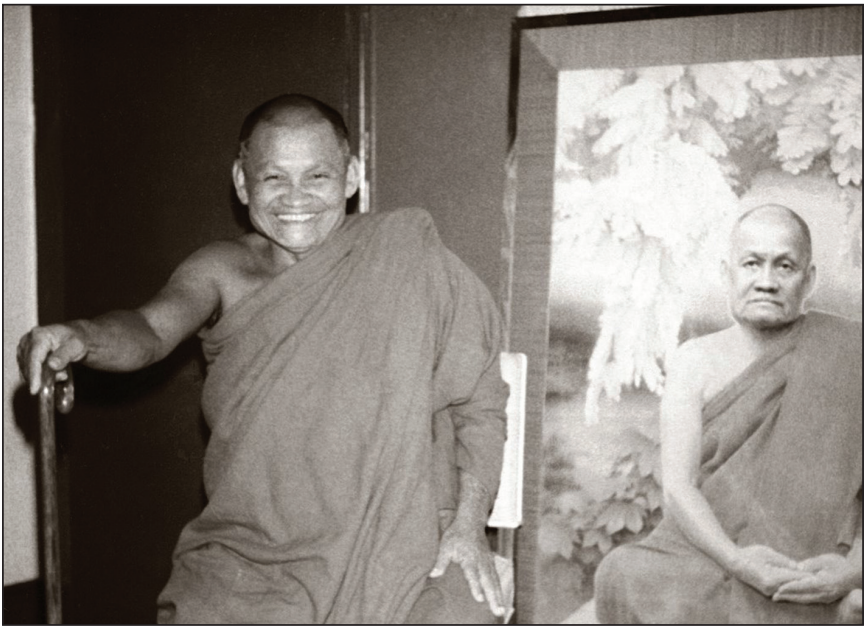
An Introduction to the Life and Teachings of Ajahn Chah

AJAHN AMARO



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

An Introduction to the Life and Teachings of Ajahn Chah

AJAHN AMARO

AMARAVATI
PUBLICATIONS

An Introduction to the Life and Teachings of Ajahn Chah

AJAHN AMARO

Adapted from:

The Introduction to *Food for the Heart*,
Wisdom Publications, 2002.

and *The Collected Teachings of Ajahn Chah,*
Aruna Publications, 2011.
Amaravati Publications, 2011.

An Introduction to the Life and teachings of Ajahn Chah
by Ajahn Amaro

Produced by Aruna Publications, Northumberland, UK.
Published by:
Amaravati Publications,
Amaravati Buddhist Monastery,
Great Gaddesden,
Hemel Hempstead,
Hertfordshire HP1 3BZ,
UK

Contact: abmpublications@amaravati.org
www.amaravati.org

This book is available for free download at
www.forestsanghapublications.org

ISBN: 978-1-870205-43-6

Cover drawing by Gerald Rollason, 1979

The body-text is typeset in Gentium, distributed with the SIL Open Font Licence by SIL International.

First edition, 10,000 copies, printed in Malaysia 2012

DEDICATION

We would like to acknowledge the support of many people in the preparation of this book, especially that of the Kataññnutā group in Malaysia, Singapore and Australia, for bringing it into production.

CONTENTS

One evening in Northeast Thailand...

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

In some ways the group gathered here is a motley crew. Close beside Ajahn Chah (or Luang Por, Venerable Father, as he is affectionately known to his students) is a cluster of bhikkhus (monks) and novices; most of them are Thai or Lao, but there are a few pale-skinned figures among them – a Canadian, two Americans, a young Australian and an Englishman. In

front of the Ajahn sits a well-groomed middle-aged couple, he in a stiff suit and she coiffed and gold-bedecked – he's a member of parliament from a distant province, they're taking the opportunity while he's in the area on official business to come and pay their respects and make some offerings to the monastery.

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

To one side, near the back, is a professor from Freiburg who has come to Thailand with a friend from her local Dharma group to study Buddhism; an American nun has come over with her from the women's section of the monastery to guide her through the forest paths and to translate. Beside them sit three or four other nuns, elder sisters from the nuns' section who have decided to take the opportunity to come over as well, to ask advice from Luang Por about an issue in the women's community and request that he visit their side of the forest and give a Dhamma talk to their whole group – it's been several days now since he last paid them a visit. They've been there for a couple of hours already, so they pay their respects and take their leave, along with the other visitors from the

nuns' section – they need to be back before dark and they're already a little late.

Also near the back, almost at the edge of the pool of light, sits a stern-faced man in his thirties. He is half turned to one side, as if his presence there is uncomfortable, tentative. He is a local hard man, a *nak leng*. Deeply disdainful of all things supposedly religious, he nevertheless has a grudging respect for Luang Por, probably stemming as much from the monk's reputation for toughness and his powers of endurance as from the recognition that, as religious people go, he might be the real thing – 'but he's probably the only one worth bowing to in the whole province.'

He's angry and upset, sick at heart. A week ago his beloved kid brother, who ran with his gang and with whom he'd been through a thousand scrapes together, went down with cerebral malaria and was dead within days. Since then he has felt as if his heart had a spear through it and that everything in the world had lost its flavour. 'If he had been killed in a knife fight, at least I could take revenge – what am I going to do: track down the mosquito that bit him and kill it?' 'Why not go see Luang Por Chah?' a friend said. So here he is.

Luang Por smiles broadly as he makes a point, holding up a glass to illustrate his analogy. He has noticed the stark young figure in the shadows. Soon he has somehow managed to coax him to the front, as if he was reeling in a tough and wily fish; next thing the hard man has his head in Luang Por's hands and is weeping like a baby; next he is somehow laughing at his own arrogance and self-obsession – he realizes that he's not

the first or only person ever to have lost a dear one – the tears of rage and grief have turned to tears of relief.

All this happens with twenty total strangers around, yet the atmosphere is one of safety and trust. For although those assembled come from all walks of life and from all round the planet, they are all united at this one moment and place as *saha-dhammika* 'fellow Dhamma-farers' or, to use another expression from the Buddhist vernacular, they are all 'brothers and sisters in old age, sickness and death' and thus belong to a single family.

This kind of scenario was played out countless times during the thirty years that Ajahn Chah spent teaching. It is significant that both in longer expositions on formal occasions and in such impromptu dialogues, the flow of teaching, and those to whom it was directed in particular, were highly spontaneous and unpredictable. In many ways, when Ajahn Chah was teaching he was like a master musician, both leading the flow of harmonious sound and producing it entirely in response to the natures and moods of the people he was with; integrating their words, feelings and questions in the crucible of his heart, and letting the responses flow forth freely.

In any kind of crowd gathered around him, he might use the example of the right and wrong ways to peel a mango one moment, then be describing the nature of Ultimate Reality the next – with identical matter-of-fact familiarity. In one moment he might be gruff and cold to the inflated, then charming and gentle to the shy; he might crack a joke with

an old friend from the village and, with the next turn, look a corrupt police colonel in the eye and speak sincerely of the central importance of honesty on the Path. Within a few minutes he might scold a bhikkhu for being sloppily dressed, then let his own robe slip off his shoulder and allow his rotund belly to show forth.

A clever question from an academic type, seeking high-minded philosophical discussion in order to display his own acumen, might easily find Luang Por's hand moving to remove his false teeth and then pass them to his attendant bhikkhu to be cleaned up a little. His interlocutor would then have to pass the test of the great master responding to his profound question through broad lips folded in over his gums, before his clean set of teeth was installed...

Ajahn Chah most often gave teachings at such spontaneous gatherings, but he was also very generous with his wisdom on more formal occasions, such as after the recitation of the bhikkhus' rules, or to the whole assembly of laity and monastics on the weekly lunar observance night. However, whether his teachings were of the former or the latter kind, Ajahn Chah never planned anything. Not one syllable of anything he taught was ever plotted out before he started speaking. He felt that this was an extremely important principle, as the job of the teacher was to get out of the way and let the Dhamma arise according to the needs of the moment – 'If it's not alive to the present, it's not Dhamma,' he would say.

Once he invited the young Ajahn Sumedho (his first Western student) to give a talk to the assembly at the main

monastery, Wat Pah Pong. This was a traumatic test – not only to have to speak to a couple of hundred people who were used to Ajahn Chah's high standard of wit and wisdom, but also to have to do it in Thai, a language Ajahn Sumedho had only started learning three or four years before. His mind teemed with ideas and fears. He had been reading about the Six Realms of Buddhist cosmology and their correlation to psychological states (anger and the hell realms, sensual bliss and the heavenly realms, etc.) He decided that this would be a good theme, and he thought through all his ideas and the right phrases for them.

On the big night he gave what he (Ajahn Sumedho) felt was a pretty good exposition, and the next day many members of the Sangha came up and said how much they had appreciated his words. He felt relieved and quite pleased with himself. Some time later, in a quiet moment, Ajahn Chah caught his attention, fixed him with a direct look and gently said, 'Don't ever do that again.'

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

The Forest Tradition

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

When the *Bodhisatta* left the life of the palace at the age of 29, it was to move into the forest and train in the yogic disciplines that were available in his time. The story of how he became dissatisfied with the teachings of his first instructors

and left them to find his own way is well-known. He succeeded, discovering that primal chord of Truth he named 'the Middle Way' under the shade of the *bodhi* tree, beside the River Nerañjara, at what is now Bodh-Gaya, in Bihar State, India.

It is frequently stated that the Buddha was born in a forest, was enlightened in a forest, lived and taught his whole life in a forest and finally passed away in a forest. When choice was possible it was the environment he opted to live in since, as he would say: '*Tathāgatas* delight in secluded places.' The lineage now known as the Thai Forest Tradition tries to live in the spirit of the way espoused by the Buddha himself, and to practise according to the same standards he encouraged during his lifetime. It is a branch of the Southern School of Buddhism, more commonly referred to as 'Theravāda.'

As far as the sketchy historical accounts can tell us, a few months after the Buddha's final passing away a great council of elders was held to establish and formalize the Teachings (the discourses and the monastic rules) in a standardized form of the vernacular called '*Pālibhasa*' – 'the language of the texts.' The Dhamma teachings formulated in this way over the next hundred years form the core of the Pāli Canon, the common basis of a range of subsequent Buddhist schools. A hundred years later there was a second council to go over all the teachings again, in an attempt to keep everyone in agreement.

However, as it transpired, it was at this time that the first major split in the Sangha occurred. The majority of the Sangha wanted to change some of the rules, including allowing the

monastics to use money. A smaller group was cautious about these proposed changes. Instead they felt, 'Well, whether it makes sense or not, we want to do things the way the Buddha and his original disciples did.' The members of the small group were known as the *Sthaviras* (in Sanskrit) or Theras (in Pāli), meaning 'Elders.' After about another 130 years they gave rise to the Theravāda school. 'Theravāda' literally means 'the Way of the Elders,' and that has been their abiding theme ever since. The ethos of the tradition can be characterized as something like, 'For better or for worse, that's the way the Buddha established it, so that is the way we'll do it.' It has thus always had a particularly conservative quality to it.

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

others were more philosophical and metaphysical, with a scholarly appeal.

Out of all this, Theravāda Buddhism crystallized. And despite wars, famines and other cultural upheavals on the Indian sub-continent, the Theravādans have survived to the present day, largely because they had originally become well-established on the island of Sri Lanka, a safer haven than many others. Other Buddhist schools operated there too, but Theravāda Buddhism was continually restored and maintained as the island's main religion.

The lineage eventually spread throughout South-east Asia as at different times missionaries were invited from Sri Lanka and India; they went out to Burma and later on to Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos, and latterly from those countries to the West. Throughout this geographical dispersion of the Theravāda tradition, the theme of continually looking back to the standards of the Pāli Canon has been maintained. When the lineage has been established in new countries, there has always been a strong sense of respectfulness and reverence for the original teachings, and also a respect for the style of life as embodied by the Buddha and the original Sangha, the forest-dwelling monastics of the earliest times.

This is the model that was employed then and has since been carried on, although obviously, during so many centuries, there have been lots of ups and downs. Sometimes the religion would die down in Sri Lanka and then some monks would come from Thailand to revive it again. Then it would fade out in Thailand, and some monks from Burma would boost it up. So its followers supported each other over the centuries, and

the religion has thus managed to keep itself afloat and still largely in its original form.

Another aspect of these cycles, along with degeneration, was the problem of success. Often, when the religion became well-developed, the monasteries would grow rich, and the whole system would become obese and corrupted and begin to collapse under its own weight. Then a splinter group would say, 'Let's get back to basics!' go off into the forest, and again return to those original standards of keeping the monastic rules, practising meditation and studying the original teachings.

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

By the mid-19th century, Buddhism in Thailand had a rich variety of regional traditions and practices, but the general field of spiritual life had become somewhat corrupt, with lax monastic discipline and Dhamma teachings mixed up with

confused vestiges of tantra and animism, plus the fact that hardly anyone practised meditation any more. In addition to this, and perhaps most significantly, the orthodox position, held by scholars and not just by lax, unlearned or confused monks, was that it was not possible to realize Nibbāna in this age, nor, indeed, even to attain *jhāna* (meditative absorption). This was something that the revivers of the Forest Tradition refused to accept. It was also one of the reasons why they were deemed mavericks and trouble-makers by the ecclesiastical hierarchy of the time, and lies behind the obvious disdain many of them (Ajahn Chah included) had for the majority of study monks of their own Theravāda lineage – as well as their refrain that 'you don't get wisdom from books.'

It is necessary to spell this point out, or it will be puzzling that Ajahn Chah should have been as negative about study as he was – especially as Theravāda is supposed to have great reverence for the word of the Buddha. It is a crucial point that delineates Thai Forest monastics: the determination to focus on life-style, and personal experience, as against books (especially the Commentaries). One might find such sentiments presumptuous or arrogant, or as seeming to express the jealousy of an unlearned mind for its betters, unless it is understood that the interpretations of scholars were leading Buddhism into a black hole. In short, it was just the kind of situation that made the spiritual landscape ripe for renewal, and it was out of this fertile ground that the revival of the Forest Tradition emerged.

The Thai Forest Tradition would not exist as it does today were it not for the influence of one particular great master. This was the Venerable Ajahn Mun Bhuridatta. He was born in the 1870's in Ubon Province, where Thailand meets with Laos and Cambodia. It was then, and still is, one of the poorer parts of the country, but it is also one where the harshness of the land and the good-humoured character of the people have led to a depth of spirituality rare in the world.

Ajahn Mun was a youth with a lively mind – he excelled at the local art of *mor lam*, spontaneously versified folk-song, and also felt strongly drawn to spiritual practice. Soon after his ordination as a bhikkhu he sought out Ven. Ajahn Sao, one of the rare local forest monks, and asked him to teach him meditation; he also had recognized that a rigorous adherence to the monastic discipline would be crucial to his spiritual progress. He became Ajahn Sao's student and threw himself into the practice with great vigour.

While both of these elements, i.e. meditation and strict discipline, might seem unremarkable from the vantage point of the present day, at that time monastic discipline had grown remarkably slipshod throughout the region, and meditation was looked upon with great suspicion – probably only those who were interested in the dark arts would be foolish enough to go near it, and it was thought likely to drive one insane or cause possession by spirits.

In time Ajahn Mun successfully explained and demonstrated the usefulness of meditation to many people,

and also became an example of a much higher standard of conduct for the monastic community. Furthermore, despite living in the remote provinces, he became the most highly regarded spiritual teacher in his country. Almost all the most accomplished and revered meditation masters of the 20th century in Thailand were either his direct disciples or were deeply influenced by him. Ajahn Chah was among them.

Ajahn Chah

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

Later, dissatisfied with the slack standard of conduct in his village temple and yearning for guidance in meditation, he left these relatively secure confines and undertook the life of a wandering- or *tudong*-bhikkhu. He sought out several of the local meditation masters and practised under their guidance. He wandered for a number of years in the style of an ascetic bhikkhu, sleeping in forests, caves and cremation grounds,

and spent a short but enlightening period with Ajahn Mun himself. Here is a description of that most significant of encounters, from the as yet unpublished biography of Luang Por Chah, *Uppalamani* – a play on words meaning both 'The Jewel of Ubon Province' and 'The Jewel in the Lotus' – written by Phra Ong Neung.

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

As they walked into the monastery, Ajahn Chah was immediately struck by its tranquil and secluded atmosphere. The central area, in which stood a small meeting hall, was immaculately swept, and the few monks they caught sight of were attending to their daily chores silently, with a measured and composed

gracefulness. There was something about the monastery that was like no other he had been in before – the silence was strangely charged and vibrant. Ajahn Chah and his companions were received politely, and after being advised where to put up their *glots* (large umbrellas from which a mosquito net is hung) they took a welcome bath to wash off the grime of the road.

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

As Ajahn Chah glanced up he would have noticed how prominently Ajahn Mun's collarbone jutted through the pale skin above his robe, and how his thin mouth stained red with betel juice formed such an arresting contrast to the strange luminosity of his presence. As is the time-honoured custom among Buddhist monks,

Ajahn Mun first asked the visitors how long they had been in the robes, in which monasteries they had practised and the details of their journey. Did they have any doubts about the practice? Ajahn Chah swallowed. Yes, he did. He had been studying Vinaya texts with great enthusiasm, but had become discouraged. The Discipline seemed too detailed to be practical; it didn't seem possible to keep every single rule; what should one's standard be?

Ajahn Mun advised Ajahn Chah to take the 'Two Guardians of the World,' *hiri* (a sense of shame) and *ottappa* (intelligent fear of consequences) as his basic principle. In the presence of those two virtues, he said, everything else would follow. He then began to discourse on the threefold training of sīla, samādhi and paññā, the Four Roads to Success and the Five Spiritual Powers, eyes half closed, his voice becoming stronger and faster as he proceeded, as if he was moving into a higher and higher gear. With absolute authority he described 'the way things truly are' and the path to liberation. Ajahn Chah and his companions sat completely enraptured. Ajahn Chah later said that although he had spent a exhausting day on the road, hearing Ajahn Mun's Dhamma talk made all his weariness disappear, his mind became peaceful and clear, and he felt as if he was floating in the air above his seat. It was late at night before Ajahn Mun called

the meeting to an end, and Ajahn Chah returned to his glot, aglow.

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

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

knowing of them. If you understand that point, then there's not a lot to do.'

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

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

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

the forest are individual huts where bhikkhus and nuns live and meditate in solitude, and where they practise walking meditation on cleared paths under the trees.

In some of the monasteries in the West, and a few in Thailand, the physical location of the centre may dictate some small variations to this style: for instance, the monastery in Switzerland is situated in an old wooden hotel building at the edge of a mountain village. However, regardless of such differences, exactly the same spirit of simplicity, quietude and scrupulosity sets the abiding tone. Discipline is maintained strictly, enabling one to lead a simple and pure life in a harmoniously regulated community where virtue, meditation and understanding may be skilfully and continuously cultivated.

Along with monastic life as it is lived within the bounds of fixed locations, the practice of tudong – wandering on foot through the countryside on pilgrimage or in search of quiet places for solitary retreat – is still considered a central part of spiritual training. Though the forests have been disappearing rapidly throughout Thailand, and the tigers and other wild creatures so often encountered during such tudong journeys in the past have been depleted almost to the point of extinction, it has still been possible for this way of life and practice to continue.

Indeed, not only has this practice been maintained by Ajahn Chah, his disciples and many other forest monastics in Thailand; it has also been sustained by his monks and nuns in many Western countries and in India. In all these situations

the strict standards of conduct are still maintained: living only on alms-food freely offered by local people, eating only between dawn and noon, not carrying or using money, sleeping wherever shelter can be found. Wisdom is a way of living and being, and Ajahn Chah endeavoured to preserve the simple monastic life-style in all its dimensions, so that people may study and practise Dhamma in the present day.

Ajahn Chah's Teaching of Westerners

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

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

Despite the primary consideration of keeping all the monastic community to a single harmonious standard, and not making the Westerners special in any way, in 1975 circumstances arose whereby Wat Pah Nanachat (the International Forest Monastery) was established near Wat Pah Pong as a place for Westerners to practise. Ajahn Sumedho and a small group of other Western bhikkhus were looking for a place to fire their alms bowls, and the forest near Bung Wai village was suggested. It was within walking distance of Wat Pah Pong and had plenty of bamboo for firewood, and there were faithful villagers who were long-standing disciples of Ajahn Chah and would be willing to help out. Ajahn Chah sent them off with a smile and said there wasn't really any rush to come back.

Within a few days the villagers had built a thatched roof shelter for the group to have their meals and gather for meditation, and to protect them if it happened to rain. A month or so later the villagers were keen to begin constructing accommodation and have the monks settle there. The plan

received approval from Ajahn Chah, and thus this special training monastery for the growing numbers of Westerners interested in undertaking monastic practice began.

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

Since then many of Ajahn Chah's senior Western disciples have been engaged in the work of establishing monasteries and spreading the Dhamma on several different continents. Other monasteries have grown up in Australia, New Zealand, Switzerland, Italy, Canada and the USA. Ajahn Chah himself travelled twice to Europe and North America, in 1977 and 1979, and wholeheartedly supported these new foundations. He once said that Buddhism in Thailand was like an old tree that had once been vigorous and abundant; now it was so aged that it could only produce a few fruits, and they were small and bitter. Buddhism in the West he likened in contrast to a young sapling, full of youthful energy and the potential for growth, but needing proper care and support for its development.

In the same light, on his visit to the USA in 1979 he commented, 'Britain is a good place for Buddhism to get established in the West but it too is an old culture. The USA, however, has the energy and flexibility of a young country

– everything is new here – it is here that the Dhamma can really flourish.' When speaking to a group of young Americans who had just opened up a Buddhist meditation centre, he also added the caveat, 'You will succeed in truly spreading the Buddha-Dhamma here only if you are not afraid to challenge the desires and opinions of your students (literally 'to stab their hearts'). If you do this, you will succeed; if you do not, if you change the Teachings and the practice to fit the existing habits and opinions of people out of a misguided sense of wanting to please them, you will have failed in your duty to serve in the best way possible.'

The Essentials: View, Teaching and Practice

Before describing the emphasis of Ajahn Chah's teachings, it might be helpful, particularly for those unfamiliar with Theravāda Buddhism in general or with the Thai Forest Tradition in particular, to outline first some of the key terms, attitudes and concepts that they use. Ajahn Chah's teachings and teaching style are set in the context of this tradition, and it is helpful to have a feeling for these fundamental roots in order to have a clearer sense of how Ajahn Chah was able to apply and illustrate it.

The Four Noble Truths

Although there are numerous volumes of the Buddha's discourses in many traditions, it is also said that the entirety

of his Teaching was contained in his very first exposition, called Setting in Motion the Wheel of Truth (SN 56.11), which he gave to five monastic companions in the deer park near Varanasi shortly after his enlightenment. In this brief discourse (it takes only twenty minutes to recite), he expounded the nature of the Middle Way and the Four Noble Truths. This teaching is common to all Buddhist traditions, and just as an acorn contains within it the genetic coding for what eventually takes shape as a vast oak, so too all the myriad Buddhist teachings can be said to derive from this essential matrix of insight.

The Four Noble Truths are formulated like a medical diagnosis in the *ayurvedic* tradition: The symptoms of the disease, the cause, the prognosis and the cure.

The Buddha always drew on structures and forms that were familiar to people in his time, and in this instance this is how he laid out the picture.

The First Truth (the 'symptom') is that there is *dukkha* – we experience incompleteness, dissatisfaction or suffering. There might be moments or even long periods when we experience happiness of a coarse or even a transcendent nature, but there are other times when the heart feels discontent. This can vary from extreme anguish at one end of the spectrum, to the faintest sense that some blissful feeling we are experiencing will not last – all of this comes under the heading of 'dukkha.'

Sometimes people read this First Truth and misinterpret it as an absolute statement, that 'Reality in every dimension is dukkha.' The statement is taken as an value judgement of

all and everything, but that's not what is meant here. If it were, that would mean that there was no hope of liberation for anyone, and to realize the truth of the way things are, the Dhamma, would not result in the abiding peace and happiness which according to the Buddha's insight it produces. What is most significant, therefore, is that these are *noble* truths, not *absolute* truths. They are noble in the sense that although they are relative truths, when they are understood they lead us to a realization of the Absolute or the Ultimate.

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

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

The Fourth Noble Truth is that of the Path, how we move from the Second Truth to the Third, from the causation of dukkha to its ending. The cure is the Eightfold Path, which can be summarized as virtue, concentration and wisdom.

The Law of Kamma

One of the crucial underpinnings of the Buddhist world-view is that of the inviolability of the law of cause and effect: every action has an equal and opposite reaction. This is seen as applying not only to the realm of physical reality, but also, and more importantly, to the psychological and social realms.

The Buddha's insight into the nature of reality led him to see that this is a moral universe. Good actions reap pleasant results, harmful acts reap painful results – that's the way nature works. The results may come soon after the act or at some very remote future time, but an effect which echoes the cause, weak or strong, will necessarily follow. In the Pāli language this dyad of 'action and its result' is called *kamma-vipāka* and can be regarded as close in meaning to the more familiar Sanskrit word karma.

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

> Mind is the forerunner of all things: think and act with a corrupt heart, and sorrow will follow one as surely as the cart follows the ox that pulls it.
>
> Mind is the forerunner of all things: think and act with a pure heart, and happiness will follow one as surely as one's never-departing shadow. (*Dhp 1-2*)

This understanding, learned at an early age and taken for granted in much of Asia, resonates throughout most Dhamma teachings in one form or another. However, even though it is something of an article of faith in the Buddhist world, it is also a law which one comes to recognize through experience, rather than accepting it blindly on the assurance of a teacher or because there is some cultural imperative to abide by it.

When Ajahn Chah encountered Westerners who said that they didn't believe in kamma as he described it, rather than criticizing them or dismissing them as having 'wrong view' or feeling that he had to make them see things his way, he was interested that someone could look at things in such a different manner – he would ask them to describe how they saw things working, and then take the conversation from there.

Everything is Uncertain

Another of the central oft-repeated teachings, is that of the Three Characteristics of Existence. From the second discourse that the Buddha gave (the *Anattālakkana Sutta*, Mv 1.6, SN 22.59), and on through the rest of his teaching career, he outlined the fact that all phenomena, internal or external, mental or physical, have three invariable qualities: *anicca-dukkha-anattā* – impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and 'not-self.' Everything is constantly changing, nothing can be permanently satisfying or dependable, and nothing can truly be said to be ours, or absolutely who and what we are. And

when these three qualities have been seen and known through direct experience, insight can truly be said to have dawned.

Anicca is the first member of the insight-forming triad, and Ajahn Chah stressed its contemplation constantly over the years as being the primary gateway to wisdom. As he says in one of his talks, 'Still, Flowing Water' – 'What we call "uncertainty" here is the Buddha. The Buddha is the Dhamma. The Dhamma is the characteristic of uncertainty. Whoever sees the uncertainty of things sees the unchanging reality of them. That's what the Dhamma is like. And that is the Buddha. If you see the Dhamma, you see the Buddha, seeing the Buddha you see the Dhamma. If you know anicca, uncertainty, you will let go of things and not grasp onto them.'

It is a characteristic of Ajahn Chah's teaching that he habitually used the less familiar rendition of 'uncertainty' (*my naer* in Thai) for anicca. Where 'impermanence' can have a more abstract or technical tone to it, 'uncertainty' better describes the feeling in the heart when that quality of change is encountered.

Choice of Expression: 'Yes' or 'No'

One of the most striking characteristics of the Theravāda teachings is that the Truth and the way leading to it are often indicated by talking about what they are *not* rather than what they *are*. In Christian theological language this is called an 'apophatic method' – talking about what God is not – as contrasted with a 'kataphatic method' – talking about what God is.

This apophatic style of approach, also known as the *via negativa*, was used by a number of eminent Christians over the centuries; one who immediately springs to mind is the famous mystic and theologian St John of the Cross. As an example of this style, in his *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, his description of the most direct spiritual method (i.e. straight up the mountain) runs something like: 'Nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing, and even on the Mountain, *nothing*.'

The Pāli Canon possesses much of the same via negativa flavour, and because of this readers have often mistaken its view on life as nihilistic – nothing could be further from the truth, but it's easy to see how the mistake could be made, particularly if one comes from a culture committed to life-affirming expressions.

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

> 'Who are you, friend? Your face is so clear and bright, your manner is awesome and serene. Surely you must

have discovered some great truth – who is your teacher, friend, and what is it that you have discovered?'

The newly-awakened Buddha replied: 'I am an All-transcender, an All-knower. I have no teacher. In all the world I alone am fully enlightened. There is none who taught me this – I came to it through my own efforts.'

'Do you mean to say that you claim to have won victory over birth and death?'

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

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

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

In the Buddha's second discourse (again, the *Anattalakkhana Sutta*), which was also given in the Deer Park at Varanasi and was the teaching which caused all the five companions to realize enlightenment, this via negativa method is most

clearly displayed. This is not the place to go into the *sutta* in detail, but in summary, the Buddha uses the search for the self (*attā* in Pāli, ātman in Skt) as his theme, and by using an analytical method he demonstrates that a 'self' cannot be found in relation to any of the factors of body or mind.

Having demonstrated this, he then states that, 'the wise noble disciple becomes dispassionate towards the body, feelings, perceptions, mental formations and consciousness.' Thus the heart is liberated. Once we let go of what we're not, the nature of what is real becomes apparent. And as that reality is beyond description, it is most appropriate, and least misleading, to leave it undescribed – this is the essence of the 'way of negation.'

The lion's share of the Buddha's teaching, particularly in the Theravāda tradition, thus addresses the nature of the Path and how best to follow it, rather than waxing lyrically about the goal. For the most part this was also true of Ajahn Chah's style. He avoided talking about levels of attainment and levels of meditative absorption as much as possible, both to counteract spiritual materialism (the gaining mind, competitiveness and jealousy) and to keep people's eyes where they were most needed: on the Path.

Having said that, Ajahn Chah was also notable for the readiness and directness with which he would speak about ultimate reality, should the occasion demand it, and regardless of whether those gathered were young or old, lay people or monastics. If, however, he thought that a person's understanding was not yet ripe (similarly, regardless of

ordination status), yet that person insisted on asking about transcendent qualities, he might well respond, as he once did when asked if there was something outside the conventional body-mind (the five *khandhas*): 'It isn't anything and we don't call it anything – that's all there is to it! Be finished with all of it,' (literally: 'If there is anything there, then just throw it to the dogs!')

Emphasis on Right View and Virtue

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

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

Ajahn Chah saw sīla (virtue) as the great protector of the heart, and encouraged a sincere commitment to the Precepts by all those who were serious about their search for happiness and a skilfully lived life, whether these were the Five Precepts

of the householder or the Eight, Ten or 227 Precepts of the various levels of the monastic community. Virtuous action and speech, sīla, brings the heart directly into accord with Dhamma and thus becomes the foundation for concentration, insight and, finally, liberation.

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

One particular outcome of this relationship, of which Ajahn Chah spoke regularly, is the intrinsic emptiness of all conventions (e.g. money, monasticism, social customs), but the simultaneous need to respect them fully. This might sound somewhat paradoxical, but he saw the Middle Way as synonymous with the resolution of this kind of conundrum. If we cling to conventions we become burdened and limited by them, but if we try to defy them or negate them we find ourselves lost, conflicted and bewildered. He saw that with the right attitude, both aspects could be respected, and in a way that was natural and freeing rather than forced or compromised.

It was probably due to his own profound insights in this area that he was able to be both extraordinarily orthodox

and austere as a Buddhist monk, yet utterly relaxed and unfettered by any of the rules he observed. To many who met him he seemed the happiest man in the world – perhaps an ironic fact for a man who had never had sex in his life, had no money, never listened to music, was regularly available to people eighteen to twenty hours a day, slept on a thin grass mat, had a diabetic condition and had had various forms of malaria, and who was delighted by the fact that Wat Pah Pong had a reputation for having the worst food in the world.

Methods of Training

There were a multitude of different dimensions to the way that Ajahn Chah trained his students. Instruction was certainly given verbally in many of the ways already described, but most of the learning process occurred through what might best be described as situational teaching. Ajahn Chah realized that for the heart to truly learn any aspect of the teaching and be transformed by it, the lesson had to be absorbed experientially, not intellectually alone. Thus he employed the 10,000 events and aspects of the monastic routine, communal living and the tudong life as ways to teach and train his disciples. Community work projects, learning to recite the rules, helping with the daily chores, random changes in the schedule – all these and more were used as a forum in which to investigate the arising of dukkha and the way leading to its cessation.

He encouraged the attitude of being ready to learn from everything. He would emphasize over and over that we are our own teachers: if we are wise, every personal problem, event and aspect of nature will instruct us; if we are foolish, not even having the Buddha before us explaining everything would make any real impression.

This insight was also borne out in the way he related to people's questions – he responded more to where people were coming from, rather than answering their questions in their own terms. Often, when asked something, he would appear to receive questions, gently take them to pieces, and then hand the bits back to the inquirers, who would then see for themselves how they were put together. To their surprise, he had guided them in such a way that they had answered their own questions. When asked how it was that he could do this so often, he replied, 'If the person did not already know the answer they could not have posed the question in the first place.'

Other key attitudes that he encouraged were the need to cultivate a profound sense of urgency in meditation practice, and (again paradoxically), to use the training environment to develop patient endurance. This latter quality is not one that has received a great deal of attention in recent times, particularly in spiritual circles in the 'quick fix' culture of the West, but in the forest life it is seen as almost synonymous with spiritual training. When the Buddha was giving his very first instructions on monastic discipline, to a spontaneous gathering of 1,250 of his enlightened disciples at the Bamboo

Grove, his first words were: 'Patient endurance is the supreme practice for freeing the heart from unwholesome states.' (Dhp 183–85, DN 14.3.28)

So when someone came to Ajahn Chah with a tale of woe, of how her husband was drinking and the rice crop looked bad this year, his first response would often be, 'Can you endure it?' This was said not as some kind of macho challenge, but more as a way of pointing to the fact that the way beyond suffering is not to run away from it, wallow in it or even grit one's teeth and get through on will alone – no, the encouragement of patient endurance is to hold steady in the midst of difficulty, to truly apprehend and digest the experience of dukkha, to understand its causes and let them go.

Teaching the Laity and Monastics

There were certainly many occasions when Ajahn Chah's teachings were as applicable to lay people as to monastics, but there were also many instances when they were not. Such a distinction was not made because certain teachings were 'secret' or higher in some respect, but rather through the need to speak in ways that would be appropriate and useful to particular audiences. Lay practitioners would naturally have a different range of concerns and influences on their daily life – e.g. trying to find time for formal meditation practice, maintaining an income, living with a spouse – from monastics. Also, most particularly, the lay community would not have

undertaken the vows of the renunciate life. An average lay student of Ajahn Chah would commit to a standard of keeping the Five Precepts, whereas the monastics would be keeping the Eight, Ten or 227 Precepts of the various levels of ordination.

When teaching monastics alone, the focus would be much more specifically on using the renunciant way of life as the key methodology of training; the instruction would therefore be concerned with the hurdles, pitfalls and glories that way of life might bring. Since the average age of the monks' community in a monastery in Thailand is usually around 25 to 30, and the precepts around celibacy are kept extremely strictly, there was also a natural need for Ajahn Chah to guide skilfully the restless and sexual energy that his monks would often experience. When well-directed, individuals would be able to contain and employ that energy, and transform it to help develop concentration and insight.

The tone of some of his talks to monastics would also in certain instances be seen to be considerably fiercer than in those given to the lay community. This manner of expression represents something of the 'take no prisoners' style which is characteristic of many teachers of the Thai Forest Tradition. It is a way of speaking that is intended to rouse the warrior heart, that attitude towards spiritual practice that enables one to be ready to endure all hardships and be wise, patient and faithful, regardless of how difficult things become.

Occasionally such a manner could come across as overly forceful or combative in tone; however, those listening to these teachings would bear in mind that the spirit behind

such language was always the endeavour to encourage them, to gladden the heart and provide supportive strength when dealing with the multifarious challenges of freeing the heart from all greed, hatred and delusion. As Ajahn Chah once said, 'All those who seriously engage in spiritual practice should expect to experience a great deal of friction and difficulty.' The heart is being trained to go against the intense current of self-centred habits, so it's quite natural for it to be buffeted around somewhat.

As a final note on this aspect of Ajahn Chah's teachings, particularly with respect to those one might term 'higher' or 'transcendent,' it is significant that he held nothing back as being especially for monastics. If he felt that any group of people was ready for the highest levels of teaching, he would impart them freely and openly. For example, in one of his talks to a group of lay people he stated, 'People these days study away, looking for good and evil. But that which is beyond good and evil they know nothing of,' and then proceeded to give extensive descriptions of how to transcend that dualism. Like the Buddha, he knew nothing of the 'teacher's closed fist,' and made his choices of what to teach solely on the basis of what would be useful to his listeners, not on their number of precepts or their religious affiliation or lack of one.

Counteracting Superstition

One of the characteristics for which Ajahn Chah was most well-known was his keenness to dispel superstition in relation

to Buddhist practice in Thailand. He strongly criticized the magic charms, amulets and fortune-telling that pervade so much of that society. He rarely spoke about past or future lives, other realms, visions or psychic experiences. Anyone who came to him asking for a tip about the next winning lottery number (a very common reason why some people go to visit famous Ajahns) would generally get very short shrift.

He saw that the Dhamma itself was the most priceless jewel which could provide genuine protection and security in life, and yet it was continually overlooked for the sake of the promise of minor improvements to saṃsāra. Over and over he emphasized the usefulness and practicality of Buddhist practice, counteracting the common belief that Dhamma was too high or abstruse for the common person, out of a genuine feeling of kindness for others. His criticisms were not aimed just to break down childish dependencies on good luck and magical charms; rather he wanted people to invest in something that would truly serve them.

In the light of this life-long effort, an ironic twist of circumstance accompanied his funeral in 1993. He passed away on the 16th of January, 1992 and his funeral was held exactly a year later. The memorial stūpa had 16 pillars, was 32 meters high, and had foundations 16 meters deep – consequently, a huge number of people in Ubon Province bought lottery tickets with ones and sixes together. The next day the headlines in the local paper proclaimed: LUANG POR CHAH'S LAST GIFT TO HIS DISCIPLES – the 16s had cleaned up and a couple of local bookmakers had even been bankrupted.

Humour

That last story brings us to a final quality of Ajahn Chah's teaching style. He was an amazingly quick-witted man and a natural performer. Although he could be either very cool and forbidding or sensitive and gentle in his way of expression, he also used a high degree of humour in his teaching. He had a way of employing wit to work his way into the hearts of his listeners, not just to amuse, but to help convey truths that would otherwise not be received so easily. His wit and skilful eye for the tragi-comic absurdities of life enabled people to see situations in such a way that they could laugh at themselves and be guided to a wiser outlook.

This might be in matters of conduct, such as a famous display he once gave of the many *wrong* ways to carry a monk's bag: slung over the back, looped round the neck, grabbed in the fist, scraped along the ground... Or it might be in terms of some painful personal struggle. One time a young bhikkhu came to him very downcast. He had seen the sorrows of the world and the horror of beings' entrapment in birth and death, and had decided that, 'I'll never be able to laugh again – it's all so sad and painful.' Within 45 minutes, via a graphic tale about a youthful squirrel repeatedly attempting and falling short in its efforts to learn tree-climbing, the monk was rolling on the floor clutching his sides, tears pouring down his face as he was convulsed with the laughter that had never been going to return.

Last Years

During the rains retreat of 1981 Ajahn Chah fell seriously ill with what was apparently some form of stroke. His health had been shaky for the last few years, with dizzy spells and diabetic problems, and now it went down with a crash. Over the next few months he received various kinds of treatment, including a couple of operations, but nothing helped. The slide continued, until by the middle of the following year he was paralyzed but for some slight movement in one hand, and he had lost the power of speech. He could still blink his eyes.

He remained in this state for the next ten years, his few areas of control diminishing slowly, until by the end all voluntary movement was lost to him. During this time it was often said that he was still teaching his students: hadn't he reiterated endlessly that the body is of the nature to sicken and decay, and that it is not under one's personal control?

Well, here was a prime object lesson in exactly that – neither a great master nor even the Buddha himself could escape the inexorable laws of nature. The task, as always, was to find peace and freedom by not identifying with the changing forms.

During this time, despite his severe limitations, on occasion he still managed to teach in ways other than just by being an example of the uncertain processes of life and giving opportunities for his monks and novices to offer their support through nursing care. The bhikkhus used to work in shifts, three or four at a time, to look after Ajahn Chah's physical needs, as he required 24-hours a day attention.

On one particular shift two monks got into an argument, quite forgetting (as often happens around paralyzed or comatose people) that the other occupant of the room might be fully cognizant of what is going on. Had Ajahn Chah been fully active, it would have been unthinkable that they would have got into such a spat in front of him. As the words got more heated, an agitated movement began in the bed across the room. Suddenly Ajahn Chah coughed violently, and according to reports, sent a sizeable gob of phlegm shooting across the intervening space, passing between the two protagonists and smacking into the wall right beside them. The teaching was duly received and the argument came to an embarrassed and abrupt conclusion.

During the course of his illness the life of the monasteries continued much as before; the Master's being both there yet not there served in a strange way to help the community

adapt to communal decision-making and to the concept of life without their beloved teacher at the centre of everything. After such a great elder passes away, it is not uncommon for things to dissipate rapidly and for all his students to go their own way, the teacher's legacy vanishing within a generation or two. It is perhaps a testimony to how well Ajahn Chah trained people to be self-reliant that whereas when he fell sick there were about 75 branch monasteries, they had increased to well over 100 by the time of his demise, and have now grown to more than 300 in Thailand and around the world.

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

About 6,000 monks, 1,000 nuns and just over 10,000 lay people camped in the forest for the entire session. Besides these, an estimated 1,000,000 people came through the monastery during the course of the practice period; 400,000, including the king and queen and the prime minister of Thailand, came on the day of the cremation itself.

In the spirit of the standards Ajahn Chah espoused during his whole teaching career, throughout this whole occasion not one penny was charged for anything: food was supplied for everyone through forty-two free food kitchens, run and stocked by many of the branch monasteries; over £160,000

worth of free Dhamma books were passed out; bottled water was provided by the ton through a local firm, and the local bus company and other nearby lorry owners ferried out the thousands of monks each morning to go on alms round through the villages and towns of the area. It was a grand festival of generosity and a fitting way to bid farewell to the great man.

The four lines at the very beginning of this book,
on thunder and rain, are the complete ‘spiritual biography’
that Ajahn Chah wrote for the ecclesiastical authorities
when pressed repeatedly by them to provide one,
so the King of Thailand could award him an honorary title.

About the Author

AJAHN AMARO was born in 1956 in England. He began his training in the forest monasteries of North-East Thailand with Ajahn Chah in 1978. He continued his training under Ajahn Sumedho, first at Chithurst Monastery in West Sussex, England, and later at Amaravati Buddhist Centre outside of London, where he lived for 10 years. In June of 1996, he moved to California to establish Abhayagiri Monastery. Ajahn Amaro lived at Abhayagiri until the summer of 2010, holding the position of co-abbot along with Ajahn Pasanno. At that time he was then invited back to Amaravati Buddhist Monastery in England, to take up the position of abbot of this large monastic community.