

# THE FOREST HERMITAGE NEWSLETTER

Issue No. 5 of 2003 / 2546



NAMO TASSA BHAGAVATO ARAHATO SAMMASAMBUDDHASSA

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

This picture of the Queen and I, reproduced here by courtesy of BCA Film, was taken on October 9th when I appeared at Buckingham Palace to be invested as an OBE, an Officer of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire. It was yet another extraordinary day in my unusual life. I'm sorry but I keep giving the meaning of OBE in full on the assumption that almost everyone I talk to or write for are as ignorant of these matters as once I was. Since my appointment was announced in the Queen's Birthday Honours List in June I've learnt a great deal more about the Order of the British Empire than I ever expected to and since October 9th I have the insignia.

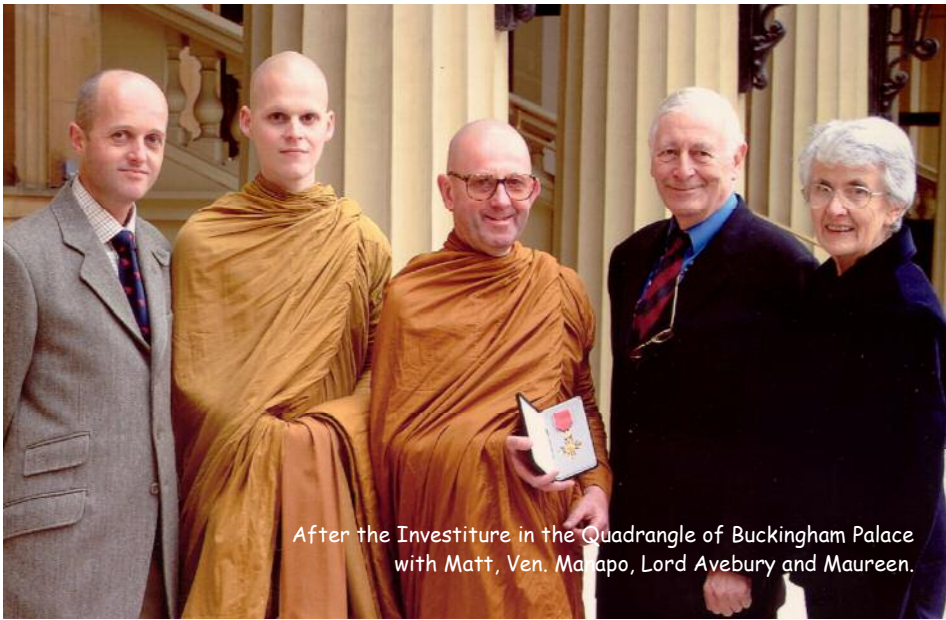
A question uppermost in the minds of just about everyone round here was how when I went to see the Queen I would manage to avoid shaking hands with her since Buddhist monks, bhikkhus that is, are strictly forbidden any direct physical contact with a woman, and that means any woman or girl whether she be your ninety year old mother, your best friend's two year old toddler or the Queen of England. I've nearly always found that if you're confident and take the trouble to speak up for yourself and explain people will respect your position and do their best to accommodate you whether they agree with you or not. So first Lord Avebury and then I rang up the Palace and the official we spoke to turned out to be wonderfully understanding and very courteously said that he would see to it that Her Majesty was briefed not to try and shake hands with me and then quite off his own bat he went to some trouble to ensure that I and the young monk accompanying me would on the day be suitably seated where we wouldn't be close to any women.

At these investitures each recipient may be accompanied by no more than three guests. I chose to take my attendant monk, Ven. Manapo, to represent the Sangha; Lord Avebury, the Patron of Angulimala and a great friend, to represent Angulimala, the Buddhist Prison Chaplaincy; and Maureen Leahy, well-known to anyone who has ever visited the Forest Hermitage, to represent the Buddha-Dhamma Fellowship and my lay-supporters. Matthew, my secretary and assistant, drove the car and organised a table for us at a very traditional English hotel near the Palace where when we'd beaten the rush hour traffic and arrived in London we were able to catch our breath, have coffee and generally settle ourselves ready for the great occasion. The Palace gates opened sharp at 10 o'clock and within a few minutes we had joined the queue of cars with boots and bonnets up to be checked for bombs and whatever else they didn't want taking in. Once inside and parked in the Quadrangle we left Matthew behind and my guests went one way and I another, they eventually to their seats in the Ballroom and I to the Picture Gallery where I joined other recipients for a good humoured briefing and demonstration

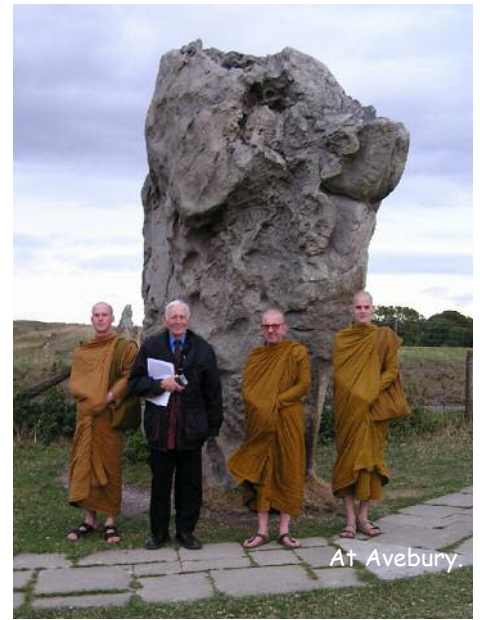
of what we were in for by two old soldiers. Then names were called out and we were marched off in batches to wait in the wings before going forward one by one to receive our insignia from Her Majesty. I was in the second batch. The last one of the first batch was a dapper, tanned and rather nervous looking fellow who just as he was marched off wai'd me (put his hands together and bowed). So I thought he might be a Buddhist but I had no idea who he was. I found out afterwards it was Sting, who I have heard of but know nothing much about because, as I've explained, he's only been in the music business for 25 years while for 32 I've been a monk and taking even less notice of the pop scene than I did before. Later, outside, I spoke to him and he told me about his recent trip to Bhutan. When we'd finished and done the photos, Lord Avebury took us off to the House of Lords and there, on the terrace overlooking the river, we had tea. We rounded the afternoon off by sitting for a few minutes below the bar in the chamber of the House where we happened to listen to a question concerning the teaching of religion in schools and the faith communities liaison group set up by the Government.

In a speech to the House of Commons in 1944, Sir Winston Churchill said that "the object of presenting medals, stars and ribbons is to give pride and pleasure to those who have deserved them." And in a letter to me following the announcement of my appointment, the Prisons Ombudsman, Dr Stephen Shaw, observed that one of the merits of the honours system "is the pleasure shared by all the friends and colleagues of those who are singled out." I can confirm the truth of both statements. I never sought this but I am delighted that it has happened. It might seem as though I have by committing myself as a Buddhist monk abandoned the heritage that I was born into but not at all. I am mindful of the Buddha's advice that to ensure its stability a nation should cherish and not abandon its ancient traditions. On the other hand it is obviously an advantage to be willing and able to absorb and learn from the traditions and cultures of others. As I see it, this OBE has been good, not just for me, but for Buddhism in this country and for Buddhism in the prisons. And it seems to me that the Buddhist prisoners whom I meet draw enormous satisfaction from a recognition that they clearly are able to feel part of.

I have received letters, cards and messages of congratulation from a whole range of people including the Home Secretary, serving prisoners, supporters and friends both old and new, some who are well-known to me and others not at all. I'm not sure whether I'm supposed to try and reply to everyone or not but if I am I shall have to say that it's probably beyond me and I hope that it will suffice for me to say here and now how much I have appreciated hearing from you. Everything to do with this, all your cards and letters, I have kept.



After the Investiture in the Quadrangle of Buckingham Palace with Matt, Ven. Malapo, Lord Avebury and Maureen.



At Avebury.

News of my OBE was covered in the Thai media and now I have been invited to Bangkok in December to a seminar organised by the Bhumipalo Bhikkhu Foundation (named after the King's name as a monk) to celebrate HM the King's 76th Anniversary. There in the presence of the King's sister, HRH Princess Krom Luang Naradhivas Raj Chanakarin, I shall speak about how we've been making Buddhism available in British prisons. The same news in Burmese was also beamed into Burma by the BBC World Service and the Sangha there has invited me to attend a gathering in Rangoon in December of next year.

The two weekends prior to the trip to the Palace saw me on more familiar territory when with other monks and accompanied by Lord Avebury we celebrated the eleventh anniversary of the very first of the prison Buddha Groves at Springhill Open Prison and then a week later conducted the ceremonies inaugurating the Buddha Grove at Erlestoke Prison. I'm happy to say that the Springhill celebration went without a hitch and followed the well established routine of chanting and speeches at the Buddha Grove, then the Thai meal and lastly, back at the Buddha Grove, the spectacular candle-lit circumambulation. The Thai food, so generously donated and cooked so expertly, was of course a huge success and fortunately sufficient portions were sent over to the members of the Buddhist group, so near and yet so far, in Grendon, the adjacent secure prison. At Erlestoke the Buddha Grove is smaller but beautifully built and cunningly set so that as you approach you see it framed by some young trees of a weeping variety. We were warmly welcomed and afterwards joined prisoners, staff and guests at an informal gathering in the chapel where the buffet this time had been provided by the prisoners.

Not only has Erlestoke named one of its wings after Avebury but on our way to and from the prison we had to pass through the Avebury Stone Circle. Despite for years meaning to I had never been to Avebury but this was my chance and on the way back before the light faded we stopped for a short guided tour that Lord Avebury had kindly arranged for us.

You may remember me writing in my last newsletter that it is probably impossible to rescue all the Buddha Images abused in advertising, as fashion accessories and ornaments and decorations. But you can try. And we have been trying and I'm happy to report some success. We managed to speak to the manager of the Oriental themed bar and eatery called Jim Thompsons where I'd spotted a Buddha

Image plonked outside on the pavement and he agreed to move that and another one inside, which of course I'd not seen, that reclined above the bar. The Buddha made no bones about his disapproval of booze and for us to see his Image or his name linked to drink, like the Buddha Bar in Sauchiehall Street, is just awful. Another success was with Tesco. As people often do, one day here someone included a packet of rice in their offering. It was Tesco's own brand of Thai rice and we noticed that it was decorated with a Thai style Buddha Image. So Matthew fired off a letter explaining how Buddhists respect the Buddha and treasure anything representative of him and Tesco had the good grace to promptly withdraw that packaging. Sir Terry Leahy, the Chief Executive, wrote to say that it was never their intention to cause offence but they had made a mistake for which they could only apologise. Well done Tesco.

Yes, mention of Sauchiehall Street means Glasgow. And on this page it means that once again I have ventured north of the border for a meeting with the Angulimala Scotland team of chaplains and supporters who are struggling to be allowed to respond to the interest there undoubtedly is in Buddhism in Scottish prisons.

Many in Angulimala's team of Buddhist Prison Chaplains have been with us for years and seem to go on and on but occasionally someone leaves and lately we have lost Tony 'Budgie' Millet who has left for New Zealand. Tony made an indelible impression on the prisons of Kent and will be much missed. We wish him well.

There have been the usual comings and goings too at the Forest Hermitage. Ven. Dhammatejo I've sent to Thailand and the former novice Sataro has just been upgraded and is the latest of our locally produced and home grown bhikkhus.

## DIARY:

### ANGULIMALA WORKSHOP

Saturday, Dec 6th, 10 a.m.



MEDITATION, a TALK and a READING from the TIPITIKA  
Mondays & Fridays at 8 pm

### LIPSAṬṬHA OBSERVANCE DAYS

	○	◐	●	◑
December	8	16	22	30
January	6	14	21	29
February	5	13	19	27

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

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