

Westerner Monks from Wat Marpjan

Desanā to Western Monks from Wat Marpjan on

January 6, 2014

By

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For Free Distribution



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“The Gift of Dhamma Excels All Other Gifts”

- The Lord Buddha

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Westerner Monks from Wat Marpjan

January 6, 2014

Tan Ajaan asked, “Have you found *sati* yet?”
Someone answered, “I find it but I lose it a lot.”

Tan Ajaan: When Tan Ajaan Mun was practising in the forest of Chiang Mai, the hill tribe went to see him and when they saw Tan Ajaan Mun who was in walking meditation, the hill tribe asked, “What are you looking for?” Tan Ajaan Mun answered, “I am looking for *Buddho*”. The hill tribe asked, “Can I help you?” Tan Ajaan Mun replied, “Sure”. “How do I do it?” the hill tribe asked. “Just repeat *Buddho, Buddho*”, Tan Ajaan answered.

That is one form of developing mindfulness. But generally in the *Satipāṭṭhana Sutta*, the *sutta* stresses the body as the point of focus. Watch your body at all times and bring your mind to be close to your body, in order to prevent your mind from wandering to various places. For some people, it may be difficult to do, so reciting the word ‘*Buddho*’, which is a mantra, can be easier. It is also easier said than done. Usually, you can only recite for a few moments, not even a few minutes, and then your mind starts to go thinking about some other things. If you cannot bring your mind back to the present, to the here and now, when you sit in

meditation, you will not achieve any results. Because your mind keeps wandering, going back and forth, going to the future, going to the past, going over there, about something, about this or that thing, so you have to bring it to the body, just be aware and observe the body. Do not think about anything.

Thinking is only good when you are on the second level of practice. We call it the practice for insight. When you are on that level, then you have to think in order to see the real nature of things. But first you need to stop your mind from wandering and thinking aimlessly. If you don't, you will not be able to direct your mind to think in the way of insight. That is the reason why we have to develop *samādhi* first. We have to develop mindfulness first, to be able to stop your thinking. When you can stop, then you can direct it to the way of developing insight or wisdom, like thinking about the *Ti-lakkhaṇa* (the three characteristics of nature), thinking about impermanence. Everything that exists in this world is impermanent. If we can see the impermanent nature of things, then we can let go of things, because if we cling to them, they will only bring us sadness. The goal is to be able to see *Ti-lakkhaṇa* in everything, so that we can relinquish and let go. When we don't cling to them, we don't have desire for them to be like this or that. When we don't have any desire, we will not have *dukkha* (suffering, discontentment, unhappiness).

Dukkha arises from our desire. Desire is the second of the four Noble Truths and is called *Samudaya*.

Samudaya is *kāma-tanhā*, *bhava-tanhā*, and *vibhava-tanhā* - your desire for things, desire for them to be this way or that way, or not to be this way or that way. You can't have desire for anything because when you do, you will only have suffering. Because you cannot change them, you cannot change things. Everything is *anattā*. *Anattā* means nature. It is beyond your control. It is like the weather - you cannot tell the weather to be warm or hot, or to be cold. You have to accept it for what it is. So that's the ultimate goal. It is to be able to remain unperturbed, undisturbed by events, whether they are arising or ceasing, because there is nothing else you can do to stop them from happening. If you have desire for reality to be otherwise, you will only be sad and unhappy.

The whole practice is this way; you have to go step by step. First, you have to develop mindfulness, because without mindfulness, you cannot have *samādhī*. Without *samādhī*, you will not have the strength to investigate the true nature of things. In order to develop mindfulness efficiently, you need to be alone, you have to seek seclusion. If you are surrounded by things or events, your mind will be distracted. You will not be able to maintain your mindfulness on one object alone. When you are distracted, your mind starts to generate more thoughts. When you have thoughts, you have desire. If you are not careful, you might be dragged to do whatever your desire asks you to do. Instead of calming your mind, you agitate your mind, causing more unpleasantness and unhappiness, which will generate

more desire to get rid of that unhappiness. The way we get rid of our unhappiness is by doing what our desire tells us to do. That will create more desire afterwards. So we're going the wrong way. People in this world are going the wrong way. When they are not happy, they go out and do something to satisfy their desire, but when they come back home, that desire remains and comes back up again, and then they have to go out again. So the only way to manage or control your desire is to calm your mind, to stop your mind from thinking about things. Because when you don't think about things you won't have any desire.

Developing mindfulness is the most important part of the practice, the starting point of any successful meditation practice. The Buddha compared developing mindfulness to the footprint of the elephant. It is the biggest footprint of all the animals in the forests. You cannot progress or advance without developing mindfulness. You should seek seclusion as much as possible. Try to lay down the extra-curricular work that you don't have to do. But sometimes it is difficult when you live in the community. When you live with your teacher, you have responsibilities, so sometimes you have to seek permission to go and stay in a quiet monastery where there are just only one or two monks. Normally, in the first five vassa (rains retreat), you are required to live with your teacher to learn from your teacher first, because basically, you still haven't got the feel of being a monk, the feel of how to do the practice. If you go and live alone by yourself then your old tendencies will be

the ones that direct you to do things that are not proper or beneficial. The Buddha set up this rule, that as a new monk, you have to live with your teacher for at least five years. That is what Luangta Maha Boowa did. Any monk who went to stay with him, usually knew that they had to stay put for five years and couldn't go anywhere except for some emergencies, like your parents got sick or die, or you got sick and you had to get treatment. But you are not allowed to go and seek seclusion yet; you are not strong enough yet to go. It will be more harmful than beneficial. It is like letting a small child go alone without having a chaperone. New monks are like a new-born children. They haven't yet got the feel of the practice or how to behave properly as a monk, and what they do will be more harmful than beneficial to them. So that's what I try to stress here when monks come here to stay with me, "Please stay here for five years." Don't go anywhere. If you wish to go, don't come back. I don't want monks to come in and out like ping-pong balls. You want to be stable; you want to fix your mind, settle your mind. Once you settle your mind, you won't be subjected to your desire to go here and there. If you don't, when you come here, you will stay here for a while and will become restless and you want to go somewhere else. When you go somewhere else, you stay there for a while, then you will become restless again, then you will want to go somewhere else. So the problem is not where you stay, it's that your mind is restless, that you have not controlled that restlessness yet. This is basically why the five-year rule applies - to get rid of your restlessness. Once you have no

restlessness, then you can practice anywhere that is quiet, any forest monastery that would be quiet enough. Except if it is a big monastery that has a lot of work to do, then you might ask permission to go away occasionally.

Luangta Maha Boowa, when he stayed with Luangpu Mun, would ask permission to go and practice alone. But he was never too far away from Ajaan Mun, because he had to be close enough in case he had any problems or any questions, he could come and ask for advice. He said that sometimes, if he had problems, then after *pindapāta*, he would walk, which might take about two or three hours to get to where Ajaan Mun stayed. He would wait for Ajaan Mun to come back in the afternoon, and then went to pay respect to Ajaan Mun and told him what he wanted to know. When he got the answer, then he would walk back. He used his walking back and forth as walking meditation.

You must never be alone without a teacher for too long, because you can be misled by your own misunderstanding, because the *kilesas* are very deceptive. Only your teacher knows this, you don't know. So you need his advice. When you have problems, you tell him, or when you have a certain opinion, you tell him, and your teacher can correct whether you have the right opinion or not. Having a Teacher to guide and direct you in your practice is the most precious things, the most important thing in your practice.

Luangta said that listening to the *Desanā* (Dhamma talks) is the most important part of your practice. The second most important thing is the practice itself. If you practice without the right directions, you can go astray. You can go in the wrong direction. So, either you have a living teacher, or if not, then you will have to rely on the scriptures, or the written teaching of the teachers, the Ajaans who have passed away already. This path is very tricky. It has many pitfalls and traps. Only those who have already gone through will know the traps and pitfalls.

Basically your practice is developing mindfulness and samādhi. When you have *samādhi*, try to direct your mind to investigate the *Ti-lakkhaṇa* (impermanence, discontentment, not self) in everything, in order to let go of your desire for them, let go of your attachment.

Questions & Answers

Question Female1 (F1): Is ambition always driven by desire, or can it come from a place that is good and leads to good?

Tan Ajaan: The only ambition that is good is to become a monk. [Laughter] That is the only right ambition. That is what the Buddha did. The rest are just delusional. They are not real. If you go after the things in this world, then you are going after bubbles. They are not real because they are impermanent. They only exist for a

certain period of time before they disappear, like fame and fortune, and happiness that you gain from things or people - they are temporary. They are never fulfilling. You have to keep getting more and more, meaning you have to work hard all the time to get this kind of happiness. The other kind of happiness that I told you about is meditation. When your mind settles down, becomes peaceful and calm, you will find real fulfilment, where you have no desire for anything. It is all yours all the time, because it is within yourself. Everything else outside yourself, comes and goes. So if you have any desire for anything in this world, be it fortune or fame or anything, you are just going after bubbles. A Thai phrase says that you are going after your shadow. It is always one step ahead of you. So the real thing is inside. The only way to get to the real thing is to meditate, to develop mindfulness, to bring your mind to stop thinking. When your mind stops thinking, you will find this peace of mind that you have never experienced before. All you need is just one shot at it. If you have seen it just once, you will be sold, you will be won over. So try to develop mindfulness, try to bring your mind to peace, to settle down, to become peaceful. Then you will realize this is the real kind of happiness that you don't have to rely on anything, not even your body. You can have this happiness if you are sick. In bed you can still meditate and you can still get your mind to become calm. Or if your body becomes paralyzed or you get old, you cannot do anything with your body, but you can still have this happiness. But for other types of happiness you need your body, a strong healthy body. Then when

your body is no longer strong and healthy, you cannot find that kind of happiness anymore. So if you want to have any ambition: have this one ambition, to become a nun or to become a monk to practice meditation. I think these gentlemen (monks) have come the right way. You are going the wrong way. [Laughter] Have you studied any Buddhist books at all?

Question F1: A little, not too much. I am just starting to become interested.

Tan Ajaan: You're not interested to know what your brother is doing right here?

Question F1: I am. I'm just starting to become really interested.

Tan Ajaan: Well, I think the fact that your brother has become a monk can be helpful to you because it can generate curiosity in yourself. Once you have this curiosity, you will start to study. When you study you will discover something totally new or different that you have not heard before. So you are fortunate to have a brother as a monk. That is why in Thailand, the family is always happy if a male family member becomes a monk because it will then encourage other family members to follow suit, at least to come to the temple to see the monk. Just like what you are doing. So the next step is to study; try to get some books to study.

Question Monk1: Ajaan, what do you think about the importance of studying *Nakdham*? (Formal *Dhamma* courses with examinations just like at university)

Tan Ajaan: Not important at all. I never studied. I studied the scriptures, but you don't have to study formally and take the examinations of that sort. You study to know the path. That's all you need to know. Once you have a teacher, you have already *Nakdham*. Every time he talks, you learn from him. I think it is much more direct than reading the scriptures. The scriptures are pretty broad. It is not like learning from a teacher who is very direct. It goes right to the point where you are right now. For you to go and study the scripture, I think you are going backward. You are not going forward. This kind of study never happened in the time of the Buddha. They didn't have the separation of *pariyati* (study) and practice; it was always combined. It was always the tradition that the teacher gives a talk and the student listens to the talk, and takes whatever the teacher tells them to absorb into their system and tries to follow what the teacher tells them. You don't need to study anything if you have a teacher unless you want to have a wider view of the Teaching for the sake of teaching others, maybe then you might want to read more. Otherwise, if it is for your own practice, there is not much for you to know. There is a lot more to do than a lot more to know. You already know what you have to do. All you need is to do it. Not to know more, because this knowledge is useless to your mind. It cannot get rid

of your suffering, cannot get rid of your desire. It's only the practice that will be able to do that.

Question Monk2: Ajaan, when we want to achieve the happiness that one experiences from meditation, how far should we push ourselves physically? For example, if we become paralyzed before we reach the goal, would it be more degenerating for the practice?

Tan Ajaan: You have to strike a right balance between your body and your mind. Luangta Maha Boowa liked to do a lot of fasting, but he knew that he could fast only to a certain point before hurting the body. So you have to know what the right balance is. You have to maintain and take care of your body, so that it maintains its normal functions, so it won't be a hindrance or be a problem to your practice. But you also have to use physical severity in order to push ahead, like fasting. Between fasting and not fasting, if you fast and it is conducive to your practice, it will be very helpful. It will move your practice a lot quicker than not fasting. Because when you are not fasting, you take things easy. You are not hungry, so you tend to look for the pillow. But when you are fasting, you are not eating and you are hungry, so you have to somehow manage your hunger, because 90% of your hunger comes from your mind, so it forces you to meditate. Once you meditate and your mind becomes calm, then 90% of your hunger disappears, and you can live with the hunger of the body, which is only 10%. It forces you to meditate a lot, to walk *jongkrom* (walking meditation), to develop

mindfulness. But if you are not fasting, then you don't have this severity. You have no problem to manage, so you just take things easy. You just lie down, go have some more coffee or talk to some other monks.

Question Monk3: Do you have any other advice on how to practice in a busy monastery while learning Thai language, learning the monastic etiquette, help out around the monastery etc. How should we keep integrity in the practice as well, such as what minimum amount of time should we spend meditating per day?

Tan Ajaan: The maximum time is that whenever you have free time on your own, then try to either walk or sit. If you have to do any chores or work with other people, try to maintain mindfulness, try to focus on whatever you do. Don't converse, don't talk with other people, don't let your mind go astray from the work that you are doing at the present. Try to do it, and then when you complete the work, try to go back to your seclusion. You have to strike a balance between communal and personal responsibility. You don't want to feel that you are selfish. When you have to work with other people, you have to do it, except if you have some special privilege or exception like when I was staying with Luangta Maha Boowa, he gave me some special privileges. When there was construction work like building a *kuti*, I tried to go and help but Luangta would chase me away. He said, "You are just wasting your time here. You are not doing any help here. Get away!" So it depends on the teacher. Sometimes he can see what you should do

more. But if there is no teacher to direct, then you just have to follow the general rules of the monastery, doing whatever is proper. You have to do that in order to live in harmony.

Luangta Maha Boowa went to seek advice when he stayed with Ajaan Mun and Ajaan Mun told him, “You have studied a lot of scriptures. You have the third level of *Pali* already, but this knowledge that you have learned is not beneficial to your mind at all because it cannot get rid of your desire. So what you need to do now is to forget everything that you have learned. Leave it alone for a while. Right now, try to clear your mind. Make your mind blank by developing *samādhi*. Once you have *samādhi* and you want to develop insight, then this knowledge that you have studied will come in handy. It will be useful to your investigation for the development of insight.” But if you have a teacher who will tell you how to develop insight, then you don’t need to go and study the different levels of *Pāli*. It is better to try to develop mindfulness and calm as much as possible. This is the real thing; other things are not real.

Get your mind to be calm and contented. Even though it may only be for a few moments at a time, at least you have a recourse, you have a refuge to go to whenever your mind becomes restless or agitated, and you can always go to that calm, to save you from the restlessness and worry. But your restlessness and worry will not disappear if you don’t have insight. You need insight to completely get rid of your anxiety, worry,

restlessness, agitation and *dukkha*. All of these arise from your own desires. And your desires arise from your delusion, from not seeing that everything is just bubbles. You think they are real. You are playing with bubbles, and you expect those bubbles to last forever. So right now, try to seek seclusion, try to have time to meditate to develop your mindfulness, and get your mind to become calm and reach the *appanā* point, where the mind becomes totally detached from everything. All that you will have is just awareness, knowingness and neutrality of mind without emotions or desires, and only peace and contentment. Once you have this, then you have the strength to withstand the attack of your desire. And you will have the leeway to use it to develop the insight to get rid of your desire permanently. If you have no *samādhī*, no contentment, then when your desires arise, it is like a house on fire, and you will become totally uncontrollable.

Try to seek seclusion, be alone in your *kuti*, in your place of practice as much as possible. Try to bring your mind to the body, or to ‘*Buddho*’ (mental repetition, a mantra). If you like to investigate, think in terms of *anicca*, *dukkha*, *anattā* (impermanence, stress, not-self), or *asubha* (loathsomeness) aspects of the body. You can do that, calming the mind that way. Go through the 32 parts of the body. First memorize the names that is hair of the head, hair of the body, nail, teeth and skin, etc. When you go through all 32 names, the next step is to visualize each part to see it clearly, what it looks like. This can also calm your mind. Get your mind away from

thinking about going here and there, going to see this and that. It is very important especially for monks to always investigate the *asubha* (loathsomeness) aspect of the body, especially the body that you have become attracted to. Your body is not so important, but the body that you become attracted to, when you see a body and you become attracted, and you have desire to have any sexual activity, then you must use this *asubha* perception to get rid of your desire. Once you see the *asubha* aspect of the body, then your desire will disappear. But if you haven't first developed this in your mind, then when you have this attraction, you will have no recourse, you will not have anything to help you get rid of your desire. So that's why the *Upajjhāya* has to teach you on the very day of your ordination, at least the first five parts of the body. It is an indicator that this is what you always have to do, when you become a monk. You always have to investigate the *asubha* nature of the body. If you have this, then you will have protection against your sexual desire.

Question Monk4: When I was a *pakow* (Eight preceptors, (candidate) for ordination) in Australia a couple of years ago, I spent a *vassa* (rains retreat) with a monk from Sri Lanka. He was really a kind monk and also inspiring with about 15 *vassa*. I could see that he put in a lot of effort into the practice and got a lot of benefits. He liked to practise in the seclusion of the forest. He followed the *suttas* a lot, but he started to rely on the Thai Ajaan' after he met up with Luangpor Liem and some of the western disciples of Luangpor Chah.

What advice would you give to a monk who does not have a teacher but relies on the *suttas* a lot?

Tan Ajaan: He has to keep on pushing himself. He has nobody else to push him, so he has to push himself. He has to look at where he is now and whether he has gone far enough yet. If not yet, he has to set up a goal and move towards it. If he does not have a goal, then he might get stuck where he is. That is one of the benefits of staying with a teacher. Sometimes you get lazy, and he will push you. But if you are all alone, sometimes you don't know, so you have to observe yourself a lot more. Investigate his practice, to see whether he is staying in the same place or if he is moving forward. He needs *virīya* and *adhitthāna* (effort and determination). He has to set up the resolve to do more.

End of *Desanā*

Glossary

The following is a list of Pali and Thai words as used in the text together with a brief translation and comment when necessary.

adithan :(Pali: *adhiṭṭhāna*)

Determination; resolution. One of the ten perfections (*pāramīs*)

ajaan, ajahn, achaan, etc.:

(Thai). Teacher; mentor. Equivalent to the Pali *ācariya*.

anattā:

Not-self; ownerless.

ānāpānasati:

Mindfulness of breathing. A meditation practice in which one maintains one's attention and mindfulness on the sensations of breathing.

appana:

Absorption (in the object), 4th *jhāna*

asubha:

Unattractiveness, loathsomeness, foulness. The Buddha recommends contemplation of this

aspect of the body as an antidote to lust and complacency.

bhava:

Becoming. States of being that develop first in the mind and can then be experienced as internal worlds and/or as worlds on an external level. There are three levels of becoming: on the sensual level, the level of form, and the level of formlessness.

desanā:

The Teachings of Dhamma; Dhamma talks.

Dhamma [Skt. dharma]:

(1) Event; a phenomenon in and of itself; (2) mental quality; (3) doctrine, teaching; (4) nibbāna. Also, principles of behavior that human beings ought to follow so as to fit in with the right natural order of things; qualities of mind they should develop so as to realize the inherent quality of the mind in and of itself. By extension, "Dhamma" (usu. capitalized) is used also to denote any doctrine that teaches such things. Thus the Dhamma of the Buddha denotes both his teachings and the direct experience of nibbāna, the quality at which those teachings are aimed.

dukkha:

Stress; suffering; pain; distress; discontent.

kilesa:

Defilement — lobha (passion), dosa (aversion), and moha (delusion) in their various forms, which include such things as greed, malevolence, anger, rancor, hypocrisy, arrogance, envy, miserliness, dishonesty, boastfulness, obstinacy, violence, pride, conceit, intoxication, and complacency.

Kuti :

Monk's resident. Normally it is a small hut for practising monks in the forest.

NakDham :

Formal Buddhist studies in Thailand with different level similar to bachelor degree, master degree and doctorate degree in the university.

Pāḷi:

The canon of texts (see Tipiṭaka) preserved by the Theravāda school and, by extension, the language in which those texts are composed

pariyatti:

Theoretical understanding of Dhamma obtained through reading, study, and learning. See patipatti and pativedha.

paṭipadā:

Walking on the Alms round.

satipaṭṭhāna:

Foundation of mindfulness; frame of reference — body, feelings, mind, and mental events, viewed in and of themselves as they occur.

sutta [sutta; Skt. sutra]:

Literally, "thread"; a discourse or sermon by the Buddha or his contemporary disciples. After the Buddha's death the suttas were passed down in the Pali language according to a well-established oral tradition, and were finally committed to written form in Sri Lanka around 100 BCE. More than 10,000 suttas are collected in the Sutta Piṭaka, one of the principal bodies of scriptural literature in Theravāda Buddhism. The Pali Suttas are widely regarded as the earliest record of the Buddha's teachings.

than, tan:

(Thai). Reverend, venerable.

Theravāda:

The "Doctrine of the Elders" — the only one of the early schools of Buddhism to have survived into the present; currently the dominant form of Buddhism in Thailand, Sri Lanka, and Burma. See also Hīnayāna.

taṇhā:

Craving — for sensuality, for becoming, or for not-becoming (see bhava). See also lobha (greed; passion)

ti-lakkhaṇa:

Three characteristics inherent in all conditioned phenomena — being inconstant, stressful, and not-self.

tipiṭaka [Skt. tripiṭaka]:

The Buddhist (Pali) Canon. Literally, "three baskets," in reference to the three principal divisions of the Canon: the *Vinaya Piṭaka* (disciplinary rules); *Sutta Piṭaka* (discourses); and *Abhidhamma Piṭaka* (abstract philosophical treatises).

upajjhāya:

A senior monk who conducts the ordination ceremony and is also responsible for the teaching of newly ordained monks for the first 5 years.

vassā:

Rains Retreat. A period from July to October, corresponding roughly to the rainy season, in which each monk is required to live settled in a single place and not wander freely about.

vipassanā:

Clear intuitive insight into physical and mental phenomena as they arise and disappear, seeing

them for what they actually are — in and of themselves — in terms of the three characteristics (see *ti-lakkhaṇa*) and in terms of stress, its origin, its disbanding, and the way leading to its disbanding (see *ariya-sacca*).

Related Website for Further Reading

More teachings on Theravada Buddhism and the contemporary Thai Forest Tradition can be obtained from the following websites;

www.kammatthana.com , www.phrasuchart.com

MP3 recorded teachings of Ajahn Suchart Abhijato in English and Thai.

www.accesstoinsight.org

- English translation of *Theravada Tipitaka*
- Some translation of the teachings from the Thai Forest Meditation Masters

www.forestdhamma.org

Translation in various languages on the teachings by Luangta Maha Boowa