



# FOREST SANGHA newsletter

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## THIS ISSUE

### Signs of Change: ■

**Cover:** ■ Ajahn Chah remembered; Jack Kornfield

**Articles:** ■ Heart of a Legacy; Luang Por Chah

■ Freedom in Restraint; Sister Sundara

■ Turning the Western Wheel; Ven. Sobhano interviews Aj. Amaro

■ Faith in Awakening; Many Monastics Reflect

**Editorial:** ■ Seize the Time; Ajahn Sucitto

**HOME** ■

**BACK ISSUES** ■

## Ajahn Chah Remembered

Jack Kornfield trained as a bhikkhu under Ven. Ajahn Chah in the early 1970's. Subsequently, he disrobed but has continued to teach meditation and Dhamma in America. In this talk, he recalls the wisdom of Ajahn Chah and his way of teaching.

Ajahn Chah had four basic levels of teaching, and each one, although at times very difficult for the students, was taught with a lot of humour and a lot of love. Ajahn Chah taught that until we can begin to respect ourselves and our environment, practice doesn't really develop. And that dignity, the ground of practice, comes through surrender, through impeccable discipline. A lot of us in the West understand freedom to mean freedom to do what we want, but I think you can see that to follow the wants of the mind isn't terribly free. It's actually rather troublesome.

A deeper freedom, taught through Dhamma, is the freedom within form: the freedom we can find while relating to another human being, the freedom of being born in a body with its limitations, and the freedom of a tight monastic form. What Ajahn Chah did was create a situation of dignity and demand. He really asked a lot from people probably more than they'd ever been asked in their whole life - to give, to pay attention, to be wholehearted. Sometimes practice is wonderful: the mind gets clear enough that you smell and taste the air in ways that you haven't since you were a child. But sometimes it's difficult. He said, "That's not the point; the point is somehow to come to inner freedom."

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We used to sit for long hours at times, and the meditation hall for the monks was a stone platform -they don't use cushions in Asia. You have a square cloth, like a handkerchief, that you put down on the stone to sit on. I remember when I started, because sitting on the floor was so painful, I would arrive early at the hall and get a place where I could sit next to one of

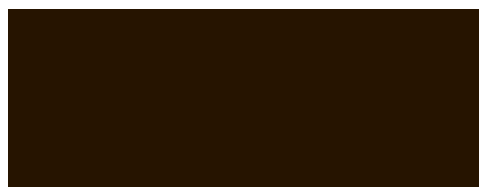
the pillars and lean against it. After about a week of being with Ajahn Chah, he gathered the monks together for an evening talk after the sitting and he began to talk about how the true practice of Dhamma was to become independent in any circumstance; to not need to lean on things. And then he looked at me.

Sometimes you would sit while he'd talk to someone or receive visitors, and you couldn't leave until you were dismissed. And you'd sit and sit and you'd look at your mind and it would go: 'Doesn't he know that we are sitting here? Doesn't he know I'm thirsty or I want to get up?' And he'd be talking away - he knew very well. And you'd sit and sit and just see all the movement of the mind. We would sit for hours. The quality of endurance in the monks' life in the forest, where you just sit and sit and sit, is a very important one.

He trusted that people came in order to learn and grow and when it was hard, that was all right by him. He didn't care if people had a hard time. He would go up to them when they were having a hard time and he'd say, "Are you angry? Whose fault is that, mine or yours?" So one really had to give up a lot, but it wasn't to him or for him - it was for oneself. With surrender and dignity one learnt to open up and see clearly. It is essential in our practice to be unflinchingly honest about ourselves and the world - just as he was.

He would sit under his kuti and various lay visitors and other disciples would come and also some of his monks would be sitting around and he would make fun of people. He'd say, "I'd like to introduce you to my monks. This one, he likes to sleep a lot. And this one, he is always sick, his health is his thing; he just spends his time worrying about his health. And this one is a big eater - he eats more than two or three other monks. And this is a doubter over there, he really likes to doubt, really gets into it. And can you imagine, he had three different wives at the same time. And this one likes to sit a lot, all he does is go and sit in his kuti; I think he is afraid of people." And then he'd point to himself and say, "Myself, I like to play teacher."

Once, when he came to the USA, there was a man who had been a monk with him for a long time who had then disrobed and taken ordination as a Zen priest. So he said, "I can't figure out this guy," - this man was acting as his translator - "he is not quite a monk and he is not quite a lay person. He must be some kind of a transvestite." And throughout the next ten days he kept introducing this man as Miss whatever his name was - Frank or John. "This is Miss John. I'd like you to meet my transvestite translator. He can't quite make up his mind." He was very funny but he was unstintingly honest. He really could make people look at themselves and their attachments. When I was here and I was translating for him, he said, "Even though I don't speak any English, I know the truth is that my translator leaves out all the really hard things I say. I tell you painful things and he leaves out all the things that have a sting in them, makes them soft and gentle for you. You can't trust him."



First comes dignity and surrender - really seeing the power of one's willingness to live in a full way in the Dhamma. And secondly one has to learn to see honestly, to be honest about oneself and the people around one, to see one's limits and not to be caught in the things outside. When I asked what is the biggest problem with new disciples, he said, "Views and opinions about everything. They are all so educated. They think they know so much. When they come to me, how can they learn anything? Wisdom is for you to watch and develop. Take from the teacher what's good but be aware of your own practice. If I am resting while you all sit up, does it make you angry? If I say that the sky is red instead of blue, don't follow me blindly. One of my teachers ate very fast and made noises as he ate. Yet he told us to eat slowly and mindfully. I used to watch him and got very upset. I suffered, but he didn't. I watched the outside. Later, I learned. Some people drive very fast but carefully, and others drive slowly and have many accidents. Don't cling to rules or to form. If you watch others at the most ten percent of the time, and yourself ninety percent, this is proper practice. First I used to watch my teacher, Ajahn Tongrath, and had many doubts. People even thought he was mad. He would do strange things and be very fierce with his disciples. Outside he was angry, but inside there was nobody, nothing there. He was remarkable. He stayed clear and mindful until the moment he died. Looking outside of yourself is comparing, discriminating; you won't find happiness that way. No way will you find peace if you spend your time looking for the perfect man, or the perfect woman or the perfect teacher."

The Buddha taught us to look at the Dhamma, the Truth, not to look at other people, to see clearly and to see into ourselves; to know our limits. Ram Dass asked him about limits. He asked, "Can you teach if your own work isn't completed, if you're not fully enlightened?" And he replied, "Be honest with them. Tell them what you know from your heart and tell people what's possible. Don't pretend to be able to lift big rocks when you can only lift small ones. Yet it doesn't hurt to tell people that if you exercise and if you work, it's possible to lift this. Just be straightforward and assess what's truly reasonable." Surrender, and dignity in that, and real impeccability: this is the ground. Then there's clarity, seeing what's true in oneself, seeing one's limits, seeing one's attachments. Then the third way he taught was by working with things.



Ajahn Chah seated in front of Sumedho Bhikkhu with Dr. Burns (Suvicanno Bhikkhu) on the left and Jack Kornfield (Sunyo Bhikkhu) to the right.

Working is done in two parts: one by overcoming obstacles and hindrances, and the other by letting go. Overcoming: the first Dhamma talk I gave was at a large gathering, Magha Puja festival day, and in a hall filled with five hundred or one thousand villagers. We sat up all night, alternatively sitting for one hour and then listening to a talk given by one of the teachers from his monasteries. He had several hundred monks there at that time; they all came together from the branch monasteries for that day. And then in the middle of the night with no preparation he said, "Now we'll hear a Dhamma talk from the Western monk." I'd never given a Dhamma talk before, much less in Lao, the local dialect. There was no time, I had to just get up and say what I could say. He had his chief Western disciple, Ajahn Sumedho, get up and give a talk. Sumedho ended after an hour and Ajahn Chah said, "Talk more." So Sumedho talked another half-an-hour; he didn't have much to say, people were getting bored, he was getting bored, he finished. Ajahn Chah said, "Now more." Another half-an-hour, three-quarters-of-an-hour, it was getting more and more boring - he's run out of things to say. People are sleeping; Sumedho doesn't know what to say, finishes finally and Ajahn Chah says, "More, a bit more." Another half-an-hour -it was the most boring talk! And why would he do it? He got Ajahn Sumedho to learn not to be afraid of being boring. It was wonderful.

He encouraged people to put themselves in situations they were afraid of. He would send people who were afraid of ghosts to sit outside at night in the charnel ground. I would go sometimes - because I wasn't afraid of ghosts, it was a way of showing off - but for them it was really scary. Or he had people go away out in the forest and meditate, and face the fear of tigers. The spirit of the practice was to really make yourself work with things to overcome them. He pushed you into what you disliked. If you liked to be alone in the forest, you were assigned to a city monastery in Bangkok. And if you liked the city and the easy life and good food, he'd send you to some impoverished forest monastery where there was just rice and tree leaves to eat. He was a real rascal. He knew all of your trips and he could find them and he would somehow, in a very funny and gentle and yet direct way, really make you look to see where you were afraid or attached. Fear, boredom, restlessness- fine, sit with it. Be bored, be restless and die, he would say over and over again. Die in that restlessness, die in that fear, die in that boredom. People were sleepy, great: the ascetic practice he'd assign would be to sit up all night and if you wouldn't sit, walk, walk more, walk backwards if you were really sleepy. Whatever it took, to really go against it.

With anger, restlessness, the same. He said, "You are restless. Fine, go back and sit. Sit more when you are restless, don't sit less." He said it's like starving a tiger to death in a cage of mindfulness. It's not that you need to do anything about the tiger - the tiger being your anger or restlessness - just let it roam around in the cage. But you make the cage around it with your sitting. He really made people look at where they were, made them face it. But still, it was done with humour and it was done with balance. He wouldn't allow people to do fasts, except very rarely. He wouldn't even allow people to do long solitary practice, unless he felt it was really good for them. Some people he'd make work: "You need to know the strength of the ox cart," he would say, "and not overload it." He made space for each person to grow at their own pace. The first part of working was really working to overcome difficulties. He said, "The way of Dhamma is the way of opposites. If you like it cold, you should have it hot, and if you like it soft, take it hard." Whatever it was, to be really willing to let go, to be free.

The second part of working was by the practice of real mindfulness, of being aware of things and letting go of them. In terms of form, this meant to let go of attachments to physical possessions. 'Letting go', however, also included matters of custom. I remember the villagers came to complain to him because he'd set up what still exists as a monastery for training Westerners. And these Westerners were celebrating Christmas, with a Christmas tree and all. The villagers came and said, "Listen, you told us we were going to have a forest monastery for Buddhist monks by our village, and these Westerners are doing Christmas. It doesn't seem right." So he listened to them and said, "Well, my understanding is that the teachings of

Christianity are the teachings of loving-kindness, of surrender and compassion, of seeing one's neighbour as oneself, of sacrifice, of non-attachment -many of the basic principles of Buddha-Dhamma. For me, it seems all right that they celebrate Christmas, especially since it is a holiday of giving and generosity, of love. But if you insist, we won't celebrate Christmas there any more." The villagers were relieved. He said, "We'll have a celebration, but instead, let's call it ChrisBuddhamas." And that was the celebration. They were satisfied, and he was satisfied.

It wasn't as if the way to do it was through some particular form, but to let go of form, to let go of doubt. He said, "You have to learn to watch doubts as they arise. Doubting is natural; we all start off with doubts. 'What's important is that you don't identify with them or get caught up in endless circles. Instead, simply watch the whole process of doubting. See how doubts come and go. Then you will no longer be victimised by them.'" To see them, to know them, to let go. The same with judgement and fear. To feel them, to experience them as physical events, as mental states and yet not be caught. To eventually come to see all of the energies - the difficult ones of anger, fear, sleepiness, doubt and restlessness; the subtle ones of our attachment to pride or to stillness, quietness or even to insight. Just to see them and allow them to come and go, and come to a really profound kind of equanimity.

He said, "Sitting for hours on end is not necessary. Some people think that the longer you can sit, the wiser you must be. I've seen chickens sitting on their nests for days on end. Wisdom comes from being mindful in all postures. Your practice should begin as you wake up in the morning and should continue until you fall asleep. Each person has their own natural pace. Some of you may die at age fifty, some at age sixty-five, some at age ninety. So too, your practice will not be identical. Don't worry about this. What is important is only that you keep watchful, whether you are working, sitting, or going to the bathroom. Try and be mindful and let things take their natural course. Then your mind will become quieter and quieter in any surroundings. It will become still, like a clear forest pool. Then all kinds of wonderful and rare animals will come to drink at the pool. You will see clearly the nature of all things in the world. You'll see many wonderful and strange things come and go, but you will be still. This is the happiness and understanding of the Buddha."



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	<b>Editorial:</b> ■ Faith in Awakening; Many Monastics Reflect ■ Seize the Time; Ajahn Sucitto	

## Heart of a Legacy

*Luang Por Chah has affected many people - even those who never met him. Dozen, a lay practitioner, writes of how he came to appreciate the legacy of Ven. Ajahn Chah.*

For a number of years I've practised Buddhist meditation with Soten Gempo Sensei, the Zen teacher who has occasionally held retreats at the Amaravati Retreat Centre. Such retreats are an opportunity for concentrated focus on personal practice, with very little time for anything else. However even on my first visit to Amaravati I remember catching glimpses of the resident community - slow figures in white or brown robes crossing the courtyard, ringing the bell - silent shapes in the field behind the retreat centre, absorbed in walking. I remember feeling surprised that such fleeting contacts made such an impression - who were those people? Why were they there and what were they doing? I started making short detours through the Amaravati office while on my way to and from my retreats. I discovered the Forest Sangha Newsletter... and books; books for free distribution! Keeping my eyes and ears open, I started to piece together a picture: the Theravadin tradition; Thailand; again and again the name of Ajahn Chah ... I remember Ajahn Chah's face smiling out of a calendar that hung above a door in the mens' dormitory, and a photograph of two monks in the mens' lounge, one sheltering the other with a parasol, with more impossibly smiling faces, almost laughing. During a retreat, Amaravati held an exhibition on Buddhist lay life; when I thought no-one was about I sneaked in for a look.

Once, angry and agitated, I marched from my retreat across to the Amaravati office and told the first person in brown I met that I needed to talk to someone. There was no fuss or protest; I was introduced to a quietly spoken monk who listened with silent attention to my questions. "Where is the beginning of the Buddha Way?" I demanded, (suddenly recognising the monk as one of those in the photograph - the one with the parasol). "This is a good question," came the untroubled reply ... The talking went on for about an hour.

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It's collaboration, isn't it ... the monks' life .. the holy life. A collaboration between the monks and the lay people. That's how it's possible.

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Afterwards, the monk suggested I might like to stay and listen to the evening chanting. It was unintelligible, but it left me with a sense of deep calm. I went back to the retreat centre and finished my retreat. One day, about two years later, I was in Exeter visiting other students of Soten Gempo Sensei when someone suggested visiting the Devon Vihara for the Sunday evening talk. It was given by the same quiet spoken monk I'd met before, the monk with the parasol. Afterwards, we had a chance to speak over a cup of tea ... to my surprise, he remembered me! Just before we left, he gave me the phone number of a lay Theravadin group

who met close to my home in Cornwall. He suggested that they and the Zen group I belong to might like to sit together sometimes. When I eventually got around to ringing some months later, it turned out that a monk, a 'bhikkhu', was staying with the group's organiser.

My wife and I, together with our two young daughters, went to visit the bhikkhu. Of course, we were all on our best behaviour; so many rules, so many precepts - wouldn't it be terrible to offend! The bhikkhu we met had the same patience, the same calm, and when one of the children asked, "Why did you become a monk?"... the same smile! I remember when, half way through a conversation several weeks later, some of the pieces I'd been struggling with suddenly fell into place. "It's collaboration, isn't it ... the monks' life .. the holy life. A collaboration between the monks and the lay people. That's how it's possible." I remember the delight on the bhikkhu's face. Suddenly, as if I'd taken a step back from a pointillist canvas, a picture started to take shape. Having realised what an opportunity the bhikkhu's visit represented, it only seemed natural to help out. For a few weeks, offering dana became a regular part of our weekend routine. By now, I was getting used to surprises, so it came as only half a surprise when I realised how much we were getting from the giving.

The sitting went on all night, from seven-thirty in the evening until seven-thirty the following morning, with two short breaks for tea. In the shrine room, flowers and elegant candles framed a picture of Ajahn Chah. More candles surrounded and illuminated an eclectic collection of Buddha images that served as a focus for the room. The light was dim, but warm; there was no sense of gloom. The atmosphere was one of quiet absorption - just the quality I remembered from the solitary walking figures in the field at Amaravati.

The sitting was very strong. The senior bhikkhu spoke with simplicity and great feeling about Ajahn Chah, about how the wheel of Dhamma is turned from generation to generation, about how that movement can be traced back through successive teachers to the point when the Buddha first set it in motion, about how all Dhamma is an expression of that sublime awakening. The talking continued - other people speaking with the same depth of feeling about simple events - Ajahn Chah laughing, Ajahn Chah washing, Ajahn Chah eating, Ajahn Chah cleaning his teeth. And quite suddenly the pieces all fell into place. For a few seconds, the picture was entirely clear: the calm; the silent attention; the smile; a solitary individual ringing the bell in the courtyard at Amaravati; the unintelligible, impossibly serene chanting; the figures

## Walking to Rest

In no thing wakes this within-me nourishing  
Heart. Its love is light, poised in abandonment,  
holding no-one into the mass of birth.  
Even the plausible urge for atonement  
is too weighty, too selfish an act for truth.  
Only say softly that life plays the moment  
wrapped in the warmth of its own body-breath:  
all our worlds rest when we are the cherishing.

*Sucitto Bhikku*

walking in the field behind the retreat centre; the patient answers to my questions and behind it all the wheel turning - Ajahn Chah, his teachers, his teachers' teachers, all the way back.

I remember feeling tremendous gratitude, both to Ajahn Chah, to the Amaravati community, and to the bhikkhus I'd met. Most of all, I felt gratitude for the opportunity to be at the vihara and say 'thank you'. Sitting quietly in the midst of these reflections, I felt the small beginnings of a sense of responsibility for what happens next. There is a short Zen verse which is usually chanted just before a Dharma talk is given.

The Dharma,  
incomparably profound and infinitely subtle,  
Is rarely encountered, even in millions of ages.  
Now we see it, hear it, receive and maintain it;  
May we completely realise the Tathagata's true meaning.

Although I've known this verse by heart for several years, I'd never understood its challenge. Ajahn Chah received and maintained the Dhamma, helping to keep the wheel turning for many years. How will the Dhamma be received and maintained in the years to come? Who will put a hand to the wheel? If not us - then who?





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## Freedom in Restraint

*Sister Sundara reflects on the value of restraint within spiritual practice in a talk given during a retreat at the Insight Meditation Society, Massachusetts.*

When the Buddha taught the First Noble Truth, he said that taking refuge in human existence is an unsatisfactory experience. If one attaches to this mortal frame, one will suffer. Not getting what you want is painful - that's quite easy to relate to. Getting what you don't want can also be painful. But as we walk a little further in the footsteps of the Buddha, even getting what we want is painful! This is the beginning of the path of awakening. When we realise that getting what we want in the material world is unsatisfactory, that's when we start to mature. We're not children any more, hoping to find happiness by getting what we want or running away from pain. We live in a society that worships the gratification of our desires. But many of us are not really interested in just gratifying desires, because we know intuitively that this is not what human existence is about.

I remember many years ago I was trying to understand what I thought Truth was, but I had no concept of it. It was something beyond the reach of either my thinking mind or my emotions, something that transcended this material realm, this cycle of birth and death. As time went on, the desire to live a life that was truthful and real became the most important thing. I was trying to harmonise my thoughts and my aspirations so that I could come to a point of peace. But there was something in between my mind and my aspirations - a huge gap - and that was what I called 'myself', this body and its five physical senses.

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Many of us tend to look with alarm upon anything that is going to bind us, any convention that is going to limit our freedom.

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At the time, I didn't realise that the Buddhist teaching presents the human being with a sixth sense, the mind, the platform on which thoughts can arise. Mind and body are like a reservoir of energy and I found that my level of energy fluctuated, depending on how I used my mind and body. My way of relating to the world was connected with the clarity of my mind, and that clarity was very much dependent on the degree of energy I had. It seemed quite urgent to understand how I could live my life without wasting energy needlessly. Then I could rally my forces and gain understanding.

Many of us have not been brought up with a very disciplined life-style. In my family, children were encouraged to express themselves totally, so they would never become repressed, neurotic individuals. Unfortunately, doing what you want, when you want, doesn't bring much wisdom to your life, nor much compassion or sensitivity. In fact, it makes you very selfish. Although I had not been inculcated with any great sense of discipline or respect for life and

living beings as a child, I could appreciate life, the beauty of being alive, and the importance of not wasting this life.

When I came across meditation and the practice of insight, this seemed a much easier introduction to discipline than following precepts or commandments. Many of us tend to look with alarm upon anything that is going to bind us, any convention that is going to limit our freedom, so many of us come to discipline through meditation.

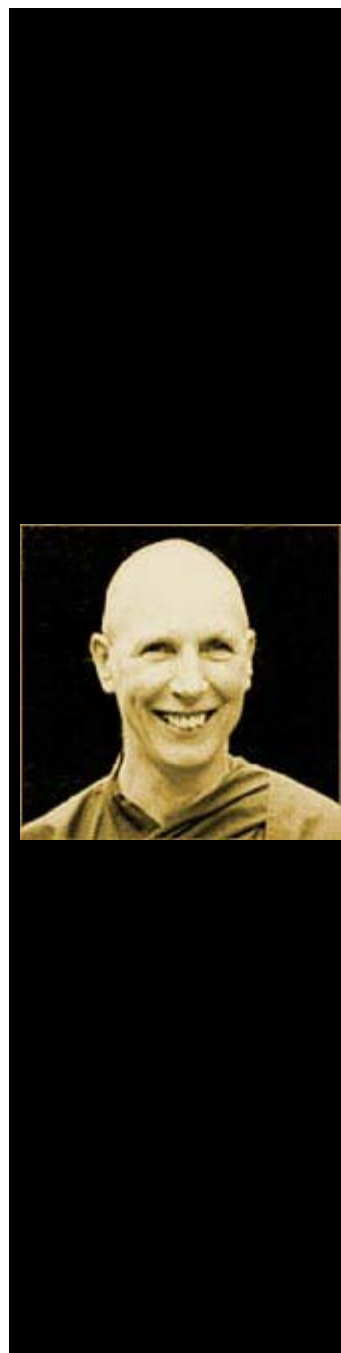
As we look into our hearts at the way we relate through the senses, we come to see how everything is inter-connected. Body and mind are constantly influencing and playing on each other. Most of us have experienced the pleasure involved in gratifying our senses, for example, when we listen to beautiful music. But when we attach ourselves to the experience, it is spoilt and we become confused by the sensory world. Through insight we can understand the danger of gratifying ourselves; we see the transient nature of our sensory experiences and become acquainted with the danger of holding on to something that is fleeting and changing. We realise how ridiculous it is to hang on to all that is changing, and with that realisation, we naturally recoil from wasting our energy on following something which we know will disappear.

Sense restraint is the natural outcome of meditation practice. Understanding the danger of following our senses, the desires connected with the senses, and the objects connected with the desires is one aspect of discipline. Understanding brings about the application of this discipline. It is not sense restraint for its own sake but because we know that the senses do not lead to peace and cannot take us beyond the limitations of identification with our mind and body.

When I came to the monastery, I had to adopt the discipline and the Eight Precepts which reflect what we call right action: refraining from killing, from stealing, from sexual misconduct, and from lying, refraining from taking drugs and intoxicants, from eating after a certain time, and restraining the physical body from dancing, singing, playing musical instruments, beautifying oneself, and sleeping on a high and luxurious bed. Some of these precepts may sound irrelevant; for example, not many people have four-poster beds these days. But these guidelines begin to make more sense when we incorporate them into our meditation practice, and reflect on them, and the spirit behind them. They help us to refine our personal conduct through awareness, through looking into our hearts and seeing the results of our actions and the consequences of the way we speak.

We tend to be impatient beings, and we like to get things right straight away, forgetting that much of our growth and development comes from accepting the fact that this human body and mind are far from perfect. For one thing, we have kamma, a past that we carry around with us which is very difficult to shed. When we contemplate the precept about refraining from wrong speech, it's an opportunity to learn not to create more kamma, so that our speech is not another source of harm and suffering for ourselves or for other beings.

Discipline really makes sense as you follow this path, because when you begin to get in touch with the raw energy of your being, and the raw energy of anger, greed, stupidity, envy,



jealousy, blind desires, pride, conceit, you become very grateful to have something that can contain all that. You can see how much the state of our planet really reflects a lack of discipline, a lack of containment of our greed, hatred and delusion.

Speech is very difficult because it can put us in a vulnerable situation. As long as one is silent, it's not so difficult. We can even seem quite wise until we start talking. Those of you who have been on retreats may have felt utter dread at the thought of having to relate verbally again with human beings. It's so nice just to be silent with each other; there are no quarrels, no conflicts. Silence is a great peace maker! But when we start talking, it's another story. We can't really fool ourselves any longer. We identify strongly with what we think, and so our speech also becomes a problem. Unless we learn how to speak more skillfully, both ourselves and others can be quite hurt and upset by our words.

Actually, speech itself is not the problem, it's more the place it comes from. When there is mindfulness, there are no traces left behind. Sometimes we say something which is not very skilful, and afterwards, we think of something much better that we could have said. But if we speak mindfully, somehow the stain of that self-image that is so powerfully embedded in us is removed. Using discipline takes a lot of humility. That's why, as long as we're immature, it's very difficult to adopt a disciplined life, we just tend to feel repressed and inhibited by it; instead of being a source of freedom, it becomes a trap.

In this practice, we are very fortunate to have a chance to realise that our actions, our speech and our desires are not ultimately what we are. Within meditation practice, this quality of impermanence becomes clearer. We can see the impermanent nature of our actions and speech, and our feelings related to these, and begin to understand that which is present in our experience but is not really touched by it. This quality of presence is always available and is not really affected by any of our sensory interactions.

To contain our energy through precepts requires a lot of attention because our minds always tend to forget. We forget our ultimate fulfilment; we always try to be fulfilled with things that are changing and not truly satisfying or nourishing. If we learn how to use our energy so that this quality of attention is sustained, it's a form of protection. Otherwise, we're at the mercy of our thoughts and desires, and are blinded by them. Through our refuge in awareness and our practice of restraint we are protected from falling into painful states.

Another aspect of discipline is the wise use of the material world. Our immediate contact with the material world is through the body. When we learn how to take care of the material world, then we are looking after the roots of our lives; we do what is necessary to bring the body and mind into harmony. This is the outcome of restraint. We become like the beautiful lotus flower which symbolises purity, resting on the water while being nourished by its roots in the mud. The Buddha is often depicted sitting on a lotus. Unless we create that foundation of morality rooted in the world, we can't really rise up or grow.

In monastic life, the skilful use of the four requisites -clothes, food, shelter and medicine - is a daily reflection. These four requisites are an essential part of our life and a very useful reflection because the human mind is intent on forgetting. For example, it is important for us to take care of the robe, to mend it, repair it, wash it, to reflect that we only have one, and it has been given by a very generous person. The same goes for the food that we eat. We live on alms food; every day people offer us a meal, so we can't eat without thinking carefully about this gift of food. We could not even lead this life without these offerings of requisites. As alms mendicants, we reflect, 'This room where you are now is only a roof over your head for one night.'

Taking care of the material world, of what surrounds us, is an important part of discipline.

When we are not able to take care of that which is immediate to us, how can we pretend to be taking care of the ultimate truths? If we don't tidy our rooms every day, how can we tidy our minds? It's very important to reflect on simple things such as taking care of our living place and not misusing our belongings. It's easy to be careless, especially if you're in control of money. If you can buy what you want, that can sometimes lead to more carelessness. You think, 'Oh well, never mind, I'll get another one.'

The last aspect of discipline or restraint is right livelihood. For a monk or a nun, there is a long list of things we should not get involved with, such as fortune-telling or participating in political activities. I can see the value of this more and more when I look at some parts of the world where monks own a lot of luxurious items or actually become landlords. Right livelihood is clearly defined as one aspect of the Noble Eightfold Path. It is important to reflect on how we want to live our life and what kind of profession or situation we want to get involved in.

These four aspects of what we call samvara or restraint are the supportive conditions within which the ultimate discipline can manifest in our hearts, and that ultimate discipline is our total dedication to the Truth, our total dedication to that which is pure and real. Sometimes we can't really say what it is, but as we meditate, we can be truly in touch with that reality within ourselves.

The ultimate discipline is the constant aspiration to go beyond our self-centred lives. All the spiritual paths and spiritual disciplines are here as supportive conditions for this aspiration; that's really their aim. The precepts, the reflections on the requisites, the reflection on one's livelihood and the discipline of our mind and body are to enable us to keep alive this aspiration and to realise Truth in our hearts.



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■ Freedom in Restraint; Sister Sundara

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**HOME** ■**BACK ISSUES** ■

## Turning the Wheel in the West

*In March 1993 about thirty distinguished Western-born Dharma teachers assembled in Dharamsala, India, for a 4-day dialogue with H.H. the Dalai Lama. In the second of a three-part interview with Ven. Sobhano, Ajahn Amaro continues with his impressions of the conference's aims and achievements.*

**Question:** Did you feel that there was any similarity between the way the Dalai Lama and Ajahn Chah related to Westerners?

**Answer:** I didn't really spend that much time with Ajahn Chah. But from what I remember from being around him, his whole manner and mode of response was similar to that of the Dalai Lama. For instance, people would make statements and His Holiness would just pause and take things in. You could see that he wasn't just reacting to ideas. Sometimes he would make no reply, or just ask a question back. Sometimes he would just un-pick the question. He seemed to be coming from an empty and loving place - totally attuned to the people around him. Pushing and yielding as and when needed. I felt an immediate and tremendous similarity - it was like the same man in a different robe. But rather than saying that Ajahn Chah had a unique understanding of Westerners, I think both of them have a very profound understanding of human nature.

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... it would also be a mistake to assume a sense of uniqueness as Westerners...

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**Q:** Which goes beyond conditions and culture?

**A:** Yes, although the Dalai Lama is also aware of the particular agendas that Westerners have, He could see where certain questions were coming from, and knew what lay behind them. If someone was making a point, he would politely side-step things sometimes, not just pick up on some line that he was being fed. He was extraordinarily perceptive and very sharp. One could imagine that someone in his position - a monarch as well as a religious leader - could just be a figurehead, but it was apparent that he is very different from that. His mental 'acuity' - even if he wasn't the Dalai Lama - would be impressive. He would remember things that had been said a day or two before, and remember who said them. He could pick up a point that had been talked about before and carry on, or use it to illustrate something else. In the same way that Ajahn Chah had developed the human potential to its limit the Dalai Lama could be very sensitive, unafraid to feel emotion, and at the same time be fierce if he needed to.

**Q:** Did he directly address the question about how much to stick with Dhamma-Vinaya to deal with the problems of our conditioning and how much to use techniques outside the Dhamma-Vinaya?

**A:** The discussion that I remember most clearly was around the subject of psychotherapy.

There were some delegates who expressed the view that we need supplementary skilful means because our present conditioning is such that people do not have the same 'mind-set' today in the Western world as they did in the time of the Buddha. The other position was that the complete practice is already found in the Buddha-Dhamma, but we just don't know how to use it. His Holiness was very impressed with people's reports on the use of psychotherapy. But he felt that it was an exaggeration to think that psychotherapy was something that is a necessity for all people. He said it would also be a mistake to assume a sense of uniqueness as Westerners - even though our Western materialism, de-spiritualised society and high-speed environment are somewhat unique.

Even though he agreed that psychotherapy could help certain people, he felt it should be looked upon in terms of our not knowing how to use what is there in the Buddha- Dhamma in a way that is helpful. His point was that the mind is extraordinarily complex and that is why the Buddha presented the Dhamma in a very complex way. It has many facets, many layers and to think that you can deal with all of the complexities of the mind with one simple practice or instrument is expecting too much.

His Holiness concluded by saying, "The Buddha-Dhamma is sufficient for realising Buddhahood, so it should be enough..." It was one of those moments when everything stopped and we felt: Yes, of course, if it wasn't sufficient for Buddhahood it wouldn't be Buddha-Dhamma. But there was a sense that there are good things to learn from Western psychotherapy; in fact, the Dalai Lama thought that it would be good if some of the Tibetan lamas studied this. He makes a point of educating himself in Western psychology and science.

**Q:** The other issue, which seems to be one of the most important ones for the monastic Buddhist communities in the West, is the whole question about the position of women in the Sangha, and women in the context of the Buddhist world. How was this topic discussed at the Conference and what kind of impression did you come back with?

**A:** There was a universal agreement amongst the conference delegates that an egalitarian system should be established. That's the reason, I think, why many women have never entered the Sangha, or have left -because of the male dominance of the whole picture and the way that the women are very much shunted into the background. This is certainly how it is in the Asian system - all the leading roles historically and contemporaneously being filled by men. For some it was a much stronger issue than others, although there was a certain sympathy for monastic orders who are trying to adopt traditional formats. People took it for granted that you would set things up in a totally egalitarian way if you could. It was remarkable how matter-of-fact and how universal this view was amongst the delegates. Martine Batchelor had just come back from touring in Asia, doing a book about Buddhist nuns. She'd been to Korea, Taiwan, Thailand and Burma interviewing nuns and women in the Buddhist world. She had a very practical approach to the question. Others had a much more idealised approach from the feminist viewpoint. I think everyone had a lot of sympathy for those voices but one also felt that people didn't want to make it a political issue. It was recognized that beyond a certain point; it gets destructive. It destroys its own potential through becoming a position that you're taking, rather than something that you're seeing as supportive to the practice of Buddha-Dhamma. The general feeling was that we should aim towards egalitarianism in every way possible.



It was interesting that by the end of the conference I'd fallen into the role of representing the old orthodoxy. I happened to be sitting next to one of the keenest feminist voices on the final evening and we were all giving a little account of our impressions. She finished her talk by

saying, 'I really look forward to seeing a Buddhism which is free from the patriarchy'. That afternoon I'd been visiting people and happened to have been at a nunnery where they had given me some white scarves as a greeting. So I had a number of these in my bag which I thought I would give away in the evening. I had considered giving one to this woman as a peace offering but had thought better of it as it would have been too condescending. So I didn't, but they happened to be sitting in my bag, and after she'd made her dramatic point for an end to patriarchy I realised the moment had come. I picked up one of the white scarves and put it around her neck as a gesture of friendship saying that even though the old order might seem to be something to contend with or leave behind, there is also that which conserves and is respectful to the past. Furthermore, that tradition can be respectful towards the agents of reform. I realised that this might look a bit out of order but it seemed important to make that kind of gesture - on the one level, not necessarily going along with a person's line of thinking, but on another level, supporting their right to hold a different opinion. Differences of opinion should not interrupt our communion as Buddhists. It was a poignant moment which received gales of applause.

While the whole monastic/non-monastic, male/ female, patriarchy/non-patriarchy issues weren't always contentious, they were there. The gesture seemed to bring a release of tension. It was a way of uniting her efforts with ours. Whether we like it or not, we're tied to each other. We're in the same boat. However much people may want to renovate everything and get beyond Buddhism as an 'ism', Buddhism is still tied to the Buddha, and the orthodoxy. Also, no matter how much you want to sustain the purity of the old order, you've got to be sensitive and open to change. It's unavoidable.

**Q:** Do you feel that there was a sense of how the two approaches to practice could start to work in a more harmonious way together in the teaching?

**A:** Certainly. Because if we're actually practising it's an inevitable outcome. I think that we come into Buddhist practice full of our own fervour and inspiration perhaps thinking: 'Tibetan Buddhism is it, or that lay practice, or monastic life is it'. After a while you realise that that's not 'it', that's the way to get to 'it'. Naturally your whole perception broadens and you see that maybe you were inspired by this because it was the first thing you saw. If you're drowning, any lump of wood is a bit of wood to hang on to. It's only when you're up on your bit of driftwood that you see other bits of driftwood around. The first thing you grab can seem very important to you.

We can relate to particular traditions or teachers or styles of practice with a frantic enthusiasm. But what I saw within this group, and in the Buddhist world generally, is less frantic. After twenty years of Buddhism in the Western world, it's settling down with a mutuality of respect. Why should we all be the same? I choose to do it this way, but that doesn't mean I feel you are wrong to do it that way - I don't want to judge too quickly where people are at because of the label that they wear or the style in which they choose to practise.

Within an egalitarian Western mentality having men first and women second is an oddity. But if such a convention is really that intolerable to us then we do have the option of leaving this 'family' and going to live elsewhere. It's up to us, we're free to choose. There seemed to be a clear recognition of this in most members of the group and, because of the mutual respect at this meeting, I felt that it boded very well for the future.



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<b>Editorial:</b> ■	■ Faith in Awakening; Many Monastics Reflect ■ Seize the Time; Ajahn Sucitto	

## Faith in Awakening

*During a weekend in September, over eighty men and women gathered together at Amaravati Buddhist monastery. The majority were monastics; Benedictines and Buddhists, Trappists, Hindus and Poor Clares. There were also meditation teachers, vicars, housewives, ecologists and writers.*

It was 'The Year of Inter-Religious Understanding' - one hundred years since the World Parliament of Religions took place in Chicago in 1893. Recognising and responding to the need for greater understanding and communication, Amaravati became host to the 'Faith in Awakening' conference, bringing together monastics and contemplatives of various traditions from over thirty communities in the United Kingdom. This unique gathering of beings was united by a mutual love and respect for monasticism and the way of meditation and prayer. The theme 'Faith in Awakening' implied both a belief in the possibility of transcendence and a united dedication to the spiritual path. Over the weekend the delegates explored together their common bond and aspiration towards the Truth, sharing experiences and discussing the various ways and means employed in realising and living the vision of their faith. The coming together of such a variety of individuals, each in their own way manifesting this faith in the world, became an inspiration for everyone involved.

### **The Role of Contemplative Communities in Contemporary Society**

Monasteries are among the last surviving examples of communities which are ordered around their faith. However, our modern society generally does not recognise the aspiration of the human heart to surrender its selfishness, and so the role of the monastery is not always clear. Do monasteries still offer a place where people can contact that aspiration and discover truth and meaning in their daily lives? Are monasteries just for the 'pure' and 'holy', or are they places where people can open to their dark side, their own sense of emptiness and fear? How can contemplative communities most effectively share their wealth of experience with those who want to 'know'? The six delegates who addressed this theme on Saturday morning all looked at various aspects of the same question: what are we doing here?

The following four talks are the thoughts of:

- Father Cyprian Smith (Ampleforth Abbey)
- Sister Lucy Mary (Turvey Abbey)
- Reverend Master Daishin Morgan (Throssel Hole Priory)
- Sister Candasiri (Chithurst Buddhist Monastery).

### **Father Cyprian Smith**

- Sister Lucy Mary (Turvey Abbey)
- Reverend Master Daishin Morgan (Throssel Hole Priory)
- Sister Candasiri (Chithurst Buddhist Monastery).



It seems to me that at the heart of modern life in Europe and America there is a great hollowness. The general level of prosperity and affluence seems fairly high; through our science and technology we have reduced disease and managed to control our environment. And yet, many people seem to feel increasingly, at the core of themselves, a deep disquiet and insecurity - an emptiness, a sense of meaninglessness and futility which frightens them. In this innermost centre we sense a sort of vacuum, an aching void. The usual reaction to that is to try and cram it, to try to fill it up with frenetic activity, noise, drugs, sex, alcohol, possessions, pursuit of power, status and so on. However, the trouble with all these attempts to plug the hole is that, in the last analysis, they don't work. This hole we find at the heart of ourselves turns out in the end to be a black hole - the sort the astronomers talk about, which will swallow anything that you put into it. It is capable, if you let it, of swallowing up the whole universe.

What we fail to realise is that this emptiness, this void at the heart of ourselves is not an enemy but a friend. It is not the negative and frightening thing it seems to be when we first encounter it. On the contrary, it is our greatest hope. If I were asked to give a snap definition of a contemplative I would say he is a person who doesn't run away from his own emptiness, who recognises that it is a positive and not a negative. A contemplative is a person who has found that the vacuum in our heart, if we confront it courageously, is not a pit of death: it is a well-spring of life and illumination. And a contemplative is one who has understood its secret - he has learned to plumb it and to draw strength from it.

To be able to do that and to be able to guide other people to do that seems to me to be an immense service which the contemplative can render the modern world. It is the service that nobody else can render, because everybody else is in the process of running away as fast as they can from the emptiness which seems to them to be the greatest of all evils.

It is not an easy task that we have taken on. It is not comfortable. It is not nice facing up to an aching void but it is there that our true hope lies - perhaps our only hope in the crisis of the modern world. So the contemplative is an explorer of inner space. It is our task to overcome the fear of our own emptiness and to uncover the treasure that lies within it - and there is a treasure there. I think the key to that discovery lies in what I said a minute ago, that the black hole can swallow up the entire universe. That is another way of saying that it has got infinite capacity - which means that only the infinite can satisfy it. It shows that we are meant for the infinite, we are meant for the universal. In the Christian tradition that was expressed very well by St. Augustine when he said of God, that He has made us for Himself and that we will never be satisfied with anything else. We would say that it is a hunger for God, a hunger for the infinite and the universal, which no finite thing can ever satisfy. It seems to me that all the great religions of the world understand this. There is a Buddhist text which runs roughly like this: There is an Unborn, an Unchanging, an Un-compounded, an Imperishable and if that were not so then there would be no escape from the born, the changing, the compounded and the perishable. That expresses to me that there is a goal that we are striving for which can't ultimately be expressed in any words or concepts. All the great religions are reaching out for that goal and the key to it all lies in the human heart, the very place we run away from all the time, cramming in everything that we can to block out that horrible feeling of inner silence and emptiness.

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The only way to get freedom is to face the emptiness within ourselves, if we don't do that, we will always find ourselves enslaved by our unconscious desires...

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Every civilisation and culture has needed men and women who are prepared to set themselves apart from the normal life of human beings, to renounce many of the ordinary comforts and securities of life. They do this in order to lay themselves open to this thing we can call the Divine, the infinite, the universal. Perhaps the very continued existence of civilisations and cultures depends on there being people who are continually prepared to do this. If that is so, then no-one can seriously doubt the relevance of contemplatives in any period in human

history.

The modern world hates silence because in silence its inner hollowness and futility are revealed. The contemplative loves silence because it allows the deep levels of the human heart to break through into consciousness, bringing healing and life, as well as initial trouble. You ride the trouble, float on it until you get into calmer water. The modern world hates stillness because it equates life with frenetic activity and thinks anything else is dead. But the contemplative loves stillness because it brings us to the centre, it brings us to the heart of ourselves and the whole world. The modern world hates poverty because it thinks that to possess means to be. And to be stripped of possessions is to un-be, to begin to slip into non-being, into death. The contemplative loves poverty because it leads us away from false reliance on outward things and teaches us to find an unfailing source of strength inside ourselves.

Perhaps most important of all, the modern world craves for freedom and talks incessantly about it. But it will never get it because the only way to get freedom is to face the emptiness within ourselves, if we don't do that, we will always find ourselves enslaved by our unconscious desires, our selfish passions, by all sorts of external conditioning factors from outside ourselves. What we think is our action is in fact not real action at all, it is reaction. We are not free autonomous human beings at all. True freedom is only found at the centre. And the centre is the whole of the contemplative path. There is little hope for the modern world, I think, until more and more people find that centre; that is our task. If there aren't any contemplatives to do these things, who else is going to do them?

### **Sister Lucy Mary Brydon**

- Father Cyprian Smith (Ampleforth Abbey)
- Reverend Master Daishin Morgan (Throssel Hole Priory)
- Sister Candasiri (Chithurst Buddhist Monastery).

In our Turvey communities, we are a double community of men and women. In this era, this is not very common in the Roman Catholic church, although it was very common in previous centuries. I think the sense of unity that comes from living in close connection - men and women working, praying, sharing together - is a very beautiful witness to the world outside the monastery of what love can be. That is just one small thing.

We are all very much aware in our communities that there is a oneness in ourselves and the whole of creation. We try to foster relations with other churches, other faiths. Our founder was an architect and very artistic in himself; one of the things he realised was the unifying power of beauty. Sometimes when people come to monasteries they expect to find grimness, horrible discomfort and ugliness made into virtue. Our founder believed that simplicity and beauty are at the root of things, that they are unifying and can bring people together in a way that other things can't. And so in our communities we have a strong tradition of cultivating beauty to give glory to God in our lives. We do this through our worship, in the use we make of light and colour in our buildings and also in the monastic customs that we all take for granted. When guests come, they say "Why are you always bowing?" The bowing is an act of reverence for the God within the other person. People are bowled over by this recognition that we are all part of divine nature and that we acknowledge it in each other. So that kind of image of unity is also a very powerful thing.

What we are trying to communicate to people who come for retreats and come to stay is that to be contemplative does not necessarily mean living in a monastery. You can live in a monastery and not be a contemplative. You can be a contemplative and not be in a monastery. This union of spirit that we have is God calling to all of us to be contemplatives in whatever way of life we are called to. That is something we can try and get across to people. They come into the monastery and see people wearing funny clothes and doing funny chanting and funny singing and prayers and so on and it can have the danger of making it all seem a little bit precious. Whereas God is in the midst of His people and in the midst of each person and our

task I suppose - this is how I see it - is to make people open their eyes. It is not that we have come to Turvey to find God who is not in our life. It is to open our eyes to see that the God here is God.

Do you know the lovely story about the fish in the ocean? The little fish saying to the old, experienced fish, "I have heard so much about the ocean. Where is it?" And the old fish says, "This is it, you are in it." And the little fish says, "No, this is just water." Our role is to try and open people's eyes to the fact that we are all in the ocean and it is in us. It is to help people to see that what is in our monasteries, the love that we have in community, the unity that we experience together, the wholeness of the life, the work we do with our hands, is a very ordinary life. And that God is in the midst of it.



Participants of the 'Faith in Awakening' gathering of 1993.

### **Reverend Master Daishin Morgan**

- Father Cyprian Smith (Ampleforth Abbey)
- Sister Lucy Mary (Turvey Abbey)
- Reverend Master Daishin Morgan (Throssel Hole Priory)
- Sister Candasiri (Chithurst Buddhist Monastery).

I'll pick up on something that Father Cyprian mentioned. "There is an Unborn, an Undying, an Unchanging, an Uncreated." There is within the heart of all beings what we call the Buddha nature: the true refuge lies within and that refuge embraces not only ourselves but all of existence. Through the contemplative life we come to know that refuge. And the great joy of it is that that refuge moves, it lives. In Buddhism we talk about meditation samadhi. Samadhi is stillness and it is also movement. The life of Buddha is there, the blood of Buddha, and it is that blood which flows through us.

The contribution of the contemplative is compassion. In the contemplative life the contribution we make is not as a psychotherapist, a counsellor, an expert. It is not to have knowledge. It is to have 'all-acceptance', to have compassion. Dogen speaks of this very graphically; he says the kind of faith we need is that of a little girl who leaps into the arms of her father with never a thought that he may drop her.

We are all confronted by suffering, the suffering that walks in through the gate of the contemplative monastery, the suffering that we find in our own hearts. It is tempting for the contemplative to try to meet that suffering with expertise and that is how we lose our direction as contemplatives. The contemplative meets that suffering with all-acceptance, with faith in the true refuge. In the heart of that stillness we find life, movement and the way to go. When we are confronted with suffering we have to confront it having nothing. Then the possibility of knowing the Unborn, the Undying, the Unchanging becomes manifest, becomes real - wanting nothing and knowing nothing. That is the particular contribution of the

contemplative.

There is a story that my teacher tells of how, when Dr. Suzuki was here in the '50s, at one point he was giving a talk and he said, "All is one and all is different." Someone corrected him and said, "Your English is wrong, it should be: 'All is one but all is different.'" And he said, "No, your Zen is wrong, it is: 'All is one and all is different.'"

The apparent differences that exist between faiths is something we have to bring together. We have to bring ourselves together with those we live with, and most of all - and this is the key - we have to bring ourselves together with the Unborn, the Undying, the Unchanging. The dew drop becomes one with the shining sea; the great ocean embraces the whole and yet the dew drop is still the dew drop.

Dogen speaks of how a painting of a rice cake will never satisfy hunger. Then he takes it further. If we see the painting of the rice cake as the world of delusion, and the true meal as the world of enlightenment within us, then actually we are still caught in duality. But for the self to merge with the shining sea, we have to know that the painting of the rice cake also satisfies hunger, that the world we live in is the world of enlightenment. We work hard to let go of all that divides, all that separates, all that makes one different from another - and we recognise that all is different. The resolution in Soto Zen of 'the all is one' and 'the all is different' is enlightenment.

### **Sister Candasiri**

- Father Cyprian Smith (Ampleforth Abbey)
- Sister Lucy Mary (Turvey Abbey)
- Reverend Master Daishin Morgan (Throssel Hole Priory)

Sister Lucy has already touched on the value of having a community as a place for people to go to. Certainly for myself, I was incredibly grateful when, as a laywoman looking for a way of life to give myself to whole-heartedly, I met Ajahn Sumedho and the other monks and realised that this was going to be a possibility. A contemplative community makes it possible for a fairly ordinary sort of human being to have a chance to live this sort of life.

Another aspect that we haven't mentioned yet is to see the value of people living according to a teaching that was presented centuries, millennia ago in some cases: a contemplative community is a community that keeps the teaching alive. In a sense, our duty as monastics, as contemplatives, is to consider the teachings that have been passed down to us and to make it real in our own lives. To actually live the teaching. Society is pretty lost in many ways. While there may be individuals in the world who are a source of inspiration, there is a tremendous power in a community who are living according to a tradition. It is like an enormous vehicle, a double decker bus that lots of people can climb on. So this is another value I see.

It is interesting to consider actually how we do keep the teachings alive. Many of the teachings are very inspiring, very lofty - they sound wonderful, but they are not so easy to practice.

In Buddhism, our main practice is to look at what separates us from the Divine. To look at the things that hold us back, that prevent us from feeling unity with all beings. We talk about love, we talk about unselfishness, we talk about peace, but I think for many of us our main work is actually looking very closely at what is unpeaceful, what is unbeautiful, what is selfish, what is violent. Certainly for me, this is mostly what I do. It might sound very negative, but this is something I see that can really give people hope.

Some time ago someone came to the monastery and said that, "Of course the monks and nuns don't have any thoughts when they sit and meditate." That we just sit quietly and peacefully. So I said, "Well, you really don't know." People may come because they are distressed with thoughts of negativity or aggression arising. They are absolutely amazed when I tell them that I know exactly what they are talking about and that I have such thoughts all the time. Then they just relax when they realise that it is not just them. It is not that they are bad, that they are evil.

What one can offer is a sense of reassurance that this is just actually part of the human predicament. That we are all human beings, we all want to be good. We all want to be loving, we all want to be kind, we all want to be generous. We have these ideals. Really it is up to us to show people how to realise them. We can go through a lot of despair if we haven't learnt that negativity is OK, and that it is just part of being human. That it is not anything to worry about. That the Divine is still there. All we have to do is relax. So we live this life with those who can offer us encouragement, who can love us in spite of our weakness, in spite of our foolishness, who can help us through the difficult times.

People ask what we are doing for the world. What we are doing for the world is understanding the hatred and the violence in the world. That is what we are doing. We are learning not to react to it, how to make peace with it. We have to try and find the way through love. And the only place we can discover that, the only place we can really accept and make peace with things is in our own hearts. Otherwise it is just a nice idea.



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**HOME****BACK ISSUES**

## EDITORIAL

### Seize the Time

Buddhism is a set of skilful means to be applied in order to realise a timeless truth. You could go further and say that being Awake is to know that the Way is not tied to the providence of an imagined god, or the mechanics of a technique, but unfolds through wise attention to what is immediately present. Instead of looking for the right opportunity or situation in which to practise, this awake attention makes it possible to develop the right practice to fit the situation that is being presented. This is what keeps things fresh. Feeling intimidated by others? It could be the time to go towards them steadily. Feeling fed-up and sorry for yourself? Remembering and enacting one's helpfulness to others may be the right step. Everything is urgent and desperately important? Now is the time to breathe in and out slowly.

Our minds incline towards habits - the pathways that require the least psychological effort - and they protect these habits with emotional attachments to security, to being certain of what we will arrive at, or to having our 'own way'. Because of this, a great source of skilful means (if one is willing to develop them!) or 'field of merit' is the community life of the Sangha in which such investments pay no dividends. The structure of the Sangha can be described as a clearly defined and systematic approach to variance and uncertainty. In no way does it ever rule those out. Suppress uncertainty for a while with structures and techniques, and it will pop up again: the very means used to avoid uncertainty sets up a ripple of stress that questions one's aspiration to live in a peaceful and compassionate way. Systems of Awakening are not intended to impose order, but to help us understand and live in harmony with uncertainty. Any other aim misuses them.

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The main point went beyond the faith and the religious forms to which all the participants had dedicated themselves; it found a unity which could be defined as Love or Truth - or be left undefined.

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With faithful lay people supporting the Sangha, it's not so much the material requisites that are uncertain these days; it is the flux of personalities (inner and outer), the mood swings and convictions about what is possible and what is really necessary in monastic life, and the variety of opinions about meditation that can leave one longing for the unity of innocence. Fifteen years ago, when our Sangha was very new in Britain, it was rough but simple; now we all know too much to trust unquestioningly. Even when a stasis is achieved, some vital ingredient of the harmonious blend gets forgotten, somebody's perception of a style or form differs, or someone leaves - and the whole thing teeters back and forth again. But there's no going back: the way it goes is the process that we have to learn within, and that process is one of change.

Clear truths have a way of appearing when one is not expecting them. The interfaith 'monastic' conference at Amaravati in September - which was not entirely monastic, and as much a way of

defining and appreciating silence as a 'conference' - turned out to be hardly 'interfaith' either. The main point went beyond the faith and the religious forms to which all the participants had dedicated themselves; it found a unity which could be defined as Love or Truth - or be left undefined. Yet the experience enriched rather than belittled the variety of skilful means that various spiritualities presented. One vital lesson for everyone was that harmony resulted from the willingness to present one's views merely to explain rather than to convince, and from the willingness to listen and respect one another's commitment. There's a simple logic there: because people acted in loving and truthful ways, whatever the words or style, the result was bound to be Love and Truth.

A few months later, the various monasteries of our family exchanged written reports of their activities during the Vassa. There was quite a range: some viharas established only a few opportunities for private retreats, in others, almost the entire community were undertaking solitary practice. In one place, there were many community meetings to discuss Dhamma and Sangha life; in another, people met infrequently. However, the well-being of the monasteries and their residents depended on one common and unspoken factor: that the well-being of the Sangha was understood to be the primary intention. 'Sangha' is our field of practice. If we respect and work with that aspect of the Refuge, the skilful means can be adapted to fit the situation. The systems and structures can't be a Refuge in themselves because they have the nature to vary. If we expect them not to, we miss out on the underlying stability of the Sangha as Refuge. The extent to which our life becomes our path is not dependent on how perfectly organised and manageable we can make it, but how well we can use the way it is to cultivate skilful means. It is the willingness to cultivate skilful means that makes the assembly of those who practise grow strong.

So maybe our New Year's resolution can form itself out of what this year and every year has been showing all along. Keep truthful to the immediacy of what you experience and listen with an open heart. On the spiritual path, there's nothing that's solid - except the path factors themselves. The test is not worth fighting or grieving over; even uncertainty is uncertain.

*Ajahn Sucitto*

## **Loch-side**

Sunlight, it's so hard to believe in.  
Have you smelled the myrtle  
where it grows wild enough  
to stop you?

Each day you lie stranded  
at the water's edge  
while those tiny waves push  
straight ahead.

The loose breeze  
could be some kind of blessing;  
only it leaves you cold  
shifting for comfort on the damp shore.

As your head falls back  
try drinking the sun.

*Jos Razzell*





<b>THIS ISSUE</b>	<b>Cover:</b> ■ Ajahn Chah remembered; Jack Kornfield	<b>HOME</b> ■
<b>Signs of Change:</b> ■	<b>Articles:</b> ■ Heart of a Legacy; Luang Por Chah ■ Freedom in Restraint; Sister Sundara ■ Turning the Western Wheel; Ven. Sobhano interviews Aj. Amaro	<b>BACK ISSUES</b> ■
	<b>Editorial:</b> ■ Faith in Awakening; Many Monastics Reflect ■ Seize the Time; Ajahn Sucitto	

## SIGNS OF CHANGE

### Space and Crowded Hours

*Winding down for the winter retreat, Venerable Sobhano reflects on the Amaravati community's efforts to strike a balance between outside activities and inner work.*

With Ajahn Sumedho abroad for three months and many of the monks who were resident during the Vassa away, it has been a time for re-evaluation and consolidation. Despite our determination at the beginning of the year to reduce our teaching commitments, scale down the work projects and allow for more contemplative time in the daily routine, the community still found itself stretched to the limit in many areas. Events during the year contributing to an already busy schedule included the temple appeal in November, a result of two previous planning applications having been refused on grounds of a forecasted traffic increase. With the help of a respected London QC, we were able to show that the case against the temple was largely based on rumour and erroneous information, and whilst we are optimistic about the outcome, we hope that with patience and good will some of the mistrust amongst local residents will subside.

Another major effort during the year was the Faith in Awakening Conference, reported on the centre pages. The months of preparation allowed all those participating and helping to enter into a wonderfully joyful occasion. While it was an inspiration to receive praise from such a wide range of seasoned contemplatives, it has also helped to focus our attention on the need for inter-monastic dialogue within our own Sangha.

Magha Puja is traditionally such a time. Following the precedent of our Sangha gathering at Wat Pah Nanachat after Luang Por Chah's funeral last January, we will meet at Amaravati over seven days, from February 28th to March 6th. The week will also include discussions with the lay community, particularly on ways to enhance our mutually supportive relationship.

As winter draws in, we find ourselves naturally re-affirming our refuge in the Triple Gem. The Buddha reminds us of the liberated mind, awake and non-distracted; the Dhamma, the true seeing of the underlying causes of suffering in our daily life; the Sangha, an appreciation of each other - that we are here to serve and support each other rather than compete or control. Reminding ourselves of this foundation enables us to bring to light the areas in our life where we have fallen short of this vision - and how we can adapt in a way that is conducive to the spiritual health of the community as a whole.

### Winter-time at Ratanagiri

*Ajahn Munindo, who will be leaving for a visit to New Zealand and Thailand in April, reports on recent developments at Harnham.*

After 18 months of chiselling and grinding, the solid stone stupa dedicated to our teacher, Ajahn Chah, has finally come to rest in its designated place. The emplacement was completed (after chipping away the ice from the mounting) late in the evening on Friday 19th November.

The surrounding pool and garden were far from lush but the spirit of the occasion was alive and beautiful.

On the following day, the masterfully executed 2m x 3m mural depicting the Buddha conquering Mara was reverentially secured in place in the Dhamma Hall. Khun Pang's skilful use of primary colours - strictly in keeping with Thai temple iconography - is now able to cast its deep impressions upon the minds of monastic residents and visitors, for valuable use in contemplation.

On the Sunday, snowflakes fluttered down through glimpses of morning sunshine as Kathina offerers from as far afield as London and Glasgow stood and placed rice in the bowls of the monks and nuns. Later, whilst the Kathina robe was being sewn by members of the Harnham Sangha, Ven Ajahn Sumedho spoke in some detail about ways of using skilful reflection upon religious icons to invigorate and strengthen both meditation and daily life practice.

As winter approaches and snow already lies deep, community members are giving attention to the heating and draught-proofing of monastery buildings in preparation for going into retreat. In spring '94 we hope to be able to recommence our work of converting the old barns into a Dhamma Hall and additional accommodation. Starting from the 15th of April, one month has been put aside so as to concentrate our efforts on this project. During this time, any assistance from the lay community would be most welcome - particularly from people who might be keen to manage the kitchen.

For those who have been following the different phases of our legal case, we are happy to report that we're still feeling positive that the settlement which has been agreed will continue through to completion quite soon, It is the intention of the Magga Bhavaka Trustees to raise an appeal in spring, so as to seek support in paying off the loans and debts accrued during this process. If all goes well, full details will be included in the next issue of the Forest Sangha Newsletter.

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