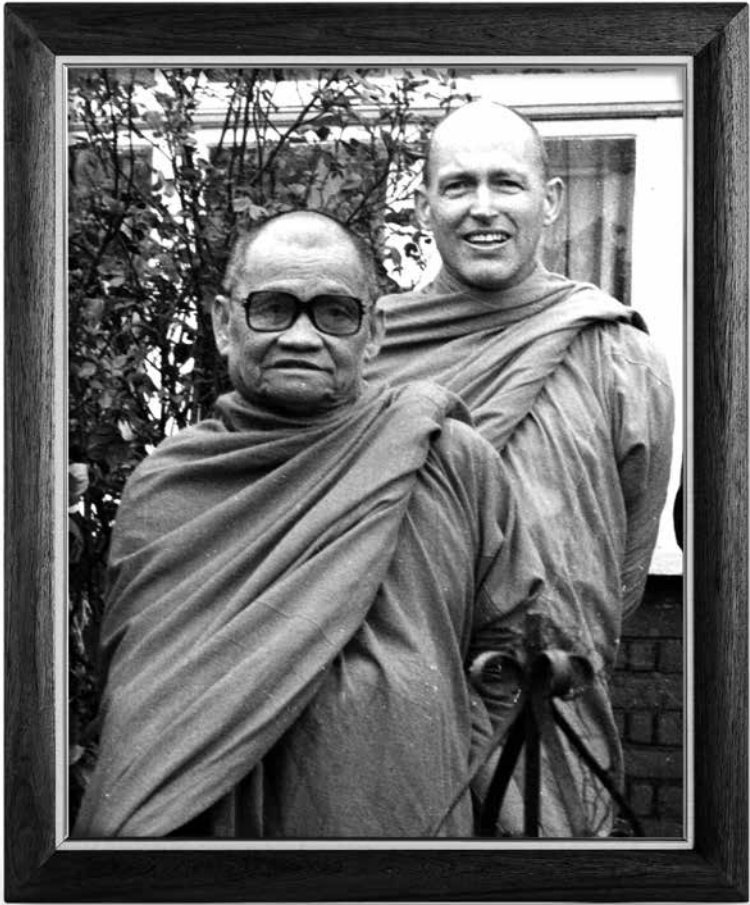




# Gratitude

Ajahn Sumedho



Ajahn Chah  
Ajahn Sumedho



*Fal*

# Introduction

This is a new translation and edition of “Gratitude to Parents”, with additional sections on gratitude to Luang Por Chah and the Buddha.

When I reflect on my life as a Buddhist monk, I found one of the most significant turning points was when I started experiencing gratitude (kataññū-katavedī). Gratitude arises spontaneously when one reflects on one’s parents, who made it possible for one to exist as a human being, Luang Por Chah, the teacher, whose wisdom was always directly pointing to the way out of suffering, and the Lord Buddha’s teaching giving direction for one’s life.

Gratitude gives you a strong foundation that is not made up out of the thinking process but is the heart’s openness to reality.

I wish to express my gratitude to the translator and those who have helped in editing and producing this work.

*Ajahn Sumedho*

Ajahn Sumedho  
September 20, 2018  
Wat Pah Ratanawan



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## *Gratitude*

Published by Amaravati Publications,  
**Amaravati Buddhist Monastery**  
St. Margarets Lane, Great Gaddesden,  
Hemel Hempstead, Hertfordshire HP1 3BZ UK  
[www.amaravati.org](http://www.amaravati.org), (0044) (0)1442 842455

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*Sabbadānaṃ dhammadānaṃ jināti*  
The gift of the Dhamma surpasses all other gifts.

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ISBN: 978-1-78432-082-9  
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Copyright © 2020 Pra Depnyanavidesa (Ajahn Sumedho)

Content: Pra Depnyanavidesa (Ajahn Sumedho)  
Illustrations: Kullachart Sitjasech  
Proofreading: Thanyathorn Chatlaong

First edition, 30,000 copies, 2020, Printed in Thailand

Print: Aksorn Sampan Press (1987) Co., Ltd.





*Gratitude to Parents*



*“I tell you, monks, there are two people who are not easy to repay. Which two? Your mother and father. Even if you were to carry your mother on one shoulder and your father on the other shoulder for a hundred years, and were to look after them by anointing, massaging, bathing, and rubbing their limbs, and they were to defecate and urinate right there on your shoulders, you would not in that way pay or repay your parents. If you were to establish your mother and father in absolute sovereignty over this great earth, abounding in the seven treasures, you would not in that way pay or repay your parents. Why is that? Mother and father do much for their children. They care for them, they nourish them, they introduce them to this world.*

*“But anyone who rouses his unbelieving mother and father, settles and establishes them in faith; rouses his unvirtuous mother and father, settles and establishes them in virtue; rouses his stingy mother and father, settles and establishes them in generosity; rouses his foolish mother and father, settles and establishes them in wisdom: to this extent one pays and repays one’s mother and father.”*

# Gratitude to Parents

Gratitude, *kataññū katavedī*, is a positive response to life. In developing this, we deliberately bring into our consciousness the good things done to us in our life. So on this day especially we remember the goodness of our parents and we contemplate it. We are not dwelling on what they did wrong; instead, we deliberately choose to remember the goodness and the kindness that our parents had for us – even though in some cases, generosity might not have been there at all times.

A life without gratitude is a joyless life. If we don't have anything to be grateful about our life is a dreary plane. If life is just a continuous complaint and moan about the injustices and unfairness we have received and we don't remember anything good ever done to us – all we do is remember the bad things – then that's called depression. This is not an uncommon problem now. When we fall into depression we cannot remember any good that has happened to us. Something stops in the brain and it is impossible to imagine ever being happy again: we think this misery is forever.

In Sri Lanka and throughout Asia, *kataññū katavedī* is a cultural virtue; it is highly regarded and cultivated. Being able to support and look after our parents is considered to be one of the great blessings of life. This is interesting for those of us who come from Western cultural background, because Western values are slightly different. Many of us have had fortunate lives, but we can tend to take a lot for granted. We have privileges and benefits, and much better lives than a good portion of people in the world can ever hope to expect. There's a lot to be grateful for, a lot to feel *kataññū* for when you live in a place like Britain.

I think back to when I was a child, and the way my parents devoted their lives to look after my sister and me. When I was young, I didn't appreciate it at all. As a child in the States, we didn't think about it; we took our mother and father for granted. We could not realize what they had to sacrifice, what they had to give up in order to take care of us. It's only when we are older and have given up things for the sake of our own children or somebody else that we begin to appreciate and feel *kataññū katavedī* for our parents.

My father was an aspiring artist before the Depression in 1929. Then the Crash came and he and my mother lost everything, so he had to take a job selling shoes. My sister and I were born during the Depression and he had to support us. When the Second World War started, my father was too old to enlist in the military. He wanted to support the war effort, so he became a ship fitter in Seattle. He worked in a shipyard. He didn't like that job, but it was the best way he could help in the war effort. After the war he went back to his shoe business and became a manager of a retail store. Talking to him when I grew up, I found that he had never really liked that work either, but he felt he was too old to find another profession. The sacrifice of his own preferences was mainly to support my mother, my sister and me.

I had a much bigger choice, much better opportunities. My generation had a whole range of possibilities available to us since we were young. My parents did not have such opportunities; people in their generation had to get on with their lives and start working when they were still quite young. When I was at university in the 1950s, it was fashionable to study psychology. At that time, the trend was to blame your mother for everything that went wrong in your life. The focus was on mothers, and what they had done to cause ME to suffer now. I didn't realize then that suffering was a natural thing for human beings. My mother was not a perfectly enlightened being when she had me, so naturally there were things she could have improved on. But generally speaking, the dedication, commitment, love and care were all there – and directed mainly to making the lives of my father's, my sister's and myself as good and as happy as could be. It was a dedication – she asked very little for herself. So when I think back like this, “kataññū”, gratitude, arises in my mind for my mother

and father. Now I can hardly think of any of the faults that used to dominate my mind when I was young; they seem so trivial now, I hardly recall any.

If we just go on with the force of habits and conditionings, we remain more or less stuck with all kinds of things instilled into us – with habits that we acquired when we were young – and these can dominate our conscious life as we get older. But as we mature and grow up, we realize that we can develop skilfulness in the way we think about ourselves, and in the way we think about others. The Buddha encouraged us to think of the good things done for us by our parents, by our teachers, friends and others; and to do this intentionally – to cultivate it, to bring it into consciousness quite deliberately – rather than just letting it happen accidentally.

When I became a Buddhist monk in Thailand, I was very fortunate to meet a teacher, Luang Por Chah, who became the catalyst for the *kataññū* in my life. At that time I was thirty-four years old and I must say, *kataññū* was not yet part of my life's experience. I was still very much obsessed with myself, with what I wanted and what I thought. However, after training as a Buddhist monk for about six years, I had a heart-opening experience that was very much the experience of *kataññū katavedī*.

I had been a Buddhist for many years before I met Luang Por Chah. I became attracted to Buddhism about the the age of twenty-one, and I had tremendous interest and faith in Buddhism as well as an eagerness to study and practise it. But it was still coming from the sense of me doing it, me studying it, me trying to practise it. When I became a monk there was still this dominant interest in my mind: 'I want to get rid of suffering, I want to be

enlightened.’ I was not much concerned about other people, about my parents or even about Luang Por Chah with whom I was living with at the time. I was grateful that he was helping me but it was not a deep gratitude.

There was a conceit, an unpleasant kind of conceit: I had the idea that life owed all this to me. In my kind of middle-class situation we take so much for granted. My parents worked hard to make my life comfortable, but I thought they should have worked harder; I deserved more than what they gave me. Even though this was not a conscious thought, there was the underlying attitude that I deserved all I had: it was right to get all this, people should give me these things, my parents should make my life as good as possible, as I wanted it to be. So from that viewpoint, it was Ajahn Chah’s duty to teach and guide me! Sometimes I had the conceit that my presence was a great blessing and asset to the monastery. It was not all that conscious, but when I began to contemplate things in my mind I could see this conceit and became aware of this insensitivity. We can take so much for granted and complain that life is not as good, as abundant, as privileged as we would like it to be; or else we think that others are much better off than ourselves.

In Thailand, I practised with diligence and was determined in my monastic life. After five vassas a monk is no longer considered to be a novice and can get away on his own. I felt that being with a teacher was fine but I wanted to go away on my own, so I went to Central Thailand from North East Thailand. Then, after the vassa I went on a pilgrimage to India. This was around 1972, and I decided to go as a tudong bhikkhu – that is, to walk from place to place as part of my practice as a monk. Somebody provided me with a ticket from Bangkok to Calcutta, and I found

myself in Calcutta with my alms-bowl, my robe and that's all. In Thailand, it had been easy, but in India it seemed that wandering around with an alms-bowl and no money would be quite frightening. As it happened, the five months I spent in India were quite an adventure and I have very pleasant memories of that time. The life of an almsmendicant worked in India. Of all countries it should work there, as that's where the Buddha lived and taught.

It was about this time that I began to think of Luang Por Chah. My mind began to recognize the kindness he had extended to me. He had accepted me as his disciple, looked after me, taken an interest, given me the teachings and helped me in almost every way. And there was his own example. If you wanted to be a monk, you wanted to be like him. He was a full human being, a man who inspired me, someone I wanted to emulate – and I must say there weren't so many men that I had had that feeling towards. In the States, the role models for men were not very attractive to me: John Wayne or President Eisenhower or Richard Nixon were not men I wanted to emulate. Film stars and athletes were given great importance, but none of them inspired me. But then in Thailand, I found this monk ...

He was very small; I towered above him. When we were together sometimes that surprised me, because he had such an enormous presence. He seemed always much bigger than I was. It was interesting, the power, the aura of this little man. I didn't really think of him as a little man; I thought of him as a huge man because of the mettā (lovingkindness) in his life. He was a man of enormous mettā. There was this feeling about him that attracted people; he was like a magnet and you wanted to be close to him. So I found myself going over to see him at his kuti in the evenings,

or whenever it was possible; I wanted to take every opportunity I had to hang around. I found that was the way most people tended to behave towards him. He had an enormous following in Thailand, both Thais and Westerners, because of his mettā practice. I asked him once what it was that drew people to him and he said, “I call it my magnet.” He was a very charming person; he had ebullience, a radiant quality. And he used his magnet to attract people so that he could teach them the Dhamma. This is how he used the charismatic quality he had: not for his ego, but to help people.

I felt a great sense of gratitude that he should do this – that he would spend his life taking on laypeople and difficult monks like myself, having to put up with all of us endlessly creating problems; we were so obsessed with ourselves; with our desires, our doubts, our opinions, and our views. To be surrounded day and night by people who are endlessly irritating takes real mettā, and he would do it. He could have just gone off to a nice place and had a quiet life. That’s what I wanted to do at the time. I wanted to get enlightened so that I could just live a nice peaceful life in a happy way; in a pleasant, peaceful place. I wanted everyone in the monastery to be harmonious, to have the right chemistry and to harmonize with me so there would be no conflict or friction. But in a Thai monastery, there are always problems and difficulties. The Vinaya Pitaka presents all the background stories of what the monastic community used to do that caused the Buddha to establish these disciplinary guidelines. Some of the rules deal with horrible things. Some of those monastics around the Lord Buddha were abominable.



After his enlightenment, the Lord Buddha at first thought that the Dhamma was too subtle, that no one would understand it so there was no point in teaching it. Then, according to the legend, one of the gods came forth and said, 'Please Lord, for the welfare of those who have little dust in their eyes, teach the Dhamma.' The Buddha then contemplated with his powerful mind who might understand the Dhamma teaching. He remembered his early teachers but through his powers realized that both of them had died. Then he remembered his five friends who had been practising with him before and who had deserted him. Out of compassion he went off to find these five friends, and expounded his brilliant teaching on the Four Noble Truths. This made me feel *kataññū katavedī* to the Lord Buddha. It's marvellous: here I am – this guy, here, in this century – having an opportunity to listen to the Dhamma, and to have this pure teaching still available.

Having a living teacher like Ajahn Chah was not like worshipping a prophet who lived 2,500 years ago, but was actually inheriting the lineage of the Lord Buddha himself. Perhaps because of visiting the Buddhist holy places, *kataññū katavedī* began to become very strong in me in India. Seeing these holy places and then thinking of Luang Por Chah in Thailand, I remembered how I had thought: 'I've done my five years, now I'm going to leave. I'm going to have a few adventures, do what I want to do, be out from under the eye of the old man.' I realized then that I had actually run away. At that time there were many Westerners coming to our monastery in Thailand, and I did not want to be bothered with them. I did not want to have to teach them and translate for them; I just wanted to have my own life and not be pestered by these people. So there was a selfish motivation in me to leave, on top of which I had left Luang Por Chah with all these Westerners who didn't speak Thai. At that time, I was the only

one who could translate for the Westerners, as Luang Por Chah could not speak English. When I felt this *kataññū katavedī*, all I wanted to do was get back to Thailand and offer myself to Ajahn Chah. How can you repay a teacher like that? I did not have any money, and that was not what he was interested in anyway. Then I thought that the only way I could make him happy was to be a good Buddhist monk and to go back and help him out; whatever he wanted me to do, I would do it. With that intention, I went back after five months in India and gave myself to the teacher. It was a joyful offering, not a begrudging one, because it came out of this *kataññū*, this gratitude for the good things I had received.

From that time on, I found that my meditation practice began to improve. That hard selfishness cracked in me: me trying to get something, my desire for harmony, me and my desire to practise and to have a peaceful life, me not wanting to be responsible for anything but just to do my own things. When I gave up all that, things seemed to fall into place. What used to be difficult, like concentrating the mind, became easier, and I found that life became joyful to me. I began to enjoy monastic life. I wasn't just sitting around thinking, 'You are disturbing my peace, I don't like this monastery – I want to go to another one', as I used to do. Nor did I feel as resentful as I had before: 'This monk is disturbing my practice, I can't live here', and so on. This grumbling used to be an obstruction in my practice, but now suddenly these things were no longer important issues.

In fact I thought that when I went back, I would ask Ajahn Chah to send me to a monastery to which no monk wanted to go, like a certain branch monastery on the Cambodian border. It was called Wat Bahn Suan Kluey, 'Banana Grove Village Monastery.' It was in the backwoods, it had no good roads and it was in an

undeveloped part of Thailand where people were quite poor. It was very hot there and all the trees were shorter than myself, although I didn't see many bananas around! It would have been like being exiled to Siberia. When I returned, I suggested to Ajahn Chah that he send me there. He didn't, but he did encourage me to go to Bahn Bung Wai, which was a village about six kilometres from the main monastery. In 1975 we established Wat Pah Nanachat, the International Forest Monastery near this village. Before we went there the place had been a charnel ground, a cremation area for the village, and it was believed that the forest was filled with ghosts. At first we didn't realize exactly what the place meant to the villagers. Then I became aware that I was staying at the spot where the most fiendish ghost in the forest was supposed to live, so the village headman used to come and ask, 'You sleep all right? Seen anything interesting?' I didn't see anything at all; the ghosts didn't bother me. But that experience helped me to prove my worth as a monk, and that was due to kataññū.

When Luang Por Chah asked me to come to England in 1977, I was determined to stick it out and not just follow my own particular feelings and moods; I felt pretty awful that first year and was ready to go back to Thailand. But because of this sense of gratitude, I wasn't going to follow a personal whim. Kataññū gave me a tremendous sense of duty, of service, but not in a heavy way. It meant that I did not stay here out of a sense of duty – which makes life unpleasant – but out of a willingness to sacrifice and to serve. This is a joyful thing to do.

This reminds me of an interesting story. The monk who took me to see Luang Por Chah, Phra Sommai, was the same age as I was; he had been in the Thai Navy, and I had been in the

American Navy during the Korean War. He could speak English and had been on tudong – wandering from Ubon province, where Ajahn Chah lived, to Nong Khai where I was. It was my first year as a novice monk and he was the first Thai monk I had met who could speak English, so I was delighted to have somebody to talk to. He was also a very strict monk, adhering to every rule in the Vinaya. He would eat from his alms-bowl and wore dark-brown forest robes, whereas in the monastery where I lived, the monks wore orange-coloured robes; he really impressed me as an exemplary monk. He told me that I should go and stay with Ajahn Chah. So after I received bhikkhu ordination, my preceptor agreed that I could go with this monk to stay with Luang Por Chah. But on the way I began to get fed up with this monk – who turned out to be a pain in the neck. He was forever fussing about things and condemning the other monks, saying that we were the very best. I could not take this incredible arrogance and conceit, and I hoped that Ajahn Chah would not be like him. I wondered what I was getting myself into.

When we arrived at Wat Pah Pong, I was relieved to find that Ajahn Chah was not like that. The following year the monk disrobed and he became an alcoholic. The only thing that had kept him off alcohol had been the monastic life, so he fell into alcoholism and became a really degenerate man with a terrible reputation in the province of Ubon. He became a tramp, a really pathetic case, and I felt a sense of disgust and aversion towards him. Talking to Ajahn Chah one evening about it, he told me: ‘You must always have kataññū towards Sommai because he brought you here. No matter how badly he behaves or how degenerate he becomes, you must always treat him like a wise teacher and express your gratitude. You are probably one of the really good things that has happened to him in his life, something he can be

proud of. If you keep reminding him of this – in a good way, not in an intimidating way – then eventually he might want to change his ways.’ So Luang Por Chah encouraged me to seek out Sommai, talk to him in a friendly way and express my gratitude to him for taking me to Ajahn Chah.

It really was a beautiful thing to do. It would have been easy to look down on him and say, ‘You really disappoint me. You used to be so critical of others and think you were such a good monk, and look at you now.’ We can feel indignant and disappointed at somebody for not living up to our expectations. But what Luang Por Chah was saying was: ‘Don’t be like that, it’s a waste of time and harmful; do what’s really beautiful out of compassion.’ I saw Sommai in the early part of this year, degenerate as ever; I could not see any change in him. Yet whenever he sees me, it seems to have a good effect on him. He remembers that he was the one responsible for me coming to stay with Luang Por Chah, and that’s a source of a few happy moments in his life. One feels quite glad to offer a few happy moments to a very unhappy person.

I remember a woman on one of our retreats who, whenever it came to spreading mettā to her parents, would go into a rage; then she felt very guilty about it. This was because she only used her intellect; she wanted to do this practice of mettā, but emotionally felt anything but that. It’s important to see this conflict between the intellect and the emotional life. We know in our mind that we should be able to forgive our enemies and love our parents, but in our hearts we feel: ‘I can never forgive them for what they’ve done.’ So then we either feel anger and resentment, or we go into rationalizations: ‘Because my parents were so bad, so unloving, so unkind, they made me suffer so much that I can’t forgive or forget’, or: ‘There’s something wrong with me, I’m a

terrible person because I can't forgive. If I were a good person I would be able to forgive, therefore I must be a bad person.' These are the conflicts that we have between the intellect and the emotions. When we don't understand this conflict, we are confused; we know how we should feel but we don't actually feel that way.

With the intellect we can figure it out in an ideal way; we can create marvellous images and perceptions in the mind. But the emotional nature is not rational. It's a feeling nature; it is not going to go along with what is reasonable, logical, or sensible. So, on the emotional level, we have to understand how we actually feel. I've found it helps to have mettā for my own feeling. When we feel that our parents are unkind and unloving to us we can have mettā towards the feeling we have in the heart; not being judgemental, but having patience with that feeling – to see that this is how it feels and then to accept that feeling. Then it is possible to resolve that. But when we get stuck in a battle between our logical perceptions and our emotional responses, it gets very confusing. Once I began to accept my negativity rather than suppress it, I could resolve it. When we resolve something with mindfulness, then we can let it go and free ourselves from the power of that particular thing – not through denial or rejection, but through understanding and accepting that particular negative feeling. The resolution of such a conflict leads us to contemplate on what life is about.

My father died about six years ago. He was then ninety years old and he had never shown love or positive feelings towards me, so from early childhood I had this feeling that he did not like me. I carried this feeling through most of my life; I never had any kind of love, any kind of warm relationship with my father. It was

always a perfunctory: 'Hello son, good to see you.' He seemed to feel threatened by me. I remember whenever I came home as a Buddhist monk he would say, 'Remember, this is my house, you've got to do as I say.' This was his greeting – and I was almost fifty years old at the time. I don't know what he thought I was going to do!

In the last decade of his life, he was quite miserable and became very resentful. He had terrible arthritis and was in constant pain; he had Parkinson's disease and everything was going wrong. Eventually he was completely paralyzed and had to be put in a nursing home. He could move his eyes and talk, but the rest of his body was rigid, totally still. He hated this and was resentful of what had happened to him because before that he had been a strong, independent man, able to control and manage everything in his life.

During my first year here I remember discussing my parents with my sister. She pointed out to me that my father was a very considerate man. He was considerate and thoughtful towards my mother. He was always eager to help her when she was tired or unwell – a very supportive husband.

Because I came from a family where it was normal for a man to be like that, I had never recognized those qualities. My sister pointed out that it is not often that a husband is supportive or helpful to his wife. For my father's generation, women's rights and feminism were not the issue. 'I bring in the money, and you do the cooking and washing,' was the attitude then. I realized then that I had not only completely overlooked these good qualities, I had not even noticed them.

The last time I went to see him, I decided that I would try to get some kind of warmth going between us before he died. It was quite difficult to even think this, because I had gone through life feeling that he didn't like me. It is very hard to break through that kind of thing. Anyway, his body needed to be stimulated so I said, 'Let me massage your leg, you'll get bedsores', and he said, 'No, you don't have to do it.' So I said, 'I would really like to do it.' He said, 'You don't have to do it.' But I could tell that he was considering it, and he said, 'So you'd really like to do it?' and I said, 'Yes.' I started massaging his feet, his legs, his neck and shoulders, his hands and his face, and he really enjoyed the physical contact. It was the first time he had been touched like that. I think elderly people really like being touched, because physical contact is quite meaningful; it's an expression of feelings.

I began to see that my father really loved me, but because of his upbringing, he didn't know how to say it. He'd been brought up in an Edwardian time in a very formal environment. His had been a 'don't touch, don't get emotional' sort of a family; feelings were always controlled. Now I realized that my father was quite a loving man and I had this great sense of relief. I couldn't understand him when I was young. I did not understand the consequences of having such an upbringing, and that once you are conditioned in that way it is difficult to break out of it. When I looked back, I could see that behind the behaviours of my father's there was love, but it always came out in a commanding or demanding way. It was the only way he knew how to talk. When he said: 'Remember, this is my house, and you have to do what I say', maybe it was because I saw him as an old man losing his control, and he could see that and felt I was a threat. He probably thought: 'He's going to think I am a hopeless old man, but I'm going to show him.'



Life is a difficult, ongoing experience; you keep learning until you die. You keep thinking that it should not be so, that it should be easy. Now, I think that life should be difficult because that's the way we learn.

Now I look back and feel *kataññū* for all those who have been responsible for encouraging me and helping me when I needed it. What they have done since then, or whether they have lived up to my expectations is not the point. Having *mettā* and *kataññū* is about not being critical or vindictive or dwelling on the bad things people have done; it's about being able to select and remember the good they have done. Having a day like this when we consciously bring to mind thoughts of our parents with gratitude is a way of bringing joy and positive feelings into our lives. Taking the Five Precepts and offering food to the Sangha as a way of remembering our parents with gratitude is a beautiful gesture. At a time like this, we should also consider expressing *kataññū* to the country we live in, because usually we take this for granted. We can remember the benefits made available to us by the state and society, rather than thinking of what's wrong with it. *Kataññū* allows us to bring into consciousness all the positive things concerned with living in this country. We should develop *kataññū*, even though modern thinking may not encourage us to do so. It is an appreciation and expression of gratitude for the opportunities and the good we derive from living in this society. We're not thinking always that this nation and society owe us everything, caught in the 'welfare mind.' We are grateful for the welfare state, and also recognize that it can breed complaining minds, minds that take things for granted.

So today is a day to develop kataññū. Do not think it is just a day to be sentimental. Kataññū is a practice to develop in daily life, because it opens the heart and brings joy to our human experience. We need that joy; it's something that nurtures us and is essential for our spiritual development. Joy is one of the factors of enlightenment. Life without joy is a dreary one – grey, dull and depressing. So today is a day for joyous recollections.





*Gratitude to Teachers*

*“That is true, Ānanda. When someone has enabled you to go for refuge to the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha, it’s not easy to repay them by bowing down to them, rising up for them, greeting them with joined palms, and observing proper etiquette for them; or by providing them with robes, alms-food, lodgings, and medicines and supplies for the sick.*

*When someone has enabled you to refrain from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, and alcoholic drinks that cause negligence, it’s not easy to repay them ...*

*When someone has enabled you to have experiential confidence in the Buddha, the teaching, and the Saṅgha, and the ethics loved by the noble ones, it’s not easy to repay them ...*

*When someone has enabled you to be free of doubt regarding suffering, its origin, its cessation, and the practice that leads to its cessation, it’s not easy to repay them by bowing down to them, rising up for them, greeting them with joined palms, and observing proper etiquette for them; or by providing them with robes, alms-food, lodgings, and medicines and supplies for the sick.”*

# Gratitude to Teachers

Ajahn Chah began life as a monk at the age of twenty, in a village monastery where he studied the pariyatti Dhamma, the more academic aspects of practice. After four years or so, he decided to develop his meditation practice, and travelled through Thailand seeking out various teachers. He spent some time with one teacher in Lopburi and then with another teacher in Ubon, but most of the time he travelled alone, gradually gaining insights through his practice of meditation. It was during this period that he spent two nights at Ajahn Mun's monastery where his insights were affirmed by the great teacher.

Luang Por Chah liked the style of practice of the Dhammayut sect, one of the two sects in Thailand, in which the monastic discipline, Vinaya, was very much part of the practice. It offered a complete monastic lifestyle and was therefore unusual in Thailand. Much of the meditation in Thailand was taught as a technique and could therefore be quite separate from monasticism. For example, with the Mahasi Sayadaw system it didn't matter if you were a layperson or a monk. It's a technique that works just as well for a layperson. But Luang Por Chah's approach was in mindfulness through ordinary monastic life. It was a way of using the monastic form to develop awareness and reflectiveness. He didn't encourage studies and when I eventually met him he saw that studying was the last thing I needed to do. I had been through the university system in the United States and was an obsessive reader – addicted to literature. Wherever I went I always had to have a book with me or I would feel nervous and ill at ease. When I met Ajahn Chah I didn't tell him this, but he seemed to pick it up intuitively because he said: 'No books!'

In Thailand they always ask me: 'How could he teach you?' because when we met I couldn't speak Thai and he couldn't speak English. Ajahn Chah always put a reflective tone into answering this by saying: 'Sumedho learned through the language of Dhamma.' And then people would ask: 'Well, what language is that?' They obviously didn't quite understand that the language I learned from wasn't English or Thai but came through living, through awakening and learning from the experience of being conscious, of having a human body, feelings, thoughts, greed, hatred and delusion. These are common human things; they are not cultural things. This is what we all share, they're common human problems and conditions.

I remember feeling an immediate confidence and trust in Ajahn Chah. I met him through a series of coincidences, or maybe it was good luck – although some people like to think that I was meant to be with him. Anyway, meeting a teacher like Ajahn Chah wasn't what I was expecting. By the time I met him I had been to many other teachers – and it wasn't that I didn't like those teachers or that I was critical of them, it was just that nothing 'clicked.' I didn't feel I wanted to be with them, so I went my own way, became a samanera in Nong Khai in the North East of Thailand and spent my first year teaching myself.

However, while living alone I had the insight that I would be able to get to a certain point with my practice, but never get beyond it; I'd never see clearly unless I learned humility. I remember having a wish that I could meet a teacher – then, almost immediately, Ajahn Chah's disciple, Phra Sommai, appeared. Coincidence? I don't know. He was about my age, thirty-two or three, and could speak English. When we met I hadn't spoken English for months and months. If you haven't spoken your native tongue for months and months, then the first opportunity is like a dam-burst. You can't stop. At first I thought I had frightened him, but he stayed with me at this monastery for a while and eventually convinced me that I should go and meet Ajahn Chah. My preceptor agreed with this. He gave me upasampadā and sent me off to stay with Ajahn Chah.

At that time Ajahn Chah was not well known in Bangkok even by Thais, not to mention the Western community, but he was increasingly well known in the North East of Thailand – an area known as the 'Isahn'. It's strange, because the Isahn was the last place that I had wanted to live. It's the poorest part of Thailand. I had always imagined living down on the coast where all the



resorts are now. I had this romantic image of being a monk sitting under a coconut palm tree on a white sand beach. Instead I ended up spending ten years in Isahn.

What impressed me about Luang Por Chah was his emphasis on teaching the Four Noble Truths. I hadn't come across this before with other teachers, or perhaps I just hadn't picked it up – there was always a problem around language because I didn't speak Thai. Many of the meditation techniques I learned were based on Abhidhamma teaching, which I found very boring. The last thing I wanted to learn was all that incredibly complex Abhidhamma. I thought: 'That's not what I want from this religion.' In that first year on my own, learning from a little book, I had developed a lot of insights into the Four Noble Truths. I found it a powerful teaching, very simple in its form; just 'one-two-three-four.' That's easy enough, I thought. It pointed to suffering – and I had plenty of that. I didn't have to go looking for it. I realized that this was the teaching I had been looking for. And when I met Luang Por Chah I found his whole emphasis was also in developing insights into these truths through daily life in the monastery.

Luang Por Chah had a great deal of mettā (lovingkindness), so I felt very welcomed by the way he received me at Wat Pah Pong. When I first met him, I felt he was very interested and I felt intuitively that he was a wise man. I couldn't understand Thai very well at the time, but what I saw of how he lived his life and his general way of being was pleasing to me. As a teacher, he seemed to pick up quickly where I was at. His teaching was very direct.

Even though he was giving a lot of talks – which I couldn't understand for the first two years – he very much emphasized 'kor wat', the way you live in the monastery: paying attention,

being mindful with the food and the robes, with the kuti and the monastery. I found him very much like a mirror that would reflect my state of mind. He always seemed to be completely present. I'd get carried away with my thoughts and emotions, and then suddenly discover that just being around him meant I could let go; I could drop what I was holding on to without even telling him. His presence helped me to see what I was doing and what I was holding. So I decided that I would live with him as long as I could since such monks are hard to find. I stayed with him for ten years at Wat Pah Pong and branch monasteries.

Luang Por Chah could be very charming and make you feel very good but he could also be critical and fierce. But I always trusted him; even when he was being critical of me, I could use that. I could see my feelings of anger towards him. One had to conform with everything at Wat Pah Pong and he would give very long *desanās* in the evening, sometimes four or five hours. And of course, I couldn't understand them. So when he would start to give a talk in Lao, I asked him if I could get up and go back to practise at my kuti. He said: 'No, no, you have to stay and develop patience.' I thought I'd better do what he said, so I did that. Of course, when you are feeling bored or have a lot of pain from sitting so long, you feel anger. And he's the one with all the power; he's the one sitting up in the Dhamma seat and he can decide to stop when he wants to. So, I'd start feeling all this rage, and I'd start thinking, 'I'm going to leave this monastery; I don't want to be here.' But then it would drop very quickly. It didn't hold, for some reasons. I didn't carry it. One time, I remember I was really angry. He'd been talking for a long time; I was so fed up and tired with the whole thing and then at the end of his talk he looked at me and smiled and asked me how I was doing. I said I felt fine, because all that anger and rage had just dropped away.

Basically I had so much faith in him that I could allow him to do things that would push me to the edge, to make me see what I was doing. Basically I trusted him, so I never felt like I was used or abused or exploited because I trusted that he was helping me even when I didn't like what he was doing.

Luang Por Chah's way of teaching was about getting to know yourself, about looking at your mind, at your citta, so you're aware all the time of what you're feeling. Know your emotions; do not get caught up in your own emotions. Keep observing what you're feeling emotionally. I had a lot of emotions coming up about being the only 'farang' (foreigner) there, feeling insecure and not understanding things very well. Sometimes I'd feel lonely and other times arrogant. I felt that a lot of what they were doing was of no values' and I didn't agree with it. But there was this emphasis on knowing yourself, knowing your emotions, to be the one who knows, or 'pu-roo' in Thai. The pu-roo style, being the knowing, I found really helpful.

I began to see how I was creating my own suffering by holding on to views or by projecting things on to other monks. When I actually reflected on the existing conditions, I saw they were very good. I had food and requisites, a good teacher, and the monks were basically all good people. So when I really contemplated the actual situation, I saw it was a very good place. Then because of the pu-roo style I could see whenever jealousy or fear, resentment or arrogance arose, how I created those things.

Once I could see this, I could let go. I didn't have to hold on. Once I saw that I was the one who created these 'arom' (moods), I could take the position of being the one who knows, the one who

is aware. I worked through a lot of emotional habits that way. You know how it can be when you're the only foreigner; you don't know what's happening or what they're thinking. I experienced times of paranoia thinking, 'What are they really thinking? Why do they do that?' And yet because of the teaching, the pu-roo, I could see that I was making it up myself, that my fear or projection of them was what I made. It wasn't the others. It was what I was creating in my mind.

I feel that I have received the very best from life, not only in terms of the Buddha's teachings, but also in terms of its manifestation in the life of Ajahn Chah. I feel a lot of gratitude to Ajahn Chah, but it's not that I'm a devotee of Ajahn Chah or a cult follower of his. He didn't want us to make him into a cult figure. He never pointed to himself saying that he was a sotāpanna or an arahant. Whenever one wanted to find out where he was at – and I don't know how many people asked him if he was an arahant – he would answer in a way that made you look at what you were asking. 'Who is it that is asking? Why do you want to know?' So he'd point you in the right direction, by refusing to answer either yes or no.

What I gained from that ten-year period was a good foundation in practice and in Vinaya. By the time I came to England I had only been a bhikkhu for ten years. I sometimes think that I was crazy to come here having just ten years in the robes. Nowadays we wouldn't think of putting a ten-year monk in such a position. But my confidence in the practice was firmly established during those ten years, and Luang Por Chah obviously realized that, because he was the one who encouraged me to come here.

During the early years of Cittaviveka Monastery, Luang Por Chah invited me back to Thailand before the five years. I took a group of English people with me. Anandho and I went to visit Luang Por Chah at Pah Goodwai [a house, by the Moon River, offered to Luang Por Chah by Khunying Toon]. I was feeling quite confident in what I was doing and in my practice. Because all that time I could use the situation I was in—praised or blamed for things—as a way of practice. And it worked. Luang Por Chah saw that. He could see that I didn't have any doubt about the practice. Even though I have been through some troubles and difficult times, it hadn't destroyed my faith and confidence in the practice.

During the time at Pah Goodwai, I had a feeling that something might happen; that it might be the last time I see Luang Por Chah in good shape. And I had a feeling that he also was aware of what was going to happen to him even though he didn't say anything. It was a touching leave-taking Anando and I had. And then we went back to England. The following year, Luang Por Chah had a stroke and was taken to Chulalongkorn Hospital in Bangkok. It was during the Pansa [Vassa or the Rain Retreat]. Right after the Pansa I flew to Bangkok to see him in Chulalongkorn Hospital.

It was a moving scene to see him in such a helpless state. He was staying in this suite. Luang Por Liem was there and some of the senior Thai monks. Ajahn Pabhakaro wheeled him out in a wheelchair. He was just sitting there. Luang Por Chah had a kind of charismatic personality, but this time it wasn't there. It was like a sack of potatoes in his body. I was with Mae Pao [one of the very first Bangkok residents to become a student of Luang Por Chah, in the 1970s]. She broke down and cried. We were on the floor bowing to him, and I was crying. I looked at Luang Por Chah

and I thought he's quite helpless now, but it must be quite hard to see his disciples all crying. So many monks said that we've got to cure him, get him back to what he was before. The whole country was in desperation to try to heal him. And I kept thinking and reflecting in my own mind that I didn't want Luang Por Chah to be like this. I wanted Luang Por Chah to return to the charismatic and charming teacher I remembered.

Suddenly I saw what I was doing and thought 'oh this is the way it is now.' He taught me all I needed to know, and I'll do that! That's the right thing to do as an act of gratitude to Luang Por Chah. This is what would please him. My determination was even stronger to do what he had already pointed out how to practice. Whether he was cured or not didn't matter anymore. The sense of love and gratitude was so strong I felt like I want to repay him and honour him, honour what he had done. So that was my motivation from that time on. I didn't look to any senior monk, really, in the same way. This was what I mean—unfortunate circumstances strengthened determination. Going back to England I knew how to deal with my own Vipakkamma [kammic results]. The point wasn't to be a missionary or spread the Dhamma or anything other than keeping myself from being caught up in my own emotional habits and delusions unaffected by praises and blames, successes and failures. I remember Luang Por Chah used to give a lot of talks on the Eight Worldly Dhammas. And I found that really skillful. He would say praise is equal to blame. In a life time you will get both, but they are equally valued. That always impressed me. When I was being praised, not to expect to get lost in being praised or get depressed or despairing when I was being blamed or criticised. So the practice was to be always observing the effects it had on

conditions arising when being praised or being blamed and criticised. So I never lost the practice at all. In England there are so many unknown factors. There wasn't a supporting society like in Thailand. I think because of that, knowing what to practice was why it worked. This is what Luang Por Chah conveyed to me while living with him in Thailand. And he was somehow able to develop and nourish that in me. That's why I have so much gratitude for him, even now when I think of him.

I was honored to have met such a wise human being.

Reflectiveness is always the way. Once you have confidence in awareness, then whatever happens to you, you can reflect on it and learn from it. I've been in England for over twenty-six years, which has been a time of learning from all the many things that have happened to me: I get praises and blames, things go well and fall apart, people come, people go. And even a teacher isn't a refuge; Ajahn Chah became ill and was incapacitated for ten years. He couldn't say a word and was nursed until he died in 1992. So the refuge is not in a teacher or in the scriptures or in a monastery or in a religious tradition or Vinaya or anything like that, but in awareness. Awareness is so ordinary, so natural to us that we ignore it, we overlook it all the time. This is where we need continuous reminders and wise reflections, so that when tragedies and difficulties happen we can use those very things as part of our training, as part of the path of cultivating the Way. This is the fourth Noble Truth.

You only need the confidence to reflect, to be aware – not of how things should be, but of what you are actually experiencing, without claiming it, without adding to it in any way. Thus when I feel sad, if I think: ‘I am sad’, then I have made it more than what it is. Instead, I am simply aware of the sadness, which is preverbal. So awareness exists without the arising of thoughts. The habitual tendency is to think: ‘I am sad, and I don’t want to be sad. I want to be happy.’ Then it becomes a big problem for us. Awareness is not a special quality that I have more of than you. It is a natural ability that we all share. The practice is in using this natural ability and in being willing to learn from it.







*Gratitude to the Buddha*

*“And Pokkharasati, having seen, attained, experienced and penetrated the Dhamma, having passed beyond doubt, transcended uncertainty, having gained perfect confidence in the Teacher’s doctrine without relying on others, said:*

*‘Excellent, Lord, excellent! It is as if someone were to set up what had been knocked down, or to point out the way to one who had got lost, or to bring an oil-lamp into a dark place, so that those with eyes could see what was there. Just so the Blessed Lord has expounded the Dhamma in various ways ...*

*I go with my son, my wife, my ministers and counsellors for refuge to the Reverend Gotama, to the Dhamma and to the Sangha.*

*May the Reverend Gotama accept me as a lay-follower who has taken refuge from this day forth as long as life shall last!”*

# Gratitude to the Buddha

My faith in the Buddha's teaching arose when I was 21 years old and in the U.S. Navy. It was 1955 and I was on a supply ship traveling to various American military bases in Japan and the Philippines. At the time I was very disillusioned with Christianity and felt quite open to other possibilities. When I came across Zen Buddhism in Japan, it sparked an interest that has carried me through to this present moment.

I would say that faith arose when I realized that the Buddha's teaching wasn't about believing or holding to doctrines, but about investigating — the willingness to doubt and investigate the nature of the mind through directly observing it yourself. I found that I never felt much faith arisen in the blind beliefs that most other religions demand. I may have been interested in them as a subject of study, but not as a path for myself.

By the early sixties, I had completed my tour of duty and was working in the Peace Corps in Sabah, North Borneo and Thailand was an easy place to get to on holidays. While living there, I twice came to Thailand and Cambodia. I felt great interest in a country that was so completely Buddhist — where the King himself was a Buddhist and 95% of the population identified themselves as being Theravāda Buddhists. Although I didn't know much about Theravāda before I came to live in Southeast Asia as there wasn't much available to read in English, I started investigating it and wrote to Sri Lanka, Bangkok, and Kuala Lumpur for literatures.

During those first 10 years of my faith in Buddhism, I was mainly just reading about it. By the time I became a Sāmaṇera (novice monk) in 1966 in Thailand, I had acquired a small book called 'The Word of the Buddha' which was a compilation of the basic teachings on the Four Noble Truths taken from the Suttas (Buddhist scriptures). I spent the first year as a sāmaṇera just inquiring into this book, putting it to the test. Having so much time to be by myself, I could actually investigate these Four Noble Truths through observing them myself rather than just reading more Theravāda literatures. During that year as a sāmaṇera, because I was pretty much living alone in a hut in a country whose language I couldn't speak, I didn't have any kind of distraction from the practice of meditation and thus I had many insights.

At first, I was mainly focusing on concentration practices, but after so much of that, I found it impossible to sustain. Then the actual investigating of the Four Noble Truths became my practice. Of course, living alone and having nothing to do all day and night, there are all kinds of conditions arising that don't arise when you are living a social or more engaged life in society. A lot of repressed anger, resentment and fear started arising and I would apply the Four Noble Truths to these conditions.

One thing was very clear: the Buddha stated that all conditions are impermanent. So I was determined to understand impermanence, not through thinking about it, but through watching it. Naturally, these mental states were impermanent — they came and went. Eventually, through patient endurance, the resentments and the fears accumulated over 31 years of life began to cease. I began to feel a sense of relief and lightness as I learned how to simply observe conditions as they arise and cease in the present moment. This led to an understanding of suffering, which is the first Noble Truth.

I have applied this insight throughout my life as a bhikkhu, living with Luang Por Chah for the first 10 years, and through the many experiences I've had: living in the UK, teaching Dhamma to others, ordaining monks and nuns, etc. Different situations would bring up various emotions or feelings — some positive, some negative — but the main focus was always on the impermanence of the condition rather than grasping it, believing it, or just trying to dismiss it.

This bore great benefits. It led to understanding how to let go of conditioned phenomena and to profound insights into the Dhamma that the Buddha proclaimed in his first sermon. This is, of course, because it is a practical teaching based on something that is ordinary in life: suffering. It is something that you can prove to yourself by investigating the source — the natural state beyond these conditions that arise and cease, the pure consciousness that they arise and cease in. So when you let things cease, then what is left is consciousness and awareness. You begin to see that this is what 'anatta' is. This is non-self. This is not a personal possession nor a personal identity. The actual teachings as recorded in the Suttas, in the Tripitaka, began to resonate with

me in a way that wasn't just an intellectual exercise, trying to figure out and understand through thinking, but from the actual ability to have profound insights into the nature of Dhamma, to recognise Dhamma, to know Dhamma in a very direct way.

These days, when I look at Buddha statues, I take refuge in the Buddha. I feel this sense of gratitude, because it's such a great gift to humanity in general that the teachings of the Lord Buddha have survived through 2,560 years — through many situations, from ancient India to modern day Thailand. Buddhism has been popular and it has been persecuted. It once was a major religion on the planet. It has developed in many ways, in many cultures and societies, but the essential teaching has never been corrupted. It's quite incorruptible. It's still workable and practical in the present day, in modern life.

I lived in England as a Buddhist monk for over thirty years, wearing these traditional robes and trying to keep my actions and speech within the boundaries of the traditional Vinaya as I learned it from Luang Por Chah in Thailand. I wanted to see if one could survive as a monk in a non-Buddhist country. It turns out that living for thirty-four years in England wasn't that difficult. There was enough interest and enough opportunity to live easily within the traditional structure of the Vinaya. Quite a lot of interest was generated in the society through the practice of Dhamma. England is a very multinational country. You have the Thai, Sri Lankan, Cambodian, and Laotian communities that are all very supportive of the monasteries in England. During this time when I was there, most of the ones that ordained and took on monastic life were Westerners: Europeans, Americans, and Australians....

There is amongst us a feeling that the ordinary life of an average person, i.e. just living a life of entertainment and material values, is a humdrum life. One feels that there's something more to learn than just acquiring more money or more security. This Buddhist teaching points to the potential for all of us to awaken to ultimate reality, to see it and know it rather than live in the tiny world of materialistic values or never feel any possibility of getting beyond it. The Buddha Dhamma has given me this opportunity.

From 2,500 years ago to the present moment, the first sermon of the Buddha in India still applies. It's a work of genius actually! It is a teaching that is important, whatever country and whatever religion you happen to identify with. The Noble Truths speak to the human side of our lives. It's not about belief. It's not a denial of doctrines of other religions. It's a willingness to investigate reality as you are living it, as you experience it: your own feelings of self-consciousness, doubts, resentments, fears, ambitions. Whatever conditions arise in your mind, you become more adept at seeing them as impermanent conditions — they arise and cease. As you learn to let go of them, you don't experience the suffering that comes through the ignorant grasping of these various conditions, beliefs, opinions or emotions. I used to grasp and be carried away by fear, anger or resentment without finding any other alternative, but to suppress them or try to forget them. But no matter how much we try to forget, there's still this lingering sense of something missing in life. The Buddha approached this with a teaching pointing directly at the exploration and investigation of the reality common to all human beings: the experience of suffering.



One cannot help but feel an enormous sense of gratitude to the historical Buddha who established this teaching and to the lineage of his disciples down to my own teacher, Luang Por Chah, who have practiced according to his instructions and advice. In terms of Dhamma practice, there's gratitude to Luang Por Chah and the Buddha. Gratitude to parents come through the fact that they actually gave me life and gave me the opportunity to encounter Buddhism. Luang Por Chah gave me opportunity to cultivate the way. Of course these are all pointing back towards the Buddha himself.