



# THE FOREST HERMITAGE

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# NEWSLETTER

NAMO TASSA BHAGAVATO ARAHATO SAMMASAMBUDDHASSA

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

In the middle of October last year I was asked to be the keynote speaker at a seminar in Bangkok to be held on the 25th December and organised by the Bhumipalo Bhikkhu Foundation. This organisation is called after the name the King of Thailand took while he was briefly a monk. I was told that the two day seminar would be presided over by the King's sister, HRH Princess Kalayaniwattana, the topic would be 'The Security of Buddhism in Thailand' and I was expected to speak for not more than thirty minutes. It seemed an awful long way and a lot of trouble to go to for just thirty minutes but there you are, in Thailand my OBE had hit the headlines and there for a while at least I had become a minor celebrity. Khun Vannee Lamsam, who told me later that she was so very proud of my achievement, stepped in to sponsor my travel and expenses and enable me to take with me an assistant. And so it came to pass that on December 17th, Matthew and I set off in some style for two weeks in Thailand.

As we stepped off the plane the following afternoon at Bangkok Airport we were met by Khun Piyaporn, a marvellously generous and energetic lady who seemed never so happy as when she was busying herself looking after and organising things for us. She led us to an airport VIP room where various people came to meet me. It was important that they brief me then, as within a couple of hours I was due on the evening flight for Ubon to spend the next few days in the North-East at Wat Pah Nanachat, not returning to Bangkok until the night before the seminar. And so it was that I discovered what had puzzled and eluded me for almost two months - the reason for this seminar and why the topic was 'The Security of Buddhism in Thailand'. I had assumed that it had something to do with bad behaviour and declining moral standards, but I was wrong, it was Islam. Not only are mosques appearing in Bangkok, some of them they said built with public money by politicians anxious to please the Muslims but in the Muslim strongholds of the South violence is on the increase and already this year monks have been murdered during their early morning alms round. We know that elements within both Islam and Christianity can be pretty pushy to say the least and I have read and heard of American Christian fundamentalist groups with plenty of cash and anxious for converts not exactly helping the process of peace and reconciliation in such troubled and traditional Buddhist countries as Cambodia and Sri Lanka. Should you happen to go on pilgrimage to the great Buddhist sites of India you will be appalled at the destruction and blood that has been spilt there. To the traditional easy going Buddhist religious imperialism is incomprehensible and it's this that gives religion a bad name and is one of the reasons some western Buddhists do not like to see Buddhism labelled a religion. What is to be done and how are we

as followers of the Buddha supposed to react when other creeds want to destroy and supplant what is so very dear to us?

Putting these problems aside for a while I enjoyed being back in the North-East again, back in the forest and once more out on an early morning alms round. Through the kindness of Peter and Tipawan it was possible too to get out and about a bit. We went again to that remote place I'd introduced them to last time where a handful of our monks live and walked all afternoon high above the Mekhong with Laos on the other side. The picture is of the cave where we stopped for tea and where one monk or novice was staying. You can see the walking meditation path at the side, the sitting platform set in tins of water or paraffin to deter the ants and his cot or umbrella from which when it's open a mosquito net is suspended to form a sort of bell tent and give him some protection from the little blighters. The pictures on either side of the Buddha-Rupa are of Ajahn Mun and Ajahn Chah in England. I also spent an afternoon with my old friend and mentor, Ajahn Dang, who despite having suffered a couple of strokes was out helping to build a wall when we unexpectedly turned up.

On the evening of the 24th, unsure quite what we might be doing after the seminar but leaving open the possibility of a return to the North-East, Matt and I left Ubon and flew down to Bangkok. The next morning a young lady came to interview me for a feature in the Outlook section of the Bangkok Post and then in the early afternoon we were collected and taken to the National Cultural Centre where the seminar was already under way. It had been running all day with about five hundred people attending but it wasn't until the mid-afternoon that the Princess was due and that was when I was supposed to say my piece. In the foyer there were various displays of art and sculpture for Her Royal Highness to view as she arrived and last before she entered the auditorium I was stood beside a glass case containing my medal and various photos of me with the Queen at my investiture last October. When she got to me the Princess chatted for a few minutes, congratulated me and I presented her with an album of pictures, mostly of the Buddha Groves and Shrines that we've established in a few English prisons; then in we all went. The Thais still have a culture of respect, something we have pretty much lost and they treat royalty with tremendous deference. When Her Royal Highness stood, the whole auditorium rose as one and when she sat so did they, then when she stood to give her speech, up they got again and so it went on. I admire that. Only the other evening in one of the gaols I visit I was pleased to hear a prisoner tell another that one of the things he had got from Buddhism was being able to give respect. Whether it was deserved or not was not up to him, that was for whoever he was respecting to worry about, his concern was only to be respectful. Quite right. My talk seemed to



Khun Piyaporn in front & some former Warwick Uni students.



With Ajahn Dang at Numyeaun.



With Prof Yongyut and children after the seminar.

go down all right - at least it wasn't too long. I began in Thai and ended in English. I spoke briefly about my prison work and then explained how we had called our prison chaplaincy organisation after Angulimala and elaborated on why and how I take every available opportunity to tell the Angulimala story, especially to prison staff.

This story is dear to my heart because it reminds us that people can and do change for the better. And it was relevant to the seminar because when we hear how the king praised the Buddha for accomplishing with neither force nor weapons what he had failed to do with both force and weapons, in other words through persuasion and example, it shows us how to respond when attacked and be a force for change. Instead of blindly clinging to the forms of Buddhism we have to remember to try and do what he did and go where he went. Only by studying and knowing it well and practising it properly will it be of use to us and we will succeed in preserving it. The purpose of our practice is to cleanse our hearts and minds of all greed, hatred and delusion and so we should try not to react in any unskillful way to anything, including violence. If we can manage not to lose sight of that these threats may yet sharpen our practice and make for better Buddhists.

Question yourselves, what is it that is special about Buddhism? Is it what changes people making them better and happier: the practice of morality, the development of meditation and the cultivation of insight and wisdom? Or can it be the rituals and paraphernalia like the ceremonial pouring of Buddha Images with much chanting and the melting of donated gold and jewellery to make the brains, heart and lungs of the image? One account I read even said that if the Image could be completed in a day and a night it would immediately answer any prayers addressed to it! People love this but it's not Buddhism; this isn't to be found in the word of the Buddha. I can remember once, many years ago, asking Ajahn Dang whether the villagers when they worshipped the Buddha Image thought that was the Buddha. At first he fell about then pulling back his robe and striking himself over the heart he bellowed at me that this was where the Buddha was.

No one believes that Islam and Christianity are what the Buddha taught but

many people do think that superstitious rituals and wrong views are and believe you me ignorance of what the Buddha taught is likely to prove the greater threat.

The following morning on December 26th I was invited by my old friend Sathienpong Wannapok to eat at the offices of Khaosod newspaper where I was also interviewed for two pieces that subsequently appeared in Khaosod and Matchon Weekly. The afternoon was spent in Bang Khen Women's Prison which houses over 4000 women. I spoke to a large mostly Thai group first and then asked if I could talk to the non Thais and soon had a virtual United Nations of about forty or more young women sitting in front of me. From there it was a frantic dash through the traffic to collect our things before speeding out to catch the evening flight back to Ubon.

The next three or four days were pretty similar to the ones that had preceded the two days in Bangkok only this time I was able to visit Luangpor Maha Supong at Wat Pah Poodindang who has been very unwell

with cancer. I spent my first vassa there with him in 1972 and although I've seen him from time to time and indeed he has been to the Forest Hermitage, I think this year was the first time I've been back to Poodindang. I also called at Wat Pah Suan Klooy where I spent my third vassa and I don't think I've been back there since either. Then again it was on the plane and back to Bangkok where I saw the New Year in sitting in the Royal Orchid Lounge at Bangkok Airport waiting to board a plane for London.

I went with Matthew, my loyal and long time secretary and assistant but I came back without him and I'm afraid I've lost him to an affair of the heart. I know I should have looked after him better. We are coping but he played an important role here and I do miss him and appreciate the support and good things he did. I'm sure we all here wish him well.

When we purchased Wood Cottage a year ago we weren't quite certain how we were going to use it apart from obviously having somewhere particularly for female guests on retreat. Then along came some women who appeared to be interested in training and so for a while it looked like we had the genesis of a women's community but that has now collapsed and we are back to Wood Cottage as a retreat centre and our minds are turning again to the possibility of organised retreats.

Unlike other religions, we Buddhists have no newspaper of our own. And so I doubt whether many of you will have heard of the Government's Interface with the Faith Communities. Our numbers are not sufficient for us to count for much and probably it was a fairly meaningless cosmetic exercise but there might nevertheless be from time to time national issues that could concern us and it is a pity that we have no efficient means of broadcasting and discussing them.

Magha Puja is with us again. Not only is this the anniversary of the Buddha's historic meeting at the Bamboo Grove with personal and enlightened disciples but it is also this year Angulimala's 19th birthday.

I will leave you with that well known verse uttered by the Buddha on the first Magha Puja: 'Avoid all evil, cultivate what is good and purify your minds; this is the teaching of all the Buddhas.'

## DIARY:

### ANGULIMALA WORKSHOP

Saturday, March 13th, 10 a.m.



### MAGHA PUJA celebration

Sunday, March 14th, 10 a.m.



### MEDITATION, a TALK and a READING from the TIPITIKA

Mondays & Fridays at 8 pm

### LIPSAṬṬHA OBSERVANCE DAYS

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March	5	13	20	28
April	4	12	18	26
May	3	11	18	26

## NEWSLETTER FROM VEN. AJAHN KHEMADHAMMO OBE OF THE FOREST HERMITAGE & ANGULIMALA, THE BUDDHIST PRISON CHAPLAINCY ORGANISATION

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