

No Thai, No Farang

In addition to the monks from abroad, a number of Thai monks also come to Wat Pa Nanachat to live and practice. Tan Jayasiri, Tan Jotimanto and Tan Dhirapanno are three such monks. Each has lived at Wat Pa Nanachat for a number of years and has contributed great service to the community through their individual times as secretary to the abbot. The following interview is conducted by Tan Pannavuddho.

Tan Pannavuddho (PV): All three of you grew up in Thailand. I'd be curious to know what were the first impressions you can remember from your childhood when you saw Buddhist monks?

Tan Jayasiri (JS): There was a branch of Wat Pa Pong (Ajan Cha's main monastery) near my home in the countryside outside of Si Saket. When I was a little boy I went to the monastery everyday. It was clear to me from an early age that I wanted to become a monk in the future. I liked the way the monks shaved their heads and wore their robes—not dressing like lay people. When I first went to the monastery I was four years old. I went to the Sunday school there.

PV: What do you remember about the first time that you saw the monks in meditation? What feelings arose for you?

JS: I felt special. It was not normal—so different from worldly people. I thought I would like to be like them in the future. I also noticed that the monks did not live together, but in the forest in their own kutis. That interested me.

At the forest monastery, I observed that each monk would put all of his food in one alms bowl (curries and sweets together) and eat it at one sitting in the morning. When I was young, I had the chance to eat the food leftover from the monks' bowls, as is common for lay people at the monastery. It smelled so different from normal food. I thought it smelled like the scent of heaven—very strange for me. While I went to school during the week, my grandmother went to the wat. At midday she would bring the monks' food back from the wat so I would go home from school during lunch break to eat it. If she didn't have any food that day, I felt upset.

Years later on the first day I became a monk, during the meal I tried to smell the food in my bowl. It smelled normal. Nothing special at all. Maybe it was just the bait to get me here.

PV: When you were little, did you ever have the opportunity to meet any of the great Krooba Ajans (forest masters) like Ajan Cha?

JS: Sure. When I was a young boy, about seven years old, I went to see Luang Por Cha at Wat Pa Pong. At that time the monastery was still very simple. Although there were many monks who lived there, after the meal the place looked deserted because all the monks went back to their kutis to practise. Luang Por Cha, however, always was receiving many visitors. He smiled all the time. When I looked at him I felt something very special.

PV: Why do you think you had so much faith at an early age?

JS: I don't know. It was just normal for me. When I was little and I would see suffering in the world I would think about the monks, their robes and their bowls. Ajahn Cha's smile is always in my memory. Never gone. Even today it is very clear. It is a very special feeling for me to be a monk in his tradition. I have never had any doubt about Luang Por Cha and the Krooba Ajans.

PV: Tan Jotimanto, can you recall your first experience when you first became aware of Buddhist monks?

Tan Jotimanto (JM): Actually, my grandmother was my main influence. When I was young I went to the monastery quite often with her. There was a forest monastery nearby where Luang Por Poot Thaniyo was the abbot. My family was very close to Luang Por Poot. From an early age I was taught to pay high respect to the monks. During the Rains Retreat, my grandmother always went to the monastery on the Uposatha day, spending all day and night observing the eight precepts. Sometime I would go and stay with her.

PV: When you observed the monks in the forest monastery environment, what was your experience?

JM: At that time I thought the monks were very special people and that they must have psychic powers because they taught us about heavens and hells. Actually, as is the case with many Thai children, I was afraid of ghosts and I thought the monks could help. I felt that since the monks had good sila, the ghosts would be afraid of them.

PV: Tan Dhirapanno, how about yourself? What were your first impressions of the Buddha-Sasana?

Tan Dhirapanno (DP): In my case, it was similar to Tan Joti. When I was young, I grew up with my grandmother in Chonburi out in the countryside. She used to go and *sai bat* every morning. On Wan Phra she would wake up extra-early in the morning to make special food for the monks. You see, as a little boy, I always slept in the same bed with my grandmother. So on the days when I woke up and I did not see her on my side, I knew that day had to be Wan Phra.

PV: Can you remember when you were young and your grandmother taught you to *sai bat*?

DP: I remember her telling me to kneel down, put my hands in *anjali*, be quiet and carefully put food into the monks bowl without touching the brim. That was in the morning and it was not that difficult. On certain special days, she would take my cousins and me to the monastery. That was the hardest part because I didn't understand most of what the monks were teaching and I had to sit with my legs politely folded behind me in the *pahpiap* position. I would sit with my grandmother in the sala while my younger cousins played loudly outside. Anyhow, my grandmother always seemed to be very happy on that day, and being around her, somehow I felt very happy too.

PV: Tan Jayasiri, what gave you the inspiration to ordain as a monk?

JS: Actually, I always had a strong ambition to become a monk. I was thinking about it when I was very young,

PV: Did you ever have any doubt...like having a girl friend maybe?

JS: It wasn't my nature to think like that. I was fortunate to come from a happy home. Still, I saw that the family life involved a lot of suffering. I valued the ideals of simplicity and renunciation, and I always was drawn to the monk's life dedicated to contemplation and peace. From the time I turned fifteen years old, of course I would be around a lot of girls at school. But for some reason my mind would always turn to the monks. When it came to having a girlfriend, I wasn't averse to it, but I always thought that I should practise the path of the Buddha first.

When I became twenty years old I asked my mother's permission to become a monk immediately.

I asked her several times and finally she said okay. She said she would be happy for me to be a monk, but not for too long, maybe a few years. After that short while, she felt that would be enough for me and I should return to her and the family.

PV: What does she say now that you have been a monk for almost ten years?

JS: She is quite happy now. Not like in the first few years though, when she would always wish for me to go back to lay life.

PV: Tan Joti, what gave you the inspiration to go forth as a monk?

JM: It also happened when I was young. I had the chance to see Luang Por Poot frequently with my grandmother. Once at his monastery a senior monk from Luang Por Mun's monastery pointed to me and said, "you should become a monk." This statement stuck to my mind all through the years. When I was a teenager I went to Wat Pa Pong and had a chance to see Luang Por Cha. He was still healthy at that time. During those days I had heard Ajan Cha was very strict and fierce—and you know when you are young you are not that interested in the strict monks.

Later my cousin introduced me to Wat Pa Nanachat. At that time I was working as a lawyer in the nearby city, Ubon. That was quite a stressful period in my life. When I visited Wat Pa Nanachat I was very impressed with the peaceful quietude of the forest and the mindfulness and kindness of the monks. My mind started to calm down. Ajan Pasanno and Ajan Jayasaro were the senior monks at that time.

PV: Was that before you went to live in New York City to help run a large restaurant?

JM: Yes, it was. After my first visit, I had been coming and going to Wat Pa Nanachat for one and a half years, for two or three days at a time as a layman. Then I moved to the States. I worked hard at the restaurant in Manhattan and earned enough money to support the family back home. I had the financial independence to have most anything I wanted, but I was not happy. I did not know what was the point. One day I went shopping with my friends. They asked me what I wanted to buy and I stopped. I felt a profound sense of boredom with worldly things and experiences. I had had enough. It was a very free and liberating kind of feeling. Reflecting back on my life I realized what I really aspired to was to practise the Dhamma and be a monk. But, I had to prepare for that and it took time.

PV: How did your parents feel at the time that you said you wanted to become a monk?

JM: They were happy that I would become a monk for just one pansa. It is the tradition for Thai men to ordain for one rainy season and my two other brothers had already done so. But, I thought if I ordained only for one pansa, I did not want to do it. I wanted to stay a monk as long as I felt it was meaningful, and if I did not like it I would disrobe. It was quite difficult for my parents at that time. They had to think about it and finally they gave me permission. At that time, both of my parents were elderly and not in good health. Even though it was very difficult for them to allow me to ordain, they wanted what was best for me, and were generous enough to make the sacrifice. This willingness on their part showed me how much they really loved me. Once they saw me as a monk, especially as a forest monk, they liked it and were inspired themselves to practise. Through Dhamma practice, they really changed the way they lived their lives. After I had been a monk for just one year, they said, "don't ever disrobe."

<laughter> **PV:** That was quick.

JM: They were very happy. I felt very lucky to have the chance to repay my debt of gratitude to my parents, who passed away soon after, by helping to teach them more about the Dhamma. In the last few years of their life, we discussed the Dhamma many times and I shared with them some books and tapes of Luang Por Cha, such as "Our Real Home." I noticed my parents came to a much greater contentment and ease with life. They deepened their understanding of impermanence and reflected on the inevitable separation at death. They started to practise everyday. My father died first, but my mother continued to be strong in spirit due to her Dhamma practice, despite her poor health. She died four months later, and at the time that she died, she was about to make an offering to the sangha. The day she died, it was a blessing to know that she was happy and at peace.

PV: Tan Dhira, what about you? You also were working in America before coming to ordain, weren't you? What made you change your direction to become a monk?

DP: After I finished medical school in Thailand, I had to decide what to do. First I wanted to be a pediatrician, like my mom. And I wanted to do my residency in the West. In those years, however, it was difficult to train in America. Finally I got accepted to the program in Michigan. During one of the first teaching rounds in the hospital, the attending doctor asked the residents where they originally came from. When the doctor found out that I came from Thailand, he had a broad smile and asked me, “so you’re from Thailand, are you? What is Nirvana?” I was shocked. I did not expect this kind of question in the West. I don’t remember what I answered but it made me think hard. I had gone all the way to America in search of knowledge, but I wondered if what I was looking for was in my own country.

PV: So how did you end up at Wat Pa Nanachat?

DP: In Detroit, every weekend the local Thai community would have a potluck meal at my aunt’s house. They would talk and then sit meditation together. I joined the group once in a while. The benefit of attending was the plentiful and delicious food. And my aunt always insisted that I take the left over food because she knew that I lived by myself and was not good at cooking. I have to admit that this was the original inspiration for meditation practice.

One day several years later I found posted on the Thai student internet that Ajan Jayasaro was coming to teach a meditation retreat in Maine. The “backpack retreat” took place at Acadia National Park and it turned out to be a life-turning experience for me. In the morning and the evening together we chanted a puja in Pali and Thai. My grandmother had taught me to chant every night before I went to bed and I had been doing that since I was a child. But I knew very little about the meaning of it. In the retreat, I was very moved to learn the deep meaning of what that I have been chanting all along. During the day, we hiked on different trails. When we got tired we sat in meditation.

During the questions and answers session each day, I was very impressed by Ajan Jayasaro’s wisdom. On the last day of the retreat, we had the ceremony to ask for forgiveness from the Ajan. It was a beautiful tradition. While we were walking to the park for this ceremony, Ajan Jayasaro handed me his bowl. That was the first time that I had carried a monk’s bowl and I felt very happy. I don’t know how to describe it but it was a special feeling that I will never forget. Tears filled my eyes. Time seemed to stand still. At that moment I felt that I too could become a monk and strive to be like the great Arahants. That was the moment I decided to become a monk.

PV: Your family had put you through medical school and supported your training as a doctor in America — was this a shock to them?

DP: I would say yes. The year that I met Ajan Jayasaro and decided to become a monk, I told them of my decision but they did not believe it. They thought I was broken-hearted or something. <laughter>

But I persisted. For the next two years while I was waiting to finish my training, I tried to keep five precepts on a regular basis and eight precepts once a week. My friends started to think that I was weird. Anyhow I found myself more and more peaceful. I would spend more time on meditation retreats where I felt very much at home. When I finished my fellowship, I came back to Thailand and found my way to Wat Pa Nanachat. I asked Ajan Jayasaro to ordain me so I could continue on the path. Of course my parents had high expectations for me. But I think I did not let them down although at the moment they might think differently. For me, becoming a monk is more challenging. There are already many doctors in my family, but there is not a single monk. There are many meaningful and worthwhile things to develop and cultivate in this holy life.

PV: Have they grown to accept your decision by now or they still hoping that you will come back?

DP: As time passes, they have begun to appreciate what I am doing as a monk. To be honest, my parents’ generous, loving support throughout my life gave me the emotional strength to feel ready to go forth as a monk. For me, the monastic life is not so much a rejection of the family life but a way to evolve one step further. If I weren’t a monk in this life, I would feel in my heart that I have not fulfilled my responsibility to the family in a higher sense.

PV: Tan Jayasiri what was it that originally brought you to Wat Pa Nanachat? How did you decide to come here to train when there also are many other good Thai forest monasteries?

JS: Just before I ordained, I went to Wat Pa Pong and I met Luang Por Sumedho and Ajan Jayasaro. From that moment I wanted to be with them. I was ordained in Ayudhya and after spending the first five years there I came to Wat Pa Nanachat.

PV: What was it that attracted you to Luang Por Sumedho and Ajan Jayasaro?

JS: It's hard to put into words—I just wanted to be with them. Their presence was peaceful and inspiring. I felt to practise under their guidance would be beneficial.

PV: Did you feel that they were different than the Thai ajans?

JS: No, similar.

PV: Having come to practice at Wat Pa Nanachat, how do you find practicing with western monks compared to the Thai sangha?

JS: Actually, in my practice, I never feel that I'm practising with special people. Everywhere I stay I just always keep Ajahn Cha's practice.

PV: Which part of Luang Por Cha's teaching do you find most important in your practice?

JS: To watch and investigate feelings and the mind. Seeing impermanence.

PV: Why do you think in Thailand where there are many great kooba ajahns, so many of the farang monks ordain with Luang Por Cha or in his specific lineage?

JS: Yes, there are many great krooba ajahns in Thailand but Luang Por Cha was a special monk. He had his own style of explaining the Dhamma in a simple yet profound way. It was easy to understand his teachings. His presence made an impact. People were happy to see him. Everyone liked to be around him. He set up a style of training that is helpful and suitable for many different kinds of people.

PV: Tan Joti, what made you decide to ordain at Wat Pa Nanachat as opposed to another Thai forest monastery?

JM: As I knew about Wat Pa Nanachat for some time I knew that I liked the way of life and I felt the monks were very sincere and diligent in their practice. Still, I went to visit Tan Ajan Dtun before ordination. I liked it there too but the monastery was very close to my family's house in Chonburi. I wanted to ordain away from my house so I came here to Ubon. Also, I felt inspired to ordain with Ajan Jayasaro.

PV: How would you compare living with western monks to living with Thai monks?

JM: In many ways things are the same, but there can be some cultural differences. At Wat Pa Nanachat, people come from many different places. Although the community usually is very harmonious, from time to time difficulties or misunderstandings can arise. As Thais, we are taught to keep things inside. We don't know how to express ourselves. But when I came to here, it seemed like everybody knew how to express himself. I have been trying to learn to do this skillfully. But it is still difficult.

I think that if people in a monastic community express their feelings too much it can create some problems. For example, people will not learn to cultivate patience. On the other hand, I think

the open communication usually is valuable because it increases understanding between people. For Thai people, if there are problems we just don't talk about it. The ideal is to find the middle way.

PV: Tan Dhira, how about yourself? Having decided to ordain here as opposed to Thai monastery, was it your connection with Ajan Jayasaro?

DP: At that time I didn't know much about other monasteries in Thailand. I did a retreat at Ajan Buddhadasa's monastery, Suan Mokkh, and a couple other places. But I thought my weak point was the vinaya—the discipline. So I tried to find the place where there were a strong sense of community and strict monastic training. I first came to Wat Pa Nanachat mainly because of my connection with Ajan Jayasaro and I liked it right away. I particularly loved the feeling of the forest. The paths that were well swept and there was a good environment for meditation. And perhaps most importantly, I immediately connected with the sangha. I felt at home here.

PV: Now I have a question for anybody. Many people think that in Thailand today there is a crisis with the sasana. There have been scandals with monks not keeping the vinaya. And some western-educated lay Buddhists are critical of a sangha that they feel is stuck in old-fashioned ways. What do you see as the future of the sasana in Thailand?

JM: I think now people are more interested in the sasana. They understand what is going on more. Before people held the sasana in very high esteem—maybe too high and it became out of touch. Now lay Buddhists are freer to speak their views and to be heard.

PV: Do you think it is the Western influence?

JM: It could be.

PV: How do you think this new attitude will affect the practice of monks? Some contend that the more worldly orientation and values of lay life can be counterproductive when brought into the sphere of monasticism. Any opinions?

JS, JM, DP: *<long pause, then laughter>* It is a difficult balance.

PV: In the West there is a stress on the value of equality, but the Buddha noted that the view “I am equal...” is still a form of attachment to self-identity view. Some monks contend that is important not to sacrifice samana sanna (the perception of being a peaceful renunciant) at the expense of conforming to current worldly ways norms.

JM: One example of this can be the way we use hierarchy. Thais maintain very high respect for the ajan. When Thais live in a western community we still put the ajan in a high position. In effect, there is a sense of formality and respectful distance. I've noticed that for the westerner, however, they are more informal and relaxed around the teacher. For them their relationship with the ajan can be like a friend. For Thais, this would be uncomfortable. For myself, I wouldn't allow myself to play to the role of a friend to the ajan even if I wanted to. For Thai monks, we can be very close with the teacher, but there is always a formality to the relationship.

PV: That's very interesting. It seems common in various Buddhist traditions to keep the teacher in a formal position to maintain proper respect. If one doesn't have that respect then it is very difficult to learn, to actually have pure communication from the teacher to the student. Do you think westerners can miss out on learning something because of the casualness with which they can relate to the teacher?

JM: Yes. In Thailand, even if the ajan is young or about the same pansa, he still is accorded the formal respect of being a teacher. It may be natural to feel a level of friendship in this situation, or to

not want to listen to the ajan as someone senior in the hierarchy. But in a Thai wat, this would rarely happen because the ajan is always put so high.

DP: Take Tan Jayasiri for example. He will turn into an ajan very soon and it will be difficult for us to relate to him. We used to be close to him and tell jokes around him. When he becomes an ajan then we have to change that perception. He will be put in the special position of a teacher soon. <laughter>

JS: I think there is a time and place for that. It's not always the case that the ajan plays the role of the formal teacher. When the situation comes up to have respect, we act accordingly, like a young son with his father. The feeling of a close relationship makes it easier to talk with each other.

PV: For western monks it usually requires some effort to adapt to hierarchical social structures in a skilful way. For example, in western culture, one tends to relate to people directly, not in terms of a formal hierarchy. One shows respect through mutual friendship, openness and trust. However, in the Buddhist tradition respect and trust can be conveyed to ones teacher and fellow monks by selflessly and harmoniously acting in accordance with ones formal place in the relationship. This can be a subtle and refined thing—something many of us westerners can learn to do better. It is a challenge to adopt a new cultural form naturally without fabricating a new identity that isn't authentic.

When I live at Thai monasteries, however, it seems comfortable to fit in the hierarchy and to relate to the ajan formally. Formal separation feels natural. It also can be useful. The Dhamma teachings flow much better this way. But with many senior western monks, when I am with them it often feels appropriate to not overdo the formality that is unnatural in our culture. But the form of these relationships changes depending on the context—whether in Asia or the west, as individuals or in a group, inside the monastery or out in public. One has to be alert and sensitive in order to adapt.

DP: I think there are both benefits and drawbacks of the “equality” form. Growing up in Thailand, the “hierarchy” system is so strong that when I was young I had very little idea about what monks do. The closest I came to the monks was offering alms food or listening to the Dhamma talk. That was it. It has never occurred to me that the monk's life was another lifestyle that I could choose from. Today is different from the old days when the monastery was also the local school and a community center. Good monks were role models to the whole community.

When I met a western monk, however, somehow that rigid hierarchy was weakened. When I spent a week hiking in America, listening and talking to Ajan Jayasaro, I felt very close to him. I felt that I could ask any question I liked and his answers personally touched me. Perhaps my western education enabled me to understand the Dhamma better in western terms. But I have to say that Ajan Jayasaro is more Thai than many Thai people I know. Even when I first met him, during many talks we had, he'd always correct me of my use of Thai words. I also think the personality of the teacher is important. When we like the teacher, we like the subject too. I have much gratitude for that chance to have a close relationship to the ajan while in America, something I had not yet experienced in Thailand.

But there are also drawbacks to the “equality” form that I can see more clearly now that I am in the robes. In monastic life, an identity with being “equal” can be detrimental. If everybody is the same we may not listen to or show appropriate humility around a more senior monk, especially if our views tell us that we know more than him. It can seem natural for the mind to follow its own kilesas, but there will be no spiritual growth then.

Another way to put it, I think it is best to recognize equality in terms of *Dhamma* while realizing hierarchy is important when it comes to communal life and the *vinaya*. Hierarchy can be a very skillful means if we use it correctly. Personally, as a monk, I feel that I want to keep the hierarchical relationship with the ajan, to keep him high, so I can do what he teaches with respect and not treat his teaching casually.

PV: So very soon Tan Jayasiri you will be going to Australia. What is it that interests you to practise in the West? Why would a Thai monk leave his own country and go practice Dhamma in Australia?

JS: The idea came from Ajan Nanadhammo. He spoke to me about this two and a half years ago. He said the monastery there is a good place with an excellent teacher. At that time I wanted to continue to practise at Wat Pa Nanachat. Now the time is appropriate and I have decided to go. I think it will be valuable for me to be tested by a new experience. After working as the secretary at Wat Pa Nanachat the opportunity for more solitude in Australia will be good. I can speed up my practice. There I will have more free time. I can set up my practice schedule the way I like.

PV: Now in the West many people have been interested in Dhamma practice for decades, but not many people have become monks. Most people prefer to keep the lay practice. Conversely, in Thailand, a young man may have little exposure to Dhamma practice, but they still have an interest to go forth into the monkhood. Do you think in the West in the future this pattern will change?

JS: Yes, in the future it will change. But by becoming a monk one has to give up so many things. When you become a monk, the important foundation is the discipline. Someone with many attachments might feel it is a narrow path and might not feel comfortable. They might think it is more convenient to practice with the five precepts.

To a westerner, the monastic precepts may seem like a lot at first. It goes against our habits in the lay life to be preoccupied with making and acquiring things as the way to realize happiness. As monks we have few requisites. But even though we may be ordained, we still can have the same perceptions as when we were laymen. When a monk is ordained on the outside, it doesn't mean he has ordained on the inside. We also can feel there are too many precepts because we still hold the views and attachments we had in the lay life. So we have to put a lot of effort in the practice. After some years, the results of the practice will arise. Perceptions and feelings from the lay life will naturally transform.

These days, with modern communications and international travel it is more possible for people to be exposed to the possibility of practising the Dhamma through monastic life. In the west you can sometimes see monks out in society and leading retreats. People can see how a monk conducts himself and lives his life. With more exposure to this, some people may become interested in ordination.

PV: Tan Joti you will be going soon to our branch monastery in New Zealand? What do you think about the interest of westerners in the monastic path?

JM: Now in the west people are interested in meditation, but without knowing that much about the bigger picture of Dhamma practice. To become a monk is a very high step to take because one has to relinquish a lot of attachments. But if westerners are really interested, they can do it. Today they can even ordain in the west, but in my opinion, there are still advantages to training in the east. Because the sasana is so rooted here, it can be very nourishing to the practice, especially at the early stages of monastic life. But, whether or not to ordain as a monk—it is something one needs to know for oneself.

DP: For myself I feel it is important to add that if someone is really seriously about the practice, I would strongly recommend the monastic life. It makes the foundation in *sila* solid and firm. The Buddha laid down the three-fold training of *sila*, *samadhi* and *panna*, but the *samadhi* that has a strong foundation in *sila* is more fruitful and leads more directly towards wisdom. In the lay life, there is often a compromise. The bhikkhu, on the other hand, can go all the way to the highest goal. The only limitation is his inner effort, not the situation outside.

PV: For me, in Thailand it is very uplifting to see so many people across the country that have a strong love for Dhamma. It can be a powerful inspirational and motivational force for a young monk like myself. Some people in the west have this love of the Dhamma, but most people don't know anything about the Dhamma at all. How do you feel about going to a place where many people don't know about Dhamma practice? They might not even know who Buddhist monks are.

<Silence & smiles>

PV: Tan Joti, you lived in Manhattan for five years. Can you imagine going for alms-round on Fifth Avenue?

JM: No, I can't really imagine that. But if I were in that situation I would have to accept it if people didn't know what a Buddhist monk was or if they looked at me strange. But then again, there are many strange things that happen in New York City. In any case, it is a good practice to uphold the tradition and the sight of a simple monk walking for alms, practising mindfulness, might offer something to the people in their busy lives. These days, however, people tend to know more about monks. Still, if I were to go walking in New York, I would be sure to be prepared to answer any questions that I might receive from the people I met.

PV: Tan Jayasiri, how would you respond to the question "who are you?" which is sometimes asked of monks in the west, perhaps while they are on alms round?

JA: If someone asked who we were, I would probably smile and respond that we are alms-mendicant Buddhist monks. If he asked me to describe our practice I would say that we try to live a simple life. We practise meditation to try to understand the true nature of things in this world. If we can practise the teachings of the Buddha and see things clearly as they truly are, we can help to lessen suffering. The aim is to have wisdom with the thoughts, emotions and feelings that arise. "I like this" or "I don't like this," "I want this" or "I don't want this"—we can let go of these. If we can keep our minds above the worldly feelings of happiness and unhappiness, then we can begin to find a true freedom and happiness that does not change. This may be easy to believe but it is difficult to do. The practice is not easy. If the person who asked me had some free time, he or she could try to practise mindfulness and meditation to investigate these things on their own.

PV: Tan Joti, how would you respond?

JM: I would try to explain to him that I am a Buddhist monk who does not handle or use money and that it is our tradition each morning to walk for alms. It might take some time to explain the Buddha's teachings. What I say would depend on the person's background and the situation.

If the situation were right, I would say we practice to let go, not to attain something. We do this through training to develop virtue, meditation and wisdom. Higher teachings on nonself and emptiness would be difficult to explain. It would be more appropriate to start with teachings about sila and metta and when a friendly relationship was established, then we could talk about something deeper. If he wanted to talk more I could invite him to visit the monastery to learn more about Dhamma practice and to try it out for himself.