The Dhamma and the Real World

by Ajahn Pasanno
and Ajahn Amaro

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Dedication

I DEDICATE THE MERIT from the offering of this book to those who inspired me to "go forth" (in the order that I met them): Jayasaro Bhikkhu, Taraniya, Thanissaro Bhikkhu, Amaro Bhikkhu, Punnadhammo Bhikkhu, and Pasanno Bhikkhu.

Also in appreciation for the love and support I receive from my parents, Donald L. Sperry and Dorothy C. Binford Sperry.

May you and all beings Know True Happiness.

—Jotipalo Bhikkhu

"What Does a Buddhist Monastic Know about Real Life, Anyway?"

by Ajahn Amaro

We are often asked, "What does a Buddhist monastic know about real life?" This is a very good question because many people may think that we don't have to deal with real life in the monastery: "Things are easy for you, but outside the monastery wall we have to deal with real life; we have a much more difficult job." Their impression is that once you have given yourself to the holy life, then you float around on little purple clouds, existing in exquisite mutual harmony at all times, exuding undifferentiated love and compassion for each other, and, finally, at the end of a life of ever-increasing blissfulness and profound insights into the nature of ultimate reality, deliquescing softly into nirvana leaving behind a soft chime of ringing bells and a rainbow. Not so. I'll get on to that in a minute. I'm joking a bit, but this is the kind of image that people may have of monasteries. It's another world, something that *other* people do.

The Buddha was asked a lot of questions in his time, and he once said there are four ways to respond to a question. The first way is to give a straight answer. The second is to ask a counter

question. The third is to rephrase the question. The fourth is to remain silent. As I look at the question at hand, what comes to mind are two counter questions: What is a Buddhist monastic? And what is real life?

Most people probably don't know all that much about how the monastic system actually functions in the Buddhist world. To many, Buddhist monks are simply people who magically appear and disappear, like wandering teachers or circuit preachers. There's not really a cognizance of what a monastery is, how it functions, or where a Buddhist monastic comes from. Even the word "monastery," like the word "morality," often has a certain emotional effect. Your blood starts to get cold, and you think, "That's a place for other people, and there's something about it I don't really like." I certainly had the same feeling at one time: You disappear behind a 20-foot-high wall into a life of scrubbing floors, freezing nights, and grim asceticism. That's "the monastery."

In many Buddhist countries — Tibet, Korea, China, and Japan — they did create a remote, enclosed, and self-sufficient model. However, in Southeast Asia, at least where Buddhism was not repressed by the various rulers, they sustained the original mendicant model that was established at the time of the Buddha. The monastery is actually like a cross between a church, commune, and community center. It's not just a place where nuns and monks live; it's everybody's place. In Thailand, for example, there are about 50,000 monasteries. Every village has a monastery; big villages have two or three. It's like a synagogue or church with six rabbis or half a dozen ministers. One or two do most of the talking, and the others live, learn, and help out. It's a commune of spiritual seekers, and it's also a place where community life happens. Many village monasteries host the local town meetings or "county" fairs. The monastery is the heart of the community, not that place out on the hill that nobody ever enters.

Of course, there's a degree of variety. Forest monasteries place an emphasis on meditation and tend to be outside of villages and a little further away. Those that are extremely popular will try to sustain a bit more quiet, with visiting hours at such and such a time. There might not be anyone to receive you. But generally speaking, most monasteries are open; they are everybody's place.

At its heart, a monastery is sustained as a spiritual sanctuary. What creates a monastery is that everyone who comes through the gate undertakes to live by a certain standard, to conduct themselves in a certain way in terms of honesty, nonviolence, modesty, restraint, and sobriety. Within that zone, it's a safe place: no one is going to rob you, to chat you up, to try to sell you anything, to attack you, to lie to you, to be drunk. It's an environment that maximizes the supportive conditions for helping you to cultivate kindness, wisdom, concentration — the whole range of wholesome spiritual qualities.

There are also teachers available. You might think that a great master like our teacher, Ajahn Chah, may have spent his life up in the mountains, meditating under a tree. He did that for a number of years, but once he opened a monastery, he spent much of the next thirty years sitting under his hut receiving visitors from ten o' clock in the morning often until midnight. That's the teacher's job: the doctor is in. Not every monastery functions in that way, but it's generally the job of certain members of monastic communities to be available to anyone who drops in. If you want to talk to the Ajahn, you don't schedule a private interview, you just hang out until there's an opportunity to ask your question

In this respect, intrinsic to a Buddhist monastic life is the fact that you can be called upon to some degree or another to share with other people the wisdom and understanding you have developed. Whatever good is developed in the lives of the inhabitants of the monastery is made available. Of course, some

people are not disposed to be teachers. Yet just aspiring to control your bad habits and get your mind a little bit clearer is in itself is a great gift and a blessing to others. It's a beautiful example.

So if this is a Buddhist monastic life, then what is real life? People often think real life means having a credit rating, a retirement plan, a job, a sex life, a house, a car, and a fixed pattern of living. But couldn't you also say a real life means simply having a body and mind? Or a personality, a feeling of identity? For people who ask the question, the implication is that those who don't have financial responsibilities, children, parents to look after, or marriage partners somehow experience a life that is intrinsically different. All the rough and tumble of the lay world is somehow intrinsically different. Seeing Buddhist monks or nuns on show — sitting in robes, statue-like and serene — it is easy to think, "They are not like me: they haven't got sore knees like me; they haven't got profane thoughts going through their minds like me; they haven't got worries and anxieties, thoughts about the past and future all the time like me; they don't have a difficult parent like me." Well believe me, the monastery gate does not create any radical alteration of human nature as you pass through it. Come live in the monastery for one week, and then ask yourself where real life is.

From the Buddhist point of view, life is happening at the level of the senses, where sense consciousness impacts sights, sounds, smell, taste, touch, body, perceptions, feelings, ideas, and emotions. That's where we experience life. Whether you are inside the monastery gate or outside it, the impact is the same. There's a saying in Japan: "There's many a shaven head surrounding a hairy mind." When you enter the monastery gate, all your struggles with your parents don't suddenly get switched off. All your sexual desires don't suddenly fizzle out. All your feelings of self criticism don't miraculously transform: "Now I am a monk. I like myself."

In fact, the monastery is an optimum environment in which to experience real life. We get the raw experience of feeling sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch because all the normal distractions, mufflings, and mutings are absent. We can't nibble or go to the fridge to help ourselves. Food has to be put into our hands before we can eat it. We don't listen to music, have any radios, listen to the news, watch TV, read novels. We don't play sports, do crossword puzzles, garden. Basically, you ain't got nothin' except your mind and the great outdoors. We live communally; everything is shared. We don't have our own choice about whom we work with or how we work. We have no choice about the menu; the cooks cook what they want to cook with whatever shows up in the larder. We can't just pop into town to do some shopping or take in a movie. We don't have our own space. Sometimes in the winter time we get cold and wet, and there isn't a way to get as warm as we'd like to be.

Maybe I'm painting a bit of a rough picture, since at times it is also very pleasant. But what I'm really trying to say is that when you start to shed the familiar props, you get life in the raw. You experience the whole battery of loves and hates, of self concern, of the amount of things we need to have to make ourselves feel good. It's like a junkie. As long as you have a good supply of clean stuff, everything is fine, but as soon as the supply starts to dry up, things get really hairy. Anyone who has been addicted — to cigarettes, food, affection, heroin, whatever — knows what that is like. When the props aren't there, we realize how dependent our life has become. By seeing this and processing it in a deep and clear way, we can understand it. Then we are more able not to be dragged around.

There was a very sweet incident that happened a number of years ago with the first nun in our community in England. She was a middle aged woman, had been married, had had quite a sophisticated life. A women's magazine came to do a feature on the nuns, and they were interviewing her. They said, "It must be

terribly difficult for you: sleeping on the floor, having one meal a day, getting up at 4 o'clock in the morning, being told what to do by all these young whipper-snappers.

"Oh," she replied, "that's easy, a piece of cake. Really. At first, I thought it would be very difficult for a woman of a certain age to adjust to all these hardships, but that's nothing. The really difficult thing is to give up your own opinions. That's the hardship. When you know — not just think, but *know* — that you are right about the way to cook courgettes but have to watch someone doing otherwise and swallow it, then things get really interesting."

The interviewer was really shocked, but it was very insightful of the nun. She realized that she was far more attached to her ideas of right and wrong, good and bad. "I think things should be this way." "Monks shouldn't talk like that." "This is what Buddhism is, and this is what it isn't." She would get really upset because Ajahn Sumedho wouldn't quote the Buddha's discourses in his Dhamma talks but would use his own language and reflect from his own experience. She'd say, "We are Buddhists. We should be quoting the Buddha!" If we don't meet them and know them, we are dragged around by our preferences, our loves and hates, rights and wrongs. As long as things go smoothly, we can be dragged around quite happily because we think this is just life. But as soon as our plans are frustrated, as soon as we meet with a situation that doesn't go the way we like, then we lose it. We get lost. We die. There's a beautiful passage in the Dhammapada where the Buddha says, "Mindfulness is the path to the Deathless, Heedlessness is the path to death. The mindful never die, the heedless are as if dead already."

In the monastery, we learn to deal with the body, with pain. Living communally, we learn a lot about forgiveness, commitment, honesty, patience. We learn how to deal with anger, jealousy, fearfulness, selfishness. We get the whole palate; every color is there. If you can't deal with them, you don't survive. The

effort within the monastic life is to know life as you experience it, as you feel it in a complete and deep way. In the monastery, you learn to understand how the feelings of love and hate, success and failure, praise and criticism all function. You learn to find that space that holds it, that knows it, and that can be with it and be still within all that occurs.

Coming to the monastery as a lay person and participating in that life, plugging into that environment can help you carry that learning back with you, and you can begin to experience the whole firmament of your daily life, your family life even while surrounded by people who are not resolute on a spiritual practice. After all, most people are caught up in the rat race and not intent on the realization of ultimate truth. What the monastery provides in the world is a reminder that everything is okay, that we can live with whatever is happening, that we can ride the wave. For those who live outside the monastic sphere, our effort is to provide an alternative to the drivenness of the world. Even though you might be driving the car to work, holding down a job, looking after your aging parents, feeding your kids, or being with a loved one who is dying, it doesn't have to be frantic. It doesn't have to be obsessive. It doesn't have to be burdensome. There is a manner in which we can relate to even the most impactful and potent, emotionally charged issues of life whereby they are held, they are understood, they are fully experienced, and they are not confusing. So real life then has to do with a mind full of life, an acceptance and appreciation of life, and the monastery is endeavoring to give us a sense of this real life.

Adapted from a talk given on August 3, 1998, in Caspar, California.

Laying the Foundation for Social Action

by Ajahn Pasanno

From a Buddhist perspective, anything to do with other people can be considered social action: how we relate to the individuals close to us such as family or neighbors, to society at large, and to the world around us. The field of social action expands out, but it begins with ourselves and our relationships to others. The individual is at the core of all relationships between any parts of society. We must always return to that core, to recognize that our own actions affect other people and the society around us. This is simply the basic law of karma — anything we do affects ourselves and others. It's not a matter of "me" and "society," as if they were separate. There isn't really any separation. The two are interrelated all the time.

What we bring to the society around us are simply our own qualities of mind, of heart, of being — our intentions and how they manifest in our actions. In order to understand our effects on society, we first have to understand ourselves, to see these qualities more clearly. The ability we have to help others, or to do anything to affect others, is dependent upon the clarity, intention, and integrity with which we live our lives. These things are inseparable. As such, the way we train ourselves is equally important to any actions we take outside ourselves.

In Buddhist practice, the training laid out for an individual begins with how one practices with others. This is *sila,* or virtue — not harming others, being honest in the way one deals with others, being trustworthy in one's actions and speech. The practice of keeping the precepts* is already social action. The precepts remind us of the ways our actions affect others. Oftentimes, people may think, "Let's get to the 'real' stuff about Buddhism — the liberation, the enlightenment; keeping the precepts is just a social convention, just the basics." But this "basic" stuff has an effect. It is important. The Buddha recognized that our actions have effects for ourselves and for others.

While virtue concerns itself with actions and speech, the second aspect of the Buddhist training is meditation, or *samadhi* — a training of the mind and the heart, a clarifying of mindfulness, awareness, and composure. These are essential to cultivate. If we are going to take any social responsibility, it has to be done with an open heart and a clear mind. We must develop a standard for reflection. We can then start to ask, what are the effects of our words and actions? Sometimes people get enthused about social action and forget about the ordinary activities in life. How do I deal with my family? How do I deal with the people closest to me? Or even how do I answer the phone? What do I put into the universe when I am irritated or upset? These are very ordinary, everyday things, preparing the ground for how we relate to the world around us. Paying attention to these things is social action. Dealing with the circle of people around us is social action. It is not different.

From a Buddhist perspective, the next step is recognizing the quality of wisdom, or *paññā.* There are many different levels of

* The five lay precepts for practicing Buddhists are: 1) to refrain from taking the life of any living creature, 2) to refrain from taking that which is not given, 3) to refrain from sexual misconduct, 4) to refrain from false and harmful speech, and 5) to refrain from consuming intoxicating drink and drugs which lead to carelessness.

wisdom, but seeing things as they truly are is its essence. With a reflective ability of the mind, we can begin to see things as they truly are and start to turn towards that. This is not simply gathering new bits of knowledge or being zapped with some sort of enlightened energy. It is a turning inward to be able to open to all the ways things truly are and allowing our lives to be guided by that wisdom. How does this affect myself? How does this affect others? What is the way to freedom and liberation? What is the way out of suffering and dissatisfaction for myself and for others? Wisdom is seeing the different ways we entangle ourselves in things and the different ways we can be free.

Virtue, meditation, and wisdom are the tools we use in training ourselves in how to relate to the world around us. This training will help us to see the qualities that bring true benefit to our society — the qualities of loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity. These are the *Brahma viharas,* or divine abodes. In a way, these can be considered a goal of social action: creating a way in which human beings should live. Loving-kindness is the wish for another's happiness. Compassion is the wish to alleviate another's suffering. Sympathetic joy is the happiness we feel in the success of another. And equanimity is the ability to stay centered in the midst of life's ups and downs.

The quality of sympathetic joy is an interesting one in terms of social action. Its opposite is jealousy or envy. In many ways, envy is the foundation for competition and conflict. If a society is based upon competitive accumulation — like some societies we know — it can create conflict and a lack of appreciation and willingness to enjoy each other. Having come to the United States after living in Thailand for twenty-three years, the sense of competition here is very striking. In Thailand, there is a wide stratification in terms of socioeconomic level and opportunity within society, but there is not a lot of envy or competition. People are often motivated to improve their economic lot, but

they don't resent those who already have wealth or privilege. Similarly, there is usually not a looking down on or shunning of those in economic difficulty or from a poor background. There is an acceptance that people have accumulated different tendencies and have different abilities.

This acceptance has imbued people's consciousness. It is a sense of karma playing a role in people's lives over many lifetimes, a feeling of "who knows?" One's fortunes in this lifetime can change; one's fortunes in other lifetimes might be different. Rebirth is an accepted part of how they perceive the world — it's a long view on life. This takes away the edge of selfishness and competitiveness and brings a sense of appreciation for each other as human beings, a joy in each other's happiness. By turning toward this quality of joy, we can draw on our wish to help others, to be of service.

Acceptance also brings the quality of equanimity, a non-reactive clarity that allows one to stay centered. Equanimity is not indifference. It is the ability to return to a place of stillness, to be non-reactive, and to weigh things carefully. This is an important quality especially when considering social action or social responsibility. Without equanimity, we can get drawn into our own reactiveness — our views and opinions. We can think that we're always right, that other people are just a bunch of idiots. It's easy to get turned around and out of balance. Not being drawn into the web of our views and opinions but being able to settle and reflect — to ask, what is the way of balance? — equanimity is essential in undertaking social action.

In the social action projects I have been involved in, the Buddhist perspective has taught me some important things. Take a particular project, like protecting the forests. The monastery in Thailand at which I was abbot was quite well-known, with a large community of monks, novices, lay men, and lay women practicing and training there. I thought it would provide a good balance to set up a more remote branch monastery. Our new

location was right along the Mekong River. It was in one of the last forests in the province, and around that time, the area was made into a national park. But this was just a designation on the map, and it caused a lot of problems. The area was full of stumps. It was being logged, and many villagers had made their fields there.

The Buddhist perspective was very helpful. We couldn't simply say, "These are awful, nasty people. The planet would be a fine sort of place if they weren't doing this." The reality was that they are doing this and that they are people just like us. They are trying to look after their families and to get ahead in the world. In order to do anything to protect the forest, we had to find ways to include them. How do you involve the people who are cutting down the forest? How do you include the merchants who are paying them? How do you include the civil servants who are taking the bribes to allow the cutting?

The teachings told us that problems come from people not understanding how they are creating suffering for themselves and for others. Problems and suffering come from desires and attachments. You can't simply wish that away. You've got to work on the basic problems of bringing knowledge and education into their lives. Why were they cutting down the forest? Of course, they wanted to live comfortably, to look after their families. So, we had to find ways to provide for them. Otherwise, it would be like trying to build a wall to stop the tide from coming in. Good luck! It's going to find a way. Instead, you have to think clearly and find ways to address peoples' needs, to include them and bring them in. This takes time.

This understanding reflects our own personal spiritual practice. We'd all like to sit down, cross our legs, close our eyes, and become enlightened — just like that. Instead, we have to take the time to lay a foundation, to become patient and clear enough to develop the path in a comprehensive way. Just as the Buddha taught us the Four Noble Truths as the basis for our own

practice — suffering, the causes of suffering, the cessation of suffering, and the path leading to the cessation of suffering — the same applies to social action. We've got suffering, we've got a problem. What are all the different causes of that problem? What kind of end can there be to that problem? If we haven't understood the problem, we won't be able to see the causes. And if we aren't really clear about the goal we are working towards, we won't really know what kinds of path to develop. It works in society the same way it works in our own practice. The more we reflect on and practice with those truths for ourselves, the more we are able to apply them in our life, in very ordinary situations, with our friends, with our family, at work, with different problems happening in the community. That is social action.

How can we work together to do this? With our project along the Mekong, we began by drawing in people affiliated with the monastery who were interested in helping. In a Buddhist society, the monastery is a foundation we could build on, a field for social action. Because the monastery is dependent on lay people to support it, there is a day-to-day connection with the neighboring society. It is a web of support and interaction, so that when there is a problem in the community, we can easily recognize who is interested in helping. At first there were a few volunteers. When there was too much work for volunteers to do, we hired some people. Again, the money for their salaries came from offerings to the monastery from people in the community.

The forest project continued to grow. We even drew in people like the police. They had power, especially when it came to controlling who was taking logs out. Rather than getting into a confrontation with them, we asked how we could work with them. That was very easy at the time because one of the supporters of the monastery was the Deputy Superintendent of Police. He was a great resource for drawing in other honest police officers, who then had a few words with even more police officers and got them on our side. This takes time, it takes patience, it takes clar-

ity. If you work in a confrontational way, it's difficult to achieve this. By having a strong focus on one's personal practice and integrity, by becoming more clear, centered, and pure-hearted in one's intention for doing good, the more one starts to connect with other people. In terms of social action, this seems to be a magnet, drawing other good people. It gets its own momentum going. So far, the forest project is working. And besides being successful in its own right, it has been adopted as a model for trial projects in other national parks in Thailand.

During one of the recent elections in Thailand, I saw a hand-written sign on the side of a building. It said something like, "The forces of corruption are given more power when good people retreat." The "system" gains more momentum when we decide we don't want to deal with it, that things are hopeless. With social action work, we have to be patient, discerning, equanimous. We have to be willing to try and to fail. We have to recognize that sometimes things will work and sometimes they won't. And that they always work out in ways we may never have conceived. This is the same as returning to the foundation of one's own practice: keeping the precepts; developing clarity, tranquillity, and peace of mind; establishing wisdom through reflective investigation; cultivating the qualities of kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity. These form the foundation that allows us to move out into the realm of social action.

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Everyone Learns Together: Youth, Families, and the Dhamma

A Conversation with Ajahn Amaro

Traditionally, Theravada monasteries have served as community centers of sorts, providing places for people of all ages to come together in a variety of ways to express and connect with the spiritual aspects permeating much of our lives. This has certainly included young people, who join with the older generations in regular visits to the monastery. During 1999, several special events brought together the Abhayagiri Monastery community with youth and families. Lay supporters Cator Shachoy, Barbara Gates, and Dennis Crean met with Ajahn Amaro to talk about these experiences and about children, parents, and the Dhamma.

Cator Shachoy: You spent some time with kids this summer — teaching at the Spirit Rock Family Retreat, visiting at Camp Winnarainbow, and hosting a teen weekend at Abhayagiri. What do you think draws kids to the Dharma and to you as a monk?

Ajahn Amaro: Well, it varies. There's obviously a certain kind of peacefulness that people feel attracted to. Young people can also really relate to the sense of commitment. We've tied ourselves to

something and are building our lives around it. And we are not afraid of looking pretty strange in the process! Then there's a magnetic quality: "Hmm. I don't know what these guys are, but I want to be close. I want to see what this is." Even at the Family Retreat at Spirit Rock, where on one level the kids seemed mostly concerned with playing with each other and not terribly into much Dhamma stuff, I found they really wanted to hang out with me as a monk. I shaved four heads during the course of five days, not counting my own!

CS: A radical fashion statement!

AA: To some degree one wonders whether it was a fashion statement. But there was also the sense of, "Monks shave their heads. I want to be like that. That's cool." There is a kind of role modeling that goes on, particularly for the boys (there weren't any nuns there). Some who were quite uncomfortable at showing any kind of softness or betraying any interest in anything spiritual actually let their defenses down. Because of wanting so much to draw close, they couldn't stay cool and distant and uninterested. Their own enthusiasm got the better of them.

CS: After participating in these various events, did you notice any common themes?

AA: Yes, it was really striking — at Camp Winnarainbow, at Spirit Rock, pretty much across ages, young kids have a very clear sense of wanting to be honest. Or wanting to be harmless, really respecting the lives of other creatures and telling their parents off for swatting mosquitoes. They have a clear sense of morality. One boy asked us, "If you're trying to be unaggressive and to be a nice guy, then sometimes you get trodden on by people who don't appreciate the fact you are nice. They just want to take advantage of you. What do you do about that?" This was a twelve-year-old, trying to figure it out for himself: "I don't want to harm anything, and I don't want to be aggressive like

the other guys. But I can also see that if I am too soft, it doesn't do me or anybody else any good either." There is a profound attraction towards goodness, but not in a prissy way. Kids see harmlessness and honesty and generosity as really important things in life, really worth paying attention to.

Dennis Crean: Are there any specific instances in the collection of teachings in which the Buddha was addressing children? Traditionally, how are kids introduced to the teachings?

AA: It is interesting that there is virtually nothing in the Pali Canon that is specifically for kids. I can think of two discourses of advice to the Buddha's son, Rahula, one where he is taught mindfulness of breathing by Sariputta and another where the Buddha talks to him mostly about the karmic effects of lying and the importance of honesty in speech.

Really, though, there is such a vast array of teachings — in terms of generosity, virtue, *samadhi* training, etc. — of which large elements apply to kids as much as to grown ups. In my experience of being in Buddhist cultures, everyone learns together. At the Dhamma talk, everyone is there from grandma down to the babies. With groups of children, they use stories from the *Dhammapada Commentary* and the *Jataka* tales, all coming from the vast sea of Indian fables and folklore, and filled in with Buddhist principles and Buddhist characters. In fact, many of Aesop's Fables come from the *Jatakas.* They are cautionary tales for children. Almost all talk about karma. The recurrent theme is: if you do good, then you will receive good; and if you do bad, then you will receive bad. This is how karma works. They use the Bodhisattva and different characters such as Devadatta, Ananda, and King Bimbisara. All these characters reappear in various different lifetimes. The stories are characterizations of moral tales. Traditionally, that was how children were taught.

Barbara Gates: At my daugher's preschool on Buddha's birthday, I told them the story of Siddhartha, using a picture book. It included his introduction to sickness, old age, and death. A number of the little kids — three- and four-year-olds — came up to me afterwards. They looked through the pictures and found the one with the dead body. They said, "Tell that part again! Tell that part again!" I notice that kids are often drawn toward looking at the hard facts of life, and they are drawn toward people who are willing to talk about impermanence and death, some of the things that are hidden in our culture. I wonder whether you have had that experience as well.

AA: Oh, yes. Not just impermanence and death, but the whole dark side. At the Spirit Rock retreat I got drawn into some storytelling. The stories I told had some serious bloodshed and darkness in them. The kids loved it. To the youngest kids of all — the four-, five-, and six-year-olds — I told a story about the cultivation of patience. In a previous life, the Bodhisattva is living in a cave. The royal hunting party is out, the men all chasing animals while the women are preparing the picnic. The women get fed up waiting for the men, so they wander around and stumble across the Bodhisattva in his cave. They see this guy with dreadlocks, birds' nests in his hair, and cobwebs all over him. They start talking to him and find that underneath the dust and the cobwebs, he is also tall and handsome and has this great voice. Soon, he has all the women of the royal court gathered around him in rapt attention. Then the king shows up and says, "Who are you, trying to steal my women?!" The Bodhisattva replies, "I am just a hermit cultivating patience." "Patience? I'll see if you can be patient!" the king roars, and he chops off the Bodhisattva's nose. He continues "testing his patience" by chopping off his hand, then another hand, an arm, etc. Finally, the Bodhisattva is sitting there with his feet, legs, arms, hands, nose, and ears all chopped off; and he's bleeding to death. Well, the six-year-olds listening to this story can't get

enough: "Oh yeah. Yuck. Absolutely gross! Great, go on, do it. More, please."

BG: Just like with the original versions of Grimm's Fairy Tales, people need to see the shadow side.

AA: Yes. The researcher Bruno Bettelheim once did a comparison study, and the kids who heard the sanitized fairy tales — where the witches had counseling rather than being put in a barrel full of nails and rolled down a hill — were much more unequipped when faced with difficult real-life situations. The kids who read about the blood and ogres knew that when someone comes at you in a rage, reach for the magic feather and don't panic; this can be dealt with. I think there is a lot of over-cautiousness in failing to present aging, sickness, death, and violence — the dark side.

CS: We tend to hide the shadow side when we are afraid of overwhelming or scaring our kids. It's really probably ourselves whom we're afraid of overwhelming or scaring, while the kids just naturally hear it and let it all pass through.

AA: Yes, so in storytelling you frame things and hold them in such a way that you are not simply trying to horrify people but to use the imagery to get people's attention. With the older kids at Spirit Rock, I told the story of the Bodhisattva falling in love. It involves the beings who were later reborn as the Buddha's attendant, Ananda, and Uppalavanna, a very beautiful and enlightened nun. When the Bodhisattva falls in love with Uppalavanna, the queen at that time, she and Ananda, who is the king, conspire to help the Bodhisattva pull out of his deluded state of being besotted with her. The teens were shocked: "Hey, the Buddha fell in love! This is amazing!" Teenagers can all relate to falling madly in love with someone who is not quite the right one or with whom it doesn't work out. So we tell stories, trying to find topics that are suitable or meaningful but without shy-

ing away from their natural intensity for fear of not presenting a pretty picture.

BG: It's like sitting on the cushion and learning to be willing to experience anger or all the other sensations and thoughts you think are ugly. But what then might you say to a parent who often finds herself driven to express those thoughts or difficult feelings when in the heat of family life? As a parent, I need some Dharma help! For me it's around anger. For other people it might be something else. I find myself doing and saying things for which I judge myself harshly the moment after I do them.

AA: First of all, I'm not a parent. But I have parents, so I am familiar with the scenarios. For parents, what seems to be one of the most prominent causes of passion in the relationship with their children is the whole galaxy of expectations and programs the adults have as the controllers, as those who dictate, "In this house we do this; we don't do that. These are the rules." When the kids confront or stumble over that and do or say things that don't fit, then a complex of frustration, irritation, impatience, intolerance, etc., grows up around "you're not doing what I say."

BG: Yes! So what can we do then?

AA: The first step is a conscious awareness, a stepping back, preferably when the kid is not around and you have time to reflect. Ask yourself what expectations you have set up in determining, "When I bring up my kids, I am going to do this and not going to do that." What have you put in place as your set of paradigms and axioms for your family life? How much are your children players in your drama? By getting familiar with your script and the scriptwriting process, you can then ask yourself, "Where did this come from? Why is that so important to me?" Some of your hopes and expectations may come from a very enlightened and wonderful place, motivated by goodheartedness. Others may come from unconscious desire systems, such as reactions against

what your own parents did: "That's what happened to *me,* and it's definitely NOT going to happen to *my* kids!" Something else might come from your eco-friendly philosophy; and so on.

I remember an incident that happened with me years ago at Amaravati Monastery in England. Sundays there are really busy days, often with 80 or 100 people coming to visit us. I would typically go into the main meeting hall around 10 a.m. People are arriving then to offer the meal. When I happened to be the senior monk, I could be in there for five or six hours straight. As the day progressed, I would witness a strong motivation to get out, to go back to my room and read the Sunday paper. It was usually around four o'clock in the afternoon before I got out of the hall for the first time. So there I was one Sunday afternoon, finally back in my room reading the Sunday paper, when I heard a knock at the door. One of the junior monks was there asking, "Is this a convenient time to talk?" And I said, "Not right now."

CS: You'd turned into your dad!

AA: Yes, there it was! As he closed the door, I thought to myself, "My God, it's happened. I'm too busy reading the paper. I swore that would never happen." I don't even have children, but there it was, a familiar childhood scenario repeating itself.

So, the first step is recognition: you can see yourself doing something. But you can't simply decide, "OK, I won't be like that anymore." A decision may set the intention, but an intention on its own is not enough to break a habit and recondition the mind. What it takes, then, is reviewing or rewriting the intentions, learning to see the reactions happening, and then not following them. You can cultivate a much more spacious attitude, like, "Why should my kid be a certain way? I may have wanted a macho, rolling-in-the-dirt kind of son, but instead I've got a doe-eyed, sensitive, lily-type son. Well, that's who he is. Instead of comparing him to how I think he should be or what I want

him to be, maybe I can meet him as he is."

BG: Do you think it's possible to work through old conditioning and get at those assumptions and expectations without having a sitting practice? After all, it's often particularly hard for parents of young children to mobilize the discipline to establish a sitting practice.

AA: Even without sitting practice, there are many hours in the day to just watch what goes on in your mind, to review it, to map out your conditioning. If you are really interested, if it's a real priority and you are making the effort, then bringing your attention to that domain is all it takes. If you have never meditated before, this may be more difficult; but if you have done some meditation before you had kids and you have a bit of a basis in samadhi and reflective wisdom, it will be easier. Obviously, sitting practice is very valuable, but I think it has been oversanctified. Just going about your business using reflective wisdom and general mindfulness as an ongoing practice should be more highly valued.

CS: So how can a family that wants to be Buddhist, to do Buddhist practice, integrate this into their homelife?

AA: One idea is to have a shrine in the home and a daily routine of chanting and meditation together. I know one family in England in which the seven-year-old daughter wanted to meditate. When her mum asked her, "What are you doing?" she replied, "I'm meditating. Sit down with me and meditate." The seven-year-old got the mother meditating, and it became a family routine.

DC: How about when a family comes to the monastery. What can they do there?

AA: To begin with, the monastery environment itself is something that kids can easily relate to. There isn't anything hap-

pening in which kids don't belong. People are often asking us, "Is it OK to bring kids?" They are astonished when we say, "Sure, no problem." After all, a monastery is not a retreat center; it is a broader environment. Traditionally at monasteries, if people are meditating, the kids are there meditating with everyone else. There are even instances in the canon in which children become enlightened, such as Dabbamallaputta, who became an arahant at the age of seven when they were shaving his head to become a novice.

After the Teen Weekend, a ten-year-old boy, Sebastian, didn't want to go home and begged and begged to be allowed to stay. When his mum went home, he stayed on and joined in the daily routine. He helped out in the mornings with the monastery work period running for this and that, and in the afternoons Ajahn Pasanno would take him under his wing as he helped to organize all the construction and earth moving. There was absolutely no problem; he totally fitted in. And he really tried. He even made it to morning chanting a couple of times. He ended up falling asleep and lying down on the floor, but no one ever dreamt of saying, "Hey, that kid's asleep. Either wake him up so he can join in, or get him out of here."

There is a breadth in what a monastery environment can offer for families that represents a fuller range of the skillful means available in the Buddhist tradition than does a retreat environment with its strict routine. Simply getting stuff together before a visit can be a family activity. "Let's give them this, let's give them that." I know a family that has a great time picking berries and making pies. Once you get to the monastery, there's general playing, going for hikes, reading books. It's quite OK for families to leave for a while to go swimming in the Russian River. Of course, everyone can join in with the chanting and bowing, or take time to chat with the monks and nuns. There's been talk about having a family camp at Abhayagiri. With the amenities we've got, it may have to start out with just three or

four families, and it will mostly be the families who get together to make it happen. But we are happy to support it.

In general, we encourage families to visit. Creating a monastery is about offering a place for all of us to come together in the context of our spiritual aspirations — monastics and laypeople, young and old. It's a home for us all.

Reprinted from the Abhayagiri newsletter, Fearless Mountain, *Vol. 4, No. 3 (Fall 1999). Cator Shachoy is a counselor at Camp Winnarainbow, works with preschool children, and teaches yoga. Barbara Gates is editor-in-chief of* Inquiring Mind a*nd draws on*

Preparing for Death: The Final Days of Death Row Inmate Jaturun "Jay" Siripongs

An Interview with Ajahn Pasanno

Jaturun "Jay" Siripongs, a native of Thailand, was convicted in 1983 for the murders of Garden Grove market owner Pakawan "Pat" Wattanaporn and store clerk Quach Nguyen. While Siripongs admitted to involvement in the robbery, he denied having committed the murders. Yet he refused to name his accomplice and was convicted and sentenced to death.

Six days before Jay Siripongs was to be executed, his friend, attorney Kendall Goh, contacted Abhayagiri Monastery seeking a Buddhist spiritual advisor. Two days later, Abhayagiri co-abbot Ajahn Pasanno expeditiously received security clearance to enter San Quentin Prison and spent three extraordinary days with Jay Siripongs, the last three days of Siripongs' life. Jay Siripongs died by lethal injection on February 9, 1999.

There were many reports that Siripongs went through a remarkable spiritual transformation while in prison. As a youth, Siripongs had taken temporary Buddhist monastic ordination in Thailand — a common Thai cultural practice. While in prison,

he drew upon the meditation training he had received during his ordination and practiced consistently. Guards and inmates alike recognized that he lived his life at San Quentin peacefully. Several guards supported the clemency appeal for Siripongs, some openly. Even former San Quentin Warden Daniel B. Vasquez supported a plea for commutation of Siripongs' sentence to life imprisonment.

Kathryn Guta and Dennis Crean spoke with Ajahn Pasanno in May 1999.

Fearless Mountain: How did you come to be called in as Jay Siripongs' spiritual counselor?

Ajahn Pasanno: The first time Jay expected to be executed was November 17, 1998. At that time, he was accompanied by a Christian minister, a woman who had attended several other executions at San Quentin. Although Jay liked the minister very much and had known her for years, there was a dynamic between them that increased his anxiety. In November, in the final hours before his scheduled death, the two talked incessantly, and Jay was distracted from composing his mind. Jay had had a clear sense of what he needed to do in order to prepare for death, but he did not do it in November. Then, at the last moment, a federal court granted a stay, and Jay was not executed for another three months. He was very fortunate that this first execution had been stayed. His situation and reactions became clear to him. He wanted to make his death as peaceful as possible, and he knew he had to do the inner work to make it so.

For the second execution date, Jay was determined to go to his execution alone so that he could try to be calm and collected in his last hours. His friend Kendall Goh was concerned about his lack of spiritual support and offered to find a Buddhist advisor. It was apparently not easy for Jay to ask for a different spiritual advisor; he encountered difficulties both from San Quentin and others, and he was cautious. I thought that his caution was

reasonable as clearly the last thing he needed at that stage was some pious lecture from a monk. However, immediately after we met we connected, and he was happy to have me there.

FM: How did it feel to serve as a spiritual counselor to a condemned man?

AP: At first, I felt happy to help. Then I thought, I'm going into a hell realm, and there was a certain amount of trepidation. There were gates, chains, a metal detector and guards. Then there was a second metal detector, guards to stamp my hand after I'd cleared it, then more gates and guards. Yet there were also many conflicting images. I heard a guard call children visitors by their names as if he knew them.

When I saw Jay, he was not like others I have been with who are approaching their deaths. Jay was young and healthy, in control of his faculties. He was sharp, intelligent and talented. It was clear he had lived the last years of his life skillfully. Although he was waist-chained, he remained dignified. He was gracious and hugged his visitors. The whole situation took on a surreal quality. Everything appeared normal, but at midnight on Monday this human being would die, he would be executed.

FM: Was there any tension in the air considering that Jay would soon be put to death?

AP: Not really. The atmosphere was relaxed and not gloomy. Sometimes we got down to the nitty gritty of the mind. Other times we joked and laughed. On the first day especially, Jay was a very gracious host. Prior to my arrival he had set up a chair for me on one side of a table and for his friends on the other side. He had instructed them very strictly on how to behave in the presence of a monk, and he had planned to offer a meal. He said it was the first time he had been able to feed a monk in twenty years. In response to questions from his friends, I talked about the Buddhist theory of awakening using the lotus

flower metaphor. I also talked quite a bit about the meaning of Taking Refuge — seeing the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha as enlightened knowing, truth and the embodiment of goodness. Jay was so happy that his friends could hear Dhamma and that he could share this with them.

Yet I felt very concerned that Jay look after the quality of his own mind and not let people distract him due to their own traumas about his imminent death. Jay recognized the dynamic that was going on around him; he was certainly not trying to maintain social contact because of agitation or restlessness. Still, he realized that he had to take responsibility for his own stability. Although he gave himself completely to his friends during the visiting hours, he meditated many of the other hours of the day beginning when he awoke at two or three o'clock in the morning.

During the days before his death, I pushed Jay into not becoming distracted. He had a lot of visitors. I told him it's best not to get too caught up with all these people. Kendall had told me when I first came that Jay was doing fine, that it was the rest of them who were falling apart. It was very obvious that Jay had touched the lives of many people, and they gathered around him before his death. His sister, Triya, was there. Some of his friends considered him their spiritual teacher. Many of his friends were lawyers, other friends were born-again Christians. So there were many different needs, and Jay, being kind-hearted and generous, tried to fulfill them all.

FM: Is it true that Jay was also an accomplished artist?

AP: Yes. Jay showed me his portfolio. He had become skilled in many different media and was obviously talented. He also gave away most of his art — over 600 pieces — to acquaintances and friends over the years. Jay used art to express his process of growing and changing. He often used butterflies as a symbol of his metamorphosis. At some time during his incarceration,

he had realized that his life would end in prison. He thought, I can't continue hating myself or others.

During the last eight years, Jay underwent a deep transformation and came to a real understanding of himself. He told me that he had been in prison for a long time and couldn't say it was a bad thing. He felt he had been able to grow in prison in a way that would not have been possible had he not been in such difficult and extreme circumstances. He learned to reflect deeply on what would create well-being and clarity in his mind. The closer he got to the execution, the more he learned about what would obstruct the mind from growth and peace. He turned himself to the process of applying the mind to truth.

FM: And this included taking up Buddhist meditation?

AP: That's right. Jay had learned how to meditate when he was a monk in Thailand many years earlier. While in the monastery, he had had a very clear vision of light while meditating, but when he had tried to replicate the experience, it didn't come back.

FM: That sounds like the common meditation experience of grasping after what is pleasant.

AP: Yes. I teased him about that. Jay then reported that three weeks earlier the light had come back. This was very encouraging to me. Since Jay was a visual artist, I realized that he could use the vision of light as an anchor at the moment of his death. I led him in guided meditations centering on the breath and light. Since his breath would only be there until the injection took effect, I told Jay that there would come a time to let the breath go and focus instead on the image of light.

FM: How else were you able to help Jay with his inner work? Was he afraid of death?

AP: The first night we talked on the phone, I had asked Jay, "What's your mental state."

"I'm at peace," he said. "I've accepted what will happen. But I still have things I want to know."

Growing up in Thailand, Jay believed in rebirth. He joked that he wanted his ashes scattered in the sea so that they might be eaten by fish and then the fish by humans. In this way, he could quickly return to the human realm to continue his work. He knew that human birth was the place where learning was possible — a place to understand pain and joy, good and evil, right and wrong. Growth and understanding were the results of choices one made. Jay had made some very bad choices over the years, but he had also made some good ones. He felt he had learned some real lessons in this lifetime and was determined to stay on the path of Dhamma in the next life.

FM: Did you ever to talk to Jay about those bad choices, about his crimes?

AP: No, I never talked to Jay specifically about the past. There was not enough time. I focused instead on his spiritual well-being, on his ability to face death with as composed a mind as possible. I was not relating to him as a person convicted of a crime. I was relating to him as a person facing death.

FM: What were the last few hours with Jay like?

AP: Six hours before an execution, the prisoner leaves his family and friends behind and goes to a very cramped cell right next to the execution chamber. Only his spiritual advisor can accompany him. There are six guards, called the execution squad, in a very confined space, and people like the prison psychiatrist and the warden also come in from time to time. There can be a lot of intimidation from the guards right before the execution. They might be carrying on loud conversations or be obnoxious in other ways. They may be watching TV very loudly just three feet away from the condemned man. On Jay's November execution date he had been allowed recitation beads in his cell, but before

giving them to him, one of the guards had put them on the floor and stepped on them.

After I was strip searched, I was taken to one of these death row holding cells. There, Jay and I were separated into two different cells connected only by a small corner. Right away I did protective chanting as a way of cleaning out negative energy. "We'll take the game away from them," I told Jay. We had planned for Jay to ask for the Refuges and Precepts in Pali, but he mistakenly did the chant to request a Dhamma talk instead. So I gave a short Dhamma talk to him and the guards.

FM: What did you talk about?

AP: I told the story of the Buddha, just after his enlightenment, not wanting to teach, as he thought nobody would understand. I talked about the nature of delusion of the human world and the liberation of the Dhamma. I talked about the Four Noble Truths, about how letting go was not a rejection of anything. I instructed Jay to pay attention to the arising of consciousness. Rather than inclining the mind towards that which will result in suffering and rebirth, I told Jay to move instead towards relinquishment and focusing the mind.

In terms of letting go or relinquishment, we talked about forgiveness in the context of "not self." If we haven't forgiven, we keep creating an identity around our pain, and that is what is reborn. That is what suffers. I asked Jay, "Is there anybody you have not forgiven yet?" I meant the system, his parents, others.

Jay thought about it. "I haven't forgiven myself completely," he said softly at last. It was touching. He had a memory of being a person who had been involved in something wrong in the past, yet now in the present he was a different person. It was helpful for him to see that he was not this memory of himself, to let go of the person in the past who was involved in the crimes.

It was also interesting to see that the guards seemed intent on what I was saying, and throughout the evening they were actually very solicitous and respectful of both of us.

FM: Was Jay preoccupied with the numerous appeals to save his life that continued during this time?

AP: Jay did not seem concerned or worried about justice. He did not hold out great hope for the appeals to go through. When the final appeals were turned down, it was not a big deal. "I'm accepting the fact that I'll be executed," he said.

FM: What was Jay's state of mind as he got closer to the execution?

AP: At one point, Jay asked, "If I am not the body, not the feelings, not the mind, then what is it that is liberated?" I told him that such a question appearing then in his mind was simply doubt arising. When you let go of everything and experience the peace and clarity inherent in that, you don't have to put a name or identity on it.

At another point Jay said, "I have two people on my mind, . . . me and you."

I said, "You've got to get rid of me. I'm not going in there with you. And then you have to let go of yourself." We really laughed about that.

Basically, I helped prepare Jay for the many distractions that might take place during the execution. "People will be strapping you down; things will be happening around you,"

I warned. "You need to establish the mind without going to externals. Keep your attention within." We spent the whole evening meditating, chanting and talking Dhamma. So in the last hour Jay was very peaceful and able to establish his mind firmly on his meditation object. Toward the end, we took the time to do a ceremony of sharing merit and offering blessings, even to the guards. After his final appeal had been turned down, Jay also asked me to do some chanting for the lawyers involved in his case. He had a quality of thoughtfulness right up until the end.

FM: Were you present at the execution?

AP: No. That had been decided before I first visited Jay at San Quentin. I believe that not having yet met me, Jay elected not to have me there with him. When I read the papers the next day, though, they reported that he lay very still during the execution and kept his eyes closed. I found this heartening because I felt he was composing his mind.

FM: How did you feel after the execution?

AP: I was very grateful to have been there. It was very humbling. One can't help but consider what any one of us would have done in a similar circumstance — relating to our death not as something abstract, sometime off in the future, but knowing that at precisely 12:01 A.M. we will definitely die.

FM: Was there a funeral for Jay?

AP: There was a private cremation the day after Jay died. I met with his sister, Triya, at the crematorium. Jay's body lay in a cardboard box. Earlier, when Triya had asked to view his body, she had been told by the funeral director that this was not possible. I wasn't aware of this, so I asked the funeral director to lift the lid to the box. With some hesitation, she lifted it. Jay was in a body bag. "There must be a zipper," I said. The woman searched around and said the zipper was by his feet. She hesitated again. She said that Jay would not be wearing any clothes. "There must be some scissors around. It's just a plastic bag," I said. The woman brought some scissors over and cut the bag open at the shoulders and head.

It was very powerful to view his body. He had the most serene expression on his face. There was a brightness to his skin. He wasn't dull or waxy. He had the tiniest bit of a smile. It was very good to see he had died a peaceful death. After all that had happened, it was a reassuring ending.

Abhayagiri Buddhist Monastery is the first monastery in the United States to be established by followers of Ajahn Chah, a respected Buddhist Master of the ancient Thai forest tradition of Theravada Buddhism.

In 1995, as Ven. Master Hsüan Hua, abbot of the City of 10,000 Buddhas, located in Ukiah, California, approached his death, he instructed his disciples to offer to Ajahn Sumedho, Ajahn Chah's senior Western disciple, 120 acres of forest fifteen miles north of the City of 10,000 Buddhas, in Redwood Valley. Subsequent to this an adjacect parcel of land with some buildings was purchased to make up the 250 acres of land that now comprise Abhayagiri Buddhist Monastery.

Abhayagiri is a center of teaching and practice for people in monastic or lay life. Its heart is a community of monks (*bhikkhus*), nuns (*siladhara*), novices (*samaneras*), and postulants (*anagarikas*) pursuing a life of meditative reflection. Frequently monastics from the other branches of this global community come and stay for shorter or longer periods of time.

The Sangha lives according to the *Vinaya,* a code of discipline established by the Buddha. In accordance with this discipline, the monastics are alms mendicants, living lives of celibacy and frugality. Above all, this training is a means of living reflectively and a guide to keeping one's needs to a minimum: a set of robes, an alms bowl, one meal a day, medicine when ill, and a sheltered place for meditation and rest.

Ajahn Amaro began his training in the forest monasteries of Northeast Thailand with Ajahn Chah in l978. He continued his training under Ajahn Sumedho first at Chithurst Monastery in West Sussex, England, and later at Amaravati Buddhist Centre outside of London, where he lived for ten years. In June of 1996, Ajahn Amaro moved to California to establish Abhayagiri Monastery. Ajahn Pasanno is a highly respected and well-known Dhamma teacher. Ordained in 1973, he spent twenty-three years as a monk in Thailand — the latter fifteen years as abbot of the International Forest Monastery (Wat Pah Nanachat). He joined Ajahn Amaro at Abhayagiri Monastery at New Year of 1997. Ajahn Amaro and Ajahn Pasanno guide the Monastery as co-abbots.

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