

# A Dhamma Compass

By Ajahn Pasanno

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Produced for free distribution by

Thawsi School

1023/46 Soi Pridi Banomyong 41,

Sukhumwit 71,

Bangkok, 10110 THAILAND

0-2713-3674

[www.thawsischool.com](http://www.thawsischool.com)

Cover painting : Peerapath Tatiyaboonsung  
(Khru Yong of Thawsi School)

First Printing : February 2007

: 10,000 copies

This book has been sponsored for free distribution  
by lay followers of Ajahn Pasanno in Thailand

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Printed by Q Print Management Co.,Ltd.

Tel. 0-2800-2292, 08-4913-8600 Fax. 0-2800-3649

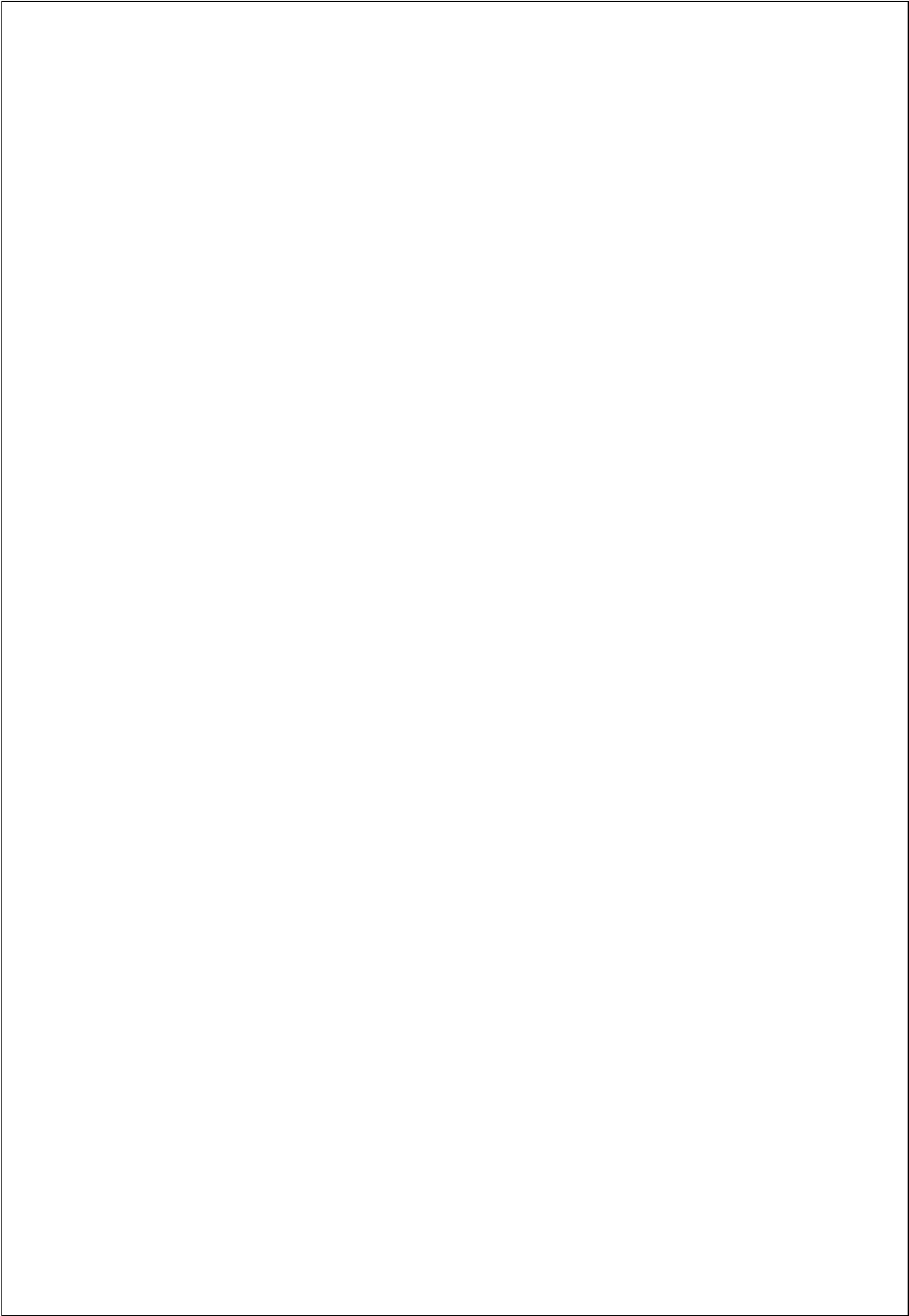
## Foreword

This past year I have had the good fortune to be on solitary retreat in Thailand. Once a month I have led meditation and taught at Bahn Boon, which is close to where I have been living. The laypeople there have expressed their wish to print a booklet of teachings as a gesture of their appreciation. The talks are from the beginning of a collection of teachings which are being compiled at Abhayagiri by several laypeople there.

I wish to express my appreciation to everyone who has helped to bring this into being. Ajahn Jayasaro kindly named the collection “A Dhamma Compass”. I hope that the teachings here are helpful for providing a direction and encouraging people in their exploration of Dhamma practice.

May all beings delight in the goodness of the Dhamma. May they experience happiness and well-being.

Pasanno Bhikkhu, January 2007



## Introduction

On the occasion that Phra Ajahn Pasanno, Co-Abbot of Abhayagiri Buddhist Monastery, took a sabbatical leave to stay in Thailand for the most part of 2006, the lay supporters have consulted Phra Ajahn about publishing a book to commemorate his one year stay and have received his kind consent.

**A Dhamma Compass** is a collection of three dhamma talks that Phra Ajahn gave in the three winter retreats during 2003-2005 at Abhayagiri. Ronna Kabatznick was the editor of the talks, and Dee Cope helped transcribe the talks, to whom all of us would like to record our thanks. Ajahn Amaro and Ajahn Jayasaro were so kind as to look over the final version of the texts.

The lay supporters in Thailand would like to express their deep sense of gratitude to Ajahn Pasanno, who spares his very precious time to meet with and teach the Thai people at Bahn Boon, Pakchong, once a month for the entire year.

# Table of Contents

	Pages
1. The Delights of Dana	7
2. How to succeed in meditation	23
3. Simile of Ducks and Chickens	37

## The Delights of Dana

On retreat a lot of emphasis is put on various insight practices, the goal and philosophy of meditation. We don't think very much about the foundation that sustains the mind and the heart in a way that opens them to the way things truly are. Dana is that foundation.

Exactly what is dana? How do we cultivate this quality of giving, generosity, liberality and munificence? There are many different translations of the word dana. It is the quality of generosity that gives physically *and* from the heart. Hearts with dana are generous, open-handed, and liberal in terms of willingness to give, share, to be present and to help. All of those qualities take us away from *me* and *my needs*, *me* and *my necessities*, *me* and *my demands*, *me* and *my expectations*, *me* and *my essential fixed residence* in the middle of the universe. That *me* and *mine* position which demands that we be recognized and noted for our importance, takes over everything. It all gets very tiring.

Ajahn Sumedho has said, "Whenever I think of myself I feel depressed." It's such a great line. When

dana is the center of life, instead of *me* and *my* needs, there is no need to be depressed. There is relief and release rather than anxiety and obsession. Dana is a dramatically different focal point. The perspective changes to “What can I give?”

Ajahn Geoff<sup>1</sup> tells the story of when he was translating for Ajahn Suwat<sup>2</sup>. It was the late 1980’s before Ajahn Geoff initiated Metta Forest Monastery. They were at Insight Meditation Society (IMS) where Ajahn Suwat was teaching a ten day retreat. Ajahn Suwat had been in America for sometime but I don’t think he had taught a retreat like that to Westerners. In the middle of the retreat Ajahn Suwat asked Ajahn Geoff, “Why do they seem so unhappy? They’re meditating. They’re here. But they seem so grim and not at all like they’re enjoying themselves.”

After thinking about it, Ajahn Geoff said, “They don’t really know how to practice dana. They know how to meditate, but not how to practice dana.” He

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<sup>1</sup> Thanissaro Bhikkhu, Abbot of Metta Forest Monastery, Valley Center, California, USA.

<sup>2</sup> Ajahn Suwat Suvaco, former Abbot of Wat Bhuridattavanaram, Ontario, California, USA.



saw a direct relationship between the lack of joy and happiness and the lack of a foundation in dana, in generosity, giving, sharing. In Thailand, generosity and giving are the first things you learn about Buddhism when you're growing up. Pregnant women go to the temple, offer food and dedicate merit. "May my child be healthy and happy." After birth, mothers continue to take their children to the temple, so giving becomes an integral part of their lives and continues through the lifespan.

When children are little, they get up early with their family to make offerings to the monks on alms rounds. Even when they are quite young, children are encouraged to give. They don't really know what they are doing because they're only two or three years old or even younger. Someone helps the child put a spoonful of rice in the monk's bowl. As the rice drops in the bowl, everyone claps and says "great." Children get the idea, "wow, giving is good." They grow up with that pleasant feeling associated with generosity. It's very natural because there is a cultural value placed on generosity and sharing.

It's not just giving to monks and to the monastery that is part of the Thai culture. I noticed how natural

it is for Thais to share. When we'd go to a dana, for a blessing ceremony in a village, we would usually be offered a Pepsi or Coke. After taking a few sips, we'd give the rest of bottle to one of the kids. Even if the child was little, he or she always shared it with friends. The adults do the same. The kids see generosity in their every day lives, so it gets reinforced. To grab the bottle, go off in the corner and gulp it down on your own doesn't really happen. The impulse is to share and to experience the joy and happiness that comes from generosity. As a result, a special sense of connection is created and sustained.

A lot of the separation and isolation in Western society is not just because Westerners tend to have so many psychological problems. The basic values in the West are not oriented toward sharing or giving. There is an absence of habits and qualities which make a connection between people. It's important to be attentive to that.

Just before coming into the hall I was telling Lance and Nick about going on alms round in the northeast of Thailand. Even though the area is very poor, people share what they have. You can get some pretty strange foods but it's what they eat, and it's

what they are willing to share. There is always enough in that sense. The perception of lack is oftentimes just a perception. Giving is not about resources and materials. In fact, you don't need a lot in order to give. At the root of generosity is the perception that there is always something, and enough to share.

During one of the first years that we were establishing Wat Pah Nanachat, the forest monastery Ajahn Chah set up for foreigners, the villagers would come and help build the place and set things up. One of the main villagers who helped out said, "I really don't have any money, but I'm not poor." He was referring to the fact that poverty is a state of mind. It's not about what we actually have in terms of material resources. Sometimes we have a lot but we feel it's not enough so we have to protect what's there. We don't even think about sharing what we have. That's a state of lack and of being poor. On the other hand, giving and sharing come from a place of wealth. There is always enough.

How does one measure what's enough? Once again, that measurement is a state of mind. The desire mind never has enough. What you desire doesn't really matter. Whether it is food, clothing, money or

property, it's never enough. That's just the nature of desire. Its nature is to always be seeking more or something else. The quality of *dana*, of generosity cuts through that desire mind. It allows us to come to that place of openness and giving, the heart at ease because it has enough.

There are many ways we can come to that place. We can work on generosity and learn to appreciate what it offers. We can consciously go against the desire mind by generating more generosity in our lives. We focus on turning to giving, relying on it, appreciating and delighting in it. In terms of practice, we cultivate and sustain generosity so that we don't get pulled back into the desire mind or the mind of jealousy and comparison. It is so satisfying to feel there is enough and take joy and delight in that.

The desire mind not only operates in wanting more material possessions, it operates in spiritual practice as well. When we're meditating, do we ever feel there is enough concentration or enough peace? The desire mind seeks more concentration, more tranquility, more peacefulness, *more* whatever. When there is a lack of peacefulness, we feel we need more. The feeling is justified because the

scriptures say there must be peaceful states of mind in order to have wisdom, for insight to arise. So we redouble our efforts to get *more* peace and the result is often frustration and misery. “Where is *my* peace of mind?”

Similarly, when do we ever have enough wisdom? The desire mind also needs more wisdom, more refined insight into anicca, dukkha, anatta, so “*I* can finally get rid of *my* defilements and experience freedom.” There is no end to the desire mind, needing more, getting more or having to have. Ajahn Chah described the mind and heart of *tanha*, as the mouth that never closes. The desire mind goes around with an open mouth looking to consume and gather things in. You can actually feel that in your mind. It is the feeling of leaning towards things, on the lookout for the next thing to consume, possess and experience. It’s not a restful place at all.

Generosity is the opposite of this misery. Giving provides a base of contentment, joy and delight. A few years ago, we put a little notice in the Abhayagiri newsletter before I went to Thailand. We announced that there is a tradition of offering gold, silver, jewelry and other valuables to melt down

and put into the Buddha image. And since we were pouring a Buddha image for the monastery, we wanted the community to know about this opportunity to make offerings. From a completely materialistic, practical, utilitarian perspective, it's really stupid to do this. What a waste. From the perspective of generosity, it's a wonderful thing to do. To give something of value that's put into an object of reverence and devotion is very precious and delightful. We received packages from all over the States. In some cases, we couldn't figure out how some people heard about what we were doing. Even a Christian monk sent things for us. People not only sent jewelry, someone sent gold teeth! I ended up carrying almost 8 pounds of gold and silver to Thailand. Explaining to customs officials and security guards why I had all of this was quite interesting.

At the actual ceremony, even more valuables were offered. It is hard to say exactly how much more. Those who were there said it was a lot. The day of the Buddha pouring was steeped in goodness and generosity. About a thousand people were present. There was such excitement that a Buddha image was being made and then shipped to America.

People came to create goodness together which ultimately turned into a physical form that would be present in the world. Giving and delight lays a foundation. It's the entry point into the Dhamma, before virtue, precepts and meditation. This is how Buddhism is taught in Thailand and in other Buddhist cultures. Generosity is the foundation, the place from which we begin the practice.

In the West, we start by learning how to meditate and after a while we think maybe "I'd better get some Precepts." Then toward the end, especially at the end of a 10 day retreat, generosity and dana are mentioned. Actually, it doesn't really matter when we pick it up. It is a matter of realizing that generosity is the foundation of the heart that feels free and unencumbered. One of the doorways out of suffering is generosity. As I said earlier, it's important to realize that's it's not just about material giving. It also involves service and keeping ones eyes open for what needs to be done and asking "How can I help? Who is in need of assistance?"

There is a lot of weight given to individualism and self-sufficiency in the West. We shrink back from helping each other. But of course, nothing

is absolutely black or white. For example, Thai and Western children are treated and raised very differently. I oftentimes tease Thais about this. I remember seeing my sister's tiny children holding a spoon and going after their food with gusto. Before they learn to speak, they learn to use a spoon to get food into their mouths. In Thailand, you see six year old kids wandering around with a nanny or their mother trailing behind trying to feed them with a spoon. The kids haven't figured out how to feed themselves yet.

In order to feel comfortable helping others, we have to leap over the hurdle of self, of *me* and *mine*. We put ourselves in a vulnerable position by helping others; it can be frightening or trigger our vulnerability. Acts of service invite us to step out of the boundaries that we set up for ourselves. Whenever those boundaries are jostled in any way, we feel uncomfortable or threatened. These boundaries are totally conditioned and part of the conventional realm. We need to be able to consciously stretch our boundaries from time to time. Helping others and offering service are ways of stepping beyond the boundaries of our imaginary self. This gives us a lot of confidence in negotiating the human realm



instead of getting bogged down in the protected areas of our being that are easily threatened. A sense of ease and well-being in any situation is one of the best gifts we can offer to ourselves and to others.

*Abhayadana* is another traditional way of giving *dana*. *Abhaya* is part of the name *Abhayagiri*. In Thai, *abhaya* is usually translated as forgiveness. We give forgiveness by not holding a grudge, ill-will or aversion. This kind of giving is considered a higher form of *dana* than material giving because it is a lot harder to forgive than it is to give material things.

Opening the heart to forgiveness, kindness and acceptance are really quite exalted states of mind. A lot of joy enters the heart when forgiveness is cultivated. It becomes second nature. And even if one can't offer forgiveness, at least there is recognition, "That's a good thing to do. I've got to figure out a way to open my heart to this person who really bugs me."

Fearless Mountain is the English translation of the name *Abhayagiri*. This fearlessness is an offering of security and trust when actions are motivated by goodness, generosity and virtue. We are not threatened, nor are we threatening. We don't generate fear and suspicion. We feel at ease and secure with any one. To

be able to consistently live this way and give that to other human beings is a wonderful gift. As we continue to practice and the mind becomes increasingly aware of what motivates us, we can see how much fear we carry. If we act this out, the human realm ends up filled with fear, competition and about getting what one can in a “dog eat dog” kind of way.

In Thailand dogs are not treated like they are in the West. In one monastery where I lived, all of the leftovers were mixed together and then put in a tire which had been cut in half. Even though there was plenty of room for all of the dogs to eat, there was fighting, biting and chaos everyday. Every dog was out to get the most. The mind that is in a competitive fear realm is always worrying about getting “enough.” It’s a miserable state of mind. Our commitment is to create a human realm from within based on dana, trust and truth.

There’s an old story about the difference between heaven and hell. The hell realms are filled with people who sit at long banquet tables piled high with all sorts of delicious foods and drinks. But everyone is completely miserable and hungry, because the utensils are too long to maneuver. No matter how

hard they try, they can't put the food in their mouths. The nourishment is there, but nobody can get to it. The heavenly realm is the same: the tables are laden with the same delicious food and with the identical utensils that look impossible to maneuver. But the people are happy and bright because they are using the utensils to feed one another. There is no hunger or frustration, only fullness and well-being, within the identical conditions. Giving and sharing is what turns a hell realm into a heavenly one. There is a sense of security and trust that people are there to help one another, which is why *abhayadana* is a higher form of *dana*. With practice and spiritual maturity, different forms of *dana* become integrated and ultimately, inform each other.

The highest form of *dana* is *Dhammadana*, which means the giving of Dhamma and of the teachings. Traditionally, making teachings available to others by helping to print Dhamma books is one of the highest forms of giving. There are many other ways that *Dhammadana* can be offered in daily life. People think they need to be a monastic or an Ajahn to give teachings. But this is not so. Any kind of advice that is grounded in Right View and Right Understanding

that is given with an open heart and good intentions is Dhammadana.

The offering of Dhammadana is so powerful that even if it's ignored or trashed, it is still the highest form of dana. Dhamma books used as doorstops or coasters cannot destroy or diminish this pure and priceless gift.

Ajahn Chah encouraged people to share their experiences. They didn't have to be anything exalted or obtuse. Helping people be more at ease and to suffer less was one of his basic teachings. In fact, Ajahn Chah said that to practice Dhammadana, you didn't have to teach or to say anything at all. "It's enough to set good examples and follow the Precepts."

Ajahn Chah frequently referred to Sariputta's introduction to the Buddha's teaching. He emphasized the essence of the story to monks and to anybody who practiced Dhamma: the way we live gives more weight than spoken words. Sariputta became interested in the Holy Life when he saw one of the first disciples of the Buddha walking on alms-round. The dignity, composure and the clarity that was involved in the simple activity of walking inspired a lot of faith in Sariputta. He then requested teachings from this

monk who humbly replied, “I’m newly ordained and don’t know much.” But Sariputta insisted on hearing the Dhamma from him. The monk, Assaji said, “All things that arise, arise from a cause, and all things end because the causes have ended.” Although he offered the gift of Dhamma through words and deeds, it was the monk’s noble presence that first inspired Sariputta. So Ajahn Chah always reminded us that actions speak louder than words.

Parents often asked Ajahn Chah what they should teach their children. Ajahn Chah would turn the question right back to the parents. “It doesn’t matter what *I* say, what do *you* say? What do *you* do?” If there is a tree way over there and a tree close by and a vine starts growing which tree will it climb? The closest one, of course. It’s the same with parents. Their example has a bigger effect than anyone else. The examples we set in the monastery, within society or within families are all aspects of Dhammadana. The gift of giving virtuous conduct and of living a life with Dhamma at its center has an extraordinarily powerful effect.

When you think of the people who have had the biggest positive impact in our life, they embody

integrity in some way. It's not because of the kind of cars they own or the vacations they've taken. We value them because they have been trustworthy, kind and patient with us. They've made us feel good, no matter how badly we feel about ourselves. This kind of giving is not beyond the capacity of anybody. Increasing well-being and decreasing dukkha are gifts we can all give.

Generosity feeds and flows into everything we do. We can even bring an attitude of sharing into our meditation practice while sitting alone in our kutis. Meditation is not just about *me*. Sharing it with those we care about and with all beings has a different effect. This kind of giving transforms the heart by taking us out of the capsule of self and of *me*. We quickly realize that the *me* and *mine* universe is terribly cramped and crowded. When we can turn our attention to the world that is outside of that, we realize the world is spacious and expansive. There are so many opportunities for sharing, giving, and for living in accordance with Dhamma. Embracing these opportunities allows petty concerns and ways we perpetuate suffering to drop away.

I offer these reflections to you this evening.

## **How to succeed in meditation**

The last few days have been a bit busy for me so I'm enjoying the opportunity to just sit, bring the attention back inward, and quiet the mind. It's so easy for the mind to go out into activity and to find all kinds of objects of attention. But unless one is extremely skilled in being mindful of those tendencies, that outward pull does have an effect. The mind can easily lose its sharpness.

It's important to recognize that and to be attentive to looking after the mind and the external circumstances we're in. Internally, how do we hold them? Are we grasping through attachment and clinging, or pushing away with aversion and resistance? These responses have an effect as well. The internal and the external responses are all causes and conditions. And whatever causes and conditions are put into place, we reap the results of them. The clearer we are that this is really the case, the more likely it is that we'll make more skilful choices or be able to accept more clearly the results of our actions. Sometimes it is necessary, useful, fruitful, to have a certain amount or kind of external engagement. We

can be clear on that; and not make it problematic. Other times, we can see that is it not really fruitful, useful or beneficial, and either we have to accept the dissonance that is created in the mind, or be able to step back from certain things.

We can also become more skilful at being able to engage in whatever activity is needed so that it doesn't create a dissonance in the mind. So there are these different ways that we have to work with the circumstances that we're in, and work within that, internally with the mind itself. To be able to do so, it is essential to recognize what internal tools are helpful.

One of the frameworks for practice that the Buddha gave is called the *iddhi-pada*. These are “the bases for success” or “bases for accomplishment,” and it's a very useful framework to investigate. In Pali these four bases are called: *chanda*, *viriya*, *citta* and *vimamsa*. This is a set of dhammas that is used quite a lot by the forest ajahns in teaching because they are useful both for describing how to be successful in any kind of worldly setting, as well as for the development of concentration and skill in meditation. So, *chanda* is skilful desire or motivation; *viriya* is effort; *citta* is focus, *citta* refers to being able to establish the mind;



and *vimamsa* is investigation, reviewing, applying wise reflection, consideration. These are important qualities to cultivate both in our spiritual training and in day to day life.

*Chanda* means bringing up of motivation, desire. If we have a particular goal we want to succeed at, to develop some kind of accomplishment in, then we have to motivate ourselves with desire and interest. In short, we have to be interested in what we are doing. I think of the times when I was young student, and not a particularly good one. I just couldn't get any interest and motivation going to do much, so I stumbled through. But my interests in spiritual training, meditation and the Buddha's teachings were strong. So because of that interest, it has been much easier to arouse the qualities of desire and motivation.

I encourage you to really focus on what interests you. How will it benefit you? What brings up a quality of desire to attain these goals? What do you want to gain? That's where the mind of desire, gaining and wanting can be channeled in a really useful way. This interest is quite necessary, because if we take absolutely zero interest in our meditation object, then

the mind is never really going to become peaceful. This is just the way it works. If the mind is without motivation, attention and interest, then it's very difficult - impossible - for the mind to really settle. Bringing up the effort and energy that it takes to sustain attention for any amount of time and these qualities will help the mind to settle and focus.

This sense of interest - clarifying it within oneself - helps us know what we are doing. Why do we meditate? Why do we keep precepts? Why do we go against the stream of our habits, desires and conditioning? This interest and recognition really helps: "Oh yeah, I really want to develop some kind of peace and contentment. I see that as valuable, as useful. I really would like to experience what it's like for the mind to settle and become clear." Or, "What is it like to really *let go*? You hear it talked about a lot. What's it like to experience that, to see that?" This kind of clarity and interest helps us see what is valuable and useful and sets up the conditions to experience some fruits and results.

Obviously if all of our focus is on desire and motivation and the other factors that lay a firm foundation for continuity are ignored, then there is

going to be endless frustration. Yet without any kind of motivating force or interest one doesn't get very far out of the starting blocks. It's like wanting to start a fire without any matches. It takes a while even to get that initial flame going.

To have that initial quality of *chanda* as a starting point and then sustaining it, means that effort must also be present. Effort is essential. That quality of bringing up energy and putting forth effort oftentimes is absent. We don't like to have to put forth effort. Bringing up the quality of sustaining energy, doing something in an energetic way takes effort.

Here is a good example of what I'm talking about. Today we were driving back from alms round and we passed Dennis Crean on the road. He wants to ride in the Buddhist bicycle pilgrimage so he's riding his bike all the time, often 27 miles a day. This takes effort! He's got the desire to do this, which motivates other people as well. But it takes effort to get out there and ride. Having the desire, the motivation, is good. It initiates us and gets us going. But actually sustaining that effort and energy is where a lot of the hard work of practice is. Bringing up of effort and energy to do sitting and walking meditation without distracting

oneself or goofing off is what I'm talking about. We need to make an effort not to distract ourselves with things that are not crucial or critical to practice so we don't get lost in daydreaming, sleeping or drifting into dull states of mind. All of this takes effort and energy.

While it's important to put forth energy, it can also be appropriate to slack off a bit. If you are always pushing, then the mind can get on edge, become restless and unsettled. So there's that necessity to be balancing energy where the energy that is needed is one of relaxing. Then it's a matter of settling or stepping back, because there's already a momentum in the mind. This means we need to gauge and reflect on what is appropriate effort. That's part of that faculty of effort that we need to be cultivating. We need to know what kind of effort is appropriate and when which kind is the right tool for the job.

*Citta*, being able to bring the mind to a place of focus and steadiness, is a part of the skill that one needs to be firmly established, where the mind isn't easily shaken. It's a matter of being able to recognize that place of refuge, when the mind has got a firm steady base within itself; it has a certain confidence,

focus and clarity. That is the strength of the mind. That strength of the mind is not always accomplished through activity. The mind gets stronger when it's able to stop and settle. That's where the strength of the mind is: in its ability to settle firmly within itself. That's the quality of citta, the mind that is settled and firm. With that quality of firmness and clarity, then the mind needs to be able to work from that base of investigation, of discernment. We can then ask, "What is the way things are? What is it that creates suffering? What is it that creates happiness? What is it that's in accordance with Truth versus what is just following one's preferences and desires? "

On a certain level you can't really figure these questions out until the mind is really steady. That's because the tendency of the mind is to get caught up in following its preferences, biases, fears, and its particular flavor of the moment in terms of attachment or desire. Being able to settle and still the mind is where one starts to be able to discern more clearly and ask, "OK, what is actually in accordance with Dhamma?" We need to be reviewing that all the time, because one can't come from a doctrinal or philosophical position as it is

not really trustworthy. The mind is always trying to find a way out, to find an easy place where it's not really challenged, and where it's not challenging. So that quality of reviewing and investigating, *vimamsa*, is the factor of wisdom that's really trying to discern, not just trying to take the easiest or the most superficial way out. It's wisdom that is trying to see underneath things according to Dhamma. What is according to Truth? What is the mind entangled in? This includes all of the stains and defilements as well as the different biases and prejudices of the mind.

It is this kind of investigation that then ties back into the whole process again, because to do that takes interest, effort and concentration. That whole cycle keeps repeating itself in a more refined and subtle way. The process of practice and training, *bhavana*, the development of the mind, starts to function. So that whole cultivation of our practice is based on very simple principles: interest, effort, stability and the reflective quality of the mind. That's when you can start investigating the assumptions that we make about ourselves and about practice. This starts to clear a path through the obstructions within the mind.

It's only necessary to clear a path through the different habits and tendencies that we have as human beings. One doesn't need to destroy all the evil in the world. All one needs to do is to deal with it within ourselves. In the same way that, if one wants to walk from point A to point B through a dense forest, all one needs to do is cut a path, cut a trail through it. You don't need to clear the whole forest. So we need to investigate internally by asking "what is cutting through the obstructions that keep tripping us up?"

One of the things that I was investigating a lot during the retreat I had was reviewing the ways in which I was holding things as self. The teachings of the Buddha point to non-self, and to just how insidious that grasping of self can be. When you investigate this, you see the holding of experience and physicality of our experience. We take the body, all moods, feelings, perceptions, views and opinions as self. Even if they're reasoned and intelligent, we still have that clinging to *self*. That attachment to *me*: my view, my perspective, my feeling, my way of doing something. You know it all has that sense of me and mine, grabbing on to it. And that's where we continue to create suffering; even if it doesn't come to fruition as

suffering at that point, one is setting the tone and the circumstances for suffering to arise.

I remember Ajahn Chah saying when you read the newspapers about somebody having their house broken into and having things stolen, it doesn't really make much of an impression. But if it's *your house* that's been broken into, it makes a whole different impression, a sense of me, my things, my possessions, my home. That same thing applies when you hear somebody saying something critical about somebody else: it doesn't really make that much of an impression; it doesn't affect the mind that much. But hear somebody criticize you, he criticizes *me*, then the feeling is very different, and it's because of the *me*.

Even the thoughts we have are all just random thoughts and moods flashing through the mind, we take them as *me* and *mine*. And either we are fascinated by them and we create a whole story, or we get fed up with them and want to get rid of them. So we're always in a struggle. But it's the reaching out with *me* and *mine* which creates the basis for the sticky quality of experience. If it is just seen as another ephemeral inconsequential mind moment, as a thought arising and passing away, the mind is left unshaken and clear.



It doesn't have that sense of "me" and "mine."

One of the things Ajahn Chah used to say when we were suffering, and experiencing a sense of discontent in the mind, was "That's not really you, that is just the defilement suffering." And you hear that and you say, "Well it may be, but it sure feels like me." The more we investigate all that we identify as *me*, the more we see that wisdom doesn't do that. Wisdom doesn't get itself entangled, bogged down, bounced back and forth with *me*. Wisdom lets go and cultivates those qualities which are peaceful and clear. So we just step back and say, "Oh well, that is just the defilements suffering." As soon as one has some feeling of dissonance, discontent, or feel shaken by any kind of suffering we can realize, "Oh yeah, that's just the defilements suffering; I don't need to suffer with that. If that's what they want to do, they can do it. I'm just not going to be bothered."

One is not taking it as *me* and *mine*, making that identification or that attachment. This brings one to a place of letting go, of relinquishment. This is where our place of peace is and the place where our practice must return to. This is the place of non-clinging, of non-attachment. But as long as we're coming from a

place of *me* and *mine*, one can never really experience that quality of non-attachment, of letting go, or of peace.

As we are cultivating our practice and training, we can use these tools: interest, motivation, effort, citta, the mind of focusing, reviewing, and investigation. All of those qualities revolve around a point of letting go and relinquishing the *I* position, the *me* position, taking things as *me* and *mine*. And as one does that, at each point there is a place of stillness, of clarity, and of spaciousness. It's not about trying to get all of the factors of practice lined up so that some place in the future you are going to experience a sense of well being, peace and non-attachment to self. It's about really bringing those qualities (of stillness, clarity and spaciousness) into the cultivation of establishing interest and desire.

That desire itself also needs to be not focused around me and mine. The motivation needs not to be focused around me and mine; the effort can't be self fixated on that sense of me and mine.

The stillness, the steadiness of the mind, is just the way the mind is. It isn't *my* peace, *my* concentration; it's just what the mind is capable of doing when it's

seeking a way out of suffering. The same is true with investigation, *vimamsa*, reviewing, it's not coming from an "I" position, it's coming from a place of, "What's appropriate to Dhamma, what fits in with the way things are according to Truth?" Taking the teachings of the Buddha and cultivating an interest in learning how to apply them, learning how to bring them to fruition, this is the foundation of our practice. I offer that for reflection this evening.



## Simile of Ducks and Chickens

This morning while listening to Ajahn Chah's teachings, I was reminded of how important it is to have proper perspective or "right view." Ajahn Chah put tremendous emphasis on right view, the effort to discern clearly where we go wrong, and set ourselves up to create suffering. Ajahn Chah pointed out that aspect of getting mixed up between what is "mind" and what is "objects of mind." We confuse what is this mind, our fundamental nature, with the *objects of mind*, the *phenomena* arising in the mind. And because we get them mixed up, we get entangled in the objects and phenomena of the mind, thinking that they are us, our mind, and that *this is me*. Just this much is enough to keep us suffering all the time.

We need to be able to keep reflecting and investigating so that we put things in the right category, the right basket: what knows phenomena and the phenomena itself. When we return to the *knower*, to the *fundamental* mind, then that in itself is very peaceful. But when we're entangled in the phenomena, and get drawn into the characteristics, the complexity, and the diversity of things, then there is suffering. It's

so easy to get involved in judgments and in the desire realm of wanting things to be a certain way.

Ajahn Chah used to illustrate this tendency by using the simile of ducks and chickens. A villager seeing ducks and chickens may start to think and wonder, “These ducks walk funny; they’re not very dignified. Why aren’t they more like chickens? Chickens can walk and run really well. Ducks make this funny noise, ‘Quack, quack.’ It is not a very beautiful sound at all. Why can’t they sound more like chickens? Chickens can crow and everything.” We spend a lot of time and energy asking and demanding: “Why aren’t ducks more like chickens? Ducks should be more like chickens.” If you start really investigating the feelings of anxiety, worries and aversions that we have, it all amounts to trying to make ducks like chickens and trying to make chickens like ducks. It is such an extraordinary waste of time and energy, and actually kind of stupid. But we do it all the time! And we justify it and become righteous because it feels *right*.

For myself, I get really frustrated by the fax machine. Why can’t it be a decent fax machine? *Well, it isn’t!* It just isn’t a decent fax machine. Why do I expect that it should be one? Why should it even

work? (Laughs) I try to make something into something that it isn't. When we do things like this, we just waste time, energy and create suffering for ourselves and others. We try to make things be the way they aren't, hoping for things to be some other way than the way they are. That's the basic misunderstanding that keeps us suffering. We spend our time experiencing certain circumstances and situations, and eventually the feeling comes up in the mind, "Why me?" Why do I have to suffer? Why should it be like this?" *Well, why not me?* (laughs) We feel impinged on and that things are so unfair, that they shouldn't be this way and that this is not right. It's so easy to get caught up in the activity, the reactions and the phenomena outside. But it's the way it is. We don't look at it in the way of Dhamma, in terms of "*This is just phenomena of the mind, these are just mind objects.*" We don't bring attention back to the mind itself, which is, say, intrinsically peaceful, clear, still.

Our practice is to ground ourselves in Dhamma, in truth. When we see and take Dhamma as Refuge, then we have a real abiding, and a real home. Through Dhamma, we recognize the way things actually function, that things arise and cease according to

causes and conditions. When we see that clearly, we can step out of the realm of self, or out of the sense of judgment, and desire. We don't get entangled, because there is the awareness "these are the causes and conditions." This doesn't mean we can't do anything. It doesn't mean we should mindlessly accept everything as it is. We need to recognize what's actually going to be useful and beneficial, according to those causes and conditions. This is where we can apply our efforts and create a sense of well being, clarity and equanimity.

When we are ill, we can complain, moan and grumble and generally feel overwhelmed by it. But what does this aversion actually accomplish? It just brings more suffering. On the other hand, we can bring a sense of clarity, patience, loving kindness and compassion, to the condition, and acknowledge, "This is what it's like to have a human body; this is what it's like to be in the human condition." Illness is certainly not the way we would desire it or want it to be, but it's just the way it is. We can bring attention to those qualities that lead to well-being or stability, even amidst something that is unwanted or unpleasant. It is the same when things change: we can feel disoriented, disturbed, agitated, averse or even delighted. It's all



just change; that's all it is: another impermanent phenomena arising and ceasing. It's important to recognize, "This is the Dhamma of change, this is the Dhamma of impermanence, this is the Dhamma of uncertainty." This is how we bring to mind and heart those qualities which are going to offer feelings of clarity, stability and equanimity – within that change.

We have to keep returning to the place of knowing, the heart of clarity, where there is a sense of the mind itself. Ajahn Chah used to say, "This original mind, this *old* mind." That perspective gives us an opportunity to establish a fresh start from a place of stillness. Moving forward from there or receiving circumstances from *that* point allows the Dhamma to unfold. It takes that simple reflection and investigation of seeing the difference between *mind* and *mind objects*. This is how we set up the dynamic where we can start to respond more skillfully.

Objects of mind aren't just negative. We can also get swept up in the delight, desire and fascination for them. "Isn't this great? Things should always be this way." (Laughs) "This is how things *really* should be!" When we're meditating or when external conditions

are finally what we want them to be, we jump. This is a great way to really crush a good meditation. Leap on it and say, “Wow! This is how it should be! Finally I got my mind right!” That sense of identification then undermines our clarity because we’ve taken phenomena and made it into *my* mind. We then declare “this is how it should be.” We forget that this is just another circumstance.

We need to be attending to our meditation practice so that we cultivate states of well-being, stability and peace. But there’s a subtle balance involved, since you’re actually also returning ‘home’ to Dhamma - a process where there’s no effort involved at all. There is a letting go, a natural relinquishment, and the mind settles. The result is the same. But how we get there - the causes and conditions that lay the foundation - are different, so the result is different. We need to ask ourselves, “What are the ways of being with experience that are going to allow me to dwell in the refuge of Dhamma?” and then “What are the appropriate ways of putting forth effort, or holding attention, so that there is this stability and peace?” The characteristics of Dhamma that the Buddha always pointed to are those qualities of dispassion,

disenchantment, a sense of relinquishment.

The cultivation of the Paramis is another way of developing peace and stability in accordance with Dhamma. These ten spiritual perfections include generosity, virtue, renunciation, patience, effort, discernment, loving kindness, equanimity, truth, and determination. Even these must be tempered with that underlying quality of relinquishment, disenchantment and dispassion. In doing so, we fully embrace those qualities of restraint, virtue and generosity. There is recognition of the underlying heart of stillness, the mind of clarity, the objects of mind, and the myriad ways that the world displays itself. Coming back and resting in that mind base, for example, is where we put our effort and attention and where we give ourselves the opportunity to rest in virtues of goodness. This is also where that sense of non-self is established. It doesn't form itself.

The Buddha taught that recognition of the law of karma is a critical aspect of Right View. All of our actions have a result, and the tone of the result is conditioned by the tone of the input. When actions are based on questions like "Why me? Why does it have to be this way?" then that karmic intention conditions

the result. By continually asking or demanding, “Why aren’t the ducks more like chickens?” there is no hope for a sense of well-being and peace. The volition that goes into this question, the karmic impulse that is invested with this type of demand, can’t help but result in dissatisfaction and discontentment.

When the volitional tone and impulse is fraught with *me*, and what *I* want, what *I* think it should be or is fraught with fear and aversion: it *shouldn’t* be this way or *I* don’t want it like this, painful results are inevitable. Even when we experience happiness and when we do things that are virtuous, if that volitional tone is one of *me* trying to make it this way, because it *should* be like this, our experience is still fraught with suffering. The karma of investing things with *me*, *self*, *desire* and *attachment*, even if they’re good or right on a conventional level, is still going to create problems. The karma is still not going to bring forth the fruit of real well-being and peace.

We tend to think in terms of “If only I didn’t do these things.” We think in terms of the equation, “I think therefore I suffer.” “If only I could only stop thinking, then I would stop suffering.” That’s a fallacy, because even if, through a force of will you could

stop the thinking process, the sense of *me* and mine is invested in both the “I think” and “I suffer.” Even in non-thinking, you are still suffering. You can feel that when you really put forth a lot of effort to stop the thinking processes, everything starts to settle. But the *tone* of it in the mind reveals that the mind still isn’t satisfied, peaceful and light. There’s still tension because you are still holding things at bay. This is different from putting forth the effort of attention, discernment and the application of the perfections such as generosity and the recollection of goodness. When these are the conditions, all of a sudden, everything clicks. The mind settles and drops into a place of stillness. You’re right there with it, and this space is very peaceful and blissful. There’s a genuine sense of wellbeing because you’re not trying to force it to be a certain way. You are not coming at it from an ideal of how things should be. Conditions are just right, and it accords with Dhamma.

When our action is grounded in dispassion, equanimity, disenchantment and clarity, we can be extraordinarily vigorous and resolute. We recognize that things are going to be the way they are based on causes and conditions. We can start trusting in those

qualities, putting in the right causes and conditions. If they are invested with a sense of letting go and of relinquishment, there are no entanglements.

The practice is one of trying to simplify how we view and investigate things, so that we can really start to get a clearer handle on the difference between the fundamental *mind*, and the *objects of mind*, the *phenomena of mind*. There actually is a difference of *feeling*, of how we experience it. How can we explore that and start investigating how to return to that fundamental mind? Ajahn Chah would say, “This is our original home, this is the abiding place that is our true Refuge.”

So I offer that for reflection this evening.

## **Ven. Ajahn Pasanno**

Ven. Pasanno Bhikkhu took ordination in Thailand in 1974 with Ven. Phra Khru Nanasirivatana as preceptor. During his first year as a monk he was taken by his teacher to meet Ajahn Chah, with whom he asked to be allowed to stay and train. One of the early residents of Wat Pah Nanachat, Ven. Pasanno became its abbot in his ninth year. During his incumbency Wat Pah Nanachat has developed considerably, both in physical size and in reputation, and Ajahn Pasanno has become a very well-known and highly respected monk and Dhamma teacher in Thailand. Ajahn Pasanno moved to California on New Year's Eve of 1997 to share the abbotship of Abhayagiri. From late-December 2005 until April of 2007 Ajahn Pasanno will be taking a sabbatical away from Abhayagiri.”

