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Consciousness and Sensitivity

Extracts from a talk given to the Theravada Class at the Buddhist Society in London, September 1989 by Venerable Ajahn Sumedho.

Sometimes we approach meditation too much from an ideal of trying to control the mind, and get rid of unwanted mental states. It can become an obsession. Meditation can be just another thing we have to do; and this worldly attitude tends to affect what we're doing. See meditation, not as something to measure yourself as a person with, but as an opportunity to be mindful and at peace with yourself and with whatever mood or state you happen to be in at this moment. Learn to be one who's at peace with the way things are, rather than trying to become something, or to achieve a state that you'd like to have.

That whole way of thinking is based on delusion. I remember when I started meditation in Thailand, all my ambitious and aggressive tendencies would start taking over. The way I'd lived my life affected how I would approach meditation. So I began to notice that I began to let go of things and to accept even those tendencies, and to be attentive to the way it is. The more you trust in that, the more quickly you will understand the Dhamma, or the way out of suffering.

Notice how things affect your mind. If you've just come from your work or from your home, notice what that does to your mind. Don't criticise it - we're not here to blame, or to think that there's something wrong with our profession if our mind isn't tranquil and pure and serene when we come here. But notice the busyness of life: having to talk to people, having to answer telephones, having to type, or to travel across London in the rush hour. Maybe we're having to work with people that we don't like in difficult, aggravating situations. Just notice - not to criticise, but just to accept that these things do have an effect on us.

Recognise that this is the experience of consciousness and sensitivity. That's what being born as a human being amounts to, isn't it? You're born, and you have to live a lifetime as a conscious being in a very sensitive form. So what impinges on you, what comes to you from the objective world is going to affect you. It's just the way it is, there's nothing wrong with it. But then as ignorant human beings we take it all personally, we tend to make everything very

personal. It's as if I shouldn't be affected by these things that impinge on me. I shouldn't feel anger, or aversion, or greed, or irritation and frustration, envy, jealousy, fear, anxiety - I shouldn't be feeling these things. If I were a normal, healthy man I wouldn't have any of these problems. If I were a normal, healthy man I wouldn't be sensitive at all - like a rhinoceros, with a tough hide that nothing could ever get through!

I got quite irritated, and wanted to throw that person out of the meditation hall. But then reflecting on it, I realise that the fault was in me, not in the person.

But recognise that being human, we have these extremely sensitive forms. So then you realise there's nothing really wrong with you. It's just the way it is. Life is like this. We live in a society that is just the way it is. Living in London or in suburbia, or in villages or whatever, we can spend our time grumbling because it's not perfect, or there are many things that are irritating, or not very nice about many aspects of our lives. But then being sensitive is like this, isn't it? Sensitivity means that we're going to, whatever it is - whether it's pleasant or unpleasant, pleasurable, painful, beautiful, ugly - we're going to feel it.

And so the way out of suffering is through mindfulness. When you're truly mindful, there's no self. You're not taking life's experiences from the assumptions of being a person. You can try to make yourself insensitive - close your eyes, put ear plugs in your ears, try to be totally insensitive, shut everything out. That's one type of meditation, sensory deprivation. If you stay that way for a while then you feel very calm, because nothing is demanded of you at that time. There's no kind of harsh or stimulating, exciting or frustrating, impingement.

If you're mindful, you have an awareness of the purity of your mind which is blissful. Your true nature is blissful and serene and pure. But then, if you still have the wrong view about it you think, 'I have to have a sensory deprivation experience all the time. I can't live in London any more - even the Buddhist Society is too noisy!'

If our peace and serenity depend upon conditions being a certain way, then we get very attached. We become enslaved, we want to control, and then we become even more angry and upset if anything disrupts or gets in the way of our peace. 'I've got to find some place, a cave. I've got to get my own sensory deprivation tank and find the ideal situation - set up all the conditions where I can keep everything at bay, so I can just abide in the blissful serenity of the purity of the mind.' But then you see, that's coming from desire, isn't it? A self-view - wanting to have that experience because you remember it, liked it and want it again.

I remember one time on a retreat I got so attached to being peaceful that I heard this person - some person was having trouble swallowing. So I was sitting there, and that person would go 'gulp, gulp.' They weren't very loud, but when you're attached to total silence, even a gulp can upset you. So I got quite irritated, and wanted to throw that person out of the meditation hall. But then reflecting on it, I realise that the fault was in me, not in the person.

But mindfulness and understanding the Dhamma allow you to adapt and accept life - the total life experience - without having to control it. With mindfulness you don't have to hold on to bits and pieces that you like, and then feel very threatened by the possibility of being separated from them. Right meditation really allows you to be very brave and adaptable, to be flexible

with your life and all that that implies.

We don't have all that much control, do we? Much as we would like to be able to control our lives, we recognise we really don't have that much control. Some things just get out of our control. Things happen and Mother Nature has her ways of letting us know that She's not just going to follow our desires. Then there are fashions and revolutions, changing conditions, population problems, and airplanes, televisions, technology, pollution. How can we control it, and make it so that we are not being affected by any of it - or only affected in the ways we like?

If we spend our lives trying to control everything, then we just increase the suffering. Even if we get a measure of control over things, we're still going to be like me with the person gulping in the meditation hall; getting very angry when the neighbour turns on the radio too loud, or the airplane flies low, or the fire engine goes by.

Now one thing you can recognise is that when you have a body, you have to live with your body for a lifetime. And these bodies are conscious and sensitive forms. This is just the way it is, this is what being born means. Bodies grow up, then they start getting old, then there's old age, sicknesses, diseases - this is a part of our human experience - and then death. We have to accept the death and separation of loved ones. This happens to all of us. Most of us will see our parents die, or even our children, or spouse or friends, loved ones. Part of all human experience is the experience of being separated from the loved.

By knowing the way it is, then you find yourself quite capable of accepting life and not being depressed and bewildered by the way life happens to be. Once you understand it and you see it in the right way, then you're not going to create any wrong views about it. You're not going to add to it with fears, and desires, and bitterness, and resentments and blame. We have the ability to accept the way life happens to us as individual beings. Even though we're terribly sensitive, we're also tough survivors in this universe.

You look at where human beings manage to live, like Eskimos up in the Arctic and people in deserts. In the most uninviting places on this planet there's usually human habitation. When forced to, we can survive anywhere.

Understanding Dhamma then allows us also to have a fearless attitude. We being to realise that we can accept whatever happens. There's really nothing to be afraid of. Then you can let go of life; you can follow it, because you're not expecting anything out of it, and you're not trying to control it. You have the wisdom, the mindfulness, the ability to roll with the flow, rather than to be drowned by the tidal waves of life.

When you learn to take time to be silent, listen to yourself. Just use the breathing and the body, just the natural rhythm, the feeling - the way your body feels now. Put your attention onto the body, because the body is a condition in nature - it's not really you. It's not 'my' breathing any more, it's not personal. You breathe even if you're crazy, or sick - and if you're asleep you're still breathing. The body breathes. From birth to death it will be breathing. So breath is something that we use as an object to focus on, to turn to. If we think too much, our thoughts get very convoluted and complicated, but if we bring attention just to the ordinary breathing of the body at this moment, at that moment you're actually not thinking - you're

Where is mindfulness?

Amongst all this space
and conditions to be embraced,
A breeze sweeps across my
Face
Yet the heartbeat
cannot be traced.

attentive to a natural rhythm.

Then you might start making problems out of it, 'Oh, I can't concentrate on my breath, blah, blah, blah' Then it becomes 'me' again, trying to be mindful of my breath. But actually in any one moment where you're just with the breath, there's no self. Your self will arise when you start thinking. When you're not thinking, there's no self; and when you're mindful, then the thought isn't coming from the wrong view that 'I am a self.' So thought can be a way of reflection, a way of focussing attention on Dhamma, rather than creating problems, criticism or anxiety about myself and humanity.

Just contemplate, when you get angry you have to think, don't you? If you stop thinking, the anger will go away. To be angry you have to think, 'He said that to me, how dare he. That dirty so and so!' But if you should stop thinking and just use the breath, eventually the feeling of the body that comes with anger will fade out, and then there is no anger. So if you feel angry, just reflect on what it feels like as a physical feeling. It's the same with any mood: contemplate, reflect on the mood that you're in. Just work with it - not to analyse it or criticise it - but merely to reflect on it how it is.

Sometimes people say, 'I get very confused when I meditate - how can I get rid of confusion?' Wanting to get rid of confusion is the problem. Being confused and not wanting it is just creating confusion. So what does confusion feel like? Some of the more stimulating passions that we can have are quite obvious. What we tend to not pay any attention to or dismiss are the more subtle states like slight confusion, or hesitation, or doubt, insecurity and anxiety. And of course, one side of us just wants to get rid of it, just stomp it out - how do I get rid of it? If I meditate, how can I get rid of my fears, anxiety?

With the right understanding, we see that the very desire-to-get-rid-of is suffering. We can bear with the feeling of insecurity if we know what it is, and that it changes, it's impermanent. So you begin to feel more and more confident in just being aware and mindful, rather than trying to develop your practice in order to become an enlightened person. The assumption is that right now you're not enlightened, you've got a lot of problems, you've got to change your life, you've got to make yourself different. You're good enough the way you are right now, so you have to meditate, and hopefully some time in the future you'll become something that you'd like to become.

If you never see the delusion of that way of thinking, then it just carries on. You never really become what you should be, no matter how much effort you put into your meditations. After years of trying to become enlightened, you always feel like a failure, because you've still got the wrong attitude about it all.



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Making Our Minds Up

Six anagarikas will be requesting bhikkhu-ordination at Chithurst on July 1. One of them reflects on some of the doubts

Once upon a time i knew what I wanted out of life. I knew where I was going. I was going to be a great inventor. And I reveled in that sense of confidence and purpose. I felt sorry for those I saw flopping around, not knowing what they wanted or where they were going. In fact, I was secretly rather scared of becoming like one of those floppy indecisive people.

Just how do we stop flopping around and make our minds up? Well, we simply use common sense - don't we? Consider the options and arguments, and aim at gradually reaching a clear and unshakable conviction in what we are doing.

There is nothing like being convinced. It's like falling in love. We are on top of the world.

Unfortunately, any conviction for or against is horribly questionable, doubtable, suspectable and threatenable. The more we get a hit out of conviction, the more we fear the first slight tremors of doubts. The first shake and we panic.

There's nothing worse than doubt and indecision. It's the dejection of having fallen out of love ...having fallen out of inspiration. And once it starts, it won't stop. It spreads. Everything is doubtable.

Peace lies in choosing what has already been chosen.

We can build our lives on an apparently unshakable conviction, prop it up with arguments, cement it with passion and seal it with a cool intuitive knowing that it's right. For a day, for a week, for a year, for a decade.

Until we see through it. And then the world rocks and we panic - and leap to the conclusion that we had it all wrong. Then we doubt that too. We don't know where we are.

In desperation, with no option left, no way out, we can decide to stay with what is happening now - not believing we're right or wrong - and resolve to face the doubts and fear. However, unhappily, that resolve is also doubtable, shakable and collapsible.

We are forced to the choice that all of us have to make eventually. Finding no safety in a decision, or in the resolve to stay with 'what's so', then we simply have to stay with what's so. But not as a second-hand resolve about the future; therein lies only danger and threat. We stay directly with what's so, choosing it at first hand, immediately. We don't decide to do it. We do it.

I am lost.

That's the choice none of us can ultimately avoid. It's the choice the universe inexorably forces us to make. And we will keep spinning around in the world of conviction and doubt until we make that choice.

Most of our other choices are attempts to avoid making this unavoidable choice. For deciding 'I want such and such' is failing to make the only safe choice. Any package of arguments, reasons, intuitions and convictions is threatenable, doubtable and insecure - and it is unsafe because it is a construction. We are building on sand.

Peace lies in choosing what has already been chosen. We learn to stop making our minds up - to see through the Great Inventor. A mind made up will be made down. There is safety where there is no made-up mind, no inventions, no fabrications, no lies.

So how do we choose that uncertainty which we compulsively avoid choosing by making our minds up? Firstly, we need to be honest and acknowledge how unbearably thirsty for certainty and safety we are. See the thirst which makes us make decisions.

Secondly, we need to look closely at those decisions and see that they are inherently unsafe, because they are made up. We might decide to do one thing, but that decision is unsafe. We can decide to not decide and just watch it all - but that decision too is unsafe.

If we really see how unsafe it all is, and are honest about how desperately thirsty we are, then that thirst starts to burn. Despair burns. With nowhere to go, no way out, it turns on itself. The flame is turned right up and turned in on itself.

It burns until it stops, until it is burnt out. And what is left? What is left is what is not made up, what is not put together, what is not constructed. A mind that cannot be 'made up'. The safe choice.

Real faith, true conviction is not a construct. It is trusting what is before construction.

However, in a particular situation often a decision has to be made. We have to be practical, don't we? So we decide on something as a working hypothesis. But if we cling to that, for even one moment, we become afraid of the doubt. And because we fear the doubt, it comes to get us. As it comes to get us, we cling all the more. And so we get hammered.

The thing that would end the doubt and fear would be to let go of deciding to do what we want to do. But we are terrified: if we let go of our decision, we might not get what we want. So we hammer ourselves. Wanting and doubting flare up, until we are hammered into letting go.

In making our minds up, we set them up to be broken down. We create the conditions for doubt by trying to create certainty. For we are afraid of doubt to the degree that we are trying to be certain. We might feel that if we don't hold fast to our decision, the doubt will win over. But actually, if we do that, then the doubt wins over precisely because we are afraid it would. If we are afraid doubt will win, it already has.

In trying to invent certainty for myself, I invent my own doubt. 'I' am the Great Inventor,

In the beauty; in the

drifting of the mind

As it travels afar,

in fantasy - with the wind.

Leaving the reality

of this paradise

far behind:

The truth that speaks;

But cannot be heard.

obsessively struggling to construct the perfectly made-up mindand instead I invent the Frankenstein Monster of Doubt.

In reality, 'I' can't make a secure decision for or against. 'I' can't go one way and 'I' can't go the other. Nor can 'I' form a secure resolve to stay unmoved watching both. There is no room for any of 'my' constructions at all. When 'I' struggle, 'I' burn up. 'I' burn in my own desire.

Finally, the whole vain building project crumbles and one abides in the foundation of real experience, where nothing is made up. Once one has seen the builder, That Great Inventor, and his labouring, the corner-stone is pulled out, the construction collapses and one stands quietly in the peaceful empty ruins.



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Self-Training

On June 17th, Ajahn Chah was 72 years old. At our monasteries, we use this day each year to remember our teacher with gratitude, and to re-dedicate ourselves to the tradition of practice he has passed on. In this spirit, we offer a teaching which he gave to a new monk at Wat Pah Pong, Vassa 1978.

We come here to practise to bring about changes - we change from our old ways. And this is the meaning of asking for guidance (nissaya) - it is asking for guidance in this changing. That is what the Buddha and all the Noble Ones were practising for - to change their ways.

There are of course those things that we do not change - they are called residual tendencies (vassana) - but our personality, our behaviour can be changed.

Like in the story of Venerable Sariputta, who would skip over puddles when he came to them. He had been a monkey in his past life and this tendency remained. Even as an Enlightened One he would go skipping over puddles, but this doesn't mean he was being heedless. As disciples of the Buddha, we cannot remove vassana - only a Buddha can do that. Venerable Sariputta liked hopping from time to time, but he was also full of profound wisdom. It was merely vassana in this case.

When you come to take dependence under a master, it means you are taking an example of what is appropriate behaviour. It's a way of letting go of pride and conceit. The manner of speaking and behaving for all monks is the same; even though we exist as different individuals, we all have the same manner of behaviour. In taking on this training, you are asking for a means of working with conceit. Also, the comfort and suitability of our monastery for the practice of concentration meditation (samatha kammathana) is dependent on everyone's willingness to be harmonious. If everyone is practising differently and following different routines, it is not at all suitable. So we have practice and one routine and everyone benefits.

When you hear the teachings, then the next step is to train yourself accordingly. Study yourself a lot, because the Truth can only be seen in ourselves.

Here, I only occasionally give interviews and formal instruction to my disciples. Actually, instruction given daily can be altogether a waste of time. Soon you don't want it any more. If I kept telling you about virtue, concentration and wisdomimpermanence, suffering and non-selfyou'd soon have all you wanted. You'd become bored with it - not because you're full, but because you've lost interest. So it's up to everyone to help themselves. Nobody can give us true goodness - the Buddha cannot give us reality. The Buddha is the instructor, but it's up to his students to use the instructions to learn to understand themselves.

When you hear the teachings, then the next step is to train yourself accordingly. Study

yourself a lot, because the Truth can only be seen in ourselves. If we see it, we see it here; if we don't see it, then it's here that we don't see it.

Whatever you do, do with total concentration. When you sit samadhi (contemplation), put yourself into lotus posture and sit! Train in this posture. Don't think if you can't do it, then you won't do it - you must train. The practice requires a great deal of perseverance and this quality of mind is necessary to be able to do the work you need to do.

Sitting samadhi means being concentrated in body and mind - not allowing hindrances (nivarana) to carry you away. The purity and goodness of our mind is continually clouded by the hindrances of desire, aversion, laziness and drowsiness, worry, and restlessness and doubt. If we are not disturbed by these things, then that is what is called samadhi. But when these hindrances are in control of our minds, our experience of reality is completely blocked.

Take doubt, for instance. If you think you will go into the village today, but then you think that maybe you shouldn'tthen you change your mind again and think you shouldthen you shouldn't and on and on - doubting is blocking your getting anywhere.

Being caught in sleepiness is the same. When you sit, don't slouch! This can be like a magnet pulling you down into drowsiness. If you feel like lying down, open your eyes wide - stare at something if necessary. Take any point and just stare at it - this can develop samadhi just the same. Don't allow yourself to be caught in drowsiness. When you sit, you must keep your back straight - not all bent. Even though you're not really tired, don't close your eyes, and your mind will become clear and bright. If all you're doing is sitting there sleeping, you're doing nothing at all.

These hindrances need to be investigated for us to tell what is what. For instance, yesterday and last night being Observance Day, we didn't sleep: so today when we sit we feel sleepy. That's natural - nature requires that we rest. But even if we've slept enough at night, when we come to sit samadhi, we can still feel sleepy - that's the killer. Be careful! Open your eyes. Make your mind bright and clear - don't be caught up in drowsiness. If you're caught in it, it obscures all goodness and all reality - you just don't know anything. If you stay with it for a long time you can become addicted. If, having tried everything, you really can't break it, then sleep. But know the right amount.

Personally, I've had very little problem with this one. Provided that it doesn't become too extreme a practice, the thing to do when tired is to enter into deep samadhi for a while. When you open your eyes, the tiredness is completely gone. It's called refreshing your body in an instant. Back in the early days of Wat Pah Pong with my first disciples, I would use samadhi like this instead of sleeping. About one or two o'clock in the morning, I would drop into stillness of samadhi. Thirty minutes later when I opened my eyes I felt fully refreshed and awake. The disciples I had then nearly died trying to follow me - they didn't know how to rest properly.

Going Away

Afternoon becomes evening.

You are going away with the
passing of light.

Soon you will leave your
Tired body where sunken eyes

Are closed in quietness.

Flesh gently covers protuberant

Bone. Breathing is slower.

Now there is only waiting for

Your final exhalation into
The gathering night of peace.

George Coombs

This is why I require that you develop your samadhi practice properly. Don't go saying, 'I want to do it another way' or 'I want to do it differently'. If you live with me, you train according to the way I teach. If you have never trained in this practice, how can you know what we are talking about? This applies to all the practices we do - you cannot appreciate them until you've developed them. You must train. Sitting samadhi in the lotus posture has been the practice ever since the time of the Buddha - nothing has changed. This is how it's done. The more correct your posture, the better your samadhi.

The practice of Dhamma (Truth) and the practice of Vinaya (Discipline/Precepts) go together. The Vinaya is our body and the Dhamma is our mind. That's all there is. We train ourselves - our body and mind. Our body and speech - that's the precepts; and our mind is the Dhamma. They go together. And there are means of training for each level. Just as a fruit has skin, flesh and pith, the Way has precepts (sila), concentration (samadhi) and wisdom (panna).

Following the Vinaya means we are contained in our speech and action, and accordingly the mind is contained - it is collected. If we are skilled in disciplining speech and action, then the faculty of knowing - mindfulness (sati) - is sharp. The mind is as skilled as speech and action, and speech and action are as skilled as the mind. This is religious practice - training of body, speech and mind. There's always something happening in the mind, and if we are doing this practice properly, we are always developing wisdom. We're always studying - constantly knowing what's happening at the ear, nose, tongue, body and mind.

All we can do is train ourselves in this kind of knowing - the knowing will not come from constantly hearing Teaching. When you have firmly developed The One Who Knows (Buddhabhava) in your minds, then whatever comes to you, you will know. When you know, when you are mindful, you are able to contemplate - investigate. This is the self-training.

So on the external level we simplify our life. If your life is too complicated, you'll lose yourself. Speak simply, work simply - simplify everything you do so you will be able to see clearly. If you arrive at wisdom, it will be because you've learned to understand your own body/mind processes and vice versa. Lokavidu* means to see through the world - this is what I am talking about. If you don't know yourself, you don't know the world. And if you don't understand the nature of the world, then you do not understand yourself. When your mind is clear and bright you are able to see clearly, and in this clarity we study - we study discipline, study samadhi, study wisdom. Whatever comes along, we study.

** lokavidu - 'Knower of the Worlds', i.e. one who understands the nature of all conditioned existence. An epithet of the Buddha.*

If we are studying wisely, we know for instance that a tree we look at has the same nature as we have. We see the process of arising, sustaining, decaying and dying in the outside world, and in 'turning inwards' we can know that same process in our own mind and body. The birth and death of the tree, if seen properly, gives rise to understanding. If we are constantly mindful, then we are constantly developing wisdom. We apply to internal world what we understand through our experience of the external. The internal understanding can likewise be applied to our study of the external. Mindfulness and wisdom come easily if you practise in this way. At this point internal phenomena and external phenomena have merged. Internal and external are the same. That means that when we understand ourselves, we will understand everything in the world. So you must keep on with this practice of knowing yourself.

If you forget yourself, if you are not knowing yourself, you will become careless - you do not

know what is going on. Keeping on with this uneven kind of practice makes things very difficult. The very activity of our mind and body is our teacher. If the One Who Knows is constantly present, then you know correctly - all that arises passes. Sometimes there's pleasure, sometimes there's pain; sometimes you like it, sometimes you don't. This is our study material - liking and disliking - not something somewhere else.

Study is constant. If you are not able to establish mindfulness constantly, then you are wasting time - not doing anything. It's that fast -- practice can cease just like that. You've got eyes, but it's like you haven't; ears, but it's like you haven't. You've got everything, but it's like you've got nothing - because you don't know yourself.

For this reason, the Teaching is to turn your minds inwards - watch your own mind. Don't go doubting by thinking that following something 'outside' or somewhere else can help you overcome doubt. All doubts start and finish in our own minds. It is the same with all the hardships, your sleepiness and all the other difficulties you have.

The Buddha taught us to know this very mind and body. He said to know, according to reality, the arising and passing away of nama and rupa - that means this mind and body - not something else. You may go visiting many places and hearing many Teachings, but it always comes back to your putting an end to your own doubts through your own practice. Everyone who practises has to go through this.



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Living with Luang Por

A series of recollections from some of those who trained with Ajahn Chah, or had occasion to meet him during his active teaching years.

Paul Breiter (formerly Ven. Varapanno) writes of his early contact with Ajahn Chah (c. 1970)

One cold afternoon as we swept the monastery grounds with long-handled brooms, I thought how nice it would be, what a simple thing it really was, if we could have a sweet drink of sugary coffee or tea after working like that, to warm the bones and give us a little energy for meditation at night.

I had heard that Western monks in the forest tend to get infatuated with sweets, and finally the dam burst for me. One morning on pindapada, from the moment I walked out of the gate of the wat to the moment I came back in about 1 1/2 hours, I thought continually about sugar, candy, sweets, chocolate. Finally I sent a letter to a lay-supporter in Bangkok to send me some palm sugar-cakes. And I waited. The weeks went by. One day I went to town with a layman to get medicine. We stopped by the Post Office and my long-awaited package was there. It was huge, and ants were already at it.

When I got back to the wat, I took the box to my kuti [hut] and opened it. There were 20-25 pounds of palm and cane sugar cakes. I went wild, stuffing them down until my stomach ached. Then I thought I should share them (otherwise I might get very sick!), so I put some aside and took the rest to Ajahn Chah's kuti. He had the bell rung, all the monks and novices came, and everyone enjoyed a rare treat.

That night I ate more; and the next morning I couldn't control myself. The sugar cakes were devouring me; my blessing started to seem like a curse. So I took the cakes in a plastic bag and decided to go round the monks kutis and gave them away.

For a start I fell down my stairs and bruised myself nicely. The wooden stairs can get slippery in cold weather, and I wasn't being very mindful in my guilty, distressed state of mind.

The first kuti I went to had a light on inside, but I called and there was no answer. Finally after calling several times and waiting, the monk timidly asked who it was (I didn't yet understand how strong fear of ghosts is among those people). I offered him some sugar, and he asked me why I didn't want to keep it for myself. I tried to explain about my defiled state of mind. He took one (it was hard to get them to take much, as it is considered to be in very bad taste to display one's desire, or anger).

I repeated this with a few others, having little chats along the way. It was getting late, and although I hadn't unloaded all the sugar cakes, I headed back to my kuti. My flashlight batteries were almost dead, so I lit matches to try to have a view of the path - there were lots of poisonous things creeping and crawling around in the forest. I ran into some army ants, and

experienced my first fiery sting. I got back to my kuti, feeling very foolish. In the morning I took the rest of the cakes and gave them to one of the senior monks, who I felt would have the wisdom and self-discipline to be able to handle them.

It was a foot in the door and a privilege. Through it, I was to start seeing that there was a way of life in the monastery which is rich, structured, and harmonious.

My heart grew heavy. I went to see Ajahn Chah in the afternoon to confess my sins. I felt like it was all over for me, there was no hope left.

He was talking with one old monk. I made the customary three prostrations, sat down and waited. When he acknowledged me, I blurted out: 'I'm impure, my mind is soiled, I'm no good....' He looked very concerned. 'What is it?' he asked. I told him my story.

Naturally he was amused, and within a few minutes I realised that he had me laughing. I was very light-hearted; the world was no longer about to end. In fact, I had forgotten about my burden. This was one of his most magical gifts. You could feel so burdened and depressed and hopeless, and after being around him for a few minutes it all vanished, and you found yourself laughing. Some times, you only needed to go and sit down at his kuti and be around him as he spoke with others. Even when he was away, I would get a 'contact high' of peacefulness as soon I got near his kuti to clean up or to sweep leaves.

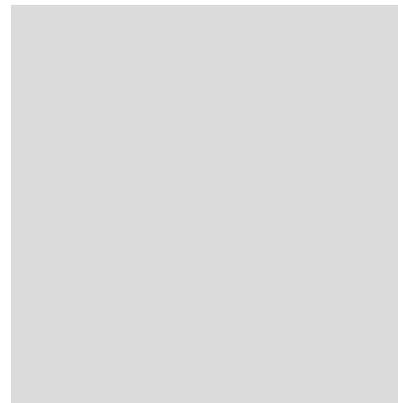
He said, 'In the afternoon, when water-hauling is finished, you come here and clean up.' My first reaction was, 'He's got a lot of nerve, telling me to come and wait on him.' But, apart from being one of my duties, it was a foot in the door and a privilege. Through it, I was to start seeing that there was a way of life in the monastery which is rich, structured, and harmonious. And at the centre of it all is the teacher, who is someone to be relied on.

Finally, he asked why was I so skinny? Immediately, one of the monks who was there told him that I took a very small ball of rice at meal-time. Did I not like the food? I told him, I just couldn't digest much of the sticky rice, so I kept cutting down. I had come to accept it as the way it was, thinking that I was so greedy that eating less and less was a virtue. But he was concerned: Did I feel tired? Most of the time I had little strength, I admitted. 'So', he said, 'I'm going to put you on a special diet for a while - just plain rice gruel and fish sauce to start with. You eat a lot of it, and your stomach will stretch out. The we'll go to boiled rice, and finally to sticky rice. I'm a doctor.', he added. (I found out later on that he actually was an accomplished herbalist, as well as having knowledge of all the illnesses monks are prone to). He told me not to push myself too much. If I didn't have any strength, I didn't have to carry water, etc.

That was when the magic really began. That was when he was no longer just Ajahn Chah to me. He became Luang Por, 'Venerable Father'

Ajahn Munindo describes a visit from Luang Por.

There was a very difficult period in my training in Thailand after I had already been a monk for about four years. As a result of a motor bike accident I had had before I was ordained, and a number of years of sitting in bad posture, my knees seized up. The doctors in Bangkok said it was severe arthritis, but nothing that a small operation couldn't fix. They said it would take two or three weeks. But after two months and three operations I was still hardly walking. There had been all kinds of complications: scar tissue, three lots of general anaesthetic and the hot season was getting at me; my mind was really in a



state . I was thinking: My whole life as a monk is ruined. Whoever heard of a Buddhist monk who can't sit cross-legged.' Every time I saw somebody sitting cross-legged I'd feel angry. I was feeling terrible, and my mind was saying, 'It shouldn't be like this; the doctor shouldn't have done it like that; the monks' rules shouldn't be this way' It was really painful, physically and mentally. I was in a very unsatisfactory situation.

Then I heard that Ajahn Chah was coming down to Bangkok. I thought if I went to see him he might be able to help in some way. His presence was always very uplifting. When I visited him I couldn't bow properly; he looked over me and asked, 'What are you up to?' I began to complain: 'Oh Luang Por,' I said, 'It's not supposed to be this way. The doctors said two weeks and it has been two months' I was really wallowing. With a surprised expression on his face he said to me, very powerfully: 'What do you mean, it shouldn't be this way? If it shouldn't be this way, it wouldn't be this way!'

That really did something to me. I can't describe how meaningful that moment was. He pointed to exactly what I was doing that was creating the problem. There was no question about the fact of the pain; the problem was my denying that fact, and that was something I was doing. This is not just a theory. When someone offers us the reflection of exactly what we are doing, we are incredibly grateful, even if at that time we feel a bit of a twit.

Ajahn Sumedho recalls an incident from his early days with Ajahn Chah (c. 1967-69)

In those days I was a very junior monk, and one night Ajahn Chah took us to a village fete - I think Satimanto was there at the time. Now we were all very serious practitioners, and didn't want any kind of frivolity or foolishness; so of course going to a village fete was the last thing we wanted to do, because in these villages they love loudspeakers.

Anyway, Ajahn Chah took Satimanto and I to this village fete, and we had to sit up all night with all the raucous sounds of the loud speakers going and monks giving talks all night long. I kept thinking, 'Oh, I want to get back to my cave. Green skin monsters and ghosts are much better than this.' I noticed that Satimanto (who was incredibly serious) was looking angry and critical and very unhappy. So we sat there looking miserable, and I thought, 'Why does Ajahn Chah bring us to these things?' Then I began to see for myself. I remember sitting there thinking, 'Here I am getting all upset over this. Is it that bad? What's really bad is what I'm making out of it, what's really miserable is my mind. Loudspeakers and noise, distraction and sleepiness - all that, one can really put up with. It's that awful thing in my mind that hates it, resents it and wants to leave.'

That evening I could really see what misery I could create in my mind, over things that one can bear. I remember that as a very clear insight of what I thought was miserable, and what really is miserable. At first, I was blaming the people and the loudspeakers and the disruption and the noise and the discomfort, I thought that was the problem. Then I realised that it wasn't - it was my mind that was miserable.

Sister Chandasiri first met Luang Por Chah while still a lay woman, during his second visit to England in 1979.

Reflection

Petals of perception

Tenderly unfurl

Over tranquil waters

Of a reflective mind

Where thoughts ripple

And ebb

Into stillness

John B. B.

For me one of the most striking things about Luang Por Chah was the effect of his presence on those around him. Watching Ajahn Sumedho - who hitherto had been for me a somewhat awe-inspiring teacher - sit at his feet with an attitude of sheer delight, devotion and adoration lingers in the mind as a memory of extraordinary sweetness. Ajahn Chah would tease him, 'Maybe it's time for you to come back to Thailand!' Everyone gasped inwardly.....Is he serious?'

Later on a visitor, a professional flautist, began to ask about music, 'What about Bach? Surely there's nothing wrong with that - much of his music is very spiritual, not at all worldly.' (It was a question that interested me greatly.) Ajahn Chah looked at her, and when she had finished he said quietly, 'Yes, but the music of the peaceful heart is much, much more beautiful.'

Ajahn Santacitto recollects his own first meeting with Ajahn Chah.

From the very first meeting with Ajahn Chah, I couldn't help but be aware of how powerful a force was emanating from this person. I had just arrived at the monastery with a friend, and neither of us spoke much Thai, so the possibility of talking with and hearing Dhamma from Ajahn Chah was very limited. I was considering taking ordination as a monk mainly in order to learn about meditation, rather than from any serious inclination towards religious practice.

It happened that, just at that time, a group of local villagers came to ask him to perform a certain traditional ceremony which involved a great deal of ritual. The lay bowed down before the Master, then they got completely covered over with a white cloth, and then holy water was brought out and candles were dripped into it, while the monks did the chanting. And, young lad that I was, very science-minded, rather iconoclastic by nature, I found this all rather startling and wondered just what I was letting myself in for. Did I really want to become one of these guys and do this kind of thing?

So I just started to look around, watching this scene unfold before me, until my eye caught Ajahn Chah's, and what I saw on his face was very unexpected: there was the smile of a mischievous young man, as if he were saying, 'Good fun, isn't it!' This threw me a bit; I could no longer think of him as being attached to this kind of ritual, and I began to appreciate his wisdom. But a few minutes later, when the ceremony was over and everyone got up and out from under the cloth, all looking very happy and elated, I noticed that the expression on his face had changed; no sign of that mischievous young lad. And although I couldn't understand a word of Thai I couldn't help but feel very deeply that quality of compassion in the way he took this opportunity of teaching people who otherwise might not have been open and susceptible. It was seeing how, rather than fighting and resisting social customs with its rites and rituals, he knew how to use it skillfully to help people. I think this is what hooked me.

It happened countless times: people would come to the monastery with their problems looking for an easy answer, but somehow, whatever the circumstances, his approach never varied. He met everybody with a complete openness with the 'eyes of a babe', as it seemed to me - no matter who they were. One day, a very large Chinese businessman came to visit. He did his rather disrespectful form of bowing, and as he did so his sports shirt slipped over his back pocket, and out stuck a pistol. Carrying a pistol is about the grossest thing you can do in coming to see an Ajahn in a Thai monastery! That really took me aback, but what struck me most of all was when Ajahn Chah looked at him, there was that same openness, no difference, 'eyes like a babe'. There was a complete openness and willingness to go into the other person's world, to be there, to experience it, to share it with them.

Ajahn Sumedho recalls an incident during Luang Por's visit to Britain in 1976.

When Ajahn Chah first visited England, he was invited to a certain woman's home for a vegetarian meal. She obviously had put a lot of effort into creating the most delicious kinds of

food. She was bustling about offering this food and looking very enthusiastic. Ajahn Chah was sitting there assessing the situation, and then suddenly he said: 'This is the most delicious and wonderful meal I have ever had!'

That comment was really something, because in Thailand, monks are not supposed to comment on the food. And yet Luag Por suddenly manifested this charming character in complimenting a woman that needed to be complimented, and that made her feel so happy. He had a feeling for the time and place, for the person he was with, for what would be kind. He could step out of the designated role, and manifest in ways that were appropriate; he was not actually breaking any rules, but it was out of character. Now that shows wisdom and the ability to respond to a situation - not to be just rigidly bound within a convention that blinds you.

Paul Breiter

On his visit in 1979, he related that once a Westerner (a layman, I think) came to Wat Pah Pong and asked him if he was an arahant. Ajahn Chah told him: 'Your question is a question to be answered. I will answer it like this: "I am like a tree in the forest. Birds come to the tree, they will sit on its branches and eat its fruit. To the birds, the fruit may be sweet or sour or whatever. But the tree doesn't know anything about it. The birds say 'sweet' or they say 'sour' - from the tree's point of view this is just the chattering of the birds.'"

On that same evening we also discussed the relative virtues of the arahant and the bodhisattva. He ended our discussion by saying: 'Don't be an arahant. Don't be a Buddha. Don't be anything at all. Being something makes problems. So don't be anything. You don't have to be something, he doesn't have to be something, I don't have to be something' He paused, and then said: 'Sometimes when I think about it, I don't want to say anything.'



THIS ISSUE**Editorial:****Cover:** ■ Consciousness and Sensitivity; Ajahn Sumedho**Articles:** ■ Making Our Minds Up; Anagarika

■ Self-Training; Ajahn Chah

■ Living with Luang Por; Several Reflections

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EDITORIAL

To the Spiritual Friend

This issue of the Newsletter is dedicated to Venerable Ajahn Chah (Than Chao Khun Bodhinayana Thera). On June 17th, the occasion of his 72nd birthday, many of his disciples will have gathered at the monasteries founded in his name to express their gratitude and respect in chanting, in Dhamma reflections and in the stillness of meditation. At Amaravati this day was also the occasion for three women to receive the Going Forth (Pabbajja) as ten-precept siladhara, in the presence of a Sangha from five of the monasteries in our immediate 'family'. In Going Forth into the Sangha one is seeking to live in a mutually supportive relationship, which is an opportunity for us all to reflect on the qualities of the Kalyanamitta, the spiritual friend.

Bearing with the difficulties of an untrained mind requires faith and a strong heart. At first glance the monastic life can seem emotionally sterile, with no feeling or warmth, but its support is of a practical rather than showy nature. The finest quality of spiritual friends is not that they are particularly effusive, but that they understand from their own experience that the defilements are not-self. From such detachment, compassion as well as wisdom naturally springs. And as we live in relationship, these qualities in others catalyse and strengthen them in ourself. On the path of insight, it is through detachment and dispassion that we become a good friend to others - and, most remarkably, to ourselves.

It is because Ajahn Chah so exemplified the qualities of a spiritual friend, and could give birth to that friend in one's own heart, that he is referred to as 'Luang Por'. The term means literally 'Venerable Father', but it can convey untranslatable dimensions of affection, devotion and respect.

It's just as well that I'm not perfect - otherwise you might
think that the Buddha was to be found anywhere outside
of your mind.

The formation of a cult around a teacher would be very much against the way of the Buddha and the wishes of Ajahn Chah himself. He always regarded himself as a simple forest monk who, aware of his many human weaknesses, had surrendered himself to living under the Vinaya discipline to become one of the many disciples of the Buddha. His practice had great faith in the Buddha and a devotion that brought forth immense effort and resourcefulness. As a teacher he imparted these qualities to those who wished to receive his guidance, but without making any personal claims.

Jack Kornfield, who trained as a bhikkhu under Ajahn Chah, tells of an occasion when he was having a lot of irritation with Wat Pah Pong, himself and Ajahn Chah. Going to see the Master, he let forth a diatribe against the monastery and the style of practice, finally criticising Ajahn Chah for some of his 'unenlightened' idiosyncrasies. Ajahn Chah was not living up to what Jack felt an enlightened master should look like. Luang Por laughed and replied: 'Good. It's just as well that I'm not perfect - otherwise you might think that the Buddha was to be found anywhere

outside of your mind. Go back to your kuti and meditate.' With wisdom and humour, Ajahn Chah could even use his own limitations as a means of pointing to where the Dhamma is to be found.

It was also the case that his means of causing someone to review their own attachments could be stern. Just as it's not always so right to be strict, it's not always so kind to be sweet. A spiritual friend points out that the highest form of refuge is not any person, but one's own practice, independent of circumstances. Although not-self, there are loving-kindness, joyousness and wisdom in the heart. We should aspire to grow beyond seeking them elsewhere.

As long as we take even the Kalyanamitta to be outside of ourselves, eventually we're going to suffer when they leave, die or fail to live up to our image of them. The Kalyanamitta is always present in the pure and compassionate heart that is the result of years of letting go - in the detachment, dispassion and that cessation of self-view that allows the mind to rest in inner stillness. For those going forth, one can have no higher wish than that they realise that for and in themselves - and bring it forth in the hearts of others.

Kindred Sayings Vol. V: Chap. XLV; 1 (ii)

Ajahn Sucitto

'It is the whole, not the half, of the holy life - this friendship, this association, this intimacy with what is lovely. Of a monk who is a friend, an associate, an intimate of what is lovely we may expect this - that he will develop the Ariyan eightfold way, that he will make much of the Ariyan eightfold way.

'And how, Ananda, does such a monk develop and make much of the Ariyan eightfold way?

'Herein, Ananda, he cultivates right view ...right aim...right speech, right action, right living, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration, which is based on detachment, on dispassion, on cessation which ends in self-surrender....

'It is by this method, Ananda, that you are to understand how the whole of this holy life consists in friendship, in association, in intimacy with what is lovely.'

