

Ajahn Chah & Mindfulness

Ajahn Chah was unusual. He was born, brought up and ordained in a remote village in the North-East, then one of the poorer and more neglected parts of Thailand. For a few years he lived the usual life of a monk in a village monastery but then, frustrated by such an aimless existence, he decided to devote himself to really practising the Buddha Dhamma. He left his village and began wandering, living off what he managed to collect each day on a morning alms round, sometimes walking long distances, and sleeping in forests and caves wherever he found himself. Wandering monks of that time were possessed of great courage and determination. They had only the bare necessities, lived close to wild and dangerous animals, and stayed in places that were often feared as being the abodes of demons and ghosts - circumstances, in which it might be remarked, you couldn't help but be mindful and aware! Eventually, having met and been inspired by the great Ajahn Mun, Ajahn Chah in 1954 accepted an invitation to settle in a forest close to his home village and that was the beginning of what was to become Wat Nong Pah Pong, where he lived and taught for the rest of his life. He died in 1992. By then branch monasteries had sprung up in other parts of Thailand and in Britain, Europe, America and Australasia.

Ajahn Chah was one who truly lived and breathed the Dhamma. With him it was always a living Dhamma, a truth that could be found here and now in life as you lived it. To him everything was practice, everything was meditation. Right now, that's where you are, that's what you're doing, and that's where your meditation should be. That's how he taught. When lay people of all walks of life came to see him he'd politely listen to their troubles but as soon as they said something that gave him an opening he would pounce and they would be taught Dhamma relevant to what they were feeling or complaining about. It was the same with the monks but in his view, monks being renunciates and living within the structures of monastic discipline and convention had at their disposal an array of tools and opportunities that others had not. The watching of one's mind and the promotion of mindfulness and investigation of defilements were seen as the key advantages of living such a simple and structured life.

Including everything as meditation didn't mean that formal practice should be neglected, on the contrary and as much time as possible was encouraged to be spent practising walking and sitting meditation. There was no instruction in complicated techniques and little ever said about the various attainments that might be expected but neither did he despise or criticise the various methods he heard about and plainly recognised that different approaches would suit different temperaments. On one occasion when asked to instruct some visiting Europeans he simply folded his legs, placed his hands one on top of the other in his lap and closed his eyes - and that was that. His concern seemed simply that however you did it you should bring your mind to a degree of rest in the here and now, a place from where you would be able to see and know the nature of things. That said the most usually recommended approaches were 'Buddho', anapanasati and contemplation of the body.

His appeal and success with Westerners when he spoke no English has long been something of a mystery to many but the answer lay in his extraordinary integrity and a practical approach that blended kindness with discipline and emanated from a place of wisdom and understanding.

He leaves behind a rich legacy that includes both in daily life and formal practice the practical use of both traditional and compassionate applications of Mindfulness.