

Theravada Buddhist Monasticism in the West

a personal view

by
Kim Wolfe Murray

As the history of Buddhism is basically a history of Buddhist monasticism, one can see that the fragile experiment that is Buddhist monasticism in the West is but a mere staccato blip on the movie reel of recorded time. Relatively short in terms of duration. Still finding its feet.

My monastic life lasted for thirteen years. I spent a year and a half as an *anagarika* (postulant or literally 'homeless one') and approximately eleven and a half years as a *bhikkhu* (roughly translated as alms mendicant).

My first exposure to the full community of the Western *Sangha* (ordained community of monks and nuns) practising in England was at Amaravati. Otherwise known as The Deathless Realm, Amaravati was a compound of cedar-clad barracks on a high ridge of the Chiltern Hills. Lines of shaven-headed men and women. Eyes downcast. Attention drawn within. The power of an assembled mass of silent witnesses. It was both awe-inspiring and intimidating. I had previously asked for *anagarika* ordination at a Northumberland branch monastery called Harnham, a small Northern outpost with a community of four. A manageable size. Here I was witnessing a phenomenon. What had brought this number of white males, and a regular sprinkling of diehard Western women, to an obscure branch of the Thai Forest tradition?

Probably for the same reasons as I. Certainly not because any of us had aspired to do anything remotely holy, or spiritual, or (dare I say it) religious before we had stumbled upon the great well of Eastern spirituality. Well, there were one or two – but they were the exceptions that proved the rule. Our generation monks were a bit of a beatnik crew. The last of the wild ones as it turned out. we were among the first generation of 'home-grown' monastics. In many ways we were the ones who were to be sacrificed as the community tried to figure out how to do this thing in a secular culture that had forgotten what the eremitical life was supposed to be about.

We were searching for a way out. A way out of the madness of twentieth century life in its headlong rush towards oblivion. We had tired of revolutions and despair. None of it seemed to work. Conformity was death. So why not! After all, the biggest revolution is the revolution inside. That's what it felt like in those heady days of the miner's strike and Reaganomics. Here was a bunch of guys who had done it. At least it seemed that way, painfully squatting, as I was half way down a freezing school dining hall near Hemel Hempstead. They had taken the seed of awakening that was the sixties era, and nourished it in the calm of the forests of North-east Thailand.

Ajahn Anando was my first teacher/inspiration/damn fool who got me involved in the first place. He had been educated in a Catholic seminary in New York until the age of sixteen whereupon he continued his schooling in the suburbs with the street-gangs. Finding the heat the cops were bringing down a bit intense, he promptly volunteered for the marines at the height of the Vietnam War. Finding one so skilled in the arts of hand-to-hand combat, his innate abilities were soon being employed as a radio operator on the front line. Directing the napalm down in the name of life, liberty and the American way. Fortunately for Corporal Klein as he then was, he got shot in the head. And again in the back as he was being airlifted out. The first bullet took a chunk out of the back of his skull causing temporary blindness. The second, that was heading for his spine, divided in two as it hit the wire under-rigging of the helicopter harness, before continuing it's dual trajectory either side of his spinal chord. Having being so miraculously saved by the beneficence of the universe (or something), he continued to explore life's challenges back in the States by taking up motorbike riding (and other recreational pursuits) at university. Soon tiring of the monotony of his existence he ventured further afield to Europe, this time in playboy mode. Touring the many splendoured coastline of Southern France. Things naturally led to India, as they tended to do in those days. He did the circuit and grew kaftans and a hairy beard. He went to Thailand where he met Venerable Sumedho, a Seattle born Peace-Corps worker who had been among the first Westerners to undertake the *bhikkhu* training under the mischievous guidance of Ajahn Chah. Greig Klein became Anando and things were different after that.

Ajahn Chah was the kind of teacher that you couldn't help loving, even though you hated him at the same time because he tortured you with your defilements. He made fun of the idealistic, over-educated, young Westerners who were taking it oh so seriously. The Thai monks in Ajahn Chah's monasteries meanwhile were largely from his own rice-farming background, whose way of life had remained largely unaffected by the hurricane of modernity. While the Thai monks were expected to gain an equivalent of a university education in Pali (the scriptural entirety of the of Theravada Buddhist canon), the Westerners were told not to open a book for two years. Minimum. How can a cup that is already overflowing with water possibly receive replenishment? The Western monks needed to unlearn everything they had previously read, thought or understood about Buddhism, as Ajahn Chah would ceaselessly remind them, before they could really listen to what the forest had to teach.

Ajahn Chah treated his Western monks with the same fierce tenderness that he did his fellow Thais. They had to learn how to haul water, sew robes and sweep the paths that interconnected the entire monastery - no more than a scattering of bamboo huts in the forest. They had to learn to sit cross-legged on concrete floors with only a thin, cotton sitting mat for comfort. Long, arduous nights of meditation with a cup of coffee at midnight to get you through the slow dawn. To survive on a regime of 3 a.m. wake-ups. Barefoot *pindapat* (alms round) to the outlying villages. Anything up to a ten mile round trip. Every day. Or you wouldn't eat. Your one meal a day that is. Of sticky rice. Crushed insects for protein. The occasional banana. Interminably long hot afternoons. Mosquitoes. Malaria. Struggling with lust. Boredom. Depression and despair.

What was it that kept them there? For years. Giving up all hope of returning to the West. Perhaps it was something to do with Ajahn Chah. In the way that he seemed to effortlessly embody both the spirit and the letter of the Buddha's way. The mindful way. He was fat and happy. Finding amusement in his old age as a compassionate terroriser of the spiritual aspirants that were crazy enough to think that they could ever get away from the truth of what he was teaching. It wasn't simply the Buddhist scriptures or some off the shelf meditation technique. It was a valid, rigorous spiritual path that demanded time. Patient endurance. And a lot of loving-kindness. A

way of directly allowing the centre of one's entire being to be transformed by facing reality. Seeing it simply as it is. And letting go.

Regardless of time, culture, background or age we are all, by virtue of being human prone to old age, sickness and death. Indeed it is inevitable. If only we were capable of being fully conscious of the fact that these realities remain as full stops. Canyons in our lives – which we ignore at our peril. Or latch onto vague hopes of an afterlife based upon blind faith that may or may not hold up to scientific scrutiny. The Buddha's whole approach was scientific. So much so that many in the West (myself included) found that the Buddha's elevated, almost remote analysis of the human condition to be the antithesis of the metaphysical expression of Judeo-Christian spirituality. A denial of that deep yearning for union – the inspiration of so much passionate beauty, poetry and art in our culture.

But once Ajahn Chah had cut through the outer coating of dogma and ritual with meditation – the bare bones, the structure of the dispensation of the Buddha, reveals itself to be a precise contemplative mechanism for opening up the self/ego/control loop to the Dhamma. The Way It Is. Enlightenment. The Middle Way between the extremes of self-mortification and indulgence in sense pleasures.

The first Western spiritual adventurers to encounter the *dhutanga* (dhutanga refers to certain ascetic practices allowed by the Buddha for those monks who were so inclined) tradition in the North-East of Thailand discovered what seemed to be a remarkable monastic time-capsule. Spiritual boot camps that almost perfectly replicated monastic life as originally outlined by the Buddha in India over 2,500 years ago. A disciplined, and yet humane, community existence that was purpose-built to support the independent investigation into the nature of mind. This framework was (and is) supported by villages most proximate to secluded monks or monastic settlements. The laity provided food and lodgings for the monks and in return they received spiritual nourishment for the heart. If the monks were not up to scratch, support would wane and the good monks would go elsewhere.

In Ajahn Chah's case, as his reputation spread, his monastery, Wat Pah Pong, expanded to the point where two to three hundred monks were living and practising at any one time. Soon branch monasteries were established by senior disciples who were pushed out

of the nest as soon as it was seen fit. Nowadays there are hundreds of Ajahn Chah's branch monasteries in Thailand. The Western branch monasteries remain practically the only monastic training available to those seeking to train in the Theravada tradition outside of South-East Asia. (Remarkable considering the plethora of Tibetan and Zen centres that proliferate in Europe and the new world.)

The kind of westerners who survived in such outposts were not all as well-prepared as Ajahn Anando. The 227 rules of the *bhikkhu vinaya* (monastic discipline) covered every area of daily life and monastic etiquette. The dos and don'ts of the renunciant life. They impinged on the westerners assumed values of equality, individuality and self-expression. Adapting to an alien culture wasn't even the half of it. The monastic discipline in the Theravada tradition provides merely a setting for the very personal struggle of awakening the heart. It wasn't about seeing the rules as arbitrary throwbacks from an irrelevant past, imposed by decaying patriarchal institutions. The Dhutanga monks were strange and aloof. The great ones were almost anarchic in their liberation. Many were fearless in their critique of the establishment. And they got away with it. Because people were in awe of their mastery of the *vinaya*.

The *vinaya* as taught by Ajahn Chah was a path of self-surrender. It only really worked within the context of community. Those of us who inherited the tradition in the UK developed an appreciation of its efficacy over time. The experience of community, or Sangha, for many of us became as essential to the deepening of practice as meditation. Sangha was the meditation.

By the time I joined in 1984 the community had already outgrown its first country residence in West Sussex and had opened a much larger centre north of London. Amaravati. The Sangha had expanded with remarkable speed in the first seven years. It had drawn together a disparate bunch of spiritual seekers from every corner of the globe as well as those who happened upon it by accident. Like me! However, integrating this fledgling family into an increasingly complex and sophisticated post-industrial society, with all the neurotic baggage that goes with that, was quite a different nut to crack than living on sticky rice in Ubon Ratchathani, North-east Thailand. The realisation gradually dawned that what Christian Monasticism had been engaged with since the Middle Ages – the accommodation of a

world view that relegated the mystical experience to the far corners of society - was being encountered in a matter of years.

The family became an organisation. A creeping systemisation was reacted to in two ways. A cautious embrace of eclecticism. Experimentation with Western psycho-therapeutic forms, ongoing dialogues with other brands of Buddhist and Christian monasticism. A willingness to adapt the letter, rather than the spirit of the *vinaya*, to Western sensibilities.

And then there was the policy of retrenchment. The attempt to draw the veil down from the public gaze. Frustrated RE teachers who wanted to pump some trendy exotica into their otherwise tedious procrastinations, found in the oddity of white men and women in saffron robes, an ideal distraction. The continuous flow of lay-people with an often only elemental grasp of even the most basic teachings of Buddhism inevitably and necessarily took second place to those who had made the ultimate commitment of ordaining. (Albeit not for life, but while you were in it there wasn't much choice but to give it everything you had.)

It was important for the Western Sangha to honour their Thai heritage. But as the community evolved independently of its roots in the UK and later Europe, New Zealand and the States, it became obvious that it would be necessary to adapt to the needs of those coming into the monasteries from cultures wholly ignorant of the Eastern world-view. Practising in the West, however tightly you held onto the tenets of the Forest masters, was fundamentally different here. And continues to be so. Taking a living shoot from an old decaying tree and planting it in foreign soil, as Ajahn Chah liked to compare the arrival of the Thai tradition in the West, was never going to be easy.

This is a continuing story with some extraordinary twists and turns. My first teacher, Ajahn Anando, disrobed in dramatic circumstances (as befitted his hardly unimaginative earlier life) and found his higher purpose through relationship with an Icelandic astrologer. Soon after they were married he was diagnosed as having a malignant brain tumour and died a year later. New satellite communities continue to emerge sustaining the possibility that a creative renewal of an ancient form is still possible in the West. And there are many, like myself, who have passed through the monastery

gates and continue to find a deep and resonating refuge in the *Dhamma* of Ajahn Chah. Who end up typing into the wee hours, fuelled by too many cigarettes and coffee, trying to figure out what on earth made us give up however many years of our life to this quest for enlightenment. And why we can't get out of it.

