

## **The Early Years of Venerable Ajahn Chah**

*The Life and Teachings of Venerable Ajahn Chah Adapted from Uppalamani*

It was in Bahn Gor, a small village a few hours walk to the south of Ubon town in the Isahn region of Thailand, that one of the greatest monks of the modern era was born, and close to which he would later establish a forest monastery that was to attain a world-wide reputation. His full monastic title came to be Tan Chao Khun Phra Bodhinyana Thera, but he is known familiarly as Luang Por (Venerable Father) Chah and to his disciples as simply ‘Luang Por’.

Luang Por Chah was born on the seventh waning day of the seventh moon of the Year of the Horse, 1918. He was the fifth child of eleven born to Mah and Pim Chooangchote, who, like the vast majority of their generation, were subsistence rice farmers. The name Chah means clever, capable and resourceful. In accordance with custom, Luang Por’s mother gave birth to him kneeling, her arms above her head grasping a rope suspended from the rafters of the house. Afterwards she endured fifteen days of confinement, lying with her stomach as close as possible to a charcoal brazier to ‘dry out’ her womb – an ancient custom that still survived in the countryside despite, some seventy years previously, King Mongkut railing against it as ‘this senseless and monstrous crime of having women smoked and roasted’. In the first months after his weaning, Luang Por's mother would have fed him by chewing and masticating sticky rice in her own mouth first and then gently spooning it into his.

Luang Por was born into an affectionate and respected household, one of the wealthier families in a closely-knit community. The Isahn villages of those days, isolated by forests and vulnerable to the vagaries of the weather and the caprice of spirits, put great store on sharing, generosity, and harmony. The model was of an extended family, and over the years marriages between inhabitants of a village tended to make it one in fact. Houses were made of wood, roofed with grass thatch, and raised on stilts as protection from floods and wild animals. They were placed close together with no fixed boundaries between them. Life was conducted on a large open space upstairs, with rooms used only for sleeping. People not only heard their neighbour’s

family dramas, they could see them as well. There was no concept of privacy, much less a desire for it. The villagers subscribed to respect for monks, elders, and spirits; consideration for the feelings of others; and a sense of shame. They relished laughter and conversation. Luang Por grew up with a strong sense of community and place and ‘the gift of the gab’.

The adjective often used to describe Luang Por in his old age – ebullient – is the one that comes most readily to mind when picturing him as a child. He was a chunky, exuberant young lad and yet, at the same time, keen and perceptive – nobody’s fool. He was full of fun and vigour, with the sunny, buoyant disposition so common to his people; but even then he showed a glint of steel in his ways. He was both, a talker and a doer, the natural leader of his group of friends, the one whom everyone wanted to be close to and without whom all games and adventures seemed dull. Luang Por bore the round face and flat ‘lion’s nose’ common to his race. More distinctively, his mouth was unusually wide and compelling – surely destined one day to have memorable things to say – while in charming contrast to the powerful symmetry of his face, his right ear was larger than the left. His childhood friends remember Luang Por’s mildness. They say he never enforced his dominance with bullying or coercion; no one can recall him in a fight. He was a mediator in his companion’s disputes and, from an early age, drawn by the yellow robe. He relates a childhood memory of playing the role of a monk. He would sit sternly on an old bamboo bed with pahkaoumah draped over his left shoulder like a robe, and his friends would be the laity. The meal time is probably the only event in the monk’s daily life that is interesting enough to lend itself to drama, and it was that which the children would enact. Luang Por would ring a bell, and his friends would bring a tray of fruit and cool water. After bowing three times they would offer it to him meekly. He in return would give them the five precepts of the Buddhist layperson and a blessing.

School was not as yet a major intrusion on children's right to fun. By the 1920s, some thirty years after its inception, a State education system had still forged few inroads into rural Isahn. During Luang Por’s childhood, three years of primary education were available, but they were not compulsory and few parents saw their worth. Luang Por, by the age of nine, had completed a single year.

Education of the young had traditionally been one of the major functions of the village Wat (monastery). Apart from the fact that fifty percent of children – the girls – were excluded, results were impressive. Foreign observers had often expressed surprise at the high standard of literacy among Thai men (at the same time, interestingly enough, praising what they saw as the superior shrewdness and industry of the women). The boys would help out with the monastery chores and, through daily personal contact with the monks and participating in the life of the Wat, received an education with a strong moral and spiritual foundation. It was a system that forged strong links between the monastery and the village, and it has been argued that the loss of this educational role to the State was a body blow to the rural Sangha's sense of purpose from which it has never fully recovered. It was at the age of nine that Luang Por asked permission from his parents to move out of the family home and into the local monastery. It was a common practice for parents to entrust sons to the monks but rare for a boy to volunteer. Many years later Luang Por spoke of his decision in the following way:

“As a boy I had a fear of committing evil actions. I was always a straightforward lad. I was honest, and I didn't tell lies. When there were things to be shared out, I was considerate; I would take less than my due. That basic nature just kept maturing until one day I said to myself, ‘Go to the monastery’. I asked my friends if they had ever thought of doing the same thing, and none of them had. The idea just arose naturally. I'd say it was the result of past actions – as time went on, wholesome qualities steadily grew inside me until one day they led me to decide and do as I did.”

On another occasion, in a more humorous vein, Luang Por told some lay disciples that he had become a dekwat (monastery child) because he was tired of watering the family tobacco fields and because the humdrum daily round of chores was so tedious and repetitive. As one of Luang Por's sisters remembers it, a small accident brought things to a head: “His going to live in the monastery wasn't arranged by our parents; it was his own idea. One day he was helping his brothers and sisters pounding rice, but he wasn't putting much heart into it. He (accidentally) got hit by the wood we were using as a mallet. It must have hurt him because he got angry and shouted out, ‘That's it! I'm going to go and ordain!’”

A few days after the mallet blow, Luang Por's parents took him to the village monastery. Wat Bahn Gor was situated in a large sandy enclosure shaded by coconut palms, mango trees, and tamarinds and consisted of a Sala (main meeting and sermon hall), a Vihāra (monks residence), and Samānam (water-ringed ceremonial hall). Por Mah and Maa Pim entrusted their son to the abbot with a predictable mixture of sadness and pride – and Luang Por was now a dekwat. But this was not the beginning of a long and painful separation from his parents; Luang Por had by no means withdrawn into a pinched and cloistered realm. The boundaries between the monastery and the surrounding world were marked not by imposing walls but a rather half-hearted bamboo fence. Indeed, the monastery was the central focus of the communal life of the village rather than a symbol of its rejection. In a sense, he had entered the world rather than left it.

Few of the images that the word 'monastery' is likely to evoke in a secular Western mind would agree with the reality of a village Wat in rural Thailand. Wat Bahn Gor, where Luang Por had gone to live, might be the abode of monks, but it was considered the property of all. The path in front of the main hall was a public thoroughfare, and the monastery well was used by all the nearby houses. Important public meetings took place in the monastery hall, which also acted as a hostel for passing travellers and was thus the centre for the reception and dissemination of news about other areas. The monastery played a central role in the social life of the village. It was the site for the important festivals that punctuated the hard struggles of the year. With daily entertainment almost nonexistent, every one looked to the lively ngahn wat (monastery fairs) for excitement and fun. Some of the fairs were of specifically Buddhist significance; others were of a more earthy animist character, presided over by the monks and sandwiched by offerings of alms to them.

As for the monks, they were not an hereditary elite. In Thai Buddhism, temporary ordination has long been the norm and constitutes a rite of passage for young men. Indeed, a man who has never been a monk would have difficulty finding a wife. Young women would shy away from him as a kon dip, literally an 'unripe' person. Customarily, the young men in a village would ordain after finishing their military service, mostly for the three-month Rains Retreat but sometimes for as long as two or three years.

Apart from their standing as members of the Buddhist Sangha, the monks also had the extra prestige of being the most educated and knowledgeable people in the community.

The result was a fluid monastic community in which serious and dedicated students rubbed shoulders with restless time-servers. One of the great merits of the system was that with every family having members who were or had been monks, the close bond between village and monastery was constantly renewed. The long-term monks would be few in number. They would almost all have been born and raised in the local village and would thus empathize deeply with the daily problems of the local people. They would take participation in village affairs seriously, sometimes as leaders in public works projects such as building bridges, or frequently as the impartial adviser and referee in lay disagreements and disputes. Historically, the Wat was the centre of learning. Apart from their standing as members of the Buddhist Sangha, the monks also had the extra prestige of being the most educated and knowledgeable people in the community. They would learn and transmit many skills such as carpentry, painting, decorative arts, and tile, brick and cement making. Some monks would be herbal doctors and many, notwithstanding the prohibition in the Monk's Discipline, were astrologers. But of course it was the monastery's religious role that was, ideally, paramount. Primarily the monks were expected to be, as far as possible, the embodiment of the Buddha's teachings and to inspire by word and deed moral and spiritual values. They were also called upon to perform traditional rituals and ceremonies. They would be invited to local houses to chant blessings and sprinkle lustral water during marriages, house-warming parties and times of sickness or ill luck. At the death of a villager they would chant the rather abstract and philosophical Matika verses, traditionally believed to be the teachings the Buddha gave to his mother in Tusita heaven following her death.

Luang Por spent four years as a dekwat. During that time, he learned to read and write, helped with the sweeping and cleaning of the monastery, served the monks, and gradually absorbed, if not their intellectual nutrition, then at least the ambience and flavour of the basic Buddhist teachings. His duties were not onerous, and there was plenty of time for play with his fellow dekwat, of whom there was a constant supply. It was the custom for rough lads to be sent to the monastery by their weary parents for

urgent moral reform; orphans, if no relation could take them, could always find a refuge with the monks. Apart from accepting boys for religious reasons, the monastery was also the local social welfare centre. In the Monk's Discipline it is laid down that an aspirant must be twenty years of age before he can become a monk but that a boy old enough 'to scare crows' can become a novice. Luang Por took the novice 'Going Forth' vows in March 1931. He was thirteen and could have driven off a raiding hawk. Luang Por's sturdy frame and bulging belly together with his resonant voice earned him the nickname Eung, or Bullfrog. Life carried on in almost the same relaxed fashion, although wearing the robe conferred a higher status and increased expectations; at least in front of the laity, a restrained demeanour was de rigour. Luang Por would spend time everyday walking up and down in the shade, memorizing the various Pāli chants: the daily service, meal blessings, auspicious verses chanted at house-warming parties and marriages, and the more sombre funeral chants: *Adhuvam jivitam, dhuvam maranam, avassam me maritabbam* – Life is uncertain; death is certain; I too will die.

He also completed the first of the three levels in the curriculum of monastic studies. It included sections on the Buddha's life and teachings, the code of Discipline and the history of Buddhism, and provided a sound foundation in the core teachings. At other times, gardening and building projects served to work off teenage steam.

During his novice years, Luang Por's teacher and mentor was a monk called Ajahn Lung. In accordance with the reciprocal relationship laid down in the ancient texts, Ajahn Lung oversaw Luang Por's studies, and Luang Por in return acted as his personal attendant. Every now and then in the evenings, Ajahn Lung would kindly accompany Luang Por on visits to his family – it would have been forbidden for a novice to go alone – and indeed seemed to enjoy these excursions even more than Luang Por, exuding a confidence and charm among Luang Por's family that the young novice found a little eccentric. At Ajahn Lung's instigation, the visits became steadily more frequent and protracted, and sometimes it would be late at night before the two of them walked back to the monastery, accompanied by the barks of the village dogs their footsteps disturbed.

One day Ajahn Lung confided in Luang Por that he had decided to disrobe and suggested that his protégé might do likewise. A confused Luang Por agreed. He had

been living in the wat for seven years and, at the dangerous and wobbly age of sixteen, a small push was enough. Some days after the joint disrobing, Luang Por's parents were visited by elder relatives of ex-Ajahn Lung to discuss a marriage proposal. The ardent admirer of Luang Por's sister Sah, assured of her affections was free at last to declare his love.

Luang Por went to work in the family fields. Inevitably, the novelty of mud and sweat soon wore off, and though he applied himself to the regular round of the rice farmer with a gusto that drew much praise, he bore quietly within himself a sense of something lost and unfulfilled. It was not an overpowering emotion – he was a buoyant, vigorous young man – but a constant, unobtrusive shadow that he could only try to ignore. For the moment Luang Por was content to divert himself in the usual ways. Together with his best friend Puut he would walk to neighbouring villages to flirt with young ladies at monastery fairs.

When Luang Por finally fell in love it was with a girl from his own village. Her name was Jyy, the step-sister of his companion Puut. The girl's parents were pleased with the prospective match; Luang Por was a friend of the family, good-natured, hard-working, and honest. In those days it was taboo for young lovers to be alone together; custom dictated that they would meet at the girl's house, upstairs on the porch in the evening, where she would be sitting demurely spinning wool. Luang Por began to spend more and more of his evenings at Puut's house. Relations between young men and women were strictly overseen by elders. Lovers, forbidden to touch, were quick to learn the nuances of the verbal caress. In Isahn village life, banter between them was inventive and the ability to extemporize much admired. The men would swagger and flatter and ardently woo in the 'I-can't-live-without-you' style, while the girls would play shy and hard to get or else wittily insult their suitor's manhood – 'the loud-mouthed swain is holding a limp kite in a windless sky', was just one of the well-known jibes gleefully repeated.

But witty repartee soon loses its charm when genuine feelings are engaged, and late at night Luang Por and Jyy would like to sit out in the starry coolness talking quietly. The plan hatched on one such night was that they would marry as soon as Luang Por had completed his National Service and spent a rains retreat as a monk to make merit for his parents in the time-honoured way. At that time Luang Por was nineteen years

old and Jyy seventeen. It would be another four years before they could expect even to hold hands.

One day that year as the rainy season approached and every household was busy preparing ploughs, rakes, hoes, yokes, fish traps, and machetes for the upcoming work in the paddy fields, Luang Por had just taken out a load of tools to the family's small hut raised on stilts in the middle of their fields. As he related himself many years later: "When I was eighteen I liked a girl. She liked me too, and, as these things go, after some time of liking her I fell deeply in love. I wanted to marry her. I daydreamed about having her by my side helping me out in the fields, making a living together. Then one day on my way home from work I met my best friend, Puut, on the road. He said, 'Chah, I'm taking the girl.' When I heard those words I went completely numb. I was in a state of shock for hours afterwards."

Simply, and with the unquestioned prerogative that parents of his age and culture possessed, Puut's father and his wife had decided that their two stepchildren should marry; there was no more to be said. The reasons were pragmatic and economic. If Puut married Jyy, the family would be saved a bride price they could ill afford. They had just acquired land some distance from the village that should not be left fallow. The young couple could move out there and farm it together.

Luang Por, despite the coming of the rains, must have felt his life suddenly beached in a dry and desolate land. But other than trying to reconcile himself to the situation, what could he do? It made no sense to be angry with Puut. His friend had not plotted behind his back and was painfully embarrassed by the whole affair. But this disappointment was a profound one, a sharp and hurtful lesson in the uncertainties that bedevil human affairs. Where should you, where could you, place your trust? Luang Por maintained his friendship with Puut, and indeed it was to last for the rest of Luang Por's life. But with Jyy he had to be more circumspect; his feelings could not be denied by an act of will. Even after becoming a monk, if Luang Por saw her in the monastery, he would have to do his utmost to avoid a meeting that might stir up painful emotions. Luang Por admitted that for the first seven years of his monkhood it was impossible to completely let go of his thoughts of Jyy. Perhaps after all, by some miracle, she would become free. The same tantalizing scenarios periodically recurred in his mind, the same facile, happy endings. Could he then in such a case



remain in the robes? He didn't know. It was only when he finally left his familiar surroundings and through meditation practice gained a method of stilling his thoughts and seeing them in perspective that the fantasies faded. In later years as abbot of Wat Nong Pah Pong, describing to the monks the drawbacks of sensual desire, he would often talk of the debt of gratitude he owed to Puut: "If he hadn't married Maa Jyy, then I probably wouldn't be here today", he would say.

When Luang Por's name was missing from the list of young men from Ubon called up for National Service, he was free to ask for ordination. But by this time his ideas about becoming a monk had changed. He no longer considered it simply in terms of making merit for his parents, an expression of the gratitude he felt towards them. These were certainly noble aims, but he desired something more, something that could resolve the dis-ease in his heart. Lay life seemed hollow, tedious, and full of vicissitudes; perhaps the monastic life could lead him to meaning and peace. He would ordain for an indefinite period. His mother and father were pleased. They had enough children to help with the farm work, and it was auspicious to have a son in robes. The ordination ceremony took place on the April 26, 1939, at Wat Gor Ny, the local monastery, on a hot, shimmering afternoon. Phra Kroo Intarasarakun was Luang Por's preceptor and conferred on him the monk's name of Subhaddo (well-developed).

Luang Por spent the first two years of his monastic life at Wat Bahn Gor: "At the end of the rains retreat, the monks and novices who joined the Sangha at the same time as me all disrobed. Sometimes before disrobing they'd try on their lay clothes and parade up and down. I thought they were completely insane. But they thought they looked good, that their clothes were smart, and they talked about the things they were going to do after they disrobed. I didn't dare to tell them that they'd got it all wrong because I didn't know how durable my own faith was. After my friends disrobed, I became resigned. 'You're on your own now', I said to myself, and pulled out my copy of the Pātimokkha (the monk's rules of discipline) and started to memorize it. It was easier than before with nobody teasing me or fooling around. I was able to concentrate on it fully. I didn't say anything, but I made a resolution that from that day onwards until the end of my life, whether it be at the age of seventy or eighty or whatever, I would try to practice with a constant appreciation, not allow my efforts to

slacken or my faith to weaken. To be consistent! That is an extremely difficult task, and I didn't dare to tell anyone else.”

Venerable Ajahn Jayasaro

### **About Luang Por Chah**



Venerable Ajahn Chah was born on June 17, 1918 in a small village near the town of Ubon Rajathani, North-East Thailand. After finishing his basic schooling, he spent three years as a novice before returning to lay life to help his parents on the farm. At the age of twenty, however, he decided to resume monastic life, and on April 26, 1939 he received upasampada (bhikkhu ordination). Ajahn Chah's early monastic life followed a traditional pattern, of studying Buddhist teachings and the Pali scriptural language. In his fifth year his father fell seriously ill and died, a blunt reminder of the frailty and precariousness of human life. It caused him to think deeply about life's real purpose, for although he had studied extensively and gained some proficiency in Pali, he seemed no nearer to a personal understanding of the end of suffering. Feelings of disenchantment set in, and finally (in 1946) he abandoned his studies and set off on mendicant pilgrimage.

He walked some 400 km to Central Thailand, sleeping in forests and gathering alms food in the villages on the way. He took up residence in a monastery where the vinaya (monastic discipline) was carefully studied and practiced. While there he was told about Venerable Ajahn Mun Bhuridatto, a most highly respected Meditation Master. Keen to meet such an accomplished teacher, Ajahn Chah set off on foot for the Northeast in search of him.

At this time Ajahn Chah was wrestling with a crucial problem. He had studied the teachings on morality, meditation and wisdom, which the texts presented in minute and refined detail, but he could not see how they could actually be put into practice. Ajahn Mun told him that although the teachings are indeed extensive, at their heart they are very simple. With mindfulness established if it is seen that everything arises in the heart/mind... right there is the true path of practice. This succinct and direct teaching was a revelation for Ajahn Chah, and transformed his approach to practice. The Way was clear.

For the next seven years Ajahn Chah practiced in the style of the austere Forest Tradition, wandering through the countryside in quest of quiet and secluded places for developing meditation. He lived in tiger and cobra infested jungles, using reflections on death to penetrate to the true meaning of life. On one occasion he practiced in a cremation ground, to challenge and eventually overcome his fear of death. Then, as he sat cold and drenched in a rainstorm, he faced the utter desolation and loneliness of a homeless monk.

In 1954, after years of wandering, he was invited back to his home village. He settled close by, in a fever ridden, haunted forest called 'Pah Pong'. Despite the hardships of malaria, poor shelter and sparse food, disciples gathered around him in increasing numbers. The monastery, which is now known as Wat Pah Pong began there, and eventually branch monasteries were also, established elsewhere.

In 1966 an American monk came to stay at Wat Pah Pong. The newly ordained Venerable Sumedho had just spent his first vassa ('Rains Retreat') practicing intensive meditation at a monastery near the Laotian border. Although his efforts had borne some fruit, Venerable Sumedho realized that he needed a teacher who could train him in all aspects of monastic life. By chance, one of Ajahn Chah's monks, one

who happened to speak a little English visited the monastery where Venerable Sumedho was staying. Upon hearing about Ajahn Chah, he asked to take leave of his preceptor, and went back to Wat Pah Pong with the monk. Ajahn Chah willingly accepted the new disciple, but insisted that he receive no special allowances for being a Westerner. He would have to eat the same simple alms food and practice in the same way as any other monk at Wat Pah Pong. The training there was quite harsh and forbidding. Ajahn Chah often pushed his monks to their limits, to test their powers of endurance so that they would develop patience and resolution. He sometimes initiated long and seemingly pointless work projects, in order to frustrate their attachment to tranquillity. The emphasis was always on surrender to the way things are, and great stress was placed upon strict observance of the vinaya.

In the course of events, other Westerners came through Wat Pah Pong. By the time Venerable Sumedho was a bhikkhu of five vassas, and Ajahn Chah considered him competent enough to teach, some of these new monks had also decided to stay on and train there. In the hot season of 1975, Venerable Sumedho and a handful of Western bhikkhus spent some time living in a forest not far from Wat Pah Pong. The local villagers there asked them to stay on, and Ajahn Chah consented. The Wat Pah Nanachat ('International Forest Monastery') came into being, and Venerable Sumedho became the abbot of the first monastery in Thailand to be run by and for English-speaking monks.

In 1977, Ajahn Chah was invited to visit Britain by the English Sangha Trust, a charity with the aim of establishing a locally-resident Buddhist Sangha. He took Venerable Sumedho and Venerable Khemadhammo along, and seeing the serious interest there, left them in London at the Hampstead Vihara (with two of his other Western disciples who were then visiting Europe). He returned to Britain in 1979, at which time the monks were leaving London to begin Chithurst Buddhist Monastery in Sussex. He then went on to America and Canada to visit and teach. After this trip, and again in 1981, Ajahn Chah spent the 'Rains' away from Wat Pah Pong, since his health was failing due to the debilitating effects of diabetes. As his illness worsened, he would use his body as a teaching, a living example of the impermanence of all things. He constantly reminded people to endeavour to find a true refuge within themselves, since he would not be able to teach for very much longer. Before the end

of the 'Rains' of 1981, he was taken to Bangkok for an operation; it, however, did little to improve his condition. Within a few months he stopped talking, and gradually he lost control of his limbs until he was virtually paralysed and bed-ridden. From then on, he was diligently and lovingly nursed and attended by devoted disciples, grateful for the occasion to offer service to the teacher who so patiently and compassionately showed the Way to so many.