



Let me tell you about my blog. Blogs are all the rage with young people apparently, so I thought I'd better get one. Actually, it was when a great friend of mine told me that I could find his latest news on his blog that I realised that a blog would be a really good way of keeping people up to date with me, the Forest Hermitage and Angulimala. For the few who don't know what I'm talking about, a blog is a sort of journal that you publish on the Internet. I understand that Blog comes from 'web log'. It's a really attractive way of recording your thoughts, your news, and including any photographs you would like to share. There are a number of sites that host these things for nothing and after a bit of research I decided to create mine with the Opera Community and call it News and Musings. That's why when I felt I could procrastinate no longer but really had to produce another newsletter I decided to rename my newsletter News and Musings as well. You won't find much on my blog just yet but if you want to keep up with what's happening in this neck of the woods, just keep a weather eye on <http://my.opera.com/Luangpor%20Khemadhammo/blog/>.

After being away in Thailand for most of January, then unwell with some sort of fluey bug for a lump of February, it hardly seems as if I've really got going this year and it's already April! And of course April means Songkrah. Songkrah, the Thai Water Festival and New Year throughout Southeast and other parts of Asia, falls on April 13th and we would normally be having our celebration on the nearest Sunday but this year that's the Easter Bank Holiday weekend, so we've decided that our Songkrah will be on April 23rd. That also happens to be the birthday of a local lad who so the story goes, was once caught poaching a deer somewhere close to where the Forest Hermitage now stands. Fortunately, he was let off but it was as well that he left the district forthwith. He went to London, found employment as an actor and began writing plays and his name was William Shakespeare. All this was, of course, a very long time ago and young Will would have had no formal knowledge of Buddhism but he was a man of insight and poetry and often in his work you can't help but hear the word of the Buddha. I have never forgotten sitting in a remote forest monastery not far from the Thai

border with Laos, and listening to a desana in which the Ajahn compared our lives to that of an actor on the stage, a sermon that could easily have come straight out of the melancholy Jacques' Seven Ages of Man speech in *As You Like It*. Otherwise, in case you happen to be in Nottingham for Easter, we will be there for Songkrah on April 15th at Yod's Thai Restaurant.

Tahn Manapo and I set off for Thailand a little earlier than usual this year on January 10th. This was not because I wanted to be there in plenty of time for Luangpor Chah's Memorial Day on the 16th - I've said before in these pages that I keep close to my heart Oscar Wilde's observation that punctuality is the thief of time and practically never leave for anywhere until the last minute. No, rest assured I was staying loyal to my usual practice by leaving on practically the last possible flight to arrive in Ubon at Wat Pah Nanachat late on the evening of the 11th ready for the WAM that was to commence first thing the following morning. The grandly entitled World Abbots Meeting (WAM) was actually a meeting of the abbots of the overseas branch monasteries of Wat Nong Pah Pong, Ajahn Chah's monastery. It lasted for three days and during that time we were more or less segregated from the rest of the community at Wat Pah Nanachat, which had swollen with monks coming in from far and near, many of them camping out under the trees, just to be there during our stay. We abbots went for pindapata at the main gate each day and then returned to eat in the back sala and afterwards our meetings were held under the verandah of the Abbot's kuti. It turned out to be a pleasant and friendly few days, an opportunity to air a few things, and a chance to meet some of the younger monks who are moving up the line and taking over established monasteries or in various parts of the world building new ones. From the outset we decided it wouldn't be a decision-making body but inevitably there were decisions to be made and the last and most protracted was where and when to meet again. We finally agreed on Bodhinyana Monastery in Western Australia in the first half of December 2008.

Most of us had at one time or another lived at Wat Pah Nanachat, a few of us in its very early days, and most of us I suspect

had not been all that happy with its Uposatha building, so it was good to see that it had been renovated and made to look like what it is supposed to be and a joy to participate in the formal installation of relics in a chedi on its roof the day after our meetings ended. This charming ceremony was arranged by Ajahn Nyanadhammo, the Abbot of Wat Pah Nanachat, as a fitting way of concluding our historic deliberations. We all had a part to play in placing the relics in their container before processing out to watch them being winched slowly up to the roof's apex while we chanted the Stanzas of Victory. It was as that was happening, despite our chanting, or perhaps because of it, that I rather expected something to go wrong, but, no, they arrived safely and the monks who had by this time scrambled up the ladders to receive them began busying themselves placing the container in the relic chamber. It was then, as we saw them trying it first this way and then that that it slowly dawned that actually something had gone wrong. It wouldn't fit. I don't know how it was managed in the end, monkish brute force I suspect, but all of a sudden it was in, on went the cap and all was well.

The day after that was the 16th and the anniversary of Ajahn Chah's death in 1992. How time flies! It doesn't seem possible that for so many years we've been meeting annually to honour his memory and circumambulate his chedi. Every year there are more new, young monks who could never have known him and who weren't even born when he last taught and every year too time does its work and deprives us of one or two of our older members. For so many years it was Luangpor Maha Supong who led the annual circumambulation but he's gone now and a wonderful garden and chedi are being built in his memory on land adjacent to his monastery at Poodindang. It was there under his guidance that I spent my first Vassa. For the chedi, a huge Buddha-Rupa is being cast and on the 16th at Wat Pah Pong at around midday there was a formal ceremony for the pouring of the head of that Rupa. And then after that came the mass circumambulation of Luangpor Chah's Chedi. The picture at the head of this newsletter was taken when we were waiting at the chedi for the dedication to be recited.

Afterwards, while nearly all the monks who had attended the meeting rapidly dispersed, either back to their monasteries or to

other parts of Thailand, Tahn Manapo and I stayed on at Wat Pah Nanachat for a few days for a little rest and the chance to visit old friends and places I love. Then we went to stay at some of the other branch monasteries and to attend a tumboon ceremony at Khun Ting's house by the sea. In Ubon, Peter and Tipawan had been on hand most generously to help us, while around Bangkok it fell to Matthew and Jim and Nui who kindly did the honours. Then, after just two and a half weeks, and it all seems like ancient history now, we were on a flight back to England.

At the Forest Hermitage it's been pretty much business as usual. I keep on going to prison, Ven. Manapo looks after the schools, either going to them or welcoming parties of children here and Jason has just joined us as an anagarika. We've had a steady stream of guests, including students from Warwick Uni and a young Vietnamese American student with whom I've had an occasional email correspondence for the last four years who came over to spend her Spring Break at Wood Cottage. Speaking of which, Wood Cottage has turned out to be an invaluable resource. I wonder how we could manage without it now. If only we could knock a bit more off the £159,000 still outstanding on it. Milan, our Czech chap, who was with us helping out for several months has gone back to the Czech Republic and Bob who has been at Wood Cottage for rather longer is also moving on. Like everywhere and everything else, things here change, people come and go, but we try to stay focussed and do our best to keep Buddhist teaching and practice alive and available in the Heart of England and in our prisons.

In a recent email to the Home Secretary in support of our concerns about the inappropriate use of the Buddha image for commercial purposes, and to sell alcohol in particular, Lord Avebury wrote: 'Offensive cartoons of the Prophet have aroused tremendous controversy and even violence in many parts of the world. The offensive use of the Buddha image has been ignored, though it has caused indignation among Buddhists. An Irishman once said that "violence is the only way of securing a hearing for moderation", a deplorable idea but one that is often encouraged by the tendency of governments to give way to threatening words or behaviour, while ignoring reasoned argument.'

And last year in another email, a young man wrote this to me: 'I just want to say thank you for the Dhamma talk about four weeks ago. You spoke about not being able to progress on the great way by consuming alcohol. I was meditating, going out and drinking alcohol expecting progress and wanting a placid mind. I was not progressing at all and my mind was very much like a monkey, restless. It is no means perfect but getting better. During the session a few weeks ago I came to realise that life is too short to be asleep. I have still been going out but not drinking or smoking. My enjoyment for partying is beginning to cease. I have started getting fit by going to combat lessons and found I feel generally happier all the time. It is because of this session, a 25 day smoker and heavy drinker was able to stop. Proximity keeps me from going to your meditation session and helping with tam boon so I am sorry I can't participate. Although I follow a different angle of the great way than you bhikkhus I was breaking one of the main precepts, consuming alcohol. It was you guys who helped me see this. This was in turn making me break all the others except killing humans; lucky I hadn't started driving! I would have been a white Rodney King! But seriously many thanks. I wish all sentient beings free from suffering.'

THE DIARY

SONGKRAHN, Thai Water Festival & New Year

From 10 a.m. on April 23rd.

ANGULIMALA WORKSHOPS

These are for Buddhist Prison Chaplains, attendance otherwise is by invitation and for Angulimala members only.

At the Forest Hermitage at 10 a.m.
on Midsummer's Day, **June 24th.**

The one following will be in September but depends on the date for the Springhill celebration which has yet to be discussed with the Governor.

MEDITATION, A DHAMMA TALK & a cup of tea at the FOREST HERMITAGE. Mondays & Fridays, 8 p.m.

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

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