

THE FOREST HERMITAGE NEWSLETTER

APRIL
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NAMO TASSA BHAGAVATO ARAHATO SAMMASAMBUDDHASSA

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

THE FOREST HERMITAGE DIARY

SONGKRAHN

THE WATER FESTIVAL

Thai, Burmese and Sri Lankan New Year
April 17th from 10.30 a.m.

VISAKHA PUJA - WESAK or BUDDHA DAY

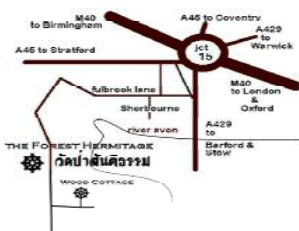
Remembering the Birth, Enlightenment and
Passing of the Buddha.
May 22nd from 10.30 a.m.

ANGULIMALA WORKSHOPS

(mainly for Buddhist Prison Chaplains,
attendance otherwise is by invitation and for
Angulimala members only)
at 10:00 on June 4th
and on September 24th.

MEDITATION, A DHAMMA TALK, A SUTTA READING

& a cup of tea on
Mondays & Fridays, 8 pm



Angulimala is twenty. It was at Magha Puja in February 1985 that we formally launched Angulimala, the Buddhist Prison Chaplaincy Organisation. I had already been doing prison chaplaincy for seven years when in 1984 we began seriously to think about a properly organised support for Buddhists in prison. By then there were one or two others including Yann Lovelock who had also been drawn into the prison work. We felt that we could do better than simply respond to such needs and requests as were relayed on to us and so we proposed that so far as possible every prison should have a Buddhist chaplain whether there were any Buddhists yet in that prison or not. From the start, we preferred to be known as Buddhist chaplains although back then it was only the Christians who were supposed to be chaplains, the rest of us were expected to make do with being visiting ministers. Sometime in 1984 Yann and I marched down Page Street for a meeting with the then Deputy Chaplain General. I remember him and his staff listening very cautiously and only warming to us when the penny dropped that we were offering a service and not at that time wanting anything more than their co-operation. To turn our ideas into practical reality there then began a flurry of activity to draw up a constitution, to gather support from the principal Buddhist groups and organisations, to enrol a supportive membership and to recruit the nucleus of a team of Buddhist Prison Chaplains. About that time, one evening in Parkhurst Prison a man I was visiting showed me a cardboard box containing an interesting assortment of Buddhist books that the County Library had unearthed for him in

response to a request from Lord Avebury. Lord Avebury I soon found out was a Buddhist. I thought I'd better get in touch. And that was how in 1985 Lord Avebury became Angulimala's Patron and has remained a staunch friend and supporter to this day. We were honoured to have him at the Forest Hermitage for our recent Workshop in March when he was our afternoon speaker and special guest. On that day, apart from the usual business, we were in celebratory mood and twenty years of Angulimala was marked with a cake specially baked and iced by Chris Cook.

I have always seen it as part of my mission to help people who have never been to prison to understand that prisoners are people just like themselves. Just like them, prisoners can do good things and not so good things, and like any other unenlightened beings, they have their failings and their virtues. We can go either way. The message is to avoid the bad, cultivate the good, and then purify your mind of all greed, hatred, and delusion. This is the message of the Buddhas. And that, as many of you will recognise, is the message of Magha Puja.

Our Magha Puja celebration this year on February 20th was in fact a double event. Not only did people gather to remember that extraordinary occasion when the Buddha met with a huge gathering of his personal and enlightened disciples at the Bamboo Grove on the first Magha Puja but also to express their mudita at my being made a Chao Khun on the King of Thailand's birthday in December, only the second foreign born monk to receive such an honour. Mudita is a concept for which strangely we have no word in our language; it means to

rejoice in the success and happiness of others. It was a bitterly cold day but at least there was neither snow nor sleet and after the food we were able to go out and make the traditional circumambulation of the main building and shrine. We were honoured with the presence of the Minister and Deputy Chief of Mission from the Royal Thai Embassy who led the expressions of mudita. He was followed by some of the Thai students and indeed we had a strong turnout from Warwick University. Everyone was so kind and as usual very generous. Anumodana! Afterwards many of our guests including the Thai Minister and his party took a walk over to Wood Cottage.

Speaking of Wood Cottage, I'm pleased to report that that debt took a rather dramatic tumble recently. Through a number of donations made during the trip that Ven. Manapo and I made recently to Thailand the amount still owing to the bank has been reduced by more than £16,000 to £169,000. Some of you may remember that two years ago the original debt stood at £425,000. Prominent among those donations was one of a million Thai baht from Khun Vannee Lamsam. This is a considerable boon and we are very appreciative of so much kindness and goodwill. Anumodana!

This winter I've been rather spoiled with two trips to Thailand although the second almost didn't happen when at the last minute I went down with some sort of flu-like virus. I was determined to go and when I boarded the plane I felt not too bad. But when I got off at Bangkok a woman who recognised me came and asked if I'd come to Thailand to go to hospital! It took a few days for the coughing to die down but it didn't stop me.

The reason we were in Thailand and why I try to go there every January is the annual Ajahn Chah Memorial Day on January 16th, the anniversary of Ajahn Chah's death in 1992. Leading up to it are days of Dhamma practice as the numbers gradually swell until by the 15th and 16th Wat Pah Pong, Ajahn Chah's monastery, is teeming with thousands of devotees and monks, many of them camping out in the forest, all there to pay their respects to the memory of this great monk. I couldn't wait to introduce Tahn Manapo to where thirty-three years ago and a little older than he is now my life as a monk began. That first evening on the 15th we flew straight on up to Ubon and having checked in at Wat Pah Nanachat where we were staying, we managed a quick trip across to Wat Pah Pong. The following day on the 16th, we went over just after midday. Meditation was followed by sermons, one for the monks and another for the laity and I gave Manapo the guided tour. Then in the middle of the afternoon we assembled for the big procession and circumambulation of the Ajahn Chah Chedi. Later, there was chanting, meditation and a night full of sermons but pretty tired by then we didn't stay for all of that.

We remained in Ubon for nine more days, resting a bit and being taken out by Peter and Tipawan to their home, to other branch wats and for two fairly energetic trips, one to the Khmer ruins of Kow Phra Viharn and the other to caves overlooking the Mekong and Laos.

On the 26th it was time for us to tear ourselves away from Ubon and Wat Pah Nanachat and take the evening flight down to Bangkok ready for my date with The Nation. Komchadleuk, one of the Nation Group's respected Thai language titles has occasionally run pieces about The Forest Hermitage and me and on the morning of the 27th we were invited for our meal at The

Nation's towering building and to speak to their employees.

Next, was a trip to the coast, for which Matthew joined us. By the way, he'll be back in England in April and should be with us for Songkrah on the 17th.

Then soon after our meal on the 30th we went to Kanchanaburi. There were two reasons for this trip: to visit the museum and remains of the infamous Burma-Siam railway; and to see a certain well-known forest monastery. We were away for one night.

At Kanachanaburi we posed for photographs on the famous Bridge over the River Kwai, toured a scruffy museum housed in rough huts of the type that were once used by the British and Australian POWs who built the railway, and walked through Hellfire Pass, a twenty metre deep cutting through practically solid rock named after the sight of skeletal POWs labouring through the night by the flickering light of fires and torches as though in the jaws of hell. Then in a well-organised museum run by the Australian Government I chatted with the Australian chap in charge who bemoaned the fact that none of the Japanese youngsters who visit have a clue about what happened here sixty-odd years ago and the Thais he complained just wanted to ascribe the enormous death toll to malaria and dysentery etc. What I think he didn't understand about the Thai unwillingness to dwell on past atrocities is that such an attitude allows what were gaping wounds to close and eventually to heal. In the Dhammapada the Buddha points out that when you permit your thoughts to dwell on how others have wronged you your hatred and resentment for them is never appeased. It's only by no longer cherishing such thoughts that your hatred eventually goes.

Our other very important port of call was a forest temple called Wat Pa Luangta Bua Yannasampanno. Although named after a very well-known teacher it is its population of tigers that has shot this monastery to international fame. At first it seems odd to hear of a forest monastery in the lineage of Ajahn Mun and Ajahn Maha Bua apparently more like a zoo or safari park than a place of Buddhist practice. But as is so often the case, first impressions are hopelessly unreliable. Later after sitting with your arm around a full grown tiger, having looked into its eyes and having fed it and its pals with your hands, you realise you've been somewhere special. After all, how often do you hear of tame tigers? Actually, it's not just tigers that the monks there care for, the wat is full of animals of all sorts that have either been rescued and brought there or have come by themselves. The first tigers were two orphan cubs, and then more came, they started breeding and now they have eleven tigers. And the key to the success it seems to me has been the virtuous life of the monks and their metta, their loving-kindness, especially that of Ajahn Phusit, the Abbot. To my mind, when you see him and his tigers you are seeing Buddhism in action.

On our way back to Bangkok we called at Nakorn Pathom and visited Phra Pathom Chedi, the oldest chedi in Thailand and the site of Suvarnabhumi where the Emperor Asoka's missionaries are believed to have first brought Buddhism to S E Asia. And on

our last day, we paid our respects to Somdet Buddhajahn at Wat Sraket and visited the Emerald Buddha Temple and the wonderful Buddhist park of Buddhamongtone.

In last few days, by phone and by text, I was kept in touch with the gradual passing of Oscar, the big dog that had been my loyal and close friend for more than a decade. As all that is born must one day die, I heard that Oscar had gone as we drove to the airport.

Uposatha Observance Days				
	1	8	16	23
April				
May	1	7	15	22
	30			

Visakha Puja - May 22nd

NEWSLETTER FROM VEN. AJAHN KHEMADHAMMO OBE (CHAO KHUN BHAVANAVITAYT) OF THE FOREST HERMITAGE (WAT PAH SANTIDHAMMA) & ANGULIMALA, THE BUDDHIST PRISON CHAPLAINCY ORGANISATION

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