

Reflections at the Vimutti Stupa Relic Enshrining

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When Luang Por Piak visited Vimutti on the occasion of enshrining Buddha Relics, he offered this Dhamma talk. Luang Por Piak is one of the most respected meditation masters in Thailand and a leading disciple of Luang Por Chah.

“I offer my blessings to everyone here. We've come together on this occasion to consecrate the new stupa at Vimutti Monastery and enshrine Buddha Relics. This monastery is under the guidance of Venerable Ajahn Chandako. He began his monastic training at Wat Pah Nanachat in Thailand, and I've known him since his very early years as a monk there. He came and spent his first rains retreat with me at my monastery on the edge of Bangkok in 1990. After that we'd meet regularly, particularly in his early years, and so I got to know him.

When our teacher, Luang Por Chah, went to Europe for the first time to teach (in 1977), I was with my good friend Ajahn Anan. In those days we were junior monks, and Ajahn Anan was Luang Por Chah's attendant. At that time Ajahn Anan and I were considering what kind of person or monk would be most suitable for teaching the Dhamma overseas, places where the Buddha's teachings have not been before. This is something Ajahn Chah himself had spoken about. He said those who go to spread the Dhamma must be suitable for that purpose, the right kind of people.

So we were thinking about this point, and we asked Luang Por Chah. Because he had said a suitable person to spread the Dhamma is really an *Arahant*, a fully enlightened being. So we asked Ajahn Chah where are these *Arahants* who will spread the Dhamma? He just smiled when we asked this question. Not long after that he travelled to the UK with Ajahn Sumedho. In those days Venerable Sumedho travelled with him as his attendant and translator.

Many years later I got to know Ajahn Chandako. As I mentioned, he stayed with me, and we met up on different occasions. There was one time (in 1998) when I was travelling in Sakon Nakhon and Nakhon Phanom provinces, and I heard that Ajahn Chandako was staying nearby with another famous teacher, Venerable Ajahn Wanchai.

Ajahn Wanchai was a disciple of Ajahn Maha Boowa. Ajahn Wanchai had a monastery at a remote location called Pu Sangko (Sangha Mountain), and Ajahn Maha Boowa had made a few comments to the effect that Ajahn Wanchai was a very well-practised monk. So he had a very good reputation and was worth visiting.

Ajahn Chandako is also a well-practised monk, and it's natural that monks who practise well want to go and stay with other monks who practise well. So I heard that Ajahn Chandako was staying there, and I went to visit him.

Since then, I've met Ajahn Chandako off and on, but not as much as in the early years, especially since he came to live here in New Zealand. But I've heard news of the monastery and what he's been accomplishing here at Vimutti. I've also had the chance to come and visit him here on numerous occasions, including teaching a retreat, and I've been invited for this occasion.

New Zealand is a very special place. It's quiet. The scenery and nature here are very beautiful. There's a lot of natural beauty, peace and quiet in the countryside and in the country as a whole. I think it's a very suitable place for Dhamma practice. It can certainly help us when we come to practise meditation if we are doing it in a quiet and peaceful place. Our teachers, from the time of Luang Por Mun and his disciples down to the present, sought out quiet, peaceful places like this to meditate. Because when you are staying out in the forest or in the countryside, you can really put your effort into developing mindfulness, developing the mental state of equanimity—where the mind is neither caught in liking or disliking, the mind which is contemplating the Dhamma, the mind that is knowing the nature of conditions.

This is definitely a quiet and peaceful environment. That's part of the story. When we come to practise meditation, the place is only part of the story. We also have to be practising in the right way. We have to be practising with right view. From this perspective, our body, our mind and the world around us are just conditions arising and passing away without attaching. Peaceful, natural surroundings can be a strong support when we are training the mind.

Luang Por Chah said that once we have physical seclusion such as this, the next step is to attain mental seclusion, seclusion of the mind. This is seclusion from all the mental hindrances and disturbing and negative mental states that bother us as human beings. But in order to do this, we have to know the way the mind is. We have to understand our own mind and train it. Just as we know the nature of the countryside and the forest, now we have to know the nature of the mind.

All of us have come here to practise, to do good. We have faith, and we have confidence in the teachings. This has brought us together from many different places, even from overseas. This faith, together with other wholesome and skilful states of mind, is a very good starting point for the practice. You could say our minds at this point are like the minds of celestial beings, *devas*. We are not thinking of doing unskilful things. Our minds are focused on the Dhamma. We have faith. Now we have to practise.

Luang Por Chah said you have to develop the internal eye of Dhamma to see the truth and the way things are. This can only be done through the practice. Of course, Dhamma practice is not easy. We have to put effort into it. We must train in keeping

precepts, *sila*, and make use of them to train our behaviour and speech, to refrain from unwholesome actions. We have to train in *samadhi*, developing a meditation object and learning to use mindfulness focused on that object to gain states of peace and calm. We have to develop wisdom, *panna*, through investigating in a way that leads to insight into the truth. When we practise ethical behaviour, we are learning to restrain the more negative and harmful tendencies of our bodily actions and speech. When we train in *samadhi*, it's even harder. It's more challenging, because we have to work with the mind, that which is on the inside, something we can't see. We have to put lots of effort into this, developing the mind until it is very firm and calm and under our control.

You could say it's a form of mental exercise. Normally as human beings we are more concerned with physical exercise. We think of physical exercise as something that involves movement. We move our bodies, train them in different ways to use up energy and keep fit. But meditation and developing *samadhi* are mental exercises. Rather than moving the mind around, we learn how to slow it down until it actually stops, until it is still. It is stilled from all the distracted, random thinking and various moods that normally disturb it. It's the opposite of physical exercise, but it still requires great effort.

The reason we do this is because wisdom arises out of stillness. When we learn to still the distracted states of mind, to overcome the mental hindrances that disturb the mind and quiet the agitating movement of the mind, then there is a chance for the mind to see things clearly as they truly are. This is where wisdom will arise.

To do this, we have to focus the mind on just one meditation object and train with it. It could be one of the traditional forty meditation techniques, but whatever form of meditation we practise, we have to learn how to overcome the five hindrances (sensual desire, ill-will, sleepiness, restlessness remorse and doubt). We have to practise in order to go beyond these hindrances. This takes time and effort.

Luang Por Chah would teach his students to put great effort into their practice, not just the Sangha but the lay community as well. He encouraged them to take on certain difficult or ascetic practices, *dhutanga*. Even the lay people were encouraged to undertake the practice of not lying down for a night, only to sit, stand or walk. Every week on the Buddhist holy days (which correspond to the four phases of the moon) lay people, nuns and monks would come together to practise meditation all night long. They would listen to Dhamma teachings and meditate right through till dawn, resolving not to lie down. In forest monasteries you still find this practised today.

There are other ascetic practices, thirteen of them all together, such as only eating from one's bowl, only having three robes, and so on. Monastics adopt them at various times, but this one practice of not lying down for a night is something practised even by the laity. The purpose is to strengthen effort. Because it requires effort not to lie down for an entire night. When you put forth this kind of effort, you

gain something back. You are abandoning some of your habits, particularly sleepiness and negativity of mind. You have to set them aside if you are going to commit to practising meditation all night long. You develop discipline, mindfulness and effort. Many very skilful qualities arise from this kind of practice.

Some people might think it's just too strict, over the top, too extreme. But from my experience and observation, everybody gains something good from practising in this way—especially when we are young and fit enough to do it. Most of us still have youth on our side. We are not eighty or a hundred years old. We are still young enough to do a practice like this.

So we should put our heart into our effort, because we really don't know how long we've got to live. We should use our time to the best of our ability, because we don't know how long we'll be living in this world. This is something that Luang Por Chah emphasised over and over again. He said be mindful of how uncertain your life is and how unsure the future is. We don't know how long we'll be here in this world. Every day he encouraged us to put effort into the practice. Over and over he reminded us to keep the precepts, to put effort into restraining the more negative tendencies of our speech and actions, and to develop virtuous behaviour with harmlessness and kindness as our principles and guide.

Based on this training, he encouraged us to develop the inner quality of mindfulness so as to truly make our own mind a refuge. We take what we learn from our Dhamma practice, and we practise with it to the point where we can depend on ourselves. Because when we face our death one day, who will be with us? We will be on our own. This is one thing we can be sure of in life—that we will one day face death. How well are we prepared for this? Have we developed an inner refuge for ourselves?

This is why we are practising. We may have practised Dhamma before. It's quite possible. Just to be reborn as a human being is an indication that we've kept the five precepts in previous lives. The fact that we were born healthy, that we have our body, mind and faculties complete—that's all a sign that we've made good kamma in the past. Now we should continue that Dhamma practice in this lifetime. We should make a resolution, a firm resolution to practise and progress on the path to *Nibbana*. That's the purpose of a human life, human existence.

All of us have experienced stress and suffering, *dukkha*, in some form in our lives—maybe in our family, maybe in the workplace. Really, the only way to overcome and go beyond this is through Dhamma practice. We have to practise in order to experience inner peace. It comes from directing our actions, our speech and our minds in a skilful way—bringing them all to a state of what you might call normality or balance. Normal here means peaceful, not causing stress and suffering for ourselves or others. We do that with our actions as well as our speech. We have to train our speech to abandon forms that are harmful, deceptive, untrue or that generate anger

among people. We learn to abandon these habits and bring our speech to a state of normality, where we speak without creating any negative *kamma*.

Then we work on our mind: bringing our inner life to a state of normality and balance, where it's not under the influence of defilements, where it's not creating unskillful mental *kamma*. This entails abandoning all mental states rooted in greed, anger and delusion. Why? Because they just cause suffering. They cause us to suffer, and then we cause other people to suffer. Dhamma practice is the tool we use to deal with defilements, or you could even say, *battle* with defilements. We all have the prerequisites we need to practise. All you need is a body and a mind.

Sometimes we become complacent in our lives. We think we don't have any real suffering—no real problems, nothing much coming up in our lives—so we become a little bit complacent and take it easy. We don't think we have to practise. But you should remember that nothing is certain. You can never be sure what the next day will bring. Sometimes other people bring us problems, sometimes it's our health, sometimes events happen that cause stress and suffering. Nothing is certain. We can't be sure what lies ahead.

One of the purposes of Dhamma practice is to prepare ourselves, to get us ready for whatever may lie ahead. Even if we think at this moment everything is fine, we should still put effort into Dhamma practice. We practise on the outside, and we practise on the inside. We have to learn to purify our hearts through the practice. We don't know how much time we have left in this world, so make the best use of that time. People are dying every day. Look around. People die from disease, from old age, from accidents, from all kinds of different situations. This is something we should be aware of. It's actually one form of meditation that the Buddha recommended, *marananusati*, reflecting on death. It brings the mind to the present moment and helps to cut through some of that mental proliferation and endless thinking.

Other people find *anapanasati* to be a suitable meditation technique. Paying attention to the feeling of breathing in and out helps to bring the mind to stillness, calm and peace. You can also reflect on the Dhamma. Even if you are following the breath as your meditation object, you can still reflect on death. What is death? One breath comes in and doesn't go out; or a breath goes out but doesn't come back in. Following the breath as a meditation and recollecting death go hand in hand.

We must keep watching over our minds; seeing how every mental state that arises, how every thought, how every mood, is impermanent. Nothing lasts. Every aspect of the physical body is impermanent, constantly changing. Go over that as well. Observe all the parts, analyse them and recognise the impermanent nature of this physical body. Then look at how mental activity is impermanent. This is where wisdom arises. When you can see the impermanence of this body and the impermanence of our mental activity, then you can also see the lack of self in it.

Because what's impermanent cannot be self. We can't really take it as ours or belonging to us. What isn't ours, what isn't a self, shouldn't be clung to.

Everyone wants to develop wisdom. Everyone wants a peaceful mind. This is what we have to do to achieve that. We have to practise. We have to put effort into Dhamma practice in order to gain wisdom and peace of mind. Peace will come if we are willing to do the practice. It comes little by little. Gradually we accumulate more peace, more wisdom. It replaces the stress, the distracted states of mind, and the suffering we've had in the past. The more you practise, the more that fades, and the more it is replaced by peace, understanding and insight. The Buddha once said, "the one who practises will escape from *mara's* snare." If we keep at it, we can find peace.

I'll just say this much for now and encourage you all to keep up your practice. I give you my blessing and appreciation for your effort. I hope you will all benefit from your Dhamma practice."