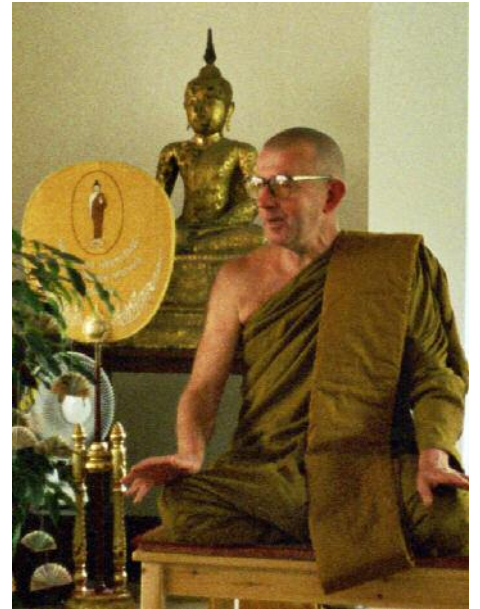




# THE FOREST HERMITAGE ISSUE NO. 1 OF 2003 / 2546 NEWSLETTER



NAMO TASSA BHAGAVATO ARAHATO SAMMASAMBUDDHASSA

HONOUR TO THE BLESSED ONE, THE EXALTED ONE, THE FULLY-ENLIGHTENED ONE

In my last newsletter at the end of August, I wrote that there was the possibility of our extending the scope and size of our operations with the acquisition of another property. The owners of Wood Cottage, originally the twin of our present building and just a five minute walk away through the forest, let it be known that they were intending to sell and gave us the chance of buying without putting it on the open market. We saw this as an opportunity that might never come again and probably the only way of our ever increasing our accommodation and being able to provide reasonable facilities for organised retreats, for guests, and even perhaps for nuns. We obviously wanted it to happen but we didn't have much time to raise the necessary and a lot of money was involved - property round here in a well positioned piece of countryside doesn't come cheap. The asking price was £425,000. As with anything and everything, all we could do was our best.

The first stage was to get a mortgage and raise enough to secure the purchase. We had only three months to find nearly £130,000, a huge sum for us - and with a lot of help we just did it! At 11:15 on December 23rd, after a dramatic weekend in which hundreds of miles were covered getting signatures before everyone shut up shop and disappeared for the Christmas and New Year break, contracts were exchanged, the deal done and we take over on March 14th. This isn't the end of it of course, there's still the mortgage to be paid and a huge debt to be reduced but I'm sure that to enable the gift of the Dhamma, it will be done.

I have to say that I have not been ambitious for anywhere larger than what we've had at the Forest Hermitage, but it has been a pity to have turned away so many who would have liked to have stayed and practised with us for want of suitable space. When it was first rumoured that Wood Cottage might be becoming available I dismissed any idea of trying for it. I preferred to settle for making more of what we had but nearly a year later when rumour became reality my mind changed and I came to think that if we didn't try for it not only I and those around me now but also those coming after would all regret a golden opportunity lost, so after much careful deliberation we went ahead.

Acquiring this second property brings responsibilities and opportunities. Buildings and gardens are like all conditioned things forever changing, which means we have to look after them. When we have them and they're well cared for we can use and enjoy them. Wood Cottage will provide accommodation suitably

separated from that of the monks, where lay guests, including women, will be able to stay. That means we can run properly organised retreats. Dates have yet to be discussed and decided on but I am thinking of teaching at least one long retreat in August and perhaps even something as early as June. We may also include some working retreats. I would welcome your interest and suggestions.

Although it still seems awfully new to us, it is nearly six months since we redesigned and renovated the main Shrine Room at the Forest Hermitage. You might have seen the picture on the web site. It's simpler and brighter and much, much nicer.

If you've been to the web site lately you might also have noticed that a recording of one of my twice weekly short talks is posted for download. There's only one talk up there at a time but it's a different one each week.

Also on the web site there's a photo of the group, minus one, on the last day of our pilgrimage to the Buddhist holy sites of India and a promise eventually to publish on the web an illustrated account of our epic journey. That's a promise I have yet to keep. I had thought to have long since finished in several newsletters back serialising the story of our journey but over the year a number of things have happened to seriously distract me. Still I do hope to complete it by the time of the first anniversary!

The last time I wrote about our memorable pilgrimage I described the day we spent wandering amongst the ruins that lie in what once was the deer park where the Buddha gave his first

## DIARY:

### ANGULIMALA WORKSHOP

(mainly for Buddhist Prison Chaplains)

March 8th with Sir David Ramsbotham.



### MEDITATION and a DHAMMA TALK

Mondays & Fridays at 8 pm

sermon to five ascetics. We had arrived there following a marathon rail journey from Delhi to Patna and then visits to Vesali, Rajgir, Nalanda and Bodh Gaya, the place of his Enlightenment. Still to come were Kusinara, where he'd passed away, Lumbini, the birthplace, and Savatthi, where he'd stayed for so many years. As I've explained before, our limited time meant that the order in which we visited these holy places could have no more than an accidental and occasional relationship to their chronological significance in the life of the Buddha.



The day after our very full day at Sarnath it had to be an early meal, practically at first light, in time for us to be cleared up, packed and ready to be on our way for a whole day in the coach as we struck north for Kusinara, described by Ananda as he waited there on the ailing Blessed One as 'this mean place, this uncivilized township in the midst of the jungle, a mere outpost of the province' to which the Buddha had rejoined that it had once been a great royal capital known as Kusavati. For the time that we needed to cover them the distances we travelled weren't all that great, on this occasion just 170 miles, but the roads were not of the best, the coach was hardly in the first league and the traffic jams could be epic. One great advantage we monks had over the rest of the party was that only eating the one meal meant that once it was over and out of the way we didn't have to worry about where and when we were going to eat again for the rest of the day. For the lay people, or all but one who was on Eight Precepts, there had to be bookings and stops for them to refuel and unsurprisingly, things didn't always work out. I remember that day that at the little wayside hotel where we stopped for the scheduled lunch break two coachloads of, I think, German Tibetan Buddhists had got there first and scoffed the meal arranged for our group. Never mind, no one appeared particularly the worse for wear when as the light was beginning to fail we eventually pulled in to the rambling Japanese hotel at Kusinara where we were to spend the night.

Early the next morning we went across to the barrel-roofed temple that sits, surrounded by ruins of old monastic buildings and chedis, next to the Parinibbana Stupa built to mark the place of the Buddha's passing. Occupying most of the floor area in that relatively modern one-roomed temple there is a large image of the Buddha reclining and entering parinibbana. This image, resting just as the Buddha did, on his right side, with the head to the north is a little over eighteen feet long, about fifteen hundred years old and was originally of one piece of stone. It was unearthed in the mid-nineteenth century when Kusinara was rediscovered by a British archeologist called Cunningham and excavated; it has since been restored and now lies in its original location on the very spot where the Buddha himself passed into parinibbana. Just a brief word of explanation, as we normally think of death being followed by rebirth and as Buddhas and Arahants don't come back, we don't usually speak of their dying but use the term parinibbana. I haven't room here for a more detailed explanation, so if you want one I'll have to leave you to look it up for yourself. When we arrived there was already a certain amount of activity with

both monks and lay people present, some circumambulating, some meditating, some chanting. When a space cleared we knelt in front of the great image, paid our respects, recited the morning chanting, meditated for a while and then I read the stirring account of the Buddha's passing from the Parinibbana Sutta. Afterwards we circumambulated and wandered amongst the ruins for a while. Then we paid a brief visit to the

Burmese temple where I'd stayed on my previous visit in 1971 before climbing back on our coach and being ferried out to the huge shapeless mass of brick that is all that remains of the stupa built over the site of the Buddha's cremation. We circumambulated in the hot sun and paid our respects and then it was back to the hotel to get ready for another journey. But for some of us before piling back on that coach and setting off for Nepal, there was just time to escape for a few minutes to sit again with that great stone image of the Buddha's parinibbana.

Of that afternoon I can now only vaguely recollect a fairly uneventful journey of the kind we had become well used to. As the afternoon wore on and was about to merge into evening we came to the border and sat for ages imprisoned in our coach while the passports were processed as the temperature slowly sank below anything that remotely justified our one stop full on air conditioning. Eventually we got on our way again and drove in darkness through one or two small towns or villages and as I listened to the remarks from our company at how different it was here, I'm sure I caught more than a note of relief at being away, if only for a few hours, from the chaos and poverty and filth of India. The hotel was smaller than usual but charming, clean and well organised. We had a short meeting and then turned in. Next day, up early, we drove through the morning mist out past the new temples and buildings that have sprung up, out to the sacred garden where the Bodhisatta, the Buddha-to-be, was born. From where the coach parked we walked in along a path that ran past the Theravadan temple and I looked up at the room in which I had spent a week in retreat in 1971. Lumbini was much less accessible back then and I remember the Home Minister of Nepal coming on a visit and the thud of the elephants' feet as he and his party approached. Since then there have been changes and a barmy development plan is slowly being implemented. In order to investigate what might have lain beneath, the Maya Devi temple has been destroyed and the Bodhi tree that stood next to it chopped down. The bas-reliefs depicting the birth of the Bodhisatta that used to be down inside the Maya Devi temple are housed now in a grubby makeshift building to one side. It's a

bit of a mess and it doesn't help that despite its importance to millions of Buddhists throughout the world this, and for that matter so many of the holy sites, is still not in the hands of Buddhists. We meditated and recited the morning chanting in front of the pillar that Ashoka raised to mark the birthplace and strolled amongst the ruins of stupas and monastic buildings. Then it was

a return to the hotel and preparations for yet another journey.

Back to the present and a Happy New Year. The Forest Hermitage Buddhist Calendar is available, if you want one just ask.

### LIPUSATIJA OBSERVANCE DAYS

	●	◐	○	◑
January	2	10	17	25
February	1	9	16	24
March	2	10	17	25

## THIS IS THE NEWSLETTER OF VEN. AJAHN KHEMADHAMMO OF THE FOREST HERMITAGE AND ANGULIMALA, THE BUDDHIST PRISON CHAPLAINCY ORGANISATION

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