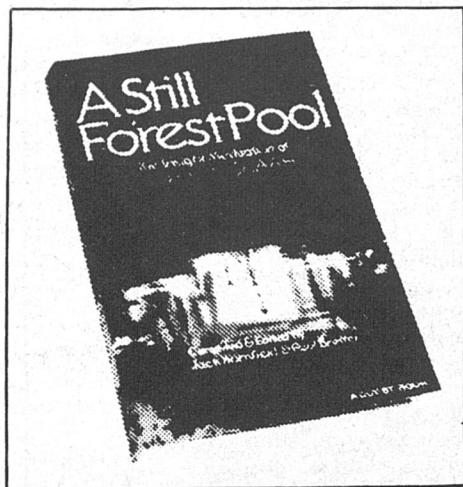


A STILL FOREST POOL. The Insight Meditation of Achaan Chah.

Compiled and edited by Jack Kornfield and Paul Breiter. (The Theosophical Publishing House, 1985, 192 pp.)

Reviewed by Shana Klinger

If you have a section on your bookshelf for Buddhist meditation books—straight from the horse's mouth, you'll be happy to make space for this wonderful new addition. But don't keep it on the shelf. Leave it lying on the dining room table or even in the bathroom (there are still a few meditators who read on the john), because the power of Achaan Chah's words, the depth and seriousness of his practice, and his daring invitations to join in such a practice are worth confronting daily, no matter what flavor of meditation you practice.



Achaan Chah is a living master of Buddhist vipassana or insight meditation. He is a monk and his "home" is a forest monastery in Thailand where he practices and teaches meditation. It is a world of thatched huts, silence, simplicity and renunciation. Like all who have practiced a meditation technique deeply, his wisdom is universal and his words are useful beyond the particulars of his situation and training.

"The original heart/mind shines like pure, clear water with the sweetest taste. But if the heart is pure, is our practice over? No, we must not cling even to this purity. We must go beyond all duality, all concepts, all bad, all good, all pure, all impure. We must go beyond self and no self, beyond birth and death. To see a self to be reborn is the real trouble of this world. True purity is limitless, untouchable, beyond all opposites and all creation."

A Still Forest Pool was translated, compiled and edited by two Western men who practiced and took monastic vows for varying periods with Achaan Chah in his forest monastery. They have arranged the book into seven chapters—many less than a page long—which are either direct teaching quotes from Achaan Chah or stories related about him and his students. In addition, each section is prefaced by a short explanation by the editors. What results, though sometimes choppy as far as continuity of style, is the kind of book you can open to almost any page to read a complete and engaging quotation or anecdote.

In many ways **A Still Forest Pool** is a manual for vipassana meditation. The words Achaan Chah uses, the concepts he employs, are often particular to that style of Theravadan Buddhism. In this way the book is a treasure house of instruction and insight into the methodology and difficulties of vipassana, particularly the sections entitled "Meditation and Formal Practice" and "Questions for the Teacher."

"You will see that when the heart/mind is unattached, it is abiding in its normal state. When it stirs from the normal because of various thoughts and feelings, the process of thought construction takes place, in which illusions are created. Learn to see through this process..."

Since Achaan Chah is himself a monk and since the context in which he teaches is monastic, a notable portion of the book

is basically advice for monks who are practicing with him or persons who are practicing in intensive retreat settings. Still the wisdom of his advice often goes beyond time and place, and sometimes about the depth of commitment and purity of purpose which underlies monastic practice is communicated in an inspiring way.

"We must use the physical solitude of the forest to develop mindfulness, not just for isolation and escape. How can we escape our mind and the three characteristics of conditioned phenomena? Really, suffering, impermanence and no self are everywhere. They are like the smell of excrement. Whether you have big piles or little piles, the smell is the same."

Such earthy metaphors are a striking and often delightful aspect of Achaan Chah's teaching style.

"Some people think that the longer you can sit, the wiser you must be. I have seen chickens sit on their nests for days on end. Wisdom comes from being mindful in all postures... Don't be concerned about how long you can sit."

Perhaps the most unsettling quality of Achaan Chah's teaching style is that of daring-inviting-chiding us to seriously follow a meditation practice and come to true peace. Over and over again there are statements like, "Do you want to practice or not?" or "From now on, it's up to you." As one who has persevered and met his own demons of laziness, doubt and desire (to name a few), he speaks with a combination of reassurance and impatience about the Buddha's Path and the difficulties thereon.

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"There is a boat you can take to the other shore. Why not jump in? Or do you prefer the ooze and slime? I could paddle away any time, but I am waiting for you."

For a book so full of spiritual challenges, practical instruction and timeless wisdom there is something strangely unsatisfying about the overall effect of **A Still Forest Pool**. Perhaps that is a credit to Achaan Chah's teaching and his editors. If we could finish the book and put it down with a sigh of pleasure or artistic appreciation, we would be missing the message entirely.

"Outward, scriptural study is not important. Of course, the Dharma books are correct, but they are not right. They cannot give you right un-

derstanding. To see the word **hatred** in print is not the same as experiencing anger, just as hearing a person's name is different from meeting him. Only experiencing for yourself can give you true faith."

"You must go beyond all words, all symbols, all plans for your practice. Then you can see for yourself the truth, arising right here. If you do not turn inward, you will never know reality."

Thank you Achaan Chah and editors of **A Still Forest Pool**. □

(Shana Klinger, a Dharma Teacher in the Kwan Um Zen School, lives with her husband and her one year old daughter at the Dharma Hope Zen Group house in Providence, RI.)

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