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NEWSLETTER

NAMO TASSA BHAGAVATO ARAHATO SAMMASAMBUDDHASSA

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

This is the time of the year come round once again when we remember the birth of the child who would one day become the Buddha, his Enlightenment when the prince turned recluse became the Buddha and when he was eighty, the Buddha's final passing. This festival is known variously as Vesakha Puja, Vesak or simply Buddha Day. In the Tipitaka or Pali Canon, the accounts of the very special events celebrated at Vesak state that each took place on a Full Moon of the month of Vesakha. This ancient lunar month normally corresponds roughly with our month of May and I believe that some people believe that Vesak always falls on the Full Moon of May, indeed I can remember once when there were two Full Moons in May some Western Buddhists thinking that that year there could be two Vesaks! Not so, it is an event fixed in the lunar calendar. The lunar and solar months and years however don't quite agree. For the lunar calendar twelve orbits of the moon are counted as one year of 12 months or 354 days, and for the solar calendar one orbit of the earth about the sun is also counted as one year but of 365 days and more than six hours. To keep them roughly in sync an extra month has to be added to the lunar year every three years or so - seven times in a cycle of 19 years. This can be the source of some confusion when different Buddhist countries make different adjustments, like not adding the extra month at the same time. Another puzzle can be why the phases of the moon marked in pocket diaries don't quite accord with the lunar observance days given on Buddhist calendars such as I produce for the Forest Hermitage and Angulimala. There are two reasons. One is that in the Buddhist calendar we treat the day as beginning and ending with dawn rather than midnight and the other is the difficulty of adjusting the lunar fortnights of twenty-nine and a half days to fourteen and fifteen day intervals.

This year the Sri Lankan and Burmese calendars placed Vesakha at the beginning of May but the Thai calendar places it a month later on June 2nd and it is the Thai calendar that we use.

Years ago when I first opened negotiations with the Prison Service I was offered just one day when Buddhist prisoners might be allowed to celebrate a Buddhist festival and be excused work or whatever else they had to do. The choice seemed obvious. Although Vesak isn't observed by all schools of Buddhism it does have a major impact amongst Buddhists in Britain and it is acknowledged by some Mahayana groups. So Vesak it was. Later they said we could have two more days for two more Buddhist festivals. This exercised me somewhat because I didn't want only what was important to Theravadans to be honoured. But when I looked farther afield into other variations and schools of Buddhism there seemed so many special occasions that I didn't know what to do or how to choose without risking offending or upsetting someone. In the end, needing to make a decision and

realising we would have to make some compromises, I and those with whom I discussed it decided in effect to create three occasions that would be of meaning to all Buddhists and use the three days to mark the Triple Gem - the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha - which all Buddhists revere and take as their refuge. We needed an authentic framework and Vesak was the only choice for Buddha Day, Asalha Puja when we celebrate the Buddha's First Sermon was the obvious candidate for Dhamma Day and then the last day of the vassa, Pavarana Day was chosen as Sangha Day.

These three under their more traditional names are celebrated at the Forest Hermitage every year as well as Magha Puja and Songkran which isn't really a Buddhist occasion but the New Year of countries such as Thailand, Burma and Sri Lanka. Songkran is also exceptional because while all the others tend to be fairly staid, decorous occasions that focus almost solely on the practices of Generosity, Virtue and the Cultivation of a mature and healthy Inner Attitude, Songkran features the ceremonial bathing of the Buddha-Rupa, monks, elders and friends and almost inevitably turns into a bit of fun with some people getting very wet indeed.

This year, fortunately for those who did get very wet and I saw at least one young woman having an entire bucket of water emptied over her, the day of our Songkran celebration was one of the hottest and most beautiful days of the year so far. The theme of my talk that afternoon was the value of respect since the ceremonial bathing is a mark of respect for the Buddha, the monks, elders, friends and whoever happens to be around. Afterwards, as if to demonstrate that respect needn't be as sombre as we've sometimes been persuaded it should be, I watched one very young lady with two paper cups, brim full of water, one in each hand, go up to another and with the words, "Join the party!" offer her one of the cups, then one after the other in two slick, swift moves, they each turned and emptied their cups of water over the nearest adult and ran for it.

Of course respect is generally accorded those or that which is worthy of respect which means that what is respected is usually valued and more often than not means a very great deal to some people at least. As I pointed out in my last newsletter, the Buddha-rupa or image of the Buddha is obviously not the Buddha but it does represent him. It symbolises for us the very best and highest that a human being can aspire to. It's therefore understandable that devotees do not want to see images or pictures of the Buddha on supermarket packets of rice, on beer mats, in bars, on women's skimpy swimwear or on shoes - all of which has happened recently. Unfortunately, to many people the Buddha is just another exotic figure with no meaning for them, so we must try to explain



MAGHA PUJA - with students from Manchester, Warwick, London & Oxford.

and educate them. This is not something to get angry about but I think neither should it be overlooked. After all, Buddhism is about overcoming ignorance with wisdom.

Our next big day will be Vesakha Puja or Buddha Day. June 2nd is the actual date but there is a practical need for our public occasions to be at weekends and so we will be celebrating on Sunday, June 6th. We will follow our well-established practice by beginning at around 10:30 with a welcome gathering in the Shrine Room and then those who wish to will take the Three Refuges and Five Precepts. As we don't have large premises to accommodate big numbers a lot depends on good weather and that's pretty important for the next item on the programme which is the pindapata or alms round when we monks do what we do every day in Thailand and step out, bare foot, to receive the food offerings of those who would like to drop something into our bowls. Then everyone eats. A principal part of the practice of Giving on these occasions is the offering and sharing of food. After the meal and when a certain amount of clearing up has been done we will

DIARY:

VESAKHA PUJA celebration

Sunday, June 6th, 10 a.m.



ANGULIMALA WORKSHOP

Saturday, June 26th, 10 a.m.



MEDITATION, a TALK and a READING from the TIPITIKA

Mondays & Fridays at 8 pm

LIPOSAṬṬHA OBSERVANCE DAYS

	○	◐	●	◑
June	2	10	16	24
July	1	9	16	24
	31			

assemble again outside to circumbulate three times with candles, flowers and incense the chedi and Buddha Rupa in the meditation garden at the back or perhaps the entire main area. This is in essence a walking meditation when we recollect the first time around, the Buddha, then the second time, the Dhamma and finally, the third time around, the Sangha. At the end the flowers, candles and incense are offered at the feet of the Image of the Buddha Walking and then we come back inside. Next, some people may wish to make a formal offering of what they may have

brought or collected. I know for example that some people have been organising for what literally translates as an Offering of Forest Cloth. This harks back to the practice of monks who observe the austerities and who collect and make use of cloth that has been thrown away in the forest. It will be an occasion to give other things as well to benefit the temple but there should be at least one piece of cloth that has no owner for me to take. Then I will follow this gift of material things with a gift of Dhamma, a talk or sermon on some aspect of Buddhism that I hope will be of use to and encourage my hearers in the development of their hearts and minds.

One thing I will certainly be telling those who will have taken the Five Precepts is that they're not to leave those precepts behind or 'lose' them on the way home! I don't want to find a great pile of discarded precepts at the gate or littering the length of our lane. They're given to be kept and kept with you at all times. And as for the fifth, I ought to remind you that it is abstinence from intoxicants and such that impairs mindfulness and not abstinence from being intoxicated or so thoroughly plastered that you can't walk as some people want to believe. Alcohol I've heard is now being called the new British disease. The personal and social consequences of the use of alcohol are utterly horrendous. I beg of those of you who might use it to reflect that the Buddha didn't make abstinence from alcohol one of the five basic precepts for nothing and consider that if you are serious about training and really want to develop your mind and improve the quality of your life then you must leave alcohol behind for ever.

At the last meeting of the Committee of the Buddha-Dhamma Fellowship, the organisation that supports the Hermitage, I had to speak about our need for more help with the running of events like Magha Puja and Songkran. Since we lost Matthew and with no one like him managing and organising as he used to, for the first time in years I have had to become actively involved in the nuts and bolts of those occasions with the two younger monks doing most of the setting up. Fortunately, there have always been people around at the end to help clear up but our experience at these last two events has highlighted the need for more help and the opportunity that generates for people to get involved.

Just for your information, at our Monday and Friday Open Evenings I usually give a talk and a reading from the Tipitika. Some of these talks and some of the readings are now freely available on CD and some are on the Forest Hermitage website.



Bathing the Buddha-Rupa and the monks.



The collaborators at Songkran



The end of our Songkran Day.

NEWSLETTER FROM VEN. AJAHN KHEMADHAMMO O.B.E. OF THE FOREST HERMITAGE & ANGULIMALA, THE BUDDHIST PRISON CHAPLAINCY ORGANISATION

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