

Food for the Heart

by Venerable Ajahn Chah

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Introduction

One of the most notable features of Venerable Ajahn Chah's teaching was the emphasis he gave to the Sangha, the monastic order, and its use as a vehicle for Dhamma practice. This is not to deny his unique gift for teaching lay people, which enabled him to communicate brilliantly with people from all walks of life, be they simple farmers or University professors. But the results he obtained with teaching and creating solid Sangha communities are plainly visible in the many monasteries which grew up around him, both within Thailand and, later, in England, Australia, Europe and elsewhere. Ajahn Chah foresaw the necessity of establishing the Sangha in the West if long-term results were to be realized.

This book is a collection of talks he gave to the monastic communities in Thailand. They are exhortations given to the communities of *bhikkhus*, or Buddhist monks, at his own monastery, Wat Ba Pong, and some of its branches. This fact should be born in mind by the lay reader. These talks are not intended to, and indeed cannot, serve as an introduction to Buddhism and meditation practice. They are monastic teachings, addressed primarily to the lifestyle and problems particular to that situation. A knowledge of the basics of Buddhism on the part of the listener was assumed. Many of the talks will thus seem strange and even daunting to the lay reader, with their emphasis on conformity and renunciation.

For the lay reader, then, it is essential to bear in mind the environment within which these talks were given — the rugged, austere, poverty-stricken North-East corner of Thailand, birth place of most of Thailand's great meditation teachers and almost its entire forest monastic tradition. The people of the North-East are honed by this environment to a rugged simplicity and gentle patience which make them ideal candidates for the forest monk's lifestyle. Within this environment, in small halls dimly lit by paraffin lamps, surrounded by the assembly of monks, Ajahn Chah gave his teachings.

Exhortations by the master occurred typically at the end of the fortnightly recitation of the Patimokkha, the monks' code of discipline. Their content would be decided by the current situation — slackness in the practice, confusion about the rules, or just plain "unenlightenment." In a lifestyle characterized by simplicity and contentment with little, complacency is an ongoing tendency, so that talks for arousing diligent effort were a regular occurrence.

The talks themselves are spontaneous reflections and exhortations rather than systematic teachings as most Westerners would know them. The listener was required to give full attention in the present moment and to reflect back on his own practice accordingly, rather than to memorize the teachings by rote or analyze them in terms of logic. In this way he could become aware of his own shortcomings and learn how to best put into effect the skillful means offered by the teacher.

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Although meant primarily for a monastic resident — be one a monk, nun or novice — the interested lay reader will no doubt obtain many insights into Buddhist practice from this book. At the very least there are the numerous anecdotes of the Venerable Ajahn's own practice which abound throughout the book; these can be read simply as biographical material or as instruction for mind training.

From the contents of this book, it will be seen that the training of the mind is not, as many believe, simply a matter of sitting with the eyes closed or perfecting a meditation technique, but is, as Ajahn Chah would say, a great renunciation.

The translator

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