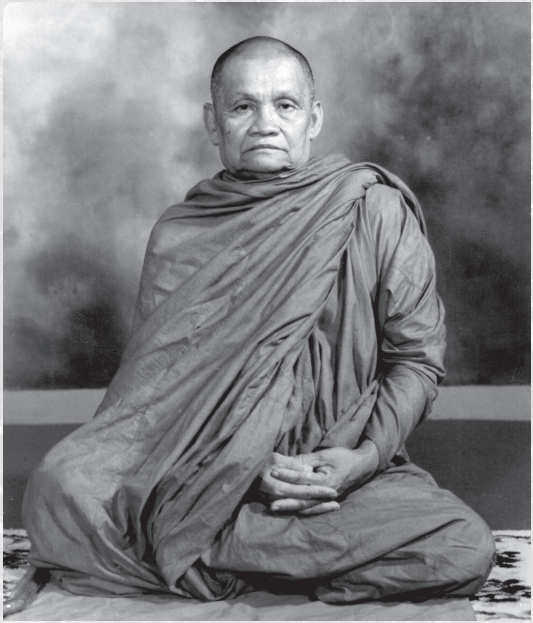

Know and
Let It Be
Ajahn Chah



~ Ajahn Chah ~

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Know and Let It Be

…It's showing us the truth—all of it. Everyone's the same. If we contemplate in line with reality, we'll see that it's always displaying the truth. Hair of the head, hair of the body, nails, teeth, skin, flesh—all these things are always reminding us. Meditation objects can also be heavenly messengers; they keep advising. Hair is telling us: before it was black, now it's turned grey. It's showing us aniccā, its nature to change and not belong to anyone. Our flesh, our skin—they dry out, shrivel up, they don't remain the same. This is aniccā. They're telling us that they don't listen to anyone. Everything in our bodies is expressing this in every moment. If we keep looking and thinking, reflecting in this way, we'll start to see them for what they truly are. Thinking and reflecting like this is called *bhāvanā*—meditation.

It's like this mango, isn't it? Where does its ripeness come from? From being unripe, that's where. If we look anywhere else for the source of its ripeness, we won't find it, because it had to be unripe first. And what about its large size? Where did that come from? From a tiny mango. It had to be small first before it could be big. It alters. It's always changing, always shifting. That's how nature and conditioned things are.

So, the Buddha had us reflect on *saṅkhāras*, on conditioned things, to see that they're all just *samutti*—conventions. Even names are. Still, we end up using conventions to talk about things. If we didn't, well, we'd just sit there silent with nothing to say. We say these supposed things simply to get the meaning across, that's all. But they aren't real. To be fully correct, we should say we're speaking conventionally. And when we speak conventionally, we should know that it's just that—convention. When we go beyond convention, that's *vimutti*—liberation.

But first, we need to understand conventions. Like us sitting here now—folks like Uncle See, Uncle Saa, Uncle Mee, Uncle Maa; or Aunty A, Aunty B, Aunty C, Aunty D—all just things people made up. Who here was born with a label attached? I've only ever seen them given out. And why? Simply to make it easier to call each other. Imagine shouting, "Hey human! Hey person!" Who's going to come? Who will answer? We give names to fulfil our aim in addressing others. So we invent names like Auntie A, Auntie B, Auntie C. All we have to do is say their name and they can answer. It's as simple as that. These names are new labels that we give, and so they're all conventions. They're saṅkhāras that have arisen. And it doesn't matter whether saṅkhāras are sentient or not, they're all conventions. So we call them "sammuti-saṅkhāra". We suppose they're cows, buffaloes, animals, this and that. We make it all up. There are only conventions.

Therefore, we should all get to know these conventions. If we

really know them for what they are, we'll see them. Once we've seen them, we should penetrate right into them until we reach them. If we arrive at the genuine reality of conventions and see them as they truly are, that's liberation. When we've reached liberation, then we still use conventions, but we're merely using them. We might say good or bad, rich or poor, happy or sad, birth or death—we still say all that, but we're just using the words with the understanding that they're conventions.

The Buddha already pointed to the ultimate truth: no one is born, and no one dies. He asked, "Who gets born or dies? Are you going to claim that it's you who's born? You really think that you die?" If we speak according to reality, then no one is born, and no one dies. It's just saṅkhāras following their nature. This phenomenon arises and then ceases. Once it's ceased, it arises. We should reflect in this way.

Take a good look—that's simply how it is. Nothing is covering it. It's all open, all the time. It's like taking off the lid of a big sticky rice basket—you can see the rice packed in there, clear as day. Arising and ceasing is right there. What's the point in arising and ceasing along with it? Look at it come and go. That's just what saṅkhāras do. And what are they? They simply are as they are. If we know this, then the truth isn't obscured, which means we have seen the truth.

This is what saṅkhāras are about. So the Buddha taught us to get a clear look at them—to see how they're arising like this, and that once they've arisen, they pass like this. That thing over there gets born and dies. And when we attach to it and expect something from it, we get born and die right along with it.

This is how people who don't understand the truth of arising and ceasing are. When they like something, they cling tightly.

They dislike something, and they tightly hold onto that too. But it gets born and then dies. It's becoming and birth—a mass of becoming and birth. If we cling, becoming and birth happen right there. But if we let things arise and pass, simply let them be, then we don't get born with them, and we don't die with them. Just let saṅkhāras be as they are. Don't arise with them. Don't cease with them. Don't be born with them. Don't die with them. That's just how they are—they have that kind of nature, that kind of condition. And once we really know that, once we see how they arise and pass away like that, then results start to appear. The results arise because we've understood their causes. We've seen their causes. This isn't something far away—it's actually very close by—but we tend to go contemplating things far off in the distance.

When we meditate and cultivate *samādhi*, some of us imprison ourselves, forcing ourselves to sit. If our mind[1] doesn't feel good,

we get all impatient and agitated, wanting it to be peaceful, and we keep struggling so long as it's not. But the Buddha taught us to know both calm and not-calm, so he encouraged us to meditate. When the heart isn't calm, he had us look to see what that agitation is about. Try it out! Contemplate the restlessness—it's yet another thing that's not constant, isn't it? If we practice evenly without stopping, then the mind will settle down on its own before long. But when we experience that stillness, we cling to it as well! That's not right either.

Don't cling to peace. Don't cling to restlessness. This is because peace is *kāmasukhallikānuyogo*, and restlessness and agitation is *attakilamathānuyogo*[2]. Don't get stuck on either of these paths. When you notice them, simply let them be. If you feel peaceful, don't attach to it. Just know that there's peace. If your mind isn't peaceful, simply notice that and let it be. Kāmasukhallikānuyogo and attakilamthānuyogo—don't get lost in them. Don't let yourself be carried away by them.

Take the middle way of *sammā-paṭipadā*, the path of right practice. When you see something bad, observe it. When you see something good, observe it. When you notice peace, watch it. When you notice agitation, watch it. All of these things are aniccā, constantly changing. Subtle things become coarse, and when they're coarse, they return to being subtle. It's all the same as how it's been before.

Some folks just want peace—to get some calm and stay peaceful like that. But they aren't aware that as long as they like, desire or attach to either peace or agitation, then both of them have the same value. Neither is better than the other. They're completely equal. Or, you could say it's like merit and demerit: their price tags are the same. Neither exceeds the other if we cling. The same goes for good and bad if we attach to them. Suppose you think that something is good, but then someone comes along and says it's not—you get angry. People who cling

to goodness are like this. But what if we say, "This is good," they disagree, and we aren't bothered?

Don't die with it. Don't be born with it. Even goodness—it's good, yes, so know it, then let it go. Having seen it, abandon it and lay it aside. The Buddha told us not to cling to anything. Simply know, then let go. Know, then let it be. See good? Let go of good. See bad? Let go of bad. Don't make anything out of them. Don't attach. Know, then leave be. Know, then let go. That's it.

How can we make merit? But why would we want to get it in the first place? Don't want merit. If we want it, we create a sense of self. If we chase after merit like we always have, we'll keep being born and dying like we always have.

Really, creating merit means cultivating letting go and non-

attachment. We need to go about it like this. People who act otherwise don't yet understand. But if they did understand, they would see that without cultivating their hearts, they don't gain or even recognise merit. And when they make merit, they get attached to it. That's not it!

Make merit for the sake of abandoning, and that way it's actually meritorious. If we make merit in order to grasp and want, that's demerit. Whoever clings to the happiness they experience will suffer like they always have. That's just how it goes.

The Buddha taught us the direct route: make merit, but don't grasp at it. Don't cling to it. That is, when we gain good things, don't get stuck on them."

(The voice of a woman asking Ajahn Chah a question.)

Laywoman: "Dropping into *bhavaṅga*,[3] is that samādhi?"

Ajahn Chah: "Have you ever dropped into it?"

Laywoman: "No, never."

Ajahn Chah: "Ah! I thought you knew what you were asking about. Let it happen first, then you'll know."

Laywoman: "But it's never happened..."

Ajahn Chah: "Well, let it happen first. You see? You've never experienced it… don't be in a rush to ask about it. You're not like Luang Pu Mun[4], you know?

Just keep contemplating and practicing. Keep at it, steadily practicing and developing. You'll come to know through your

practice. Don't get others to tell you. If they do, then you merely know it second-hand, and that won't make a deep impression on your heart—like asking what entering bhavaṅga is like. Just carry on practising and practising. There's no place you can go where, if you drop into bhavaṅga, there's a signpost saying, "This is bhavaṅga!" That's not how the Buddha taught. Rather, something new and strange arises in your own heart—it feels different. But it's still convention.

When the mind is calm and enters bhavaṅga, that's *bhava*, becoming and existence. Bhavaṅga is bhava. By dropping into bhavaṅga, you're tumbling down yet another hole of becoming. Don't get stuck on it.

Laywoman: "That's why I'm scared of dropping into it."

Ajahn Chah: "Why would you be afraid? Don't be! Why be afraid? You've been born already. Don't be scared of meditation.

Whatever happens will happen—just observe it. When you're about to die, if you're not afraid of having to die again and again, then you'll get born again. Try investigating like this: 'You want to cling? Then go ahead and cling. See how that goes for you! When the body breaks and goes all crippled, you'll suffer. You get the point?' This is how you have to teach yourself, alright?

"*Piyato jāyate soko*:" Sorrow arises from that which is dear to us. Whatever we cherish, whoever we love—that's what brings us suffering. They give us difficulty and weigh us down. Like how I train all of you lay folk these days—it's so you can let go and abstain. It's so you can know how to observe and make good use of yourselves.

Making merit is no different. Generosity, virtue and mental cultivation are the ways to create merit. And merit is simply our goodness, the wholesome qualities we develop. But even when something is good, keep watching it. Don't get attached

to goodness. Once people cling to being good, no one can touch them. Like the head of Suay Village:

They say that after he was appointed Village Chief, his friends visited him, and he said "You'd better not get close to me."

"Why? What's the matter?" his friends asked.

"I'm not the same as before, okay? I'm the Village Head now!"

You see what people who cling to being good are like? As soon as he received the title, he began to change. But really, he should still allow his friends to see him. What awful thing would happen if he lets his friends get close? It's not that when they tease you a bit, you tell them, "Don't mess around with me! I'm different now, alright?" But this is how someone who attaches to goodness is. If you become Village Head, carry

on speaking to your family and friends as you did before. What's the big deal?

With goodness, just keep things as they were. Why take it so seriously? Prestige and gain—what value do they have? Just take a look at the head of Suay Village. They told me his story (laughs). Before he was appointed, his friends could joke and mess around with him. They could go places together. But as soon as he got the post, even coming near him was a problem. "Don't come near me! I'm different now," he'd say. He'd gone too far! Here is someone who's stuck on goodness. That's what happens, and it's painful! No one can get close, let alone criticize him—he's the Village Chief, after all. Before, he could eat and live at ease. He could go out with his friends if he wanted. But when they appointed him, they gave him something good, and his life became harder. No one could talk to him or even get near him.

But this is just a story they tell. Or maybe it's true? I don't know. Whatever the case, it can teach us that when we receive goodness, we shouldn't get attached to it. Just watch it as it is. This is what meditation is about. If we cling to the good, we also grab hold of the bad. That's how it goes. That's why the Buddha said we shouldn't cling. When we've gained something good, know it, understand it, and take care of it.

The teaching of our Buddha takes time. We have to see every facet from every angle, looking carefully, recognising our traits and characteristics. But we want results now, to grab them right away. We want to sit down and instantly drop into peace, to cut off the defilements in one go. Whatever it is, we want to get it quick. But we know nothing about ourselves. The Buddha said that wherever you're sitting, whatever you see—contemplate that. Whether you're standing, sitting, or walking somewhere—reflect on it. Keep observing, being aware of yourself, knowing what you're thinking and feeling.

When you're walking through a village or being around people, wherever you are, there's always something you can contemplate. The Buddha wanted us to have *sati*, recollection, and *sampajañña*, clear knowing. Whether you're sitting, standing or walking, be mindful. Right now, we're aware. When we're talking, we know that, we're mindful of it. We're mindful of sitting, of whatever we're doing, however we are. If we start straying from the Dhamma and virtue, we're aware of that. While speaking and acting, we know—careful that we're getting too far away, conscious that we're about to fall into unwholesome ways. This is called *sīla-saṃvara*. Saṃvara is restraint and composure. When it comes together in the heart, it's *sīla*—virtue.

The mind's composure and restraint is sīla. Its steady awareness and holding an intention is samādhi. Its clear knowing of all the objects and states that appear to it is *paññā*—wisdom. So sīla, samādhi and paññā are there in the same place: the mind, one single knowing. And since sīla, samādhi and paññā are there,

that means the Noble Eightfold Path is also there. The *Maggas* are there, and the *Phalas*[5] are there. Causes are there, and results are there. And so it's *eko Dhammo*: there's one Dhamma. The Dhamma arises in one place, and there's one of it.

That's why the Buddha taught us to observe our minds. But some folks think, "What's there to find out about the mind, anyway? What's it all about?" You see? They don't know anything about their mind. They don't know its source, where it arises, where it ceases, what it clings to or fixates on, or how that causes them such difficulty and suffering. They aren't aware that the mind arises and ceases. They don't look at themselves. People simply don't observe themselves.

But if we do look, everything starts coming inwards. Whatever we see, it draws inwards, inwards. If we notice good or evil, the mind internalises it. We see mountains, trees, birds,

or any phenomena—whether material or immaterial—and we bring it all inside. There's nothing left to cling to. All things are one and the same. It's all alike. Once we truly see this, it's all just the same.

Therefore, all sincere practitioners who have trained and seen the Dhamma to a sufficient extent are those who have entered the stream of Right View, of the Noble Path. They have the mind of a *sotāpanna*. This is what a sotāpanna is—a stream-enterer. Once minds enter that current, they align. No matter which corner of the sky or earth sotāpannas come from, when they speak, they speak of the same thing. There's no contradictions, no arguments. It all comes down to one place: the mind. Therefore, the Buddha and all of his awakened disciples have views that are in harmony. They act the same. They are the same. This is because they have reached the same truth.

Let's just make it simple and talk about us Dhamma practitioners here at Wat Nong Pah Pong. We share the same view. Some people have the same experience and feel the same way. So when one person mentions it, that's the end of it—there's nothing to argue about. Someone speaks, and there isn't anything for the others to take issue with. This is called truly seeing the same. Even though 100, 200, or 300 people may arrive—if we all have this kind of view and feel the same—it's peaceful. No matter where we stay, we feel the same way.

It's like heat and cold. It makes no difference how old or young someone is, or what language they speak. If they grab something cold, it's cold. It feels the same, no different. If they touch something hot, like fire, they'll get the same feeling. Really, all beings with consciousness—whether Khmer, Vietnamese, Chinese or anyone at all—have an equal feeling of heat and cold. When there's physical contact, they feel the same way.

They share the same feelings and perceptions about what comes into contact with them.

Similarly, when a sense impression contacts us as we're practicing—one we find displeasing, for example—we'll still experience ease and peace. Those who know don't get tangled up. They don't arise or die with it, don't grasp or cling. When people have the same views, encounter the same sense impression, and then feel the same response—that's what we call equality of the mind.

So when someone is on a different level—whether lower or higher—it's difficult to understand them. Those on the same level, however, understand each other well. But if someone higher up says something, we don't get it. It's hard to make sense of, because our minds are lower down. They tell the truth in a certain way to a certain group, and we go off thinking and feeling

about it in an entirely different way. This is called not connecting, not reaching that level.

We have to keep trying. Or, to put it simply, it's like how the Buddha spoke about *nibbāna*. Suppose someone said, "Go to nibbāna over there," but in truth, it's devoid of coming or going. So why say, "Go to nibbāna" then? It's because we are familiar with going—we've all gone to our fields and gone home before, gone off to the market, gone here and there. So we pick up this conventional language, say "go", and others understand.

Nibbāna doesn't arise, doesn't age, doesn't sicken or die. Now, if someone has a coarse and lowly heart—like us *puthujjanas*[6] here—they'll think, "Darn! How could I possibly live there?" And those with lots of children and grandchildren say, "But we'll never get to see each other again!" The thought of their children arises and they say, "Oh, I'd better not go in this life after all." You

see? These are folks who don't understand. They think, "Now, if I go to the birthless and deathless where there's no brothers or sisters, no children or grandchildren—that sounds like no fun at all!"

Those who are stuck in the realm of sensuality—caught in sights, sounds, odours, flavours, tactile sensations, and mental impressions—simply can't live without these things. They're like a fish taken out of water; from here to that hill over there, it can't stay anywhere. There's no place for it. It'll only have one thought in its head: "I'm going to wriggle back into the water." It's only ever lived in water.

We're the same—we're addicted to sights, sounds, odours, flavours, tactile sensations, and mental impressions. Try separating us from them and—oh!—we keep slipping back to them, flipping and flopping towards those sights and sounds,

chasing after what we find pleasing. That's where our pleasures arise, so that's where we stay.

This is why it's hard to understand each other—just like ducks and geese living on land, and fish dwelling underwater. If the ducks and geese thought like us, they'd wonder, "So, fish live in the water, right? How do they survive? Can they even breathe?!" They try imagining the comfort of a fish, but nothing comes up. Land creatures just can't fathom the happiness of aquatic animals. Why? Because they've never lived in water. They've only stayed on land.

Likewise, the fish in the water think along the same lines. When they see an animal on land, they get distressed: "How's it going to live without water?! How can it possibly breathe?" They say the same kind of thing, because their nature is to be in water.

It's the same when people try to imagine a state without becoming and birth—they just can't wrap their heads around it, like a fish that's puzzled thinking of rabbits and cats. "But they don't have water… how do they live?" it'd wonder, completely bewildered. And the rabbits and cats are just as baffled by the fish: "*There's nothing but water!* How does it survive? How does it breathe?!"

Even if they were to ponder this until their dying day, they still wouldn't have a clue about one another. If they don't get born as a fish or a rabbit first, there's no way they'll know. They'll just keep going around in circles, asking and wondering, caught in confusion.

Clearing up doubts is the same. No matter how much we listen to or study, if our hearts don't truly become that way, we won't really know. But once our hearts are that way—ah!—they let go

immediately! This isn't knowing through memory or perception; it's knowing in accordance with the truth. But if we merely study things, even if we gain knowledge, we can't let go. We may know, but we don't see. It's not both knowing and seeing.

It's the same for things like anger and greed—they're difficult to give up. Well, actually, it's not hard. If someone knows where and how to let go, it's nothing tough. It's a breeze. But if they don't know, it's difficult. It's difficult because of foolishness. Really, all of us are fools, ignorant about everything. We're ignorant in every area where we haven't yet seen for ourselves. There are only senseless issues going on there. But it's not hard and it's not senseless *if we know in a way that's correct according to the Dhamma.*

Therefore, our Foremost Teacher, the Buddha, said: "*Paccattaṃ veditabbo viññūhī*"—the wise know for themselves.

There! He taught us to practise to see for ourselves. But if we're just going around asking this person and that person, and they tell us, we don't see for ourselves. The knowledge we gain from other people's explanations doesn't reach; it falls short of the mark. It's not clear. Our second-hand knowledge is blurry. But if we get in there and know directly—*ah!*—that's something else entirely. That's when we truly know and gain Dhamma.

Asking others is just academics and theory, but it's not practical administration. For it to be practical work, we need to give it a go. We must put it into practice so that it manifests within us and we know it as *paccattaṃ*—directly, for ourselves.

"*Eko Dhammo*": there is one Dhamma, which is this Magga, this Path. It's a path walked by a single person. You can't walk it in a group; each traveller must go by themselves. Even when many of us gather like this, we can't go together. Whether we

are many or few, each of us has our own path. It's the path of the individual traveller, of the individual heart. What we see, we can't explain to others—well, we can, but they won't understand. It's just one of those things.

If we're practising meditation, or bhāvanā, we should know what meditation is about. Don't think that this word "meditation" only means sitting down with our eyes closed. Meditation is contemplation. When we sit, close our eyes, calm the mind, and hold it steady on a single object, we're cultivating the mind and charging it with energy. A peaceful mind is a powerful one. When it's unpeaceful, it's drained—just like someone lying in bed, thinking about this and that, unable to sleep. If this carries on, they'll go crazy, because their mind isn't at peace and hasn't rested. It has no power. Developing samādhi in our heart is developing the power of our heart.

It's like a knife that you grind against a stone to make it sharp. Once the blade is sharp, you can use it to cut, chop, and clear a path. Likewise, the practice is to discipline your mind with *sīla*—virtue. Here, the whetstone is sīla, and the knife is your mind. You take the knife and grind it against the stone, scraping bits off until it becomes sharp. It's the same with virtue and the mind.

Grate away. Shed things off. Pull them out. "This is forbidden and that's forbidden! You can't touch it like that! And don't do that either!" There are all these rules and standards, and they grate. They grate away at the defilements, but we reckon they get in our way. They frustrate our desires. We don't get what we like and want. We take the defilements to be ourselves. We take ourselves to be the defilements.

So they say that virtue is a whetstone—something that sharpens and emboldens our hearts, like grinding a knife on a

stone. This is sīla. Once it's sharp, steady, and set in place, that's samādhi. When it's sharp, able to be used in various ways, and we gain benefits from it, that's paññā—wisdom. All three arise from one mind.

The Buddha phrased it as "sīla, samādhi, and paññā." He spoke about it as three aspects, and all three reside within the one mind. You can talk about it as three things, or even many more if you like. Talking about it as the Eightfold Path is alright, too: Right View, Right Intention, Right Livelihood, Right Action, Right Speech, and keep going until you've got all eight. And you can fit more in. You can talk about it in terms of as many things as you like, as long as they extend outward from the mind. But if you bring them inward, he called them "sīla, samādhi and paññā." Gather them in further and you have "body and mind." And even further: "one mind."

That's it. Sīla is here. Samādhi is here. Paññā is here. They are created right here; developed in this single place. Therefore, you need to cultivate your mind.

Notes:

[1] In this translation of this talk, the words 'mind' and 'heart' are used interchangeably, as they are in Thai. Both refer to the citta: the knowing element that receives and is aware of sensory experiences such as sights, sounds, and thoughts.

[2] *Kāmasukhallikānuyogo*—the way of indulging in sensual pleasure. *attakilamathānuyogo*—the way of self-mortification. The Buddha taught a Middle Way between these two extremes that leads to awakening.

[3] *Bhavaṅga*—The mind's resting state in between objects of attention.

[4] Luang Pu Mun (or Ajahn Mun)—A highly respected mediation master who was instrumental in establishing the Thai Forest Tradition. He was one of Ajahn Chah's main teachers.

[5] Magga means "path" and refers to the four paths of awakening; phala means "fruit" and refers to the result of awakening that follows the completion of each path.

[6] An unenlightened being with thick defilements.

There's nothing left to cling to.
All things are one and the same.
It's all alike.

Once we truly see this,
it's all the same.

/ Ajahn Chah /

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