

## *Remembering Ajaan Fuang*

*May 14, 2020*

Tonight's the 34<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Ajaan Fuang's passing. He was a person who, like the poet has said, contained multitudes. I had a dream about him once, very early on in my time with him. He was wearing a cowboy hat. Then he went into this room and he came out wearing another hat. He went back in the room and came back with another hat. I peeked into the room. It was a closet full of all kinds of hats.

The dream seemed to have to do with the fact that he could play many roles. This was at a time when they were preparing for a Kathin, and he was in charge of the construction of the booths. They didn't have tents the way we have here. They would make booths out of bamboo and palm fronds. He was skilled in all kinds of ways. But he was also a person of many personalities. He could be harsh. He could be gentle. There were times when he would explain things in great detail, and other times he wouldn't explain things at all.

There's that passage in Ajaan Lee's autobiography where he talks about being Ajaan Mun's attendant. His duty was to arrange things in Ajaan Mun's room after the meal. Ajaan Mun would complain to Ajaan Lee that things were not put in the right places, but he would never tell him where the right places were. Ajaan Lee solved the problem. Ajaan Mun lived in a hut that had banana leaf walls, so he poked a hole in one of the walls.

After he'd arranged the room, he went out and peeked through the hole. Ajaan Mun went into the room, looked left, looked right, arranged this, arranged that, rearranged this, rearranged that. So Ajaan Lee made a mental note of where everything was supposed to be.

The next day, he went in and arranged things as he'd remembered, went back, and peeked through the hole again. Ajaan Mun went into the room. He probably knew Ajaan Lee was looking. He looked left, right. Nothing was out of place, so he sat down and did his chants.

Well, this was the way Ajaan Fuang was with me. I was in charge of arranging things in his hut. He would never tell me where the right places were. If something was in the wrong place, simply he'd just pick it up and throw it—not at me, but just throw it. I had to notice, when he placed things himself: Where did he place them? There were other times, though, when he would explain things in great detail.

Part of the forest tradition is an old Thai tradition in general: that you train people to be observant by not explaining things all the time. Some things are explained, some things you leave it up to the student to figure out, on the basic assumption that when the ajaan does something, he has a reason.

I know a lot of Western monks who studied in Thailand and came back. And their conclusion was, “Well, the ajaans did things simply because they were Thai, because that’s the way Thais do things,” which meant, of course, that as a Westerner, you weren’t bound to do things that way. But I discovered that if I assumed that Ajaan Fuang had reasons for doing things, I could find lots of good reasons. It made me think back on my own actions, and his way of doing things then became lessons.

He was loyal, extremely loyal to Ajaan Lee. He had one ajaan in his life. He did study at one point with Ajaan Mun, but he never felt quite comfortable with Ajaan Mun. He stuck with Ajaan Lee until the end of Ajaan Lee’s life, stayed on, made sure everything was arranged for the funeral, and then went off. He was very independent—loyal, but independent at the same time. As he liked to say, “We’re nobody’s servant. Nobody hired us to be born. Nobody hired us to practice. So don’t let people order us around.”

There’s one time when I came across some of his old papers. I was sorting through his things and throwing out things that needed to be thrown out. I came across some papers where he’d been practicing signing his name. A few years earlier, he’d been given an ecclesiastical rank, Phra Khru, which is just below that of a Chao Khun. When you get a rank like that, you get a new name. So he’d been practicing signing his new name. I asked him, “Than Paw, when are you going to become a Chao Khun?” He said, “That kind of stuff is no good at all. You become a Chao Khun, and rich and famous people come to the monastery to check you out. They start ordering you around.” He then told the story of what had happened in Bangkok just a few weeks earlier.

There was a woman who was famous for raising support for the forest tradition. She was head of a Buddhist organization at one of the large government monopolies in Bangkok. The organization would print books, hold meetings, and raise money for different monasteries. Some of Ajaan Fuang’s students kept hoping that she would find out about us and raise money for us. Then someone had finally prevailed upon her to come and visit Ajaan Fuang in Bangkok.

She told him that she was interested in printing some English Dhamma books, and she’d heard he had some English translations of Ajaan Lee. At that point, we had *Keeping the Breath in Mind*, *Frames of Reference*, and *The Craft of the Heart*. So he gave her a copy of each and said, “You can print whichever one you like.”

She took them and then, a week later, she came back, saying, “That’s not what I want. I want his autobiography.” Now, I had already translated the autobiography. It hadn’t been printed. Ajaan Fuang’s policy was that you lead with the Dhamma, not with biographies or autobiographies. So he told her, “Sorry, I can’t help you.” She never came back. And that was his purpose. He didn’t want people ordering us around in the monastery.

As I said, he was extremely independent, but he also was very loyal, and also had a very strong sense of duty. He was very strict about the Vinaya. He had very clear standards about what was proper and what was not proper, which made it very easy to live with him. Once you got a sense of what his standards were, you could stick by them. There were times when I would be criticized by some of the lay people for holding to Ajaan Fuang’s standards. They went and complained. And I could always depend on him. If I was holding by his standards, he wasn’t going to criticize me, no matter how influential or how large a role the lay people might have played in the monastery.

I came to take that for granted. But after he passed away and I had to deal with the monk who was appointed as acting abbot, I began to realize how special Ajaan Fuang was, because with that monk, if any wealthy lay person came in with some project for the monastery, he would just go along, go along, go along, no matter how good or bad it was for the monastery to do that.

So it’s good to think about the standards of the ajaans of the past, the real ajaans. In this way, Ajaan Fuang was typical of the really great ajaans in that he had, as I said, a strong sense of duty, strong loyalty to his teacher, but a very strong independent streak. An interesting combination, but a combination that works well as you practice, because you will have to be independent. What he was teaching me, by not telling me where things were supposed to be, was to be independent, to use my own powers of observation.

His policy also was never to praise his students, except in cases where he felt a particular student wouldn’t be making any further progress than that. I began to realize, if I heard him praise somebody, that was a sign that that was as far as that person was going to go. If he felt there was room for improvement, he’d keep finding ways to criticize you. When I was his attendant, I was always trying to please him, but I never got any indication from him, any direct verbal indication, that I was doing okay. His attitude was that as a student, you should want to study. You shouldn’t want to have things handed to you. You should take the initiative to figure things out, and learn how to take criticism in the spirit in which it was given, which is: Here’s an area where you need improvement. If you improve, you’re going to be better off.

You're not practicing to please somebody else. You're practicing because you have suffering in your heart. The teacher's there to offer you advice on how to get rid of that suffering. That should be your motivation. Someone once came to the monastery and noticed that there was a Western monk there. So he asked Ajaan Fuang, "How is it that Westerners can ordain?" And his response was, "Don't Westerners have hearts? Can't they suffer too?"

I think that was what pulled me to Ajaan Fuang to begin with: a strong sense that he cared about my training. He saw that I was suffering, and he sympathized. But his sympathy was not the sympathy of soft words. It was a sympathy of, "This is what you need to do, and if you're motivated, okay, you'll do it."

After he died, they created a museum of his effects. I was in charge of arranging things for it, and one of the things we arranged in there was his robe. I found one of his robes that he had darned. I wanted to show that he took good care of his things, so I folded it up and placed it in the cabinet, showing the spot where it was darned. A week or two after we placed it in there, someone came running down to the bottom of the hill where I was staying. "There's something on the robe," they said. So I went up and looked in the cabinet and it looked like a kind of diamond dust on the robe. My first reaction was it was mold. I said, "How did mold get on it? After all, we ironed the robe properly and everything." Everybody else, though, was assuming that his sweat had turned into relics.

Word got out. Every now and then we'd have people come and visit the monastery to see the robe. One group in particular stands out. They were from the Education Ministry in Bangkok. They came in a large van. I was staying in the hut at the foot of the hill, and they came up and said, "We understand that Ajaan Fuang's robe shows his relics. Can we see it?" I said, "Well, it's up on the top of the hill in his mausoleum."

So they went up. They came back down again, and asked, "Since he passed away, had any other things amazing happened around Ajaan Fuang?" And I said, "I think it's pretty amazing there are people who drive all the way from Bangkok to look at a piece of cloth." They said, "No, no, no. That's not what we meant. How about when he was alive, anything amazing then?"

I said, "What I thought was amazing was that even though he was Thai, and I was a Westerner, during my time with him I never had the feeling that that was a barrier between us. The communication was heart to heart. Even though I had to learn Thai ways of doing things, still I had a strong sense that he didn't treat me simply as a Westerner. He treated me as a human being. And I tried to reciprocate." That, I thought, was amazing. It's very hard to find that kind of

communication. “No, no, that’s not what we meant,” they said. So I took pity on them, handed out some amulets, and they went home.

But there was that quality about Ajaan Fuang. He always seemed to stand outside of Thai culture a little bit. As I said, he was very independent. And because he was something of an outsider, and I was something of an outsider, I think that was where we connected.

As always, when we think about the good qualities of people who’ve passed away, the question always is: How can we develop some of their good qualities—such as a strong sense of duty, and that kind of independence that’s willing to figure things out—to make sure they don’t disappear from the world?

After all, this is a practice where we’re not just sitting here accepting, accepting, accepting things as they come. We’ve got to figure things out. The mind is suffering. It’s creating its own suffering, even though it wants happiness. Why? How? What can we do to stop? We’re happy to accept help from those who’ve found a reliable way to the end of suffering. But, as they all point out, the work is up to us.

So you end up having to do what I did, even if it was something as simple as learning where the right places were. You try things out, and then you look. See what the reaction is. You try something else. You’re not so afraid to make a mistake that you don’t try. You’ve *got* to try. The mistake comes. As Ajaan Fuang always said, “Mistakes can always be rectified if you’re willing to look, willing to admit that they’re mistakes, and look inside yourself for what went wrong.”

So you become responsible. You become accountable. That’s how an independent streak becomes not just willfulness and stubbornness, but an asset in doing your duty of trying to comprehend suffering, abandon its cause, develop the path so you can realize the end of suffering. That’s what we’re here for. That should be your motivating force. So whether things get explained or don’t get explained, you try to figure them out. That way, that riddle of the heart—Why does the heart create suffering even though it wants happiness?—has a chance of getting solved.