

The State of Buddhism in the West: Thoughts of a Western Monk in Thailand

By Brooke Schedneck, originally published in the Prapañca Journal

As an American scholar practicing field research in Thailand's Buddhist temples, I have discussed the state of Buddhism in the West with many meditation teachers, and each encounter has struck me with the unique viewpoints presented. Out of all my interviews with Thai and Western monks and lay teachers, one of the most interesting conversations I have had was with the German monk Ajahn Martin Piyadhammo, who currently lives in Thailand but has practiced Buddhism in Europe for many years. His opinions about Buddhism in the West impressed me as insightful and especially significant to the way Buddhist teaching is disseminated among Western practitioners. During our interview, Ajahn Martin discussed the issues of translating the Buddhist teachings into different cultures and the laicization of Buddhism in the West. He feels that because Buddhism was spread by travelers throughout the West, it has taken on different characteristics than the ways Buddhism is practiced in Asia. Western lay seekers interested in meditation have often learned from a variety of teachers in various Buddhist countries and subsequently brought these teachings back to their home countries. This is in contrast to the traditional model where monastics purposefully propagate the teachings, which include the monastic discipline and a history of knowledge steeped in one tradition.

Ajahn Martin's personal history plays a role in understanding his views on Buddhism in the West. He was brought up Christian but in his teenage years began to question the tradition and wonder about the nature of the universe and humanity. This curiosity allowed him to seek out other religious alternatives. He came to Buddhism like many Westerners, through an interest in meditation. In his early thirties he was introduced to meditation teacher Ven. Vimalo and soon afterwards attended his first meditation retreat with him. Since his first ten-day retreat, Ajahn Martin has not gone a day without meditation. But during that first year of practice he did not want to know anything about Buddhism; he only wanted to bring his mind to a stop. At one of Ven. Vimalo's retreats he reached a state of bliss that lasted three days. After this he decided to forget about worldly life, and gave up all his possessions.

After experiencing the joy of meditation in 1991, Ajahn Martin toured much of Europe seeking out the best places to practice and the best teachers to learn from. He first lived at a meditation center called [Gaia House](#) in Devon, England, and eventually stayed for over four months. He attended every retreat, even one only for women. After this he decided to go to the English monasteries of Ajahn Chah because with only a limited amount of funds he knew he would have to join a monastery. He stayed in the monasteries of Chithurst, Harnham, and Amaravati for one year, as a layman. Before he stayed there he was under the illusion that monks do nothing other than practice meditation, a common misconception among novice Western Buddhists, but that illusion was destroyed quickly as the daily schedule involved many activities such as chores and chanting as well as work projects.

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After this experience he went to [Buddha-Haus](#) to receive further instruction from his second

teacher, Ven. Ayya Khema. He had met her while at Gaia House, when she taught him how to systematically get into the jhanas (meditative absorption states), how to distinguish them, and how to jump from one jhana to the other, in just ten days. Ajahn Martin comments, "Just knowing this made the worldly pleasures like eating dirt." But his meditation at Buddha-Haus was not progressing and he remembered a book he was given called *Straight from the Heart* by Luangta Maha Bua while meditating at Gaia House. After reading this book he knew that this man could show him the truth. Ajahn Martin was apprehensive, however, about going to Thailand because of the difference in culture and language. But he felt he had found the best teachers in Europe already and they could not show him how to overcome greed and hatred. So he went to Thailand in the spring of 1995, headed for the well-known forest monastery of Luangta Maha Bua called Wat Pa Baan That in Udon Thani, Northeastern Thailand.

Upon arrival he met British monk Ajahn Paññavaddho, who taught him the dhamma of Luangta Maha Bua. Then one day he met Luangta Maha Bua and faith immediately arose in him. The memory of his other meditation teachers faded away instantly, so strong was this impression. But at that time he had no interest in ordaining. He just wanted to practice and he was able to for 18 hours a day without any interruptions. However, he soon realized that for visa purposes it would be much easier to ordain. So in late 1995, he became a monk and has been living at Wat Pa Baan That ever since.

Not only has Ajahn Martin experienced learning about meditation and Buddhism in Europe and Thailand, but he has also taught the English-speakers who come to practice at Wat Pa Baan That. He offers traditional Buddhist teachings in a strict forest monastery environment. Ajahn Martin expresses his ideas about the adaptation of Buddhism to different cultures through his teaching as he makes accommodations for non-Buddhists and those new to the tradition. If the listeners are Christians he will use ideas from the Bible that explains a Buddhist concept, or if someone has a scientific background, Ajahn Martin will try to find some similes in this area. But Ajahn Martin finds that by using the language of a particular culture, the teaching is cultured already. He believes that the dhamma comes through the language of the speaker, and this is determined by their cultural background. Thus there is no way of removing cultural aspects. The best way, Ajahn Martin finds, is to first experience the universal, non-cultural dhamma. Then one can translate this into the language of the listener. Ajahn Martin expresses his feelings on this issue: "All this discussion about Western Buddhism, Asian Buddhism and what kind is right or wrong, or how to remove Asian culture from Buddhism is going in the wrong direction. Our attention should be on how to find dhamma, implement the dhamma and then express it in our own language and culture, so that people who have a similar cultural background can understand it." "All this discussion about Western Buddhism, Asian Buddhism and what kind is right or wrong, or how to remove Asian culture from Buddhism is going in the wrong direction."

In addition to his ideas about Buddhism and culture, Ajahn Martin also discusses the transmission of Buddhism to the West. Some monks (notably famous teacher of Western monks, Ajahn Chah) have called Western Buddhism a place where a new Buddhism can flower devoid of the stagnation and cultural practices of Asian Buddhism. But Ajahn Martin has a different way of thinking about Buddhism in the West. Ajahn Martin responded by discussing the first transmission of the dhamma during the time of the Buddha: "At that time only arahants were allowed to go abroad and teach in other countries. That means the dhamma has traveled from India to Asia by more or less this means, so in most of the cases the dhamma has been seeded by monks, and grown to what we know now as Asian Buddhism."

Ajahn Martin asserts that, in contrast to the traditional means, the transmission has occurred in the opposite way in the West. He believes that "the dhamma has been brought to the West by travelers. These travelers brought Buddhism from all different countries in Asia back to Europe and the States. Some of them were scholars, some of them writers. Only recently Buddhist monks have come to the West, and they still are very sparse, compared with the many people in Europe and the States that have formed Buddhist circles for over 100 years. So views of Buddhism have been formed by laypeople for decades, some of whom have never been trained in the discipline and the dhamma of the Buddha."

Thus Ajahn Martin believes that each person spreading the dhamma in the West returns to their home country with a different opinion of what practice is. Each person has trained in a different way, achieved different results, read different books or different translations of the texts and therefore teaches in a different way. He likens this to the example of the Indian king who had six blind men touch an elephant at different parts of its body and then asked them to describe the elephant. In addition to the lack of monastics and unified teachings, Ajahn Martin also feels that the path to overcome greed, hatred, and delusion were missing from what he learned in Europe. What he found to be taught more or less correctly is the morality of the five precepts, concentration meditation and the absorption states as well as some of the insight leading to wisdom. But he found that it was not taught in sequence but mixed up by different teachers so that some stressed insight, some the absorption states, and some the morality. Thus some parts of Buddhist meditation are taught sufficiently in the West but Ajahn Martin conceives of Buddhism as a complete teaching, which should be taught as such. He has also not seen enough stress on the fourth noble truth, which is necessary to know the way out of suffering. And he would like to see more teaching on the prerequisites for beginning the path such as generosity, respect, and gratitude. Thus when Ajahn Martin compares what he learned in Thailand with his experiences in Europe, he finds some of the fundamental teachings lacking or mixed up in the West.

Some people wonder what is wrong with this approach in the West as it does produce positive results such as decreasing greed and hatred and increasing happiness, similar to psychotherapy. But the problem lies in the details for Ajahn Martin and he believes it would be better to teach the dhamma in a complete way and not in bits and pieces, where each person has to solve the puzzle for himself, trying to find and fit everything together. Thus from his point of view, the potential in the West is there, but it must be taught in a fuller way, with practicing monks who can be admired and will inspire practitioners by living their path of dhamma as an example for others to see.

Through Ajahn Martin's experiences practicing in Europe and Thailand and then teaching English-speakers in Thailand, he has an interesting perspective in discussing the status of Buddhism in the West. Ajahn Martin has a unique outlook coming from a Western background but having adapted to Thai Buddhist ways, practicing as a layman and monastic and having been taught by both European and Thai teachers. He hopes for a complete path of Buddhism for Western countries.