



THE FOREST HERMITAGE NEWSLETTER

AUGUST 2543 / 2000

From Venerable Ajahn Khemadhammo
of The Forest Hermitage and
Angulimala, the Buddhist Prison Chaplaincy Organisation

NAMO TASSA BHAGAVATO ARAHATO SAMMASAMBUDDHASSA

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

The picture above is of a temporary shrine set up in the grounds of the Forest Hermitage beneath a Tree of Heaven planted in memory of Ajahn Chah. It was there for our Āsālha Pūjā celebration a few weeks ago and we liked it so much that now we're thinking of making a more permanent version. This Buddha-Rupa was cast in a mould made from one of the old images in our Shrine Room and is one of several produced especially for the prisons. This particular Buddha-Rupa is due to go this month to New Hall, a women's prison near Wakefield in Yorkshire where a multicultural day has been arranged for August 18th and Lord Avebury and I have been invited to unveil it then.

Similar shrines are already in place in a handful of other gaols with a few more at various stages of development and even more to come if the mould holds out. These have all grown from an inspired original idea of Sam Cutler's that brought about at HMP Springhill the first purpose-built Buddhist shrine in a British prison. Sam's idea was a response to the need of the small Buddhist group in Springhill for a sacred space of their own, charged with the belief that anywhere graced by the presence of a Buddha Image is a place transformed. With room inside at a premium these Buddhist inmates turned to the ample space outside and within a small grove of well established trees, in their own time, they landscaped an area, and built the retaining walls, steps and a substantial plinth for the Buddha-Rupa that was flown in specially from Thailand. The Springhill Buddha Grove was opened on the last chilly night of October in 1992.

Since then, we have gone back every year to celebrate that Buddha Grove and to demonstrate our commitment to a Buddhist presence in the prisons of this country. We also reaffirm our confidence that even in the most extreme and desperate of

circumstances the potential for change and even the right to change and develop lies within all of us. And we take inspiration from the observation by King Pasenadi following the Buddha's conversion of the murderous Angulimala that the Buddha had accomplished with neither force nor weapons what he and others had failed to do by force and with weapons.

We will be there again on September 3rd and the programme will be as before, chanting, speeches, lashings of Thai food and the candle-lit circumambulation of the Buddha Grove. If you can help or you would like to come, please get in touch. Do remember that it is a prison and although it is an Open prison and security is not tight, we need to know if you want to be involved.

In recent weeks both the Buddha-Dhamma Fellowship that maintains The Forest Hermitage and Angulimala, the Buddhist Prison Chaplaincy have held their respective Annual General Meetings. Apart from important and necessary formal business like the presentation of the accounts, these are times for us to stop and take stock of what has been, where we are and where we're going. They also make us reflect on how these charities depend on the kindness and generosity of many good people, people who want us to be doing what we do - making the Teachings of the Buddha available - and to keep on doing it. Inevitably, both organisations have their special workers and supporters and at these annual meetings I try to name as many as I can to thank them for what they've done and sometimes to say farewell as they hand over their responsibilities and retire into the background or move on to other things. This year Albert Holdsworth stood down from the BDF committee on which he has served as secretary for many years and Joan Hamze and Stephen Batchelor are now no longer on the Angulimala list of Buddhist prison chaplains. Joan, a marvellously determined and committed woman who seems always to have been part of the British Buddhist world as far back as I can remember has been highly thought of and much loved by the prisoners to whom she has ministered over the years, so much so that it was through their concern for her increasing frailty that the inmates in the last prison in which she worked suggested it was time she stopped. Stephen and his wife have just moved to France, which is a bit far for visits to Channings Wood in Devon, so after many years he has handed over to someone else. Albert, Joan and Stephen have each played their part in these particular ways in making Buddhism available and I am sure that we would all like to join in thanking them and rejoicing in such merits.

THE ANNUAL SPRINGHILL BUDDHA GROVE CELEBRATION

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 3RD AT 6 PM

If you would like to help, or if you want to attend,
please let us know, admission is by Invitation only.

THE FOREST HERMITAGE DIARY:

ANGULIMALA WORKSHOPS

(mainly for Buddhist Prison Chaplains)
September 2nd & December 2nd
from 10 a.m.



TEA PARTY

An informal 'get-together' for our lay Buddhist members.
September 10th at 4 p.m.



A DAY RETREAT

September 23rd.
Enquire for details, please.



THE VASSA ENDS

October 13th



UPASAMPADA

The Ordination of new bhikkhus.
October 14th



MEDITATION,

A DHAMMA TALK,

a reading & a cup of tea.

Mondays & Fridays at 8 p.m.



A Shrine built by prisoners at
Glen Ochil Prison in Scotland

denominations have little to say about and that 'there needs to be an acceptance of at least the possibility that certain currently illegal drugs can produce life and performance enhancing effects'. He concluded, 'Unless the hysteria and repressive blindness around drug use begin to diminish, a sane and constructive response to an issue that threatens to spiral dangerously out of control will elude us.'

Most of this article I disagreed with but I am sympathetic to his point about double standards and to that last sentence. With the use of illegal and proscribed drugs apparently permeating almost every corner of our society, including those who condemn it, this is an issue wreathed in hypocrisy and humbug and so muddled that no one seems to know how to handle it.

In his first sermon and on many occasions throughout his long life the Buddha addressed the fundamental problem of suffering that we all live with by bringing it out into the open, then identifying its source, then the solution and finally the method of arriving at that solution. Problems exist to be solved and this problem-solving formula used by the Buddha is equally applicable to all other problems, including drugs.

Which leads me to sometimes wonder why the reason for drug taking isn't investigated more thoroughly and openly. Then I think to myself, it's probably because the people in power know they'll find something they can't handle.

I think that what they would find is what the Buddha called *dukkha*, suffering or unsatisfactoriness. It's practically everywhere. We all have to try and cope with this. We've been born and we're going to die and in between there's aging, pain, grief and despair. There's not getting what

we want, and what we do get, even the pleasure and happiness, we can't keep. In short, all that we are, mind and matter, is ephemeral, unsatisfactory and unsubstantial. It is all this that the Buddhist path addresses head on. The Five Lay Buddhist Precepts that prohibit the use of alcohol and drugs are not meaningless rules, there just for the sake of it but practical expressions of the three steps of the Noble Eightfold Path that are concerned with limiting unskilful and harmful conduct in speech, in action and at work and promoting clarity and contentment. The Five Precepts are frontline spirituality.

No doubt drugs do give you new and unusual experiences but what is their worth when they are drug dependent and make you drug dependent? Dependence is suffering.

In case anyone still doesn't think that drugs and alcohol are a problem just remember that the use of this stuff is enormously damaging. Yes, some of that harm is through the way that society criminalises the drug addict and encourages the alcoholic but still if you look in the hospitals and prisons you will see many people whose minds and bodies and potential for spiritual growth has been spoilt by using drugs and alcohol.

If you are on our mailing list and/or a member of BDF or ANGULIMALA, your name, address, phone number & membership details are on our computer files. If you object and you let us know we'll willingly remove you.

When I first looked at Stephen's article it seemed to me that his example of double standards, his comparison of the artist whose drug inspired work is praised with the athlete whose drug-assisted performance is condemned was not well chosen. Surely, the two are quite different, I thought. The artist is not bound by any rules of competition, it does not normally matter how he achieves his result but the reason the athlete is condemned is because he is known to have cheated, he has broken the rules and been dishonest and untruthful and it is this that is unacceptable. Then I realised that of course both have cheated and worst of all they've cheated themselves.

This is why drugs have no place on the Buddhist voyage of discovery. On this journey you have to find out for yourself, be true to yourself and be forever refining your search and testing your findings until there is no further to go.

In case any of you would like to be more involved with what goes on at the Forest Hermitage, a monthly tea party has been started for people to come and chat and explore how as lay people they can deepen their practice and play a part in the life of the temple.

UPOSATHA OBSERVANCE DAYS

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August	8	15	23	29
September	6	13	21	28
October	6	13	21	27

In a recent article, 'Cannabis is, quite literally, good for your soul', published in the Independent, Stephen Batchelor argued that the issue of drug use in our society today is surrounded by contradictions and double standards, he went on to suggest that there is a legitimate spiritual dimension to the use of drugs which mainstream