungle do I get to meditate in so as to delight in solitude?' Unfortunately, it was 'not recommended' for women to stay in some branch monasteries unless there were two women together. It was also 'not recommended' for women to go to certain areas of a monastery. The 'not recommended' advice was frustrating for me because I believed that deep and heartfelt insights came from intensive solitary practice. Women practitioners who wished to meditate in more isolated areas were bound to come into contact with the fears, worries and anxieties expressed by Thai people. Thais asked, 'What if ghosts should appear?' What was considered appropriate, safe and respectable for women were factors that made it challenging for women who wished to delight in solitude.

In hindsight there was enough solitude, but I let *dukkha* get the better of me. Living in my *kuṭī* in the forest, sweeping and meditating were periods of solitude which were overlooked because they didn't match my ideal type of solitude. It was pure *dukkha* to have

high standards and not be able to maintain or keep up with them. I experienced the 'ideal' type of solitude a few times, but using that memory to compare the daily life experience of solitude only created unease in my mind. I didn't appreciate or make good use of ordinary, everyday solitude, which probably would have measured up to the dream type of solitude I frequently envisioned in my mind.

I noticed that some days I would love Wat Pah Nanachat. It was the best monastery, with the best monks. It was the most authentic and pure practice place in all Thailand. Everyone was wholeheartedly into the practice. We had the most faithful and dedicated villagers who came every day to support the monastery. Then there were other days when I said, 'I'm leaving tomorrow and I'm never coming back. It's all wrong here, they should be updating and adjusting their rules of discipline to keep up with modern times, I'm not going along with these outdated, old-fashioned ways of interacting with one another.' Which was real and which was not? I couldn't believe in these passing thoughts or moods. They were too much *dukkha*. I found it both time-consuming and tiring to resist present conditions at the monastery. I spent too much energy not accepting the way things were. It was less exhausting to let go and conform to the way things were, because Wat Pah Nanachat is actually a fine place to practice. In the monastery I meditated, ate a little, slept a little and lived simply in the forest. After a while I noticed, 'What else do I really need in life?' I heard myself saying things like, 'I love Wat Pah Nanachat 95% of the time in order to keep room to express my frustration and complaints.' Was the dissatisfaction reality or not? On different days different mind states appeared, directed at different situations and different people. The mind's moods kept changing. What could be so important as to take away my peace of mind?

I continued to make frequent visits to Wat Pah Nanachat, because I loved the simplicity, authenticity and purity of the living Dhamma that existed in the monastery. I felt my life opening powerfully when I came into contact with the straightforward teachings of the three characteristics of existence, *aniccā, dukkha* and *anattā*. Wat Pah Nanachat provided a good setting in which to continue to investigate these truths at ever-deepening levels. I kept going back because realistically there was no going back to my old ways of thinking. In retrospect I can see how Wat Pah Nanachat shook the foundations under my feet. The experience of living for an extended period of time in a community of full-time Dhamma practitioners, people with whom I had not individually chosen to live, became the teaching of my life. Although Wat Pah Nanachat always managed to provide an array of challenges, I learnt that the monastery had no inherent *dukkha*, just as it had no inherent *sukha* (happiness). I needed to take responsibility for my own experience of life.

Women who visit Wat Pah Nanachat will perhaps feel it is similar to a boys' club. Some women might wish to be part of the boys' club. Who likes the feeling of being excluded or left out? This is the challenge for all women who visit Wat Pah Nanachat. But whether one is male or female, the practice is to keep watching the movement of the mind and protect it from falling into states of greed, hatred and delusion. Some women find Wat Pah Nanachat a useful place to practice for a few days, others for weeks and months, and some are not yet ready for it. This is all just fine. It is good to acknowledge where we are at in the present moment.

My experience of living in a monastery was intense because it meant I had to be with things I did not wish to be with, I was separated from the things I wished to be with and I didn't get what I wished for. There was no escape except to face the *dukkha*. *Dukkha* was crystal-

clear, and so was the path leading out of *dukkha*. These were the sorrows and joys of living at Wat Pah Nanachat. It was an opportunity to deepen my understanding and reflect on my defilements and habits, in order to learn and know more about myself. I saw myself investing energy in confronting situations and striving for ideals which it was beyond my ability to do anything about. Meanwhile, what it was in my power to change did not seem as appealing to work with. While living in the monastery I experienced what 'real life' was all about. I heard lay visitors express comments such as, 'The monastery isn't real life.' I felt that in the monastery I began to learn about my multi-dimensional mind states. My attitude began to change and insights came through experiencing community life, understanding Thai culture, relating to monks and observing my idealism. The simplicity of living in a forest and the ascetic practices of monastic life resonated well. I felt in tune with this lifestyle because I was drawn to simplicity and to what was 'real', elements which were lacking in my life. For me 'real life' meant reflecting and working with the *dukkha* that appeared in the present moment. This meant that there was a lot of 'real life' in the monastery!

I would like to express my sincere appreciation and deep gratitude to Ajahn Jayasāro, Ajahn Vipassi and the entire Wat Pah Nanachat community, and all those wonderful beings who have supported, lived at, and visited Wat Pah Nanachat. Thank you for your kindness, generosity and the opportunity to practice at Wat Pah Nanachat. Thank you for the teaching in my life.

I hope that what I have written is helpful for all beings who find themselves at Wat Pah Nanachat, especially women, who might find the experiences of monasticism, Thai culture and Buddhism challenging.

The Author

Born in Canada of Chinese origin, Christine initially spent six years in Thailand and India practising the Dhamma. Her introduction to the Dhamma began with Tibetan Buddhism in India. Eventually her travels led her to Southern Thailand and a retreat at Wat Suan Mokkh in 1993, where she first encountered the teachings of Theravāda Buddhism. Soon after that retreat she visited Wat Pah Nanachat for the first time in August 1993. The monastery was part of the Dhamma trail and on her 'list'. During the period when this article was written she was staying at Abhayagiri Forest Monastery in America for a few months, and eventually travelled to England to spend a year as an *anāgārika* at Chithurst Monastery. After leaving the monastery, having decided not to pursue the monastic life there, she returned to Vancouver and alternated work with travelling to Asia and spending time practising in forest monasteries and meditation centres there. Between 2006 and 2008 she lived in Burma, mainly at Pa-Auk Forest Monastery and Shwe Oo Min. Over the years she has often called in at Wat Pah Nanachat for a few days or weeks at a time.

10

HEY, MAN, DON'T GIVE UP YOUR MUSIC!

Sāmaṇera Gunavuddho

Exploring identity and the similarities between his training in music and monastic life.

Barely a month in the robes, I am a newly ordained *sāmaṇera* who is still trying to understand exactly what has happened to his life. Sometimes I wake up from sleep in a moment of disorientation and ask, 'Where am I and why am I dressed like this?' I thought my goal in life was to be a jazz recording artist, but somehow I have made the transition into the Theravāda monastic lifestyle. I have a desire to understand the transition better; and I admit that it is only now, through writing this piece, that I am able to start investigating the deeper reasons why I am willing not to play music again. I wish to make the piece an exploration of my experiences in music practice and monastic practice, in the hope of understanding better what has happened.

When I look deep in my heart and ask why I practice Dhamma, I see that the answer comes forth with great energy. I practice to learn the truth of how nature works and to do what is good. After the heart has spoken, I feel a heating-up of the body with an increased flow of blood; my back straightens up nobly, my mind becomes quiet

and my gaze softens. I am also told by my heart that the same goal was the powerful current that carried me through all those years of music practice. When this is revealed I see that I have not given up what I find truly important, and that there was a natural flow to the recent transition I've made into the monastic life. Like a raft, music practice was able to take me part-way across the river, but I have now switched to the raft of Buddhist monasticism, which I believe has the ability to take me right across to the shore of liberation. When looking at the similarities between my music practice and this monastic practice, I am able to feel a deep sense of gratitude for my past musical experience, while investigating the differences which mean the monastic practice goes further towards my goal. I have experienced the role of devotion, sacrifice, the teacher, solitude, awareness, creativity, effort and challenge in both my past music practice, and the monastic practice of the Thai forest tradition.

Devotion

My music practice started with devotion. I was born into a family devoted to music, where all the conditions for setting me on the path of music practice were ripe. My family would go to church occasionally, but music was the religion I practised at home, and I could trust it and use it to relate to the world. My grandfather had a music store and taught my father music. My father taught me, and I eventually taught others after many years of practice. Playing a musical instrument almost seemed to be a prerequisite for being in the family. A visit to my grandparents' house always included an offering of a musical performance by someone. I remember my father would play music on the fishing boat as we sat meditating on our floating bobbers, in the house while we cleaned it, and even in the bathroom as he showered. Our house always had many different instruments to experiment with: drums, saxophones, keyboards, trumpets and others. Teaching music and selling instruments were

what put food on the table and enabled us to continue our music practice. My father and I would talk for hours about music; this was one of our main ways of bonding. I would also carry his instruments to his public performances in order to watch him play, which he did in a way that was inspiring and magical for myself and others. He taught the values of music to me through example from the very beginning of my life, and after seeing my deep desire to follow in the path of music, he started giving me formal piano lessons when I was five. I grew up with small ceramic clowns holding instruments and Christmas ornaments that played music. Our house was also filled with paraphernalia like mugs, posters, belts, scarves, T-shirts, neckties and stationery which were all decorated with musical notes.

A bit obsessive, you may think, but believe it or not, it all made perfect sense at the time. Upon reflection I think that always seeing those musical trinkets in my environment strengthened my identity as a musician. Likewise, someone can strengthen the identity of being a Buddhist by merely owning a statue or image of the Buddha, but I think it is more beneficial to use the Buddha statue as a devotional tool to open the heart and the mind. When I bow to the statue of the Buddha I have the opportunity to recollect the Buddha's virtuous qualities and his teaching, and to bring my mind back to the practice. I feel that I am fortunate in having such an object of devotion as the Buddha, and there is a feeling that every ounce of effort I give is returned one hundredfold. To me the goodness that can result from the practice of Buddhism seems limitless, so it is worthy of limitless devotion.

Sacrifice

When one has deep devotion, one is willing to sacrifice just about anything. Music always came first in my life, and I would sacrifice many things without question. Sleep would be sacrificed by waking up early in the morning or staying up into the late hours of the

night, practising the piano or listening to jazz performances in clubs. After-school activities, sports and dances didn't seem nearly as important as going home to practice music. My parents spent a lot of money on music lessons, instruments and recordings to support the cultivation of my abilities, and put in many hours behind the wheel of the car to drive me to lessons and performances. At home my family sacrificed their outer silence to let me practice, and my sister can testify to the hours and hours of piano-playing on the other side of her bedroom wall.

Now that I am ordained I have given up my worldly possessions. Bit by bit, as my instruments, recordings and other tools of the trade made their exit from my life by being sold or given away, my identity as a musician started to fade. Having left my position as a teacher and band leader in the field where I had experience, I have now traded that status to become a beginner at the bottom of the line. After being ordained I found simple actions such as getting dressed hard to do. I thought I was shown how to dress myself when I was a little boy, but the familiar pants are gone and the robes are hanging in their place. So many actions I thought I already knew, such as walking, eating and sleeping, are now challenged by the monastic training. Even the name I've used since birth has changed. I once believed there were possessions and experiences that were necessary for survival, but as I experiment with living very simply I experience some joy from learning that my safety doesn't hinge on having those things after all. I would say that the main thing I thought I knew was that I was a musician, but where has that gone?

Realizing that I have personally felt a fair bit of thrashing around in my life in an attempt to 'be somebody', I hope to resist the temptation merely to trade my identity as a musician for that of a monk. Trading for the identity of an ex-musician is probably another trap. At some level I understand that attaching to the identity of being a monk is entirely different from actually being

present to the way things are, through the monastic practice as taught by the Buddha. Sacrificing the need to attach to an identity is extremely hard to do, but I believe that the invaluable guidance provided by an experienced teacher on the spiritual path can make it possible.

Role of the teacher

Sometimes the teacher will select a practice which is not one we would select ourselves, but out of faith and trust we follow the guidance we have been given. Great experience gives the teacher the wisdom to see where the student is weak in the practice, and the ability to protect the student from training in a harmful way. In both music practice and monastic practice, the teacher is one to whom we can sacrifice our ego. I would admit what I did not know to my music teachers, but they could already hear it in my playing. There was nowhere to hide and it felt great to be seen.

I think that this attitude of observing and exposing weakness in a relationship of trust is a central part of the Holy Life. I find that in the monastic practice, due to the safety of the Dhamma teachings and the morality practised in the environment, there is much more of an opportunity to humble oneself and give oneself fully to the teacher. We can bow with reverence to the teacher and allow this relationship to develop as a spiritual tool in order to dissolve egotism. There are opportunities to tend to the teacher by carrying his bag, washing his feet, washing his clothes, bringing him something to drink, cleaning his lodging and cleaning his bowl. Even though this man can do these things for himself and has done for many years, the opportunity to think of someone besides oneself, even for a moment, can be very powerful.

With my music teachers the relationship was usually only musically and financially based. I always felt there was a cut-off after I paid

for the lesson and was out the door. If I did not pay for the lessons, the relationship would end. That's the way it works in the business. Some teachers would take more time to talk after the lesson, go to the store and help me buy recordings or invite me to come to their performances, but that was as deep as the relationship would go in the context of my life as a whole. The only opportunities to give of myself were to pay for the lesson, practice what I was assigned, provide supportive energy in the audience at a performance and maybe give a gift at Christmas. It would be quite strange to go early to a piano lesson to tidy up the teacher's studio and bring him a drink on my knees. There just wasn't room for that.

Solitude

Both musicians and monks spend a great deal of time in solitude in order to deepen their practice. I remember the small piano rooms at college dedicated to solitary practice. Each was insulated with white-walled foam for soundproofing, in order to create an environment with minimal distraction. Restraining the non-listening senses was an aid to concentration. It was in those rooms that most of the daily sweat was released. I spent many timeless hours in these practice rooms, and sometimes I would emerge surprised to see that it was already dark outside, or that a snowfall had blanketed the city without my knowing it. So after years of such experiences, I don't mind practising in the *kuṭī*. Having space to oneself in the forest functions as insulation from many worldly dhammas. I've searched for solitude in both practices, and I am just starting to understand that true solitude is a state of mind. Whether from amplified long-haired guitarists, mango pickers, aeroplanes or loud insects, there is always outside noise. The silence must come from inside. Just as the silence or 'rests' in music give the listener space to appreciate all the notes, our mental silence similarly brings awareness and meaning to our actions and the actions of those with whom we are in contact.

Working with the Sangha and helping others

As Buddhists, a central part of our practice is to work with the community of monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen who make up the Sangha. Similarly, musicians work with their band mates to give to and receive from an audience. In each public performance there is an opportunity for the band members to give a teaching in the virtues of diligent practice, by providing a good example through the way they play their instruments and how they act on-stage or off-stage. Each composition focuses on different aspects of life, and if the composition touches something inside the listener or the performer, the experience can be used as a point of reference or inspiration for understanding better what is truly important in their own lives. If the music provides an environment for releasing blocked energies such as stress and anxiety, there is an opportunity for healing and insight to occur.

In the jazz world it is completely appropriate for the listener to respond to the music during the song. Listeners have an opportunity to be an active part of the improvisation and their response becomes a part of the music. Some responses may be in the form of shouting out, 'A-MEN!', or 'That's right!' Clapping and whistling after a musician has played a solo improvisation are also common responses. If the band is really burnin' or a player is playing so well that they may be described as being 'on fire', the audience's response will reflect exactly that and be more animated and lively. I see this as a sharing of energy. The musician directs energy through the instrument, and the audience transmits energy through verbal and physical responses. It is this sharing of energy that makes the performance experience so alive and special.

When people come to hear the Dhamma teaching with sincere interest and faith, they reciprocate by transmitting the positive energy of the inspiring truths they hear back to the teacher. The

teacher may respond by touching the heart with humour, which will be met with wholesome laughter from the listeners. The fearsome demons of negative mental states can be transformed into little puppies during these special moments of a powerful Dhamma teaching. A release of fear and anxiety can bring a sigh of relief and a moment of silence from the listener. Breathing may become deep and slow. Others may feel open and safe enough to respond by asking questions that touch tender areas of their lives. As with jazz improvisation, if the teaching is done naturally in the moment, the product is much better than anything one might pre-plan.

The development and communication of the most profound insights in music occur during rehearsals, performances, instruction and jam-sessions. Through these forms we have the opportunity to help others with the challenges of life. Personal issues will come up during rehearsals, and the group contact can help bring awareness of certain issues. If a musician only plays alone in the practice room, he will never have the possibility of experiencing the contrasts that expose his habits through the group. But when a musician plays with a group he can investigate whether he plays too loud, too softly, too slowly, too busily or in balance with the others.

Similarly, in Buddhist practice the Sangha is the community of disciples who work together through the traditional form of daily group activities, ceremonies, instruction and discussion. We constantly compare ourselves in relation to the way the group practises as a whole. Do I walk too slowly or too fast? Do I eat more slowly or more quickly than the others in the group? In relation to the group, how do I speak, sleep, do chores or put forth effort? Being aware of these habitual energies is a preliminary step, but in the monastic practice awareness is encouraged in order to transform unwholesome habits into the wholesome ones which lead to liberation, as taught by the Buddha. On one occasion a community member spoke

with me about my tendency to chant louder than others in the group. It was only through chanting with the Sangha that I had the opportunity to have this tendency brought forth into my awareness. The old tendency to play louder than some band mates also used to crop up in my jazz playing at times. Training with the Sangha helps me to bring my habits into the light of mindfulness, so that I can begin to change them for the good of all.

Awareness

In the practice of both music and monasticism repetitive actions are used to cultivate mindfulness. The scales, finger techniques and following music theory rules are to the daily life of a musician as bowing, meditation techniques and following the Vinaya rules are to the daily life of a monk. Walking, speaking, washing things, moving things, entering and leaving the *sāla* or *kuṭī* and getting on the *āsana* are all areas which, if approached with great care and awareness, become beautiful and magical. How many times do we take off our bowl lid each day? Even in the smallest of acts there are opportunities to act with dignity and allow the sacred to enter our lives. How does one ring the bell? If we listen closely to the way it is rung, we can learn about the one who is ringing it. Is there a sense of urgency, frustration or restlessness? Can one hear the focus of the act, or is there an irregularity? In general, does the execution of our actions both support the mind in abiding peacefully and inspire others? For myself I find it very inspirational to witness masterful expression through the living examples of experienced practitioners.

I was introduced to the Theravāda tradition at Abhayagiri Monastery near my home in California. I remember how the everyday tea conversation at Abhayagiri was turned into an art. It was a safe place for people to ask questions about the practice. Ajahn Pasanno would answer questions from the laity with ease, and then

skilfully allow for a space of silence. It was a moment of being with things as they were. At this time one could be conscious of the breath and let what had been said be observed fully. If a person had another question, there was the opportunity to ask it. There was a feeling that people could ask all their questions until there were none left. After that period had passed there was another time of silence. Since at that time I was an enthusiastic layman with many questions, I remember feeling very satisfied to be listened to. The whole approach was peaceful and allowed for the release of anxious energy.

Usually in life I experience conversations that move quickly, jumping around from one topic to another. People rarely listen to what has already been said and might even interrupt each other. Interruption is not a personal attack but a reflection of the restless mind. When conversing in the language of music, it is the same restless mind which interrupts others on the bandstand or interrupts one's own thread of continuity during solo improvisation. I have noticed that many of these unsatisfactory conversations tend to be oriented towards trying to be understood, instead of trying to understand what others are experiencing. We may have to embrace an uncomfortable feeling if we wish to truly understand the suffering another is expressing. If we are not aware that we are uncomfortable with an issue brought up in a conversation or that we are interrupting others, we will always be blinded by the restless mind, which selfishly only wants to be understood. It helps to use creative means to keep the mind malleable and receptive, in order to listen with understanding to whatever comes to us in life.

Creativity

Sometimes 'life just happens' on the bandstand, and in that moment some playful creativity may work better than letting it all fall apart. In jazz improvisation a mistake is worked with on the spot in live

time. For example, if the saxophone player accidentally makes an irritating high-pitched squeak on his reed, this mistake can be transformed by deliberately inviting it into the piece. If the player makes the mistake twice in a row, another band member could notice the rhythmic pattern of the squeak and incorporate that rhythm in some form of a response. Sometimes the reed may be difficult to work with, but many times the squeaking is the result of a player experiencing fear. Think how someone's voice may crack or squeak if they are excited; it can be similar to that. The process of befriending the fear happens all in the moment. There isn't time for thinking, and it takes practice in creativity to pull this off.

Creativity is a necessity in both practices. Ajahns use creative means in relating the teaching. One of my favourite devices is humour, and as a musician I would use humour in compositions or improvisation. I have noticed that the Ajahns in this lineage use wholesome humour as a skilful device, to make things light enough for the mind to be malleable and receptive to the teaching. I bet the Buddha had a good sense of humour, but unfortunately I don't hear much about this personality trait. It takes creative means such as this to really reach people. If they feel bored or just talked at they may get up and leave the Dhamma teaching behind. Metaphor and analogy are creative devices that the Buddha used and his disciples continue to use today. The ability to find creative ways to relate the Dhamma in simple terms that people can understand is the mark of a masterful teacher. All Ajahn Chah's teachings that I've heard are of this style. The teaching is clear, simple and goes straight to the heart.

Effort

In the music world, challenges such as anxiety, fear, absent band mates, miscommunication, drug and alcohol use, bad attitudes and different ability levels are just some of the reasons why proficiency can decrease during a performance. My piano teacher would

recommend putting forth effort through pushing up tempos and practising long hours, in order to have the strength and endurance needed to persevere in such challenging situations.

In the monastic training, effort is put into pushing up tempos and practising long hours in order to cultivate the focus of mind needed to greet the raw conditions of life exactly as they are in the given moment. Doing group activities briskly, walking barefoot over long alms-round routes and sitting in meditation for vigils and retreats are all ways in which we put forth effort in the monastery. When one puts effort into making things neat and tidy, there is an opportunity to see the result of a job well done, which provides a space for future good actions to arise. I remember seeing a monk working with great vigour as he shovelled sand on a workday, and that inspirational display of effort wholesomely affected many areas of my practice long after the workday was over.

When cultivating music, I found that good results were more likely to arise if I put effort into maintaining a daily practice. As momentum built up and less effort was spent on simply getting myself to sit on the piano bench, I could redirect my energy towards the more refined aspects of the music.

Just as I would wake up early before school as a child to practice piano, or stay up late at night enduring fatigue in order to fit in the daily practice which had not happened yet that day, I now put in that same kind of effort to go to the meditation hall in an attempt to cultivate good qualities. Even though there are times when I don't feel like practising, there is also deep joy, and a desire to do the practice that seems to summon the effort needed for the occasion.

Challenges

When I was introduced to Abhayagiri Monastery, I was given a photocopy of what visitors needed to know before staying at the

monastery. I remember reading the Eight Precepts and laughing out loud when I got to what I now affectionately refer to as 'number seven'. I didn't understand why refraining from playing or listening to music would even make the list. I remember showing this Precept to a few people close to me and saying, 'I can do it for a week, but that's it!'

The one-week stay gradually turned into a three-month lay residency. That period of time was fraught with 'number seven' questions. I remember Ajahn Pasanno gently answering my questions relating to the monastic practice. I would ask, 'Ajahn, can monks give music instruction if they don't touch any instruments? Can monks at least accompany the chanting with guitar?' My mind wrestled with absolutes. I wondered whether music was wrong action. Was I a bad person for playing music? I noticed from the questions that friends and family members asked that they also looked at the Precepts more as commandments than training guidelines. If I looked at 'number seven' as 'Thou Shall Not...', I could only feel guilt and remorse.

Through the instruction at Abhayagiri, I feel that I was able both to appreciate what my music practice had given to me and see how the unwholesome environments and mental states often associated with music practice can be a hindrance to the Holy Life and true peace of mind. I was also glad to see that by giving up my music for the practice of the Thai forest tradition, I was not giving up learning from challenging situations. In this Thai forest tradition there is a warrior spirit that is willing to go against the grain by marching fearlessly into the middle of the battle to endure whatever comes, even if it is uncomfortable. One is encouraged to give 100% to the training with fierce determination. I find it particularly challenging at this point in my development to reach a balance between knowing when it is time to push and time not to push, but I feel that through the practice of the Thai forest tradition I have an

opportunity to find the middle way by seeing where the boundaries lie.

With my music practice I was constantly looking for challenges in order to sharpen my skills. Some of them included moving far away from home to study at one of the world's most intensive music colleges; taking almost any opportunity to put my practice on the line in a public performance situation; sharing my most personal original compositions with others; enduring the discomfort of playing with musicians who were much more advanced instead of trying to be in the superior position; seeking out the most qualified and disciplined teachers available; and playing demanding music that was outside the comfort zone of the traditional jazz I specialized in.

Similarly, I looked for challenges in the monastic life such as moving far away from home in order to participate in the intense practice at Wat Pah Nanachat, led by some of the most disciplined and experienced practitioners, who keep a strict standard of Vinaya. Through seeking the opportunity to put my practice on the line by working out in the open with the Sangha, I expose my most tender moments in the context of a community where it is impossible to have a secret. Training as a beginner at the bottom of the line, I am constantly in a position to learn about all the do's and don'ts of monastery standards, instead of comfortably sticking to what I learned years ago in the music field. I feel that living this monastic life is the greatest challenge I can use to meet my goal of learning the truth of how nature works. The restraint of the senses feels like a pressure-cooker at times. We don't eat whenever we wish, there's no flipping on the television for a little distraction, and there's no sexual activity whatsoever. The rules of training ask one to give up many means of outer control, and put one in a position where there is much less room to run away and hide from long-avoided fears. By going against the grain of these habitual tendencies, we have the opportunity to learn the ways of the mind.

The monastic life is difficult enough as it is, but I find that being in Thailand adds another layer of challenge to my practice. The forest environment in Thailand is constantly changing, and has an aggressive quality to it that never gives one a chance to relax completely. There are intense weather conditions of heat and rain. Either mosquitoes and ants are biting you or you know that they could bite at any time. There are other insects, scorpions, centipedes, poisonous snakes and wild animals to be mindful of here in Thailand as well. Recently thousands of termites took over my *kuṭī*, swarming all over the walls and door just inches away from me. I walked through the night with the belongings that I thought the termites would consider edible and tasty, and found refuge in the monastery's sewing room. In the mornings on alms-round, I am challenged by walking barefoot over sharp stones, while dodging occasional shards of glass and ridged bottle caps. Even though there may be cuts on my feet, walking through the widespread buffalo dung smeared on the road by the village traffic is sometimes unavoidable. Compared to the USA, in Thailand I am challenged by the different sanitary standards, increased threat of disease, different cultural values, the different language, and being apart from family and the familiar. But though the challenges I've mentioned have been difficult, they aren't as bad in the moment as my mind would like to tell me. I also realize that I am supported through these challenges by generous lay supporters, Sangha members, family members and, in general, by practising in the context of a Buddhist country.

So how do I blend music with the monastic life now? I like to appreciate the sound of dissonance from out-of-tune Sangha members during the chanting. Other times I enjoy the sound of someone mistakenly hitting their bowl or spittoon, appreciating the different timbres each produces. I enjoy the chance to ring the monastery bell and to listen to others briefly express the causes and conditions

of nature through ringing the bell themselves. And of course, it may not be a surprise to anyone that I enjoy chanting.

'Hey man, don't give up your music!', counselled my jazz piano-player friend with a tone of urgency and disappointment, as he saw me move off the path of music practice that we had once shared. I've been questioning what I have actually given up and what is happening in my life, but after the exploration of writing this piece I feel that the question of 'Who am I?' is closer to my heart. There are many layers to my recent transition from music practice into the monastic life, but ordaining as a *sāmaṇera* has been predominantly marked by an intense questioning of my identity and sense of self. Uncomfortable with not knowing who I am, I feel that holding the question is more important than trying to wrap it up neatly with a bow on top, tucking it away as if I've found a conclusive answer. So in the midst of uncertainty I will practice on.

The Author

Sāmaṇera Guṇavuddho went on to take full ordination a year later, with Luang Por Liem, the abbot of Wat Pah Pong, as his preceptor. He trained in Wat Pah Nanachat and subsequently at Wat Marb Jan in Rayong Province. In 2007 and 2008 he undertook to help the current abbot, Ajahn Kevalī, to look after Wat Pah Nanachat and Poo Jom Gom Monastery. Following his tenth Rains Retreat, he joined the community of Abhayagiri Monastery in California. He has helped spread the Dhamma in the San Francisco Bay Area, and played an active role in the Buddhist Global Relief Foundation, a charity devoted to the goal of working to eliminate global poverty and its associated problems. He has since decided after 14 years in the robes to live as a lay Buddhist in Thailand by his name David De Young, and continues spreading the Dhamma in English in Bangkok.

11

REFUGE IN THE SANGHA

Two local lay supporters talk about their relationship to the wat.

Many people in Thailand have ties to Wat Pah Nanachat. The villagers of Ban Bung Wai, even those who rarely go to the wat except for funerals, see the monastery as 'theirs'. They feel a sense of pride about it, and a sense of responsibility. Then there are the people from surrounding villages, the local town of Warin and the city of Ubon who regularly come to make merit, keep the Eight Precepts on Wan Phra days or practice in the monastery for longer periods. Lay supporters from Bangkok and other provinces may also come up to stay in the wat during their holidays. This section consists of the words of Mae Samlee, a village woman living in a house in the fields outside the monastery, and Por Khroo, a primary school teacher from Ubon.

Mae Samlee

'The pain's not been so bad really. My husband ordained as a monk for fifteen days to make merit for me [she smiles at him warmly], and I've been feeling better ever since. It's just the past three or four days that have been a bit more difficult.'

Mae Samlee is 55. She has cancer of the spleen which is metastizing. She has spent many months in hospital over the past year and had two operations. Now she is back at home in her house among the rice fields between the monastery and the main road.

'I've been going to monasteries for as long as I can remember. When I was a young girl my mother would always take me with her when she went to make merit. After I got married I used to go to Wat Pah Pong on Observance Days. I loved it so much: making food for the monks, listening to Dhamma talks, meditating. Then we moved to Kanchanaburi and stayed there for six years. It was a rough place. My husband became the village headman and everywhere he went he had to carry a rifle and a pistol, he said one weapon wasn't enough. Then he read a talk by Luang Por Chah and we decided to come back to Ubon. My brother-in-law lives in Bung Wai. He wanted us to come here and said he'd look around for some land for us. I said, "I don't care how expensive it is, please find us land close to the monastery, so that I will be able to go every day, even when I'm old." Everything worked out: we got this plot of land right in front of the wat, we built a house on it and now [she smiles widely] it looks like I'm not going to have an old age after all. I must admit that sometimes I wish I had accumulated more merit in my life.

'I meditate whenever I can, whenever the pain is not so bad. I chant in the morning and evenings. Actually, these days I often do the evening service at three o'clock in the afternoon! The pain usually comes on in the evening, you see, and I'm afraid it will stop me from chanting. But today, I've been so excited all day waiting for Ajahn Jayasāro to come to visit that I've felt fine all day.

'I felt homesick when I was in the hospital in Bangkok having my operation. It all took such a long time. On the days when I could sit up, I did the morning and evening chanting normally. When I couldn't sit up, I chanted as best I could lying down. Then that first time Ajahn Jayasāro walked into the ward I felt so happy! It was such

a wonderful surprise. And he brought me a little picture of Luang Por Chah, too, to put on the table by my bed. After he'd gone the other patients were really curious. "Who is that Western monk? Where does he come from? How do you know him?" I felt much better after he came. Things didn't seem so bad. I remembered the things he taught me and they were a refuge to me. I always kept in my mind the virtues of the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha.

'Next Wan Phra, if I'm feeling any better, I hope I will be able to go to the wat. I don't want to miss the morning talk. It's another few days yet. I hope I'll feel a bit better by then.'

Por Kroo

Por Kroo is a male primary school teacher aged 57 and a member of the monastery's lay committee.

'I've been going to monasteries since I was a child, when my father used to take me. I first went to Wat Pah Pong way back in 1959. But it was so difficult to get there that I didn't keep it up. I was disillusioned by the monasteries near my home in Ubon. One day I went to invite some monks from the local monastery to come and eat in my house. I happened to see them acting in ways completely unfitting for monks. I lost all my faith. I didn't go near monks again for three or four years. I didn't even put food in monks' bowls on alms-round. During that time I felt as if I'd lost my sense of purpose, that I had no refuge and was just drifting through my life. Then I thought of Wat Pah Nanachat, and it happened that that year – it was 1983 or 1984, I think – the ministry made it compulsory for teachers to go to listen to Dhamma teachings in monasteries. Our group came to Wat Pah Nanachat. I walked into the *sāla*, and the first thing I saw was Ajahn Pasanno and Ajahn Jayasāro sitting on the *āsana* talking together. It was such a moving sight for me to see two Westerners so restrained and composed in their bearing; I

felt a new wave of inspiration and I started coming regularly. I was impressed by the dedication of the monks. I came to know for the first time that monks are not supposed to use money, and I began to realize the way monks are supposed to live.

'The result of coming to the wat over the years that I see most clearly is that I'm a lot more calm and patient than I used to be. I'm basically quite a forceful, headstrong kind of person. Listening to the Dhamma and the teachings of the Buddha and trying to put them into practice, I've seen my mind cool down and become more peaceful. I don't lose my temper or get angry when I'm provoked in the way that I used to. My temper has improved a lot. Also, I feel more mindful in my daily life. I always tell people that I've been to many monasteries, but it's here that I've received the most beneficial teachings.

'I've had some difficult times at work over the past few years. When I see something wrong I can't always keep quiet. On occasions when I've spoken up against corruption, I've been slandered and victimized by my seniors. At home too it's been hard. My wife was in a motorcycle crash last year. Worse than that, a few years ago my son died. One day he returned from work in Bangkok in his boss's car. His boss had driven him up himself. He said my son had an inoperable brain tumour and didn't have long to live. That night I spent many hours with my son, teaching him the Dhamma reflections that I had learned from my teachers. The following morning I went to the wat, and when I came home in the late morning I found him lying dead on the couch. It was a terrible shock for my wife and it took her months to get over it. I've had a lot to endure. If it wasn't for the Dhamma and the advice and support of the Sangha, I don't know how I would have coped.'

12

DTAO DAM FOREST MONASTERY

Ajahn Jayasāro

An interview conducted by Tan Paññāvuddho.

Dtao Dam Forest Monastery is a branch monastery of Wat Pah Nanachat, located in the mountainous, thickly-forested jungle of Mae Nam Noy, Sai Yok National Park in the Kanchanaburi Province of Thailand. Mostly through the tireless efforts of the monastery's main lay supporter, a brave and determined woman called Tivaporn Srivorakul, the pristine, lush quality of the Dtao Dam forest has been well preserved. Tivaporn operates a tin mine in the Dtao Dam area, employing Burmese, Karen and Mon workers who live in this remote border region in order to escape the social and political strife of present-day Burma. Despite great pressure on her for many years, she has stood up to all those interested in destroying the forest.

At the onset of each hot season, the monks and novices of Wat Pah Nanachat make a three-day *tudong* through the National Park into the monastery, where they spend two months in retreat. This year (April 1999), the *tudong* was cancelled due to cattle and drug-smuggling activity in the outlying area, forcing the Sangha to be

brought in by four-wheel drive vehicles. The following interview covering these and other issues related to Dtao Dam was conducted by Tan Paññāvuddho at Ajahn Jayasāro's *dtieng* in the Dtao Dam forest.

Tan Paññāvuddho: Tan Ajahn, to begin, could you give a brief history of Dtao Dam Forest Monastery? How was this place founded, and how has it developed and evolved to reach its present state today?

Ajahn Jayasāro: In 1979 Ajahn Pasanno was on *tudong* in Kanchanaburi. He got to know Khun Sunan, the owner of another mine in this part of Kanchanaburi, and she built a *kuṭī* for him in the forest near her mine where he spent the Rains Retreat. That mine is now abandoned – we pass it as we come into Dtao Dam. Years later the owner of the Dtao Dam mine, Yom Tivaporn, was struggling to preserve the forest here in the National Park. She thought this would be a wonderful place for forest monks to live and train, and hoped that their presence might also deter hunters and loggers. So she invited Ajahn Pasanno to bring some monks in and do a retreat here. She offered to make sure food and any other requisites would be provided, as there's no village for alms-round. The idea was that if it was appropriate some basic *kuṭīs* would be built and two or three monks could stay on for the Rains Retreat. Everything worked out as she hoped.

Tan Paññāvuddho: So in what year did Ajahn Pasanno first bring the monks?

Ajahn Jayasāro: About eight years ago. That year two monks spent the Rains Retreat here in *kuṭīs* built at the foot of this mountain. Since then monks have spent the rainy season here on a regular basis. Gradually, over the years, there have been developments. A few years ago we had a tractor come in and cut a road up to the upper *sāla*. Three *kuṭīs* have been built up on the ridge there.

As you know, where we are now (to the west of the upper *sāla*

on a different mountain, where the inner *sāla* is located) is a very densely-forested plateau through which the stream meanders. We have twenty *dtiengs* scattered throughout the forest for the monks to use during the hot season. On this plateau the climate is very pleasant in the hot season, but extremely damp and unpleasant in the rainy season; there are many leeches, and if you put a robe out to dry after washing it, it may still be wet after twenty-four hours. Hence the need to build the upper *sāla* and three small *kuṭīs* on the more exposed ridge over to the east of here, so monks can stay at Dtao Dam during the rainy season.

We also built a lower *sāla* down at the base of these two mountains. The monks walk down in the early morning, take their daily meal and then come straight back up the mountain afterwards. There's no village for monks to go on alms-round, which makes this quite an unusual place for monks to live and puts serious restrictions on how many can stay here on a long-term basis. But we have a lot of lay supporters, particularly in Kanchanaburi, who give Yom Tivaporn food and provisions to bring to the monastery when the whole community comes in the hot season. There are a couple of Burmese families who cook for the monks, particularly one lady.

Tan Paññāvuddho: Is it common for monks to inhabit forest in National Parks?

Ajahn Jayasāro: About six years ago there was a period in which the presence of forest monks was looked upon by the government as being detrimental to the forests. In a number of highly publicized cases monks were accused of felling trees to build lodgings and developing monasteries in a way that harmed the forest. A government plan proposed having all monks living in national parks or reserved forests ejected from them. In fact, although there have been isolated instances of monks being insensitive to forests they were living in, this has never been one of the major problems facing forests in this country. But anyone who lives out in country areas

knows that the presence of monks is the major factor inhibiting deforestation. It's hard to say to what extent the plan was devised out of ignorance, and to what extent it was influenced by the forces who want to get the monks out of the way. Fortunately, however, there was an about-face – the plan aroused a lot of opposition. Tan Chao Khun Payutto wrote an influential pamphlet explaining the importance of the forest to Buddhism and Buddhist monasticism, and subsequently a new plan emerged which involved giving opportunities for monastic communities to help to care for the forest. The new plan allowed monasteries to apply for permission from the Royal Forestry Department to look after a certain area of land, from a thousand *rai* upwards to five thousand *rai*. Looking after the forest in this case means little more than living in it in very basic dwellings. The respect that monks command, at least amongst the local people, is acknowledged to inhibit the destruction of the forest. The Forestry Department is seriously understaffed and underfunded. The U-turn regarding the role of monks in forest conservation was more or less an admission of defeat. They know that they can't prevent the forest from disappearing and the government prefers to spend its money on other things.

So we applied to participate in this programme. In fact, we asked for a lot more land than we were eventually given. The head of the National Park (suspected by many to be deeply implicated in illegal logging in the park and now transferred) was not supportive and cut our application down to a thousand *rai*. The only condition laid down for us to be here is that we don't do a lot of building and don't cut down any trees. We have fulfilled our plan to build the three small *sālas* and the three *kuṭīs*, so as for the material development of Dtao Dam, I can't see that there is really much more that needs to be done. Anyway, Tivaporn feels that if there was to be any more building, the officials hostile to her would use it as a pretext to accuse her of something.

Tan Paññāvuddho: Who are these officials? Why are they apparently so hostile to Tivaporn?

Ajahn Jayasāro: Well, she's a thorn in the side of the 'baddies'. She stands in the way of certain people making a lot of money. Every branch of the Thai civil service is plagued by corruption. It seems, at least from the outside, that the corrupt officials outnumber the honest ones to a frightening degree. In many places corruption is institutionalized, difficult to avoid being sucked into because social pressures to conform in the workplace are so powerful. Of course there are some who manage it, but if you stay honest it means you're unlikely to advance very far in your career. Your boss may well not put you forward for promotions. Some people who are ambitious and feel they have something to offer society justify their corruption by arguing that it is the only way they can get into a position where they can change things for the better.

In the eyes of many people in this country, forests mean money. Dtao Dam is, to put it bluntly, big bucks. Some of these people who hate Tivaporn don't see nature as we do when they see a forest, they don't see wildlife – they see money in a previous existence. Trees are money. Land and animals are money. And because there is so much corruption, there's so much influence-peddling up to the very highest levels. That means the laws don't have the kind of irrevocable fixed quality that they have in the West, at least in most people's minds. In Thailand you always feel that there's a way to get around things. You can often get things changed, get exceptions made, if you know the right people, or if you are the right people yourself. There actually was a law prohibiting gas pipelines through national forests, so a special law was passed to make it all right. At the same time, a sub-clause allowing mining operations in national parks somehow slipped in.

There are various kinds of scams for forestry and national park officials, the most obvious one being turning a blind eye to the

illegal logging interests. As time goes on and good timber becomes increasingly rare, the whole business becomes more and more lucrative. National parks can be eligible for grants for reforestation, but the area in question has first to be classified as degraded forest. So a common ploy is to light a fire or cut down some trees and then get the designation of the land changed. Once it has been declared 'degraded forest' you can apply for funds for reforestation. Then you can use one part of the grant for reforestation but keep the rest for yourself and your henchmen. You can also let the loggers have more of the original big trees. And so on.

On the national level, forests all over the country are under pressure from the growing human population. The whole question of land settlement has become a political hot yam and it brought down the government before last. The question that has arisen with some urgency over the past few years is: what do you do when poor and desperate people encroach on national park or reserved forest in order to clear the land and grow themselves some food? If you evict them, where are you going to put them? What will be the political repercussions for political parties which seek to present themselves as protectors of the poor? The answer given by the previous government was to pass a law giving these people squatters' rights, which in effect encouraged people all over the country to clear land in national parks for farming.

So there are many pressures on Dtao Dam. Corrupt local politicians, government officials, businessmen, soldiers, border police: a lot of ethically challenged people have their eyes on the place. Theoretically it should not be too hard to protect Dtao Dam. To get wood out there's only one road, and there's a border police barrier across it and a barracks overlooking it. But of course, all the people at the police post are on a very low wage, far from home. People at the National Park are involved. Everyone takes their share.

Tan Paññāvuddho: Tan Ajahn, a couple of weeks ago several of us

climbed to the top of the tallest local mountain peak, where one can get a view in all four directions. From there it is forest as far as the eye can see. You have mentioned before that there are plans to build a road from Burma into Thailand though this mountain pass. Why are various parties so interested in building a road through such remote mountainous forest?

Ajahn Jayasāro: If you look on a map, you'll find this pass is the shortest and most direct route between the city of Kanchanaburi and the Burmese port of Tavoy, which is maybe forty kilometres away. That's not a long way to cut a road. It would provide Thai industry with direct access from Bangkok, through Kanchanaburi, to the Andaman Sea – port facilities, holiday resorts and so on. The army officers, politicians etc. who've been buying up land on either side of the prospective road would make huge profits when the land prices go up. And of course, once the road is cut you open up the entire forest for exploitation. In every case that I can think of, a road built through a forested area has signalled the beginning of the end for that forest. I don't think there's any question that the road will be built – it's just a question of what route it will take. The pass here happens to be the easiest traverse of this mountain range. Further to the south and to the north the mountains are much more difficult to cross. This is why in the past, during conflicts between the Thai or Burmese, this was the pass that the invading armies would march through. It's a kind of gap in the mountain range. From where we are sitting right now at an elevation of about seven hundred metres, we're only about a fifteen-minute walk from Burma. From an engineering point of view it would be a relatively easy job. Driving along this route, you'd hardly notice the gradient.

Tan Paññāvuddho: So out there, what interested parties besides the monks are working to preserve this Dtao Dam forest?

Ajahn Jayasāro: Well, the Thai environmental movement is in many ways still in its infancy. Probably only in the last five to ten years

has it had any kind of muscle. It is only very recently that the authorities have even felt a need to pay lip-service to environment protection. Of course there have always been people warning against the destruction of the environment, but during the boom economy that preceded the economic collapse, many people just assumed that environmental degradation was the price you had to pay for prosperity. Preserving forest was considered the concern of romantics or people not living in the real world. After all, what does a tree contribute to the gross national product? Now, of course, with the economy on the rocks, the reasoning is that there are more pressing priorities.

Another telling factor is the perception of forest. Until recently forests were associated in Thailand, and indeed throughout Asia generally, with backwardness. Cities mean civilization. For example, you have the Thai word *Pah-thuean*. '*Pah*' means 'forest' and '*thuean*' means 'uncivilized', implying that people who live in the forest are backward and uncivilized, and that everything associated with nature is the past. That's been a strong underlying idea in the view of the urban population, and particularly perhaps among businessmen and politicians. There has never been any sense of the forest as a national heritage that should be looked after. And this prejudice is still very strong. It's only recently that there have been attempts to introduce a more progressive understanding of nature in the school curriculum, with the aim of creating a new respect for nature. Perhaps a period of alienation from nature is necessary. As far as I know, love of nature did not develop in the West until the Industrial Revolution either. If you look at the history of Western art, for example, it wasn't until the eighteenth century that there were pure landscapes, paintings in which nature was considered an interesting topic in itself, rather than as merely a backdrop for human beings.

So there are various non-governmental environmental groups at

work. But as far as the government itself is concerned, the Ministry of the Environment is officially called the Ministry of Industry, Technology and the Environment, which gives you some idea of the priorities and conflict of interests there.

Tan Paññāvuddho: All three interests lumped together?

Ajahn Jayasāro: All lumped together. And it's the same with the Forestry Department. It has a dual role: firstly, caring for the forest, secondly, the promotion of agro-forestry. So it's inevitably tied up with big business and not free to preserve the forest.

There are good people, educated people particularly, who are starting to appreciate nature and coming together to protect what is left, but they often feel somewhat helpless and intimidated by all the forces against them. These people live in the cities, a long way away. As you can see, I am not particularly optimistic, but there is a bright side. Here at Dtao Dam we have representatives from the palace helping us.

Right from the first days of the Thai kingdom in Sukhothai, there was a custom whereby on Wan Phra anyone could go to the palace and ring a certain bell to request an audience with the King in which to let him know their grievances. You could discuss a problem where you hadn't been given a fair deal by the government authorities, for instance, or where you'd been the victim of corruption. It was a very special appeal court that bypassed the judicial system. This custom has come down to the present day. Now it takes the form of an office in the palace to which anyone can write and appeal. The people who work in this office liaise with the Queen's private secretaries to investigate these claims, so you go right to the top. And since the power of the monarchy is strong, this office exercises a lot of influence outside the conventional power structures of parliament. People from this office have been instrumental in getting some of the most corrupt officials transferred, for example. We

also have friends in various conservation bodies, as well as a senior minister in the present government.

Tan Paññāvuddho: What about Nature Care, the environmental preservation organization founded by Ajahn Pasanno? How is it involved?

Ajahn Jayasāro: Nature Care is an NGO, a non-governmental organization, set up originally in Ubon to help preserve the forest bordering the Mekong River. Subsequently, with our association with Tivaporn, Nature Care established a branch in Kanchanaburi. This facilitates applications for funds from businesses and government bodies for conservation purposes.

Returning to Dtao Dam again, one of the things that complicates the issue here is Tivaporn's mine. She has been running this mine since well before the area was declared a National Park, and she's deeply in debt. The mine also functions as a kind of welfare programme for over 100 workers and their families, most of whom are undocumented immigrants from Burma. Her mining concession will last for another four or five years. But people who wish she wasn't here – she is the main obstacle to people destroying the forest – have gone as far as to threaten her life on a number of occasions. Others have instigated various rumours to blacken her reputation. One of the things that people say is that she invited the monks here as a front. Or they say that she's trying to create the image of being an environmentalist, when all she is interested in is keeping her mine going. She has even been accused of building a private luxury resort here.

Tan Paññāvuddho: That's pretty unbelievable!

Ajahn Jayasāro: Well, you'd think so, but as the people spreading it were powerful and influential, this accusation apparently reached the highest circles of the government and the royal family. As you know, last year Tivaporn was given a prize as Thai Citizen of the Year

by a leading charity of which the Crown Princess is the patron. The charity was worried they'd been deceived and decided to investigate. Of course, they found the charge was baseless. But these kinds of slurs are leaked to the newspapers. Also, senior army officers are given folders containing facts about Dtao Dam which distort the picture. For instance, Tivaporn was shown a folder two weeks ago in which her signature for an application for funds for reforestation of Dtao Dam had been forged. It's not clear whether someone is attempting to embezzle these funds or is trying to accuse her of receiving the funds and not using the money for reforestation. But this kind of thing is going on all the time. All the various parties involved, even the environmental groups, have their own contacts, and they hear these things. Naturally, they're not always sure what to believe. So the policy for us has been to invite these people in to see for themselves.

Another problem down the road is when the mining concession ends. One of the plans is to have various kinds of scientific projects going on, especially ones related to biodiversity and botanical research. This is an area rich in biodiversity. A botanist was here a few weeks ago and he was extremely excited by what he saw, all kinds of things that he'd never come across before. So there is a hope that there will be some kind of botanical or biological station at the base of the mountain, where graduate students can come and do research.

Tan Paññāvuddho: What about the animal life? We've seen all kinds of exotic animals, from elephants to black panthers to white tigers, and bizarre-looking creatures unlike anything I've ever seen before.

Ajahn Jayasāro: That's why we have those animal-sighting forms, to document that these animals are really here. It's a matter of getting this information into the hands of the people with the right intention towards forests.

Tan Paññāvuddho: Tan Ajahn, you've alluded to it somewhat, but could you articulate your role as Abbot and as a forest monk in addressing these problems?

Ajahn Jayasāro: Well, as you know conventionally speaking, I am the Abbot of Dtao Dam, but most of the year I live at Wat Pah Nanachat. I'm able to come out for a month or two in the hot season, but I keep in contact by telephone with Tivaporn when I'm back in Ubon, to stay abreast of what's going on and give her support and encouragement. She gets bullied and slandered a lot. It's a lot to put up with, apart from the ordinary pressures of running a business in adverse circumstances and struggling to make enough money to keep going. You know what an incredible drive it is in and out from here, and you know how often she does that. She goes out for a day, then comes back in again, then drives a truck all the way to Phuket to sell the ore from the mine, then drives all the way back up again to meet with all these academics and scientists here for a visit tomorrow. I've asked her to phone me right away if anything really difficult or heavy comes up. For example, she gave us the advance warning about the cattle and drug-smuggling going on across the border this year.

Also, a role that one plays as a forest monk who is also an Abbot is to be a liaison or central figure. Being the Abbot of a large monastery, and having been in Thailand for many years, I've come to know a lot of people and I can help interested parties get in contact with each other. So to summarize my role, I'd say it involves first, giving moral, spiritual support, Dhamma teaching, encouragement and reflections. Second, in the social role as the Abbot of a well-known monastery who knows lots of people, I can help the right people get in touch with each other.

Tan Paññāvuddho: Seems potentially like a pretty adversarial situation. How do you manage to maintain a non-partisan position in a scenario that is very partisan?

Ajahn Jayasāro: The abbot of a monastery usually plays the role of being the referee or the impartial resort for both sides in a dispute, whereas here it's a little different in that we're part of it. I'm not absolutely equanimous about this. I'm not totally impartial. I'm definitely on the side of the people who want to save this forest. But I find it important to avoid the 'us' and 'them' way of thinking. Also, I don't personally have to confront these people trying to destroy the forest the way Tivaporn does. I've met very few of the leading figures. And Thai society being what it is, one always keeps up social proprieties. If someone were to wish bad things for the forest monastery and curse us to our backs, if he met me he'd probably bow and speak very politely.

For a monk the principle is always, 'What's correct according to Dhamma-Vinaya?; what's wholesome, what's right?', and standing up for that in certain circumstances, while being sensitive to time and place and the way to go about things. And not to come across as being adversarial. For example, if something illegal is going on in the forest, I wouldn't confront the person directly, but I might try to see their superior, or superior's superior. Rather than being a problem between me and someone, it's a problem in the wider community that calls for the right people to be alerted.

Tan Paññāvuddho: In personal terms, training here in this remote, wild forest has been a very enjoyable and profound experience. Could you put into words why it is so important for monks to train in forests? What are the advantages? How do we reflect on and learn from nature in the context of Dhamma practice?

Ajahn Jayasāro: Well, the practice of Dhamma is one in which it's very important to develop the ability to calm the mind, to make the mind peaceful and concentrated. That being so, it's essential to have a conducive environment in which there is nothing too jarring or too exciting. So we lead a very simple life, one bared down to the essentials, not surrounded by anything man-made or anything

that's going to pull you out of yourself. Living in a forest, there's nothing really, nowhere for your eyes to go – just greenness and trees all around. It automatically encourages you to incline inwards. The natural rhythms of the forest, of the trees and the streams, give a sense of uplift and well-being to our minds. They ground us. This provides a very important foundation for the meditation practice. It comes to feel natural to be by yourself and you come to delight in solitude. Sitting meditation and walking meditation become obvious ways to spend time, not something you have to push yourself into. I think that for most people support from the environment is still vitally important for success in practice. Ajahn Chah would often talk of the relationship between physical seclusion and seclusion from the Hindrances.

The forest is not quiet, but it is tranquil and it is teaching you the laws of nature all the time. The things you see around you are just natural phenomena. You're surrounded by birth, ageing, sickness and death, arising and passing away in the most raw and obvious forms. As you reflect on those principles internally, your contemplations find a resonance outside of you. The phases of the moon, dawn and dusk, the play of heat and cold, the whole natural environment attain an increased profundity, because they express the nature of things you're investigating internally. You feel a sense of harmony and a seamless unity between the inner and the outer.

Living at the foot of a tree, keeping the *dhutaṅga* practices, we also have this wonderful feeling of being the inheritors of a tradition that stretches back for over 2,500 years. We are not living so differently at all from the way the great monks of the Buddha's time lived. That sense of being a part of something larger, something noble that stretches in an unbroken line right back to the Buddha: I think that's a very wholesome feeling, one that a monk may cherish.

This particular forest, being home to so many wild animals, gives us the opportunity to look at fear, anxiety and attachment to the

body in a very direct way, seeing the effect they have on our mind, the sense of urgency they give us. While living in the forest, a lot of these phrases: 'a sense of urgency', 'making every moment count' – teachings we've read about and studied – really come alive. In a way it's difficult to articulate, I feel a sense of rightness, a feeling of 'This is exactly how I should be living', and 'This is how a monk lives'.

Tan Paññāvuddho: In the Suttas, so many passages from the Buddha's enlightenment to the *Parinibbāna* take place under trees. The Buddha always lived and practised in the forest when possible. With the forest disappearing, and the subsequent likelihood that this will be the last generation of forest monks, how do you see a Buddhist monk responding to a predicament like this?

Ajahn Jayasāro: Well, you don't have any choice really. There's not so much that can be done. As you become a more senior monk and you have more responsibilities and opportunity to teach the Dhamma to lay Buddhists, you can at least point out the value of the forest, how little remains and the need to look after it. It's also important to point out the relationship between the forest and the Buddhist religion. Then as a younger monk, just make the best of the forested areas available while you can. But I think it's really important to have young monastics come out and experience this way of practice right from the beginning of their monastic career, because it can create such a strong impression. You know you'll remember this for the rest of your life. Hopefully you will continue to have the possibility to keep coming here or to places like this to train. But even if that is not the case, for monks to have the experience of living simply in a forest like this, even once, has a ripple effect. As monks become more senior and have their own monasteries and their own disciples, they will pass on their love of nature and appreciation of the role of solitude in monastic life.

But you know, I must admit I sometimes feel that this destruction is not going to stop until every last tree outside of private hands

is gone. To effect a real change, it has to start in the schools. Last week, when I went out to see what was going on with the various arson fires in the area, Tivaporn was running a retreat for school kids in the village at the edge of the forest. And the kids loved it – they really responded to the teaching about nature very well. At one point the children were asked what their parents do for a living, and three of them replied that it was illegal logging. It's the same everywhere. In Huay Ka Kaeng, just north-east of here, there is a lot of wild forest. It's labelled a World Heritage Site. It's also the place where a forest park official called Seup Nakasatheean killed himself as a gesture to call attention what is happening to the forests across Thailand. A foundation was set up in his name and the army was sent in to look after and patrol the land. But still there is cutting going on to this day. I myself don't see any fundamental changes being made until there comes a point where laws are laws, and whoever breaks the law is wrong and is dealt with appropriately.

But I feel reasonably confident about the prospect of saving Dtao Dam. It is really hard to say when you don't know everything going on, really hearing everything second or third-hand. Still, overall, I think there are enough people with influence who know about Dtao Dam to keep this tract of forest intact.

Tan Paññāvuddho: You mentioned that you went to a conference about Dtao Dam last year. What was that like?

Ajahn Jayasāro: Well, yes, it was strange for me. One has the idea that Dtao Dam is a forest far away from anywhere else, where we come on retreat every year. But at this conference I walked into a large room with academics who all seemed to be experts on Dtao Dam. I was wondering where these people came from. They were talking about the biology and topography and all kinds of esoteric subjects.

Tan Paññāvuddho: Ajahn, when I'm practising *sīla, samādhi, paññā* in long periods of solitude in the forest, I sometimes get the sense

that this in itself feels like the most direct, authentic response to the threat of this forest being destroyed, not to mention all the other environmental, economic and socio-political calamities on earth. But I find it challenging to articulate this. If I were to try to explain it to somebody who hasn't had much experience with meditation, I wouldn't know how to put it into words. But the sense of authenticity seems true and real.

Ajahn Jayasāro: Yes, I agree, but I also have the same kind of difficulty in explaining it, why it is best to practice in this way. One thing I said the other day: if we look at the root of all mankind's self-imposed difficulties, there is a common underlying cause. We find that because mankind doesn't know himself, he constantly acts in conflict with his own best interests, living merely as the puppet of desires, fears and delusions. But practising *sīla, samādhi, paññā* deals with these things at their very roots. That way one really works with the whole structure of what is going on, rather than just responding to a particular expression of it. We study the mind to understand what greed is, what hatred is, what delusion is, even in their most subtle forms, while developing the skilful means to abandon them, to let them go. That seems to me to be as an intelligent response as any other.

But with trying to save the forest or whatever, I myself am always wary of falling into the trap of 'I've got to do it', or 'We've got to do this'. Once you fall into this 'We've got to!' mentality, you've lost it already. Yes, I will do what I can. But who knows what will happen? These things occur due to causes and conditions, many of them way out of my control.

Recent developments in Dtao Dam

In the following little sequel, Ajahn Siripañño, who has been the abbot of Dtao Dam Monastery for the last five years, gives an overview of some of the developments which have taken place since the original article was written.

Since the publication of this article, a whole host of factors regarding the situation at Dtao Dam have changed, mainly for the better. What remain almost entirely unchanged are the pristine nature of the jungle there and the ongoing presence of a small number of forest monks dedicated to living in the open, under the beautiful tree canopy, with the call of gibbons and crickets echoing around.

Regarding Khun Tivaporn and the mine, in 2003 the mine lease expired, and with it permission for the hermitage. Certain forces within the National Park Department tried their best to force the monks to leave, presumably hoping to exploit the area commercially in some way. However, pressure from monastery supporters, the national press and, finally, from within the National Parks Department itself, resulted in the monastery being given permission to stay on, with the agreement to be renewed every five years. More stability was achieved when in 2009 the Thai government created a nationwide 'Buddhist National Parks' project, with the specific aim of enabling legitimate monasteries to stay in forest areas and make use of national park land for Dhamma practice, while at the same time relying on the Sangha for help in preserving the forests by keeping an eye open for illegal hunting, logging, forest fires and other dangers. In fact, with the closure of the mine and the departure from the area of Tivaporn's family and all the workers, the hermitage has become a completely isolated spot right on the Burmese border, with very few people coming in and out other than a seasoned bunch of off-road vehicle drivers.

As for Tivaporn herself, this hardy woman, now approaching 70, runs a community centre on the property surrounding her house

on the outskirts of Kanchanaburi Town, teaching seminars on environmental matters and sustainable livelihood. She also maintains a centre in the village nearest to Dtao Dam, Tung Ma Sa Yo, which provides work opportunities for her former mine-workers, many of whom remain undocumented due to Thai bureaucratic complexities.

The road linking Bangkok and Davoy (now usually marked on maps as Tawei) is currently under construction. Luckily, the possibility that it might actually pass right through the Dtao Dam area was averted when sufficient pressure from environmental groups made it clear that this would not be acceptable. The route now passes some twenty kilometres south of the monastery.

Food is mainly brought in by monastery supporters, cooked by one or two resident workers and supplemented by a vegetable garden and forest fruits and vegetables, roots, shoots and herbs which can be collected.

Every year a group of monks and novices from Wat Pah Nanachat go there to spend the hot season in the same way as they have done for some twenty years. The three original *kuṭīs* provide enough shelter for a small group of monastics to spend each Rains Retreat there. During the last two Decembers a group of students, parents and teachers from Panyaprateep school have visited for a few days with Ajahn Jayasāro.

Animals, large and small, are still in evidence. Two years ago a herd of elephants strolled through the hermitage, completely demolishing our inner *sāla*. Tigers and other forest cats are still being sighted, and recently a protective mother bear rushed at one of our monks high up on a mountain after her cub had wandered towards him. (Admittedly the monk was using a mobile phone at the time, which might have alarmed her even more. Both the monk and the monastery Nokia survived unscathed). A rustling

in the bushes may turn out to be the reclusive Dtao Dam itself (a six-legged black turtle), a porcupine with eight-inch quills or the bizarre Malayan tapir, a cow-sized beast resembling a combination of elephant and rhino. These incidents, though, are very rare. What are experienced daily are the beautiful singing of gibbons and the chatter of monkeys. A strange rhythmic whooshing sound high in the sky will be the flight of a giant hornbill, or even a pair mated for life, as they fly through the valleys looking for their regular spots to feast on figs and insects in the tree canopy. All this and more, set to music: night and day the jungle noises beat out a samba to rival any carnival. The streams are still flowing, and the waterfall cascades down several levels before levelling off at the foot of the mountain on the top of which the monks dwell. The sun rises in the east over Thailand and sets in the west over Burma; the timeless rhythm of nature undisturbed by man's whims and fancies. Long may it be so.

13

LEARNING FOREST DHAMMA

Paññāvuddho Bhikkhu

Practising in the ancient way at the foot of a tree.

Alone with other creatures

> 'As long as the monks see their own benefit in wilderness dwellings, their growth can be expected, not their decline.'
>
> D.II.77; A.IV.20[1]

Emerging from meditation while nestled in an isolated spot deep within the folds of the forest certainly makes a wonderful way to greet the day. As I sit here on my *dtieng* in Dtao Dam, the crescendo of the birds and insects celebrating the crack of dawn has subsided, and shafts of light begin to seep through the trees. The beams of sunshine from the early morning sun rising over the mountainous horizon produce a dance of light throughout the trees and imbue the forest air with a glowing yellow-orange hue.

Here in the lush, tropical forests of Dtao Dam I often catch myself marvelling at the degree to which the forest brims with life. The

[1] Bhikkhu Aparihaniya-Dhamma, translated by Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu.

natural surroundings pulsate with a vibrant energy. From the gurgling flow of water in the creek, to the bass undertone of humming bees, to the punctuated, high-pitched cries of barking deer, the forest provides a constant symphonic medley of sound. At dawn the energy peaks; while nocturnal creatures return to their abodes, the rest of the fauna awaken with the sun to embark on a search for a new day's meal. A little bird perched just on the front ledge of my *dtieng* sings a small song. Then with a sudden quiver of its wings it slices through the timelessness of a moment. I note how a detached observation of nature's rhythmic movements brings peace, ease and a sense of release to the ceaselessly thinking mind. In my Dhamma practice the pristine wilderness inspires me to turn within and attempt to attune to that which is true. The whole environment encourages me to develop a deeper awareness of the present moment and practice letting go.

Suddenly, while sitting on my *dtieng*, I hear a commotion in the brush several metres away. The noises are insistent in their beckoning. Noting a subtle ripple of sensation from my abdomen up to the crown of my head, I anticipate the onset of some mental proliferation. I make an effort to bring attention to the breath to re-establish mindfulness in the present moment, but the mind doesn't cooperate. Instead the sounds trigger a reminiscence of a similar occasion a year ago. Immediately I feel myself reliving the scene.

I have just completed my early morning meditations, concluding with a chant of the *Mettā Sutta*, the Buddha's discourse on loving-kindness for all beings. I check my clock and discover that I am a little late for the descent down the mountain to take the daily meal. But this is my favourite part of the day and I want to soak up a bit more meditation in the radiant morning sun. The fresh dew-drops on the abundant flora indicate the cool, crisp moistness of the air, and I feel quite content to remain sitting here, comfortably tucked away in my robes.

I re-close my eyes to sit in meditation for a couple more minutes, but a sudden crashing sound in the brush competes for my attention. To hear sounds, even loud sounds, in the forest is so common that I tell myself not to take note and to return to the meditation. But as the volume and frequency of the fracas in the brush increase, I can't refrain from speculation. I realize that whatever is going on is coming closer. Unable to control my curiosity, I open my eyes and slowly rotate my neck to look over my left shoulder. It takes my vision a moment to focus. The greenness of the forest all seems to melt together like an Impressionist painting. And then I see it. The form of an animal is darting to and fro between clusters of bamboo and through the dense underbrush.

I make out the shape of a large sandy-beige feline-like form, about human size, jumping up and down and zipping left and right in an almost playful fashion. Two butterflies flutter their wings over its head. Is it chasing butterflies or following some ground animal through the brush? I can't see. Everything is taking place so quickly. But whatever is happening, this feline creature apparently doesn't see or smell me and is on a collision course with my *dtieng*. Not really thinking of anything, I find myself making a noise by gently but audibly clearing my throat. The large cat instantly stops jumping around, ducks low behind some tall grass and shrubs, then shoots clear out of sight. It had been only three or four metres from my *dtieng*.

Finding resolve in the forest

The proverbial forest monk story revolves around the encounter with a tiger. As the fiercest predator to be found in the wild, this large flesh-eating character unquestionably rules the jungles of Southeast Asia. Tigers notoriously reek with the smell of death on their breath, usually strong from a recent kill. Yet interestingly, although there are countless documented instances of forest monks

meeting up with tigers in recent recorded Thai history, there is not one single known case of any forest monk being killed by one of these beings. I had just met up with a relative of one of these regal beasts, (later I discovered the animal I saw was probably an Asian Golden Cat, not a properly striped full-grown Bengal Tiger), and fortunately I did not become the first victim on the list.

Now a year later, as I sit at the foot of a giant tree at a new spot in the same Dtao Dam forest recollecting this encounter, I contemplate why fear did not arise. Why do I feel so at home in this seemingly wild and uncontrollable environment? Practising in the forest in accordance with a forest monastic tradition dating back to the time of the Buddha, I get a gut sense of the authenticity of this form of training, although it is a far cry from my upbringing and education in America. For a forest monk there are a bare-bones honesty and naked simplicity to daily life. Everything is a teacher. Every moment is geared toward awakening. Ajahn Chah points the way:

'Whether a tree, a mountain or an animal, it's all Dhamma, everything is Dhamma. Where is this Dhamma? Speaking simply, that which is not Dhamma doesn't exist. Dhamma is Nature. This is called the *saccadhamma*, the True Dhamma. If one sees Nature, one sees Dhamma; if one sees Dhamma, one sees Nature. Seeing Nature, one knows the Dhamma.'[1]

And elsewhere

'Where is the Buddha? We may think the Buddha has been and gone, but the Buddha is the Dhamma, the Truth of the way things are. The Buddha is still here. Regardless of whoever is born or not, whether someone knows it or not, the Truth is still there. So we should get close to the Buddha, we should come within and find the Dhamma.

[1]Ajahn Chah: "Dhamma Nature", The Collected Teachings of Ajahn Chah Vol.III, page 11.

When we reach the Dhamma we will see the Buddha and all doubts will dissolve.'[1]

In the solitude of the deep forest, however, inspiration in practice is always quickly tempered by the work at hand – overcoming the *kilesas*. For me, battling the *kilesas* involves a continual struggle with some deeply ingrained proclivities: always catching myself ruminating about some aspect of the past, present or future; trying to let go of and unlearn desires that have been drummed into me by society to become 'somebody' or to achieve 'something'; being mindful of the arising and passing away of moods, emotions and unskilful habitual tendencies; and forever uprooting and investigating deeply entrenched perceptions.

With nowhere to go and nothing new to see, I experience a spaciousness and lightness of mind that allow some deep stuff to percolate up, flooding the mind with a deluge of memories. I'm reminded of various accounts about the experience of the mind just before death. Here at Dtao Dam I've managed to review what seems like my whole life, remembering some of the tiniest details, recollecting where I did no more than spit on the ground. Yet when I can get beyond this recursive thinking, there's absolutely nothing to do all day to distract me from a full-on practice of sitting and walking meditation. Any patterns of greed, hatred and delusion are given room to manifest in their most subtle forms. The process of birth, sickness, ageing and death, internally and externally, becomes so obvious. As Ajahn Chah liked to say, 'We practice to understand just this much'.

In similar intensive meditation situations of the past I often found support and encouragement though practising with others and surrendering to a retreat schedule. But at Dtao Dam there is no retreat schedule to which to surrender. Although I have gratitude

[1] Ajahn Chah: "No Abiding", The Collected Teachings of Ajahn Chah Vol.I, page 34 (adapted)

for those years of formal retreats in America – they now provide me with an invaluable array of tools to help put my time to wise use – I recognize that the level of surrender here on a long-term retreat in solitude is of an entirely different order. I realize that in the past I often motivated myself to practice through working with a teacher or a group of fellow-practitioners. Here, although the Sangha is scattered in isolated spots throughout the surrounding Dtao Dam forest, when it comes down to it I must muster up the gumption and resolve to maintain an impeccable standard of discipline on my own. In solitude a more honest and natural kind of effort replaces any determination fuelled by hubris.

The anchor for my practice of awareness is *ānāpānasati*, mindfulness of breathing. I learn to come back to the breath in the here and now, again and again and again. With one-pointed awareness of the breath in the present moment, I practice quieting the mind, cutting off the incessant internal chatter and, as Carlos Castaneda says, 'stopping the world'. As the practice moves towards a balanced sense of serenity and tranquillity, I note how investigative energy begins to transform the very base of conditioned consciousness. Instead of relating to nature by dividing experience into dichotomous fictions of 'self' and other, as my mind becomes more silent I see the possibility of experiencing things simply and truly as they are.

Recollecting family and spiritual companions, teachers and students, and wishing I could offer them a realization of peace and truth, elevates my mind and gives it motivation. But over time I witness my mind oscillating between inspiration and a more humble recognition of how much there is to do.

Slowly I learn to see these passing emotions as just more mind states. Could it be any other way? I keep the goals of the Buddha's path clear in my mind, but the art is learning how to relate to these goals in a skilful way. The sincere desire for true freedom from the compulsions of craving is usually the most direct way to give rise to

right effort. Over the weeks and months at Dtao Dam, I gradually learn how to exert an effort that is wholehearted and rigorous, while at the same time balanced, measured and at ease with letting go. Ajahn Chah remarks:

'The worldly way is to do things for a reason, to get some return, but in Buddhism we do things without any gaining idea ... If we don't want anything at all, what will we get? We don't get anything! Whatever you get is just a cause for suffering, so we practice not getting anything ... This kind of understanding which comes from [practising Dhamma] leads to surrender, to giving up. Until there is complete surrender, we persevere, we persist in our contemplation. If desires or anger and dislike arise in our mind, we aren't indifferent to them. We don't just leave them out but rather take them and investigate to see how and from where they arise. We see them clearly and understand the difficulties which we cause ourselves by believing and following these moods. This kind of understanding is not found anywhere other than in our own pure mind.'

The challenge to live in harmony with nature

In the forest monk life there are various themes which undergird our practice, to give us a form in which to surrender. One main theme is that of *nekkhamma*, simplicity and renunciation. The Buddha and our teachers urge us to eat little, sleep little, talk little and practice a lot. We're far away from any distraction. The nearest Thai village is over forty kilometres away, three hours by a difficult four-wheel drive journey. When it rains the road is easily washed out. So here at Dtao Dam the sense of *viveka* – solitude, quietude and detachment from the world – is real. Furthermore, we undertake a number of *dhutaṅga* practices to cultivate a spirit of simplicity and renunciation in relation to our four requisites of food, shelter, clothing and medicine. We live at the foot of trees on small open-air bamboo platforms, take just one meal a day in one bowl, wear and

sleep with our robes and get by with a modest supply of communal medicines.

At the same time, the natural habitat and wildlife make me feel deeply enmeshed in nature. Biologists and botanists who visit speak with great enthusiasm about the ecological diversity of the surroundings. The place is a tropical paradise. Exotic funky-looking palms and ferns abound. Ancient hardwood trees tower over dense thickets of bamboo. It takes seventeen people with arms stretched to form a ring around the base of the tree where I sit this year. The tree-top provides a home for a cornucopia of life-forms. There are dozens of bee colonies, whose beehives at this time of the year drop every so often like grenades from the branches over a hundred feet above. Ancient ferns sprout out from the hardwood branches. A family of hornbills makes its nest in the tree as well. Indeed, looking up at the top I find a whole ecosystem. In several recent visits to Dtao Dam forest a group of birdwatchers spotted and catalogued over two hundred bird species, some of which were thought to be extinct in Thailand. And I can only speculate about how many *devas* make their homes here.

Throughout the forest, water flows everywhere. From the cusp of the mountain ridge to the depth of the valley several hundred metres below, the creek cascades into a meandering staircase of waterfalls which furnish the community with invigorating showers. Small pools at their bases offer fresh-water baths – that is, if we can withstand the curious nibbling on the skin from schools of colourful fish which dart about. We have agreed not to use soap products in or near the water when bathing, washing by gently scrubbing with sand or taking a bucket of water to a spot away from the creek if we use soap. Ajahn Chah, having spent many years living in the forest, would teach his monks how to live off the forest in harmony, while keeping the strict precepts of the Vinaya. He would describe the different trees and plants, indicating which ones could be used

for medicines or allowable food. So although we have hardly any possessions beyond a few simple requisites, we rarely feel a sense of lack in such a natural environment. The whole experience creates an attitude of mind that easily learns to let go and live in harmony with the surroundings.

While living in such an environment may sound quite idyllic from a romantic standpoint, on a practical front a number of difficulties exist. The hour-long daily climb up the mountain after the meal is always a hot and sweaty affair. Any water drawn from the creek used for drinking must be filtered and then boiled to prevent sickness. And perhaps the most incessant challenge comes from the impressive array of insects and creepy-crawlies that have to be reckoned with: ticks, biting horse flies, bees, termites, ants, mosquitoes, spiders, snakes, scorpions, rats and centipedes. Bloodsucking leeches, albeit harmless creatures, can also cause quite a mess of blood. If not bitten by a leech, my body always manages to get cut, scraped, bloodied and bruised in some manner.

It requires constant effort to keep my few possessions dry from the rain and free from the creatures that ascend the *dtieng*. The nights are cold and damp. When I awaken in the night on the *dtieng*, I often have the sense that I am open prey for any large flesh-eating creature. It is not uncommon in the middle of the night to hear the footsteps of animals, or even the breathing next to my *dtieng* of some confused animal such as a bear or wild boar, seemingly trying to determine what it has bumped into. Invariably these animals smell who I am and leave me alone. On more rare occasions, monks have come across deer being attacked by wild dogs or a panther. Other monks have seen tigers while doing walking meditation. Some locals have even reported running into wild rhinoceroses. One recent night a monk walked down the path from his *dtieng* to investigate a curious sound of bamboo being munched upon, only to find, to his astonishment, a herd of wild elephants. The earth shook, rumbling

as if there had been a small earthquake, as the elephants fled in surprise. The one creature in the forest that does offer a serious health hazard is the malarial mosquito. This year five members of our community of about twenty have contracted the malarial parasite from a mosquito bite and have had to be taken out to a hospital for treatment. Mosquito nets offer some protection, but the insects can apparently bite at any time of the day, not just dawn and dusk.

All in all I experience a renouncing of many comforts and securities I didn't even realize I had. The tenuous, uncertain nature of the body really draws me within, in an urgent search for a peace unconditioned by these external phenomena. If I complicate my daily life by holding on to any attachments or acting in an unwholesome way, the suffering and negative *kamma-vipāka* seem almost instant.

Lastly, the sense of urgency in practice is heightened by the fact that the forested Dtao Dam area, which has undoubtedly taken centuries to grow, could be gone or nearly destroyed within the next few years. The hardwood trees fetch a good price for loggers in the timber industry and the wild animals are prized by hunters. National Park officials have been known to burn the forest to get reforestation funds. I can vividly remember sitting in meditation at the upper *sāla* late one night, with a clear vista of the forest for miles, and observing lines of fire apparently set by arsonists blazing from mountain to mountain. Now commercial interests want to cut a road through the heart of this pristine, virgin forest to expedite the transfer of goods from a port in Burma to Bangkok. First-hand accounts from fellow monks who have done *tudong* throughout Thailand indicate that forests like this, which one generation ago covered this country, are now almost non-existent. When I think about this it makes me want to practice even harder.

Cultivating the Sublime Mind

A second theme penetrating many aspects of our practice is the diligent development of *sīla, mettā* and wholesome, radiant states of mind. For Buddhist monks, the primary precept guiding our relation to the world is harmlessness. Expressed in a positive way, this means the cherishing of all life. Interestingly, it also functions as our greatest protection when living in a wild environment. Giving great importance to our *sīla* and actively practising the *brahma-vihāras* of *mettā*, *karuṇā*, *muditā* and *upekkhā* gives us a skilful method to work with fear. Dealing with the wild animals is not a matter of bravado or machismo. Asserting a self against nature only gives rise to conflict. Instead we learn through the cultivation of *mettā* to emanate a kindness that gives no footing for fear to arise. Indeed, in the forest we can study how fear and love are like darkness and light – the presence of one drives out the other. In the forest we are instructed not to go out and look for wild animals, nor to shun them. We just attempt to look at whatever comes our way with equanimity. When we face wild animals with *mettā* and succeed in letting go of fear, we can unearth a deep Dhamma treasure buried beneath the fear. This can open us up to a new taste of freedom and ease. It is a common theme in the poems written by monks and nuns at the time of the Buddha:

> 'I am friend to all, companion to all,
> sympathetic to all beings,
> and I develop a heart full of mettā,
> always delighting in non-harming.'
> Thag. 648.[1]

Holding to the principles of non-violence and harmlessness, a monk trains not to lift a finger, even in self-defence, to harm another sentient being. Many of the 227 major training precepts in the Vinaya

[1] Adapted from K.R. Norman's translation (Pāli Text Society Translation Series No 38, Oxford 1990)

cultivate a respect for animal and plant life in the most refined ways. Monks are prohibited from digging the earth, trimming foliage or uprooting plants. When drawing drinking or bathing water from the creek, we must carefully check the water for any beings visible to the eye. If there is even a tiny mosquito larva the water cannot be used, or it must be filtered and any living creatures returned to the water.

These details of the monk's discipline might appear excessive, but they create a new attitude of mind in relation to nature. We endeavour to look upon everything in nature as worthy of care and respect. Rather than being a source of material for use and consumption, nature is understood as a process that incorporates our very life. I am aware that the *dtieng* upon which I meditate and sleep is constructed from dead bamboo, and when I move away the bamboo rots in the torrential rains and becomes a natural part of the forest carpet, as it would anyway. As alms mendicants, Sangha members depend upon lay support for the building of these simple structures in the first place, so we learn to relinquish any sense of ownership.

The practice of living in harmony with nature also extends to the method we use to wash our robes. Laypeople offer a piece of heartwood from a jackfruit tree, which the monks in turn chop into small chips and boil in water, making a *gaen-kanun* concoction for washing. The *gaen-kanun* has a marvellous disinfectant and deodorizing effect that lasts for days. If a robe washed in it becomes sweaty, hanging it in the sunlight gives it a natural freshness in minutes. In understanding that we are an aspect of nature, the emphasis is upon living in harmony, attuned to nature's processes. The fortnightly recitation of the Pāṭimokkha is scheduled according to the lunar cycle, occurring every new and full moon. By forgetting the date and month of the worldly calendar and just living according to the patterns of the sun and the moon, we create a sense of timelessness.

There's no time to practice awakening except the present moment.

This shift in attitude generates some positive results. To begin with, wild animals respond differently. They can intuitively sense harmlessness and any accompanying fearlessness. When we encounter wild animals in the forest, they seem simply to mirror what they sense. Many people also respect the strict ethical standards of forest monks. Lay Buddhists consider it auspicious to have forest monks around, and as a subsequent effect the monastery protects not only the forest in its own immediate area, but the whole forest around it. Lay Buddhists in Asia find inspiration if their monks are putting forth a lot of effort in practice. Although few people make it into Dtao Dam, the ones who do come from throughout Thailand, and range from businessmen to ecologists to military historians.

Another interesting development in Thailand is that a tradition of ordaining trees has been introduced to protect the forest from logging – tying a semblance of the *gaen-kanun*-coloured forest monk's robe around the trunks of trees. Even the most callous Thai logger will think twice before killing a tree with a monk's robe tied round it. To be sure, there are glaring exceptions to this tendency to respect the trees and the wildlife in and around the forest monastery, but generally the presence of monks has a strong deterrent effect on deforestation, inhibits the hunting of wild animals and engenders an increased appreciation and love of nature. As we are forest monks, our teachers encourage us to reflect consciously on the value of the forest, and bring to mind that our presence and sincerity of practice are intended to be a force for preservation. At Dtao Dam Ajahn Jayasāro spurs us on with an analogy:

'Living in a forest threatened with extinction is like encountering a human being on the side of the road, injured or with an illness, possibly dying. One doesn't worry about the person's previous behaviour, inquire about their nationality or ethnicity, wonder whether the human being is rich or poor, young or old, famous

or not. In any case, human life is sacrosanct. You attend to the threat on the person's life by taking them to a hospital or doing everything possible to try to save them. Similarly, just as human life has intrinsic value, so does the life of the forest, with the multitudes of life within it. Who knows, the forest may contain a rare plant species that leads to a cure for cancer. Or maybe not – one way or the other, a forest supports the lives of countless beings, and if it is subject to destruction, that merits an immediate and appropriate response towards protection and preservation.'

The intrinsic power of mind

A third major theme of the forest Dhamma practice, in many ways the point of retreating to the forests, is to develop *sati, sampajañña* and *samādhi*. Ajahn Ṭhānissaro (abbot of Wat Mettā in California) once challenged my enthusiasm for practising at a place like Dtao Dam, perhaps sensing my enchantment with the exoticism of the retreat setting, by remarking, 'It's a good thing as long as it helps you with your meditation'. This echoes a relevant exhortation by the Buddha in the Saṃyutta Nikāya of the Pāli Canon:

> 'Monks, the establishing of mindfulness is to be practised with the thought, "I'll watch after myself." The establishing of mindfulness is to be practised with the thought, "I'll watch after others." When watching after yourself, you watch after others. When watching after others, you watch after yourself.
>
> 'And how do you watch after others when watching after yourself? Through cultivating [the practice], through developing it, through pursuing it. This is how you watch after others when watching after yourself.
>
> 'And how do you watch after yourself when watching after others? Through endurance, through harmlessness, through

> a mind of goodwill, & through sympathy. This is how you watch after yourself when watching after others.'
>
> S.V.168[1]

With the simplicity of the *viveka* environment, all the energies of the day can be focused resolutely on cultivating the Four Foundations of Mindfulness. *Sati* functions as a fulcrum for every aspect of our practice. It is the *sine qua non* of the spiritual life. In whatever posture one finds oneself, there is the determination to give rise to the *sati* and *sampajañña* of the situation, knowing the body as body, feelings as feelings, the mind as mind and dhammas as just dhammas. We practice to know things just as they are, impermanent and empty of an inherent self. *Sati* and *sampajañña* both bolster the strength of the *samādhi* cultivated in the formal sitting practice, and operate as extensions of it. Ideally, *sati* and *sampajañña* form a seamless continuum of awareness and investigation throughout the entire day and night. They are the presence of mind that is life itself; without them there is heedlessness. When we are heedless, as the Buddha said, it is as if we are dead.

Over an extended period of diligent practice, I begin to experience how the power and knowledge of *sati* and *sampajañña* grow organically and build upon themselves as they develop. The power and knowledge intrinsic to these qualities of mind are not derived from force or coercion. Once in motion, with continual effort, they naturally deepen. By their inherent nature, the faculties of *sati* and *sampajañña* are ready for development in all human beings. And although they can be aimed toward a variety of ends, our task in Dhamma practice is to use *sati* and *sampajañña* as tools to be awakened by all things. We're not trying to concoct beautiful theories and ideologies, but to develop a penetrative clarity in the study of moment-to-moment experience. We learn from Dhamma, manifest in the nature around us, through *opanayiko*, turning inwards. We

[1] http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn47/sn47.019.than.html

endeavour to continue to take the practice yet further, looking deeply at the nature of the mind. Indeed, by getting in touch with the pristine, natural state of the mind, we let the rigid separation between inside and outside become deliquescent, giving rise to a more unified awareness.

The breath, in constant flow between the inner and outer natures, is an ideal *samatha* meditation object for myself and many others. As I learn to let the breath breathe itself naturally, accompanied by a suffused and unwavering awareness, I try to let the doer of the meditation process disappear. Only when the doer steps out of the way and the knower of the breath lets go of any attachment and identification with the process, does *samādhi* mature. But as soon as my mind proliferates – 'How can I give impetus to the *samādhi nimitta*?' or, 'Will this lead to *jhāna*?' – a taint of craving, a glimmer of grasping and a subtle sense of lack all obfuscate the knowing, and my mind becomes distracted. With distraction there is no possibility to cultivate awareness of phenomena just as they are. With even a subtle sense of contrivance, luminosity fades. But fortunately, there's always the next breath, another mind moment, to begin anew.

The wisdom to let go

According to the Buddha's teaching, *sīla* and *samādhi* are the ground for *paññā* to arise. With a mind brought to malleability, sharpness, clarity and deep peace through *samādhi*, the defilements are at least temporarily held at bay and the investigative faculty of *paññā* is tractable for making some decent headway. Again from Ajahn Chah:

'With right *samādhi*, no matter what level of calm is reached, there is awareness. There is *sati* and *sampajañña*. This is the *samādhi* which can give rise to *paññā*, one cannot get lost in it ... Don't think that when you have gained some peace of mind living here in the quiet

forest, that's enough. Don't settle for just that! Remember that we have come to cultivate and grow the seeds of *paññā*.'

Reading the Suttas, I am struck by the plethora of passages in which a monk or a nun, given the teachings by the Buddha, retreats to meditative solitude at the foot of a tree and in no long time 'does what is to be done'. That is, the monk or nun sees the five *khandhas* as impermanent and empty, puts an end to *dukkha*, liberates the mind from the *saṃsāric* treadmill of birth and death and realizes complete Awakening. It sounds utterly straightforward. Yet in my practice, without constant heedfulness it can be natural for mindfulness to lose touch with the present moment and allow the *kilesas* to slip in.

Memories from the past, coupled with creative imagination about the future, perpetually enchant and fascinate. Or conversely, my mind can feel immured by the extremes of languor and impetuousness. When practising in America I never considered myself to be interested in sense desires. Now though, living the renunciant life of a monk in the meditative solitude of the forest, I am more acutely aware of sense impingement and the lure of sensuality. The ostensible comfort of the familiar and the secure and the ensuing entanglements of the worldly life can seem more alluring than ever before. Such is the pathos of *dukkha*!

If I do get a bit of sustained success in the practice, I notice that a subtle sense of pride in living a pure and good life can enter the mind. As I attempt to live a simple, selfless life, the sense of self unwittingly tends to emerge in new and unforeseen forms. It wants to claim ownership of any goodness and wisdom that might arise. Here Ajahn Chah continues the encouragement:

'For the ultimate in the practice of Buddhist Meditation, the Buddha taught the practice of letting go. Don't carry anything around! Detach! If you see goodness, let it go. If you see rightness, let it go.

These words, "Let go", do not mean we don't have to practice. They mean that we have to practice the method of letting go itself. The Buddha taught us to contemplate all of the dhammas, to develop the Path through contemplating our own body and heart. The Dhamma isn't anywhere else. It's right here, not somewhere far away! It's right here in this very body and heart of ours.'

On still other occasions I find the sense of self assert itself through doubt. My mind wonders, 'Would it be better to go out and help others? What use am I to the world sitting at the foot of this tree? What if I don't awaken to the unconditioned truth of Nibbāna? Isn't it a bit presumptuous for me to think that I can realize the ultimate truth?' The Theravāda forest masters' arousing exhortations in this respect are echoed in Patrul Rinpoche's classic introduction to Tibetan Buddhism, 'The Words of My Perfect Teacher':

'Until you have overcome wanting anything for yourself, it would be better not to rush into altruistic activities ... The ancient [practitioners] had these four goals: Base your mind on the Dhamma, base your Dhamma on a humble life, base your humble life on the thought of death, base your death on a lonely cave. Nowadays we think we can practice Dhamma alongside our worldly activities, without the need for bold determination, courage, and difficult practices, all the while enjoying comfort, well-being and popularity ... But how could there be a way to marry Dhamma and worldly life? Those who claim to be doing so are likely to be leading a good worldly life, but you may be sure that they are not practising pure Dhamma. To say that you can practice Dhamma and worldly life at the same time is like saying that you can sew with a double pointed needle, put fire and water in the same container or ride two horses (simultaneously) in opposite directions. All these things are simply impossible. Could any ordinary person ever surpass Sākyamuni Buddha? Yet even he found no way of practising Dhamma and worldly life side by side.'

Another reflection that sits powerfully in my mind is the story of

a Zen Buddhist monk who, as I remember the story, was asked, 'What would you do if you were told that you had twenty-four hours to live?' He responded, 'Sit straight zazen *samādhi*' – that is concentrate the mind in meditation in the sitting posture. The questioner persisted, 'What about your vow to liberate all sentient beings?' The monk retorted, 'That is the most direct, complete way to liberate all sentient beings'.

Our teachers remind us that the mind absorbed with the bliss of *samādhi* is far from intoxication. With a pliant and supple mind primed for the work of investigation from one-pointed concentration, it's natural for insight into the tenuous, transient nature of conditioned existence to deepen. In the forest I notice that when my mind is in a peaceful state, ordinary discursive consciousness dissatisfies; thoughts, even astute ones, are of their nature ephemeral and capricious. To indulge in the thinking mind gives me a feeling akin to not having taken a shower or brushed my teeth for days.

When I realize dispassion towards mental proliferation the practice takes on a greater immediacy for me. *Dukkha* is ubiquitous. It is imperative to understand the source of the incessant torrent of suffering, and to tread the path to realize its cessation. Resorting to belief systems, philosophical explanations of ultimate truth or supplication to an external being only takes me further away from peace. Any approach that is bound up with the five *khandhas* is still within the realm of *dukkha*. But how do I penetrate or transcend the conditionality of the five *khandhas* while still operating from within their realm? I find this to be the heart of the investigation.

In his book *Heartwood of the Bodhi Tree*, Ajahn Buddhadāsa mentions that in the *Majjhima Nikāya* the Buddha is asked to summarize his teachings in one statement. To this the Buddha responds, '*Sabbe dhammā nālaṃ abhinivesaya*' – nothing whatsoever should be clung to. Implicit in this utterance is the teaching of *anattā* – not-self, voidness of a separate self, emptiness of a soul-entity. So in the

Dhamma practice I attempt to see though the seemingly *a priori* concepts of 'I', 'me' and 'mine'. Ajahn Chah explains:

'So we practice not getting anything. Just this is called "making the mind empty". It's empty, but there is still doing. This emptiness is something people don't usually understand, but those who reach it see the use of knowing it. It's not the emptiness of not having anything, it's emptiness within the things that are here.'

Investigation of birth and death

In my Dhamma practice, the steady contemplation of birth and death brings the practice right to the heart. The forest affords numerous opportunities to confront matters of life and death. Walking along the forest paths, one frequently comes across a snake eating a frog or lizard, swallowing the animal whole and head first. The process takes maybe twenty minutes and the snake, having once overcome his victim, rarely stops the process because of a curious onlooker.

In the investigation of birth and death I make a repeated effort to come to peace with the fact that my body – this bag of flesh and bones – although not likely prey, will certainly die and is not really mine. Its constituent parts, comprised of the four elements, are constantly returning to their nature. When I look closely, I can begin to see this process of birth and death at every moment. We have all known many people who have died. I find the practice most honest and powerful, however, when I am able to weigh the fact of death not just for others, but for my own body.

So contemplation of my death helps brings the essence of the practice into the present moment. Ajahn Chah would ask newcomers to his monastery, 'Did you come here to die?' (Interestingly, the word 'die' is the same in Thai and English). This kind of vital question catapults us from the dogmatic slumbers of our everyday existence

into awakeness. Making an investigation into death with continuity and sincerity breathes a heedful clarity into our daily life. The Buddha exhorts his monks to recollect frequently: 'Has my practice borne fruit with freedom or insight, so that at the end of my life I need not feel ashamed when questioned by my spiritual companions?' By frequently reflecting on death, I find my understanding of life and death gradually takes on an earthy honesty. Death can become just like an old friend. Connecting this with the fact that death spurs urgency, I then ask, 'Within just this, what is it that does not die?'

Everything or nothing?

So as a community of forest monks, our endeavour at Dtao Dam is to make progress on the noble path to Nibbāna. Naturally, in this process our gift to the forest is our very practice of *sīla*, *samādhi* and *paññā*. Our aim is to tilt the balance of virtuous and evil forces in the world decisively towards goodness. And if a positive evolutionary change is to take place in the world in any significant and fundamental way, from a Buddhist perspective it must grow from an enlightening shift or awakened transformation in consciousness. Without such a change, any attempts to heal the world are just band-aid remedies. Although perhaps well intentioned and important, these efforts are not enough. The Buddha has indicated that the human being has the potential to go beyond the *saṃsāric* realm of *dukkha* altogether, and settling for anything less would be to sell ourselves short.

But, to see beyond the clutches of conditioned existence necessarily entails experiential knowledge of the unconditioned. In other words, to paraphrase Einstein, the most significant problems we face cannot be solved by the same level of thinking which created them. Similarly, in the practice of Dhamma we see that *dukkha* is a problem which cannot be extinguished by the same mindset that

fabricates it in the first place. Hence the imperative to develop the path to go beyond our conditioned perspective. And the Buddha and the *arahants* show us that the goal of realizing the unconditioned is achievable in this life, and worth any sacrifice.

The teachings of the Buddha also indicate that the effects of the profound transformation of Awakening reverberate far and wide throughout the web of life, although perhaps in ways imperceptible to the unenlightened eye. We're more interconnected than we think. Systems theorists make a parallel point when they contend that a seemingly small input at the beginning of a process can have huge ramifications in the big picture. And quantum physicists concur that the effect of something as small as one electron making contact with another electron might not bear any fruition until over a thousand years later. From a Buddhist perspective, it's the accumulation of the moment-to-moment efforts to practice *sīla, samādhi* and *paññā* and tread the path to Nibbāna over the long haul that count.

So given that every small action can carry significant *kammic* weight, before we (as monks) presume to know what is the best way to help others, and before we become too engaged in resolving worldly matters, we need to be solid in our realization of Dhamma. Again, we can draw a parallel with contemporary science. David Bohm, the eminent quantum physicist, also holds that the process of changing the world occurs first through transforming the mind:

> 'A change of meaning [within the human mind] is necessary to change this world politically, economically and socially. But that change must begin with the individual; it must change for him ... if meaning is a key part of reality, then, once society, the individual and relationships are seen to mean something different a fundamental change has taken place.'[1]

In any case, for the meditator who has success in the practice,

[1] *Unfolding Meaning: A Weekend of Dialogue with David Bohm*

all these explanations are superfluous. From reading the Suttas and hearing the words of contemporary masters, we see that the enlightened, liberated mind validates itself and inherently knows what is the best thing to do in order truly to help others. Even the teachings and the practice become just the raft to the other shore. They are the finger pointing at the moon, not Awakening itself. As Ajahn Chah indicates:

'The Buddha laid down *sīla*, *samādhi* and *paññā* as the Path to peace, the way to enlightenment. But in truth these things are not the essence of Buddhism. They are merely the Path ... The essence of Buddhism is peace and that peace arises from truly knowing the nature of things ... Regardless of time and place, the whole practice of Dhamma comes to completion at the place where there is nothing. It's a place of surrender, of emptiness, of laying down the burden ...'

So here at Dtao Dam, through various aspects of the practice of Forest Dhamma, I have come to find that many of the Buddha's discourses in the Suttas which once seemed recondite or beyond me are now clearer and easy to apply to my life. Pāli words such as *nekkhamma*, *viveka, sīla, mettā, sati, sampajañña, samādhi* and *paññā* become the vernacular of everyday situations. Far from being ossified or esoteric teachings from two and a half millennia ago, the Suttas become living teachings. They are urgent reminders and vivid pointers to the way it is with the body and mind right here and now. I ask myself, can my practice with heartfelt dedication make progress towards the goal of awakening, dropping the burden of *dukkha* and at last transcending the vicious cycle of birth and death?

My mind returns once more to the time of the cat encounter. It is forty-eight hours later, and I have just spent another pleasant morning of meditation at my *dtieng*. I pick up my robe and carry-bag and set out for the morning descent down the mountain for the

meal. Having taken only a few steps on the path, I suddenly see a large black animal up ahead, but I am not fully sure what it is. It has apparently just stepped off the path about twenty metres ahead of me and has hunched itself right behind a large cluster of brush. By sight I can't make out the type of animal for certain from its general physical form, but I am instantly reminded of the large black panther (three and a half metres in length!) sighted several times wandering around the Dtao Dam forest in recent weeks. (Several nights earlier one of the novices had been circled by the black cat while walking the thirty-minute walk from the upper to the inner *sāla* late at night with only his candle lantern. The workers at the mine also saw it one morning recently). In any case, the animal is far too large to walk up to on the path and it seems to have its gaze fixed dead centre on me.

Spontaneously, and perhaps with a bit of over-confidence and fearlessness from my previous cat encounter, I clear my throat as if to signal an indication of my presence and wish to walk by. The animal does not budge. Then I feel a wave of energy coming from this impressive cat sweep over me. It has a very strong and fierce feeling-tone. If I had to put it into words, it would be something like: 'Who in the world do you think you are to be telling me to get off this path? I am in charge here!'

This feeling that I get from the stealthy animal on the path is unlike anything I have ever experienced in the forest in daylight hours. To be sure, at night on countless previous occasions I have heard the footsteps of a large animal padding though the brush, gently crushing the bamboo leaves as it moves. On those occasions fear sometimes would arise, but I have never actually seen any animal that I recognized as a tiger. This morning, however, I am looking at a giant black cat. There is uncertainty and I feel a profound presence of death. I collect my *sati* and slowly take a couple of steps backwards without turning round. My hands instinctively go into

añjalī, palms joined in reverential salutation, and I start to gently chant the *Mettā Sutta*, the Buddha's words of loving-kindness which I had chanted moments before at my *dtieng*. I close my eyes and tap into the energy I had felt so strongly that morning. And with the mind imbued with *mettā*, I practice letting go.

After finishing the chant about three minutes later, I open my eyes and can no longer make out any large black animal in the brush. Keeping my hands in *añjalī*, I chant homage to the Buddha (*Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā-sambuddhassa*) and proceed down the path. Whatever was previously there has silently walked away. While walking down the mountain that morning, my mind naturally turns to the contemplation of death and the empty and impersonal nature of the five *khandhas*. The energy from the encounter gives me a definite penetrative push. During these moments I feel a deep and meaningful trust in the Buddha and the path of Dhamma. To the extent that I have been able to devote my life to the cultivation of the path of *sīla, samādhi* and *paññā*, my heart feels good and true. In the face of what appeared to me as death, or at least a purveyor of it, the question of what really matters hit home. I experience an appreciation for my life that resonates deeply in my bones.

Yet while contemplating the empty nature of the five *khandhas* and feeling immeasurable gratitude for the Buddha's teaching, there is a wonderful and ineffable mystery to it all, a kind of 'Don't know' mind. The experience is light and peaceful. Although my heart feels full of *mettā* and connected to the beauty of everything around it, *paññā* insists that everything is completely empty, with nothing really there at all. And for once I don't experience the pressing need to reconcile this seeming contradiction. How to realize these two insights as not separate but one is the practice of Forest Dhamma that I continue to learn.

The Author

Tan Paññāvuddho carried on his training in Wat Pah Nanachat and branch monasteries in Thailand before joining the community at Buddha Bodhivana Monastery, north-east of Melbourne, Australia. Having returned to Thailand after his sixth Rains Retreat as a monk, he spent many months in solitude in a cave in the Pak Chong district of Korat province. In 2005, the year of his seventh Rains Retreat, Tan Paññāvuddho travelled to Wat Boonyawad in Chonburi, where he entered the Rains Retreat practising under Tan Ajahn Dtun Thiracitto's guidance. A few days into the Rains Retreat he failed to come out for the alms-round or the meal, which was unusual for him. A check in his *kuṭī* led to the very sad news, which spread through Thailand and very quickly all round the world, that this much-loved Sangha member had died in a simple accident in his bathroom. Subject for many years to fatigue caused by low blood pressure and dehydration, he had fainted early in the morning. His forehead had struck a corner post as he fell, forcing his head sharply back with tremendous force and breaking his neck. His death, the doctors concluded, would have been instantaneous and painless. His cremation, carried out at Wat Pah Nanachat, was attended by monks and laypeople from all over Thailand, Ajahn Kalyāṇo, the abbot of Buddha Bodhivana Monastery, Melbourne, and Tan Paññāvuddho's brother from the US.

As a Sangha member Tan Paññāvuddho was known for his keen intellect, sensitivity and kindness in community situations, and most of all for his absolute dedication to training in the way of the Buddhist monk. This publication, 'Forest Path', is one example of his creative skills: as well as writing this chapter, he was one of the main collaborators on the whole project. His love of the Thai forest tradition was very deep, despite his earlier background in the Zen school and a strong appreciation of Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna

teachings. When he died it was a certain source of comfort that he was truly practising in the way he loved, and living with a teacher, Tan Ajahn Dtun, for whom he had much devotion and respect.

14

WHAT IT TAKES TO REACH THE GOAL

Ajahn Piak

An interview with a senior disciple of Ajahn Chah conducted by Ajahn Chandako.

During the first few years of his monastic career, a young monk's training is divided between Wat Pah Nanachat and other branch monasteries of Wat Pah Pong. One of the disciples of Ajahn Chah who has helped to train Wat Pah Nanachat monks is Tan Ajahn Piak, abbot of Wat Pah Cittabhāvanā, a branch monastery situated to the north of Bangkok. The following conversation with Tan Chandako took place in 1998.

Tan Ajahn Piak: The *Kruba Ajahns* rarely say anything directly about Nibbāna because it is beyond a normal person's realm of possible experience. Even if the people listening believe the explanation, it still doesn't actually help them much, and if they don't believe it they may make a lot of bad *kamma* for themselves. So the *Kruba Ajahns* usually refer to it using metaphors or refuse to speak of it at all, only teaching the path to get there.

The important thing is to keep going straight without stopping. For example, say you want to go to Fa Kram Village over there; if you

follow the path and keep walking you'll get there in a short time. If you stop to take a look at something and then chat with people, then go off with them to see something else, it will take a long time before you reach Fa Kram, if ever. But the reality is that almost everybody gets sidetracked or at least stuck in *samādhi*, thinking that they've arrived already. Even Luang Por Chah was stuck for a while; Tan Ajahn Mahā Boowa for six years; Ajahn Tate for ten years; Ajahn Sot (Wat Pak Nam) for twenty years.

Tan Chandako: Because to all intents and purposes it appears to be full enlightenment?

Tan Ajahn Piak: Yes. There seem to be no *kilesas* whatsoever. Everything is clear. Many people don't make it past this stage. Other people practice for five Rains Retreats, ten Rains Retreats, and still feel they haven't made much progress and get discouraged. But one has to keep in mind that it is always only a very few people who have the *pāramī* to reach the goal. Compare it with the US President or the Thai King. Out of an entire nation of millions of people, only one person at a time has the *pāramī* to be in the top position. You have to think in terms of what you are going to do to set yourself above the crowd, creating the causes and conditions for future liberation. Effort in the practice is what makes the difference. There are thousands of monks in Thailand who ordain with the sincere intention of realizing Nibbāna. What sets people apart, why some succeed while others don't, is mainly due to their level of effort, as well as the effort they've put forth in the past. A person has to train himself to the point where it becomes an ingrained character trait to be continuously putting forth effort, whether he's around other people or alone. Some people are very diligent as long as there is a teacher or other monks watching, but as soon as they're alone their effort slackens.

When I was a young monk and my body was strong, I'd stay up later than everyone else walking *jongrom* and see the candles in the other

kuṭīs go out one by one. Then I'd get up before the others and watch the candles gradually being lit. It wasn't that I had it easy. The *kilesas* in my heart were always trying to convince me to take a rest: 'Everyone else has crashed out. Why shouldn't you do the same?' The two voices in my head would argue: 'You're tired. You need a rest. You're too sleepy to practice.' 'What are you going to do to overcome sleepiness? Keep going.' Sometimes the *kilesas* would win, but then I'd start again and eventually they weakened.

Tan Chandako: It's often when *samādhi* or *vipassanā* has been going well that *kilesas* seem to arise the most. At such times it seems I've got more *kilesas* than ever. Is that normal?

Tan Ajahn Piak: Very normal. The average person has a huge amount of *kilesas*. Just to recognize that one has a lot of *kilesas* is already a big step. Even the *sotāpanna* has many *kilesas* to become free from, much work to be done. Even at that stage it's not as if everything is *sabai*. It's as if there is a vast reservoir of *kilesas* below us which gradually come to the surface, and it's not easy to know how much is remaining. Just when you think you've fully gone beyond a particular *kilesa*, it will arise again. This happens over and over. The only thing to do is to keep using *paññā* to keep pace with the *kilesas*, meet and let go of them as they arise in the present.

Tan Chandako: Have you ever met or heard of anyone who has attained *magga-phala* by only contemplating and not practising *samādhi*?

Tan Ajahn Piak: No, if you want a straight answer. *Samādhi* is essential for the mind to have enough power to cut thoroughly through the *kilesas*. However, if one is practising *vipassanā* with the understanding and intention that it will lead to the development of *samādhi* at a later stage, this is a valid way to go about it.

The character of almost all meditation monks, both Thais and those born in Western countries, is such that they need to use a lot of

paññā right from the very beginning in order to gradually make their minds peaceful enough to be able to develop *samādhi*. Only a very small percentage of Thais, and possibly no Westerners, are the type to develop *samādhi* fully before beginning *vipassanā*.

Tan Chandako: Can it be said how deep and strong *samādhi* must be in order to attain *magga-phala*?

Tan Ajahn Piak: It must be strong enough to be still and unified as one, without any thinking whatsoever. There will still be awareness – knowing what one is experiencing.

Tan Chandako: According to whether one is in a remote location or in a busy monastery, should one's Dhamma practice change or remain the same?

Tan Ajahn Piak: Dhamma practice takes on a different character if you are in the city or are busy with duties in a monastery. In the forest there are few external distractions and it is easy to make the mind peaceful. If you have many sense contacts and dealings with other people, it is essential to figure out how not to pick up other people's emotional vibes (*arom*). Otherwise what happens is that the people around us feel lighter, while we feel heavier and heavier. It's necessary to be able to completely drop mental engagement as soon as interactions with other people have finished. Otherwise all the conversations and emotions of the day are floating around in the *citta* when one goes to sit in meditation.

It's easy to say, 'Just be mindful' and 'Don't pick up other people's baggage', but it is very difficult to do. Luang Por Chah could take on the problems and sufferings of others without picking up any of them himself, because his *citta* was very strong. The people around him didn't know what was happening. They just knew that they felt cool and happy around Luang Por. But this is not a practice for beginners. Most people just get burned out.

Practising in the forest is easier, and I recommend that you should

try as much as possible not to get involved with too many responsibilities, especially being an abbot. If someone tries to tell you that you are selfish and should be helping others, reflect that this is due in large part to the conditioning from Western society. If the Buddha had thought that way, we never would have had a Buddha. In order to put your mind at rest, reflect on the goodness you've done and rejoice in the *pāramī* that you're creating. Those who try to help others too much before they've helped themselves will never be able to teach or help beyond the superficial. If their teachings mislead others due to their own ignorance, they can make a lot of negative *kamma*. Many of the Wat Pah Pong monks try to emulate Luang Por in his later years, when he would talk with people all day, rather than his early years of difficult practice. But it was precisely those years in the forest that made Luang Por into the great teacher that he was.

Tan Chandako: Have you ever heard of anyone attaining *magga-phala* by any means other than analyzing the body into its component parts and elements?

Tan Ajahn Piak: No. At the very least, when the *citta* is clearly known as *anattā*, the knowing mind will return to knowing the body thoroughly as *anattā* as well.

Tan Chandako: In one of Luang Por Chah's Dhamma talks he says that even for *arahants* there are still *kilesas*, but like a bead of water rolling off a lotus petal: nothing sticks. How do you understand this?

Tan Ajahn Piak: Luang Por liked to use language in unconventional ways in order to get people's attention and make them think. What he was referring to was the body – the result of previous *kamma* – but the *citta* was completely devoid of *kilesas*. Normally people use other terms to refer to the body and the physical *dukkha* of an *arahant*, but Luang Por was quite creative in his use of the convention of language.

Tan Chandako: I've heard that while still a student, before you'd met Luang Por Chah, you had a vision of him.

Tan Ajahn Piak: That's right. I'd intended to return, [to New York, to finish a master's degree in business management] but soon after I'd begun to meditate I had a clear vision of a monk whom I didn't recognize, chewing betel nut. I went to see many of the famous *Kruba Ajahns* at that time – Luang Por Fun, Luang Por Waen – but when I met Luang Por Chah I recognized him from the vision and figured that he would be my teacher.

When I began to consider ordaining instead of completing my studies, my family tried hard to dissuade me, but I found meditation so peaceful that everything else felt like *dukkha*.

The Authors

Tan Ajahn Piak still lives in his monastery to the north of Bangkok. Any fields surrounding it are long gone and now the Bangkok suburban sprawl has engulfed Wat Pah Cittabhāvanā. The 2011 flooding saw the monastery submerged under a couple of metres of water. However, Ajahn Piak still provides a refuge for those seeking the Buddha's path. His reputation as a meditation teacher has grown, and his emphasis on combining the cultivation of *samādhi* with staying up all night brings many people to practice under him. Despite poor health he has begun travelling and teaching abroad in recent years, most notably in Malaysia, Singapore, Australia and New Zealand.

Tan Chandako carried on training in Thailand under various teachers, and also spent periods of time in Perth, living in Bodhiñāṇa Monastery. He spent a year in Wat Pah Nanachat as Vice-Abbot in

2002, before seeking a place to settle down. A Rains Retreat in the Czech Republic led to his return to Australia and finally to Auckland, New Zealand, where in 2004 he was invited by the ABTA (Auckland Theravāda Buddhist Association) to establish a monastic residence on their recently-acquired property not too far from the city. Thus Vimutti Monastery was born, and an extensive programme of tree-planting and construction has been under way since then. Additional land has been purchased to provide something of a buffer zone.

As well as his responsibility for running the monastery, Ajahn Chandako provides regular teaching and retreats both at the monastery and in various other parts of New Zealand. Every year he comes to Thailand and visits his home in the US, where he also conducts retreats.

15

ACCEPTANCE, FORGIVENESS AND DEEP BLUE EMPATHY... GOING HOME

Tan Acalo

A monk visits his family after three years at Wat Pah Nanachat.

It had been three years since I'd spent any time in the country of my birth, when I unexpectedly had the opportunity to return to Australia with one of my teachers. Tan Ajahn Anan had been invited to Melbourne, to visit a newly established meditation hermitage and give teachings at the local Buddhist society. Several other monks were going and we would be passing through the cities of Sydney and Canberra, staying in Thai wats and then later going on to Melbourne. In Melbourne I would take leave of my teacher and travel to Queensland to spend time with my mother and father. As a monk, one tries to practice in all situations. In Australia I would be close to the members of my family. I would have to honour our own relationship and also their relationships with others. I would have to be considerate of their lifestyles and views, yet at the same time maintain my own loyalties. This article explores some of the challenges, along with what to me were some of the more significant and moving times during my visit.

An earlier incident is a good way to introduce Tan Ajahn Anan. It was the middle of my second Rains Retreat, and I was staying for the first time at a Wat Pah Pong branch monastery where everyone except myself and another English-speaking monk was Thai. During one evening meditation session I was concerned about myself. I was stuck in a negative mood that just wouldn't move. All the other monks appeared so sweet and kind, and I was sitting there being angry, thinking about what was wrong with everyone and everything: 'Maybe everyone else's moods arise and pass away, but maybe mine won't! Maybe I'm just too defiled to be a monk.' I faintly knew all these thoughts were silly, yet somehow I couldn't stop them and it was very uncomfortable. The Rains Retreat can be a tense or difficult period, and most monks will experience some kind of negativity at some time or other during those three months. All this I knew, but this particular time I couldn't help making a big deal out my negative mood.

After the evening sitting the bell was rung routinely and we chanted in Pāli and Thai, sharing merit and taking refuge, bowing our respects to the Buddha and our teacher. As the monks left the room I lingered a little, wanting to be alone. When I left a few minutes later, passing through the rear door, I noticed that Tan Ajahn Anan was seated alone on a wooden dais in the corner of the balcony surrounding the hall. Intuitively I lowered to my knees and respectfully approached. With a characteristic firmness that was also caring, he looked at me, raising his chin in acknowledgement, and asked, as if he had been waiting, '*Acalo, tam-mai mai sa-ngop ley?*' (Why are you not peaceful at all?) Defeated, I couldn't actually articulate anything, but I knew he was not angry at me; he was not demanding that I answer. After what seemed like a very long but exquisitely empathic moment, he said to me in carefully practised English, 'You think a lot about Australia', a statement and a question to which I replied, 'Yes it's true.' Then he continued,

'When you think about the future you throw your mindfulness in the dirt.' Another pause. 'When mindfulness is not strong you cannot let go of *arom*.' Then we talked a little more about how I'd been feeling and what to do about it. The Ajahn explained that the mindfulness of a good meditator is usually a nice clean white colour, while the mindfulness of an enlightened being is radiantly clear and impenetrable like a diamond. But when a person is lost in some kind of delusion, mindfulness degenerates to the colour of dirt or mud. After allowing me some time to describe my difficulties of late, this kind and wise teacher assured me that it was ordinary for young monks to experience such things. He then encouraged me very gently to keep to myself for a few days, try to eat lightly and refrain as much as possible from thinking about the future, letting mindfulness re-establish itself.

It was true I had been obsessing about the future, a transgression in the Buddhist sense if ever there was one, particularly for someone who has made a firm resolve to cultivate awareness in the present. But I'd been caught off guard when just a month before I'd found that there was an opportunity to go to Australia and that my family was eager to help with the ticket. I had previously assumed that it would be a few more years before I returned to Australia. As a young monk still learning the ropes, I would ideally choose to stay within the most clear and supportive of contexts. However, the opportunity to return to my country with one of my teachers seemed a blessing too providential to refuse. Now that there was an upcoming travel date to fuel proliferation, I had got lost in remembering, fantasizing and planning. Certainly there were things to think about. I would have to prepare my mind for the change of locations and consider what rules of discipline to brush up on, so that I could maintain my practices while travelling. I would also have to consider my relationship with the members of my family. How should I relate to them? Over the years I'd been fairly diligent

in maintaining correspondence with my family. Basically they had been supportive of my choice to be a monk. My mother gave me her blessing and encouragement before I'd even asked for it. I recollected with affection the words she spoke to me before I last left Australia: 'You seem very happy and the monastery sounds like a safe place. I always knew you'd find what you needed to do with your life. I never knew what you should do, that's why I used to worry about you so much! But I knew you'd find your niche. If you want to become a monk you have my blessing.' Indeed I had the blessing of my parents, for they were happy that I seemed well, but at the same time I sensed an absence of true empathic appreciation. They appeared to be unconcerned about spiritual matters, and even though they were supportive, there was always, perhaps reasonably enough, the lament: 'We're glad that you're happy, but we miss you and it's sad that you have to live so far away.'

At Wat Pah Nanachat a few days before our departure I was meditating alone in the main *sāla*. I had been busy getting things together for my trip, and had decided to take a few quiet moments to collect my mind. When I opened my eyes, a layman approached and said that he wanted to offer me the Buddha statue placed by his side. Saying that the Abbot would be along in ten minutes, I suggested that he wait and offer it to him. He went away for a minute, but then came back and said that he wished to offer it to me, so this time I received it happily. Ironically, this small figure was in the same standing posture as the large Buddha statue in the ceremonial hall where I'd been ordained. I remembered the morning of my ordination in pre-dawn darkness, looking up at an ominous black figure standing with both hands held in the posture named 'holding back the waters'. His arms and hands were straight and taut, with palms exposed in a gesture that seemed to be making a firm command. At that time I had seen the gesture as an emanation of assertive compassion, compelling me to see the importance and

urgency of my opportunities. The figure I held in my hands was a more androgynous and serene one. With both palms held out, he seemed to be saying something more along the lines of, 'Truly I come in absolute peace'. When I showed it to Tan Ajahn Jayasāro, he suggested that I let my parents be its new owners. As I looked at the statue's expression, I had a feeling that my mother would adore it but I wasn't quite sure. It was definitely a religious object, and, as my parents do not profess any faith they might in fact find it objectionable. But I decided to trust my feeling and take it anyway.

On the day of our departure in Bangkok, at the airport moving towards the check-in counter, a robust short-haired woman was vigorously employing her feet to kick and push her backpack along the ground, while heaving another large bag in her arms. I was standing in the queue alongside her with my teacher and three other senior monks. They were quiet and composed in manner. The young woman then began arguing with the delicately mannered Thai assistant behind the counter, in an English that screamed 'Australia!' 'This is the bag I want to take onto the plane.' 'I'm sorry, but it's too big', came the quiet and polite reply. The passenger continued, obstinate and confrontational, 'But they let me take it last time! They did! This same bag! They let me take it last time!' After several more imploring but quiet pleas, the check-in assistant gave in and allowed her to keep the large bag. As a rule Thai people abhor public conflict. At once I felt deeply embarrassed and a terrible sense of trepidation about our journey. The incident reminded me of some of the defects in the character of my countrymen. As I looked to my right I could see a row of monks who had come to bid farewell to their teacher. Their robes were immaculate, their countenance serene; they were sitting together in a neat row, talking quietly among themselves. The contrast created an uneasy tension. I shouldn't have taken it so personally. I should just have accepted things as they were, and taken solace in the equanimity

and wisdom of the other monks and my teacher. But as the only Australian in our group, I felt somehow responsible. We would be flying economy class on Qantas, the Australian national carrier, and I couldn't help worrying that the plane would be full of poorly mannered drunken people who would be rude to my fellow monks. The ground staff were organizing a first-class classification for our luggage and a security escort onto the plane, and I was acutely aware then of the grace, humility and kindness of so many of the Thais.

We were the last passengers to enter the plane, on stopover from London. As we were led through the aisle to our seats, I was struck by the sheer number of big-bodied white people. At the same time I was relieved to see that for the most part they appeared personable and harmless enough. As my anxiety level lowered, I forgivingly remembered that for the most part that is the way Australians are. After sitting down I noticed this was a fascinating realm, caught in limbo, but which in many respects could already be considered part of Australia. The air was thick with a familiar slouching accent and hearty laughter. The airline staff walked swiftly, confidently and heavily up and down the aisles, stopping occasionally to receive loud orders or deliver food and drink with an equally enthusiastic command to enjoy. I must admit I really did enjoy the spectacle, and was surprised by the amount of affection I felt for everyone inside the plane.

In the aircraft my mind at last felt clear and it was easier to feel prepared for the impending change of situation. After four or so hours in the air, the Thai monk next to me said that he would really like to meet the captain and have a look at the cockpit. He'd seen pictures before but never the real thing. Seeing the eager look on his face, I knew I would have to ask one of the cabin crew. 'Why not?' I thought, 'they might just say yes', and so, feeling stupid, I asked. Twenty minutes later there were three Buddhist monks in the cockpit and the one by my side was positively delighted. Rolling 180

degrees before us were scores of magical billowy cumulus clouds, illuminated by the clear blue sky of mid-afternoon. Eager to know how the pilots were trained, the senior monk asked many questions and we were both impressed by their impeccable discipline. The monks drew parallels between the discipline of the pilots and our own training. Much to my surprise, the co-pilot then confessed that he thought he was a Buddhist. Our visit to the cockpit was timely, as the captain announced that in a few minutes we would come to the north-western corner of the Australian continent. Feeling sad for the other two monks, still on the lower level, I asked if it would be possible to send for them. My friends departed, satisfied, and a few minutes later my teacher and another monk were with us in the cockpit. As we approached land I was surprised by an unfamiliar burst of patriotism, as if this really was my country. Through the many windows the view was fantastically clear. A delicate white strip of sand gracefully traced the coastline of the semi-arid ochre-coloured earth, defining it as separate from the huge expanse of ocean directly below. Before us the continent seemed endless, and once over land I was emotional for a different reason. Years ago I had left this country seeking a lifestyle with purpose and an authentic spiritual training. Now I had returned physically, and as I reflected that one of my much-revered teachers was sitting just a little to my left, I felt exultant at such good fortune.

On arriving in Sydney, I was met by my younger by eighteen months brother, and it was weird to look into a face so similar to mine. He was easy in manner and happy to see me, and I felt the same. Over the following few days I had the opportunity to spend some time with both my younger brother and elder sister, who came to visit me at the Thai temple and also took me on a picnic. The talk was mostly about jobs and careers, politics and current affairs. We all felt affection and joy at being able to be with one another after such a long time. Upon returning to the wat however, I felt

a little scattered, and was grateful to participate in the evening chanting and meditation with the resident monks and a few local Thais. Throughout the entire trip the visiting monks were surrounded by the warmth and courtesy of faithful Thai Australians, and were taken on many sight-seeing tours by their eager hosts. In Sydney my Dhamma brothers were as impressed by the clean and free-flowing roadways and the large suburban houses as they were by the Opera House, and the deep harbour and its famous old bridge. Although there were no particular teaching engagements in Sydney, the Thai community truly relished the presence of Tan Ajahn Anan. Some asked questions about meditation practice or inquired about his monastery and our lineage, and several people subsequently made plans to visit and spend some time practising back in Thailand.

From Sydney we drove to Canberra and all, including myself, were awestruck at the vast expanses of pasture lands so sparsely inhabited. Heavy spring showers had turned the land a gorgeous rich green, with large patches of lilac wild flowers. Staying in a Thai monastery once again, we were pleased to see that the Wat in Canberra was very well supported. Each evening a good number of laypeople came to chant, meditate and listen to either a taped Dhamma talk or a teaching by one of the Ajahns. Ajahn Anan gave a teaching on the second evening.

Having been away from Australia for some years, and then returning surrounded by Thais, I felt I could contemplate aspects of the country of my birth with a greater degree of detachment, asking myself such questions as what nationality actually meant. What did it mean to be Australian and what were the core values of this culture? I wasn't looking for answers so much as stimulating reflection. In Canberra, the nation's capital, the War Museum and Parliament House were particularly thought-provoking. In Parliament House, walking through vast rooms and corridors, I wondering whether I

was really close to the heart of Australia, in this place that had cost over a billion (Australian) dollars to build. I was certainly grateful to such an abundant and well-organized society, and all the opportunities it had made available to me. But somehow I felt unmoved. One notable comment by the other English-speaking monk seemed to capture something of my sentiments: 'The design seems to be full of complicated patterns, shapes and angles, but it doesn't seem to be going anywhere or pointing to anything. Like cleverness just for the sake of cleverness.' Admittedly, sitting in the Senate Room and House of Representatives with my teacher was certainly fun, and there is one particular image that I will always remember. There was a curving corridor; large panes of plate glass looked over a perfectly tended garden lawn. Above the mirror-like granite floor hung an impressively lofty roof, emanating soft, even golden light. A huge hand-woven woollen rug with a bold geometric design of black with reds and yellows lay beneath, between two large dark leather sofas. On one of these large sofas I and a Thai layman sat, and sitting alone on the other was my teacher. Amid such contrived beauty, cleanliness and order, the look on my teacher's face was probably that of equanimity, yet that word somehow doesn't capture it – cool, relaxed, detached and unmoved., But the air around him was not a vacuum. He seemed in fact to be making a pronouncement, saying something about where to place one's efforts and attention in order to know what is most worthy of reverence.

In Melbourne we were received by members of the Buddhist Society of Victoria. It was an inspiring sight to see a room full of practising Buddhists of many different ethnic origins. Here in the evenings Tan Ajahn gave several Dhamma teachings followed by questions and answers, all of which were translated. Many practitioners were keen to ask specific questions about their meditation practice, and Tan Ajahn was pleased with their energy and willingness to learn. People stayed for hours listening to the answers to questions and all

the evenings ended quite late. It was a pleasure to be practising the dhammas of listening and meditating among sincere Australians. As most of my Dhamma experience is associated with Thailand, these occasions helped me to feel more the global relevance of the Dhamma, and less isolated from where I had begun my life. Tan Ajahn instructed me that I must practice very hard to develop my skills well, so that I could come back and truly help these people. Although I was flattered by his faith in me, I was more than a little daunted by the prospect.

After four days in Melbourne it was time for me to separate from my teacher. He and the others would stay on there for a while and then fly to our branch monastery in Perth. I would go alone to Sydney, travelling to the Blue Mountains to spend a few days with my elder sister and her children. From there I would go back to Sydney to meet one of the monks and we would fly to Brisbane together. Having a friend who was a monk as my companion would be a valuable support, and I felt lucky that he had been willing to meet up with me again. After performing the ceremony for asking forgiveness, I asked Tan Ajahn Anan if he had any advice. He simply answered that I should take care of my heart and mind. We were drinking afternoon tea when a kind Sri Lankan doctor arrived to pick me up. As I drank the last few mouthfuls of tea, I became aware that I was suddenly feeling very vulnerable. Moments later I noticed a distinct lightness in my heart. The feeling grew, my face smiled broadly as if of its own will and I was left feeling supported and safe. I realized that my teacher was radiating loving-kindness toward me, a highly developed ability for which Tan Ajahn Anan is renowned.

Away from my teacher and the Thais who surrounded him like a comforting universe, it was interesting to see that I did feel a little less safe and confident. However, having a few days alone in Sydney was relevant to my experience of going home. It was like going on a pilgrimage into my past. As a young adult these streets were

the backdrop of my life, and I was keen to walk them alone, to observe my thoughts and notice if there had been any changes. With nothing but my robe and the underground ticket offered by a lay supporter, I walked down the main street of the central business and shopping district. Observing people's faces, I could remember the way I used to live my life and the thoughts I used to think. Most people looked physically healthy but distracted and tense, in a hurry. While walking along the street I was determined to think thoughts of kindness and keep in mind my faith in the Buddha's teaching. Although I was a little fearful, it was interesting to see that among all the varied inner-city subcultures, there were very few comments, sneers or noticeable reactions to my presence. I had wondered if people would move away or be uncomfortable standing close to me at traffic lights or while waiting on the train platform. Repeatedly people stopped close by and seemed quite at ease, so much so that my faith in the human capacity to sense a commitment to harmlessness grew. Towards the end of my urban pilgrimage, an elderly Aboriginal woman caught my attention. She was sitting on a park bench outside the Town Hall, by the entrance to the underground. As I walked towards the stairs, she looked me briefly in the eyes, then raised her joined hands to her forehead in the traditional Buddhist gesture of respect. I felt as though I'd been blessed by a true native elder. This incident touched me profoundly, as it was so completely unexpected. I looked her in the eyes with tremendous appreciation, and I'm sure she began to blush.

Visiting my elder sister in the Blue Mountains entailed a significant shift in modes of relating. I was glad that I'd had a few weeks to adjust to being busier and talking more. It was also interesting that for this leg of the journey I was not accompanied by any other monks. My sister's ten-year-old son fulfilled the Vinaya requirement for the presence of another male, creating a lot of space for spending very natural time talking in her home. Before living

overseas I had been especially close to this sister. Dianne trained as a nurse and a midwife, and had also travelled through Asia as a backpacker in her mid-twenties. With the arrival of three delightful children she had ceased caring for other people's babies to pay attention to her own. She has a love of good natural food, yoga, alternative medicine and Asian arts. We always got on well together. After living for a year or so in Thailand, my sister fell out with her husband and a long and painful separation ensued, complete with custody battles and ugly court cases. That time in Thailand was difficult for me too. I wanted to be physically and emotionally present for my sister and her children. Feelings of love and guilt often tugged at my heart. I'm quite sure that had the difficulties begun before my departure, I wouldn't have left such a situation. As it happened, though, I'd relinquished all my possessions and was already wearing the *sāmaṇera's* robe when the news reached me.

Seeing Dianne waiting on the train platform with her beautiful fairy-like three-year-old daughter, I was relieved to notice that she was radiant with life. I still remember her first few words: 'God look at you! You look great... I suppose I can't give you a hug? ... How strange! ... Oh well, doesn't matter! ... Wow, it's great to see you... The colour of your robe is beautiful, so earthy and natural.' When I explained to her that the dye was handmade from boiled-down heartwood, she was overjoyed and started telling me how she had begun taking African drumming classes, and that the drums were carved from the heartwood of big old mango trees. Later she admired the handiwork of my crochet bowl cover and hand-made monk's umbrella. Things settled into a new kind of order. My sister and her children were quite well, indeed, all having a lot of fun. The new house they were renting was perched on a small hill which backed directly onto an expansive area of undulating ranges, carpeted in a reserve of native Australian bush. The forest was a beautiful backdrop to our many long conversations. It was

a relief to be able finally to listen, to hear the many details of the past years of struggle, to encourage her in maintaining a generous heart and in learning to forgive, a process in which she was already well established. She and her children performed a show of tribal rhythms and dance on their drums, and Dianne later played some songs on the piano, the very songs she used to rehearse in our family home and to which I would wake up as a five-year-old all those years ago. Admittedly these were strange activities to be participating in as a monk, yet in such a context they seemed harmless enough.

I also visited my niece's and nephew's school classes and gave a talk about the lifestyle of forest monks. Happily, the schoolchildren were attracted by the forest monk uncle, asking many questions about my daily routine, meditation and Thai culture. Some curious questions were put to me: 'Can you make yourself float up in the air?' 'I know you can't eat at night, but if you're really hungry can't you just have some crackers or something?' They were amazed when I explained that I didn't have a refrigerator or cupboard, or even electricity. On both occasions I left classrooms hearing such exclamations as: 'That's what I'm gonna do. When I grow up, I'm gonna be a monk!' I had intended these talks to be a gift to my young niece and nephew, to show them that although I lived far away, I still cared for them. There had been some reservations in my mind, however, as I was not sure that such exotic spirituality would be appreciated by all. The fears were unfounded. When I asked my nephew whether any of the kids thought I was weird, he answered, 'Nuh... They all thought you were cool!'

A monk companion met me for the flight between Sydney and Brisbane, which was probably the tensest time during my travels in Australia. When, a person is propelled several hundred miles in a few minutes and thousands of feet above the ground from where a life was recently being conducted, I expect it is normal to become very circumspect. I thought a lot during that flight. Now that after

so many phone-calls I would really be meeting my parents and again staying in their home, the nagging little thoughts which had been lingering in the recesses of the mind came clearly into view and expressed themselves: 'I do live a long way away ... A son being a Buddhist monk would be challenging to most conservative parents ... Maybe they've been pretending to be supportive out of fear of estrangement ... Maybe the truth is that they have many reservations, and once I am again within their sphere of influence they will be angry or possessive.' As I mused over the possibilities, I laughed to reflect that they probably had uneasy thoughts themselves: 'He might be demanding or difficult to take care of ... Maybe he will try to convert us! ... Maybe he'll just want to meditate and be by himself all the time.' Remembering the small Buddha statue, I recollected his message and reminded myself that I was also coming in peace. Foremost in my mind was that we should all have a pleasant and relaxed time, to be remembered happily. I had already decided not to try to teach my parents anything about Buddhist spirituality unless they asked out of their own interest. I hoped this attitude would make them feel open and unthreatened.

But even with such a sure game-plan, the nervousness persisted. As we started to descend, I decided that there was nothing to do but let go of wanting to control and be with the anxious, gurgly feelings in the stomach. It would be how it would be, I'd done everything I could to try to set things up right. On landing I asked my friend to wait a minute so that we could leave last and take things slowly. Walking down the connecting corridor between aircraft and terminal I was embraced by an amazing sense of familiarity. The weather in the other cities we'd visited recently had been surprisingly cool to our seasoned tropical bodies. Brisbane, an hour south of my parents' house, is notably subtropical. It is the region where I spent my childhood, and though I could not say exactly what they were, the very air seemed pungent with familiar smells.

Reaching the end of the corridor and seeing my mother and father, I noticed that they looked older than I remembered, but I was glad to see such big smiles and joyful light streaming from their eyes. My father moved forward as though he were about to embrace me. Slowing a little, I looked at him firmly – they had promised to save their hugs for once we got home. As I took the last few deliberate steps, he responded to my hesitation with a hearty, 'You're my son, I haven't seen you for a long time and I'm gonna give you a hug.' In his strong embrace I felt humbled, childlike, with a disarming kind of happiness. Concerned thoughts whispered in the back of my mind: 'He hasn't honoured my wishes to be discreet and restrained. He's not going to respect the boundaries that a monk needs to maintain.' Gently I pushed the thoughts aside. For a sixty-year-old Caucasian man to publicly hug another man, shaven-headed and clad in religious robes, seemed a gesture too beautiful to be censured. There was also a feeling of acceptance. The boldness of his affection signalled that he had indeed respected my decisions. By his side, my mother smiled a little awkwardly but didn't express any demands for physical affection. I introduced them both to Tan Neng, the monk who had accompanied me, and then presented my mother with the gift which I had carefully wrapped myself. She gazed at the black and gold paper, testing the weight in her hand and I caught a sparkle in her eye – my mother always loved gifts! My father insisted on helping with the bags, saying: 'When you didn't come with the others, I thought, "Uh-oh! He's missed the plane"... When we saw you walking down you did look very peaceful. You look healthy but you seem to have lost some weight.'

In the car my mother opened her gift. 'She's beautiful', she exclaimed, then kissed the statue and held it to her breast. I explained that it was an image of the Lord Buddha, and that it would probably be best if she didn't kiss it. My mother promised that she would find a nice place for it in the living room. In the company of

a Thai *bhikkhu* I was embarrassed by my parents' lack of familiarity with Buddhist customs, but happy that they appreciated the gift. Things went well at my parents' house. Although Tan Neng and I continued to eat our main meal from our alms bowls alone on the veranda, Ajahn Jayasāro had given special permission to have breakfast with my parents, to enjoy a casual time for chatting. There were many simple joys to rediscover: looking at childhood photographs, eating favourite foods specially home-cooked, walking through the local forest reserves. And after discussing at length what would be a most suitable and practical gift in the future, I drew a pattern and taught my mother how to sew the monk's lower robe.

One day, after about a week or so with my parents, Tan Neng and I spent the day at a meditation centre in the Tibetan tradition and my father came to pick us up. Much to my astonishment, a little more than halfway home, I caught myself speaking to my father in a sharp and angry voice. He'd said something about some of my habits in adolescence, and an unexpected ball of fire began flaring in my abdomen. Do parents have a special gift for poking the most sensitive spots in their children's hearts? I implored myself to abide with the feeling and contain it skilfully, hoping that my father wouldn't say anything else to exacerbate the situation, but inevitably he did and out flew my grievances. In his eyes I had been in some ways an obnoxious teenage son. To me he had appeared in some respects to be a distant man who could have paid his children a little more attention. Was there any point to discussing these things after so long? Sitting in the strained silence afterwards, I was sure the rest of my stay would be tainted by this unfortunate outburst and couldn't help feeling sad.

Returning to Thailand for a moment, in the forest monasteries one finds oneself with many hours to consider things deeply, to investigate affections and disaffections and the layers and aspects of attachments as they present themselves. I must have asked myself

a hundred times what I missed about Australia, and was frequently surprised to find that except for a few close relationships, I didn't really miss much. It seems that once we've firmly established new habits and a new lifestyle, old memories and old habits slowly fade, and unless deliberately recollected become increasingly distant. But one memory that would always assert itself hauntingly was that of the beach and the ocean. I spent my entire childhood and early adult life within a short distance of the deep blue Pacific. Along the entire east coast, from spring through autumn the water is cool but not really cold, and when people go to the beach it may be for a half-day or indeed an entire day. A day at the beach is an Australian institution, and if the sun is shining there are always as many people in the water as there are on the sand. The surf of the east coast had received me in its waters on thousands of occasions over many years, propelling me between waves, pummelling my body or allowing me to float out past the breakers, stilled by the sheer immensity below, around and beyond. The ocean seemed to possess an awesome power, being capable of empathizing with anything that I could feel, offering a watery cushion between myself and the demands of living back in the shore-bound world. Once I entered the sea, hours could go by before I returned from this watery other-world. I was never a surfer, but for as long as I can remember I was a swimmer. Sometimes in the dry or hot seasons in Thailand my body would lament and grieve, aching for the temporary respite that can be had in the Pacific.

During my trip to Australia I had several opportunities to visit the ocean. One time in particular was especially magical. It was the weekend and I was walking along the beach with my father. The terrible feelings from the incident in the car seemed to have evaporated. Surprisingly, what had appeared to be a disaster had triggered a warm opening in my father's heart. Perhaps it was wisdom coming from age, or perhaps it was my long absence and

impending departure that stimulated a kind of urgency in him. His past habit would have been to talk little if at all about such tension, but this time he wanted to discuss things, with an interest in the details. What ensued were several beautiful conversations and an opportunity to learn many unknown things about one another. On this fantastically bright day my father was wearing his swimming trunks, I was wearing my robe and my twin brother had lent me his sunglasses. We walked for many minutes along an endless beach, and then turned round to enjoy the long walk back. The smell of the salt air, the tumbling roar of the waves and my father by my side engendered an exquisite sense of reunion. Our discussions led us to the place where I could lovingly acknowledge my father's honourable qualities. Walking over the silk-like sand we discussed each other's good qualities, with the sky above a clear and brilliant blue and the ocean beneath it darker, rich and deep. Hearing about my father's own experiences with his father and teachers, I felt sure he had done a better job than the examples given him. Learning about his past opened up a space in my mind which placed him in a larger context. Aware of my pain and his pain, I experienced a vast sense of empathy and wondered if there were ever a father and son who did not feel such things. As we approached our spot on the sand, my sun-bronzed twin brother who had driven up for the weekend waved from his beach towel, pleased to see us together.

The remaining few days went by easily. On the last day we performed a small ceremony where my parents formally offered me a new lower robe. I had drawn the pattern, my mother had sewn the fabric and my father had helped with the dyeing. On the way to the airport we visited the memorial where my grandmother's cremated remains were stored and I recited some funeral chants. I had been unable to come to her funeral, so this was a kind of symbolic goodbye and it felt good to be able to offer the chanting.

Once again in an airport, another neat expensive new building of

well-considered design, sitting in large comfortable chairs arranged around a coffee table to give the sense of lounge-room intimacy, my family and I drank some 'goodbye espresso'. Brisbane Airport is a large cube-like open space, with veritable walls of glass and huge skylights which nourish the fully grown palm trees that towered around us inside. The polished marble and chrome and the sophisticated displays of the duty-free shops gave the place the air more of a modern art gallery than a transit centre. The monk who had accompanied me earlier had left for Bangkok a week before. After five weeks in Australia I felt markedly out of place sitting there. My father and elder brother were talking about car insurance, my twin brother was exploring the options for rust-proofing his new four-wheel drive, while my sister-in-law was complaining that her work was boring. Nervous and self-conscious, I reacted to my family's discussions by feeling impatient. I was guilty of indignation and could fairly have been accused of having judgemental and critical thoughts. At this and other times during the preceding weeks I had felt exasperated by the nature of some of the conversation from the members of my family. It would have been nice had that not been so, as that would have been most comfortable. But there were times when I was confounded by what appeared to me to be my family's disinterest in engaging their experience of life with integrity. I had to remind myself several times to see things in a suitable context.

As a member of a community of dedicated contemplatives, I had begun to take the qualities of meditation and frank investigation for granted. If you were to define a religious life by the qualities of honesty, morality and generosity, then the members of my family are in fact quite religious. I had to remember simply to be grateful for the Sangha back in Thailand, to recognize that they were people dedicated to spiritual cultivation and to respect the members of my family for the decent people that they are. I should add, however, that at times my critical thoughts were not based in negativity.

As an observer I could see that some of my family's habits were bringing them more pain and danger than happiness. When these came up in conversation I wanted to interject. More often than not, however, I bit my tongue, as I know that people must feel a lot of trust and be in an open, willing frame of mind before criticisms can be skilfully received.

Now at the airport, my frustrations were running high. Within minutes I would have to leave them once again, and somehow it seemed important to say something of integrity. Deciding there was little to lose, I interrupted the flow and announced that I needed to say something: 'Mother, father, thank you very much for looking after me and making my visit comfortable and enjoyable. I really am grateful and impressed with the way you made so much effort and took so much time for me. If there's anything that I said or did that was inappropriate, please forgive me. And if there was anything that I didn't say or do which I should have, please forgive that also.' 'No, it was great having you here, mate!' said my father, while my mother looked at me in a moment of uncharacteristically intense concentration, and said all of a sudden, 'And will you please forgive me?' The look in her eyes was surprisingly emotional. As I expect is the case for everyone, my mother and I have had our share of confusion and pain. As an adult and as a meditator, one who has had ample time to notice his own shortcomings and human fallibility more and more, I have grown to appreciate both my parents more and more and to feel very much at peace with them. The past ten or so days had been very pleasant and it seemed there was no particular 'thing' to forgive. But I felt I knew somehow what she was saying. When separated from loved ones by large distances and time, it is normal to ask oneself such questions as, 'Did I do something wrong for them to want to stay away?'; or to have worrying thoughts like, 'Maybe I shouldn't have said those things in the past', or 'Maybe I should have done more or given more.'

These thoughts had occasionally been in my mind in Thailand. Being close to each other and allowing the worries a moment of acknowledgement seemed important. It was with earnest sincerity and much relief that I could look into her caring eyes and truthfully say, 'I forgive you.' I could have said much more, but that phrase seemed to say just enough.

Both my parents are over sixty years old now and they are in some respects creatures of habit. We have discussed the possibility of their coming to visit me in Thailand, and although they try to sound willing, I sense that perhaps they're just not that adventurous. Sadly, it may once again be years before I see them. Indeed, as the Buddha encourages us to consider, one or all of us may pass away, so this might have been our last opportunity to see each other. It may sound precious or excessive, but it was important to give them these messages and to let them know, 'I really am OK with you people. I care for you, and when I think of you it will be kindly.' The sudden shift to frankness and resolution left me feeling a little bewildered. And then it was time to go. My father followed me to the escalator and insisted upon another hug. Alone with him at the top of the escalator, I felt something very consciously for the first time: that I was a man just as he was a man. Indeed, I actually stood a little taller than he. There was an uncanny sense of mutual respect and separateness, yet at the same time I felt closer to him than I ever had before.

Going down the escalator and through customs wearing my new lower robe, I was quite astonished by the sense that things had gone wonderfully, that in fact I couldn't have hoped for a more positive visit. There were many events that I could later share with my teachers and the other monks. Tan Ajahn Anan had been very supportive of this visit with my family. I would tell him how my mother had decided to offer the Buddha statue flowers fresh from her own garden whenever she was thinking about me, so that she

could feel that she was giving something instead of just worrying.

Once a person has taken the mendicant's vows, the question of exactly where home is becomes primary. For me, though, I suppose home is the place that I miss most. After five weeks in Australia, my years in Thailand had begun to feel like a short vacation I'd had years ago. Although I'd had many pleasant experiences and met many good people, I was missing the quiet of the forest monasteries. I missed my Dhamma brothers and the simplicity and clarity that come from monastic routine. After having such a pleasant time with the members of my family, I anticipated that perhaps upon returning to Thailand I would feel even more at ease. After coming home, I felt that I could once again go home.

About the Author

As well as living in Thailand, Tan Acalo went on to spend time with Tan Ajahn Pasanno at the then recently-established Abhayagiri Monastery in California, and with Luang Por Sumedho at Amaravati Monastery in England. Following his fifth Rains he went to live in Wat Marb Jan, to continue his training with Ajahn Anan for a few years. After more time in the UK and then in Melbourne, where he spent the Vassa with Ajahn Kalyāṇo, he returned to Thailand, where following the 2010 Rains Retreat he was invited to take up residence on a piece of land in the beautiful hills of Petchaboon Province, starting Ānandagiri Forest Monastery which nestles at a meeting point between central, northern and north-east Thailand.

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TWO MONTHS AT WAT PAH BAAN TAAD

Tan Yātiko

An account of a period practising at the monastery of Tan Ajahn Mahā Boowa.

Mosquito repellent? Check. Ground sheet? Check. Road map of Isan? Check. Spare flashlight batteries? Check. Water filter? Check. Candle lantern? Check.

So I was packed and ready for my upcoming *tudong*. I had decided that I would start from Wat Pah Baan Taad, the famous monastery of Ajahn Mahā Boowa, and from there walk through much of the province of Udorn Thani in the north-east of Thailand. My plan was pretty loose, if you wanted to call it a plan. I would keep my ears open for tips on good teachers and monasteries in the area that monks would recommend. It would be my first real *tudong* on my own, and I was looking forward to the adventure and the uncertainty that *tudong* would be sure to offer.

The *tudong*, however, never even began.

I remember going to Ajahn Paññāvaddho's *kuṭī* the day after I arrived at Wat Pah Baan Taad to introduce myself and ask permission to stay. Ajahn Paññāvaddho is a senior English monk of over forty rains and is in charge of the practical running of the monas-

tery, while Luang Por Mahā Boowa occupies his time in receiving guests and teaching. Ajahn Paññāvaddho's *kuṭī* is a simple wooden structure in the forest, built on concrete posts about four feet high. Inside it is perhaps some ten by ten feet, and it has a rectangular porch out front, large enough to seat four or five people. Just in front of this old well-worn *kuṭī* is a sandy meditation path that stretches some eighteen paces, shaded by the shadow cast by a tall wooden pole. Ajahn Paññāvaddho's solar panel, which he uses to recharge batteries and run his water heater, is secured atop the pole. I coughed as I entered the sandy yard, and when he invited me up I ascended the *kuṭī* steps and saw him sitting on the step between the *kuṭī* door and the porch, with knees up near his chest and his elbows on his knees.

I felt immediate affection for Ajahn Paññāvaddho. His gentle old eyes glowed at me as I bowed to pay my respects, and his informal greeting, 'So, how's it going?' quickly made me feel at ease. I explained to him that I wanted to spend a few nights at the monastery, pay respects to Ajahn Mahā Boowa and then head off on my *tudong* trip through the province of Udorn Thani. Ajahn Mahā Boowa, he told me, had gone away to Bangkok until New Year, still two weeks away, but I would be welcome to stay until he came back. Well, it wasn't what I had planned, but I thought that this would be an ideal opportunity to spend some time at the monastery and receive some teachings from Ajahn Paññāvaddho. Besides, after Ajahn Mahā Boowa came back I could just carry on with my *tudong* as I had planned. So I decided to stay on till Ajahn Mahā Boowa returned.

That afternoon Ajahn Paññāvaddho took me personally around the monastery. It's a fairly small place, maybe some 200 acres in area, and with a forbidding chicken population one's first impression is that it's a rather unlikely place to come and calm your nerves. Within the monastery confines there are about forty little shelters,

mostly open-air wooden platforms with iron roofing, and a handful of larger *kuṭīs*. He took me to one of the *kuṭīs* which had recently been evacuated by one of the senior monks, and suggested I sweep around the *kuṭī* and spend the day meditating. With the monastery being about as peaceful as a chicken-farm, and with Ajahn Mahā Boowa's current fund-raising programme to help the country out of its financial crisis (he had then raised over a billion Thai Baht as an offering to the National Reserve), I wasn't expecting much out of my meditation. I prefer the silence of caves to the clucking of chickens and I have always been sensitive to noise when I sit. But quite unexpectedly, I found that as I sat in my hut my mind felt brighter and stronger than usual. 'Must be a fluke,' I thought to myself. But no, there was no denying it, after a few days I found that my meditations had improved; I was feeling much more focused. I mentioned this to Ajahn Paññāvaddho, and he said it was the power of living in Ajahn Mahā Boowa's monastery. 'He's a special man', he said with an air of understatement, 'and that's why your meditation is going so well here. Living under a teacher like Luang Por is a critical part of the practice.'

Well, I'm not so sure that just being there had any magical influence, but it's certainly true that I took to reading Ajahn Mahā Boowa's talks like never before, and I felt a confidence in the tradition and in the man that surprised even me. Being in the presence of a realized being helps one to know that this is not a path 'I' am walking on, and one for which 'I' must have the qualifications to succeed, but rather that the path is a simple cause and effect process. Just as any one of these realized masters was once as deluded and self-centred as I am now, so too can this set of five *khandhas* one day be as free of suffering and delusion as theirs.

Afternoon tea would take place at the dyeing shed shortly after 1 p.m., and then I would have the chance to ask questions about Dhamma. During my stay there I had many inspiring conversations

with Ajahn Paññāvaddho over a hot drink. A small handful of Westerners would gather round outside the shed and squat down on tiny five inch-high wooden stools. One of the resident monks would make Ajahn Paññāvaddho's usual, a cup of black unsweetened Earl Grey, and would make me a cup of black coffee. I'd set my stool on the dusty soil to the left of Ajahn Paññāvaddho, while a dachshund, a poodle and a few cheerful dalmatians would playfully compete for our attention around the shed. As the conversations evolved, almost invariably the talk would turn to or at least encompass Dhamma.

Often when talking Dhamma with someone it's not so much the content of what is said that educates, but rather the way a point is made, fashioned exactly to illuminate an aspect of practice you may have overlooked or forgotten. Ajahn Paññāvaddho had that valuable knack of being able to offer a pointful reflection on any given topic of Dhamma that one might raise. I described to him once how my meditation was losing some of its sense of direction and my mind was beginning to wander again. Ajahn Paññāvaddho's response was almost uncannily fitting. He told me that whatever we do in meditation, the main point is to undermine the defilements. That's it. Simple words, nothing I couldn't have thought of myself, but their simplicity and directness gave me a new outlook on meditation and I found that my sittings improved. I noticed that I had been getting bogged down with techniques and strategies, without focusing on the actual purpose. A good teacher is one who can notice these subtleties in a student and point them out.

That being the case however, the most educative thing about being with Ajahn Paññāvaddho was just his relaxed and mild presence. He was a man with nothing to prove to anyone, and he was not out to convince me of anything. One point he would often make was that a meditator has to have *samādhi* before he can get very far with *vipassanā*. 'Without *samādhi*', he'd say with a gentle authority, 'it's

unlikely that one will have the emotional maturity to deal skilfully with profound insights. When deep insights occur, one can be left with the sense that there is no place for the mind to stand, and this can be very unsettling. When one has *samādhi*, one has a comfortable abiding and one has the freedom to ease into one's insights with skill.' I then asked, 'What about the need for *jhāna* on the path? Do you feel it's necessary to have *jhāna*?' A reserved look appeared on his wrinkled face, and in his soft voice he explained, 'The thing is that people will often talk about *jhāna* without knowing what it really is. Ajahn Mahā Boowa prefers to use the word *samādhi*. We need *samādhi*, and the more we have the better, but we must not neglect our investigation.'

One of the practice techniques that is often encouraged by the forest Ajahns is the investigation of the body. This practice will involve visualizing a part of the body, focusing on it and studying it, so as to achieve a soothing and dispassionate calm and counterbalance an underlying infatuation with the body that lies within the unenlightened mind. It is a practice which for those unacquainted with Buddhism is often unpalatable and hard to understand. Ever since I ordained I had had a chronic avoidance of this technique and I asked the Ajahn about it. He said that the fact that I avoided it probably showed there was much for me to learn in that area: 'That's your front line of investigation.' He went on to say, 'Why do you think you are so hesitant to pick up this practice? I'm not saying it is necessarily an appropriate meditation theme for you to work with simply because you are resistant to it, only that you should at the very least understand the nature of that resistance before you just go ahead and believe in it.' So I looked at the resistance deeply and found it hard to see exactly what it was all about. After a few weeks of being in the monastery and taking up a considerable amount of contemplation of the body as my meditation theme, I began to feel a certain weariness with it, and felt a kind of depression coming

up. I told this to Ajahn Paññāvaddho. He smiled knowingly and shook his head as if to say, 'Yup, that makes sense', and explained, 'Yes, this can happen to some people if they are doing a lot of body contemplation. It can feel disappointing if you suddenly start to see the reality of the body's unattractiveness and impermanence. After all, most of us have been running around glorifying it for lifetimes.'

I sat and listened to what the Ajahn was saying, somehow sensing that the truths that he was talking about weren't sinking in. I tried to force myself to believe what he was saying, but found that I couldn't. And yet I trusted the man and I trusted in the truths of which he was speaking. In the end I found myself stuck between a reality I couldn't accept and a trust I couldn't deny. I asked him how I should proceed if I found this kind of meditation left me feeling a bit down. His answer was reassuring. He said I shouldn't force it and that it was important to balance this meditation technique with other techniques that I found uplifting. For years one of my major meditation themes had been contemplation of the Buddha, something that always brought me great joy. I told this to Ajahn Paññāvaddho and he said that it would be an excellent counterpart to body contemplation.

While at Wat Pah Baan Taad I actually had very little contact with Ajahn Mahā Boowa himself. He kept quite aloof from the monks and gave more attention to the laity. I remember that a few days after he had returned from Bangkok, word went round that he would be giving a talk at the dyeing shed that night at eight o'clock. 'That must be nice', I thought to myself. I imagined the group of monks gathering around Luang Por in the cool of a chilly Isan night, warmed by a fire lit in the wood stove, listening to stirring personal Dhamma from the master himself. Not quite. I approached the dyeing shed around five minutes to eight and saw Ajahn Mahā Boowa studying some newspaper clippings that had been posted on the wall of the shed. There wasn't a soul around and I thought to

myself, 'What an opportunity to approach Ajahn Mahā Boowa and say a few words!' So I somewhat meekly approached Luang Por, holding my hands up in the traditional gesture of respect, when suddenly from out of the shadows of the night appeared a nervous young monk, tugging at my robes and, whispering in Thai, 'Come here! Come here!' gesturing me to steal away behind a pile of buckets and squat down. As we squatted there in the silence with eyes glued to the Ajahn, I noticed that to my left behind the water tank another shadowy figure was squatting, and then to my right, closer to the wood stove, was another one. This one had a pair of headphones on, and some electronic gadgetry with little red LED indicators that danced up and down to the crackle of the fire. He reminded me of some FBI agent or private eye. In fact the whole scene was a kind of *déjà vu* of some half-forgotten memory from high school. I was both amused and confused, and it took more than a few seconds to realize what was going on. Ajahn Mahā Boowa wasn't giving a talk to the monks, he was giving a talk to a certain layperson, and the resident monks were gathering around in the dark to hear and even tape the conversation.

It was strange. I didn't understand. Why was Ajahn Mahā Boowa so aloof from the monks? He was known for his uncompromising strictness and his readiness to scold, and I found it hard to understand to what purpose. Was this really coming from a heart of *mettā*? As with any situation one wants to understand, one has to understand it from within its own context. It wasn't until I had stayed there for several weeks that I began to get a feeling for how Ajahn Mahā Boowa motivates his monks. It isn't through playing the charming, soft, lovable role of a guru. He does not become informal with any of his disciples, and this serves to establish a very specific role in their relationship which is felt and understood by those who practice under him, but may not be felt and understood by newcomers. It was obvious that Ajahn Mahā Boowa cares for

the monks, he cares for the world, he cares for the religion, and he sees the sincere practice of monks and nuns as an immeasurable contribution to the virtue in the world. He wants to protect the high standards of Dhamma and his life is dedicated to that valuable end:

'Don't waste your time letting any job become an obstacle, because for the most part exterior work is work that destroys your work at mental development ... These sorts of things clutter up the religion and the lives of the monks, so I ask that you not think of getting involved in them.'

For Ajahn Mahā Boowa the role of monastics is clearly defined. He says it is those who have gone forth who are the '... important factors that can make the religion prosper and serve as witnesses [of the Dhamma] to the people who become involved with it, for the sake of all things meritorious and auspicious ...' It is the monastics who preserve the actual teachings through their practice, and it is the teaching which will help promote goodness and virtues in all those who come in contact with it and take an interest in it.

It seems that one of the dangers he sees for monks is over-association with laypeople. Particularly in a country like Thailand, where so many of the population have great faith and respect, I think he sees that respect as a possible source of corruption for monks. Maybe that is partly why he doesn't seem to over-value impressing laypeople with politeness. He shows no interest in receiving respect for mere social niceties, and when he teaches the monks he warns them of the danger: 'No matter how many people come to respect us, that's their business. In practising the Dhamma we should be aware of that sort of thing, because it is a concern and a distraction, an inconvenience in the practice. We shouldn't get involved in anything except the contact between the heart and the Dhamma at all times. That's what is appropriate for us...'

In one of his talks he tells a story about a childhood experience. It

seems his father was a short-tempered man, and one day during the evening meal his father began to turn on him and his brothers: 'You're all a bunch of cow manure. All of you. I don't see a single one of you who is going to ordain as a monk and make something of yourself... none of you except maybe... Boowa over there. He might have what it takes... but other than him, you're all a bunch of cow manure, you'll never come to anything.' The scrawny little Boowa was so shaken by this first and only 'compliment' from his father that he got up from the meal and ran out of the house with tears welling up in his eyes. He leant up against one of the water tanks with his head on his arm, trying to collect his emotions and thoughts. There was no denying the feelings rushing through him. His fate had been sealed. 'It's decided,' he felt in the pit of his stomach, 'I'll be a monk, and if I'm going to be a monk, I'll do it right. I'll spend however long it takes to pass the third grade of Pāli studies and then I'll go off to the mountains and spend my life meditating.'

And that's exactly what he did. It's perhaps this determined nature that comes across most clearly in his talks, and it is what he seeks to cultivate in his disciples. He makes frequent references to the need for whole-heartedness in one's practice and candidly recounts his own attitude as a young monk: 'From the very start of my practice, I was really in earnest, because that's the sort of person I was. I wouldn't just play around. Wherever I would take my stance, that's how it would have to be. When I set out to practice, I had only one book, the Pāṭimokkha, in my shoulder-bag. Now I was going for the full path and full results. I was going to give it my all, give it my life. I was going to hope for nothing but release from suffering.'

He is uncompromising in the teaching and devotes a large part of its contents to the dangers of being consumed by the changes of modern society and all its trappings. I have heard the occasional person comment that Ajahn Mahā Boowa is old-fashioned. I consider the comment misses the point of Dhamma practice. Yes, he

keeps to most of the old traditions and may not be in touch with the younger generation and where they are, but that means we must use our own wisdom to unearth where he is and learn from that. There is a well-spring of wisdom in the forest tradition which people are liable to overlook because it doesn't answer their questions in the way they hope. Ajahn Mahā Boowa is not interested in dressing up the Dhamma to make it tastier medicine to swallow, and this may make him distasteful to the modern spiritual seeker. But what he does teach is powerful and transformative for those who are willing to commit themselves to it.

One of his constant refrains to monks is to seek out the forests, the hills, the lonely places, and meditate. Distractions not only interfere with our cultivation of meditation; more seriously, they can delude us into taking the worthwhile for worthless and the worthless for worthwhile. Computers, books, worldly conversation – it's not so much that he sees them as bad in themselves, but he does see them as great dangers to meditating *samaṇas* and puts them in their proper perspective. Regarding material society, Ajahn Mahā Boowa says:

'We've gone way out of bounds. We say we've progressed, that we're advanced and civilized, but if we get so reckless and carried away with the world that we don't give a thought to what's reasonable, noble, or right, then the material progress of the world will simply become a fire with which we burn one another and we won't have a world left to live in.'

And elsewhere he suggests:

'The teachings of the religion are an important means for putting ourselves in order as good people living in happiness and peace. If you lack moral virtue, then even if you search for happiness until the day you die, you'll never find it. Instead you'll find nothing but suffering and discontent.'

While there is almost certainly no forest monastery in Thailand that could bring in anywhere near as much money as Wat Pah Baan Taad, Ajahn Mahā Boowa still lives in a simple wooden hut. As he approaches his late eighties he still eats at only one sitting. His monastery still has no electricity running into it (though generators are used for certain things), and thus the monks clean the Dhamma-hall by the light of candle lanterns. Apparently the King of Thailand has repeatedly offered to build a new modern Dhamma-hall for the monastery, but Ajahn Mahā Boowa has insisted on keeping the original old wooden structure in use. So in a sense he is a bit old-fashioned; he's certainly not intoxicated with progress and development, because he sees virtue and insight as the most significant factors in peace and happiness.

When I first arrived at the monastery I was not without some critical feelings. I wondered if there might not be a better system of running a monastery than having hundreds of laypeople donating food to a monk who was in the midst of receiving his fifteenth bowl-full that morning. But when I looked closer, when I looked from within, I could see that Ajahn Mahā Boowa is operating from a fundamental premise that nothing has more value than the Dhamma, and indeed that its value is immeasurable. That's what the fault-finding mind tends to forget. I would become frustrated with the speed with which the monks there ate or their style of going on alms-round (they walk very fast), because I failed to remember that behind all this, in the backdrop, is an enlightened mind which is creating the conditions for profound transformation within individual minds. In one of his Dhamma talks Ajahn Mahā Boowa says the happiness of the world is like the happiness of a prisoner, and the happiness that comes from Dhamma is like the happiness of freedom:

'[As we practice] the happiness that comes from the outside world – in other words, from the current of the Dhamma seeping into our heart – we begin to see, step by step, enough to make com-

parisons. We see the outside world, the inside world, their benefits and drawbacks. When we take them and compare them, we gain an even greater understanding – plus greater persistence, greater stamina ... The more peace we obtain, the greater the exertion we make. Mindfulness and wisdom gradually appear. We see the harm of the tyranny and the oppressions imposed by the defilements in the heart. We see the value of the Dhamma, which is a means of liberation. The more it frees us, the more ease we feel in the heart. Respite. Relief.'

That's what it all comes down to. He wants his monks and lay supporters to practice. And when I read one of his books or listen to one of his talks I can sense the intelligence that goes into them, and the will that is doing part of the work for me by inspiring me and instructing me.

When the time came for me to leave Ajahn Mahā Boowa's monastery, I felt richer and more connected to the forest tradition. For three or four years I had had a strong appreciation of the Suttas, but not having known Ajahn Chah in his teaching days, I had not had the good fortune of training under a fully enlightened master. My visit to Ajahn Mahā Boowa's monastery and subsequent visit to the monastery of one of his great disciples, Ajahn Wanchai, opened my eyes to the Sangha, the enlightened Sangha, as a living force in this world, shaping and moulding the understanding and right intentions of those who come into contact with it.

The Author

Tan Yātiko did finally go on *tudong*, spending some of his years as a junior monk in the Dhammayut forest monasteries of Udorn Thani, most notably with Tan Ajahn Wanchai. He returned to Wat Pah Nanachat to offer his assistance to the community in 2003. For the next four years he was the senior monk at Dtao Dam Forest Hermitage in Kanchanaburi Province. Following a Rains Retreat in his home country of Canada in 2008, he joined the community at Abhayagiri Monastery in California where he is still a resident monk, assisting Tan Ajahn Pasanno in the running of the monastery and the training of the monks. Over the years he has maintained the tudong spirit of an unsupported alms mendicant, walking in Thailand, India and, most recently, California.

Note

Venerable Ajahn Mahā Boowa passed away on 30 January 2011 in his *kuṭī* in Wat Pah Baan Taad.

Many of the teachings by Luang Por Mahā Boowa are available in English in '*Samaṇa*', published for free distribution by Forest Dhamma Books.

17

FAITH IN THE QUEST

Ajahn Jayasāro

An edited version of a Dhamma talk given to the Sangha during the Rains Retreat of 1998.

As a child I was fascinated by quests: I loved reading about Greek heroes facing tests of their endurance and ingenuity as they sought some great treasure, and of the knights of the Round Table searching for the Holy Grail. In my teens I discovered the Buddhist vision of life as a spiritual quest.

At a time when I was finding the values of the world in which I lived hollow and inane, the Buddha's declaration of the search for freedom from ignorance and attachments as the truly Noble Quest seemed irrefutable to me, and it still does today. I became convinced that any human endeavour alienated from the Noble Quest, no matter how conventionally worthy it may be, was ultimately trivial.

As monastics we take on the form of the Buddhist monk with its discipline and regulations, not as a new identity, but out of a recognition that in our chosen quest we need a certain degree of structure and support. Any quest worthy of its name involves facing up to demons, avoiding quicksands and disregarding sirens. With the

backing of the Sangha and faith in the value of the quest we can achieve this.

Faith has been an unpopular word in some Western Buddhist circles, especially with those people who have felt bitter about their theistic upbringing and seen in Buddhism something more 'scientific'. For myself I like the word, and find 'confidence', the other popular choice as a translation for '*saddhā*', too mundane. Anyway, however this term is rendered into English, I think we must first acknowledge that we can't do without it. Nobody can prove that there is such a thing as enlightenment, but if we don't have faith that there is our practice is unlikely to go very far. Faith clarifies the goal, focuses our efforts and fills us with energy. Ultimately it is wisdom rather than faith that moves mountains, but it is faith that impels us to move them in the first place, and faith that sustains us through the inevitable frustrations that dog our efforts.

There are so many things that human beings can search for in life: security, wealth, power, fame, respect, love, immortality and even annihilation. Many people spend their life searching without ever clarifying exactly what it is they want; all they know is that whatever it is, they haven't found it yet. Some give up their quest, some turn to drink or drugs, others become bitter and cynical. Many people search for the ultimate experience, doing outlandish things merely because nobody has ever done them before. They want 'the challenge', they crave the adrenaline. They want to stand out from the crowd. Everyone is afraid that their life doesn't mean anything. But all experience, from cleaning out a dingy drain filled with human hair to sexual bliss in Shangri-la, lies within this very narrow circumscribed realm which the Buddha called the *āyatanas*. We see that none of the exotic, mind-boggling things that people get up to in the world ever transcend the sense spheres. No matter how much money people have and how well-endowed they are with worldly blessings, wherever they go they are still stuck fast within

the realm of the sense bases. No matter how exalted the aesthetic experience, nobody is ever going to be able to see with their eyes a form which is anything other than a form. Form is just form. It arises and then it passes away. That's all it knows how to do – quite pathetic when you think about it. *Saṃsāra* just doesn't live up to the hype. When we understand a form as a form, the content of that form starts to lose its power to enthral or enslave us, depress or enrage us. Sounds are only ever just sounds. No matter what sound it might be, the nature of a sound is always the same – it's just this much, unstable and inconstant. Sound is just sound. Odours are just odours. Flavours are just flavours. Physical sensations are just physical sensations. Thoughts, moods, emotions are just that, and they can't ever be more or less than just that – impermanent, empty and ownerless. Not one of the *āyatanas* can be sustained and enjoyed for an indefinite length of time.

This, I feel, is where the whole concept and idea of renunciation starts to become so compelling, uncommon sense. Racing around, struggling and striving, just to be able to experience more forms, more sounds, more odours, more flavours, more physical sensations, more emotions, thoughts and ideas, starts to appear tiresome. Is it really a satisfactory way to spend a human existence? Prince Siddhārtha and countless men and women after him have started their spiritual quests with the conviction that there must be something more to life than this.

But in the world, pursuing sense desires is the norm. Enjoying certain kinds of feeling and avoiding others is the aim. The more experiences you have, the fuller your life is considered to be. Intensity and passion are seen as ends in themselves. From an early age we absorb the idea that romantic love is the supreme fulfilment – poetry, novels, television, movies all tell us the same thing. Freedom is usually considered to lie in consumption; the more money we have, the greater the choice of hamburger fillings available, the

freer, it seems, we are to consider ourselves. Even financial markets are called free. In the monastic life, however, we are willing to look into everything carefully in order to see what is truly what. Our role in the world is to step back a little from the pace and pressures of the world, to investigate and penetrate the nature of existence. We do this with the understanding that the quest is not exclusively intellectual. Success will depend a great deal on our moral integrity and emotional maturity. In the uncovering of truth, our effort is not to try to make all our ideas conform to what's written in the Buddhist books, but to use the teachings as working hypotheses. Do they explain human experience adequately, completely? With the power of *sati, samādhi* and *paññā*, we learn to see the truth, just as it is.

What we're offered by the Buddha is a teaching that opens our eyes to look at life and at experience. We investigate: 'What is this?' 'What am I?' 'What is this life ... this body ... this mind?' And humble acknowledgement that we don't know is the motor for the search. We cherish a faith in the ultimate value of the search for a direct experience of truth. Ajahn Chah once spoke of a bird waking up and realizing it's in a cage. No matter what the cage is like, even if it's a most beautiful ornate cage with gold bars, once the bird clearly understands what a cage is and that liberation lies outside it, it can never be content with its old life again. We undertake the spiritual life to seek freedom from the confines of the cage.

The path we follow, the way we live our life as *samaṇas*, only becomes really sensible and meaningful in light of the aspiration for transcendence. We must believe in the vision of freedom outside the bonds and attachments founded on a sense of self. That freedom comes from fully understanding, moment by moment, the nature and mechanics of bondage. We practice to understand the nature of the five *khandhas* and the six *āyatanas*. The reason why attachment to forms, sounds, odours and all the *āyatanas* is so treacherous is,

quite simply, because they don't last. Today I went to visit our lay supporter Mae Jorm in the hospital. Her cancer is now at the stage where she doesn't even have enough energy to swallow water. Her throat was dry and she desperately wanted some water, but when it was poured into her mouth she couldn't swallow it. The water started to drip from the side of her mouth. It was a heartbreaking thing to see. Her body and sense organs are shutting down. I have known this woman since I was a novice and soon she will be dead.

Our eyes start to go, our ears start to go, and even if the forms are still there, they are not for us any more. Sounds were there before we were born and will be there after we have died. No one has ever become free through looking at beautiful things. No one has ever become free, liberated from the vicious round of birth and death, through listening to beautiful music or hearing beautiful sounds. We might have become quite peaceful for a short while, but there was no wisdom – we were merely fine-tuning the quality of our distraction.

With basic faith and confidence in the teachings of the Buddha, we get a foretaste that there is such a thing as freedom, and that it is realizable. It is possible. There is hope. There is a path. But as long as there is still attachment to the five *khandhas*, as long as there is still clinging to delight in the physical body, to delight in feeling, perception, thoughts, ideas, emotions and sense-consciousness, there is still delight in *dukkha*. The Buddha made this very clear. The attachment to the five *khandhas* is attachment to *dukkha*. One who is attached to *dukkha* cannot be free from *dukkha*.

So there is really nowhere to go – nowhere new, anyway. Wherever we go, we're always going to be in exactly the same place. We'll be in a place where there are forms, sounds, odours, tastes, physical sensations and mental events. This is it. We've already got the whole package. No matter whether we're trekking through a pristine Himalayan valley or struggling through a crowd in a frowning city, we

have the same work to do. We can see the truth of things wherever we are. Of course, certain environments are more conducive to the work than others – that is why the Buddha established monasteries and a monastic order – but even so, wherever we are, in whatever posture we find ourselves, we can do the work of developing awareness, turning the light within. We seek to learn from whatever it is, learning to see things as dhammas rather than as 'this person', 'that person' and 'this and that'. We apply ourselves steadily to the process of de-conditioning and re-education. Stopping the rot. Making a fresh start, again and again. Infinitely patient. Until the work is done.

With the faith that the Buddha was fully enlightened, with the trust that the teachings which he shared with human beings and *devas* for forty-five years are true, and with the conviction that the *ariya-sāvakas* truly penetrated those teachings, it follows that each one of us, wherever we're from, wherever we were born, whatever language we speak, man, woman, old or young; we all bear within us this capacity to realize the truth. Human beings can attain Awakening, can realize Nibbāna, because we're fish in the water. Why shouldn't fish be able to understand what water is? It's all around us, it's all within us. All we have to do is learn how to open our eyes.

It's common amongst Buddhist practitioners, however, to realize that their strong sense of *saddhā* or faith in the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha, a profound trust and confidence in the truth of the Buddha's teachings, is not matched by faith in their capacity to realize that truth. But without this faith in ourselves the five *indriyas* have no opportunity to mature. This lack of faith in our potential for enlightenment is crippling and unwise. The doubt is based on a mistaken way of looking at ourselves. Swallowing the whole myth of the independent 'I' gives us spiritual indigestion. We can't force ourselves to have faith, and we don't need to. We merely have to

remove the wrong thinking that prevents faith from arising, and start paying more attention to our experience.

Our tradition makes an important distinction between two levels of truth: the conventional and the absolute. The term 'conventional truth' refers to the conditioned, phenomenal or relative sphere. In this sphere it is valid to talk about 'self', 'human beings', 'monasteries' and 'monastic orders'. 'Absolute truth' refers to the way things are, unmediated by concepts and bias; in this sphere language and thought are transcended. The wise person uses conventional truths in order to communicate, but he is not fooled by them. When this way of exposition is understood, certain Buddhist teachings which would otherwise remain quite puzzling become clear, in particular those regarding 'self'.

A number of references in the Suttas to 'self' – for example, the famous saying that the self should be the refuge of the self and the instructions on various kinds of self-development – are expressions on the conventional level. They do not clash with the 'absolute' truth of *anattā*. The teaching of *anattā* does not mean that the Buddha is refuting the self on the conventional level; he is simply reminding us not to confuse a useful social fiction with ultimate reality. There is no independent, timeless 'I', no unmoving centre of experience, no soul-entity, no separate ego-identity, as we assume. However closely we look we cannot find 'one who acts', 'one who thinks', 'one who does' and 'one who wanders from life to life'. But there is a conventional 'I'. One teacher puts it well: 'There is a self; it's just not permanent'.

Our discouragement in the practice frequently comes from trying to imagine how this limited 'I' could possibly realize the unlimited. How could this bounded 'I' realize the unbounded? Having posed a question based on false premises (that the 'I' is real) we naturally conclude with a false answer, 'No, I can't see how realizing Nibbāna could ever happen; it just doesn't seem possible'. In other words,

how could little old me ever realize something so marvellous? The gap seems too wide. How can this person realize the truth?

Well, that's exactly the point, isn't it? It can't. This 'person' doesn't realize the truth. Rather, it's through understanding what this 'person' is, that truth is revealed. The realization of the Third Noble Truth leads to the unveiling and manifestation of Nibbāna. In the words of the Suttas, it involves 'upturning something that has been overturned'. It is a 'shining of light in the darkness'. Nothing new is created; what occurs is a radical re-appreciation of experience and a recognition of something which has always already existed. The deathless element is also a birthless element. It is not something that is brought into existence. Instead, those things which conceal or envelop it are removed. If we can grasp this point, we can feel a new surge of energy. We see that any sense of inadequacy we might feel is founded on attachment to the conventional self as being ultimately real. At this point our effort and energy, our persistence in practice are greatly strengthened, and the nagging doubt about our capacity to follow the path to its end may even disappear in a flash. We start to give what it takes.

If doubts arise in practice, investigate the discouragement, the uncertainty and hesitancy as mental states. Watch when questions like, 'Could I possibly reach the same level as Ajahn Chah and Ajahn Mun and all those great teachers?' arise. If we dwell on 'me' and 'my' personal history, 'my' foibles and idiosyncrasies, it seems ridiculous even to imagine that we could ever possibly attain the same level as monks like that. But the essence of the practice is not – what a relief! – the gradual perfection of character and personality; it is the understanding of character and personality as conditioned phenomena. Certainly, unwholesome features like selfishness, jealousy, anxiety, etc. inevitably abate through practice, but the idea is not to mould our self into a new, more 'spiritual' being. Character and personality are not and never have been who we are. They

are not self. They are not anything ultimately real. So we have to learn to stand back from the idea of becoming an enlightened being. Otherwise, when we contemplate, 'Is enlightenment really possible for me?' and we are unsure – is this hubris, worldly ambition, spiritual materialism? – we may decide, 'No, not for me' and then falsely dignify that wrong view by calling it humility.

Asmimāna, the subtle conceit 'I am', is the crux of the problem, the spoiler, the fly in the cosmic soup. It's the most difficult thing to see through, because the self-assumption is the foundation on which unenlightened human beings build their whole world-view. The existence of an independent self-existent 'I' seems obvious; everyone takes it for granted, it's common sense. That's why it's so hard to face up to the realities of life – birth, old age, sickness and death – we see them as things that happen to 'me'. It's 'my' dilemma, it's 'my' problem. 'I' was born, 'I'm' getting old and 'I'm' going to die. In Thai the word *samkan* means 'important'. But sometimes the word is used as a verb, to *samkan tua*, which means to give importance to self. And we give importance to self in so many ways, not just in our arrogance and pride, but also in our humility. Or in being anything at all. We see this clearly when we compare ourselves with others, considering ourselves as better, as equal, as worse and so on. This is where we '*samkan tua*' This is where we most prominently uphold the myth of self.

The Buddha said that the practice which most directly opposes or undermines *asmimāna* is *aniccā saññā*, the contemplation or constant recollection of transience and change. Investigation of the impermanence and inconstancy of phenomena enables us to see that those things we've always assumed to be solid are in fact not solid; that which we think is permanent is not permanent at all. This solid 'I' who does things, has experienced things, has highs and lows, ups and downs, is not a coherent entity at all. If you take a light, a candle, a torch, and you wave it around in a circle fast enough, you

get the illusion of a fixed circle of light. But in fact there is no such thing. The same principle applies to our investigation of the mind and the five *khandhas*. Through the practice of being fully awake and alert in the present moment, the truth of change becomes manifest. Mindfulness slows things down, at least subjectively. Suddenly we have time. There are gaps. There is a sense of things not moving so fast any more. And when there is that penetrative awareness and presence of mind, there is the opportunity for circumspection and for the recognition of things arising and passing away. The arising and passing away of the five *khandhas* may be seen as a simple impersonal truth. We know consciousness as just that, without having to add anything to it. With mindfulness and wisdom we don't make a big story out of things any more. We experience the episodes of our life more as haikus than as scenes from a fat and portentous autobiographical novel.

Faith is what keeps us going through the difficult times. Faith and endurance. Human beings in extreme conditions show an incredible capacity for endurance – the prisoners of war on the Death Railway in Kanchanaburi during the Second World War are a good example – but whether people survive ill-treatment and deprivation seems often to lie more in whether they want to endure, rather than whether they can. Those who don't see the purpose or the value of endurance are alienated from their innermost resources and die. They lose their will to live, or we might say their faith. In spiritual life, our capacity to endure through the ups and downs, the dark nights and deserts and sloughs of despond, is dependent on our wanting to do so. And if we want to, it's because we believe it to be worthwhile. This is faith.

Blind dogmatic faith was sharply criticized by the Buddha. He taught a faith that welcomes the critical faculty and does not claim to be more than it is. He pointed out that it is possible to have a strong faith in something and be completely mistaken. The strength

of the feeling is not a proof. He taught us to take the teachings as working hypotheses and then put them to the test of experience. Observe yourself and the world about you. Many years ago I experienced a small epiphany, one that greatly increased my faith in the capacity for radical change in my life. What I experienced wasn't an intellectual proof of that capacity, but it had a deep emotional significance for me which has not faded.

I was travelling in a bus through a huge desert. The journey was to take fifteen to twenty hours and there was almost nothing to be seen on either side of the bus, just sand and rock. At the time I was in my late teenage years and at a pretty low ebb in my life. I'd been in India practising meditation and was just starting to feel that I was making some progress, but then I had to leave because my money ran out. During the many adventures I had as I travelled westwards, there was this underlying feeling that I had squandered a marvellous opportunity. Something had been lost. So I was travelling through a seemingly endless expanse of desert. Looking out of the window, all I could see was just sand and rock everywhere. I remember thinking, 'That's me, just sand and rock, as far as the eye can see ...' Every time I looked out of the window this thought just kept coming up: 'That's me, sand and rock.' Then I must have dozed off. During the night quite an unusual thing happened; there was a rain storm in the desert. As I came round I could feel straightaway that it was cooler and fresher. I looked out through the window and couldn't believe my eyes. Throughout the desert and on the rocky outcrops were these beautiful flowers, a profusion of the most vibrant yellow, mauve and turquoise blooms! It struck me as a miracle. How could these flowers exist in such a place? Where did they come from? Just a few hours ago there were endless stretches of sand and rock. Now there were beautiful wild flowers everywhere! The flowers were not big flowers, just tiny little flowers, but they sprang up in such a short time. And as I was already in a metaphorical frame of mind, the

beauty and surprise of the experience made me think, 'I've got all those little flowers in my heart, they're dormant in my mind, and all they need is just a little bit of rain on them'. And so with that thought a big smile came over my face and I felt, 'Yes, I can do it'.

Even the desert can sprout flowers. Even when our mind is feeling dry, lifeless and dull, if we just keep at the practice, continue the development of the five *indriyas*, sprinkling the water of Dhamma, of mindfulness, clear comprehension and sincere effort, skilfully applying all the Buddha's wonderful teachings that we've learnt, then we can create freshness and beauty in the mind. There's always a way forward. There's always a way to peace. This is the hope that the Buddha held out to us. All mental conditions are just that: they're conditions. They change. And we can influence the nature of that change through seeing life just as it is, by doing something wise about it through our study and practice of Dhamma.

So with *saddhā* in the path, in the quest for truth, seeing its value, there arises a *viriya* independent of all the passing feelings of inspiration, depression, like, dislike and pleasure – those are all part of it, they're not something outside of it. Practice is developing this right, wise attitude to practice and not taking all those feelings so seriously – not taking the person who seems to experience them so seriously.

Practically speaking, it is *sati* and *samādhi* that enable us to see what is what. The practice of *samatha* meditation, concentration on an object, is in fact a kind of mindfulness practice. It's training our awareness to maintain an uninterrupted conjunction with an object, for example, the breath. Mindfulness of breathing has been called the king or the crown jewel of meditation objects, because it may be used both as a means of calming the mind and also for the direct penetration of *aniccā, dukkha* and *anattā*. Arousing the feeling that the breath is more important, more interesting, more fascinating than anything else in the world makes the practice

progress. We generate the deep faith that mindfulness of breathing can take us to liberation. This faith energizes the mind.

When the mind becomes calm, notice how your attitudes and values change. There is a recognition that stuffing the mind full of thoughts and fantasies is pointless, that dwelling in even subtle forms of anger, ill-will or greed is painful and a waste of time; that searching the universe for pleasant sensory experiences is demeaning and irrelevant. You wonder that you never thought about getting out of these traps before. *Samādhi*, the deep peace and happiness of mind, brings forth a very different kind of logic from that of the busy mind. Suddenly there is a sense of sadness for the time that you've allowed the mind to hang out with the hindrances, all the time that has been squandered! You think, 'How could I have been so foolish?' To the peaceful mind, only peace makes sense.

The mind stabilized by *samādhi* loses its habitual reaction to objects, which is to rush towards the pleasant and away from the unpleasant. Without *samādhi* the mind has no home. It has no dwelling-place, it has nowhere it really wants to be. And so when faced with objects, the mind rushes around, moving towards the pleasant and away from the unpleasant, and hovering around the neutral, not quite sure whether to move towards it or away from it. But peace of mind has a stabilizing effect on this process. Suddenly it's almost as if the mind is too content; it just can't be bothered to make a fuss about things any more. The mind in *samādhi* is quite happy to be where it is, at home.

But the mind is not peaceful all the time. Awareness of the value of *samādhi* can be lost again. When we're in the hindrance-mode, then *samādhi* seems so far away. All the teachings about peace of mind seem like pious platitudes and the practice doesn't really gel. We may even find ourselves trying to avoid meditation, though we still aspire to its fruits. But if we are willing to go against the grain, once the mind starts to become calm and *sati* and *sampajañña*

increase, that kind of negative thinking appears foolish once more. The pacification and clarification of the mind's intrinsic power seem so obviously the most intelligent thing that we could be doing. We see how state-specific are our thoughts about life.

If the mind takes joy in its object, chooses it wholeheartedly, then what starts to become clear is the inherently peaceful nature of the mind. The meditator experiences clarity, transparency, brightness and purity; he connects with the strength, resolution and firmness of the concentrated mind. At the same time, with *samādhi*, we are aware of a flexibility, suppleness and malleability in the mind. Put into words, that sounds self-contradictory, doesn't it? How is that possible? How can the mind be both firm, resolute and rock-solid, and yet at the same time flexible and pliable? Well, why not? It's not a logical theorem. It is '*paccattaṃ*', to be realized by each person for themselves.

With the practice of *samādhi* the meditator samples the initial wonders of the inner world. He reaches the gates to the marvellous, something few human beings ever experience. Here is where the mind begins to intuit its full power and potential, and is exhilarated by that. The meditator sees how unsatisfactory and superficial ordinary sense-consciousness is – it's as if human beings are just skating around on dirty ice looking for water, never aware of the beautiful, cool flow beneath their feet.

As the mind becomes imbued with *sati* and *samādhi*, the powers of this penetrative awareness can be applied. In accordance with its nature, the mind will move and flow towards the objects of investigation and contemplation. The mind emerging from *samādhi* is naturally ripe for the emergence of *paññā*. With *paññā*, what becomes most clear to us is that every aspect of our experience, everything that we can perceive and conceive, has the same value. We enter a calm egalitarian land. Everything does exactly the same thing: it arises and then passes away. For the first time the nature of

experience far outweighs the significance of its content. We make a radical switch or revolution, from obsession with the contents of experience to the cool, clear-eyed appreciation of the process or contour of experience, this rising and passing away. With insight and understanding of the process of rising and passing away, it's here that *asmimāna*, the upholding of the idea of self, raising the flag of 'me' and 'mine', starts to be undermined.

So as we progress down the path, we come to understand that part of our development as human beings is the gradual maturing of our understanding of happiness. The increasingly subtle and profound forms of human happiness developed through the five *indriyas* of *saddhā, viriya, sati, samādhi* and *paññā* are sometimes invisible to others, especially those who do not practice. They're not objects of possession and they're not founded upon the *āyatanas*, and yet these qualities truly sustain the human heart. But if we find ourselves trapped in that no-man's land where we have given up some of the coarser pleasures based on gratification of sense desire, but do not yet have any real access to the higher, more subtle and refined pleasures, enjoyments and happiness of the path, then we need to be very patient and dwell in faith in the Buddha.

Even though I don't think my critical faculty is lacking in any way, after devoting most of my life to studying and practising the Buddha's teachings to the best of my abilities, I have yet to find a single teaching that I have been able to disprove. This gives me a great deal of faith in those aspects of the Dhamma that I have not yet verified. It's like a map. If you have found it to be trustworthy in one area of the landscape, you find it unlikely to be at fault in another. The Buddha teaches that the practice of Dhamma brings happiness to the human heart. We trust the Buddha's teachings not by dismissing doubts, but by putting our life on the line. Faith does not entail the mere acceptance of a philosophy. Buddhist faith is the faith to do. It is a trust in our capacity, a belief in our own

potential; something we can put to the test. The daily practice may sometimes feel little more than a stumble or crawl, but through faith our underlying effort and sincerity is unwavering. Eventually, attainment of the goal is assured.

COMING TO VISIT WAT PAH NANACHAT

Wat Pah Nanachat (the International Forest Monastery) is situated in a small forest in the north-east of Thailand, about fifteen kilometres from the city of Ubon Ratchathani. In 1975 Ajahn Chah established it in order to give foreigners who do not know the Thai language and culture the possibility of a traditional monastic training. English serves as the primary language of communication and instruction. Our community consists of monks, novices and postulants from a wide range of nationalities. There is no permanent nuns' community at Wat Pah Nanachat. Women interested in a monastic commitment are invited to contact our affiliated nuns' community at Amaravati Buddhist Monastery, Great Gaddesden, Hemel Hempstead, Hertfordshire HP1 3BZ, Great Britain.

Although Wat Pah Nanachat is not a meditation centre, there are facilities for a limited number of male and female guests to stay at the monastery and practice with the resident monastic community. We like our guests to follow the daily routines of the monks as much as possible, and join in all communal meetings and work activities. As the teachers of the forest tradition stress, in monastic life qualities like cooperation, respect and self-sacrifice facilitate both communal harmony and individual growth in the practice. Generally the training at Wat Pah Nanachat aims to follow the Dhamma-Vinaya, the teachings and code of monastic discipline

laid down by the Buddha, respecting both their letter and their spirit. The monastic life encourages the development of simplicity, renunciation and quietude. It is a deliberate commitment to this way of life that creates a community environment where people of varied backgrounds, personalities and temperaments can cooperate in the effort to practice and realize the Buddha's path to liberation.

Practice Schedule

In general guests have many hours a day for study and meditation practice, so to make the best use of the situation it is advisable to have had previous meditation experience in a retreat setting and exposure to Buddhist teachings. Below is an outline of the standard daily routine, which varies from time to time.

3:00 AM	Morning wake-up bell
3:30 AM	Morning meeting: chanting and meditation
Dawn	Monks go out to surrounding villages on alms-round. Lay guests sweep the monastery or help in the kitchen.
8:00 AM	The meal (followed by short instructions and teachings from the Abbot)
9:30 AM	Chores period
4:00 PM	Afternoon drink
6:15 PM	Evening meeting: chanting and meditation

The schedule may be supplemented by periods of group practice, communal work or Dhamma instructions according to the needs of the community. After the meal the Abbot or a senior monk is available to receive visitors and resident guests and answer questions. Four times in a lunar month, on Wan Phra (the Buddhist holy day), the community observes a late-night vigil, during which there is the opportunity to discuss aspects of Dhamma practice with one of the senior monks.

Much of the day is reserved for private practice, using the time for sitting and walking meditation in either one's private hut in the forest or one of the meditation halls. Regarding meditation instructions at Wat Pah Nanachat, rather than utilizing only one particular technique, we aim to have our practice include all aspects of daily life, however simple and ordinary, as opportunities to develop mindfulness and other spiritual qualities such as diligent effort, joy, contentment, patience and faith. In time, the virtuous qualities that grow out of such a training gather strength and contribute towards deeper peace and concentration, leading to insight and the growth of liberating wisdom.

The Buddhist lay training guidelines (precepts)

Lay guests who stay at Wat Pah Nanachat are expected to abide by the traditional eight Buddhist precepts. The first five form the basic guidelines for conduct leading to harmony and self-respect. The other three precepts encourage a spirit of renunciation and simplicity and are among the fundamental principles of monastic practice.

The five training precepts:

- *Harmlessness:* to refrain from intentionally taking the life of any living creature.
- *Trustworthiness:* to refrain from taking anything that is not given.
- *Chastity:* to refrain from all sexual activity.
- *Right Speech:* to refrain from false, abusive, malicious or disharmonious speech and worldly gossip.
- *Sobriety:* to refrain from taking intoxicating drinks or drugs (smoking is prohibited at all times at the monastery).

The three renunciation precepts:

- *to refrain from eating after midday:* The monastery practice is to eat one meal a day in one bowl at one sitting. This frees time for meditation and enhances simplicity of life.
- *to refrain from using entertainment such as music, dance, playing games and beautifying or adorning the body with jewellery or makeup:* This assists in focusing the mind's attention inwards towards Dhamma.
- *to refrain from using high or luxurious beds or seats and from indulging in sleep:* This develops the qualities of wakefulness, mindfulness and clear awareness in all postures and all activities throughout the day.

These training precepts are guidelines for good conduct in body and speech and provide a necessary foundation for the development of mindfulness, clear comprehension and meditation in our endeavour to cultivate the Noble Eightfold Path. The precepts serve to promote harmony within the community through restraining unwholesome speech and action. These fundamental principles of training cultivate the self-discipline necessary for spiritual development and are taken up as an act of deliberate personal choice and initiative.

Staying as a guest

If you wish to come and stay at Wat Pah Nanachat, you need to write in advance to the guest monk and allow several weeks in which to receive a written response. We only have limited space for guests and are often booked up, so it is good to write well in advance. Please understand that it is the wish of our community not to be publicly available by telephone or email. Guests are accepted initially for

three days. If they wish to stay longer, they can consult the guest monk or the Abbot. The best time to arrive is before 8:00 am, in order to take part in the meal and meet with the guest monk.

Resident lay guests in Wat Pah Nanachat wear traditional Thai lay monastic attire: loose white and long trousers with a white shirt for men, and a white blouse and long black skirt for women. Men staying longer than one week are asked to shave their heads, beards and eyebrows. Guests are advised to be in good physical and mental health and to have health coverage or travel insurance. If you have previously had any serious mental illnesses, please inform us openly about them, so we can be sure that your stay in the monastery won't give rise to major problems for you and the community. There is no malaria at Wat Pah Nanachat.

While the monastery provides bedding and a mosquito net, guests are expected to supply other requisites (e.g. a good flashlight/torch, an alarm clock, flip-flop sandals, candles, mosquito repellent and toiletries). A padlock for locking away personal valuables is very useful. The monks are happy to share food and drinks that are offered to them with the lay guests each morning, but as it is part of the renunciant tradition to accept whatever is offered, they are unable to arrange any special diets for the guests or residents. Please either do not bring electronic gadgets like mobile phones, portable computers, cameras, etc. with you, or lock them away in the monastery safe. These things create a worldly atmosphere which impinges on the simple meditative lifestyle in the monastery. Also, this is a strictly non-smoking monastery. Please note that the financial expenses of the monastery are completely covered by donations out of faith and free will from our lay community, whether local or international.

If you would like to visit and stay at Wat Pah Nanachat, please write a letter (suggesting possible dates) to:

The Guest Monk
Wat Pah Nanachat
Bahn Bung Wai
Warin Chamrab
Ubon Rachathani 34310
THAILAND

Some more information about life at Wat Pah Nanachat can be found on the monastery's website:

www.watpahnanachat.org

GLOSSARY[1]

adhiṭṭhāna Determination; resolution. One of the 'ten perfections'. *See* pāramī.

Ajahn (*Thai*) From the Pāli *ācariya*, literally 'teacher'; often used as a title of senior monks or nuns of more than ten years' seniority in a monastery.

Ajahn Buddhadāsa A highly respected Thai monk who lived from 1906 to 1993, and founded Suan Mokkh monastery in Surat Thani province, Chaiya, Southern Thailand. Known throughout the world for his modern-minded and highly accessible teachings.

anāgārika (Thai: *pah kow*) Literally: 'homeless one'. An eight-precept postulant who often lives with bhikkhus and, in addition to his own meditation practice, also helps them with certain services that the Vinaya forbids bhikkhus to do – for example, cutting weeds or carrying food overnight through unpopulated areas.

ānāpānasati Literally: 'awareness of inhalation and exhalation', or mindfulness of breathing. The meditation practice of maintaining one's attention and mindfulness on the sensations of breathing.

anattā Not-self, ownerless, impersonal.

añjali Joining the palms in front of oneself as a gesture of respect; still widely used in Buddhist countries and India today.

ānupubbī-kathā Gradual instruction. The Buddha's method of teaching Dhamma that guides his listeners progressively through increasingly advanced topics: generosity, virtue, heavens, the drawbacks of sensuality, renunciation and the Four Noble Truths. *See* dāna, sīla, nekkhamma, Four Noble Truths.

anusaya Predisposition; underlying tendency. There are seven major underlying tendencies to which the mind returns over and over again: tendency sensual passion (*kāma-rāganusaya*), aversion (*paṭighāńusaya*), views (*diṭṭhanusaya*), uncertainty (*vicikicchanusaya*), conceit (*māńusaya*), passion for becoming (*bhava-rāganusaya*), and ignorance (*avijjāńusaya*). *See* saṃyojana.

apāya-bhūmi State of deprivation; the four lower levels of existence into which one might be reborn as a result of past unskilful actions (*kamma*): rebirth in hell, as a hungry ghost (*peta*), an angry god (*asura*), or as a common animal. None of these states are permanent. Compare with *sugati*. *See* kamma, peta, asura, sugati.

arahant Literally: a 'Worthy One'. A person whose mind is free of defilement (*kilesa*), who has abandoned all ten of the fetters (*saṃyojana*) that bind the mind to the cycle of rebirth, whose heart is free of mental effluents (*āsava*), and who is thus not destined for further rebirth. A title for the Buddha and the highest level of his noble disciples. *See* kilesa, āsava, saṃyojana.

ārammaṇa Mental object.

ariya Noble, a noble one; i.e. one who has attained transcendent insight on one of the

[1] *Note*: These definitions of terms have been collected from a number of free distribution publications of the Forest Sangha. We have also included material from '*A Glossary of Pāli and Buddhist Terms*' edited by John T. Bullitt, available at www.accesstoinsight.org/glossary.html. Definitions from the different sources have been revised for relevance and consistency.

four levels, the highest of which is the *arahant*. *See* arahant, ariya-puggala.

ariya sāvaka 'Noble beings'. *See* ariya-puggala.

ariya-puggala Literally: noble person. An individual who has realized at least the lowest of the four noble paths (*magga*) or their fruitions (*phala*). Compare with *puthujjana* (worldling). *See* magga, phala, puthujjana.

ariya-sacca Noble Truth. The word '*ariya*' (noble) can also mean 'ideal' or 'standard', and in this context means 'objective' or 'universal' truth. Usually refers to the Four Noble Truths that form the foundation of the Buddha's teachings. *See* Four Noble Truths.

arom (*Thai*) Feeling, atmosphere; mental object (derived from the Pāli *ārammaṇa*). *See* ārammaṇa.

āsana Raised platform on which monks sit.

āsava Mental effluent, taint, fermentation or outflow. Four qualities that taint the mind: sensuality, views, becoming, and ignorance.

asura A class of *devas*, often referred to as 'the angry gods'. Like the Titans of Greek mythology, they fight the *devas* for sovereignty over the heavens and usually lose the battle. Rebirth as an *asura* is considered as one of the four unhappy rebirths. *See* apāya-bhūmi.

avijjā Unknowing; ignorance; obscured awareness; delusion about the nature of the mind. The main root of evil and continual rebirth. *See* moha.

āyatana Sense base. The inner sense bases are the sense organs: eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind. The outer sense bases are their respective objects.

baht The national currency of Thailand.

bhāvanā Meditation, development or cultivation; often used to refer to *citta-bhāvanā*, mind development, or *paññā-bhāvanā*, wisdom development, or contemplation. *See* kammaṭṭhāna.

bhikkhu A Buddhist monk; a man who has given up the householder's life to live a life of heightened virtue (*sīla*) in accordance with the *Vinaya* in general, and the *Pāṭimokkha* rules in particular. *See* sīla, vinaya, pāṭimokkha, Sangha, parisā, upasampadā.

bhikkhunī A Buddhist nun; a woman who has given up the householder's life to live a life of heightened virtue (*sīla*) in accordance with the *Vinaya* in general, and the *Pāṭimokkha* rules in particular. *See* sīla, vinaya, pāṭimokkha, Sangha, parisā, upasampadā.

bodhi-pakkhiya-dhammā 'Ways to Awakening' – thirty-seven principles that are conducive to Awakening and that, according to the Buddha, form the heart of his teaching: the (1) four foundations of mindfulness (*satipaṭṭhāna*); (2) four right exertions (*sammappadhāna*); (3) four bases of success (*iddhipadā*); (4) five spiritual faculties (*indriya*); (5) five strengths (*bala*); (6) seven factors for Awakening (*bojjhaṅga*); and (7) the Eightfold Path (*magga*). *See* satipaṭṭhāna, bojjhaṅga, iddhipāda, indriya, Eightfold Path.

bodhisatta (Skt. *Bodhisattva*) 'A being striving for Awakening'; the term used to describe the Buddha before he actually became Buddha, from his first aspiration to Buddhahood until the time of his full Awakening.

bojjhaṅga The Seven Factors of Enlightenment: mindfulness (*sati*), investigation of Dhamma (*dhamma-vicaya*), energy (*viriya*), rapture (*pīti*), tranquillity (*passadhi*), concentration or collectedness (*samādhi*) and equanimity (*upekkhā*).

borikan (*Thai*) A monk's requisites.

brahmacariyā Literally: the Brahma-conduct; usually referring to the monastic life, using this term emphasizes the vow of celibacy.

brahmavihāra The four 'sublime' or 'divine' abodes that are attained through the development of boundless *mettā* (goodwill), *karuṇā* (compassion), *muditā* (appreciative joy), and *upekkhā* (equanimity).

Buddha The name given to one who rediscovers for himself the liberating path of Dhamma, after a long period of its having been forgotten by the world. According to tradition, a long line of Buddhas stretches off into the distant past. The most recent Buddha was born Siddhattha Gotama in India in the sixth century BCE. A well-educated and wealthy young man, he relinquished his family and his princely inheritance in the prime of his life to search for true freedom and an end to suffering (*dukkha*). After six years of austerities in the forest, he rediscovered the 'middle way' and achieved his goal, becoming a Buddha.

Buddho Used in the literal sense, its meaning is 'awake', 'enlightened'. It is also used as a meditation mantra, internally reciting BUD- on the inhalation, and -DHO on the exhalation.

cańkama Walking meditation, usually in the form of walking back and forth along a prescribed path, focusing attention on the meditation object.

citta Mind; heart; state of consciousness.

dāna Giving, liberality; offering, alms. Specifically, giving of any of the four requisites to the monastic order. More generally, the inclination to give, without expecting any form of repayment from the recipient. *Dāna* is the first theme in the Buddha's system of gradual training (*ānupubbī-kathā*), the first of the ten *pāramīs*, one of the seven treasures (*dhana*), and the first of the three grounds for meritorious action (*sīla* and *bhāvanā*). *See* ānupubbī-kathā, pāramī, dhana, sīla, bhāvanā.

desanā Dhamma talk.

deva Literally: 'shining one' – an inhabitant of the heavenly realms. Sometimes translated as 'gods' or 'angels'. *See* sagga, sugati, deva.

Dhamma (Skt. *Dharma*) The truth of the way things are; the teachings of the Buddha that reveal the truth and elucidate the means of realizing it as a direct phenomenon.

dhamma (Skt. *dharma*) (1) a phenomenon in and of itself; (2) mental quality; (3) doctrine, teaching; (4) nibbāna. Also, principles of behaviour that human beings ought to follow so as to fit in with the right natural order of things; qualities of mind they should develop so as to realize the inherent quality of the mind in and of itself. By extension, 'Dhamma' (usually capitalized) is also used to denote any doctrine that teaches such things. Thus the Dhamma of the Buddha denotes both his teachings and the direct experience of nibbāna, the quality at which those teachings are aimed.

Dhamma-Vinaya 'Doctrine and Discipline', the name the Buddha gave to his own dispensation.

dhana Treasure(s). The seven qualities of conviction (*saddhā*), virtue (*sīla*), conscience and concern, learning, generosity (*dāna*), and wisdom (*paññā*). *See* saddhā, sīla, dāna, paññā.

dhutaṅga Voluntary ascetic practices that practitioners may undertake from time to time or as a long-term commitment in order to cultivate renunciation and contentment, and to stir up energy. For the monks, there are thirteen such practices: (1) using only patched-up robes; (2) using only one set of three robes; (3) going for alms; (4) not by-passing any donors on one's alms path; (5) eating no more than

one meal a day; (6) eating only from the alms-bowl; (7) refusing any food offered after the almsround; (8) living in the forest; (9) living under a tree; (10) living under the open sky; (11) living in a cemetery; (12) being content with whatever dwelling one has; (13) not lying down. *See* tudong.

dtieng (*Thai*) An open-air bamboo platform which functions as a meditation and sleeping platform.

dukkha 'Hard to bear'. unsatisfactoriness, suffering, inherent insecurity, instability, stress, one of the three characteristics of all conditioned phenomena.

Eightfold Path Eight factors of spiritual practice leading to the cessation of suffering: Right View, Right Intention, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, Right Concentration.

ekaggatā One-pointedness; the fifth factor of meditative absorption. In meditation, the mental quality that allows one's attention to remain collected and focused on the chosen meditation object. It reaches full maturity upon the development of the fourth level of *jhāna*. *See* jhāna.

farang (*Thai*) European, foreigner. Derived from 'Frank' or 'French', the first Westerners known to the Thais.

Five Precepts The five basic guidelines for training in wholesome actions of body and speech: refraining from killing other beings; refraining from stealing; responsible sexual conduct; refraining from lying and false speech; refraining from the use of intoxicants.

Four Noble Truths The first and central teaching of the Buddha about dukkha, its origin, cessation and the path leading towards its cessation. Complete understanding of the Four Noble Truths is equivalent to the attainment of nibbāna.

gaen-kanun (*Thai*) Dye made from the heartwood of the jack fruit tree, used for dyeing monks' robes.

glot (*Thai*) A large umbrella equipped with a mosquito net, used by Thai *dhutaṅga* monks for meditation and shelter while staying in the forest. *See* dhutaṅga, tudong.

going forth Monastic ordination, 'going forth from home to homelessness'. *See* pabbajjā.

Hīnayāna 'Lesser Vehicle', originally a pejorative term – coined by a group who called themselves followers of the Mahāyāna, the 'Great Vehicle' – to denote the path of practice of those who adhered only to the earliest discourses as the word of the Buddha. Hīnayānists refused to recognize the later discourses, composed by the Mahāyānists, which claimed to contain teachings that the Buddha felt were too deep for his first generation of disciples, and which he thus secretly entrusted to underground serpents. The Theravāda school of today is historically related to the Hīnayāna, although not identical with it.

hiri-ottappa 'Conscience and concern'; 'moral shame and moral dread'. These twin emotions – the 'guardians of the world' – are associated with all skilful actions. *Hiri* is an inner conscience which restrains us from doing deeds that would jeopardize our own self-respect; *ottappa* is a healthy fear of committing unskilful deeds that might bring about harm to ourselves or others. *See* kamma.

holy life Celibate life, often referring to the monastic life. *See* brahmacariyā.

iddhipāda Bases for spiritual power; pathways to spiritual success. The four *iddhipāda* are *chanda* (zeal), *viriya* (effort), *citta* (application of mind), and *vīmaṃsā* (investigation).

indriya Spiritual faculties; mental factors. In the suttas the term can refer either to the six sense base (*āyatana*) or to the five mental factors of *saddhā* (conviction), *viriya* (persistence), *sati* (mindfulness), *samādhi* (concentration), and *paññā* (discernment). *See* bodhi-pakkhiya-dhammā.

Isan (*Thai*) The north-east region of Thailand.

Jātaka A collection of stories about the Buddha's past lives which forms a part of the Buddhist canonical scriptures.

jhāna (Skt. *dhyāna*) Mental absorption. A state of strong concentration focused on a single physical sensation (resulting in *rūpa jhāna*) or mental notion (resulting in *arūpa jhāna*). Development of *jhāna* arises from the temporary suspension of the five hindrances (*nīvaraṇa*) through the development of five mental factors: *vitakka* (directed thought), *vicāra* (evaluation), *pīti* (rapture), *sukha* (pleasure), and *ekaggatārammaṇa* (one-pointedness of mind). *See* nīvaraṇa, ekaggatā.

jit (*Thai*) *See* citta.

jongrom (*Thai*) Walking meditation. *See* caṅkama.

jy (*Thai*) *See* citta.

kamma (Skt. *karma*) Volitional action by means of body, speech, or mind, always producing an effect (*kamma-vipāka*).

kammaṭṭhāna Literally, 'basis of work' or 'place of work'. The word refers to the 'occupation' of a meditator: namely, the contemplation of certain meditation themes by which the forces of defilement (*kilesa*), craving (*taṇhā*), and ignorance (*avijjā*) may be uprooted from the mind. In the ordination procedure, every new monastic is taught five basic *kammaṭṭhāna* that form the basis for contemplation of the body: hair of the head (*kesā*), hair of the body (*lomā*), nails (*nakhā*), teeth (*dantā*), and skin (*taco*). By extension, the *kammaṭṭhāna* include all the forty classical meditation themes.

kamma-vipāka *See* kamma, vipāka.

karuṇā Compassion; sympathy; the aspiration to find a way to be truly helpful to oneself and others. One of the four 'sublime abodes'. *See* brahmavihāra.

Kaṭhina A ceremony, held in the fourth month of the rainy season (October, sometimes November), in which a Sangha of bhikkhus receives a gift of cloth from lay people, bestows it on one of their members, and then makes it into a robe before dawn of the following day.

khandha (Skt. *skandha*) Heap; group; aggregate. Physical and mental components of the personality and of sensory experience in general. The five bases of clinging (*upādāna*): *rūpa* (form), *vedanā* (feeling), *saññā* (perception), *saṅkhāra* (mental formations), and *viññāṇa* (consciousness). *See* upādāna, nāma, rūpa, vedanā, saññā, saṅkhāra, viññāṇa.

khanti Patience; forbearance. One of the ten perfections. *See* pāramī.

kilesa (Skt. *klesha*) Defilement – *lobha* (passion), *dosa* (aversion), and *moha* (delusion) in their various forms, which include such things as greed, malevolence, anger, rancour, hypocrisy, arrogance, envy, miserliness, dishonesty, boastfulness, obstinacy, violence, pride, conceit, intoxication and complacency.

kor wat (*Thai*) Monastic regulations and observances.

Kruba Ajahns (*Thai*) Literally: 'forest teachers'.

kusala Wholesome, skilful, good, meritorious. An action characterized by this moral quality (*kusala-kamma*) is bound to result (eventually) in happiness and a favourable outcome. Actions characterized by its opposite (*akusala-kamma*) lead to sorrow. *See* kamma.

kuṭī A small dwelling place for a Buddhist monastic; a hut.

kwai (*Thai*) Water buffalo.

Luang Por (*Thai*) Venerable Father, Respected Father; a friendly and reverential term of address used for elderly monks.

magga 'Path'; Specifically, the path to the cessation of suffering and stress. The four transcendent paths – or rather, one path with four levels of refinement – are the path to *stream-entry* (entering the stream to nibbāna, which ensures that one will be reborn at most only seven more times), the path to once-returning, the path to non-returning, and the path to arahantship. *See* Eightfold Path, phala, nibbāna.

magga-phala-nibbāna The four stages of the path, fruition and full attainment of Nibbāna, the goal of Buddhist practice. *See* magga, Eightfold Path, phala, nibbāna.

mahāthera 'Great elder'. An honorific title automatically conferred upon a *bhikkhu* of at least twenty years' standing. Compare with *thera*. *See* thera.

majjhima Middle; appropriate; just right. Also used to refer to a monk of five to ten years' standing.

Majjhima Nikāya The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha, a part of the Pāli Canon. *See* Pāli Canon.

Māra Evil and temptation personified as a deity over the highest heaven of the sensual sphere, personification of the defilements, the totality of worldly existence, and death.

mettā Loving-kindness, goodwill, friendliness. One of the ten perfections (*pāramīs*) and one of the four 'sublime abodes' (*brahma-vihāra*). *See* pāramī, brahmavihāra.

moha Delusion; ignorance (*avijjā*). One of three unwholesome roots (*mūla*) in the mind. *See* mūla.

muditā Appreciative or sympathetic joy. Taking delight in one's own goodness and that of others. One of the four 'sublime abodes'. *See* brahmavihāra.

mūla Literally, 'root'. The fundamental conditions in the mind that determine the moral quality – skilful (*kusala*) or unskilful (*akusala*) – of one's intentional actions (*kamma*). The three unskilful roots are *lobha* (greed), *dosa* (aversion), and *moha* (delusion); the skilful roots are their opposites. *See* kusala, kamma, kilesa.

nāma Mental phenomena. A collective term for *vedanā* (feeling), *saññā* (perception), *cetanā* (intention, volition), *phassa* (sensory contact) and *manasikāra* (attention). Compare with *rūpa*. Some commentators also use *nāma* to refer to the mental components of the five *khandhas*. *See* khandha, rūpa.

nāvaka A monk of less than five years' standing. *See* majjhima.

nekkhamma Renunciation; literally, 'freedom from sensual lust'. One of the ten *pāramīs*. *See* pāramī.

nibbāna (Skt. *nirvāna*) Final liberation from all suffering, the goal of Buddhist practice. The liberation of the mind from the mental effluents (*āsava*), defilements (*kilesa*), and the round of rebirth (*vaṭṭa*), and from all that can be described or defined. As this term also denotes the extinguishing of a fire, it carries the connotations of stilling, cooling, and peace. (According to the physics taught at the time of the Buddha, a burning fire seizes or adheres to its fuel; when extinguished, it is unbound.) 'Total nibbāna' in some contexts denotes the experience of Awakening; in others, the final passing away of an *arahant*. *See* āsava, kilesa, arahant, vaṭṭa.

nimitta Mental sign, image or vision that may arise in meditation. *Uggaha nimitta* refers to any image that arises spontaneously in the course of meditation. *Paribhāga nimitta* refers to an image that has been subjected to mental manipulation.

nīvaraṇa Hindrances to progress in the practice of meditation – sensual desire, ill will, sloth and drowsiness, restlessness and anxiety, and uncertainty.

one who knows An inner faculty of awareness. Under the influence of ignorance or defilements, it knows things wrongly.

Trained through the practice of the Eightfold Path, it is the awakened knowing of a Buddha. *See* Eightfold Path.

opanayiko 'Leading inwards'; worthy of inducing in and by one's own mind; worthy of realizing. An epithet of the Dhamma.

ottappa *See* hiri-ottappa.

pabbajjā Literally, 'going forth'. Ordination as a novice (*sāmaṇera*). Going forth from the household life to the homeless life of a *samaṇa*, a contemplative. *See* upasampadā.

paccattaṁ To be individually experienced (i.e. *veditabbo viññūhi* – by the wise for themselves).

Pāli The canon of texts (*Tipiṭaka*) preserved by the Theravāda school and, by extension, the language in which those texts are composed. *See* Tipiṭaka.

Pāli Canon The Theravāda Buddhist scriptures.

paññā (Skt. *prajña*) Wisdom; discernment; insight; intelligence; common sense; ingenuity. One of the ten perfections. *See* pāramī.

pansa (*Thai*) The Rains Retreat, or *vassa* in Pāli. *See* vassa.

papañca Complication, proliferation, objectification. The tendency of the mind to proliferate issues from the sense of 'self'. This term can also be translated as self-reflexive thinking, reification, falsification, distortion, elaboration, or exaggeration. In the discourses, it is frequently used in analyses of the psychology of conflict.

papiap (*Thai*) A common sitting posture in monasteries, with one leg folded sideways to the back.

pāramī (Skt. *pāramitā*) Perfection of the character. A group of ten qualities developed over many lifetimes by a *bodhisatta*: generosity (*dāna*), virtue (*sīla*), renunciation (*nekkhamma*), discernment (*paññā*), energy / persistence (*viriya*), patience / forbearance (*khanti*), truthfulness (*sacca*), determination (*adhiṭṭhāna*), good will (*mettā*) and equanimity (*upekkhā*). *See* bodhisatta, dāna, sīla, nekkhamma, paññā, viriya, khanti, sacca, adhiṭṭhāna, mettā, upekkhā.

parinibbāna Complete or final nibbāna. Always applied to the cessation of the five *khandhas* at the passing away of an *arahant*.

parisā Following; assembly. The four groups of the Buddha's following, which comprise monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen. *See* Sangha, bhikkhu, bhikkhunī, upāsaka, upāsikā.

pāṭimokkha The basic code of monastic discipline which is recited fortnightly in the Pāli language, consisting of 227 rules for monks (*bhikkhus*) and 311 for nuns (*bhikkhunīs*). *See* vinaya.

peta (Skt. *preta*) A 'hungry shade' or 'hungry ghost' – one of a class of beings in the lower realms, sometimes capable of appearing to human beings. The petas are often depicted in Buddhist art as starving beings with narrow throats through which they can never pass enough food to ease their hunger.

phala Fruition. Specifically, the fruition of any of the four transcendent paths. *See* magga.

pūjā Devotional meeting to make offerings at a shrine. In Buddhist monasteries, the gathering of the community to pay respects and make symbolic offerings to the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha, usually consisting of the lighting of candles and incense, as well as the offering of flowers and devotional chanting.

puthujjana One of the many-folk; a 'worlding'. An ordinary person who has not yet realized any of the four stages of Awakening. *See* ariya-puggala, magga.

rai (*Thai*) An area of land measuring just less than half an acre or 1600 square metres.

Right View *See* sammā-diṭṭhi.

rūpa Body; physical phenomenon; sense datum. The basic meaning of this word is 'appearance' or 'form'. It is used, however, in a number of different contexts, taking on different shades of meaning in each. In lists of the objects of the senses, it is given as the object of the sense of sight. As one of the *khandha*, it refers to physical phenomena or sensations (visible appearance or form being the defining characteristics of what is physical). This is also the meaning it carries when opposed to *nāma*, or mental phenomena. *See* khandha, nāma.

sabai (*Thai*) Content, at ease, well, comfortable.

sacca Truthfulness. One of the ten perfections. *See* pāramī.

saddhā Conviction, faith, trust. A confidence in the Buddha that gives one the willingness to put his teachings into practice. Conviction becomes unshakeable upon the attainment of stream-entry. *See* sotāpanna.

sagga Heaven, heavenly realm. The dwelling place of the *devas*. Rebirth in the heavens is said to be one of the rewards for practising generosity (*dāna)* and virtue (*sīla*). Like all way stations in *saṃsāra*, however, rebirth here is temporary. *See* dāna, sīla, saṃsāra, sugati.

sai baht (*Thai*) To put alms-food into a monk's bowl.

Sākyamuni 'Sage of the Sakyans'; an epithet for the Buddha.

sāla (*Thai*) A hall.

samādhi Concentration, one-pointedness of mind, mental stability; state of concentrated calm resulting from meditation practice.

samādhi nimitta A sign which appears in the mind during *samatha* meditation. *See* samādhi, samatha, nimitta.

samaṇa Contemplative. Literally, a person who abandons the conventional obligations of social life in order to find a way of life more 'in tune' (*sama*) with the ways of nature.

samaṇa dassana The sight of *samaṇas*. *See* samaṇa.

sāmaṇera Literally, a small *samaṇa*; a novice monk who observes ten precepts and who is a candidate for admission to the order of *bhikkhus*. *See* samaṇa, bhikkhu, pabbajjā, upasampadā.

samatha Calm, tranquillity. Meditation emphasizing the calming and stilling of the mind that culminates in *jhāna*. *See* samādhi, jhāna.

sambhavesin A being searching for a place to take birth.

sammā-diṭṭhi Right View, the first of the eight factors of the Noble Eightfold Path, the path leading to nibbāna. In the highest sense, to have Right View means to understand the Four Noble Truths.

sampajañña Self-awareness, self-recollection, clear comprehension, alertness. *See* sati.

saṃsāra Wheel of Existence; lit., 'perpetual wandering'; the continuous process of being born, growing old, suffering and dying again and again; the world of all conditioned phenomena, mental and material. *See* vaṭṭa.

saṃyojana Fetter that binds the mind to the cycle of rebirth (*vaṭṭa*) – self-identification views (*sakkāya-diṭṭhi*), uncertainty (*vicikicchā*), grasping at precepts and practices (*sīlabbata-parāmāsa*); sensual passion (*kāma-rāga*), aversion (*vyāpāda*); passion for form (*rūpa-rāga*), passion for formless phenomena (*arūpa-rāga*), conceit (*māna*), restlessness (*uddhacca*), and unawareness (*avijjā*). *See* vaṭṭa, saṃsāra, anusaya.

Saṃyutta Nikāya The Kindred Sayings of the Buddha, part of the Pāli Canon. *See* Pāli Canon.

Sangha On the conventional (*sammuti*) level, this term denotes the communities of Buddhist monks and nuns; on the ideal (*ariya*) level, it denotes those followers of the Buddha, lay or ordained, who have attained at least stream-entry (*sotāpanna*), the first of the transcendent paths (*magga*) culminating in nibbāna. *See* sotāpanna, magga, nibbāna.

saṅkhāra Formation, compound, formation – the forces and factors that form things (physical or mental), the process of forming, and the formed things that result. *Saṅkhāra* can refer to anything formed by conditions, or, more specifically, (as one of the five *khandhas*) to thought-formations within the mind. *See* khandha.

saññā Perception; act of memory or recognition; interpretation. *See* khandha.

sāsana Literally, 'message'. The dispensation, doctrine, and legacy of the Buddha; the Buddhist religion. *See* Dhamma-Vinaya.

sati Mindfulness, self-collectedness, recollection. In some contexts, the word *sati* when used alone covers clear comprehension (*sampajañña*) as well. *See* sampajañña.

satipaṭṭhāna Foundation of mindfulness; frame of reference – body, feelings, mind, and mental phenomena, viewed in and of themselves as they occur.

sāvaka Literally, 'hearer'. A disciple of the Buddha, especially a noble disciple. *See* ariya-puggala.

sīla Virtue, morality. The quality of ethical and moral purity that prevents one from performing unskilful actions. Also, the training precepts that restrain one from performing unskilful actions. *Sīla* is the second theme in the gradual training (*ānupubbī-kathā*), one of the ten *pāramīs*, the second of the seven treasures (*dhana*), and the first of the three grounds for meritorious action. *See* ānupubbī-kathā, pāramī, dhana, dāna, bhāvanā.

sotāpanna Stream-enterer or stream-winner. A person who has abandoned the first three of the fetters (*saṃyojana*) that bind the mind to the cycle of rebirth and has thus entered the 'stream' flowing inexorably to nibbāna, ensuring that one will be reborn at most only seven more times, and only into human or higher realms. *See* saṃyojana, nibbāna.

stream-enterer A person who has reached the first stage of enlightenment. *See* sotāpanna.

sugati Happy destinations; the two higher levels of existence into which one might be reborn as a result of past skilful actions (*kamma*): rebirth in the human world or in the heavens (*sagga*). None of these states is permanent. *See* kamma, sagga, apāya-bhūmi.

sukha Pleasure; ease; satisfaction. In meditation, a mental quality that reaches full maturity upon the development of the third level of *jhāna*. *See* jhāna.

sutta (Skt. *sutra*) Literally, 'thread'; a discourse or sermon by the Buddha or his contemporary disciples. After the Buddha's death the suttas were passed down in the Pāli language according to a well-established oral tradition, and were finally committed to written form in Sri Lanka. According to the Sinhalese chronicles, the Pāli Canon was written down in the reign of King Vaṭṭagamiṇi in 29-17 BCE. More than 10,000 suttas are collected in the Sutta Piṭaka, one of the principal bodies of scriptural literature in Therāvada Buddhism. The Pāli Suttas are widely regarded as the earliest record of the Buddha's teachings.

Tan (*Thai*) Venerable. A way of addressing *bhikkhus*.

thera 'Elder'. An honorific title automatically conferred upon a *bhikkhu* of at least ten years' standing. *See* mahāthera.

Theravāda The 'Doctrine of the Elders' – the only one of the early schools of Buddhism

to have survived into the present; currently the dominant form of Buddhism in South-East Asia. *See* Hīnayāna.

tilakkhaṇa The qualities of all phenomena; impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and not-self.

Tipiṭaka (Skt. *tripiṭaka*) The Buddhist Pāli Canon. Literally, 'three baskets', in reference to the three principal divisions of the Canon: the Vinaya Piṭaka (disciplinary rules); Sutta Piṭaka (discourses); and Abhidhamma Piṭaka (abstract philosophical treatises).

tudong *(Thai)* The practice of wandering in the country and living on almsfood. *See* dhutaṅga.

upādāna Clinging; grasping; attachment; sustenance for becoming and birth – attachment to sensuality, to views, to precepts and practices, and to theories of the self.

upāsaka A lay devotee (male).

upasampadā Acceptance; full ordination as a *bhikkhu* or *bhikkhunī*. *See* pabbajjā.

upāsikā A lay devotee (female).

upekkhā Equanimity. One of the ten perfections (*pāramīs*) and one of the four 'sublime abodes'. *See* brahmavihāra.

vassa Rains Retreat. A period from July to October, corresponding roughly to the rainy season in Asia, in which each monk is required to live settled in a single place and not wander freely about.

vaṭṭa That which is done, which goes on or is customary, i.e. duty, service, custom. In the Buddhist context, it refers to the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. This denotes both the death and rebirth of living beings and the death and rebirth of defilement (*kilesa*) within the mind. *See* saṃsāra, kilesa.

vedanā Feeling. Either painful (*dukkha*-), pleasant (*sukha*-), or neither-painful-nor-pleasant (*adukkhaṃ-asukhā*). *See* khandha.

vicikicchā Sceptical doubt, uncertainty. *See* saṃyojana.

vinaya The Buddhist monastic discipline, lit., 'leading out', because maintenance of these rules 'leads out' of unskilful states of mind; in addition it can be said to 'lead out' of the household life and attachment to the world. Spanning six volumes in printed text, the Vinaya rules and traditions define every aspect of the *bhikkhus*' and *bhikkhunīs*' way of life. The essence of the rules for monastics is contained in the *Pāṭimokkha*. The conjunction of the Dhamma with the Vinaya forms the core of the Buddhist religion: 'Dhamma-Vinaya' – 'the Doctrine and Discipline' – is the name the Buddha gave to the religion he founded.

viññāṇa Consciousness; cognizance; the act of taking note of sense data and ideas as they occur. *See* khandha.

vipāka The consequence and result of a past volitional action (*kamma*). *See* kamma.

vipassanā Clear intuitive insight into physical and mental phenomena as they arise and disappear, seeing them for what they actually are – in and of themselves – in terms of the three characteristics (*tilakkhaṇa*) and in terms of suffering (*dukkha*), its origin, its cessation, and the way leading to its cessation. *See* ariya-sacca, Four Noble Truths, tilakkhaṇa.

viriya Persistence; energy. One of the ten perfections (*pāramīs*), the five faculties (*bala*); and the five strengths / spiritual faculties (*indriya*). *See* bodhi-pakkhiya-dhammā, pāramī.

viveka Solitude.

Wan Phra (*Thai*) Literally: 'Holy Day'. A weekly Buddhist holiday, corresponding with the lunar phases.

wat (*Thai*) A Buddhist monastery.

worldly dhammas The eight worldly conditions of gain and loss, praise and criticism,

happiness and suffering, fame and disrepute.

yakkha One of a special class of powerful non-human beings – sometimes kindly, sometimes murderous and cruel – corresponding roughly to the demons and ogres of Western fairy tales.

yarm (*Thai*) A monk's shoulder bag.