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the Path of Joy

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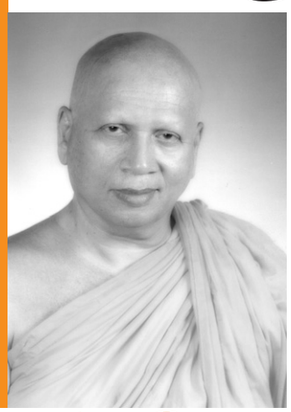

Bhante Says

An Elephant's Footprint

I would like to talk about a sutra called the Great Discourse of the Simile of the Elephant's Footprint.

The *Mahahatthipadopama Sutta* (literally, *Great Elephant Footprint Simile Discourse*) was actually delivered by Venerable Sariputta, one of the Buddha's great disciples. But we should not simply conclude from this that the sutra does not contain the words of the Buddha. The Buddha did, after all, approve the sutra and it represents his wisdom and teachings. So the sutra is generally considered the word of the Buddha. Venerable Sariputta began by saying – *'Friends, just as the footprint of any living thing that walks can be placed within an elephant's footprint, and so the elephant's footprint is declared the chief of them because of its great size; so too, all wholesome states can be included in the Four Noble Truths.'*

In other words, the Four Noble Truths are a summary of all of the Buddha's teachings. There is a direct link between the Four Noble Truths and all Buddhist teachings.

It's very important to keep this in mind. Unlike other religions which rely on a single holy book (say, the Bible or the Koran), Buddhist teachings are spread over numerous volumes. Some people may therefore think that the Buddha's teachings are too voluminous, complicated and difficult to understand.

The Buddha delivered so many teachings to suit the mindsets of the many different kinds of people that he taught. At the same time, we can say that the Buddha in fact only gave 2 teachings – *dukkha* and how to get rid of *dukkha*. The Buddha himself said – "*Monks, I teach only 2 things – suffering and the way out of suffering.*" (*Dukkha* is traditionally translated as *suffering* but that term does not give the real meaning of *dukkha*. I prefer to translate it as *unsatisfactoriness* or *discomfort*).

In fact, we can also say that, despite the development of so many different Buddhist traditions over the last 2,500 years, all Buddhist teachings - whether Theravada, Zen, Pure Land or Tibetan - can fit firmly and squarely within the framework of the Four Noble Truths.

Despite the attention paid by the Buddha to *dukkha*, it does not mean that he taught that there's no happiness in life. Of course, there is. But most of the time, there's unsatisfactoriness or discomfort. Besides, since we crave for permanent happiness but get only temporary relief, the happiness that we get in life is unsatisfactory.

Venerable Sariputta then enumerated the Four Noble Truths - *'the noble truth of suffering, the noble truth of the origin of suffering, the noble truth of the cessation of suffering, and the noble truth of the way leading to the cessation of suffering'*.

I'm not going to talk in detail about the Four Noble Truths because you already know quite a lot about them. I would just like to mention certain points.

We all know that the root cause of *dukkha* is craving (*tanha*). Why? *Tanha* means *wanting*. We want. Why do we want? Because we think happiness can be achieved by gaining things. And gaining is the only way to be happy.

> "Monks, I teach only 2 things – suffering and the way out of suffering."

One way of looking at *dukkha* is to see that when we want something, there's a chemical reaction in our body caused by the mind which wants that thing. As a result, our body gets very tense, very stressful. Until we get what we want, we cannot release the tension. And we go all out to get the thing we want.

Take a simple example. We see a dress or suit. We think it's very expensive, not really necessary to buy. Yet, we like it very much. The thought keeps popping up in our mind. Until we buy it, we cannot release the tension.

I myself have experienced this. When I was in Nepal, I saw a book costing US$15,000. For sure, that's a lot of money. But it was a really good book about *thangkas* (Tibetan religious paintings), a very rare book printed in Germany with very nice paintings and good explanations. Throughout the day I thought of buying the book. I went back to see the book. But still, I hesitated - *"No, no way."* Then, I went for the 3rd time. Finally, I decided against buying it.

Now, when I think about it, I realise that, during that time, I created so much tension in my mind. If I had bought the book, my tension would have been released. But for how long?

Our desire for something arises mainly because it's not something within us, but somewhere else. However, once we acquire it, its value to us drops, probably even to zero.

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Then, we turn our attention to something else which we don't have. Again, we create tension. And so the process goes on. This is *dukkha*. That's why I call it *discomfort.*

But acquiring something is not the only way of releasing tension. The Buddha taught us a much better way – mindfulness. Take my case. I could have realised that the book was too expensive, not within my means (to buy it), that I should not bother others (to get the money), that there are other books on the same subject (which cost a fraction of the price). In this way, I would be applying the Buddha's teachings on mindfully releasing tension.

Venerable Sariputta then proceeded to elaborate on what constitutes *dukkha* -

Birth is suffering, ageing is suffering, death is suffering; sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair are suffering; not to obtain what one wants is suffering. In short, the five aggregates affected by clinging are suffering.

I want to talk here only about the last sentence. What are these five aggregates? They are form, sensations, perception, mental energy and consciousness or mere awareness. Together, they constitute the human personality.

But can we say that the 5 aggregates are suffering? No, it's only the 5 aggregates *'affected by clinging'* that cause suffering. In other words, if you cling to the 5 aggregates, saying - *This is mine, this I am, this is my self'* - you have a problem, you suffer. Attachment arises when you cling to the 5 aggregates.

The Buddha's life is the best example. Do you think that, from the day the Buddha attained enlightenment until the moment he passed away, he suffered? No. If he did, there's no meaning to the attainment of enlightenment, no difference between the Buddha and us, no meaning, in fact, to Buddhism itself.

There are 2 types of suffering, physical and mental. The Buddha did not even undergo one split second of suffering after he attained enlightenment. He knew that the 5 aggregates are impermanent and so he did not identify with them.

For instance, when people blamed him, he knew that there was no permanent person to take the blame. Thus, he had no difficulty in accepting the criticism. Even when he went through physical pain, he did not suffer like we do. He took it in a mature way. He saw the body just as a body and ageing, sickness and death as a natural process, nothing more, nothing less. We, on the other hand, identify with the body and personalise it as - *'This is mine, this I am, this is my self'* – and we suffer all the more.

Let's take the 1st aggregate - form (*rupa*), our physical body. The physical body has 4 elements - earth or hardness, water or liquidity, fire or heat, and air.

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Earth is both internal – things inside our body, such as bones, flesh, teeth and other organs - and external – the outside world. The hardness comes from the universe. As living beings, we have to depend on outside earth elements for our survival. Our bones and body parts contain the earth element and they come about as a result of the food and drinks that we take. Food and drinks come from the outside. If we don't take them, we can't maintain our earth element.

If we view the earth element with wisdom, we can understand the principle of non-self (*anatta*). The earth element comes from the universe. When we leave this world, our earth element returns to the universe. There's nothing we can cling to as our '*self*'. That's the way to see with wisdom. And in that way, we can overcome our clinging to self, or, at least, weaken it. Until, gradually, one day, we're able to get rid of our attachment to self. That's a huge advantage. We can overcome our anger, greed and other defilements. If we get blamed, for example, we don't take it as blaming '*me*'. Someone is blaming me, but there's no permanent 'I' to be blamed. Why should I get angry? There's no valid reason.

The earth element is very vast especially the outside earth element. We know about the world, the universe. Everywhere, we can find the external earth element. In a way, there's no limit. In fact, according to Buddhism – and science – there are many universes. Yet, it's not permanent. It can be destroyed. Earthquakes, volcanic eruptions - all these things are due to disturbances involving the earth element. So the earth element can be destructive. But whether external or internal, the earth element is not permanent

Venerable Sariputta explained the water element in a similar way – internal and external. Internal water elements are saliva, blood, grease near joints of the body, many things that are liquid. External water elements are greater and more powerful but they're also not permanent. They can be destroyed and be very destructive.

He then said - *'Now there comes a time when the external element is disturbed. It carries away villages, towns, cities, districts, and countries. There comes a time when the waters in the great ocean sink down, a hundred leagues … seven hundred leagues. There comes a time when the waters in the great oceans stand seven fathoms deep.'*

Now, what do these ancient words spoken 2,500 words remind you of? Yes, of course, the tsunami. Whole villages were totally wiped out during the tsunami. Towns and cities were very badly damaged. Thousands of people are still missing.

And then there's the converse situation -

'There comes a time when the waters in the great oceans stand half a fathom deep, only waist deep, only knee deep, only ankle deep. There comes a time when the waters in the great oceans are not enough to wet even the joint of a finger.'

Scientists have discovered planets which were previously living but are now dead. Some people even consider the moon as a dead planet. Similarly, when the external water element is eliminated, the Earth will one day become a dead planet too.

Then, Venerable Sariputta asked this crucial question -

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'When even the external water element, great as it is, is seen to be impermanent, subject to destruction, disappearance, and change, what of this body, which is clung-to by craving and lasts but a little while?'

And he answered the question himself –

'There can be no considering that as 'I' or 'mine' or 'I am'.'

The Third Noble Truth is the cessation of *dukkha*. What happens when we overcome attachment? Do we become people who want nothing? No. Even the Buddha was not a person who wanted nothing. Every morning, he would go out of the temple to get his meals. He had a monk's residence (*kuti*) to sleep in. He had a physician employed by King Bimbisara, his royal patron.

So the Buddha also wanted things. But he wanted those things merely for the sake of survival, not out of attachment. Cessation of *dukkha* therefore means cessation of attachment, not ceasing to want anything.

The Fourth Noble Truth – the path leading to the cessation of *dukkha* – comprises the Noble Eightfold Path. which is divided into 3 sections. These are discipline, concentration and wisdom.

We first have to discipline ourselves. Discipline is not just the 5 precepts. That is for our bodily activities. We have to discipline our mind also. Then, with discipline, through the practice of concentration to focus our normally scattered mind and meditation, we achieve wisdom or understanding of ourselves and the world around us in a realistic way. It's a changing world not within our control.

This is a very interesting and important sutra. I would encourage you, if you have the time, to read it for yourself. It's quite long but well worth the effort. As the great Indian Buddhist philosopher and logician, Dharmakirti, once remarked – *'It's not very important to know the number of atoms on this earth or how many insects exist but it's important to know the Four Noble Truths.'*

BHANTE B DHAMMARATANA
RELIGIOUS ADVISOR
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Editorial

Teaching At The Wat

Chiangmai, northern Thailand on a cold December morning. The sky's grey and the streets drenched. But the rain has stopped. It's a perfect morning for sleeping. But it's a working day. Work for me is teaching English to Thai novice monks.

Wat Chedi Luang is a 700-year old monastery which sits right in the centre of Chiangmai's ancient city. The Wat houses the city pillar which marks that exact spot.

Entering a class, I meet several novices preparing to leave.

'Oh, Ajahn (teacher), we have to attend a function', someone says to me in Thai, smiling. I smile back and leave.

Downstairs, I spot the head teacher, a genial, kindhearted man, extremely dedicated to his work. Ajahn Charoen is teacher, administrator and general guardian angel to the novices.

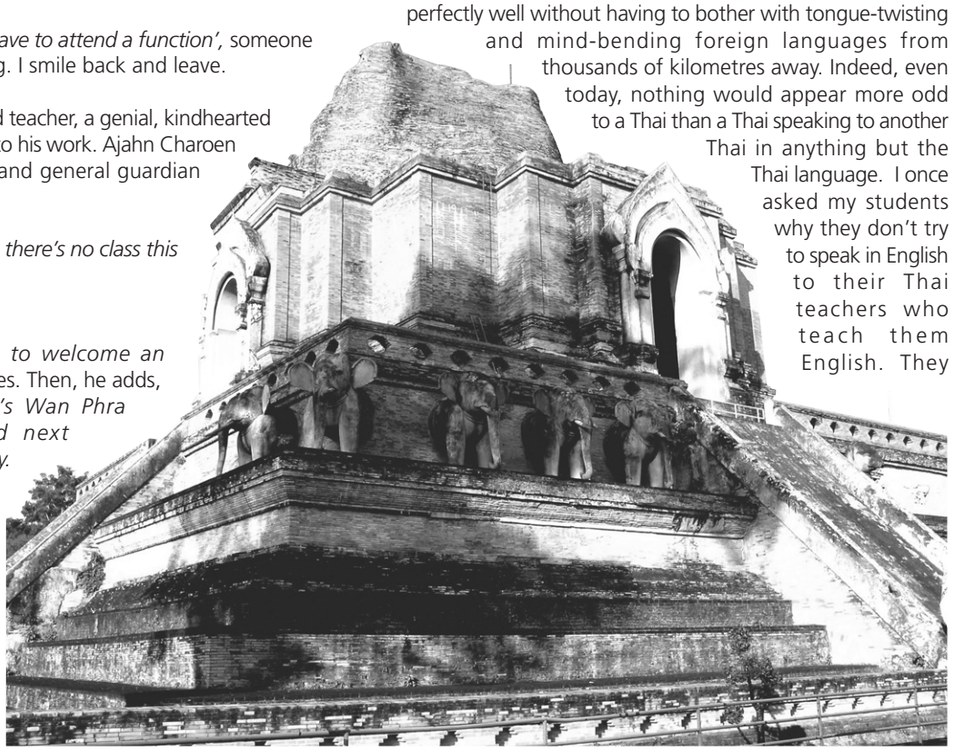
'Ajahn, the novices tell me there's no class this morning,' I say to him.

'*Oh, yes, they're going to welcome an important monk,*' he replies. Then, he adds, '*You know, this Friday's Wan Phra (monk's holiday), and next Monday's Constitution Day. So no classes for 4 days this weekend.*' He smiles.

To Singaporeans unfamiliar with Thai ways, this situation may seem unsettling, perhaps even unreal. Having studies interrupted frequently by holidays, functions and extra-curricular duties is not quite what Singaporeans expect when it comes to their children's education.

But the fact that Samakeewitayatan School is a religious school makes it somewhat special. Indeed, I wouldn't be surprised if some of my students wonder why on earth they have to study English. After all, they're novice monks. And, unlike its neighbours, Thailand has never been colonised before.

For centuries, Thais have been going about their business perfectly well without having to bother with tongue-twisting and mind-bending foreign languages from thousands of kilometres away. Indeed, even today, nothing would appear more odd to a Thai than a Thai speaking to another Thai in anything but the Thai language. I once asked my students why they don't try to speak in English to their Thai teachers who teach them English. They



smile and giggle, as if to say – "*Are you for real?*"

And so I was surprised – pleasantly so – to find that the school curriculum includes not only modern secular subjects like English, mathematics, physics, chemistry and computer studies but also Chinese and Japanese (although these are optional). The teaching of English is spread over several courses to cover its various aspects, such as grammar, reading, writing, conversation and so on.

The fact that the curriculum is so varied and modern is, no doubt, a great tribute to the school authorities. They recognise that the vast majority of novices ordain not because they're interested in the religious or contemplative life but because their families are desperately poor. The monastery is simply the only way these boys can get an education and escape the vicious cycle of menial and backbreaking work – like rice planting - handed down from one generation to the next. Some families are even too poor to feed an extra mouth, let alone educate him.

But I soon learn that the monastery helps these unfortunate children vitally in another way too. Those novices who do not ordain to escape the poverty trap do so to escape another – equally pernicious - one. Where they were, they would have languished in a life of lying, cheating, stealing and other petty crimes from which only the controlled environment of the Wat offers any realistic escape.

Someone once told me that, in his country, when he went to school as a novice monk, his teachers who were monks caned novices when they were naughty. The novices in turn took it out on the lay teachers. This struck me as ridiculous but did not otherwise bother me. But it did make me wonder how I should interact with the novices once I got to the Wat. How should I address them? How should they address me? And how would I be able to maintain discipline in the class, if discipline was needed?

As it turned out, I needn't have been concerned. Thais are incredibly friendly. They smile and laugh easily. (The novices would even smile and giggle at the sound of a sneeze along the corridor outside the classroom especially when they're trying in vain to answer a particularly difficult question). They're talkative. And incurably inquisitive. In my very 1st class, my students asked me why I came to Thailand to teach them. I said – '*Because I like Thailand and Thai people.*' They didn't buy that one bit. '*Oh, I know,*' someone said, '*You have a Thai wife!*'

And when I brought my laptop to class, they wanted to know – '*Where did you buy it? How much did it cost?*' Later, when I decided to leave the laptop at home, the students asked me – '*Teacher, what happened to your laptop?*'

Eventually, the students themselves taught me how to behave. When I entered a class, a novice yelled – '*Stand up, please!*' Then, the boys stood up, shouting a greeting in unison at the top of their voices.

As for discipline, I never have any problem. Although they can be as mischievous as other boys of their age, the novices are generally well behaved. Besides, I soon learned that the best way to discourage negative behaviour in class is to ask questions. There's probably nothing the novices dislike more than having attention focussed on them, especially when they don't have the answers.

Losing one's temper, shouting and ranting, is never a good idea in teaching. More so in Thailand. And besides, these students are, after all, novice monks. More often than not, I find that whenever the students do not respond well to my lessons, it's because I myself have not kept my cool sufficiently when confronted by unexpected problems in class.

One of the biggest problems faced by the school is lack of funds. Although the students study physics and chemistry, they don't have a proper laboratory. In the computer room, several of the computers don't even work. Sometimes, a light or a fan does not function for days or weeks. When I asked a novice how he felt about his school not having proper science facilities unlike other schools, he replied in English - with a smile - *'I accept that our school is poor*'.

Despite all the problems, however, there's nothing I would rather be doing than teaching English to the novices at the Wat. It's a beautiful historical monument in its own right, frequented everyday by tourists. And it's situated near the place I live.

Here, I'm left alone to do my professional best. I design my own syllabus and lessons. I set examination questions, mark them and grade the students. And I'm left alone to do what I do best – teach – without any administrative or bureaucratic duties or interference.

At the Wat, I'm surrounded by polite and helpful people. Often, when I go to my desk, there's a small present – a bun or a small bag of longans, perhaps – that one of my colleagues has brought to school to distribute to the others. Considering that they're poorly paid even by local standards – in fact, teaching at the Wat for all of them is something of a sacrifice, especially for the younger ones – this, to me, is a remarkable gesture of thoughtfulness and generosity.

But most of all, it's especially satisfying to me personally that many of the novices belong to minority hill tribes like the Hmong, Akha and Karen. These *'chao kao'* (people of the mountain) are poorer than the poor, sometimes socially discriminated against and often do not enjoy rights normally available to the mainstream Thais. The general comment is that they're lazy but some of the best students in the School are '*chao kao*'.

In this issue, I'm happy to bring you interviews with some novices. One, in particular, has a rather unique background. A Newari Theravadin novice, he comes from Nepal and has been studying in Thailand for 2 years. One of the amazing things I learned from him was that, coming, as he does, from the land of the Buddha's birth, he did not know the Pali language until he came to Thailand. Now, of course, besides Pali, he speaks, reads and writes Thai - so proficiently, in fact, that he's invariably at the top of his class. On the 1st day in class, I thought he was a Thai novice from the south of Thailand (because he's darker than the average northerner) until I spoke to him. When he replied to my question in fluent English, I blurted out - quite spontaneously - '*Hey, you're not Thai!*'

As always, I wish you pleasant reading.

Chwee Beng
Editor

Interview with a Buddhist Funeral Undertaker

by Sunanda

Mr Sng Ah Seng is 46 years old and has been in this line of business for 6 years. I first came to know him many years ago when he helped me to organize a Zen retreat led by a Korean Zen master. Subsequently, I met him at the wake of a friend's husband. Since then, I have engaged him to conduct my parents' funerals and also recommended him to close friends when they requested for assistance.

I remember one particular incident clearly. Ah Seng handled the funeral arrangements for a close friend's deceased mother. During the wake, unknown to my friend, one of his close relatives started playing a card game with some other people. Ah Seng told my friend to do something about this but to do it tactfully. Far from being upset, my friend was impressed that the man took his job as a 'Buddhist' undertaker so seriously.

The death of a loved one like a parent or a spouse is a very trying moment, a time when the person is particularly vulnerable to an unscrupulous or greedy undertaker. A responsible undertaker, on the other hand, someone who does his job thoroughly and sensitively, can make all the difference. What more, a person who follows proper Buddhist practices faithfully.

Why did you decide to do this work?

To promote the right idea of a Buddhist funeral. I wanted to educate people on the right procedure for a Buddhist funeral. Through the right way of the Buddhist funeral, we hope to encourage the family to practise the Dharma and also to understand Buddhism better.

Monks who attend the funeral service will teach the Dharma to those present. If they do their job well, they will give people a good impression of Buddhism. Most people confuse Buddhism with Taoism. We hope that through our service, we can make people see that these are two different religions.

The best thing to do (for a Buddhist funeral) is to chant and offer *dana* (food offerings) to the monks during the funeral. Then, dedicate the merits to the deceased.

Say, someone now contacts you for a funeral service. What do you do?

We first discuss the proposed arrangements with family members. If all members of the family agree, we will proceed. This ensures that that there won't be any major problems later.

We advise them not to waste food. So, we don't encourage them to order a lot of food for relatives and others attending the wake or funeral. We also encourage members of the family to be vegetarians during the funeral. (We believe that this) protects lives.

Why do we have funeral rituals?

(One of the main purposes of the funeral rites is to) transfer our merits to the deceased by chanting, praying and becoming vegetarian throughout the funeral period. (We believe that) these positive or good deeds will help the deceased to have a better rebirth.

Do you impose any restrictions on what people can do during the wake and the funeral?

There are certain prohibitions which the members of the family must accept before we will agree to help with the funeral.

These are:

- No burning of joss paper etc.
- Do not gamble or make noise at the wake so as to maintain a serene and solemn atmosphere.
- Do not allow non-Buddhist religious services to be conducted. Only Buddhist chanting groups should be allowed to chant Buddhist sutras or give Buddhist sermons at the wake.
- Do not employ percussion groups or musical bands during the funeral procession.

Do you require that the family of the deceased must invite certain monks or nuns to officiate at the funeral service?

No. We leave that entirely to the family members to decide. In fact, the funerals that we have arranged have been performed by Theravadin, Tibetan and Chinese Mahayana monks and nuns from many different temples and centres. We do not interfere in this matter at all.

Do you have any requirements about what images or statues of deities and Buddhas and Bodhisattvas may be placed on the altar?

About which statues or images to be put on the altar, we also leave that entirely to the family. We do not force or influence them in any way.

Have you met any major problems in your work?

Until today, everyone is quite happy with our service.

Most of them are not Buddhists, but after hearing the Dharma, many take refuge (in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha). If not, they are, at least, willing to greet and welcome the monks.

Before the service, many were very defensive but, after that, most of them have become our friends, especially the older folk, who are always greeting the monks '*Amitabha*'.

Your job is not an ordinary kind of job. What special qualities do people need to possess to do this job?

We have to sincerely love our job and be dedicated. It's not something that we can do just for the money. It's very important

that we must never be commercialised. The family who has just lost their loved one is naturally very sad and perhaps even sensitive. So, we need to be responsible and mindful of our duties. As Buddhists, we should also understand the law of cause and effect that affects whatever actions we do.

So you also involve yourself in some counseling of family members.

In fact, counseling the sick and members of the family is the most important.

What else do you do?

Nowadays, we also help to look after terminally ill patients. Once a doctor confirms that it's a terminal case involving a Buddhist patient, we invite monks or nuns to counsel the patient so that he or she will have a peaceful death.

This has nothing to do with the funeral service as we do not force anyone to let us take charge of the funeral service.

The main idea is to teach the relatives how to take care of the sick and inculcate in them (the important Buddhist principles of) non-attachment and the Dharma.

If they enquire, we will advise them how to perform a simple Buddhist funeral service but we will not force them to use our service.

Will you object to your children following your footsteps?

Our objective is to promote the right idea about a proper Buddhist funeral. Therefore, if my children truly understand the meaning of it, I will not object.

In the same way, if anyone shares the same ideals that we have, we welcome them to join us.

Thank you so much, Ah Seng.

Editor – Anyone who wishes to contact Mr Sng Ah Seng may call Metta Supplies & Services Mobile: 9237 9239 or 9834 9089.

Interview

Interviews Buddhist Novices in Thailand

by Chwee Beng

In the course of teaching English at a school for novices in Chiangmai for nearly a year, I've come to know and appreciate many of them. Here, 4 of my students talk about their lives, problems and aspirations.

"I wanted very much to study Buddhism"

KIJAN MAHARJAN
16 years old, Newari from Nepal,
Mathayom (M) 4
(Interviewed in English)

When I ordained in Nepal as a novice, I did not know anything about Buddhism. I wanted very much to study it.

I came to Thailand in 2003. I'd been a novice for 4 months. My teacher said that he needed 90 novices. Only 30 of us ordained at that time. Together with novices from other parts of Nepal, a total of 45 of us came together to Thailand.

I was very excited when I came to Thailand but (also) afraid of travelling by plane.

At first, I lived in a wat in Nakorn Pathom (near Bangkok). I stayed there for 8 months. (Unfortunately) there was no regular school for novices there. (We) could just study Pali, Dharma and Thai. So I came to Chiangmai.

I arrived in this school in the middle of the school term so I did not begin my studies yet. After 6 months, I was admitted to the School in *M3* (secondary 3).

I first began studying the Thai language (when I was) in Nakorn Pathom. I could not speak it well. It was difficult. It was only when I came to Chiangmai that I could speak Thai better.

I can speak Nepali, Newari, English and Thai. Newaris have a spoken and written language but I can only speak (the language). Nepali is similar to Sanskrit but not Newari. I find the Thai language easier to learn than Nepali because (Nepali) pronunciation is very difficult. I think the (novices who belong to the) hill tribes in Thailand should find it easy to learn Nepali because the pronunciations (in Nepali and their hill tribe languages) appear similar.

I find physics and biology the most difficult. (But) chemistry is fine. It's not that I don't like physics and biology. It's just that I find it very difficult to improve in them. My favourite subject is computer.

At first, I had a problem mixing with the local novices mainly because of the language barrier. Now I've gotten to know them better. I like Thai food even though it's spicy.

(As for my future) I want to do computer studies but I'm not yet sure in what subject. I will go back to Nepal after *M6* to catch up with my family and friends. Then I hope to return to Thailand for further studies, probably at the Mahamakut Buddhist University here in Wat Chedi Luang.

In the whole of Nepal, there are (only) about 200 to 300 Theravadin monks. There are many more Tibetan monks but they're mostly found in Swyambunath. .

SETTHA PAEKEAWMANEE
20 years old, born in Bangkok, Thai, *Mathayom (M) 4*
(Translated from Thai by Boonmee Sansong)

I'm the only child in my family. Both my parents are working and we're quite comfortable.

I completed my junior high school education (*M3* or secondary

3) at Suan Kulab School (a prestigious Bangkok school).

I obtained good grades but lost interest in studies after that. I went around in a big group of more than 10 people. We drank alcohol, smoked cigarettes, played football and computer games. We had a good time outside almost everyday and did not go to school.

I took drugs - *ya ba* (amphetamines) and ganja - for about 2 years. Then, I decided to stop. It wasn't difficult. It took about 6 months But I still continued to drink alcohol. (Laughter). I stopped everything when I became a novice.

I lied to my parents. They thought I was in school. Finally, my teacher called them.

"We drank alcohol, smoked cigarettes, played football and computer games."

I dropped out of school and went to a commercial college. But I could not complete my 1st year. I had many problems - girl friend, friends and so on. I left in the 2nd term.

Then I took up a car mechanics course. But the old problems remained. I dropped out from St John's Polytechnic in the 1st term.

After that, I stayed at home for a few months. My mother asked me to ordain as a novice. This would give her and me some peace of mind. I agreed to try it for a month.

At the *wat* in Prae Province, I did the usual duties of a novice – learned how to meditate, chanted, swept the floor, cleaned the temple. But I did not study there because there was no school.

At the end of the month, my mother told me to continue as a novice. I thought to myself – '*OK, here, it's not so bad. I'm not confused. I don't have to meet my old friends.*' So I continued as a novice there for about a year.

Then, I came to Wat Chedi Luang in May 2005 to continue my education. No one recommended me here but I knew that there's a school for novices here.

Now I'm in *M4*. I've been here for 8 months. My classmates are younger than I am -16 to 18 years old - but I don't have any problems with that.

My favourite subjects are English and art. I love sports but as a novice, I can't play games.

I'm happy here. I will remain in robes indefinitely. I want my mum to be happy. I've disappointed her so much already. This life is good. I can forget the past and work on my future.

If I can go to university, I want to study law.

BOONMEE SANSONG
19 years old, born in Nan Province, Hmong (hill tribe), *Mathayom (M)5*
(Interviewed in English)

I have 9 brothers and sisters. My family is very poor. My father is a rice farmer but he pays rent for his padi field.

I went to primary school in Nan Province. The school had about 1,200 students but it was very poor. I studied the usual subjects – Thai, science, art, mathematics and so on.

I completed my junior high school education (M3 or secondary 3) in Nan. Then I decided to come to Chiangmai. I wanted to help my father. He had to work very hard to support such a big family. I also thought that in Chiangmai, I would be able to get a better education than in Nan.

I became a novice at 15. I had a friend who studied in Wat Chedi Luang. I asked him, '*How is your school?*'
He said, '*Oh, my school is good*'.
'How much do you pay for your school?' 'It's not expensive.'
'How much do you pay for your house?' 'No, it's free. I live in a temple.'
'Wow! That's good. Please give me some advice.'

My father disagreed (to my leaving Nan). He did not know anything about Buddhism or monks. I told him I had to go. It was a good way for me and for him.

My mother (on the other hand) was happy to let me go. She said I could do what I wanted so long as I was a good person.

I became a novice to get an education but I also wanted to study Lord Buddha's teachings. How to be a good man. How to choose a good way of life. In fact, now there are many problems (in Thailand). Many people don't know how to solve their problems. If I know the Buddha's teachings, I can protect myself and help others to choose the good things to do - not to sell drugs, for example.

"I did not know the monastic rules ...'(For example) I drank water standing up."

I came to Wat Chedi Luang in April 2003 and entered *M3*. I came by myself.

At first, I had many problems. I missed my family very much. I was the only Hmong in my class and my temple. (I live in Wat Santitharm, not far from Wat Chedi Luang). I did not know the monastic rules and was scolded by my Abbot (for breaking them). (For example) I drank water standing up. For me, this was a very serious problem.

(As for my studies) I wasn't good in anything. I did not know what my talent was. I wasn't good in mathematics, physics, biology or other subjects. (Although) I always managed to pass my examinations, (my results) were not so good. (So) I decided to concentrate on English.

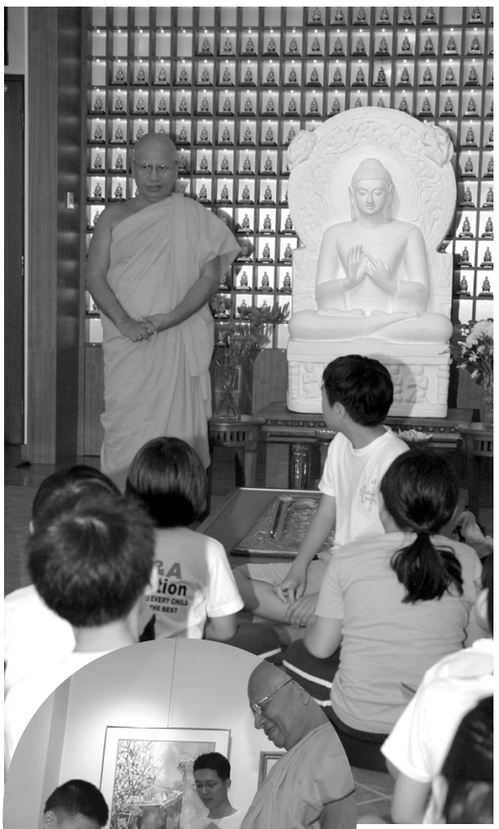
For my future, I want to major in humanities. After my degree, I would like to work as a tourist guide here in Chiangmai. I'm happy when I meet people and talk to foreigners. I'm familiar with many places here.

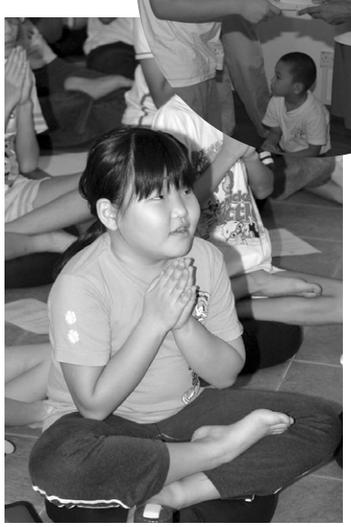
I will study in the daytime and work at night. I know it will be tough but I have to try. I want to pay for the education of my younger brothers and sisters (too).

Congratulations to all students of BL's Sunday Dhamma School!

Graduation ceremony held on 19 March 2006

Guest of Honour - Prof Chandima

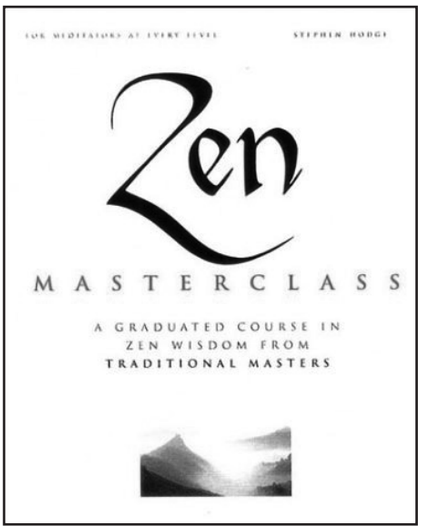




Zen Masterclass:

A graduated course in Zen wisdom from traditional Masters

by Stephen Hodge
Quest books (2002), 144 pages
Reviewed by Kim Li



This book provides a short yet concise write-up about the various masters of the different Zen lineages. It touches on the different teaching styles of the various Masters as well as their teachings, providing an overview and a factual write up of the growth of Zen over the centuries.

For each master, a chapter is devoted to his experiences in life and his teaching style, while another chapter goes into an in-depth exploration of his teachings.

It starts with Bodhidharma, recognised as the first Indian patriarch of Zen in China and goes on to describe snippets of Bodhidharma's time in China, his experience with the Emperor of that era and a little background of Buddhism in China prior to Bodhidharma's time, and from there, his style and his teachings.

From the tranquil, meditative teachings of Bodhidharma to the practical and dry humour of Huineng, the sudden shouts and blows of Mazu Daoyi, the determined emphasis on morality by Myoam Eisai, the simple systematic teachings of Hakuin Zenji, this book explores the various styles of teachings of the Buddhist masters. It shows that throughout the history of Zen Buddhism, there are different ways of practising the Dharma and regardless of the level of practice, there will be a style that is suitable for a particular individual.

Personally, I like best the story of Dajian Huineng and Yuquan Shenxiu, 2 disciples of Hongren, who had different levels of understanding.

When Master Hongren was about to die, he announced a contest to choose his successor. Each candidate was to put forth a short poem of realization to express his insights into Buddhism.

Shenxiu put forth the following poem: -
The body is like a bodhi tree
And the mind a bright mirror.
Carefully polish it clean every day,
And let no dust alight.

In a demonstration of his deeper understanding of the Dharma, Huineng replied:-
From the start, there is no bodhi tree
Nor stand of a bright mirror.
Buddha-nature is ever pure;
Where can the dust alight?

Upon reading Huineng's verse, most people will appreciate his profound understanding of Dharma. Bit by bit, most Buddhists will like to achieve the level of understanding that everything is relative and that Buddha-nature is ever present, ever true and pure.

However, I personally find Shenxiu's approach as something that is more attainable. With the constant bombardment of information, it requires effort to practise the Dharma. As such, I should constantly remind myself to practise the Dharma and from there, to remove the dust from my Buddha-nature in the hope that one day, it will shine through and perhaps I can attain the same level of understanding of Dharma as Huineng.

Another master that left a deep impression on me is Zhaozhou Congshen. This is a Master who purportedly prefers to use humour to inspire and teach others, to emphasise that Buddha-nature is omni-present, even within the most ordinary daily activities. I especially like the dialogue asked of Zhaozhou by an official:

Official: *Will you go to hell or not?*
Zhaozhou: *I entered hell a long time ago.*
Official (worried): *So, why did you enter hell?"*
Zhaozhou: *If I don't enter hell, who will teach you?*

It is often said that Bodhisattvas prefer to remain as Bodhisattvas in order to continue teaching and spreading Dharma to save more beings. I find that this dialogue puts across that mindset very well, in a more light-hearted manner where Zhaozhou seems to be teasing the official who asked the question.

Buddhism is always thought to be a heavy-duty religion where Buddhists do nothing but chant all day. It is also thought to be a serious, dry religion where most of the concepts are rarely attainable by the layperson. Perhaps we need more teachers who are able to put the message across in a more light-hearted manner. Reading about Zhaozhou reminds me of 2 contemporary venerables, Ajahn Brahmavamso and His Holiness the Dalai Lama. These are 2 masters who are not afraid to laugh in public, to lighten up the mood of the day.

There are many ways to practise Buddhism. The trick is in finding a teacher who is suitable for oneself as well as a method of practice that is sufficiently comfortable for oneself and from there, to proceed on.

This is definitely a good read for those interested in knowing more about the history of Zen, Zen masters and their styles and teachings.