

Lights along the path

The 2 monks who have greatly benefitted me
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Ajahn Sumedho

In my life as a practising Buddhist, I knew only a handful of elder monks who shunned publicity and wealth. One of them is Ajahn Sumedho (born 1934). During the Korean War, he (then as 18-year-old Robert Kan Jackman) served as a US navy medic. After graduating in MA in South Asian studies at the University of California, Berkeley (1963), he served a year as a Red Cross social worker, and then with the Peace Corps in Borneo (1964-1966).

During a break in Singapore, sitting one morning in a sidewalk café, he saw a Buddhist monk walk by and thought to himself: “This looks interesting!” In 1966, he became a novice in NE Thailand, and ordained a monk the following year. From 1967-1977, he trained at Wat Nong Pah Pong under Ajahn Chah. In 1975, he helped establish and became the 1st abbot of Wat Pah Nanachat (International Thai Monastery). In 1977, he accompanied Ajahn Chah on a visit to England. Sumedho remained there to establish a branch monastery, which became Cittaviveka Forest Monastery, West Sussex. In 2010, he retired as abbot of Amaravati, and lives as a “free agent” in Thailand.

True spirit of renunciation

True to his monastic training, Sumedho keeps strictly to the Vinaya and teaches Dhamma in practical terms. Understanding that the **state** of renunciation to be more vital in spiritual training than the **status** of nunhood (the bhikkhunis), Sumedho established the “Siladhara” or 10-precept ordination lineage for women.



Ajahn Sumedho and monks before a meal at Amaravati, founded in 1984.

This approach allows women to properly live a life of renunciation for the sake of attaining the path in this life free from the glamour and populism of some “reform movement” and fund-raising, but flowing “against the currents” of the world. In short, this is a full dedication to the spirit of **renunciation**.

As a young monk in Wat Sraek, Bangkok, I met Sumedho for only 2 hours sitting before him in Section 5 (the abbot’s residential quarters) listening to him instructing me on the Vinaya. The peace that he emanated remains with me to this day, and reminds me of the true fruits of renunciation as taught by the Buddha.¹

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ajahn_Sumedho.

The inner peace that Sumedho transmitted to me is a driving light, a very brilliant one, that reminds me of my task as a full-time lay Dhamma teacher: to study the suttas, practise the Buddha Dhamma and share it with others. This we must persevere despite the worldly distractions that so many other good monks are overwhelmed with—indeed, **because** of this, which makes the task of lay practice and attaining of streamwinning in this life even more urgent.

Chao Khun Prayudh

The other true monastic I personally knew who shuns publicity and wealth is Phra Payudh Payutto (born 1938), a most exemplary monk of Thailand. I knew him while I was a young monk ordained in Thailand, and he was still a young monk, only with a “Mahā” title before his name denoting that he had completed 6 years of Pali studies successfully.

He qualified for the Mahā title while still a novice (sāmaṇera) then, which was very rare. In due course, he lived in a little known monastery of which he became deputy abbot, from which he later resigned to focus on Dhamma study, teaching and writing.



Dhamma defender

My 5 years of tutelage (1971-1976) as a monk in Thailand included completing the 3-year Nak Tham (*dhammika*) Dhamma, vinaya studies (in Thai). It was when I was a student of the Mahāchulalongkorn Rājavidyālaya (monastic university) that I first knew “Chao Khun Prayudh,” as we lovingly called him. Amongst the books he presented to me was his valuable *Dictionary of Buddhism* (Thai/English, 5th imprint, 1985).

Although he is not a forest monk, he is, in many ways, the ideal scholar-monk and Dhamma practitioner who keeps to the Vinaya and lives to protect the Dhamma. The only worldly award he accepted was UNESCO’s Prize for Peace Education (1994). Although a man of mild monastic nature, he adamantly wrote against the wrongs of the Dhammakāya Movement.²

Against the stream

These 2 monks remind us that the Buddha’s teaching is “**against the stream**,” that is, the Buddhist life, especially the life of renunciation, is letting go of the world in every way. The Buddha clearly warns monastics about the dangers of worldly gains, honours and praises as a burden and distraction to a life of renunciation. When monastics are caught up with this flow of the world, they are no different the laity and the world.

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² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prayudh_Payutto.