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IN SPIRIT

My Best Friend: Living and learning under Tan Ajahn Buddhadasa

To mark the 101st anniversary of the birth of the late Buddhadasa Bhikkhu today, his former disciple and translator looks back on the precious years he spent with Thailand's great spiritual teacher

STORY BY SANITKARO

In my very personal estimation, Ajahn Buddhadasa Bhikkhu has been the most significant, creative and profound Thai Buddhist teacher of modern times. Of course, this perspective is not necessarily neutral or objective. I had the great fortune to live with him at Suan Mokkh for the final nine years of his life - nine years which were the most significant of mine. I lived there in order to study and train with him, a richly inspiring and joyful experience.

I arrived at Suan Mokkh at a time when a regular translator was needed. My years in the Peace Corp had equipped me to fill that role, one I count as a great blessing in my life. The experience of having an impeccably profound exposition of Buddha Dharma passed on to me from Tan Ajahn was an incredible education.

I also led monthly meditation retreats at Suan Mokkh International for many years. This was largely possible because I had regular access to Tan Ajahn's guidance, through hundreds of hours of Dharma discussions, especially concerning mindfulness with breathing. The recordings of these conversations are my most valued material treasure.

In this space, I would like to convey a few of the things from my relationship with Tan Ajahn that have meant the most to me.

Everything in terms of Dharma

Tan Ajahn had a deep and refined ability to see all things in terms of Dharma, and also with a wry sense of humour. His perspectives on the workings of society, the education of children, art and poetry, religious traditions and rituals, meditation practice, the running of a monastery - all of these were grounded in Dharma.

In teaching Dharma, Tan Ajahn was always grounded in the basics of dukkha (suffering) and the end of dukkha, idappaccayata (conditionality) as well as Dharma as duty. Early in my training, he advised me to memorise the Buddha's words, saying, "Now, as well as in the past, I teach only dukkha and the utter quenching of dukkha." What a wonderfully simple, direct way to remember what it's all about! Though I've still not arrived at the bottom of dukkha, I've made progress, and for that I owe him a tremendous debt.

He urged us always to consider things in the light of idappaccayata. All things arise, do their dance on the stage of the world, and pass away due to causes and



Santikaro (seated in the middle, front row) in a picture with his teacher Buddhadasa Bhikkhu (left, second row), Phra Panyananda Bhikkhu (right, front row) and other monks at Dawn Kiam where Santikaro was abbot.

conditions; in turn, they are causes and conditions for other things. This flow of conditionality is what we call life, the universe, or truth. This liberating vision has helped me to escape tendencies towards black and white thinking, blaming others for problems and egoism, and has helped me to develop a greater sense of our mutual existence as beings in samsara (the endless cycle of birth and suffering and death and rebirth).

When it came to Dharma study, Tan Ajahn was an exceedingly careful thinker. It wasn't enough to memorise and repeat the Buddha's teachings; one had to consider the meaning carefully and deeply. He gave great importance to how we use language, admitting it often made understanding Dharma more difficult.

As his translator, I had many opportunities to discuss not only Pali words, but the English translations for them. Embarrassingly, for an English honours graduate, there were times when he would suggest a translation that I was quizzical about, only to find after looking it up in the dictionary that he understood subtleties of the word that I had overlooked.

He also conveyed a loyalty to the Pali suttas that could only befit someone who has taken the name Buddhadasa. This loyalty was deeper than mere adherence to the printed words. He read the suttas critically and with an open mind, always inquiring what the words had to do with the end of dukkha. He didn't gloss over the contradictions of Theravada Buddhism. He took time to read and re-read, and to inquire which of the traditions and interpretations fitted with the major threads and themes of the Pali teachings. Which were relevant to the ending of dukkha? Did they partake of the emptiness that the Buddha declared were part and parcel of his teaching?

Work as Dharma

For a "Servant of the Buddha", work is an important theme. As Dharma, work is a matter of serving the Triple Gem (the Buddha, his teachings and the Buddhist monkhood) rather than serving the common defilements of ambition, greed or fear. When work is spiritual practice it is duty in the highest sense of the word, that is, it responds to Dharma, to the reality of nature and our nature as human beings. "Duty", perhaps the most ancient meaning of Dharma, is not what is imposed by religious tradition, social pressure or economic bribery; it arises from clear sighted awareness of the reality of each moment.

This was and remains a powerful challenge for me - how do we work without fixating on goals and tasks? How do we let go of our desire to be productive in order to impress or win approval? How do we work without anxiety? How do we balance work with the other needs of our life? How do we work without making it an ego project? Even more crucially, how do we approach work as fun?

Sanuk is a wonderful Thai word. As I understand it, sanuk expresses a sense that anything worth doing ought to be done pleurably. This is a cultural art that Tan Ajahn expressed, both to remind Thais of their heritage in the face of the capitalist onslaught and to protect work from wage slavery. So today, as I teach in the US and work on Liberation Park, a small rural Dharma refuge inspired by Suan Mokkh, I call on his words to remind us to enjoy what we are doing, and to stop and rethink when we find ourselves pressured, stressed out, or dissatisfied. We remember Tan Ajahn's teachings and remind ourselves that work is Dharma, is natural duty. Work and Dharma need not be at odds with each other; work is how we navigate the world in support of liberation, both in and from this same world.

Dharma as natural principle

There were times at Suan Mokkh when I was annoyed or discomfited by the behaviour of other foreigners, by the tourists and travellers whom I judged as ignorant or oblivious to the subtleties of Thai culture. My knee-jerk response was that "we need to make rules for these people." From time to time I'd approach Tan Ajahn with a proposal for this or that rule. Inevitably he smiled, usually he didn't say much, sometimes he chuckled, but he never took my attempts at rules seriously, except when I was stubborn enough to argue the point. Then, he would point out that making rules for others amounts to trying to force them to be the way we want them to be and that this helps neither them nor us. I learned from him a capacity to relax such rigidity when more was at stake.

He considered kindness and compassion towards others as more important than rigidity about Vinaya (monastic discipline). I came to see this attitude as being kind and compassionate towards ourselves. Though he was not sloppy about the Vinaya, he knew that uptight monks are not happy monks, nor are they very good Dharma teachers. That was a lesson I needed.

Yet, being relaxed about rules did not mean irresponsibility or merely going with the flow. Tan Ajahn exemplified a high sense of responsibility, not only for himself, but for his culture, his country, and the world. The Dharma could take care of itself, but the expression of it in human society was a crucial responsibility for him. Tan Ajahn stuck to the highest ideals, envisioning a society in which selfishness no longer reigns and the world is truly at peace. He wasn't afraid to stand by these principles, yet he took them one day at a time, with humour, humility and respect for others. I strive to emulate his down-to-earth idealism.

Exemplar of emptiness

Since I looked up to Tan Ajahn as my teacher, I often expected him to tell me what to do: Should I accept this speaking invitation? What should I translate? How much should I meditate? Although he was always willing to discuss the options, he refrained from ever making decisions for me. Usually he just chuckled and suggested that I grow up and decide for myself.

In my more immature moments I would bring him not dilemmas and decisions, but a litany of complaints or requests that he "fix" something or other. He never opposed my foolishness, anger and stubbornness; rather, my egoistic spewings would disperse in his non-opposition. Instead of amplifying my reactions in another egoistic mirror, he was like talking to emptiness. He related to everything at Suan Mokkh this way. He wasn't there to tell people what to do, to be their guru, or to make everything better. Instead, he set an example of spiritual maturity. He behaved towards us in a way that challenged us to grow up.

As I look at the pictures of Tan Ajahn in my current dwelling, and think back to those wonderful years, I feel a great deal of love for the best friend I'll ever have. I've been blessed with many wonderful friends, yet Tan Ajahn gave me a friendship which is deeper than the rest. Even more, his friendship, which was about intimacy with Dharma, has enriched all my other friendships. I sincerely hope that I can find ways to keep this understanding and experience of Dharma alive in our world, especially here in the US where there is so much fear, confusion, and suffering.

Santikaro lived with Buddhadasa Bhikkhu during the last nine years of Buddhadasa Bhikkhu's life and became his primary translator. Ordained as a Theravada Bhikkhu in 1985, Santikaro spent most of his monastic life at Suan Mokkh. During this time he led many meditation retreats, taught throughout Thailand and led Dawn Kiam, a small monastic community for foreigners. He returned to the US in 2000 and currently resides at Liberation Park in rural Wisconsin with his partner, Jo Marie. Liberation Park is a small refuge modelled after Suan Mokkh.

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