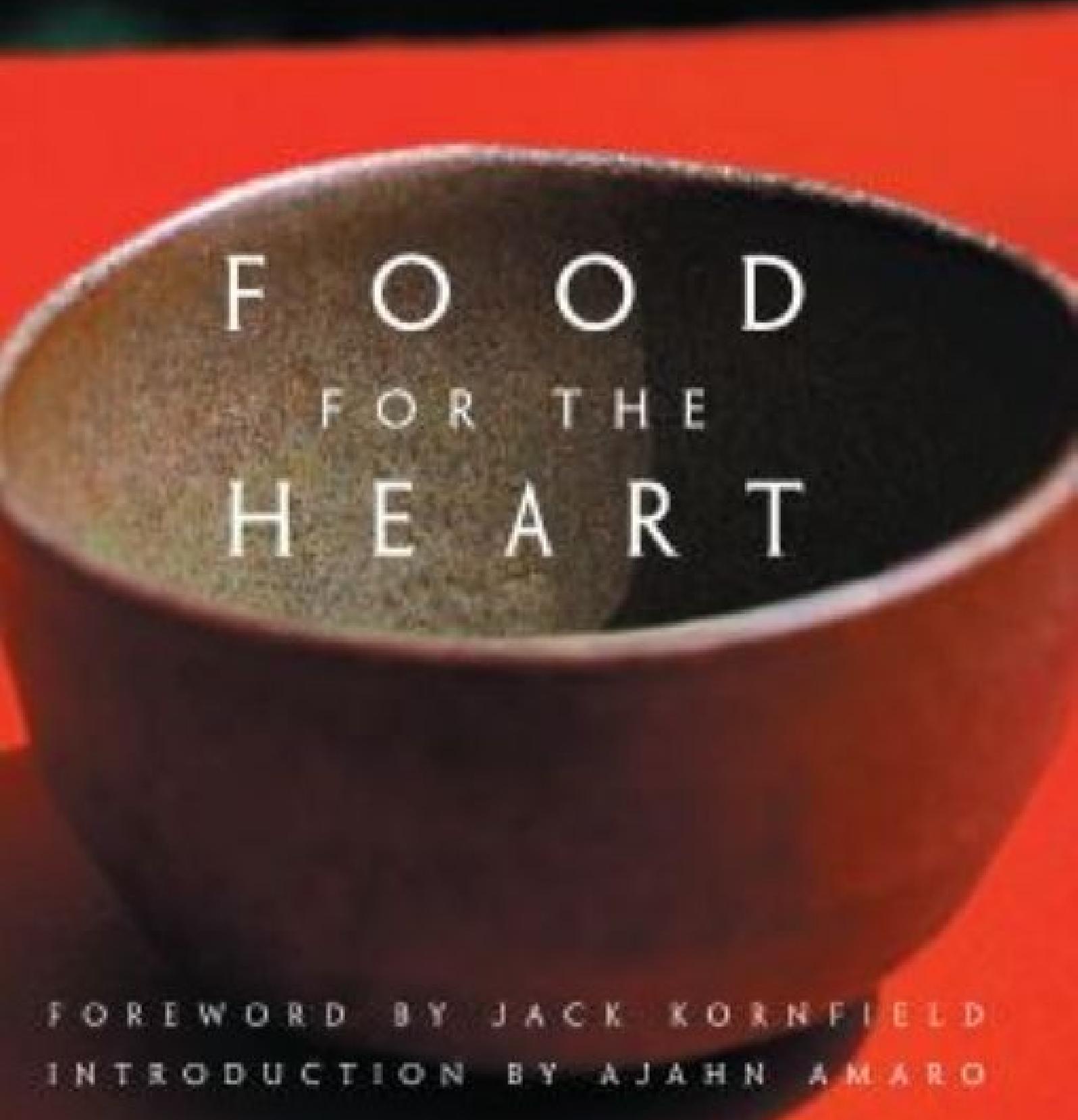


THE COLLECTED TEACHINGS OF  
AJAHN CHAH



F O O D  
F O R T H E  
H E A R T

FOREWORD BY JACK KORNFIELD  
INTRODUCTION BY AJAHN AMARO



THE COLLECTED TEACHINGS OF  
AJAHN CHAH

F O O D  
FOR THE  
H E A R T

FOREWORD BY JACK KORNFIELD  
INTRODUCTION BY AJAHN AMARO

# Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Foreword](#)

[Introduction](#)

[CHAPTER 1 - ABOUT THIS MIND](#)

[CHAPTER 2 - FRAGMENTS OF A TEACHING](#)

[ONE WHO WISHES TO REACH THE BUDDHADHAMMA](#)

[WALKING THE PATH OF BUDDHADHAMMA](#)

[HOW TO PURIFY ONE'S MORALITY](#)

[THE PRACTICE OF CONCENTRATION](#)

[THE ARISING OF WISDOM](#)

[THE BENEFITS OF PRACTICE](#)

## [PART 1 - Conduct—Virtue and the World of the Senses](#)

[CHAPTER 3 - LIVING IN THE WORLD WITH DHAMMA](#)

[CHAPTER 4 - MAKING THE HEART GOOD](#)

[CHAPTER 5 - SENSE CONTACT—THE FOUNT OF WISDOM](#)

[CHAPTER 6 - UNDERSTANDING VINAYA](#)

[CHAPTER 7 - MAINTAINING THE STANDARD](#)

[CHAPTER 8 - WHY ARE WE HERE?](#)

[CHAPTER 9 - THE FLOOD OF SENSUALITY](#)

[CHAPTER 10 - THE TWO FACES OF REALITY](#)

[THE TRAP OF THE SENSES](#)

[THE WORLDLY WAY AND LIBERATION](#)

[CONSTANT PRACTICE](#)

[THE EMPTY FLAG](#)

[THE FOREST OF THE SENSES](#)

[COMING TO THE CENTER](#)

[ESCAPE](#)

## [PART 2 - Meditation](#)

[CHAPTER 11 - A GIFT OF DHAMMA](#)

[CHAPTER 12 - INNER BALANCE](#)

[CHAPTER 13 - THE PATH IN HARMONY](#)  
[ON THE DANGERS OF SAMĀDHI](#)  
[CHAPTER 14 - THE TRAINING OF THE HEART](#)  
[CHAPTER 15 - READING THE NATURAL MIND](#)  
[THE WISDOM OF EVERYDAY EXPERIENCE](#)  
[CONSTANT EFFORT](#)  
[KNOWING ONESELF AND KNOWING OTHERS](#)  
[THEORY AND PRACTICE](#)  
[INSIGHT MEDITATION \(VIPASSANĀ\)](#)  
[SAMATHA MEDITATION](#)  
[UNTYING THE KNOT](#)  
[DISENCHANTMENT](#)  
[THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS](#)  
[CHAPTER 16 - THE KEY TO LIBERATION](#)  
[THEORY AND REALITY](#)  
[SĪLA, SAMĀDHI, AND PAÑÑĀ](#)  
[THE DANGERS OF ATTACHMENT](#)  
[“SPONTANEOUS COMBUSTION”](#)  
[THE POWER OF SAMĀDHI](#)  
[WORKING IN ACCORD WITH NATURE](#)  
[CHANGING OUR VISION](#)  
[FOLLOWING THE MIDDLE PATH](#)  
[DEDICATION TO THE PRACTICE](#)  
[DO IT!](#)  
[ESTABLISHING THE BASIS OF MEDITATION](#)  
[CONTEMPLATION](#)  
[CHAPTER 17 - MEDITATION \(SAMĀDHI BHĀVĀNA\)](#)  
[CHAPTER 18 - DHAMMA FIGHTING](#)  
[CHAPTER 19 - JUST DO IT!](#)  
[CHAPTER 20 - RIGHT PRACTICE—STEADY PRACTICE](#)  
[CHAPTER 21 - SAMMĀ SAMĀDHI—DETACHMENT WITHIN ACTIVITY](#)  
[CHAPTER 22 - IN THE DEAD OF NIGHT](#)

## [PART 3 - Wisdom](#)

[CHAPTER 23 - WHAT IS CONTEMPLATION?](#)  
[CHAPTER 24 - DHAMMA NATURE](#)  
[CHAPTER 25 - LIVING WITH THE COBRA](#)  
[CHAPTER 26 - THE MIDDLE WAY WITHIN](#)  
[CHAPTER 27 - THE PEACE BEYOND](#)  
[CHAPTER 28 - CONVENTION AND LIBERATION](#)  
[CHAPTER 29 - NO ABIDING](#)  
[CHAPTER 30 - RIGHT VIEW—THE PLACE OF COOLNESS](#)

[CHAPTER 31 - OUR REAL HOME](#)  
[CHAPTER 32 - THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS](#)  
[CHAPTER 33 - “TUCCHO POTHILA”— VENERABLE EMPTY SCRIPTURE](#)  
[CHAPTER 34 - “NOT SURE!”—THE STANDARD OF THE NOBLE ONES](#)  
[CHAPTER 35 - STILL, FLOWING WATER](#)  
[CHAPTER 36 - TRANSCENDENCE](#)  
[CHAPTER 37 - TOWARD THE UNCONDITIONED](#)  
[CHAPTER 38 - EPILOGUE](#)

[GLOSSARY](#)

[NOTES](#)

[SOURCES OF THE TEXT](#)

[INDEX](#)

[WISDOM PUBLICATIONS](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

# Food for the Heart



*The Collected Teachings  
of Ajahn Chah*



WISDOM PUBLICATIONS • BOSTON

## FOREWORD

IT'S HARD TO KNOW how to best introduce the wisest man I have ever met. In his presence, there was immediacy and aliveness, simplicity and truth-telling, dignity and intimacy; humor and serious discipline, heart-breaking compassion and spontaneous freedom. Ajahn Amaro's beautiful introduction to this book describes him well.

Most of Ajahn Chah's teaching was done in the reality of the moment, by example, by metaphor, by the aliveness of dialogue. His teaching was direct and honest, with no holds barred. "Look at the cause of suffering in this human realm, it's like this," he would say, pointing our hearts toward the truth. Because he was a consummate performer who taught with a hundred skillful means, because he met each new visitor so directly, adapting his humor and penetrating eye to the circumstances before him, it is hard to wholly capture the vitality of his teaching in words. Fortunately, his legacy also includes nearly two hundred monasteries, many wonderful living and teaching disciples, hundreds of tapes recorded in Thai and some millions of people who have been touched by his wisdom.

On these pages you will find another aspect of Ajahn Chah, the disciplined and somewhat serious side primarily recorded on occasions where he offered longer systematic teachings to groups of monks, nuns, and visitors. In them he invites us all to reflect on the essence of the teachings, to consider them, to take them to heart. In this book he leaps off the page to remind us that, whoever we are, the conditions of life are uncertain: "If death is within you, then where are you going to run to escape it? Whether you are afraid or not, you die just the same. There is nowhere to escape death."

From this ground of truth, he points the way that leads endlessly beyond the changing conditions of birth and death to true freedom. "This is the important thing: you must contemplate until you reach the point where you let go, where there isn't anything left, beyond good and bad, coming and going, birth and death. Train the heart, rest in the unconditioned," he urges. "Liberation is possible."

Those who would follow the teachings of this beloved master must be willing to look into their own heart and mind, to loosen the knots, release the grasping, the fears, the whole false sense of self. "If you really understand, no matter what life you live, you can practice the Dhamma every minute of the day. Why not give it a try?" Ajahn Chah suggests. "It will transform your life!"

May the blessings of the compassionate Buddha be carried by Ajahn Chah's words to feed your heart and benefit all beings everywhere.

With great respect,

Jack Kornfield

Spirit Rock Meditation Center  
Woodacre, California, 2002

## INTRODUCTION

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

In some ways, the group that is gathered here is a motley crew: close beside Ajahn Chah (or *Luang Por*, Venerable Father, as he is affectionately known to his students) are a cluster of *bhikkhus* (monks) and novices; most of them are Thai or Lao, but there are a few pale-skinned figures among them—a Canadian, two Americans, a young Australian, and an English-man. In front of the Ajahn sits a well-groomed, middle-aged couple—he in a stiff suit, and she coiffed and gold-bedecked—he’s a member of parliament from a distant province; they’re taking the opportunity while he’s in the area on official business to come and pay their respects and make some offerings to the monastery.

A little behind them and to both sides are scattered a sizeable group of local villagers. Their shirts and blouses are worn thin, and the skin on their lean limbs is sun-darkened, wrinkled—baked like the poor earth of the region. A few of those here Luang Por played with as a child—catching frogs and climbing trees—others he helped, and was helped by, in the years before he was a *bhikkhu*, as they planted out their annual round of rice seedlings and then harvested the fields together at the end of the monsoon. To one side, near the back, is a professor from Freiburg who has come to Thailand with a friend from her local Dhamma (Skt. *Dharma*) group to study Buddhism; an American nun has come over with her from the women’s section of the monastery to guide her through the forest paths and to translate.

Beside them sit three or four other nuns, elder sisters from the nuns’ section who decided to take the opportunity to come over as well to ask advice from Luang Por about an issue in the women’s community and to request that he come over to their side of the forest and give a Dhamma talk to their whole group—it’s been several days now since he last paid them a visit. They’ve been there for a couple of hours already, so they pay their respects and take their leave, along with the other visitors from the nuns’ section—they need to be back before dark and they’re already a little late.

Near the back, almost at the edge of the pool of light, sits a stern-faced man in his thirties. He is half turned to one side, as if his presence there is uncomfortable, tentative. He is a local tough guy—a *nak leng*. Deeply disdainful of all things supposedly religious, he nevertheless has a grudging respect for Luang Por; probably stemming as much from the monk’s reputation for toughness and his powers of endurance as from the recognition that, as far as religious people go, he might be the

real thing—“but he’s probably the only one worth bowing to in the whole province.”

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

Luang Por smiles broadly as he makes a point, holding up a glass to illustrate his analogy. He has noticed the stark young figure in the shadows. Soon he has somehow managed to coax him to the front, as if he were reeling in a tough and wily fish; next thing, the tough guy has his head in Luang Por’s hands and is weeping like a baby; next, he is somehow laughing at his own arrogance and self-obsession—he realizes that he’s not the first or only person ever to have lost a dear one—the tears of rage and grief have turned to tears of relief.

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

This kind of scenario was played out countless times during the thirty years that Ajahn Chah spent teaching, and it was often at such times that someone had the foresight to bring along a tape recorder (and had managed to find enough batteries to keep it alive) and thus caught some of the talks gathered in this book.

Along with such longer expositions as are printed here, the reader should also know that, more often than not, especially in such informal dialogues, the flow of teaching, and to whom in particular it was directed, was highly spontaneous and unpredictable. In many ways when Ajahn Chah was teaching, he was like a master musician: both leading the flow of harmonious sound and yet producing it entirely in response to the natures and moods of the people he was with; integrating their words, feelings, and questions in the crucible of his heart, and letting the responses flow forth freely.

In any kind of crowd gathered around him, he might use an example of the right and wrong ways to peel a mango one moment, then be describing the nature of ultimate reality the next—with identical matter-of-fact familiarity. In one moment he might be gruff and cold to the inflated, then charming and gentle to the shy; he might crack a joke with an old friend from the village and, with the next turn, look a corrupt police colonel in the eye and speak sincerely of the centrality of honesty on the Path. Within a few minutes he might scold a bhikkhu for being sloppily dressed, then let his own robe slip off his shoulder and allow his rotund belly to show forth. A clever question from an academic type, seeking high-minded philosophical discussion to display his own acumen, might easily find Luang Por’s hand moving to remove his false teeth and then handing them to his attendant bhikkhu to be cleaned up a little. His interlocutor

would then have to pass the test of the great master, responding to his profound question through broad lips folded in over his gums, before his fresh set of teeth was installed.

Some of the talks in this collection were given in such spontaneous gatherings; others were given on more formal occasions—such as after the recitation of the bhikkhus’ rules, or to the whole assembly of laity and monastics on the weekly lunar observance night—however, whether they were of either the former or the latter kind, Ajahn Chah never planned anything. Not one syllable of the Dhamma teachings printed here was plotted out before he started speaking. This was an extremely important principle, he felt, as the job of the teacher was to get out of the way and to let the Dhamma arise according to the needs of the moment—“If it’s not alive to the present, it’s not Dhamma,” he would say.

Once he invited the young Ajahn Sumedho (his first Western student) to give a talk to the assembly at the main monastery, Wat Pah Pong. This was a traumatic test—not only to have to speak to a couple of hundred people who were used to Ajahn Chah’s high standard of wit and wisdom, but also to have to do it in Thai, a language he had only started learning three or four years before. His mind teemed with fears and ideas. He had been reading about the Six Realms of Buddhist cosmology and their correlation to psychological states (anger and the hell realms, sensual bliss and the heavenly realms, etc.). He decided that this would be a good theme, and he thought through all his ideas and the right phrases for them. On the big night Ajahn Sumedho gave what he felt was a pretty good exposition, and the next day many members of the Sangha came up and said how much they had appreciated his words. He felt relieved and quite pleased with himself. Sometime later, in a quiet moment, Ajahn Chah caught his attention, fixed him with a direct look, and gently said, “Don’t ever do that again.”

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

## **THE FOREST TRADITION**

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

When the Bodhisattva left the life of the palace at the age of 29, it was to move into the forest and to train in the yogic disciplines that were available in his time. The story

is well known, how he became dissatisfied with the teachings of his first instructors and left them to find his own way. He did so, discovering that primal chord of truth he named “the Middle Way” under the shade of the bodhi tree, beside the River Nerañjarā, in what is now Bodh-Gaya, in Bihar State, India.

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

As far as the sketchy historical accounts can tell us, a few months after the Buddha’s final passing away a great council of elders was held to formalize and establish the teachings (the discourses and the monastic rules) in a standardized form of the vernacular called *Pālibhasa*—“the language of the texts.” The Dhamma teachings formulated in this way over the next hundred years form the core of the Pali canon, the common basis of a range of subsequent Buddhist schools. A hundred years later they had a second council, again to go over all the teachings, in an attempt to keep everyone in accord. However, as it transpired, it was at this time that the first major split in the Sangha occurred. The larger portion of the Sangha wanted to change some of the rules, including allowing the monastics to use money.

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

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

crystallized. And despite wars, famines, and other cultural upheavals on the Indian subcontinent, the Therāvādins have survived to the present day, largely because of originally having become well established on the island of Sri Lanka—a safer haven than many others. Other Buddhist schools operated there; however, Theravāda Buddhism was continually restored and maintained as the main religion of the island.

The lineage eventually spread throughout Southeast Asia, as at different times missionaries were invited from Sri Lanka and India; they went out to Burma and later on to Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos—later, from these countries to the West. Throughout this period of geographical dispersion of the Theravāda tradition, the theme of a continual looking back to the standards of the Pali canon has been sustained. When being established in new countries, there has always been a strong sense of respectfulness and reverence for the original teachings, and also a respect for the style of life as embodied by the Buddha and the original Sangha, the forest-dwelling monastics of the earliest times. This is the model that was employed then and has thus been carried on.

Obviously, in these many centuries there have been many ups and downs, but this pattern is what has been sustained. Sometimes the religion would die down in Sri Lanka, and then some monks would come from Thailand to lift it up again. Then it would fade out in Thailand, and some monks from Burma would boost it up—supporting each other over the centuries. Thus the religion has managed to keep itself afloat and still largely in its original form.

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

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

By the mid-nineteenth century, Buddhism in Thailand had a rich variety of regional traditions and practices, but the general field of spiritual life had become somewhat corrupt, with lax monastic discipline, Dhamma teachings mixed up with confused vestiges of tantra and animism, plus the fact that hardly anyone practiced meditation anymore. In addition to this, and perhaps most significantly, the orthodox position held by scholars (not just by lax, unlearned, or confused monks) was that it was not

possible to realize *nibbāna* in this age or, in fact, even to attain *jhāna* (meditative absorption).<sup>1</sup>

This was something that the revivers of the Forest Tradition refused to accept. It was also one of the reasons for which they were deemed mavericks and troublemakers by the ecclesiastical hierarchy of the time, and it lies behind the obvious disdain many of them (Ajahn Chah included) had for the majority of study monks of their own Theravāda lineage—as well as their refrain that “you don’t get wisdom from books.”

It is necessary to elaborate on this point, otherwise the reader may wonder why Ajahn Chah is somewhat down on study—especially as Theravāda is supposed to have great reverence for the word of the Buddha. It is a crucial point that delineates the Thai Forest monastics: the determination to focus on life style, and on personal experience, as opposed to books (especially the commentaries). One might find such sentiments presumptuous or arrogant, or seeming to be expressing the jealousy of an unlearned mind for its betters, unless it is understood that the interpretations of scholars were leading Buddhism into a black hole. In short, it was just the kind of situation that made the spiritual landscape ripe for renewal. And it was out of this fertile ground that the revival of the Forest Tradition emerged.

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

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

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

In time, Ajahn Mun successfully explained and demonstrated the usefulness of meditation to many people and also became an exemplar of a much higher standard of conduct for the monastic community. Furthermore, despite living in the remote provinces, he became the most highly regarded of spiritual teachers in his country. Almost all of the most accomplished and revered meditation masters of the twentieth century in Thailand were either his direct disciples or were deeply influenced by him. Ajahn Chah was among these.

## AJAHN CHAH

Ajahn Chah was born into a large and comfortable family in a village in Ubon Province, northeast Thailand. On his own initiative, at the tender age of nine, he opted to move out of the family home and went to live in the local monastery. He was ordained as a novice and, still feeling the call of the religious life, on reaching the age of twenty took higher ordination. As a young bhikkhu he studied some basic Dhamma, the discipline, and other scriptures. Later, dissatisfied with the slack standard of discipline in his village temple and yearning for guidance in meditation, he left these relatively secure confines and undertook the life of a wandering or *tudong* bhikkhu. He sought out several of the local meditation masters and practiced under their guidance. He wandered for a number of years in the style of an ascetic bhikkhu, sleeping in forests, caves, and cremation grounds, and spent a short but enlightening period with Ajahn Mun himself.

Here is a description of that most significant of encounters, from the forthcoming biography of Luang Por Chah *Uppalamani*—a play on words meaning both “The Jewel of Ubon Province” and “The Jewel in the Lotus”—composed by Phra Ong Neung.

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

As they walked into the monastery, Ajahn Chah was immediately struck by its tranquil and secluded atmosphere. The central area, in which stood a small meeting hall, was immaculately swept, and the few monks they caught sight of were attending to their daily chores silently, with a measured and composed gracefulness. There was something about the monastery that was like no other that he had been in before—the silence was strangely charged and vibrant. Ajahn Chah and his companions were received politely and after being advised where to put up their *glots* (large umbrellas from which a mosquito net is hung) they took a welcome bath to wash off the grime of the road.

In the evening the three young monks, their double-layered outer robes folded neatly over their left shoulders, minds fluctuating between keen anticipation and cold fear, made their way to the wooden *sālā* (meeting hall) to pay respects to Ajahn Mun. Crawling on his knees toward the great master, flanked on both sides by the resident monks, Ajahn Chah approached a slight

and aged figure with an indomitable, diamond-like presence. It is easy to imagine Ajahn Mun's bottomless eyes and his deeply penetrating gaze boring into Ajahn Chah as he bowed three times and sat down at a suitable distance. Most of the monks were sitting with eyes closed in meditation; one sat slightly behind Ajahn Mun, slowly fanning away the evening's mosquitoes. As Ajahn Chah glanced up, he would have noticed how prominently Ajahn Mun's collarbone jutted through the pale skin above his robe and how his thin mouth, stained red with betel juice, formed such an arresting contrast to the strange luminosity of his presence. As is the time-honored custom among Buddhist monks, Ajahn Mun first asked the visitors how long they had been in the robes, the monasteries they had practiced in, and the details of their journey. Did they have any doubts about the practice? Ajahn Chah swallowed. Yes, he did. He had been studying *vinaya* texts with great enthusiasm but had become discouraged. The discipline seemed too detailed to be practical; it didn't seem possible to keep every single rule; what should one's standard be? Ajahn Mun advised Ajahn Chah to take the "Two Guardians of the World," *hiri* (a sense of shame) and *ottappa* (intelligent fear of consequences), as his basic principle. In the presence of those two virtues, he said, everything else would follow. He then began to discourse on the threefold training of *sīla*,<sup>2</sup> *samādhī*,<sup>3</sup> and *paññā*, the four Roads to Success, and the five Spiritual Powers. Eyes half closed, his voice becoming stronger and faster as he proceeded, as if he were moving into a higher and higher gear. With absolute authority he described the "way things truly are" and the path to liberation. Ajahn Chah and his companions sat completely enrapt. Ajahn Chah later said that although he had spent an exhausting day on the road, hearing Ajahn Mun's Dhamma talk made all of his weariness disappear; his mind became peaceful and clear, and he felt as if he were floating in the air above his seat. It was late at night before Ajahn Mun called the meeting to an end and Ajahn Chah returned to his glot, aglow.

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

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

understand that point then there's not a lot to do.”

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

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

Although Ajahn Chah passed away in 1992, the training that he established is still carried on at Wat Pah Pong and its branches. There is usually group meditation twice a day and sometimes a talk by the senior teacher, but the heart of the meditation is the way of life. The monastics do manual work, dye and sew their own robes, make most of their own requisites and keep the monastery buildings and grounds in immaculate condition. They live extremely simply, following the ascetic precepts of eating once a day from the alms bowl and limiting their possessions. Scattered throughout the forest are individual huts where bhikkhus and nuns live and meditate in solitude, and where they practice walking meditation on cleared paths under the trees.

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

Along with monastic life as it is lived within the bounds of fixed locations, the practice of tudong—wandering on foot through the countryside, on pilgrimage or in search of quiet places for solitary retreat—is still considered a central part of spiritual training. Even though the forests have been disappearing rapidly throughout Thailand, and the tigers and other wild creatures so often encountered during such tudong journeys in the past have been depleted almost to the point of extinction, it has still been possible for this way of life and practice to continue. Indeed, not only has this practice been maintained by Ajahn Chah, his disciples, and many other forest monastics in Thailand, it has also been sustained by his monks and nuns in many countries of the West and in India. In these situations the strict standards of conduct are still maintained: living only on almsfood freely offered by local people, eating only between dawn and noon, not carrying or using money, sleeping wherever shelter can be found.

Wisdom is a way of living and being, and Ajahn Chah endeavored to preserve the simple monastic lifestyle in all its dimensions in order that people may study and practice Dhamma in the present day.

## AJAHN CHAH'S TEACHING OF WESTERNERS

There is a widely circulated and well-attested tale that, shortly before the newly ordained Ajahn Sumedho arrived to request training under Ajahn Chah's guidance in 1967, Ajahn Chah initiated the construction of a new *kuṭī* (meditation cabin) in the forest. As the timbers that formed the corner posts were being put into place, one of the villagers who was helping with the construction asked, "Eh, Luang Por, how come we are building this so tall? The roof is much higher than it needs to be." He was puzzled, as such structures are usually designed to be just enough space for one person to live in comfortably, customarily about eight feet by ten feet with a roof peak at around seven feet.

"Don't worry, it's not being wasteful," he replied. "There will be some *farang* (Western) monks coming here one day; they are a lot bigger than we are."

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

Despite the primary consideration of holding the entire monastic community to a single harmonious standard, and not making the Westerners special in any way, in 1975 circumstances arose whereby Wat Pah Nanachat (the International Forest Monastery) was established near Wat Pah Pong as a place for Westerners to practice. Ajahn Sumedho and a small group of other Western bhikkhus were walking to a branch monastery near the banks of the Muhn River. They stopped overnight in a small forest outside the village of Bung Wai. It so happened that many of the villagers were longstanding disciples of Ajahn Chah, and surprised and delighted to see this group of foreign monks walking together on alms round through their dusty streets, they asked if they would settle in the forest nearby and start a new monastery. The plan received approval from Ajahn Chah, and this special training monastery for the growing numbers of Westerners interested in undertaking monastic practice began.

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

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

In the same light, on his visit to the U.S. in 1979, he commented, “Britain is a good place for Buddhism to get established in the West, but it too is an old culture. The U.S., however, has the energy and flexibility of a young country—everything is new here—it is here that the Dhamma can really flourish.” When speaking to a group of young Americans who had just opened up a Buddhist meditation center, he also added the caveat, “You will succeed in truly spreading the Buddhadhamma here only if you are not afraid to challenge the desires and opinions of your students (literally, “to stab their hearts”). If you do this, you will succeed; if you do not, if you change the teachings and the practice to fit the existent habits and opinions of people out of a misguided sense of wanting to please them, you will have failed in your duty to serve in the best way possible.”

## **THE ESSENTIALS: VIEW, TEACHING, AND PRACTICE**

Even though this book contains many lucid explanations of the Buddha’s teachings, it might be helpful, particularly for those unfamiliar with the Theravādan expression of things in general, or with the Thai Forest Tradition in particular, to outline first some of the key terms, attitudes, and concepts that are used throughout this collection

### ***The Four Noble Truths***

Although there are numerous volumes of the Buddha’s discourses in many traditions, it is also said that the entirety of his teaching was contained in his very first exposition—called *The Setting in Motion of the Wheel of Truth*—which he gave to five monastic companions in the deer park near Benares shortly after his enlightenment. In this brief discourse (it takes only twenty minutes to recite), he expounded on the nature of the Middle Way and the Four Noble Truths. This teaching is common to all Buddhist traditions, and just as an acorn contains within it the genetic coding for what eventually takes shape as a vast oak, so too all the myriad Buddhist teachings can be said to derive from this essential matrix of insight.