

Meeting the Dharma Alone

A late Thai master's final advice on walking
the path to enlightenment

By Ajahn Chah



Spring Nude, Nathan Oliveira, 1962, oil on canvas, 96 x 76 inches |
Courtesy of the Oakland Museum of California, gift of the artist, in
memory of Edna Stoddard Siegrist

People may look at you and feel that your way of life, your interest in dharma, makes no sense. Others may say that if you want to practice dharma, you ought to ordain. Ordaining or not ordaining isn't the crucial point. It's how you practice.

Laypeople live in the realm of sensuality. They have families, money, and possessions, and are deeply involved in all sorts of activities. Yet sometimes they will gain insight and see dharma before monks and nuns do. Why is this? It's because of their suffering from all these things. They see the fault and can let go. They can put it down after seeing clearly in their experience. Seeing the harm and letting go, they are able to make good sense of their position in the world and benefit others.

We ordained people, on the other hand, might sit here daydreaming about lay life, thinking how great it could be. "Oh yeah, I'd work my fields and make money, then I could have a nice family and a comfortable home." We don't know what it's really like. The laypeople are out there doing it, breaking their backs in the fields, struggling to earn some money and survive. But for us, it's only fantasy.

The laypeople live in a certain kind of thoroughness and clarity. Whatever they do, they really do it. Even getting drunk, they do it thoroughly and have the experience of what it actually is, while we can only imagine what it's like. So, because of their experience, they may become tired of things and realise the dharma quicker than monks can.

You should be your own witness. Don't take others as your witness. This means learning to trust yourself.

People may think you're crazy, but never mind. It only means they don't know anything about dharma. But if you lack confidence and instead rely on the opinions of unenlightened people, you can easily be deterred. In Thailand these days, it's hard for young people to sustain an interest in dharma. Maybe they come to the monastery a few times, and then their friends start teasing them, complaining: "Since you started going to the monastery, you don't want to hang out or go drinking anymore. What's wrong with you?" So they often give up the path.

Others' words can't measure your practice, and you don't realise the dharma because of what others say. I mean the real dharma. The teachings others can give you are to show you the path, but that isn't real knowledge. When people genuinely meet the dharma, they realise it directly within themselves. So the Buddha said that he is merely the one who shows the way. In teaching us, he is not accomplishing the way for us. It is not so easy as that. It's like someone who sells us a plow to till the fields. He isn't going to do the plowing for us. We have to do that ourselves. Don't wait for the salesman to do it. Once he's made the sale, he takes the money and splits. That's his part. That's how it is in practice. The Buddha shows the way. He's not the one who does it for us. Don't expect the salesman to till your field. If we understand the path in this way, it's a little more comfortable for us, and we will do it ourselves. Then there will be fruition. Teachings can be most profound, but those who listen may not understand. Never mind. Don't be perplexed over profundity or lack of it. Just do the practice

wholeheartedly, and you can arrive at real understanding —it will bring you to the place the teachings talk about. Don't rely on the perceptions of ordinary people. Have you read the story about the blind men and the elephant? It's a good illustration. Suppose there's an elephant, and a group of blind people are trying to describe it. One touches the leg and says it's like a pillar. Another touches the ear and says it's like a fan. Another touches the tail and says, "No, it's not a fan, it's like a broom." Another touches the body and says it's something else again from what the others say.

There's no resolution. Each blind person touches part of the elephant and has a completely different idea of what it is. But it's the same one elephant. It's like this in practice. With a little understanding or experience, you get limited ideas. You can go from one teacher to the next seeking explanations and instructions, trying to figure out if they are teaching correctly or incorrectly and how their teachings compare to each other. Some people are always traveling around to learn from different teachers. They try to judge and measure, so when they sit down to meditate they are constantly in confusion about what is right and what is wrong. "This teacher said this, but that teacher said that. One guy teaches in this way, but the other guy's methods are different. They don't seem to agree." It can lead to a lot of doubt.

You might hear that certain teachers are really good, and so you go to receive teachings from Thai ajahns, Zen masters, Vipassana teachers, and others. It seems to me that most of you have probably had enough teaching, but the tendency is to always want to hear more, to compare,

and to end up in doubt as a result. Each successive teacher might well increase your confusion further. Thus the Buddha said, “I am enlightened through my own efforts, without any teacher.” A wandering ascetic asked him, “Who is your teacher?” The Buddha answered, “I have no teacher. I attained enlightenment by myself.” But that wanderer just shook his head and went away. He thought the Buddha was making up a story and had no interest in what he said. He believed it wasn’t possible to achieve anything without a teacher or a guide.

You study with a spiritual teacher, and she tells you to give up greed and anger. She tells you they are harmful and that you need to get rid of them. Then you may practice and do that. But getting rid of greed and anger doesn’t come about just because she taught you; you have to actually practice and accomplish that. Through practice you come to realise something for yourself. You see greed in your mind and give it up. You see anger in your mind and give it up. The teacher doesn’t get rid of them for you. She tells you about getting rid of them, but it doesn’t happen just because she tells you. You do the practice and come to realisation. You understand these things for yourself.

It’s like the Buddha is catching hold of you and bringing you to the beginning of the path, and he tells you, “Here is the path—walk on it.” He doesn’t help you walk. You do that yourself. When you do travel the path and practice dharma, you meet the real dharma, which is beyond anything that anyone can explain to you. So one is enlightened by oneself, understanding past, future,

and present, understanding cause and result. Then doubt is finished.

We talk about giving up and developing, renouncing and cultivating. But when the fruit of practice is realised, there is nothing to add and nothing to remove. The Buddha taught that this is the point we want to arrive at, but people don't want to stop there. Their doubts and attachments keep them on the move, keep them confused, keep them from stopping. So when one person has arrived but others are somewhere else, they won't be able to make any sense of what he may say about it. They might have some intellectual understanding of the words, but this is not real knowledge of the truth.

Usually when we talk about practice we talk about what to develop and what to renounce, about increasing the positive and removing the negative. But the final result is that all of these are done with. There is the level of *sekha*, the person who needs to train in these things, and there is the level of *asekha*, the person who no longer needs to train in anything. When the mind has reached the level of full realisation, there is nothing more to practice. Such a person doesn't have to make use of any of the conventions of teaching and practice. It's spoken of as someone who has gotten rid of the defilements. The *sekha* person has to train in the steps of the path, from the very beginning to the highest level. When she has completed this, she is called *asekha*, meaning she no longer has to train, because everything is finished. The things to be trained in are finished. Doubts are finished. There are no qualities to be developed. There are no defilements to remove. This is talking about the

empty mind. Once this is realised, you will no longer be affected by whatever good or evil there is. You are unshakable no matter what you meet, and you live in peace and happiness.

In this realm of impermanence, there will be times when we cannot find spiritual teachers to point out the path to us. When there is no spiritual guidance for people, we become thickly obscured by craving, and society in general is ruled by desire, anger, and delusion. So at the present time, though the Buddhist religion may be struggling to survive, though in general the way it's practiced is far from the truth of what really is, we should make the most of the opportunity we do have.

When the Buddha passed into final nirvana, the different types of disciples had different feelings. There were those who had awakened to the dharma, and when they saw the Buddha enter nirvana, they were happy: "The Lord Buddha is well-gone; he has gone to peace." But those whose defilements were not yet finished thought, "The Buddha has died! Who will teach us now? The one we bowed down before is gone!" So they wailed and shed tears. That's really bad, crying over the Buddha like a bunch of bums. Thinking like fools, they feared no one would teach them anymore. But those who were awakened understood that the Buddha is just this dharma that he has taught us; though he passes away, his teachings are still here. So their spirits were still strong, and they did not lack for means of practice, because they understood that the Buddha does not die. We can easily see that except for the dharma, there is nothing that will relieve the trouble and distress in the

world and cool the fires of beings' torment. Ordinary people of the world are struggling, fighting, suffering, and dying because they are not following a true spiritual path. So let's make efforts to devote our minds and bodies to discovering virtue and spirituality, to becoming real human beings who live according to the dharma of humans. We don't have to look at others and be critical of their lack of virtue. Even when those close to us can't practice, we should do what we can first. Before we worry about the deficiencies of others, those of us who understand and can practice should do that straightaway. Outside of the dharma, there isn't anything that will bring peace and happiness to this world. Outside of dharma, there is only the struggle of winning and losing, envy and ill will. One who enters the dharma lets go of these things and spreads lovingkindness and compassion instead. Even a little bit of such dharma is of great benefit. Whenever an individual has such qualities in the heart, the Buddha's way is flourishing.



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Ajahn Chah (1918–1992), a teacher in the Thai forest tradition, founded several monasteries, including Wat Pah Nanachat in Thailand and Cittaviveka in England.