

AJAHN CHAH'S TEACHINGS ON NATURE

*A Dhamma talk given at
Abhayagiri Monastery in September of 2011
by Pasanno Bhikkhu*

ABHAYAGIRI MONASTERY

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Sabbadānaṃ dhammadānaṃ jināti

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Tomorrow I am invited to teach a day-long retreat at Spirit Rock Meditation Center on the theme of “Ajahn Chah’s Teachings on Nature.” For the past few days I’ve been preparing and have steeped myself in Ajahn Chah’s teachings – swimming in the soup of his biography as well as reading and listening to some of his talks. I’ve enjoyed it immensely. I have no idea what will come out in this evening’s talk, but I think it will be influenced by the things that I’ve reviewed.

I have many recollections of Ajahn Chah. I'm completely biased. I was an early student of his, and I am a monk because of the inspiration Ajahn Chah gave me. For everything I say, everything I've learned and the practice I've done, I owe a great debt of gratitude to Ajahn Chah. His teaching and his presence still affect me.

One of Ajahn Chah's unique qualities as a teacher was his ability to explain and encourage people in ways that made the practice very tangible. Some of this was his ability to use imagery and similes. One of the images that he gave of the practice was of a coconut tree. A coconut tree draws nutriment from the planet; it draws elements good and bad, clean and dirty, up through the roots and into the top of the tree and then produces fruit that gives both sweet water and delicious meat.

In the same way, as practitioners, we take all the different experiences that we have, all the different contacts with the world that we have, and we draw them up through our practice of *Virtue*, of *Concentration*, of *Wisdom*. They can be all trans-

formed into something that is very peaceful, that bears great fruit in terms of insight, understanding, and a tremendous balance and sense of peace. We don't need to be shy or worried or concerned about the different experiences that we have – whether we're successful or not in our meditation, or whether we experience *praise* or *blame*, *gain* or *loss*.

All of those experiences can be drawn up, through our practice, through our training. They can all be transformed. I think that's a wonderfully encouraging image.

Another image Ajahn Chah used for practicing meditation is the leaves in the trees and the forest. Quite naturally, the leaves in the forest are quite still. Only when the wind blows will the leaves vibrate or shake, be blown back and forth. In the same way, our mind, our actual mind, our real mind, is always still and steady. It's the moods of the mind that shake it.

When the winds of our moods, impressions, thoughts and feelings come up, we take the mind to be the various moods and impressions, rather than recognizing that it's just the winds of

mood, of thought and feeling, of perception. The underlying mind is the quality of knowing. The underlying mind is the quality of being present. With that quality, we are able to distinguish between the wind of mood and the quality of knowing and able to be attentive, and recognize that both those things are happening. The moods of the mind – the impressions, the reactions, the additions that we make and the proliferations that we add – affect what we consider to be the mind. In fact, we misperceive experience or don't recognize the distinction between the two.

One doesn't stand outside and force the wind not to blow or get upset because the wind does blow. It's just a natural phenomenon. In the same way, we can allow the mind to become steady, to become peaceful, to attend in ways that don't get caught up in the activity of the mind. Or, we can be swept up by the winds of change that blow through the mind, but see that as a natural phenomenon. Ajahn Chah was skillful at getting

us to really pay attention to the nature and naturalness of the practice - that very natural reality we easily miss.

So often we tend to believe that things should be special in some way, they should conform to some ideal or doctrinal position. But Ajahn Chah was able to see through that habit, that human tendency. The Noble Truths that the Buddha taught were about Nature. All of our experience is something that's in Nature, it's something natural. But that truth is something we overlook. Instead, we create all sorts of suffering and confusion around it.

One time when I was sitting with Ajahn Chah, I was asked to be a translator for a visitor – a journalist from Sweden. He was interviewing various spiritual teachers and asking the same questions, and, of course, getting a huge range of answers. His questions included: “Why do you practice? How do you practice? And what results do you get from the practice?” My participation as the translator complicated the situation and created a big obstacle. I felt a particular irritation towards

the monk from Bangkok who brought the journalist to the monastery. There were also my views and opinions about what I thought were idiotic questions asked by the journalist. This made the situation really interesting because *nothing* slipped by Ajahn Chah.

We sat down and the whole farcical scene started to play itself out. The journalist asked questions, then I translated them for Ajahn Chah. Ajahn Chah started talking about something else – asking his own questions and talking about this and that. After some time, he turned to me and asked, “What were those questions again?” I had to re-translate them and then Ajahn Chah went off on another tangent. After a while he said, “Did the journalist ask some questions? Oh, what were those questions?” And then I had to translate the questions yet again and, of course, Ajahn Chah went off again, and then asked, “Has anybody got a pencil and paper? Can somebody write those questions down for me?” So we went to find the pencil and paper. Ajahn Chah then asked, “So what was that first

question?” I had to translate the question slowly enough so Ajahn Chah could write it. “Okay, *why* do we practice?” Ajahn Chah wrote it down. “What was that second question again?” “*How* do we practice?” “Oh, okay,” and he wrote it down.

“What was that third question?” He wrote it down. Then he looked at the journalist and asked really sharply, “*Why* do you eat?”

That question took the journalist aback, and he responded, “Uhh... I’m not quite sure.”

“No, why do you eat?” Ajahn Chah said, “I want an answer to the question, why do you eat?”

The journalist responded, “I eat because I’m hungry.” And Ajahn Chah said, “Exactly – that’s why we practice. We’re hungry – we’re hungry for truth, we’re hungry for peace, we’re hungry for reality. We are suffering, and we’re hungry to be able to free ourselves from suffering.” And then he talked on that theme, explaining that when you really realize you’re hungry, you look around and try to find ways of practice that

make sense to you. And the result is that if you are hungry and you find something to eat, and you find out how to make that food and nourish yourself, you will be full; you will be replete; you will be at ease. And that is the whole purpose of practice.

He put it into something very immediate, natural, and practical, rather than a theoretical and doctrinal position. And he gave me a bad time while he did it. It was very masterful, and he was so skillful at doing that, at picking up on things. He used many different ways of encouraging people in practice. He wasn't fixed in his techniques or his methodologies. He encouraged people to practice and to reap the fruits of the practice. When he talked about meditation, meditation techniques and tools, he would be very open.

When Ajahn Sumedho first went to Wat Nong Pa Pong, he was the first Westerner Ajahn Chah had ever seen; he had not really taught anybody other than local villagers. Ajahn Sumedho had been practicing at a meditation center, where he was a novice for a year; he had recently ordained as a monk.

The center was focused on the Mahasi Sayadaw – technique – a Burmese method of “walking, sitting, walking, sitting.” Ajahn Sumedho found himself getting quite dry. Then he experimented with a technique from the Chan tradition, with translations of a Chan meditation retreat that Master Hsu Yun had given in Hong Kong. When that retreat was given, Master Hsu Yun was about 115 years old and still leading meditation retreats. Master Hsu Yun used a completely different methodology than Ajahn Chah was used to, the *Hua-tou* method of questioning – posing the question, “Who am I?” or something like it – trying to come back to the source of the *knowing*.

Ajahn Sumedho asked Ajahn Chah if he could use this technique, and if he had to follow a particular method. Ajahn Chah asked him what he was doing, what results he was getting, and how he applied it, and said, “Yeah, if it’s working, fine.” He had that kind of openness to different ways of practice and encouraged people to experiment. He compared practice with paying attention to the food you eat. Some foods will upset

your stomach; some foods will give you energy, while some foods will make you sluggish. Some food might taste good but may not be good for you, or might not taste good but be nourishing for you. In the same way that you have to pay attention to the result of the food that you eat, you have to pay attention to different methods, techniques and ways of practice. You have to see what the flavor is, what the results are, what the benefits and drawbacks are.

Ajahn Chah had the sense that there is a pool of options and opportunities that we have to learn how to apply skillfully. Practice is not “by the book, this one method is going to work for everybody.” Ajahn Chah’s approach to practice was not to just “dig in” to a technique, meditation or training and “put your foot to the pedal” and go to the end of it. It’s not a sprint; it’s more like a marathon. You have to be able to pace yourself and be in it for the long haul. You have to be ready to gauge how to sustain practice, how to have continuity of practice, how to make the continuous effort in practice. Continuous effort

is not a “striving and pushing” effort. It’s a *sustaining* effort – a continuity of attention, reflection, application – because that’s what really undermines the habitual tendencies, the defilements, *ignorance* and *delusion*. Steadiness and continuity allow the practice to unfold and to reveal what we need to let go of; what we need to develop. That’s the essence of the practice.

This sense of the naturalness of practice is why Ajahn Chah put a lot of emphasis on *Virtue*. The things that he would emphasize most were Virtue and Right Understanding, *Sīla* and *Sammā-ditṭhi* – meditation grows from that foundation. Wisdom and Penetration rise up out of the foundation of Virtue and Right Understanding, from being attentive to those qualities. There’s a naturalness that’s not about technique or about heroic effort for a short period of time, but really knowing how to be rounded and grounded in the practice. He exemplified that in his own being, his own commitment to virtue and integrity. He was impeccable, but he was never forced. You never got the sense of him worrying about his

precepts or about his conduct. Everything was steeped within him, and the expression of his life and his being was as a person who had tremendous integrity and virtue. In the same way, his wisdom - his discernment - weren't thought out or planned, and he didn't just recite it back to you. It arose out of right view and right understanding. He had contemplated, cultivated, and investigated, questioned and developed it over the time of his training. That's what he encouraged in all of us, to be willing to put in the time and the effort, to be consistent in the practice, to have that continuity of training.

These are some of the reasons why he wouldn't ordain people quickly. It was quite rare in his time to go against the custom of temporary ordination or receiving ordination quickly. With Ajahn Chah, you'd have to be an *Anāgārika* for a year, then a novice for a year, and you would have to stay with him as a monk for five years. It was quite rare that a monk and a teacher emphasized that level of commitment. People would complain, "Why does it have to be so difficult? Why can't a

person take ordination more quickly?” Ajahn Chah responded, “People take ordination quickly, and then they disrobe quickly.” If it’s too easy to ordain, then it’s easy to leave and go off somewhere else. If there’s too much wandering around and doing too many other things, you don’t get it; you don’t reap the fruits of the practice.

You have to be willing to make a commitment to the training, to develop that continuity and consistency of practice. That commitment was something he really emphasized over and over. Those who are willing to stick with a practice, with the training, will reap the fruits of it and the benefits.

That’s probably enough for this evening; these are just things percolating up from my reviewing and remembering different teachings of Ajahn Chah.

I offer that for reflection this evening.



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