

THE FOREST HERMITAGE Issue No. 4 of 2003 / 2546 NEWSLETTER



NAMO TASSA BHAGAVATO ARAHATO SAMMASAMBUDDHASSA

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

Ven. Ajahn Khemadhammo appointed OBE

The appointment of Ven Ajahn Khemadhammo Mahathera as an Officer of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire in the Queen's Birthday Honours 'for services to prisoners' is a splendid tribute to his work over more than 25 years in the prisons and special hospitals. It is an honour that acknowledges the outstanding role Ajahn Khemadhammo has played in building up Angulimala, the Buddhist Prison Chaplaincy, and in steering the Prison Service towards a multi-faith approach that treats all religions and beliefs equally.

Under Ajahn Khemadhammo's leadership, Buddha Groves have been created in a number of prisons and special hospitals, and they have had a profound effect on the environment of prisoners and staff of all faiths. The anniversary celebrations at the Springhill Buddha Grove have become a notable event in the prison calendar.

An established team of Buddhist prison chaplains is delivering spiritual care to an increasing number of Buddhist prisoners. Their work is coordinated by Angulimala, which also runs for them workshops at The Forest Hermitage. All of this is under the spiritual direction of the Ajahn, and much of the practical work falls to him as well. Dealing with the Prison Service management at all levels, and undertaking a gruelling programme of prison visits up and down the country is all part of his work. His personal, hands-on knowledge of many establishments is unrivalled, and this honour is undoubtedly a reflection of the esteem in which he is held in the Home Office and the Prison Service. But it is also the Buddhist prisoners who revere him greatly.

Angulimala is an extraordinary achievement, and owes its success to the selfless dedication, compassion and loving kindness put into it by Ajahn Khemadhammo over the years. It is hard to remember that the Prison Act of 1952 looks to the Church of England as the sole provider of spiritual care in the prisons of England and Wales, with 'visiting ministers' very much of an afterthought. Today there is a real transformation under way, and the award of the OBE to Ajahn Khemadhammo acknowledges his remarkable record.

All those who dedicate so much of their time and effort to the work of Angulimala can be proud of this award. Buddhist chaplains, lay contributors, those who drive the Ajahn on his visits to the prisons may see that their contribution is a valuable one, and Buddhist prisoners too may rejoice in the recognition of their beliefs.

Lord Avebury

News & Views from Ven. Ajahn Khemadhammo, OBE

I had better begin by saying how grateful I am to Lord Avebury for his generous appraisal of my prison activities over the past twenty-six years and my appointment as an OBE. This award is of significance not only for me personally but for Buddhism in this country. When prompted by curiosity I first walked through the doors of the old Hampstead Vihara in 1967 I remember the ambition then of people who went there that one day there should be a native sangha of four English bhikkhus in this country. At that time no English man had ever been ordained a Buddhist monk as long as I have now and there was certainly no recognition the like of which has just been bestowed on me, so in a relatively short time we have come a long way. And let us not forget what the citation has to say about services to prisoners because this award also recognises Angulimala and all those who help to make Buddhism available in the prisons and who contribute in a variety of ways to shining the light of the Dhamma on this often forgotten and neglected corner of society. Then there are the prisoners themselves, for the most part ordinary men and women doing their best to cope with their predicament and often showing extraordinary zeal and commitment to their Buddhist practice against odds that few who have never been to prison will ever have to face. I hope you will all feel honoured by this award.

Just about a year ago, at the completion of last year's Asalha Puja celebration I led a group of people on a short walk through Hampton Wood to Wood Cottage which we had then only recently learnt would be sold and which we had the chance of buying. It was a lovely sunny day and the cottage located on the edge of the wood and surrounded by ripening cornfields seemed idyllic. There was no dissent about the desirability of acquiring it but doubt registered on more than one face as to the likelihood of ever making that a reality.

When on July 13th we celebrated Asalha Puja this year I was reminded of last year's walk through the woods and I couldn't help but reflect on just how much water had passed under the bridge since then. In the year that has gone, through earnest commitment, hard work, and enormous generosity, not only have we bought and moved into Wood Cottage but also over half the £425,000 purchase price has been raised. This has been a tremendous achievement and enabled us to increase the scale of our operation and include women in the full time training that we offer and already Buddhist nuns are in residence.

Asalha Puja, which this year fell on Sunday, July 13th, commemorates the Buddha's first sermon and the day after is when we begin the annual Vassa or Rains Retreat. The week

DIARY:

ANGULIMALA WORKSHOP

Saturday, Sept 27th, 10 a.m.



MEDITATION, a TALK and a
READING from the TIPITIKA

Mondays & Fridays at 8 pm

LIPOSATIJA OBSERVANCE DAYS

| | 🕒 | 🕒 | 🕒 | 🕒 |
|-----------|---|----|----|----|
| August | 5 | 12 | 20 | 26 |
| September | 3 | 10 | 18 | 25 |
| October | 3 | 10 | 18 | 24 |



before Asalha Puja two women left their household life behind them and became nuns. Then in the afternoon of our Asalha celebration itself, outside in the Pagoda garden in blazing sunshine (see the main photo and another on this page), Anthony formally requested and received the Going Forth as a samanera with the ordination name of Khemajaro. The next morning it was Peter's turn and he is now known as Samanera Kovidho. These two were formerly leading members of the Warwick University Buddhist Society and had just graduated. Now they're in another university where the course is much more profound. And could last a lifetime or more!

We have started to produce CDs that include on them a complete meditation evening at the Forest Hermitage and various talks that I have given here. These have been mostly intended for distribution in the prisons but are available to anyone who wants them. There are also always a few talks available on the website. We may be extending the range of our CDs soon to include recordings of the readings I am giving from the books of the Tipitika, particularly the Majjhima Nikaya on Monday and Friday evenings throughout the Vassa. I also have plans and permission to record the book, *The Life of the Buddha* according to the Pali Canon. For some time I have been concerned that more attention seems to be given to what people write and say about Buddhism than what the Buddha himself said. I realise that the books of scripture are often very expensive and don't always make easy reading and I doubt whether any thoughts I might have of producing simple and popular versions of the scriptures will ever come to much; but I still possess some ability to read aloud and

for many listening is more attractive than reading, so I have begun by replacing the tea time that used to follow our Monday and Friday evening open sessions with a reading from the Tipitika.

As well as books and CDs, Angulimala also distributes to Buddhist prisoners small images of the Buddha. They are an obvious source of inspiration and very popular. They are also rather more fragile than they appear and easily mishandled and broken. Now, Buddhists have enormous reverence for the Buddha and treasure anything connected with or representative of him. A Buddha Image therefore should generally be placed somewhere above the height of one's head, where it can be seen and respected and if possible a small shrine may be created around it. When it needs to be cleaned, handled or moved it should be treated with the greatest care and respect and before touching it it's good practice to make anjali, to raise one's hands together, palm to palm, to one's forehead. Obviously you can't expect non-Buddhists to feel and do the same but the Prison Service does to its credit encourage staff to be sensitive to religious practices and sometimes I am asked to explain to officers Buddhist customs and sensitivities and show them what to do and what not to do in order to avoid upset and offence.

It would clearly be impossible to rescue all the Buddha Images abused in advertising, as fashion accessories, and as ornaments and decorations, like the one unceremoniously plonked on the dusty pavement outside an oriental themed bar and restaurant called Jim Thompson's that I pass when shuttling between Wandsworth and Wormwood Scrubs prisons; or the table

mats and coasters bearing pictures of the Buddha that a firm called Castle Melamine are producing. In most cases, probably no offence is intended or thought of and there's certainly nothing to be gained by getting angry or upset. However, as I do in the prisons, if you can it's always worth trying to teach and inform people and explain how these images are revered because they represent the very highest that a human being can aspire to. You never know what the response might be.

On March 7th last year, our pilgrimage to the Buddhist holy places in India concluded with a candle-lit ceremony at the ruin of what had sometimes been the Buddha's dwelling in Jetavana at Savatthi. It had been an intense fortnight and both during and since there has been much to reflect on and not just the inspiration derived from the extraordinary privilege of following in the footsteps of the Perfectly Enlightened One and his great disciples. What else? Well, everywhere we went, at almost each of the great holy sites there was evidence of destruction, of a savage and blind intolerance of one religion by another. And in the midst of our pilgrimage there was the attack on the train at Godhra and the unrest that followed and spread like a fire throughout India. One could be excused for wondering what hope there can be when even in India with its rich spiritual heritage the history of religious rivalry continues to be written in blood. But then you have to remember to keep on trying and however unpalatable the beliefs and practices of another religion might be, if nothing else we must learn to live together and even if another's views are anathema to us we should try to cultivate tolerance and loving-kindness.

VEN. AJAHN KHEMADHAMMO'S NEWSLETTER FROM THE FOREST HERMITAGE & ANGULIMALA, THE BUDDHIST PRISON CHAPLAINCY ORGANISATION

The Forest Hermitage Lower Fulbrook nr Sherbourne Warwickshire CV35 8AS United Kingdom
For Ven. Ajahn Khemadhammo & ANGULIMALA - direct telephone: 01926 624385 mobile: 07941 013319 facsimile: 07092 397172
Email address: prakhem@foresthermitage.org.uk Websites: www.foresthermitage.org.uk & www.angulimala.org.uk
THE BUDDHA-DHAMMA FELLOWSHIP, Reg. Charity No 289913 ANGULIMALA, Reg. Charity No 294939