



KARUNA VIRUS

19 ORIGINAL STORIES
ABOUT **AJAHN BRAHM**,
OFFERING HOPE, LOVE,
AND INSPIRATION
AMID THE COVID-19
PANDEMIC



BODHINYANA 覺智國際基金會
INTERNATIONAL FOUNDATION

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AMID THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC



*If kindness is
imagined as a beautiful dove,
then wisdom is its wings.
Compassion without wisdom
never takes off.*

AJAHN BRAHM

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FOREWORD

BY

AJAHN GANHA¹

Abbot of Wat Pa Subthaweethammaram
Nakhon Ratchasima, Thailand

December 2019



AJAHN BRAHM is a good monk. He is a monk par excellence. He is very precious – good-natured, responsible, and self-sacrificing.

Ajahn Brahm loves the Dhamma. He loves other people more than himself. He was born to be a giver. He will always do everything he can to help humankind. Whatever he does, he does it for the benefit of the public at large. He does it for the happiness of all people, to truly end their suffering. This is the right way to be!

People in the West have wisdom. They should develop the Dhamma to keep up with the times. You should develop Bodhinyana Monastery in your own way. You do not have to follow the way they do things at any other monastery, even Wat Pa Pong. Just go straight to the model the Buddha laid down and take that as your guiding principle. Embody the Dhamma. Be your own person.

You do not have to be under the authority of anyone. You are still disciples of Ajahn Chah. You are still disciples of the Buddha. So, you, in Perth, Ajahn Brahm, you have to be your own person. Be happy, be courageous, be your best!

You have to act in this way. If you do things correctly, if you have the right view and right practice, you will not have any doubts. And those who give of themselves will always be accepted by everyone.

The monastery in Perth is a place to teach the Dhamma. You should teach only about Nibbana. Teach about happiness and the ending of suffering to the general populace. It is not right to take the Thai way of practice and apply it in Australia because each country is different.

Although there are people who want to control Ajahn Brahm and the monks in Perth, they cannot do it. Ajahn Brahm already is the embodiment of the Dhamma. He has wisdom. How would they be able to dominate him?

Spread the good message. Spread the Dhamma. From Perth to the entire world!

¹ Ajahn Ganha Sukhakāmo is Ajahn Chah's nephew, and a highly respected monk in the Thai forest tradition. He is a few years senior to Ajahn Brahm as a monk, and one year older. Ajahn Ganha and Ajahn Brahm have known each other since the mid-1970s, when they were young monks together at Wat Pa Pong, Ajahn Chah's main monastery in Thailand. Ajahn Ganha also came to stay at Bodhinyana Monastery in Perth, for the rains retreat in 1987 and a month in 1994, to offer support to the new monastery. This foreword is an edited version of remarks made by Ajahn Ganha during a visit to his monastery in December 2019. Ajahn Ganha was asked to provide comments for the occasion of Ajahn Brahm's birthday.

FOREWORD

BY

MR DENNIS SHEPPARD

President of the Buddhist Society of Western Australia (BSWA)
Perth, Australia

June 2020



AJAHN BRAHM has been a close friend since he arrived in Australia in April 1983. Looking back, I reflect with much gratitude on the opportunity I have had to share my life with him, especially as an office bearer of the Buddhist Society of Western Australia (BSWA). I am blessed to be serving as its President once again this term.

Ajahn Brahm arrived in Perth as a quiet, unassuming Monk and has developed into one of the world's most powerful voices and exemplars of the Buddha-Dhamma. At the time of his arrival, Ajahn Jagaro was the Spiritual Director of BSWA, and he said to me, "You just wait until you meet him, Dennis. He is a Monk's Monk." So, we knew he was held in high regard by his peers and we knew he was intelligent; after all, he had won a scholarship to study theoretical physics at Cambridge. What the BSWA had not figured out in those early years, when he was the quiet second Monk, was that he had latent wisdom inside him that was being cultivated, ready to explode into the world. Ajahn Brahm has an innate wit and sense of fun. You can never get too intense with him because he will bring your "well-constructed" ideas of how things are right back into the farce that

accompanies our human conditioning. Having said this, he is also the architect of the word “kindfulness” and will demonstrate this quality over and over.

I have observed Ajahn Brahm closely over the years of his spiritual development and can attest to his absolute commitment to the monastic orders. When I say this, I am especially thinking of the way he held the space open for our Nuns² to be fully ordained back into the Theravada tradition. The BSWA always had a policy to create a way for aspiring females to become Theravadin Nuns, but it was Ajahn Brahm’s clarity of insight that allowed the now “Famous Four” postulants to make it happen. This happening was especially important for Theravada Buddhism because, following the Buddha’s enlightenment, in an exchange with Māra, the personification of delusion, the Buddha vowed that he would not die until he had the four great assemblies in place. The assembly of fully-ordained Monks, the assembly of fully-ordained Nuns, the assembly of strong Laymen and the assembly of strong Laywomen. The assembly of Nuns in the Theravada tradition had died out some centuries ago, and Ajahn Brahm, with the help of others also skilled in the Pali language, found a way to legally reinstate the order. We did this with the help of a senior Nun who in 1997 had been given the full ordination as a Nun by Sri Lankan Monks, who were the pioneers in re-establishing the order of Nuns within Theravada. While most rejoiced, it is true to say that the ordination was not accepted kindly in some of the more patriarchal parts of the world. Throughout this time of change, the animosities and differences have been managed by him with good humour and without any rancour. “The Four Great Pillars or Assemblies of Buddhism” have been reinstated in the world and they are once again alive, especially so at the BSWA under his spiritual guidance.

Ajahn Brahm is a congruent man. What he is projecting, is how he is inside. He is not a pretender. Ajahn Brahm is a man who loves himself equally with others. It is an absolute joy to see how he projects this love into the way he teaches the Dhamma. So often in the Western World, we have high ideals, but it is rare to find someone who can embody those ideals, let alone the

² In this book, “nun” is used for *bhikkhuni* and “monk” for *bhikkhu*, respectively a fully-ordained female and male monastic.

purity of balance being pointed to by the Buddha. Notwithstanding, with simple stories, sharp wit, and a wicked sense of humour, Ajahn Brahm has empowered thousands, if not millions of people to understand why it is necessary to practice the Buddha's path. As conditioning has become more sophisticated in the world, so too has its dualistic balance, forever working to ensure that *dukkha* (suffering) will always be present. The Four Noble Truths will always be relevant. Our being, and the world we are part of, is beguiling. It is difficult to see past the delusion, past the desire and aversion that keeps us bound into *saṃsāra*.

Ajahn Brahm is a man for the times, as the simple stories and anecdotes that you will find in this book will demonstrate to you. It is a book put together by his close associates who love and respect him. I commend this book to you.

INTRODUCTION



IN EARLY January 2020, COVID-19, a highly infectious novel coronavirus, began to rapidly spread and has since affected millions of lives around the globe, causing hundreds of thousands of deaths across all continents. As this introduction is being prepared, the numbers are still rising. Our teacher, Ajahn Brahm, a fully ordained Buddhist monk for over 45 years, reminds us that “this too will pass” because nothing is permanent. He encourages us to consider this global pandemic not as a crisis but rather as an opportunity to care for and serve one another, especially those in need.

Inspired by Ajahn Brahm’s timeless teachings, the aim of this book is twofold: first, to use 19 never-before-published stories from Ajahn Brahm’s life to bring joy and give hope to anyone whose life has been affected by COVID-19; and second, to present it as a gift to Ajahn Brahm on his 69th birthday, on 7 August 2020.

The title of this book, Karuna-virus, resonates with the pronunciation of “coronavirus.” In Pali, an ancient Indian language possibly used by the

Buddha himself, the word *karuṇā* means “compassion.” We hope that compassion, together with kindness and wisdom, can replace greed, anger and ignorance far and wide as the world continues to grapple with this global pandemic.

In early February 2020, a disciple from Hong Kong – one of the very first places where COVID-19 had broken out – wrote to Ajahn Brahm and literally begged him not to travel overseas to teach anymore, because he had experienced first-hand how serious and terrible the situation was, when the rest of the world was still largely unaware. Ajahn Brahm replied:

Thank you for your concern. I just received your email, in Bangkok. I arrived an hour or two ago. Please do not worry. My immune system is strong and I know how to rest deeply in meditation. I do not see any chance of an infection. But I do see many chances of teaching the Dhamma and inspiring people to meditate and increase their health.

In answering a question from a frontline doctor in Spain, who celebrated her daughter’s 7th birthday recently, whilst attending an online retreat organised by the Buddhist Society of Western Australia, Ajahn Brahm says:

Nature is so beautiful, but so destructive, too. It gives you your beautiful daughter, but confronts you with so much raw suffering at your work. You may regard yourself as a player in a big orchestra, performing to your highest ability, but knowing that you do not control the process. Give in the moment, not caring too much about the future. When you are with a patient, they become part of you. You help as much as you are able and let them go with loving-kindness in your heart. Show that metta on your face and with your eyes as you bid them farewell. Death is not the end, just as the finale is not the end of all concerts. You are participating in the seasons of life. After winter, always comes the spring.³

May you find peace and comfort in the following 19 stories. May the kindness, compassion and wisdom generated by them protect you and your loved ones from COVID-19 and relieve any suffering it may have already caused.

³ Quoted from the Buddhist Society of Western Australia’s website:
<https://bswa.org/ajahn-brahms-message-healthcare-workers-covid-19-front-line/>



The Bushfire



IN MANY WAYS, the following story seems so mundane. Yet sometimes gems of deep spiritual significance can be found hidden in the most worldly of events.

It was late January 1991. After many weeks of a typically bone-dry Western Australian summer, record-breaking temperatures coupled with strong winds were fuelling a devastating bushfire a few kilometres south of Bodhinyana Monastery. As the wind propelled the enormous fire, wiping out hectares of bush in its wake, Ajahn Brahm and the rest of the monks were gathered in the monastery's main hall, discussing evacuation plans with the fire brigade.

Australian forest fires are made worse by the prevalence of the highly flammable eucalyptus trees, or gum trees, with their oil-filled leaves. As the fire leapt from tree to tree on the strength of the wind, the trees exploded in loud bangs as the oil caught fire. The greenery was incinerated, and all that remained was a grey, desolate and barren landscape. The bare ground was covered in ash and burnt remnants of branches and trees. It was as bleak as the surface of the moon, not the usual delightful and calming natural setting that monastery residents and visitors are so familiar with. It was a frightening scene.

By the time the monks evacuated, there was no doubt that the fire would reach the monastery. They knew the outcome would be devastating because wood was an important construction material in the monastery buildings, especially in the roofs. At that point, it was clear to Ajahn Brahm that the monastery would be burned to the ground.

It is important to emphasize that, at that time, the building of Bodhinyana Monastery had been the life work of Ajahn Brahm. For over seven full

years – whilst Ajahn Jagaro was the abbot and main teacher – Ajahn Brahm had spent up to 12 hours a day, day in and day out, working to build up the perfect Buddhist monastery. It was so much more than just a set of buildings. For Ajahn Brahm, it had been a labour of love. At times, he had even put his life on the line to ensure that everything was done to the highest standard. Yet at that moment, as the blaze roared closer and closer, Ajahn Brahm was sure everything would be destroyed in a matter of minutes.

Imagine that for a moment. If it were you, and your home of many years, or a project you had worked on for the best part of a decade, was about to be wiped out by nature's rage, what would you do? How would you feel? Most people would sink into a bottomless pit of despair and anger. They would probably question the injustice of it all, and perhaps even reject their belief system, with the wail, "Why is this happening to me?"

But not Ajahn Brahm. "At that moment, I knew the monastery was going to burn down. I knew it would be no more. But I also knew that the following morning – with the fire gone and only ashes left – I would return and start building it again from scratch." Picture that – having the ability to let go so completely and quickly of your life's work! If there is a superhuman power, it is this. Of all the superpowers we sometimes celebrate in Buddhism, such as walking on water or flying through the air, this is surely far more impressive. This is the sort of authentic spiritual power that has real significance.

But how do such profound acts of renunciation actually happen? How was Ajahn Brahm able to let go so utterly and completely in a matter of seconds? His explanation is both surprising and interesting: "I was able to let go because I was not interested in results. The outcome was not the point. My main purpose had not been to build a beautiful monastery. Instead, I did it because it was a good thing to do. I did it as an act of generosity, as an act of compassion and kindness for the world. As soon as it had burned down, I would be able to continue practicing that kindness on the very next day by starting the rebuilding process. You see, the fire did not take anything away from me because everything I had done, I had done for a very different purpose. It was to build up good spiritual qualities inside.

Those qualities were still there. And I would have the chance to continue building up the same good spiritual qualities on the following day.”

As we plough through life, it is so easy to lose sight of what truly matters. Ajahn Brahm’s life philosophy is one we can all learn from: do not focus on results. Focus instead on the process. In our troubled and uncontrollable world, we need to remember what counts in the long run. We need to focus on *how* we live our life, on *how* we deal with things, not on the outcomes. Outcomes are always going to be beyond our control, as Ajahn Brahm found out. But what we can control, at least to some extent, is the quality of our heart, and the kindness and care we put into our actions.

In the end, the monastery did not actually burn down. And paradoxically, that was a good outcome, at least for those of us who have benefited from Ajahn Brahm’s generous teachings. For had it burned down, you might not be reading these words now!

A Letter to a Young Monk



IN THE EARLY 1990s, Ajahn Brahm was becoming well-known among the Western monastics of the Ajahn Chah tradition. He had the gift of being able to explain deep aspects of meditation, especially the various stages of *jhāna*, in a lucid and realistic manner. It is little wonder, then, that he began to attract a sizeable following. A number of monks were starting to seek his counsel. Amongst these was a young German, only recently ordained, from a monastery in the UK.

In a letter to Ajahn Brahm, he asked questions about the profound and abstruse Buddhist doctrine of Dependent Origination. Ajahn Brahm's response came in the form of a ten-page handwritten reply, which neatly illustrated a number of his remarkable qualities.

The most obvious thing that stood out was the erudition of his reply. As part of the process of coming to understand the monastic rules and regulations, the Vinaya – of which Ajahn Brahm had been the foremost expert amongst the Western disciples of Ajahn Chah – he had taught himself the Pali language. The importance of proficiency in Pali for the proper grasp of Early Buddhism cannot be overstated. Once mastered, it opens up a whole new world of direct access to the discourses of the Buddha, known as the Suttas, the source of the entire Buddhist tradition. If you can read the Buddha's words in their original language, you become independent of often inaccurate translations.

Going straight to the earliest records of the Buddha's teachings takes one on the most direct route towards understanding his message. In effect, one becomes a closer disciple of the Buddha. This is what emerged so powerfully in Ajahn Brahm's letter – his own deep meditative experiences and insights were understood in relation to the authentic teachings of the Buddha.

Then there was the precision of the handwriting. Each word – indeed, each letter – was beautifully crafted and uniform in appearance to the point of resembling a printed page. He had displayed similar handwriting standards in penning (literally) his first book, *Opening the Door of Your Heart*. The manuscript had been written entirely by hand with the same exactitude, page after page. And despite being written with a ballpoint pen, it was virtually free of errors. When you see it, you cannot help but think that this sort of writing could only come from someone with a highly developed mind. Only with such a mind would it be possible to sustain the focus necessary for such a high level of precision, accuracy and consistency over such a long period of time.

The crux of this story, however, is generosity and kindness. Even though he was a senior monk who had already been ordained for over twenty years, Ajahn Brahm had the generosity of heart and kindness of spirit to take the time to reply to and inspire a newly ordained monk. He had even gone out of his way to give a particularly thorough and detailed response. It is all the more remarkable that this happened before the advent of the internet, which meant all that work was only for the recipient and the few people he may have shared the physical letter with. It was the kind of beautiful gesture we so rarely see in the world.

There is, in fact, a strong connection between generosity and the profundity of one's spiritual qualities. The third of the Four Noble Truths, which concerns the culmination of the spiritual path, is characterised by the Buddha using a number of Pali words that relate closely to generosity. Thus *cāga*, *paṭinissagga* and *mutti* all signify aspects of awakening, but are also regularly employed in the Suttas to describe generosity.⁴ So wherever we see exceptional generosity, we can expect deep spiritual qualities as well.

In one sense, it was just a letter. In another, it was so much more.

⁴ The three Pali words *cāga*, *paṭinissagga* and *mutti* can be rendered as "giving up," "relinquishment" and "release," respectively.

Advice to the Dying



AJAHN BRAHM may be many things to many people, but one of his undeniable gifts is his ability to impart a unique take on life matters. Among these is his uncommon perspective on death. Death is a scary concept for most people. And yet, it is an unavoidable reality for every one of us. Ajahn Brahm prefers to view death as an opportunity for release, a positive journey forward.

He is able to spread some of this optimism at funeral ceremonies where he may uplift the grievors by telling a joke or giving a humorous perspective on a difficult situation. Telling jokes at a funeral service goes against what is culturally acceptable. But when you dare to break the taboo, you find that most people actually do laugh, no doubt glad to experience a bit of relief during an emotionally difficult time.

Ajahn Brahm's unconventional approach to death is not limited to funeral services. On one occasion he was visiting a young disciple, a woman in her twenties, who was dying of cancer in hospital. As he entered her hospital room, he was met with a scene of crushing defeat. Her sorrowful parents were sitting beside the young woman's bed, lost in their own grief as they awaited their daughter's impending death.

Indeed, it was clear to everyone that there was no future for her. The cancer had thoroughly ravaged her body. She was just a few hours, at best a day or two, from the end of her life. And yet, despite such harrowing circumstances, Ajahn Brahm was able to give valuable advice and, perhaps more importantly, to lift the mood.

He started by explaining to her that her body was worn out and falling apart. As she neared the end of her life, nothing more was required of her except lying back, relaxing and enjoying the journey of letting go. He spoke

about how joyful it can be for a good person to let go of a sick body and allowing the body to fade away. Now was the time to give up life's burdens, of which the body had become one of the most onerous. He encouraged her to let it all go and savour the bliss that comes from releasing the heavy baggage of this particular life.

Through the course of this conversation, something extraordinary happened. The young woman began to beam. As she changed her attitude, so did her parents. They realised that death need not be a tragic departure. Looked at in the right way, it could be a beautiful junction in the evolution of life. A simple change in perspective can make all the difference.

In this final meeting with his young disciple, Ajahn Brahm delivered an important message: even the most challenging situations in life, including death, can be turned into positive experiences. Of course, it does take someone special to convey this philosophy. But thanks to his joyful, calm and natural presence, combined with a wisdom that penetrates to the essence of things, Ajahn Brahm is able to do just that.

A Bear Hug for a Beggar



Most devout Buddhists aspire to travel to India at least once in their life to visit the holy sites that have a special connection to the Buddha. Such a pilgrimage not only gives you a richer and more direct understanding of Buddhism, but also leaves memorable impressions that inspire you for a lifetime.

Ajahn Brahm likes to say that the real holy places of Buddhism are actually found within us: namely, the four *jhānas*, or the four stages of deep *samādhi*. Yet for the vast majority of Buddhists, who are unable to access such profound meditation experiences, a pilgrimage to India is still hugely worthwhile. Indeed, Ajahn Brahm has himself visited India a number of times. It was on one of these trips that something extraordinary happened – an occasion on which he vividly manifested the embracing quality of compassion.

Despite India's rapid economic progress in recent decades, acute poverty remains. One fallout from this is the prevalence of beggars. Marginalised people are often exploited by gangs who deliberately maim or disfigure them before sending them out to beg. At day's end, they are forced to hand over most of their earnings to the ringleader, trapping them in a hopeless situation of dependency on criminals. From train stations to city centres, from tourist sites to places of worship, the sight of beggars hassling visitors and the well-to-do is common. Even monks and nuns, many of whom carry money despite the monastic precepts prohibiting this, are seen as attractive targets.

Ajahn Brahm was on his way to Bodh Gaya, the site of the Buddha's awakening under the Bodhi tree, when a beggar approached him. Deformed and bedraggled, he followed Ajahn Brahm around and was unrelenting in his request for money. Little did he know that Ajahn Brahm

is the rare kind of monk who follows the monastic rules scrupulously and does not use money. There was no way he was going to get money from Ajahn Brahm. Yet once these beggars have chosen you as a target, it is virtually impossible to evade them.

Now, for most people, this is an uncomfortable and unnerving situation, where you tend to waver between sympathy and fear, between pity and resentment. But not for Ajahn Brahm. He likes to think out of the box. When he saw this beggar, he did not see a foul-smelling, unkempt and crippled nuisance. Rather, he saw a human being. Instead of trying to send the beggar off or ignoring him, Ajahn Brahm embraced him – figuratively and literally.

You see, Ajahn Brahm was able to look beyond the superficial. He saw that the beggar had most likely been abused and manipulated by a powerful force behind the scenes and was suffering intensely. So he picked the beggar up right off the ground and gave him a good bear hug before putting him back down again. The beggar was astonished and happy, all at the same time. Never in his life as a beggar had this happened before. Someone actually hugged him! He probably had not experienced such warmth and care from another human being for a very long time. Because he could see the compassion and kindness coming from Ajahn Brahm, he felt he should leave Ajahn Brahm alone. Completely unintentionally, Ajahn Brahm had discovered what was probably the only way that would cause the beggar to leave him in peace.

The compassion shown by Ajahn Brahm went beyond empathy. He had a genuine desire to alleviate another's suffering. And when the beggar departed, he immediately experienced an unforeseen benefit from his kind action.

Kindness is the path. Kindness works. Never underestimate its power, even in the most challenging situations.

The Dhamma of Socks



IN HIS DAILY interactions with people, Ajahn Brahm exemplifies the essence of generosity: the desire to do the big and little things to make people around him happy, and to provide them with a sense of meaning and purpose in life.

On one occasion Ajahn Brahm was visiting a long-standing disciple, an elderly Sri Lankan lady, in a hospital in Melbourne. After a heart-warming visit filled with his usual jokes and uplifting stories, he left her room. Because it was a cold day, he put on a pair of socks that this very disciple had given him some time before. Once he was outside the building, he looked up and saw the old lady standing at her second-floor window waving him good-bye. Intentionally but inconspicuously, he pulled up his robe and walked a little slower so that she could see him wearing the socks she had made him a few months earlier. She beamed when she saw Ajahn Brahm making use of her beautiful gift.

At another time, when Ajahn Brahm was giving a Dhamma talk at the Dhammaloka Centre in Perth, he happened to be wearing a pair of socks knitted for him by a member of the audience. As he was speaking, Ajahn Brahm spotted her. Wanting to show his appreciation for the gift, he discreetly pulled back his robe and stuck out his foot just enough for her to see that he was wearing her socks. In a hushed but excited voice, she exclaimed to her friend, "Look, he's wearing my socks!"

Indeed, it is possible to show gratitude in so many different ways. Often people bring special food to the monastery specifically for Ajahn Brahm. Typically he will wait until the donor is looking and then take an extra-large helping, perhaps even sniffing the food and making a facial expression of appreciation. Invariably the donors will smile when they see Ajahn Brahm's enthusiasm for their gift.

In the smallest of ways, Ajahn Brahm demonstrates that anyone can show generosity of spirit at any time and in any place. Even just reminding someone else of their own kindness creates a lot of joy in the world.

Ghost Business



WHEN Ajahn Brahm was still a young monk in Thailand, he enjoyed a period of what is known in Thai as *tudong*, a lifestyle of wandering on foot in search of places conducive for meditation. *Tudong* is often undertaken by forest monks to challenge and test themselves after an initial period of training in a monastery.

As he was criss-crossing the country, Ajahn Brahm would often ask the locals for suitable places to stay. An abbot at a monastery where he had been staying recommended a special cave as his next meditation stop. There was only one problem. According to the locals, the cave was haunted by a malevolent ghost, and as a result no monks wanted to stay there. For Ajahn Brahm, however, this was a bonus, because it meant he would have the cave all to himself. Moreover, the prospect of meeting a ghost excited him. Whilst he was still a student at Cambridge University, he had been on a number of ghost-hunting expeditions with the Society for Psychical Research, but he had never yet had a proper encounter. Now he saw another opportunity!

The villagers in the area were at first reluctant to show Ajahn Brahm the cave. They were terrified of this haunted place and warned him not to go. Apparently, a monk had died in that very cave. When Ajahn Brahm insisted, however, the villagers finally took him there. But since the ghost was expected to appear after dark and the sun was about to set, they all left in a hurry, leaving Ajahn Brahm all by himself.

The cave was beautiful. It was secluded and peaceful, the perfect place for meditation. Ajahn Brahm went about halfway in, prepared his seat and started meditating, whilst waiting for nightfall and the arrival of the ghost. He waited and waited, but nothing happened. Perhaps this “ghost” had been a mere figment of the locals’ imagination. Eventually, he decided there was little point waiting any longer, so he lay down to get some sleep.

As soon as Ajahn Brahm reclined, something started to happen. He heard the sound of running, which grew louder and louder. Whatever it was, it was coming towards him. Just as it was about to reach him, it came to a screeching halt. But the ghost had missed its chance. If you want to haunt someone, you have to know your victim and pick the right time. By now Ajahn Brahm was tired and fed up with waiting for the ghost. So he said to his visitor, “You’re too late. I’m tired. Just go away.” The ghost disappeared and Ajahn Brahm fell into a deep sleep.

Later, Ajahn Brahm discovered that deeper inside that cave lay the skeleton of a monk. Perhaps that monk had not been as keen on meeting ghosts as Ajahn Brahm had; perhaps he was literally scared to death!

As for Ajahn Brahm, it was just another experience. He knew that one need not be afraid of ghosts because they normally have neither the wish nor the power to harm you.

The Nibbana Box



WHAT IS Nibbana? The most profound truths of life can be hard to understand intellectually. It is often better to approach them through the use of similes and metaphors.

It was Ajahn Brahm's birthday. Usually this is a big occasion at Bodhinyana Monastery, and this day was no exception. People brought all sorts of delicious food to offer, as well as the odd gift.

Now, Ajahn Brahm is not particularly interested in gifts. He is a simple monk who prefers a simple life. Unless he really needs something, which is rare, he considers possessions as clutter that is best avoided. Meditation succeeds when you let go, not when you accumulate.

Yet on this occasion Ajahn Brahm was given that rare gift that he actually really valued. When he unwrapped the gift, he found a perfect cube-shaped box with a single switch on the side. He put the box down and flicked the switch to the "on" position. The top of the box opened up. Out emerged a mechanical hand, which then bent around the side of the box, flicked the switch into the "off" position, and then retreated back into the box, after which the box closed up. That was it! The box only had one purpose, to turn itself off.

That is Nibbana. You discover that "switch" and turn your(non)self off. Things come to an end. What a brilliant metaphor for the Buddhist spiritual path!

Enchanted Chanting



ANYONE who has seen Ajahn Brahm in action at a Dhamma talk, Buddhist ceremony, or indeed any mundane situation, has likely been treated to a quick-witted riposte, funny anecdote or amusing prank. It is fair to say Ajahn Brahm does not take life too seriously.

He has woven much of this good cheer into the life of Bodhinyana Monastery. One such example is the way the monks sometimes chant the *anumodanā*, the blessing given in appreciation of any offering of food. It is probably unlike anything you have heard before. The chant rises in volume and pitch, reaching a crescendo at the very end. It is hard not to laugh at the silliness of it all.

Ajahn Brahm first picked up this unique way of chanting early on in his life as a monk, when, during his *tudong* years in the early 1980s, he encountered an exceptional monk named Ajahn Singtong, the abbot of a monastery in the Northeast of Thailand. Ajahn Brahm found he had much in common with Ajahn Singtong. They shared a sense of humour and approached life with a lively sense of fun. Ajahn Brahm admired the way Ajahn Singtong interacted with people, and how effortlessly he made them laugh. He seemed to enjoy whatever he was doing, whilst bringing about a sense of ease in the people around him.

Ajahn Singtong's humour made him extremely popular with the local villagers. One of his trademarks was his outlandish way of chanting the *anumodanā*. As Ajahn Brahm witnessed first-hand, the chanting grew progressively louder and louder, rounding off with a big roar at the end. It was both hilarious and daring at the same time, going, as it did, against the culturally accepted norms. At a deep level the villagers probably realised that the best sort of humour is not merely funny, but subversive.

A few months after Ajahn Brahm met him, Ajahn Singtong's life was cut tragically short in a plane crash. He was one of three highly-revered monks who were killed in the accident. It was another reminder of the impermanence of life and how quickly anything can change. One of the brightest lights of Thai Buddhism had been extinguished.

To this day, however, Ajahn Brahm likes to tell the story of how Ajahn Singtong had once even played a prank on Ajahn Maha Boowa, who during his heyday was widely considered one of Thailand's fiercest and most austere forest monks. For most people, he was not a monk to be messed with. But not so for Ajahn Singtong. One morning, when Ajahn Singtong was staying at Ajahn Maha Boowa's monastery, he overslept. Now, there was a monastery rule that if you did not make it for the early morning group meditation, you could not go on almsround, and hence you could not eat that day. But, thought the cheeky Ajahn Singtong, maybe there was a way around this.

He walked off into the forest, got hold of a wild chicken – in itself no mean feat – tied a string around its neck and dragged it back to the monastery. As they arrived, the chicken was crowing at full volume for the whole monastery to hear. Ajahn Singtong then released the chicken, entered the hall and told the gathering that he had come before the chicken. Everyone burst out laughing. In the Thai idiom, to “come before the chicken” means you have arrived early in the morning. Ajahn Maha Boowa threw his hands up and told him he had earned his right to eat.

At Bodhinyana Monastery today, there is a picture of a grinning Ajahn Singtong on the wall of the dining hall. It reminds everyone of the many qualities of a special monk. And of how, in life and in Dhamma practice, it is better not to be too serious: just relax and enjoy the journey.

Holy Shit



AJAHN BRAHM has that rare and elusive combination of intellectual capacity and down-to-earth practical sense. When he puts the two together, he sometimes comes up with ingenious contrivances using very simple means.

Wat Pa Nanachat, the International Forest Monastery in the Northeast of Thailand, was established by Ajahn Chah in early 1975. Ajahn Brahm was part of a pioneering group of Western monks who moved to the new monastery. In those early days, life there was simple, without access to even the most basic of modern amenities such as electricity. If the monks wanted to boil water, for instance, they had to gather wood and light a fire. Even just making a hot drink was a time-consuming and arduous process. When considering this inconvenient state of affairs, it occurred to Ajahn Brahm that there was an alternative source of energy close at hand: methane emitted from human waste.

The monastery toilet was already connected to a large concrete cylinder that received the waste product. Ajahn Brahm decided to put together a system whereby the emitted methane would be collected and used for boiling water. He rolled a sheet of tin into a cylinder that fitted snugly into the septic container. He then fitted an airtight lid onto the tin cylinder and drilled a small hole, to which he connected a rubber hose with a valve. The other end of the rubber hose went straight to the kitchen, where it was connected to a home-made gas burner. After collecting methane for 24 hours, you could turn the little valve, light the gas burner, and *voila* – you had enough energy to boil a full kettle of water!

This improvised contraption was much appreciated by the monks. After the long almsround in the early morning, when they had not eaten for twenty-four hours, they could now all have a hot drink before the meal. It may not seem like much, but given the austerity of their lifestyle, it was tantamount to luxury.

After a couple of years of operation, the human waste was no longer adequate. The monks now needed to collect manure for the device to produce enough methane. This proved to be too much work, so they abandoned the project.

But while it lasted, the clever device gave much joy to the whole community. If you have a special ability or knowledge in a particular field, the best way to use it is to provide a service to others.

Thinking for Yourself



AJAHN BRAHM has never shied away from doing things differently. In fact, he has earned a reputation for fearless independence. For him, being subject to criticism is no reason to shrink from doing what you believe is morally right.

Indeed, the Buddha was himself a revolutionary. He challenged the religious practices and dogmas of his time to discover the truth that he later proclaimed to the world. His unique insight into the nature of the mind would not have been possible had he not dared to reject ideas current at the time.

Many great monks and nuns have taken a similarly independent-minded approach, challenging often ossified institutions to establish a new and vibrant direction for an ancient teaching by getting as close as possible to its authentic roots. Obvious examples from Thailand include the founder of the modern Thai Forest Tradition, Ajahn Mun, and Ajahn Brahm's own teacher, Ajahn Chah. What such venerated monastics have in common is their concern for preserving and passing on the true Dhamma, not the superficial features of Buddhist culture. If the mainstream tradition has it wrong, going against core elements of what the Buddha taught, they have the courage to go against the establishment and the generally accepted norms. As a result, they are often regarded as rebels, sometimes even as outcasts. Frequently, their contribution to Buddhism is fully appreciated only later in life, and sometimes only after their death.

Ajahn Brahm relates how Ajahn Chah emphasized to his disciples the importance of thinking for themselves. He used the simile of a mother crab that limped because she had a bad leg. As a result of simply mimicking

their mother, all her baby crabs limped too, even though their legs were perfectly fine. Applying this simile to the issue of authentic Buddhist teachings versus tradition, if we blindly follow the way things have been done by past generations of monastics, we might end up “limping” through our monastic lives, potentially doing harm to Buddhism in the process.

The most obvious example of Ajahn Brahm’s independent mindset was his decision in 2009 to help ordain *bhikkhunis*. Less known, but perhaps equally significant, was his willingness to break with precedent and teach the practice of deep meditation, *samādhi*. Although he had recognised the importance of these profound states of mind, there had been a persistent bias against teaching them in many meditation circles. There were only a few independent teachers who bucked the prevailing trend. In the Western World, one of the most prominent of these was the *bhikkhuni* Ayya Khemā.

When Ayya Khemā happened to visit Bodhinyana Monastery in 1992, she was invited to give a talk to the monks, and to Ajahn Brahm’s delight she talked about the *jhānas*, the special states of deep *samādhi* described in the Suttas. It was an eye-opener for Ajahn Brahm. He realised he did not need to limit himself to the cultural norm. From then on he started teaching about this neglected but crucial aspect of Buddhist practice, sometimes at great personal cost.

Ajahn Brahm encourages the same attitude of independence in his disciples. At Bodhinyana Monastery it is perfectly acceptable to disagree with the teacher. And you are never punished or given a cold shoulder for such dissent. If a decision to be made concerns the whole community, it will usually go to a vote, in which case everyone, Ajahn Brahm included, is obliged to abide by the outcome. But perhaps most significant of all, Ajahn Brahm always tells his students that, in the final analysis, they should take the Buddha as their teacher.

Going along with accumulated historical precedents without any critical evaluation leads to stagnation and even decline. Independent thinking and questioning allows for the continuous renewal that is necessary to keep any tradition, including Buddhism, alive and relevant.

Against the Grain



AJAHN BRAHM has always been rebellious. Whether it was his long hair as a teenager, his giving up of alcohol as a student, or his embrace of Buddhism at the tender age of sixteen, he has never been satisfied with mainstream thinking and received wisdom. This sense of non-conformism is evident throughout his spiritual journey as a monk.

On one occasion, as a young monk at Wat Pa Nanachat, he had been invited by the abbot to give the evening Dhamma talk. The monks, as well as all the laypeople, had arrived at the main hall and taken their seats. Ajahn Brahm then rose from his seat, bowed down to the abbot, and ascended the high Dhamma seat. He then closed his eyes to focus his mind, as is customary before giving a talk. Except this time, he never opened his eyes. He just sat there quietly with closed eyes for a full hour! That was his “talk.” Uh-oh. The abbot was not impressed. This was not what a junior monk was supposed to do when asked to give a talk. But from Ajahn Brahm’s perspective, he was offering a lesson in understanding expectation. It was not the lack of a talk that was a problem, but the expectation of one. So much suffering in life comes from having expectations.

Ajahn Brahm liked to challenge convention also in his personal practice, such as by meditating in charnel grounds where corpses are taken to be burned in the open air. For the average Thai, this is almost unthinkable. In Thai culture, charnel grounds are closely associated with ghosts. Moreover, as most Thais are brought up on a steady diet of ghost stories, many are terrified at the prospect of encountering one. It takes a brave Thai monk to meditate overnight in a charnel ground, and only the boldest of forest monks would do it. When Ajahn Brahm said he was going, some of the monks tried to dissuade him, saying, “Don’t go. Stay with us. You’ll be safe here.” But to no avail.

For a Westerner, Ajahn Brahm thought, charnel grounds are not scary. So he found a suitable place, set up his little platform and started to meditate, waiting for the dark to arrive. But to his consternation, as the light faded, his imagination started to play tricks on him.

In tropical forests, there is a constant backdrop of noise. At night, when the sense of hearing gets more acute, these noises seem to intensify. And so, as Ajahn Brahm was sitting there, he started to hear sounds. It must be a small animal moving through the forest, he thought. As the light faded, the sound grew louder, coming closer and closer. Perhaps it was not a small animal, after all. Perhaps it was a cat or a dog. By the time it was pitch black, the sound was extremely loud and very close by. Oh no, it must be a tiger! He finally opened his eyes. The "tiger" turned out to be a tiny mouse sitting next to him on the platform.

Maybe charnel grounds are scary for Westerners after all. But the real lesson was that sometimes you need to go against the stream to make progress on the path. In this case, Ajahn Brahm made an important discovery about the power of the imagination. Through one's own fabrications, things often appear far worse than they really are.

As with most things in life, there is a right and a wrong way to be rebellious. Used wisely, it opens up new avenues for learning. To achieve uncommon wisdom, by definition, you need to go against the grain.

Batty About Caves



SINCE the time of the Buddha, Buddhist monastics have been drawn to caves. The Suttas mention caves among the standard places for monastics to seek seclusion, even citing a few caves by name, such as the Pippali Cave outside Rājagaha, used by one of the Buddha's most famous disciples, Venerable Mahākassapa. In the centuries after the Buddha's lifetime, the Sangha built vast complexes of caves at the now famous sites of Ajanta and Ellora, a few hundred kilometres to the northeast of present-day Mumbai. Caves have continued to be sought out by forest monastics up to the present day. Many of the most well-known Thai forest monks, including Ajahn Mun and Ajahn Chah, spent periods of time in caves during their formative years.

Caves are great places to meditate. Not only do they provide protection from the weather, but they are usually quiet and dark, with a pleasant and stable temperature. A good cave is a spartan one, ideally containing no more than a basic platform for sitting and lying down on. Life in such caves is simple, almost perfectly suited to meditation. For anyone seeking to deepen their practice, caves tend to provide the optimal environment.

It is no surprise, then, that Ajahn Brahm too likes caves. Indeed, some of his fondest memories from Thailand are of the times he stayed in these natural cathedrals to meditation. Unlike brick-and-mortar cathedrals, however, caves are inhabited by all sorts of animals, including, quite often, whole colonies of bats. Sharing a cave with bats is no problem provided you are able to tolerate the smell of bat faeces. But Ajahn Brahm did one better: he not only tolerated it, he developed a veritable love of bat poo. He associated its smell – or should we say, aroma – with the profound happiness and peace of meditation. To Ajahn Brahm, bat poo is a most delightful substance.

Many years later, after he had moved to Perth, two of his monks built a cave for him at Bodhinyana Monastery to try to simulate the conditions that had facilitated his deep meditation experiences in Thailand. After two years of hard work, they presented Ajahn Brahm with a cave built to virtual perfection. There was only one thing missing: bat poo. They thought at length of how they might import it into Australia, even considering the option of smuggling it in to circumvent the strict Australian biosecurity laws. After being momentarily tempted by the prospect of solitary confinement in prison, they came to their senses. Hard as it was to accept, Ajahn Brahm would have to live without bat poo. The cave was eventually decorated with a black-and-white toy bat and, as a homage to Ajahn Brahm's penchant for puns, a cricket bat!

With or without bat poo, Ajahn Brahm loves his cave. All he does there is meditate and rest. If there is a holy place at Bodhinyana Monastery, this is it.

Inspired Dreaming



AJAHN BRAHM'S monkhood is built on strong faith and inspiration, rooted in his deep respect for the Buddha. He takes the Suttas and the Vinaya – the word of the Buddha – as his guides for how to live the monastic life. And he has great veneration for those who practise the Buddha's path with integrity and, to all appearances, achieve profound results. Such masters of meditation demonstrate their deep understanding of the Dhamma through their exceptional kindness, peaceful presence and wise counsel.

If one's faith is genuine, it will manifest as inspiration and joy. This can arise at almost any time – surprisingly, perhaps, even during sleep.

On one occasion, Ajahn Brahm dreamt that his teacher, Ajahn Chah, was giving him an inspiring Dhamma talk. At that point in time, Ajahn Chah was, in actuality, severely ill back in Thailand, and had not given a Dhamma talk for several years. Ajahn Brahm was overawed at meeting his teacher again after many years apart and receiving the gift of the Dhamma. Yet he also realised that he was dreaming and made a determination to recall Ajahn Chah's powerful message after waking up. Because of the delight of meeting his teacher and the joy of hearing the Dhamma, he woke up almost instantly. Straightaway his mind was clear, bright and joyful, but he could not for his life remember the contents of the talk! He reflected how strange it was that one could be so inspired, yet only have a vague idea of what caused it.

On another occasion, Ajahn Brahm dreamt about Ajahn Tate, another great amongst the famous meditation masters from the Northeast of Thailand. In the dream, as he was bowing down to Ajahn Tate, he was overcome by a feeling of sheer bliss. The bliss was so strong that he literally burst out of the dream into the waking world. He sat up, his mind luminous and radiant. Effortlessly, he was drawn into a state of deep meditation.

Inspiration and bliss are often closer than you think. And when inspiration is strong, *samādhi* is never far away.

Giving, Always Giving



FOR Ajahn Brahm, kindness is at the core of the spiritual life. Kindness and generosity are threads that run through his entire monastic life, stretching back all the way to his earliest days as a monk.

Ajahn Brahm actively seeks out opportunities to be kind, often in small and unusual ways. As a young monk at Wat Pa Nanachat, one day he promised one of his fellow monks to bring him a mug of tea before the early morning meditation meeting the next day. Since the meeting started at 3.30 a.m., he needed to get up at 2.30 to boil the water and prepare the tea. In a simple monastery like Wat Pa Nanachat, these tasks were quite involved, including the making of an actual fire. No wonder his fellow monk was surprised when Ajahn Brahm actually showed up at his *kuti* at 3.00 a.m., tea in hand. He had been sceptical about Ajahn Brahm making it, but Ajahn Brahm always did his best to keep his promises. He felt such little gestures of goodwill were good ways of showing care and compassion to his fellow monks.

Ajahn Brahm has continued in the same manner throughout his monastic life. Even as the abbot and by far the most senior monk of Bodhinyana Monastery, he still treats everyone with kindness and respect, regardless of their age or seniority. From holding the door for a junior monk to helping unload a car full of food donations, he is always on the lookout for ways to help out and participate in community life. He never sets himself above or apart from anyone else. Rather, he understands that harmony and a well-functioning community come from everyone working together with kindness and care for each other.

Of course, his kindness also extends beyond the doors of his monastery, to the Buddhist lay community and indeed to anyone who crosses his path. On one occasion when he was visiting Christmas Island, he was approached by a couple who were extremely worried about their gravely ill baby. Ajahn Brahm gave them his old robe, saying, "Take this robe and put it around the baby. It will improve its chances of pulling through the illness." Many Buddhists will consider such a cloth to have special healing properties because of its long association with a highly esteemed monastic. The couple were immensely grateful. They did as told, and the baby recovered.

On another occasion, Ajahn Brahm gave special attention to a disciple in Hong Kong whose father was seriously ill with scleroderma, an autoimmune rheumatic disease. In spite of his hectic schedule, Ajahn Brahm took the time to visit the man and give him a blessing. Later, as he was leaving for the airport, he pulled out one of the very few personal possessions he had with him, a woolly beanie, and asked his attendant to pass it on to the daughter of the sick man, saying, "Take this beanie and give it to his daughter. Tell her to put it on her father so he can feel the warmth and compassion of a good monk. That will support him through this difficult time."

His disciple did just that, and her father wore the beanie both at home and in hospital. And although he died a few months later, the family remained forever grateful to Ajahn Brahm for this act of kindness. The beanie even went with the man into his grave so as to allow Ajahn Brahm's care to comfort him even beyond this life.

Giving, caring and being compassionate are fundamental to the spiritual life. Spiritual maturity can be gauged by how deeply these qualities are embedded in one's psyche.

How to Run a Monastery



MANY people enter monastic life because of a love of meditation. They seek the solitude and support that monastic life provides for meditators. It is quite paradoxical, then, that the same people, Ajahn Brahm included, often end up running monasteries and being in charge of communities. So how do these natural hermits run a monastery?

Ajahn Brahm applies principles of leadership that he picked up from his teachers in Thailand, especially Ajahn Chah. Some of these ideas are quite different from what most people are used to in general society. For instance, Ajahn Chah was sometimes criticised for being inconsistent in his teaching style, at times saying one thing on one day and the exact opposite the next. He explained his approach in this way: if a person is veering too far to the left then you need to push them to the right, whereas if they are veering too far to the right then you need to push them to the left. In other words, what is right at any particular time depends entirely on the circumstances. Being inconsistent is not necessarily wrong.

Another lesson for Ajahn Brahm was seeing the importance of knowing how to let go. He tells the story of what happened at Ajahn Chah's funeral. Ajahn Liem, the new abbot of Wat Pa Pong, had constructed the stupa within which Ajahn Chah's body was to be cremated. The body was contained in an iron casket, which was placed inside the stupa, whereupon the fire was lit. Unfortunately, the engineering details were not up to scratch. As the flames grew out of control, it looked as if the whole stupa might burn down. Ajahn Liem took one look at it, then calmly went back to his *kuṭi* to have a rest. He had done his duty in building the stupa to the best of his ability. He could leave this unforeseen problem for someone else to solve. What may seem irresponsible to an ordinary person is probably just a selfless act of letting go to someone with a higher level of wisdom.

Ajahn Brahm took these lessons to heart and added a few ideas of his own. From this emerged his own unique management style. On a typical day at Bodhinyana Monastery, he might walk around inspecting what the various monks are doing during the work period. He might see one monk sweeping, another chopping wood, and a third preparing for the installation of a funeral plaque. In each case, he would probably crack a joke before saying, "Very good, carry on." One of the hallmarks of his leadership style is gentle encouragement without fault-finding.

Ajahn Brahm encourages everyone at the monastery to take responsibility for themselves. He recognises that true spiritual progress comes when you are self-motivated, not when you are pushed from the outside to do the right thing. For this reason, there are no group meditation meetings at Bodhinyana Monastery. In fact, the interaction between the monks is kept to a minimum, in line with Ajahn Brahm's idea that a good monastery is not just a spiritual community, but a community of hermits. The monks are, therefore, allowed ample time for personal meditation retreats. Based on the general guidance given by Ajahn Brahm, it is for everyone to decide for themselves what they need to do to make the best possible use of their time.

When it comes to deciding who should be allowed to ordain, Ajahn Brahm always prefers to give everyone a chance. He has learnt from experience that it is very hard to predict who will make a good monk. It is better to have someone ordain and then disrobe than not to give the opportunity to a person who might turn out to be an exemplary monastic. And if someone turns out to be difficult to live with, it becomes a learning experience for everyone to develop patience, kindness and compassion.

Indeed, Ajahn Brahm prefers to motivate rather than to criticise, to inspire rather than to control. He trusts his disciples to do the right thing. More often than not, the trust pays off with the monks mostly living the monastic life to a high standard. Ajahn Brahm's management style is really just an extension of the principles he uses in his meditation practice: be kind, make peace and let go. And if you uphold such high principles, there is no need to worry about being inconsistent!

Wise Compassion



AJAHN BRAHM is altruistic by nature. He loves teaching the Dhamma and helping people. But he also knows that sometimes people are beyond help. Understanding when you can help and when you cannot help is an important aspect of wise compassion.

A few years ago, a young couple came to Bodhinyana Monastery to seek Ajahn Brahm's advice. They were about to get married, but wanted to sort out a few potential problems beforehand. They asked him about anger management, and Ajahn Brahm obliged with a long, meaningful and deeply moving response. He then carried on in the same vein about general relationship issues. By the end of the talk, both visitors were moved to tears by Ajahn Brahm's care and compassion. They had been ready to hear the Dhamma.

As the couple was leaving, Ajahn Brahm saw a man just behind them pacing restlessly up and down. He said, "If you wish to speak with me, now is a good time." The man came up and asked for a blessing for good fortune and material wealth. Ajahn Brahm gave him a short blessing. The man then left straightaway.

Once he was gone, Ajahn Brahm turned to his attendant monk and said, "He would not be able to see a real treasure." Ajahn Brahm had realised that for a man like this, who was looking only for good luck and riches, you can only do so much. This was a good example of someone who was not reachable, at least for the time being.

On another occasion, Ajahn Brahm had to deal with a visiting monk who had broken some of the most fundamental of the monastic rules. Ajahn Brahm did not berate him for his transgressions. The monk, who was already distraught and crying, did not need someone to make him feel worse; he needed understanding and care. Ajahn Brahm not only sympathised with him, but tried to find a way out that might save his monastic life. He left almost no stone unturned in his search for a solution to this monk's difficult predicament. Yet, sometimes, it is just too hard. Despite Ajahn Brahm's best efforts, the monk ended up disrobing. Wise compassion is knowing that even if you do your best to help, you may not achieve the ideal outcome.

Nonetheless, this incident exemplifies his approach to issues of Vinaya, the rules of the monastic life laid down by the Buddha. These are always to be applied with the underlying principle of compassion. One should not jump to conclusions and presume guilt too quickly. Instead, one should try to find reasons why the person may not be guilty after all. When one takes all extenuating circumstances into account, one often finds that the issue is less serious than it may have appeared at first sight.

Compassion is also at the forefront of Bodhinyana Monastery's set of "house rules," which lay out the behaviour and etiquette expected of the monks. Ajahn Brahm made sure to make the very first rule "Be kind at all times and non-judgmental. Focus on your own practice of these rules, not the practice of other people." This makes it absolutely clear that the purpose of these rules is to guide new monks and to make the monastery run smoothly, not to provide grounds for fault-finding. When people make mistakes, we should either just let it be or approach them to talk about it with compassion and understanding.

We are all fallible and easily led astray by our weaknesses and old habits. It is when we are given compassion and understanding that we have the best possible basis for abandoning our unskilful tendencies and moving on to new heights of spiritual development.

Club Med



AJAHN BRAHM is renowned for his love of meditation, with lifetime membership in what he jokingly calls “Club Med.” In 2002, he undertook a six-month solitary retreat in strict silence. Apart from occasionally reading Suttas from *The Middle-Length Discourses of the Buddha*, all he did during this period was to meditate. When he emerged after half a year, he gave one of his most memorable talks, entitled “Six months of bliss.”

Ajahn Brahm’s started meditating as a layperson, but his practice truly flourished after he was ordained as a monk. During his early years as a monk, whilst he was wandering on *tudong* in Thailand, he visited some of the most famous Thai meditation masters. One late afternoon, he arrived at a certain monastery, exhausted from hours of travel. Almost as soon as he had arrived, he was told that all the monks, visitors included, were required to join a three-hour meditation session. Instinctively, Ajahn Brahm balked at the notion, for up to this point it had been his experience that meditation, especially for long hours, is very hard when the body is exhausted. But then a bit of wisdom kicked in. He realised that complaining was only going to make matters worse. So instead, he embraced the task at hand. He redirected his mind to access the mental energy beyond the physical body. He ended up having a wonderful three hours of meditation. When the bell rang slightly early, he was disappointed that he had been cheated of the full three hours.

On another occasion, a monk sitting next to Ajahn Brahm at a meditation retreat noticed several mosquitos swirling around him. They seemed to be endlessly revolving, as if they could not quite decide what to do. Now, mosquitos are typically attracted to the carbon dioxide emissions of humans. In deep meditation, however, breathing, and therefore carbon dioxide emissions, is greatly reduced, even entirely eliminated. This must have been the reason why the mosquitos were so confused around Ajahn Brahm. There was perhaps a residue of carbon dioxide, but it was so little that they could not decide whether he was a tree, a rock or a sentient being!

On yet another occasion, Ajahn Brahm was at Wat Pa Nanachat on the *uposatha*, the Buddhist observance day of the full or new moon. A large number of monks and laypeople had taken their seats in the hall for the all-night meditation session. As the hours passed and people got tired, they started leaving the hall, until eventually there were only two people left: Ajahn Brahm and an old Thai lady. She was an old-school rural woman, who had grown up with sitting on the floor. There was almost no limit to how long she could sit cross-legged, even on the bare concrete. From time to time, she glanced up at Ajahn Brahm, observing how he was sitting perfectly still. There was literally no movement, not even any discernible breath. After seeing no change for several hours, she got up and went outside. She found a monk and told him, "There is a dead monk sitting in the hall!"

What Ajahn Brahm can do, we can all do. Ajahn Brahm's experiences should serve as an inspiration for all of us that powerful states of meditation are available to anyone who practices the path fully.

Fun(d)raising



APART from the time spent on his own meditation practice, Ajahn Brahm lives to spread the Dhamma, including building monasteries and travelling to bring the teachings of the Buddha to all corners of the globe. Everything he does is aimed at serving this higher goal.

Ajahn Brahm's disciples have discovered that a fun and effective way of fundraising to support these Dhamma endeavours is to auction off his possessions. Many people consider these personal requisites as precious or even powerful, or at the very least as personal reminders of their teacher. Ajahn Brahm allows the auction organisers into his cave and office to identify items that might be auctioned off. Over the years, many of his most private and personal effects have been sold off. These include his meditation cushion, old robes, handwritten manuscripts of his books, and even his toilet seat. Nothing is too private, with the possible exception of his favourite tea. In some countries, even the contents of a famous monk's toilet are sometimes regarded as collectors' items by his disciples! Ajahn Brahm's auctions have yet to reach that stage, but it is amazing – verging on concerning – what sometimes goes on in the Buddhist world.

From Ajahn Brahm's point of view, auctioning off his possessions is a wonderful way of serving the greater good of the Dhamma. To ensure there is no conflict of interest, Ajahn Brahm makes it a policy to only attend fundraising events for projects unrelated to his own monastery. One of the fundamental principles of Buddhist morality is selflessness, which includes avoiding corruption and vested interests.

In the life of a Buddhist monastic, or of any Buddhist really, the overarching goals are to develop one's own mind and to help others. The most meaningful use of personal possessions is in the pursuit of these spiritual ends.

The Benefits of Being Antisocial



AT HIS public appearances, Ajahn Brahm normally comes across as friendly, entertaining, and even gregarious. Deep down, however, he actually prefers his own company. By nature, he is a lover of solitude.

Ajahn Brahm likes to spend as much time as he can in his cave or on his walking path. He will attend to any business that requires his attention, he may even joke around with his fellow monks to lighten up the atmosphere, but he will never waste any time with pointless socialising. He will head back to his cave at the earliest opportunity. On one occasion, one of the *anagarikas* at the monastery was taken aback when Ajahn Brahm actually said something to him other than a polite greeting. Apart from the occasional scheduled meeting, this was the first time Ajahn Brahm had spoken to him in over a year.

When he is being driven to any of his many appointments, Ajahn Brahm prefers to sit quietly, preparing himself for his next event by accessing the clarity of mind that comes from inner stillness. He does not like to chat, and he prefers fellow passengers also to remain quiet. When he travels by airplane on one of his numerous trips overseas, he always travels alone, even though bringing along an attendant is the customary practice among monastics. This allows him the opportunity to sit down, close his eyes and enjoy the peace at any time without having to consider the needs of a companion. As he likes to joke, attendants need to be attended to.

In his early days as a monk in Thailand, life was basic and simple. The Western monks at Wat Pa Nanachat had very little interaction with the outside world – no newspapers, magazines or radios, and few visitors apart from the local villagers. At one point Ajahn Brahm had actually forgotten what year it was! The monks lived in a timeless sphere of minimum interaction with anyone, which is the ideal setting for developing

the mind. Counterintuitive as it may seem, the qualities of compassion and kindness are in many respects best developed in seclusion.

Ajahn Brahm truly delights in solitude. His preference for being alone goes hand in hand with his love of meditation. Even for an experienced meditator like Ajahn Brahm, talking and socialising affects his meditation practice. He is sociable when necessary only out of compassion for others and because he desires to share the healing message of the Dhamma. In fact, it is precisely his genuine love of solitude that enables him to impart this message so powerfully and authentically, especially at times when it is needed so much, either because of the COVID-19 pandemic or the innumerable other problems that afflict humanity.

The Life of Ajahn Brahm: An Unauthorised Hagiography⁵



CHILDHOOD

London, 7th August 1951: it was probably a wet and gloomy day. But then into the gloom came a ray of light. Ajahn Brahm, then known as baby Betts – his parents had wished for a daughter and had no name at hand for a boy – had entered the human world.

Where did the baby come from? Later on, he would be given the name Brahmavamso, “He of Brahma’s lineage.” Some have suggested that this name was no coincidence. As the events of his life unfolded, it became clear that there was something special about this child. Perhaps he really had descended from the lofty Brahma realms; perhaps his name was a reflection of a greater truth. But the name Brahmavamso was still far away in the future. In the meantime the nurse at the maternity ward suggested to the child’s parents that Peter would be a suitable name. It was thus that Peter Betts came into our midst.

⁵ Revised and updated excerpt from *Emptiness and Stillness: A Tribute to Venerable Ajahn Brahmavamso on the Occasion of His 60th Birthday*, pages 1 to 32. The original version was written by Ajahn Brahmalī. Grateful thanks to the Buddhist Society of Western Australia (BSWA) for permission to reprint.

Peter had been born into a working class family in post-war London, a time of relative hardship for many people, including the Betts family. They lived in a council flat, a kind of subsidised housing designated for people with limited means. One day, whilst the family was watching TV, a gust of wind caught a £1 note and carried it into the fireplace. His father rushed to it, but it was too late. He only succeeded in burning his hand. Peter's mother wept, for even this was a financial setback for the family.

Despite the lack of material wealth, the Betts family home was a good place for a young child to grow up. Peter's paternal grandfather had been a strict disciplinarian, and Peter's father had made a firm determination that he would be different. Peter thus grew up in a caring and loving household. It was in this household that Peter's father famously told the young adolescent, "The door of my house is always open to you, no matter what you do in life."⁶

Peter was also close to his maternal grandparents. When he visited his grandmother, she would usually make him a big portion of chips. He would happily gobble it down. Those who know Ajahn Brahm's taste in food will realise that some things in *samsāra* are less impermanent than others. So for those who think Ajahn Brahm eats too much greasy food, it was all conditioned by his grandmother's affection. *Tout comprendre c'est tout pardonner*.⁷

One Christmas, Peter was given a fishing rod by his grandfather. Before the youngster got the opportunity to make any bad *kamma*, his father decided he first needed to test the rod. Testing ... testing ... break! The fishing rod was no more. Grandfather was upset, and Peter was furious. Only later did he understand his good fortune in being saved from killing animals.

From early on it was apparent that the young Peter was not quite like other children. When his school had the occasional half-day holiday for well-behaved children, Peter would finish his homework and then delight in having absolutely nothing to do. These were the most memorable times of his childhood. While most children would delight in activity, Peter would

⁶ This is perhaps the most widely told story by Ajahn Brahm in his talks. The full version can be found in his book *Opening the Door of Your Heart and Other Buddhist Tales of Happiness*.

⁷ French phrase which means "to understand all is to forgive all."

delight in doing absolutely nothing. The seeds of *samādhi* were clearly there from the very beginning.

It is perhaps not surprising, then, that the adolescent Peter would resonate with the Buddhist teachings when he first came across them at 16. He had won an academic prize through his excellent O-level exam results, and he used the prize money to buy Christmas Humphreys' pioneering book on Buddhism. He quickly recognised that, in fact, he was already a Buddhist. But not being content with partial research, he decided to study other religions as well. Only when he felt satisfied that he understood the alternatives, did he call himself a Buddhist. Thus at the age of 16 he had made the most important choice in his life.

It was fortunate for him that he had the Buddhist teachings for support during this period, because this was also the time when his father died. One night Peter's mother came into his room and said she was unable to wake up his father. Peter went into his parents' bedroom, shook his father, and realised straight away that he was dead. Most people would get upset by such a discovery, but Peter instead remembered the Buddhist Teachings: the difference between grief and non-grief is in how you perceive the situation. If you focus on the loss, you grieve. If instead you focus on how the departed person has enriched your life, you feel a sense of gratitude.

AT CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY

In October 1969, Peter entered Emmanuel College at Cambridge University with a scholarship to study theoretical physics. There, he joined the Buddhist Society, whose president, Bernard Carr, became a lifelong friend. Bernard would later become a student and colleague of the world renowned cosmologist Stephen Hawking. Both Peter and Bernard were members of the Society for Psychical Research, where they conducted all manner of unorthodox research, including genuine ghost-hunting expeditions.

Peter's first teacher at the Society was the abbot of the recently established Thai temple in London, Wat Buddhapadipa. He proved to be

adept at explaining Buddhism and Buddhist meditation, and Peter was inspired. After Peter had attended his talks two or three times, the monk stopped coming. He had disrobed, and was going to get married to an English girl. Peter was shocked. It dawned on him that being an articulate and inspiring teacher is quite different from having a deep appreciation of the teachings.

His next teacher was Nai Boonman, a Thai lay Buddhist who had been one of the founders of the Samatha Society, perhaps the most successful of all British meditation societies. Peter soon became a serious practitioner of *samatha* meditation, a type of meditation for which Ajahn Brahm would later become well-known. Peter also took up other aspects of Buddhist practice. After an alcohol-fuelled party where he had too much to drink, he decided to give up alcohol. He never looked back. He also became a vegetarian at this time, a practice that ironically he had to give up when he became a monk, since there was no such thing as vegetarian food in the Northeast of Thailand in the mid-1970s. But sometimes his idealism went too far: when his girlfriend prepared a delicious non-vegetarian meal for him, he refused to eat it. He later realised that sometimes kindness and compassion for your fellows is more important than strict adherence to principles.

He also cultivated generosity. He volunteered at a home for people with intellectual disabilities. He gave £10 to a Tibetan orphanage, even though this meant he had to go without food. When one of his Christian friends decided to fast, not to be outdone, he too went on a fast. Every day he would cycle past the fish and chips shop to test his resolve! Anyone who knows Ajahn Brahm well knows that he has an iron will, although it is rarely on display. And of course, he easily outlasted his Christian mate.

It was at Cambridge that he discovered that intelligence and wisdom are very different things. He looked carefully at the Cambridge faculty, which included a significant number of Nobel laureates, and he realised that even the brightest of people could have miserable private lives. Some had domestic problems, some were painfully socially inept, and others just plain unhappy. Intelligence may make you academically successful, but not necessarily successful in life. Peter had understood that real “success” was not of the academic variety.

He would spend the summer holidays working and travelling the world. He went to such places as North Africa and Central America, and in 1973 to India on his first Buddhist pilgrimage. It was during his time in Central America, whilst visiting one of the Mayan pyramids on the Yucatan peninsula, that he had one of his insights about the nature of *samādhi*. He realised that the experience of deep *samādhi* is similar to climbing one of those ancient pyramids: just as when climbing a pyramid you get out of the jungle and get a proper perspective on the landscape below, so too, with the experience of *samādhi*, you emerge from the “jungle” of the sensual world and for the first time understand it properly.

But as always Peter was at his happiest when he had absolutely nothing to do. One of his most memorable moments at Cambridge was sitting in the back of a punt that someone else was rowing. Once again, there was nothing to do in the whole world – the bliss of complete contentment.

It was also at Cambridge that Peter attended his first meditation retreat, and it was at this retreat that he experienced deep meditation for the first time. His mind was so peaceful that when he went out into the gardens he would sit for hours just staring at a clump of bamboo. He had never realised that bamboo could be so beautiful.

It was the power of his meditation that helped Peter achieve academic distinction. At Cambridge, exams were done during a single week, with one exam in the morning and another in the afternoon. Most students would go for lunch between the morning and afternoon exams, but Peter would instead meditate. When he again met his fellow students just before the afternoon exam, he was so bright and cheery that his friends were wondering what sort of drug he was on. With the help of meditation he achieved the highest academic distinction – first class honours.

WORKING AS A TEACHER

Whilst at Cambridge, Peter decided to become a teacher. To qualify, he spent one year at Durham University near Newcastle. He then got a job at a secondary school in Devon, teaching maths and science.

Always questioning the way things appear to be, he set out to improve

the results of the students who were performing the worst. He reasoned that, if instead of neglecting the poor performers – which seems to be a common problem in education – he gave them extra attention, he might be able to prove that “dummies” aren’t necessarily stupid. Of course, he was right. The extra attention did prove that a poor academic record is not always due to lack of ability. But Peter’s proudest achievement as a teacher was teaching meditation to 650 students at the school assembly. If a single student had started to giggle, it could have been a complete flop. But to his astonishment all the children followed his instructions and became dead quiet. After 5 minutes of meditation, he got a spontaneous ovation. Many years later he accidentally met one of his former students who told him that that short session of meditation had changed his life.

For those who think that Ajahn Brahm was born a saint, it may come as a surprise to learn that he also indulged in worldly pursuits. He had loved music from an early age, anything from rock and roll to classical. One of his favourites was the American guitarist Jimi Hendrix, and as a teenager he would compete in the volume stakes with his father who was playing Frank Sinatra. Later on he would frequent the London music scene, which in those days was the avant-garde of rock and roll. He sported a beard, long hair and green velvet trousers. He played the guitar and had a girlfriend. It is good to know that no one – not even the Buddha before his awakening – starts out as a perfect saint. It gives hope to all the rest of us.

TAKING ORDINATION AS A BHIKKHU

It was while he was working as teacher that Peter decided to try out monastic life. After completing a year of teaching in Devon, he returned to London and was told by the monks at Wat Buddhapadipa to go to Thailand for ordination. Whilst he was waiting for the right time to leave, every day he would rise early and ride his motorbike to Wat Buddhapadipa to attend the morning chanting and meditation. He was so keen, and would sometimes arrive so early, that he had to wake up the resident monks before the chanting could begin.

When Peter arrived in Bangkok, his taxi driver refused to believe that a foreigner wanted to go to a temple and kept insisting on taking him to a

hotel instead. The taxi driver was at his wit's end when Peter told him he wanted to become a monk. In those days in Thailand, the West was looked upon as "the land of plenty," and surely no Westerner in his right mind would seek ordination as a Buddhist monk in Thailand! Despite his taxi driver's insistence, Peter eventually made it to Wat Saket, one of the most famous temples in Bangkok.

Wat Saket is generally regarded as the head monastery of the entire Maha Nikaya order, the branch of the Thai Sangha which has by far the largest number of monks. Ajahn Brahm's ordination preceptor was none other than the monk who was later to become the acting head of the entire Thai Sangha, Somdet Phra Buddhajahn. Such a close connection to a high-ranking Sangha member in Thailand can be very useful, particularly when one needs support in difficult circumstances. During the brouhaha after the Perth *bhikkhunī* ordination, Ajahn Brahm got private and personal support from the very top of the Thai Sangha.⁸

In December 1974 Peter made the transition to Venerable Brahmavamso, and later, Ajahn Brahm. Once he had been ordained, he knew he would never again be a lay Buddhist. His worst nightmare in those early months was dreaming that he was no longer a monk. He would wake up in a sweat and breathe a sigh of relief when he saw the brown robes next to him.

Although Wat Saket was a city temple, Ajahn Brahm diligently continued his meditation practice. As a young monk with few responsibilities, his meditation continued to improve. But city life is never ideal for a meditation monk. After three months at Wat Saket, he met Ajahn Sumedho who was in Bangkok to extend his Thai visa. Ajahn Sumedho told him about Ajahn Chah and Wat Pa Pong, and Ajahn Brahm knew that this was his future as a monk.

AT WAT PA PONG

Wat Pa Pong was an ascetic meditation monastery. The food was simple, often just glutinous rice and insects, and sometimes perhaps half a boiled frog. The climate was hot and humid, particularly for Westerners used to

⁸ A detailed account of what had happened from Ajahn Brahm's perspective can be found in the chapter titled "Moving Toward Life – No Matter How Difficult" in his book *Falling is Flying: The Dharma of Facing Adversity*.

colder climes. The monastery routine was usually gruelling, with chanting and group meditation beginning at 3.30 a.m. But Wat Pa Pong had one thing that set it apart from other monasteries: Ajahn Chah.

Soon after he arrived at Wat Pa Pong in January 1975, Ajahn Brahm overheard a conversation between Ajahn Chah and one of the Western monks. As the conversation progressed, Ajahn Brahm would mentally formulate his own question. To his astonishment, what Ajahn Chah said next seemed to be tailored to his query. Ajahn Brahm would then formulate another question in his mind, and the same thing happened again ... and again ... and again. After the interview was over, the Western monk who had been asking the questions told Ajahn Brahm that he could not make any sense of Ajahn Chah's answers. It was this experience that cemented Ajahn Brahm's decision to become an Ajahn Chah disciple.

One of Ajahn Chah's famous teaching methods was the use of ascetic practices, *toraman*, the purpose of which were to teach the monks that desire is the cause of suffering. Not long after Ajahn Brahm's arrival, but before he was allowed to take part in the monastic meetings, he witnessed how Ajahn Chah gave an all-night talk to the Sangha, speaking for perhaps 6 or 7 hours. One of the monks was particularly displeased, telling the new arrival that, "Ajahn Chah is just crazy!"

Another of Ajahn Chah's *toraman* techniques was getting the monks to sit meditation in an old tin shed in the middle of the day when the heat was at its most oppressive. Participation was compulsory but, as Ajahn Brahm now jokes, wearing blankets was voluntary. For most monks such tough practices were plainly a matter of endurance. But for Ajahn Brahm it was the right opportunity for learning how to let go of the body. In those situations, you either suffer terribly or you enter the world of the mind.

Sometimes Ajahn Chah would send his monks to a branch monastery almost without notice. On one occasion Ajahn Brahm didn't even have time to collect his toothbrush before he was sent off to a remote hermitage on the border with Laos. He learned to improvise. He found new ways of cleaning his teeth. From Ajahn Chah's point of view such exercises were simply lessons in impermanence.

Supplies of anything were very limited. Sometimes the monks had to walk barefoot because there were no sandals. When Ajahn Brahm went to see Ajahn Chah to ask for new batteries for his torch – and this was after squeezing out virtually every single electron from his existing batteries – he was told there weren't any. When walking at night in snake-infested Wat Pa Pong, there was only one possibility: develop your mindfulness to the maximum. And sure enough, Ajahn Brahm proved to himself that even in the dark of night in the snake-ridden jungles of Thailand it was possible to walk barefoot and still not be bitten.

AT WAT PA NANACHAT

After Ajahn Brahm had stayed at Wat Pa Pong for about two months, the Western monks were invited to start a separate monastery near Bung Wai village, the monastery which is now known as Wat Pa Nanachat, the International Forest Monastery. It was a rough group of monks that set out from Wat Pa Pong, many of them American veterans from the Vietnam War. And apart from their experiences at Wat Pa Pong, their understanding of Buddhist monasticism was still very limited.

Ajahn Brahm realised the importance of improving the Western Sangha's appreciation of Buddhist monasticism. He set out to study the monastic Vinaya with his considerable analytical powers. Although the resources at Wat Nanachat were very limited, he was soon recognised as the in-house Vinaya master. He continued his studies of the Vinaya for the next 15 years, and by the early 1990s, he was generally regarded as the foremost Vinaya expert in the international Ajahn Chah Sangha, and even beyond.

Apart from studies, Ajahn Brahm took an interest in the practical side of running the monastery. In 1978, when he became the second monk at Wat Nanachat, he took on the job of building supervisor. Although he had no experience with building work, he was energetic and always willing to help out. The local villagers would do most of the manual labour, and Ajahn Brahm would ensure that the quality of their work was up to scratch; after all, they were rice farmers, not builders.

He was also a good friend to his monastic companions. On one occasion

one of his fellow monks told him how he would love a cup of tea in the morning before the meditation at 3.30 a.m. Ajahn Brahm thought he would surprise the monk, and the next morning he brought him a cup of tea at 3.00 a.m. It was an attitude that had a powerful effect on his meditation.

More significantly, he would spend much time teaching the *anagarikas* to sew robes. One evening when the ordainees were exhausted after spending long hours preparing to dye their new robes, Ajahn Brahm told them that he would look after the robes and that they could all take a rest. Ajahn Brahm didn't sleep at all that night, yet the following morning his meditation was particularly blissful. On the morning alms round through Bung Wai village he asked Ajahn Sumedho how this was possible. Ajahn Sumedho told him that it was the fruit of his sitting up all night to help others. Perhaps more than any other event in his life, this showed Ajahn Brahm the importance of service and generosity, not just for lay Buddhists but for monastics.

Despite his efforts at being a good community member, for Ajahn Brahm meditation has always been the core aspect of monastic life. Although he had been a gifted meditator since he started practicing, he did have problems with dullness and drowsiness in those early days at Wat Nanachat. Initially he tried to fight the tiredness, but over the years he gradually learned that fighting just makes matters worse and that the proper response is to allow the tiredness to be. The idea of letting things be, rather than exerting will-power, has in later years become an important aspect of Ajahn Brahm's meditation teachings.

Of course, at times Ajahn Brahm's meditation would be very powerful. Whilst doing walking meditation on the concrete floor in the hall at Wat Nanachat, he became so peaceful that his perception of the concrete would undergo mind-boggling transformations. What used to be a dull, grey surface became an explosion of colour, in the most beautiful of shapes. Ever since those experiences Ajahn Brahm has had a veritable love affair with concrete, wanting concrete here and there and everywhere, sometimes driving his fellow monks to the edge of despair.

On one occasion when Ajahn Brahm's meditation was particularly deep, his body became so still for such a long time that the monk sitting next

to him quite literally thought he had died. At another time he had an unbearably painful toothache. He didn't know what to do with himself – he could neither sit still nor focus on anything – when he realised that craving was the problem. The realisation brought about a full embracing of the painful feeling. The result was complete contentment and the painful feeling just vanished. It was an almost unreal reminder of the power of insight. On yet another occasion Ajahn Brahm was hospitalised with typhus fever. He was so ill that he was unable to walk without supporting himself. When Ajahn Chah visited him in hospital and saw his condition, he famously said, “You'll either get better or you'll die.” Yet in spite of his dire condition, Ajahn Brahm was able to let go of the body and enter *samādhī*.

One of Ajahn Brahm's most important personal experiences occurred one evening when Ajahn Chah was visiting Wat Nanachat for his weekly sauna. Since there was an abundance of monks looking after the ageing Master, Ajahn Brahm decided to do some meditation instead. After his meditation, he walked in the direction of the sauna to see if he could assist Ajahn Chah in any way. Ajahn Chah had already finished and was walking in Ajahn Brahm's direction. Straight away he could see that Ajahn Brahm was very peaceful and so he decided to give him a teaching. He asked, “Why?” – “I don't know.” – “I'll tell you why. There is nothing. Do you understand?” – “Yes.” – “No, you don't!” And he walked away. Only later did Ajahn Brahm understand that he had been given a profound teaching on *anattā*, nonself.

At Wat Pa Pong and its branch monasteries it has generally been the custom for monks to go wandering – *tudong* – after their fifth rains retreat, and so it was for Ajahn Brahm. When he first suggested to Ajahn Chah that he might go on *tudong*, Ajahn Chah told him to just walk round and round the perimeter of the monastery. This wasn't exactly what he had had in mind, but soon afterwards he got his chance to wander around the Northeast of Thailand.

During his *tudong* months he visited many of the most famous meditation masters, including Ajahn Tate and Ajahn Maha Boowa. Ajahn Brahm had a special affinity for Ajahn Tate and he found him to be one of the most selfless (in the higher sense of the world) and peaceful of all the monks he had ever met. Meeting someone truly special can be enough to inspire you for a lifetime.

At one point, whilst walking between villages, he became particularly thirsty but there was nothing suitable to drink. He then thought to himself, "I'm a good monk. If there are any *devas* out there, can you please ensure I get a Pepsi in the next village?" Ajahn Brahm soon entered the next village and walked past the village store. Then, just as he was about to give up hope, a lady came running out of the store and said, "Venerable, may I offer you a Pepsi?" Then another person came, then another, then another ... until he had nine bottles of Pepsi. That's right, nine bottles of Pepsi, and nothing else.

During his *tudong* months Ajahn Brahm spent a lot of time by himself on remote mountains and in isolated forests, just practicing meditation. This time his greatest hindrance was not dullness and drowsiness but too much sensual thinking. He tried to use force to silence the thoughts, but to his dismay the thinking got worse. He then realised that the use of force makes the mind rebel, and thus it is counterproductive. So he decided to set aside a full hour every day just for thinking. His mind went dead quiet! Once again he had seen that force and control are not the path to success in meditation.

During this period he discovered a small area of pristine jungle, with beautiful clear ponds, enormous trees, and wildlife in abundance. He realised what the Northeast of Thailand once must have looked like. However, even whilst Ajahn Brahm was staying in that forest, the villagers decided to burn it down and convert it to farmland. Ajahn Brahm was upset, since he knew this was probably the last piece of real jungle in the entire Northeast. He then caught himself and realised the foolishness of getting angry: this was just the course of nature, and there was truly nothing he could do to prevent it.

GOING TO PERTH

When he had been in Thailand for seven years, Ajahn Brahm decided it was time to visit his family. Arriving in England was a real culture shock, but he usually found the right answers to any difficult situations. As he walked past a group of menacing teenagers, he jokingly did a few kungfu

moves. The kids ran a mile; they must have thought he was a real Shaolin kungfu master. Whilst he was staying at his mother's flat, a gypsy woman came to beg for money. She said she would curse Ajahn Brahm's mother if she didn't give anything. Then Ajahn Brahm came to the door and told the gypsy woman that Buddhist curses were much stronger than hers. The gypsy woman fled on the spot. While visiting Stoke-on-Trent he couldn't figure out why people kept pointing at him and laughing, until he realised there was a circus in town. Apparently people had thought he was a clown!

Not long after he returned to Wat Nanachat, Ajahn Sumedho asked Ajahn Brahm to go to Perth. Ajahn Jagaro, an Australian monk who had also trained at Wat Nanachat, had already been in Perth for about four months, but his second monk Ajahn Puriso was returning to Thailand. Ajahn Brahm was going to be Ajahn Jagaro's new lieutenant.

Ajahn Brahm used his impending transfer as a spur in his practice. Instead of the usual rest after the meal in the hottest part of the day, he decided to put forth extra effort in meditation for the benefit of the people he was going to serve in Australia.

In April 1983 Ajahn Brahm flew from Thailand and moved into the small *vihāra* in Magnolia Street owned by the Buddhist Society of Western Australia (BSWA). The two resident monks closely followed the way of running a monastery they had learned in Thailand. This meant that Ajahn Jagaro did the teaching and the counselling of the lay Buddhists, whilst Ajahn Brahm fulfilled the more anonymous role of second monk. Indeed, Ajahn Brahm was so good at staying in the background that when he had to speak because Ajahn Jagaro was away, someone exclaimed, "You can speak! I had thought you were demented or something."

Because Ajahn Brahm had few teaching duties, he used his spare time to further his study of the Vinaya. As part of this effort, he taught himself Pali, the ancient Indian language of the Buddhist scriptures, since a thorough understanding of the Vinaya requires a good knowledge of Pali. And once you know Pali, you also have direct access to the Buddhist Suttas. Thus Ajahn Brahm gained an access to the Buddha's teachings shared by few other Western monks trained in Thailand.

ESTABLISHING BODHINYANA MONASTERY

The Magnolia Street *vihāra* was never intended as a permanent monastic residence, and the Buddhist Society had long wished to establish a proper forest monastery. After the rains retreat of 1983, the two monks set out in earnest to find a suitable property. They considered several options, and Ajahn Brahm pushed for the property that would stretch the Buddhist Society's finances the most. He maintained that instead of settling for a smaller property with limited prospects, the Buddhist Society should envisage where one day they hoped to be. Since they agreed that they hoped for a large and thriving Sangha, they would require a large and secluded property. It was thus that Bodhinyana Monastery was established on 97 acres of bushland on Kingsbury Drive in Serpentine, about an hour's drive south of Perth.

Despite the lack of facilities, the two monks moved to Serpentine straight away in November 1983. An old sheep shearer's shed became the dining hall. Ajahn Brahm's first *kuṭi* was an old door with bricks for legs. One evening he wasn't able to find his door and had to curl up under a tree for the night. As the monastery gradually developed, Ajahn Brahm moved into a tent and then half a water tank. The water tank was fitted with walls, a window and a door. Luxury! Unfortunately it was located in a gully where a small stream would run in winter. His mattress was soaking wet. If he moved too abruptly on the mattress, water would literally flow out of it. This is how Ajahn Brahm spent his first rains retreat at Bodhinyana. The shell of that half water tank *kuṭi* is still in the monastery, and it helps remind the rest of the Sangha of the high standard of their present dwellings.

During the early years at Serpentine, support from Thailand was essential for the development of the monastery. Not only did the bulk of financial support come from Thailand, but senior Thai monks such as the late Luang Por Paññānanda played a critical role in generating support, consecrating the Main Hall, and acting as preceptor at ordination ceremonies. It was the new monastery's close association with Ajahn Chah and Wat Pa Pong that ensured such generous support from Thailand.

Nevertheless, in the earliest period the monastery's financial situation was very tight. Having spent all – and more – of the Buddhist Society's money

on the land, there was nothing left for buildings. They could barely afford building materials, and for the most part had to do completely without hired manpower. Since Ajahn Brahm had been in charge of building at Wat Nanachat, he naturally became the builder of Bodhinyana Monastery. He learned how to lay concrete and bricks, how to erect roofs and fit ceilings, how to do carpentry work and lay pipes. The workmanship was invariably of a very high standard, the sort of standard that is achievable only with a very focused mind.

But even a master builder makes mistakes. In one of the first buildings he built, Ajahn Brahm discovered to his horror that two of the bricks had not been laid to perfection. Thus his well-known story of the two bad bricks was born.⁹ Many years later people began asking to see the by now famous two bad bricks. But Ajahn Brahm could no longer remember where they were. He was simply practicing what he was preaching: he had completely let go of those bricks.

On a potentially fateful day he decided he was going to lay the bricks for the gable of the Main Hall, the highest point of any building in the monastery. He had no scaffolding and no ropes, and the recently built brick wall was entirely unsupported. All Ajahn Brahm had was an eight-metre long ladder, which he extended to the max. He then took a few bricks in one hand and a bucket with mortar in the other, and proceeded up the ladder. When he reached the top, he laid the bricks and then came down for more. By all appearances he was putting his life on the line to get the Monastery Hall completed.

A more indirect danger of being the builder is that you tend to focus on faults. What needs to be repaired? How can the buildings be made safe from bushfires? What are the further needs of the monastery? To counter this fault-finding tendency, Ajahn Brahm began walking round the monastery deliberately just focusing on what had already been achieved. By rejoicing in what he had already done, he further developed the contentment that is so important for success in meditation.

⁹ "Two bad bricks" is the first story in Ajahn Brahm's book *Opening the Door of Your Heart and Other Buddhist Tales of Happiness*.

Ajahn Brahm has continued doing building work all along. As his 69th birthday is approaching, he is still involved, often walking round our building sites, helping out with the manual work and checking that everything is OK. He is not beyond getting dirty for the sake of the monastery. Despite the fame and the accolades, he is a humble monk, and he understands the power of service.

Apart from the building work, which in the 1980s and early 90s would take up about 8 hours on a normal day, Ajahn Brahm continued his efforts in meditation. Although he sometimes felt there was too much work, he made a determination not to complain until he had properly utilised every single minute of his free time. So he never complained.

He became adept at using all his hard work to boost his meditation, thus using the method the Buddha called *cāgānussati*.¹⁰ Such recollection generates joy, which in turn quickly takes the mind to *samādhi*. This is another technique that has been a hallmark of Ajahn Brahm's meditation methodology.

He also started practicing *samādhi* more systematically, in accordance with the instructions found in the Suttas (see, for example, AN 9.35).¹¹ His *samādhi* became more stable and then developed further, and along with the *samādhi* came profound insights. "For one who has *samādhi*, knowing and seeing things according to reality is not to be done through an act of will. It is natural that one who has *samādhi* knows and sees things according to reality" (AN 10.2).

When the mind has been properly prepared by *samādhi*, insight can happen in seemingly unlikely situations. One day after giving a Dhamma talk, he decided to listen to one of his own talks from a few years before. To his astonishment, the two talks were almost verbatim the same. Ajahn Brahm had thought that the previous evening's talk was the result of his freely choosing what to talk about. He had had a clear sense that his will was entirely free. But when he then listened to the older talk, he was forced to conclude the exact opposite: his will was entirely conditioned. It is the sort of insight that leads to the ending of *saṃsāra*.

¹⁰ Literally, "recollection of (one's) generosity."

¹¹ "AN" is the abbreviation of *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, "The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha." Free online access to this can be found at <https://suttacentral.net>.

In 2002 Ajahn Brahm entered a 6-month meditation retreat. He didn't speak to a single person for six months; he even picked up his food from a box. All he did was meditate and read the occasional *sutta* in the *Majjhima Nikāya*.¹² Most people would go nuts. After the six months Ajahn Brahm was beaming. His mind had been so peaceful for so long that for the first few days after the retreat he was virtually unable to speak. After he regained his powers of speech, he gave a talk to the Sangha called "Six months of bliss."

Not everything Ajahn Brahm did was successful. His early talks at the Buddhist Society were considered by many as hopeless. Some said he had the style of a schoolteacher lecturing his audience, others that his jokes were lame and badly delivered. One man, after attending a retreat with Ajahn Brahm, swore that he would never again go to any of his talks. A lady said the talks were poor, but she would "front up" anyway just to show her support for the Buddhist cause.

But being persistent and irrepressible by nature, Ajahn Brahm gradually learned the ropes of public speaking. By the mid-1990s, he was beginning to show the qualities that would make him one of the most popular speakers on Buddhism in large parts of the Buddhist world. He became more compassionate in his style and learned how to connect better with his audience. His comic timing improved to virtual perfection, although his jokes were occasionally still a bit weak. And importantly, he started to tackle difficult but contemporary issues – euthanasia, abortion, human rights – and was thus able to make Buddhism much more relevant for his audience. In language and content he was relating directly to the audience, but his inspiration and clarity came from a deep understanding of the Buddhist Suttas and his own profound meditation.

BECOMING THE ABBOT OF BODHINYANA MONASTERY

In late 1993, Ajahn Jagaro went on sabbatical leave to get away from his usual duties and increase his efforts in meditation. At around the same time, Ajahn Brahm's reputation as a meditation master was gradually

¹² "The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha" which is abbreviated as "MN." Free online access to this can be found at <https://suttacentral.net>.

taking hold. Monks and laypeople who wanted Ajahn Brahm as their teacher started to arrive at Bodhinyana Monastery.

Ajahn Jagaro eventually returned to Bodhinyana in March 1995. By that time he had concluded that Ajahn Brahm was better qualified to be the abbot, and the two of them agreed that Ajahn Brahm would now take over. Ajahn Jagaro stayed on for about a month before he headed for Melbourne. Then came the sad news for the Buddhist Society: he was going to disrobe. Ajahn Brahm immediately flew to Melbourne to dissuade him, as did Ajahn Sumedho, but to no avail.

As abbot Ajahn Brahm was quite different from Ajahn Jagaro. Where Ajahn Jagaro had been committed to the Thai way of doing things, Ajahn Brahm had a more independent streak. He had already argued that some of the practices pursued at Wat Pa Pong were not suitable at Bodhinyana. At one point he lost all his energy, apparently due to lack of nutrition. Since the physical work at Bodhinyana was particularly arduous, Ajahn Brahm argued that a strict one meal a day practice was inappropriate and that a small breakfast would be helpful. Ajahn Jagaro eventually agreed.

In the area of community life, too, Ajahn Brahm had a different outlook from most of the other senior monks affiliated with Wat Pa Pong. Most Wat Pa Pong monasteries had compulsory all-night group meditation on the *uposatha* days twice a month. In Ajahn Brahm's estimation such practices tended to lead to dullness and drowsiness. Another Wat Pa Pong custom was group chanting and meditation in the early morning and evening. Ajahn Brahm argued that deep meditation is much easier to access in solitude, and he used the Suttas to support his argument. Gradually Ajahn Brahm was able to convince the resident Sangha, and Bodhinyana Monastery became more closely aligned with the ideals of the Suttas and less so with the practices current at Wat Pa Pong.

ESTABLISHING DHAMMASARA NUNS' MONASTERY

The Buddhist Society had been established to cater for both monks and nuns. When the Serpentine property was purchased, the idea had been to divide the land into a monks' section and a nuns' section. After the basic

infrastructure was in place, a nun's *kuṭi* was built on the far side of the monastery creek.

However, by the early 1990s it had become clear that men and women living together in the same monastery was far from ideal. Long-term female guests would occasionally fall in love with Ajahn Jagaro. This is not exactly helpful for celibacy. Indeed, after he disrobed Ajahn Jagaro went on to live with one of the most persistent of his female admirers, and her advances had clearly been a factor (among many) in his decision to disrobe. In 1997, a couple of years after Ajahn Brahm had become the new abbot, the Buddhist Society decided to look for another property to establish an independent and separate nuns' monastery.

The Buddhist Society had been looking at several properties when a large block of almost 600 acres came onto the market in the locality of Gidgegannup to the east of Perth, over one hour's drive from Bodhinyana. Many thought it would be too large and too expensive, but not Ajahn Brahm. Ajahn Brahm argued that the property would give a nuns' monastery a high degree of independence, since it was so large that regardless of what happened on the adjacent land it would have minimal impact on monastery residents. The Buddhist Society committee agreed to bid a maximum of AU\$600,000 at the upcoming auction, and the Buddhist Society treasurer, together with Ajahn Brahm, was dispatched to do the bidding. The Buddhist Society held the bid at AU\$600,000 when someone else bid AU\$625,000. Was the limit given by the Buddhist Society absolutely binding, or was it more of a guideline? Ajahn Brahm thought it was the latter, and the Buddhist Society treasurer promptly bid AU\$650,000. The deal was done. The mood at the Buddhist Society was jubilant, and Ajahn Brahm and the treasurer were the heroes of the day.

From the beginning Ajahn Brahm's policy was to avoid interfering with the running of Dhammasara. He reckoned that a strong and sustainable nuns' community comes from independence and a sense of being in charge of one's own affairs. There was no need for any "patriarchal" oversight. At the same time Ajahn Brahm would make himself available if the nuns needed advice or guidance: after all, he was very experienced in building and running monasteries. In this way Dhammasara gradually developed under the pioneering leadership and capable hands of the abbot, Ajahn Vāyāmā.

BHIKKHUNĪ ORDINATION

Possibly the most momentous event in the history of the Buddhist Society, the full consequences of which will take a long time to become fully apparent, was the decision by the four Dhammasara nuns to take the full *bhikkhuni* ordination in October 2009. The event was later listed by an American Buddhist pundit as the third most significant event in the entire Buddhist world in 2009. The groundwork had been laid by Buddhist scholars, including Ajahn Brahm, who had successfully argued that *bhikkhuni* ordination was fully possible within the constraints of the monastic Vinaya. Once this hurdle had been cleared, there were no serious barriers left to the full ordination of women. The Buddhist lay community in Perth was keen on the idea, the nuns at Dhammasara were slowly forming the opinion that this was the future of Buddhist monasticism for women, and the monks at Bodhinyana were supportive. The ordination was a *fait accompli*. Though it was a potentially controversial decision, the subsequent feedback from around the world has mostly been very positive.

Almost a decade after the pioneering *bhikkhuni* ordination, its positive consequences continued to be felt. In June 2019, Ajahn Brahm was appointed a Member of the Order of Australia, an honour bestowed by Queen Elizabeth, “for significant service to Buddhism, and to gender equality.”

BUILDING THE RETREAT CENTRE

In 2001 the Buddhist Society acquired a property diagonally across Kingsbury Drive from Bodhinyana Monastery. Not long after the purchase, money was donated with the express purpose of building a dedicated retreat *kuṭi*. The Sangha decided that a *kuṭi* with all facilities, enabling long-term and independent retreats, would be built on the new land. The *kuṭi* was built and has since housed a number of monastics, both male and female, both locally resident and visiting.

Around 2003 Ajahn Brahm first suggested that the new property would be suitable for a retreat centre. The Buddhist Society had been renting premises for its retreats for a couple of decades and a dedicated Buddhist

retreat centre was considered by many as highly desirable. The new property was seen as an ideal location for many reasons: it was secluded and quiet, with beautiful natural bushlands; it was close to Bodhinyana Monastery, which would allow Ajahn Brahm to teach retreatants while simultaneously keeping an eye on the monastery; and the Buddhist Society did not need to look for another piece of land. Ajahn Brahm's very first estimate for the building cost was AU\$1 million. Among irrepressible optimists, Ajahn Brahm is the supreme leader!

Gradually the plans became more concrete and the cost estimates started to rise. After Ajahn Brahm had made the first rough sketch of the required buildings, he acknowledged that AU\$2 million was closer to the mark. A pamphlet with a computerised drawing of the envisaged centre was produced to help people get some idea of what they were donating towards. By this stage the cost estimate was AU\$3 million. An architect was hired, detailed drawings produced, and a professional cost estimator hired. Cost: about AU\$6.5 million. Ajahn Brahm would have none of it, but conceded that the final bill would probably amount to AU\$5 million. To make a long story short, the final cost was in excess of AU\$5 million. But if the discount received from the builder is included, the figure is closer to AU\$7 million. Of course, if it hadn't been for Ajahn Brahm's optimism, the Buddhist Society might never have had a retreat centre.

What really made the retreat centre possible was Ajahn Brahm's large support base in a number of countries. When the news of the project gradually spread, donors came forward because of their confidence in Ajahn Brahm. Large donations were received from Singapore and Malaysia, and Thai Buddhists also made an important contribution. In addition, significant donations were received from around the world. But perhaps most auspicious of all – with an eye on the future of Buddhism in Australia – was that an important part of the funding came from local Australians, including donations from the immigrant Buddhist population and the generous builder who, by forgoing any profit, in effect donated almost AU\$1.5 million.

When the building work started in November 2007 the naysayers were in rapid retreat. By the end of 2008 the retreat centre was fully financed and the building work, despite delays, was making good progress. Geoff Gallop,

the ex-premier of Western Australia, was asked to become the patron of the centre. He had received advice from Ajahn Brahm a few years earlier whilst he was going through a difficult period. He readily accepted.

The opening ceremony was held in April 2009. Geoff Gallop was present, as were several local and state politicians. Some of the monks had been working until the early hours of the morning to help finish the building work. Beautiful stupas and carved lions that were gifts from Indonesia were all in place. The ceremony itself had been thoughtfully and professionally put together by Buddhist Society volunteers. The name of the centre, Jhana Grove, had been suggested by one of Ajahn Brahm's disciples to honour his style of teaching. It was a proud moment.

As soon as the opening ceremony was over the first retreat started. There were, of course, teething problems, but the centre has proved outstanding for meditation retreats. Since then Jhana Grove has been the venue for a large number of retreats. The centre is open to any Buddhist group, and there is no fixed charge. It is thus a resource not just for the Buddhist Society but for all Buddhists, both in Perth and elsewhere. As the BSWA marked the centre's ten-year anniversary in April 2019, it was running at close to full capacity.

TIRELESSLY SPREADING THE DHAMMA

Ajahn Brahm has almost unlimited energy for teaching the Dhamma. He has a deep conviction that he has an important message to deliver, and his audience can usually sense that they are receiving the genuine article. Add his remarkable wit and sense of humour, and it is easy to see why he is such a popular teacher and speaker.

One of the first countries outside of Australia where he gained great popularity was Singapore. The Singaporeans marketed him with great zeal: his talks were advertised in the newspapers and on posters on the back of buses. Soon he attracted crowds in the thousands. In Malaysia the story was similar, but because the country has a Muslim majority the promotion was more low key. Nonetheless, as he goes from city to city on

one of his typical Dhamma tours, the crowds are always large. In Thailand, where the language barrier is a significant obstacle, he has reached large parts of the population principally because of the Thai translations of his books. He has become well-known among the English speaking population of Hong Kong, and in Indonesia his books are bestsellers, on par with Indonesian translations of Dan Brown thrillers and the Harry Potter series. But perhaps his greatest following is in Sri Lanka, where he speaks on national television, gives private teachings to the President, and is greeted on the streets by ordinary Sri Lankans as if he were a movie star.

Ajahn Brahm's teachings have resonated not just in Asia but also in the West. His first book, *Opening the Door of Your Heart*, has been translated into 15 different European languages. His second book, *Mindfulness, Bliss, and Beyond*, is often quoted in meditation circles as an authoritative guide on meditation. He has a large following in Europe and North America.

In the end, the most important reasons for Ajahn Brahm's success as a teacher are simply his high energy levels and his willingness to work inhumane hours. Typically, Ajahn Brahm will give a Friday night talk at the Buddhist Society city centre in Nollamara. He will then speak to people until about 10 p.m., at which point he rushes off to the airport in a car. He then takes the overnight flight to Singapore, where he has breakfast with a large number of disciples. He continues teaching non-stop until perhaps 11 p.m. The next morning he might be off on a 6-night Dhamma tour of Indonesia, with a similar daily schedule, before he flies back to Perth, arriving 3 or 4 hours before the next Friday night talk. You get the idea.

How does he do it? By being at ease and relaxed in virtually all situations, and by enjoying what he does. And by not taking himself at all seriously. Waiting at the airport in Kuala Lumpur for a flight back to Perth, his disciples bought him a nice ice-cream coffee with a straw. He sucked, but nothing came out. He tried harder, but still nothing. He then noticed that some of his disciples were holding their mouths, trying not to giggle. He had another look at his "straw" – it was a spoon! He had a good laugh at himself. That's how he does it.

NAMES & TERMINOLOGY



Ajahn

A Thai word, derived from Pali or Sanskrit, meaning “teacher.”

Ajahn Chah Subhaddo (1918-1992)

Ajahn Chah was one of the most famous forest monks from Thailand in the 20th century, whose renown spread internationally. His main monastery, Wat Pa Pong, was located in his home province of Ubon Ratchathani in the Northeast of Thailand. He attracted a large number of foreigners as students, including Ajahn Brahm.

Ajahn Jagaro (1948-)

An Australian senior disciple of Ajahn Chah and the first abbot of Bodhinyana Monastery in Perth. When he disrobed in 1995, Ajahn Brahm succeeded him as the abbot.

Ajahn Liem Thitadhammo (1941-)

A senior disciple of Ajahn Chah from Sri Saket Province in Northeast Thailand. When Ajahn Chah became severely ill in 1982, he entrusted the leadership of Wat Pa Pong to him.

Ajahn Maha Boowa Ñāṇasampanno (1913-2011)

Among the last of the direct disciples of Ajahn Mun, he succeeded Ajahn Tate as the head of the Thai forest tradition lineage, and was one of the most influential monks in modern Thailand. He was from Udon Thani Province in Northeast Thailand.

Ajahn Mun Bhuridatta (1870-1949)

Widely considered the founder of the modern Thai forest tradition. Born in Ubon Ratchathani province, he was very influential in Thai Buddhism, and indirectly in Buddhism around the world. Most of the highly acclaimed forest monks of Thailand can trace their lineage to Ajahn Mun.

Ajahn Singtong Dhammavaro (1924-1980)

A leading disciple of Ajahn Maha Boowa born in Ubon Ratchathani in Northeast Thailand. He had a number of Western disciples, including Ayya Khemā.

Ajahn Sumedho (1934-)

Ajahn Chah’s first Western monastic disciple, ordained in 1967. An American, he led the establishment of a number of forest monasteries in the UK, before “retiring” to Thailand.

Ajahn Tate Desaraṃsi (1902-1994)

A disciple of Ajahn Mun born in Udon Thani province in Northeast Thailand. After Ajahn Mun’s death, he was considered the head of the Thai forest tradition lineage until his own death in 1994.

Ajahn Vāyāmā (1952-)

Ajahn Vāyāmā is an Australian *bhikkhuni* who was the first abbot of Dhammasara Nuns’ Monastery in Perth. Having been a ten-precept nun for 24 years, she was the most senior of the four nuns ordained as *bhikkhunīs* in Perth in 2009. She is a disciple of Ayya Khemā.

Anagarika

A layperson undertaking the eight precepts and living in a monastery, normally in training to become a monk or a nun.

Anumodanā

Anumodanā, "rejoicing along with," is the word for the traditional blessing or short talk given by a monastic in gratitude for the offering of a meal.

Ayya Khemā (1923-1997)

A pioneering German *bhikkhunī* who played a significant role in re-establishing the female Sangha in Theravada Buddhism.

Bhikkhu

A fully-ordained Buddhist monk.

Bhikkhunī

A fully-ordained Buddhist nun.

Brahma

A high divine being. The Brahmas exist in planes that are the rebirth equivalent of the four *jhānas* or the four divine abidings.

BSWA

The Buddhist Society of Western Australia. The lay Buddhist organisation connected with Bodhiyana Buddhist Monastery and Dhammasara Nuns' Monastery.

Deva

A divine being.

Dhamma

The teachings of the Buddha. It is often encountered in its Sanskrit form, Dharma.

Jhāna

Profound states of meditation, of which the Suttas mention four. They constitute the last factor of the Noble Eightfold Path.

Kamma

Action, specifically intentional action. The quality of the intention determines whether an action is ethical or not. Unethical action is known as *bad kamma*, ethical action as *good kamma*. Its Sanskrit form is *karma*.

Karuṇā

Compassion. One of the four divine abidings.

Kuṭi

A simple monastic dwelling.

Mahākassapa

One of the direct, fully-awakened disciples of the Buddha. He was known for his ascetic practices.

Māra

A Buddhist deity who exerts power on people to keep them bound to *samsāra*. More importantly, Māra refers to our own psychological tendency to be tempted by the sensual world.

Metta

Loving kindness. One of the four divine abidings.

Nibbana

The final goal of the Buddhist path. It is the extinguishment of craving, ill will and delusion, and the ending of suffering. Its Sanskrit form is *Nirvana*.

Pali

The language of the Buddhist scriptures of the Theravada Buddhist tradition. It is closely related to Sanskrit.

Rājagaha

The capital of the ancient Indian kingdom of Magadha. The Buddha spent a significant amount of time in and around Rajagaha. There is still a small town in the area called Rajgir.

Samādhi

A profound state of meditation. Right *samādhi*, *sammā-samādhi*, is the last factor of the Noble Eightfold Path and equivalent to the four *jhānas*.

Samatha

Calm. An important aspect of Buddhist meditation.

Samsāra

The potentially endless round of birth and death.

Somdet Phra Buddhajahn (1928-2013)

Ajahn Brahm's ordination preceptor and the acting head of the Thai Sangha in the period 2005-2013.

Sangha

The Buddhist monastic community.

Stupa

A Buddhist dome-shaped commemorative monument, normally erected in memory of someone regarded as awakened.

Suttas

The collection of discourses given by the Buddha. The Sanskrit form is *Sūtras*.

Theravada

The branch of Buddhism practiced in South and Southeast Asia. Bodhiyana Monastery belongs to this branch.

Tudong

The practice of forest monks, especially in Thailand, to go wandering after completing their basic five years of training as a monastic. The purpose of such wandering is to seek solitude for meditation and perhaps to visit famous meditation teachers. It is a test of one's independence and ability to live the monastic life without the support of a community.

Uposatha

The day and night of the full or the new moon. In Buddhist countries, it is a traditional holiday when people visit monasteries, keep the eight precepts and meditate. The monastic Sangha meets and recites their rules of conduct on this day.

Vihāra

A Buddhist monastery or monastic residence.

Vinaya

The collection of monastic rules and regulations.

Wat Pa Nanachat

The international monastery in Ubon Ratchathani, Northeast Thailand, established by Ajahn Chah in 1975 to provide a training monastery using English for his growing number of foreign disciples.

Wat Pa Pong

Ajahn Chah's main monastery in Ubon Ratchathani, Northeast Thailand.

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Sabbadānaṃ dhammadānaṃ jināti

“The gift of the Dhamma excels all gifts.”

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***May the merits accrued from this Dhamma-dāna
be dedicated to the departed and loved ones.***

May they be relieved from all suffering.

***May they take existence in a happier and
more blissful state in their next birth.***

May this merit too be a condition for their attainment of Nibbana.

Sādhu! Sādhu! Sādhu!

BOOKS BY AJAHN BRAHM



Opening the Door of Your Heart: And Other Buddhist Tales of Happiness
(Published in the U.S. under the title *Who Ordered this Truckload of Dung?*
Inspiring Stories for Welcoming Life's Difficulties)

Mindfulness, Bliss and Beyond: A Meditator's Handbook

The Art of Disappearing: The Buddha's Path to Lasting Joy

Good? Bad? Who Knows?

(Published in the U.S. under the title *Don't Worry, Be Grumpy: Inspiring Stories for Making the Most of Each Moment*)

Kindfulness

Bear Awareness: Questions and Answers on Taming Your Wild Mind

Falling is Flying: the Dharma of Facing Adversity

(Coauthored with Chan Master Guojun and edited by Kenneth Wapner)

Wisdom of Silence

The Basic Method of Meditation

The Word of the Buddha (forthcoming)



In early January 2020, COVID-19, a highly infectious novel coronavirus, began to spread and has since affected millions of lives around the globe, causing hundreds of thousands of deaths across all continents. As this book is being prepared, the numbers are still rising. Ajahn Brahm, a fully-ordained Buddhist monk for over 45 years, reminds us that “this too will pass,” because nothing is permanent. He encourages us to consider this global pandemic not as a crisis but rather as an opportunity to care for and serve one another, especially those in need.

Inspired by Ajahn Brahm’s timeless teachings, the aim of this book is twofold: first, to use 19 never-before-published stories from Ajahn Brahm’s life to bring joy and give hope to anyone whose life has been affected by COVID-19; and second, to present it as a gift to Ajahn Brahm on his 69th birthday, on 7 August 2020.

The title of this book, Karuna-virus, resonates with the pronunciation of “coronavirus.” In Pali, an ancient Indian language possibly used by the Buddha himself, the word *karuṇā* means “compassion.” It is hoped that compassion, together with kindness and wisdom, can replace greed, anger and ignorance far and wide as the world continues to grapple with this global pandemic.

Ajahn Brahm, born in London and trained as a theoretical physicist at Cambridge, is the Abbot of Bodhinyana Monastery in Serpentine, Western Australia. He is a disciple of the late Ajahn Chah, an eminent Thai forest monk regarded by many as a meditation master.