

NOTES FROM: *Food for the Heart*, by Ajahn Chah

SUMMARY: Ajahn Chah is Thailand's best-known meditation teacher, and I *challenge* you to look at this guy's picture and *not* smile. It's damn near impossible. In fact, I'd say that achieving *enlightenment* is probably easier than suppressing a smile when you look at any photo of Chah. It's not that he's particularly funny looking or anything, it's just that he positively *radiates* happiness, joy, and love of life.

Food for the Heart combines many of Chah's most powerful teachings on things like meditation, calming the mind, dealing with people, and eliminating suffering. All classic Buddhist themes, of course.

What struck me, however - besides his intimate, often hilarious style and obvious joie de vivre - was that a lot of his ideas have found expression in some of the most important texts in the Western canon as well.

I'm thinking here of Chah's "three characteristics of existence," (below) which one can just as easily imagine finding in the pages of *Meditations* by Marcus Aurelius. Both Aurelius and Chah - effortlessly grouped together in the same breath - claim that it's impossible to go through life without experiencing any problems, so maybe we ought to expect them!

At the end of it all, Chah just says, "Hey look, guys" - I'm paraphrasing, of course - "I've been learning this stuff as I go along, same as you, and I haven't found too many answers. Everything is uncertain; suffering exists and it's coming for you eventually; nobody really knows what the hell is going on. But there's beauty and life and strength and love and awesomeness *everywhere* you look, and you're going to miss it if you're not *right* here, *right* now, *living*. So let's dive in!"

"Whoever we are, the conditions of life are uncertain."

"If death is within you, then where are you going to run to escape it? Whether you are afraid or not, you die just the same. There is nowhere to escape death."

"The mind is pure and clear, basically. What rises and falls are mental states that all pass away."

"The first Noble Truth does not mean that everything is suffering at all times, but that we have the capacity to suffer at many times throughout our lives and for various reasons."

"They are 'noble truths,' not 'absolute truths.'"

The Three Characteristics of Existence: "Everything is changing; nothing can be permanently satisfying or dependable; nothing can be said to be absolutely who and what we are."

The Apophatic Method: "Talking about what god is not."

The Kataphatic Method: "Talking about what God is."

"If you didn't already know the answer, you couldn't have posed the question in the first place."

"All those who seriously engage in spiritual practice should expect to experience a great deal of friction and difficulty."

"The untrained mind is stupid. Sense impressions come and trick it into happiness, suffering, gladness, and sorrow, but the mind's true nature is none of those things."

"The true refuge is the trained mind."

"Morality, concentration, and wisdom are so interrelated that it's not really possible to separate them."

"Don't let time roll by unused and without purpose."

"If there is sufficient desire, people can do anything."

"'I don't have time to meditate.' Then how come you've got time to breathe?"

"Do you expect everybody to say only pleasant things to you all your life?"

"Most people seem to be seeking something outside of themselves, but relatively few are seeking a way out of wrongdoing."

"Most people want to perform good works, but don't want to give up wrongdoing."

"The source of all good, evil, well-being, and harm lies with action, speech, and thoughts."

"Before you do something you know is wrong, you will look around to make sure that no one will see you. But you will see you! Aren't you somebody?"

"The serene and peaceful mind is the true epitome of human achievement."

"'That tree is too short!' 'That tree is hollow!' Those trees are simply trees; they're better off than we are."

"You should try to learn at least one thing from a tree. There are so many trees, all with something to teach you."

"Don't go blaming the hole for being too deep. Turn around and look at your own arm!"

"This tape recorder here is not important. The really important thing is the 'recorder' in the heart. The tape recorder is perishable, but if the Dhamma really reaches the heart, it's imperishable; it's there for good. And you don't have to waste money on batteries."

“You won’t transcend anything by looking away from it, good or bad.”

“Escaping from suffering means knowing the way out of suffering; it doesn't mean running away from wherever suffering arises. By doing that you just carry your suffering with you.”

“Where suffering lies is right where non-suffering will arise.”

“Suffering is none other than the first Noble Truth. Are you going to look at that as something bad?”

“Peace comes from doing things completely with your whole body and mind.”

“You will not find liberation by running around looking elsewhere.”

“Why do you want things when their nature is pain and suffering?”

“You must constantly go against the stream of ignorance. This is called discipline.”

“There is peace everywhere, no matter where you may go.”

“Don’t think that what you are looking for can be found anywhere other than right here.”

“The road you traveled on is not the monastery.”

“How could you possibly fall into Hell when your mind has abandoned evil?”

“Everyone wants to feel good, but they’re less concerned with whether it’s right or not.”

“If you’ve done the work, there’s no need to worry about the results.”

“Whenever a visitor approaches you wave them away. If you forbid them to enter, where are they going to sit down? There's only one seat, and you're sitting in it. Spend the whole day in this one spot.”

“Simply know who the guests are as they arrive. Once they've dropped by they will find that there's only one chair, and as long as you're occupying it they will have no place to sit down. They come thinking to fill your ear with gossip, but this time there's no room for them to sit. Next time they come there will also be no chair free. No matter how many times these chattering visitors show up, they always meet the same fellow sitting in the same spot. You haven't budged from that chair. How long do you think they will continue to put up with this situation? In just speaking to them you get to know them thoroughly. Everyone and everything you've ever known since you began to experience the world will come for a visit. Simply observing and being aware right here is enough to see the Dhamma entirely.”

“Having insight into impermanence means not allowing ourselves to suffer.”

“To meditate, you have to resolve that now is the time for training the mind and nothing else.”

“People are already intoxicated enough with things like wealth and striving, without having to get intoxicated further by alcohol and such.”

“Both happiness and sadness are uncertain and impermanent.”

“Whatever we are thinking or feeling, we must know it.”

“If you are without awareness for 5 minutes, you are crazy for 5 minutes.”

“Hold your pain as an object of attention. When the pain has reached its limit, see what happens.”

“If you don’t have desire, you can’t meditate. But if you have desire, you can’t meditate either.”

“Whether you feel like it or not, you should practice.”

“If they don’t practice when death is near, when will they? I don’t know when people think they’re going to practice!”

“When coming out of sitting meditation, don’t think that you’re coming out of meditation. Reflect that you’re simply changing postures.”

“The mind is simply like this. We let it go at that, and the mind becomes peaceful.”

“The mind is already disturbed, and then we further disturb things by wanting to make it calm.”

“The mind is like this, and it goes on talking just like a small child. But we can let the child just go on talking while we attend to what’s important, which is our focus.”

“Sever the causes of suffering, and suffering cannot arise.”

“To understand suffering and to kill it off, you first have to experience it.”

“Taking only what you like and discarding whatever you don’t like isn’t practice, it’s disaster.”

“People commit malicious acts, and yet they want to be good.”

“Everything in the world is ready to teach us.”

“That which is not God doesn’t exist.”

“Suffering and happiness are like the two ends of a snake, head and tail. If you put your hand near the head, it’ll bite you right away. But if you grab the tail, happiness, it’ll just turn around to bite you almost as quickly.”

“You can’t get on the freeway and yell at the cars for being there. The road is the place where cars go. If you don’t want the cars to be there, you suffer. So what can you do? Get off the road!”

“Desire is a burning house; you can leave any time you like, and you probably should!”

“Wherever we are, we have time to meditate.”

“You must understand emptiness within the things that are here.”

“The Buddha told us that we should ensure that it's only the body that is locked up in jail, and not to let the mind be imprisoned along with it.”

“If there’s a flood, let it only affect your house; don’t let it flood your mind. If there’s a fire, don’t let it burn your heart.”

“Even if you don’t let go, everything is starting to leave you anyway.”

“Truth can be passed on to as many other people as you like, and it will never be depleted.”

“We have time to breathe because we see the importance of the breath. So when we see the importance of meditation, we will meditate.”

“All this effort, and no one really gains anything!”

“He must have been determined to get enlightened before sundown or something; he thought it would be so easy.”

“Everything is uncertain. I’ve searched for over forty years as a monk and this is all I could find. That and patient endurance.”

“You can't just go up to a group of monkeys and say, 'Hey, you monkeys! Stop that!' If you do, that just means that you don’t understand monkeys. When you understand what monkeys are like, that’s enough; you can be at peace.”

“Everything breakable is already broken. Everything that is alive is already dead.”

“Nobody wants suffering and yet people keep creating the causes of suffering, almost as if they were wandering around looking for it.”

“If we just leave our senses to perform their natural functions, where will problems arise? There are no problems.”

“However much we are lacking in mindfulness, that’s how crazy we are.”

“As long as the sources of confusion are still present within our minds, we will never be free of confusion.”

“A deluded mind can never lead us out of our delusions.”

“We’ve had to create things like conventions because they are not intrinsically there.”

“Right here is where you’re stuck, so your work is right here.”

“The Buddha can only bring you to the beginning of the Path.”