Ajaan Fuang’s Birthday

May 5, 2020

If Ajaan Foong were still alive, he’d be 105 years old. He was born in early May. As a child, all he knew was that he was born in the week leading up to Visakha Puja. Later in life, when he was in Bangkok, someone had the idea of taking him to see an astrologer and do a reverse horoscope. He’d look at the events of his life and then figure out from those events which day he’d been born. It was either the 4th or the 5th of May. So it was either yesterday or today was his birthday, perhaps. He was born in a very poor family. He didn’t know the inside details of his birth, and there wasn’t much to give hope. He was orphaned at the age of eleven. Prior to that time, one main memory he had of his childhood was that they had a cow. The cow gave birth to a calf, and he raised the calf. Finally, they were able to sell the calf for some money, and so he had some money as a little child. Then he got very, very sick, and the money was all used up by the medicine for his illness. A few years later, his mother got sick. A few years later, his father got sick. They both died. So at age eleven, he found himself a temple boy. It was a pretty rough life. We tend to think of temple boys as having a religious education, but it’s basically kids without parents. They’re subject to whatever the abbot or the monks of the monastery would inflict on them. The very first place he was sent, the abbot sounded pretty sadistic. He beat the kids quite a lot. And if any kid was caught trying to run away, he’d get beaten really badly. They’d tie him up to a rafter, hanging down from a rafter with a rope, and beat him for the other kids to see. So Jon Foon decided this was not for him. So one day, after school, instead of going back to the monastery, he went back to his relatives and said, “I’m not going back there.” He was sent to another monastery. There he was sent to school again. But every morning he had to leave school in order to fix food for the monks for their eleven o’clock meal. As he said, he liked to put a little bit of marijuana in the curry for them, so they would nap nicely in the afternoon. One of the monks tried to teach him music, but he had no musical talent. The abbot tried to teach him medicine, but the abbot was the village doctor. But all Jon Foon could see was that he read everybody’s beck and call all hours of the day and night. He had to go along as his assistant for a while, carrying medicines, carrying this or that. It wasn’t until he was sixteen or seventeen years old that he actually started listening to the Dhamma that was being preached and began to reflect on his life. Here he had nothing, not much of an education, no family he could depend on. He was going to have to develop some perfections. So when he was old enough, he decided to ordain. That was back in the days when they were beginning to have some textbooks that actually explained what was in the Pali Canon. Prior to that, if you studied in a monastery out in the countryside, who knows what you’d learn. By the early twentieth century, Bangkok was producing some textbooks, and so he was reading about the Vinaya and began to realize that his life there at the monastery had very little to do with the rules of the Vinaya. He was beginning to get discouraged. So he gave himself two years. He said that if at the end of the two years he hadn’t met anybody who really inspired him, he’d disrobe. Fortunately, during his second year, he met Ajaan Lee. Ajaan Lee had come to Chandrabodhi. So every day he would go and listen to Ajaan Lee’s Dhamma talks, ask him questions, talk with him. Then he’d go back and stay at his monastery and try to live the life of a one-meal monk, meditating. He’d go for alms round, and instead of joining the other monks for the eleven o’clock meal, he’d go into the ordination hall and spend the day doing walking, sitting, meditation. At the end of the rains, he and one other monk decided to see if they were up for the life of a forest monk. So they wandered through the province there in Chandrabodhi, and finally got to this one mountain. It’s called Kamonkot, which means “maze mountain.” I visited one time with Ajaan Furin. We took a trip to visit his home village. On the way there, we stopped off and said, “This is where I decided that, yes, I would ordain in the Dhammavida order and be a forest monk with Ajaan Lee.” The other monk at that point had decided this was too much for him, so he went back. So Ajaan Furin returned to Chandrabodhi and told Ajaan Lee of his intention. That was back in the days when the relationship between Dhammavida and Mahanikaya was very touching. The chief Dhammavida monk in the province didn’t dare re-ordain a Mahanikaya monk as a Dhammavida monk for fear of the backlash. So Ajaan Lee said he was ready to take Ajaan Furin into Bangkok. He knew some monks in Bangkok who would ordain him. Finally, the chief monk of the province gave in. So Ajaan Furin was able to join Ajaan Lee. And there, he said, that’s where he learned the brightness of life. One of my favorite stories of his early time with Ajaan Lee is that they went on a two-dome trip, and some of the other monks were carrying Ajaan Lee’s umbrella tent and his bowl, his bag of provisions. Well, not provisions, but his bag of things he needed, and they’re in the forest. And Ajaan Furin realized that if he was going to keep up with Ajaan Lee, he’d have to just follow right in his footsteps. He couldn’t let himself fall back, because otherwise he’d lose him. And all the other monks got lost. So when evening came, he and Ajaan Lee found themselves on a mountaintop with nobody else around. So Ajaan Furin set up his umbrella tent. The two of them shared the umbrella tent that night. He massaged Ajaan Lee’s legs a little bit, then sat and meditated. He thought of a passage in the Canon where he talks about the monk who travels with his bowl as his only burden, in the same way that a bird flies with its wings as its only burden. He felt a great sense of freedom. The next morning, they went down to a village nearby. He went for alms and came back. They split the food. Ajaan Lee ate the food out of the bowl. Ajaan Furin ate out of the bowl lid. After the meal was over, he thought that the other monks had caught up with him. So he basically lived with Ajaan Lee for 20 years, until Ajaan Lee’s death. They were going to make him abbot of Ajaan Lee’s monastery, and he decided that’s not what he wanted. So he went off. First spent some time at Wamakun in Bangkok, then spent some time at a monastery up in Lopburi. Finally settled at Wat Thammasat Thet. Very remote, very secluded. Yet over time, people found him. He was never a famous teacher, but a very devoted group of students. He was able to accomplish a lot. There are lessons you can learn from his story. One is that you can’t judge people by their breath. The details of the breath. I remember going to his home village. It was really poor. I remember he talked one time about the Ordination Hall at the monastery. He said it had a really nice mural up on the ceiling, a mural of samsara. When we actually got to see it, it was pretty sad. A little kid born out in the countryside, it was something. He was born into a place with a lot of misunderstandings about the teachings. The word for nirvana in Thai, nipan, is very close to himapan, which is the name for the Himalaya Mountains. When he was young, he thought that’s what the practice was for, to go to the Himalaya Mountains. So a lot of misunderstandings he had to work through. But he was able to do it, as he decided that time when he’d looked at his life. If his life is going to have any meaning at all, he’s going to have to work on his perfections. In the later years of his life, he happened to go up north one time and meet a woman he hadn’t seen for many decades. She had been a supporter of Ajahn Lee. She had moved up north and now was a grandmother. So the woman invited him to give a Dhamma talk to her children and grandchildren. The theme of the talk was, “What are you born for? Who are you going to take as your model for what’s a good life?” If you’re born for material pleasures, material wealth, it’s not going to last. The only thing you can really hold on to are the perfections. That way, no matter what condition you’re born in—there’s a passage where the Buddha talks about being born in darkness and going in light, being born in light and going into light, being born in darkness and going in darkness, being born in light and going into darkness—the darkness where you’re born has to do with the material and other circumstances in which you’re born. But where you go has to do with what you make of your life. So how you’re born doesn’t matter. It’s how you go. As John Fuehring said, the Buddha decided he was going to be born for the sake of the perfections, every time he took birth. That’s a good vow to take on, that no matter where you’re born, you’re going to be born for the sake of the perfections, for the sake of developing your generosity, your virtue, your powers of renunciation, your discernment, your persistence, your endurance, your truth, your determination, your goodwill, and your equanimity. Make your birth worthwhile. Because here we are born. What happens after birth? Well, there’s aging, illness, and death. That’s for sure. But above and beyond that, what do you actually want to get out of life? What do you want to gain from all the pain that comes from having to be born? We’ve all been born in relative comfort. But that’s not what gives life meaning. It’s what you do with it, how you dedicate it. This is the story of all the Thai Jhans. Most of them were born in pretty poor circumstances. But as Ajahn Mun taught them, simply the fact that you’re a human being, you’re already in the supreme position for awakening, agatandesu muni sesu. It’s in the human birth that the highest foundation for the practice is found. But it doesn’t matter whether you’re poor or rich, male or female. What’s your background? You’ve got the potential within you to work on your perfections, to work for the sake of awakening. That’s what gives your life meaning. As Ajahn Fung said, if he hadn’t found Ajahn Lee, he probably would have been a small-time gangster. We never would have heard of him. But because he gave himself to the perfections, he’s become an example to all of us. So ask yourself, “Here you are born. What’s next?” Think about the Buddha’s memory of his lifetimes. There’s birth, pleasure, pain, feeding, death. That’s the common course of life, each lifetime. If you want to make it uncommon, you can do so by developing the perfections. The choice is yours.

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