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NAMO TASSA BHAGAVATO ARAHATO SAMMASAMBUDDHASSA

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

This year, on July 24th we celebrated Asalha Puja or Dhamma Day, the anniversary of the Buddha's first sermon when he set rolling the Wheel of Dhamma. That was the full moon and so the last day of that lunar month. The next day was then the first day of the Vassa when for three months all bhikkhus are supposed to observe a time of stability and retreat.

After his Enlightenment, the Buddha sat in various places close to the Bodhi Tree and savoured the bliss, the peace, the freedom, the understanding that he now enjoyed. At first he saw no reason to teach but then Brahma Sahampati realising that if he didn't a great opportunity would be lost, put it into the Blessed One's mind that if only he would there would certainly be some who would understand, there would be some with but little dust in their eyes. Once he had accepted that, the Buddha's first thought was for those who had helped him along his way. As his early teachers had already died he decided to seek out the five ascetics who had waited on him and looked after him while he had fasted and who had then abandoned him when he gave up those bitter practices. By this time, they were living in a deer park not far from Benares. In the eighth week after his Enlightenment then, the Buddha set out on foot to find them.

During most of our pilgrimage earlier this year to the Buddhist holy sites of India, it was just not practical to visit places in any sort of chronological order of their significance in the life of the Buddha. Had we tried we would have been zigzagging back and forth all over the place and it would have taken ages. However, when we left Bodhgaya, just as the Buddha had done after his Enlightenment we too headed in the direction of Varanasi or Benares as it is probably better known. It's a journey of about a hundred and fifty miles. The Buddha went on foot and by stages and took five or six days. We sat in a coach, encountered the occasional Indian traffic jam and took all day!

As we crossed the Ganges to enter Varanasi I saw from the bridge what looked like a family attending a poor and hastily improvised cremation on one of the banks and I looked forward to a boat trip we had arranged for early the next morning to view the cremation ghats. I was hoping our party would be able to see things there usually hidden from view in the West and have a chance to practise for themselves the traditional Buddhist contemplation of death and the dissolution of the body after death. We set off the next morning with great expectations only to find

nothing doing and so after a moderately lazy inspection of some of the sights from our boat we disembarked and threaded our way back through the lanes and alleyways and so back to the hotel.

Once we'd eaten we set out again, this time for Sarnath and one of the longest and most rewarding days of our pilgrimage. When we arrived, the sun was practically at its highest and to escape the heat our tour operators thoughtfully sent us in to do the museum in the company of a well-meaning but super garrulous guide who they'd engaged for the day. Straight through the door and the token security precautions and you come face to face with the very splendid and highly polished Lion Capital that once topped the 45 foot high pillar erected at Sarnath by the Emperor Ashoka in the third century BCE. The four smiling lions sitting back to back and each facing one of the four cardinal points represent the Buddha proclaiming the doctrine of peace to the world, a meaning sadly lost on India at the moment though the Lion Capital is still a national symbol and they've got it on the flag. The young monks and I left the rest of the party listening to the guide rapidly getting into his stride with all and everything you might ever possibly want to know about the Lion Capital and nipped off to see the famous image of the Buddha preaching the First Sermon. When having seen all we wanted to we got back to the exit cum entrance, the

DIARY:

BDF AGM & A MEETING TO DISCUSS THE PURCHASE OF WOOD COTTAGE - Sept 1st



ANGULIMALA WORKSHOP

(mainly for Buddhist Prison Chaplains)

September 21st from 10 a.m. + the AGM.



MEDITATION and a DHAMMA TALK

Mondays & Fridays at 8 pm

others by now looking slightly fractious had progressed no further and were still there with the guide going on and on about the Lion Capital. This wasn't how I had envisaged our pilgrimage at all and having quickly reflected that the place to begin our visit to Sarnath should be where the Buddha had met again the five ascetics, I recaptured the party, whisked them back to the coach and restarted our pilgrimage to Sarnath at the Chaukhandi Stupa.



SPRINGHILL BUDDHA GROVE Annual Celebration - Sept 22nd, at 6pm.

This stupa built in the 5th century of our Common Era and was apparently originally a square four-storied platform, one lying above the other, until it was plundered for the bricks and became a mound. On the top is an octagonal tower built in the 16th century by the Moghul Emperor Akbar in gratitude for a night's shelter given to his father on the run from his enemies. It's recently been partially excavated. It was here that the Buddha and his five former companions were reunited. The five ascetics weren't too pleased to see him again but as the Buddha approached it became obvious that some extraordinary change had taken place and that he was no longer the same man they had abandoned. They felt compelled to receive him and eventually to listen to him. Braving the hot sun - a small price to pay when none of us might ever visit this holy place again - we slowly circumambulated the Chaukhandi Stupa three times before moving on to where those five had sat and listened to the Buddha teach for the first time.

It was still baking hot as I led our group towards the Dhamekha Stupa and it seemed that only these mad dogs the English with one Thai, one American and two Sri Lankans were out in the midday sun. As usual, I had only the vaguest idea what I was going to do and began leading the party in procession around the huge ancient and solid stupa that Ashoka had built, and then as we stepped into its shade I seated myself on a ledge at its base and asked everyone to gather round. There at the very place where the voice of Buddhism was first heard I read an English translation of the Buddha's first sermon, the sermon that set rolling the Wheel of Truth. What the Buddha had to say then is what we might call essential Buddhism. In that sermon he identified and enlarged on what he sometimes described as his only concern, suffering and the end of suffering. He reminded his listeners that he had been a prince and had had access to all the sensual pleasure he wanted but it was no use. Then he'd been an ascetic practising bitter disciplines to an extreme and that was no use. Therefore, he developed the principle of the middle way, a principle that's sometimes conveniently misunderstood but a skill for every meditator to master. Next, the Buddha described the problem, its source, its solution and the way to that solution. We stayed there sitting and

meditating for some time until as the afternoon cooled more pilgrims began to appear and taking that as our cue we circumambulated the stupa and then moved on to explore the rest of the ruins roundabout.

Like nearly all the Buddhist ruins in India, these at Sarnath are a sad testament to intolerance and carelessness. We rambled in the sun through the remains of the many monasteries and spent some time inspecting the stump of the Ashoka pillar. Here it is believed is the place where the Buddha sent the sixty Arahants to wander for the welfare and

happiness of many and out of compassion for the world to teach the Dhamma and proclaim a holy life that is utterly perfect and pure. We lit candles and incense wherever it seemed appropriate and paid our respects at the site of the great Dhammarajika Stupa that once housed relics of the Buddha and which was destroyed for its bricks in the 18th century, the relics thrown into the Ganges.

As the afternoon drew on, we visited the adjacent and more recently built Burmese monastery and then wandered up the road to the Thai temple. I knew that the Abbot of the Thai temple was an Indian monk because I met him briefly when I was in Sarnath in 1971 but I was still surprised to see not Thai style Buddha Images but Buddhas of an early Indian style carved from stone. We found the abbot, a tiny energetic eighty year old, and he kindly showed us around and told us the story of how he had dissuaded a wealthy hotelier from building an hotel at this holy place and ended up with the land for a temple. The Buddha rupas, carved replicas of ancient images, were all the work of one man, a sculptor who he had given a home to and persuaded to do this great work. We thought he was clearly a man it would be difficult to say no to.

When we made our way back to the coach darkness had fallen and by the time we'd returned to the hotel we were too tired for an evening meeting. All we wanted to do was to rest and prepare for the early start next morning and the long drive to Kusinara where the Buddha had passed away.

Back to the present and at the Forest Hermitage we are of course in the middle of the Vassa and life goes on more or less as it should. Stirring things up a bit though is the chance we have of extending the scope and size of our operations with the acquisition of another cottage, originally the twin of our present building, just a short walk from here through the forest. It's an opportunity that may not come again and probably the only way we'll ever increase our accommodation and provide reasonable facilities for visitors, and even perhaps for nuns. We'd like it to happen and it'd be a shame if it didn't but time is short and a lot of money is involved. As with everything, all we can do is our best.

UPOSATHA OBSERVANCE DAYS

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August	8	16	23	31
September	6	14	21	29
October	6	14	21	29

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

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