



THE FOREST HERMITAGE DIARY

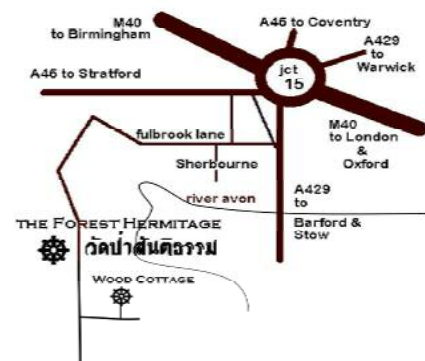
NEW YEAR

See the New Year in mindfully.
Join us on New Year's Eve for
meditation and be with us when we
chant the parittas at midnight.

ANGULIMALA WORKSHOPS

(mainly for Buddhist Prison Chaplains,
attendance otherwise is by invitation and for
Angulimala members only)
at 10:00 on March 5th
and on June 4th.

MEDITATION,
A DHAMMA TALK,
A SUTTA READING
& a cup of tea on
Mondays & Fridays, 8 pm



NAMO TASSA BHAGAVATO ARAHATO SAMMASAMBUDDHASSA

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

You know you never know quite what's around the corner and so you're wisest if you're prepared for the unexpected. That may not be how we like it but that's how it is and that's how we ought to try to be. There are times when things are more unexpected than others and well laid plans have quickly to be rearranged. That's how it was for me when suddenly one morning in mid November I put my phone to my ear and heard Ajahn Nyanadhammo (the Abbot of Wat Pah Nanachat in NE Thailand) saying that it had just been announced that on the King's birthday on December 5th I was to be made a Chao Khun so I'd better start making plans to be in Bangkok by then. It took a few days for it all to sink in and then began the scramble to arrange tickets, a visa and reorganise a few things here. In the meantime, I was preoccupied by the Prison Service Chaplaincy Conference and my own programme of prison visits.

The most important thing to rearrange was the Angulimala Workshop scheduled for December 4th. I talked to some of the committee and we considered the three options: go ahead as planned but without me, cancel, or postpone. We decided to postpone it for a week and it was arranged for everybody to be contacted by email or phone. In the event I'm afraid the message didn't reach one person who turned up alone on the 4th and afterwards reported a very harmonious meeting!

On December 2nd, a fortnight since receiving the phone call, I stepped off a jet at Bangkok Airport and realised that it was actually 33 years to the day since I first set foot on Thai soil. Uncharacteristically I had arrived with plenty of time to spare. It was an important occasion and I wanted to be well prepared for the unexpected. Otherwise, I'm afraid I tend to take to heart Oscar Wilde's observation that punctuality is

the thief of time. So I had a couple of days with nothing much to do but thankfully Jim and Nui ran me down to bless their new house at Cha'am. There I enjoyed some good air and a stroll by the sea. Back in Bangkok, Matthew, my erstwhile secretary and assistant, arrived to look after me and it was good to have him taking charge of things again.

The big day itself began quietly enough just after dawn with a short alms round, then the meal. Then some good kind people appeared with a beautiful inlaid mother of pearl stand for the ceremonial fan that I would be receiving and a matching frame for the certificate. I don't know where these had been made but years ago I once saw fine work like this being taught and done in a Thai prison. Dhammaram where we stay in Bangkok can be quite a crossroads with at times many monks coming and going. While I was there, Ajahn Sumedho came in from Cambodia, Ajahn Kawesako arrived from Kanchanaburi and Ajahn Nyanadhammo was on his way back to Ubon. The presence of so many added to the sense of occasion and was a great support. At Dhammaram, we are very well looked after and people I'd never seen before appeared to help and ensure that everything went smoothly for me. In the early afternoon accompanied by Matthew and a young Thai monk, I was driven off to the Grand Palace where crowds in their holiday best were already gathering to celebrate the King's birthday. We were waved in at the same gate outside of which, craning to catch a glimpse of the King, I had stood thirty-three years previously during my first few days in Thailand. Once out of the car I was guided through to where I had to go, handed a number and taken to my seat. I found myself at the back of a group of mostly elderly monks, some of whom were there for a promotion and others like me brand new

Chao Khuns. My group, the last group, were all from Thai wats outside of Thailand. The monk on my left had spent many years in Hawaii and the one to my right was based in Holland. I was the only European. During the long wait that followed, we were each presented with a set of robes and then told how to accept and handle the fan and certificate. It was relaxed and good-humoured. Eventually we were led off and sat down again, this time outside the Amarin Winitchai Throne Hall. Again, I was at the back and again for some time nothing much seemed to happen, then suddenly we were on our feet and filing in to where the Royal Family was seated with the Crown Prince making the presentation on behalf of the King. By the time it was over and we were driving away darkness had fallen and the whole area of the Grand Palace, the Emerald Buddha Temple and Sanam Luang was lit like fairy land with the roads lined with people waiting to see the King they love so much.



It's customary after being honoured or promoted for us to pay our respects to certain elders and seniors. I can remember Ajahn Chah becoming a Chao Khun and going to the railway station and lining up on the platform to greet him on his return from Bangkok and then going back and at Wat Pah Pong waiting for ages while he did the rounds of the local senior monks. So, the next day in the afternoon, I had to go with others for us to pay our respects first to the Sangharaja (the Supreme Patriarch) who looked very old and frail and then to Somdet Buddhajahn at Wat Sraket. Then, to continue and do the same with some of the seniors of the Wat Pah Pong Sangha, I set off well before dawn on the Tuesday morning with Ajahn Nyanadhammo to catch the early morning flight to Ubon. This had to be a lightning visit as the following night I was due on a plane back to England so I did my best to pack as much in as I could. Peter and Tipawan were already at Wat Pah Nanachat when we arrived just in time for the meal and as soon as I was ready, they took me off on the long drive to see my dear friend and mentor Ajahn Dang at Numyeun. From there I called on Ajahn Anek and then Ajahn Liam, the Abbot of Wat Pah Pong. The following morning I went to see Tahn Chao Khun Amon and then before boarding the plane to Bangkok I stopped again at Wat Pah Pong for a few minutes to pay my respects at the Chedi of Ajahn Chah.

As well as all this, each evening seemed to be taken up with guests and talking to people: some former Warwick University students who used to come here and at Wat Pah Nanachat a group of younger monks with a lot of questions for me.

Titles and medals are all of course worldly dhammas and it's not for these that we monks do what we do but I'm grateful and pleased to accept these honours because at the very least they mean that the world acknowledges and values what we try to do.

When I arrived back here on Thursday, December 9th, it seemed pretty bleak after the green and the warmth of Thailand. I'm sure there were still a few leaves left on the trees when I left but when I got back it was only the evergreens and oaks that still retained a covering. However, I had little time to dwell on any of that because in less than forty-eight hours, on the Saturday, I had the postponed Angulimala Workshop to look after. The week before I went away we'd had the Prison Service Chaplaincy Conference at Birmingham's NEC and at our workshop I wanted to focus on some of the topics that had been discussed, particularly the shared Sacred Space issue and Restorative Justice. While I've been quick to make clear that I couldn't possibly take full responsibility for everything

to do with the Prison Service Chaplaincy Conference I have had to admit to the privilege of being a member of the Multifaith working party that organised it and I welcomed the chance to do my bit to make it a success. Where conferences are concerned, I'm generally a sceptic. I tend to view them as either excuses for a bit of a junket or self-important talking shops and sometimes both but I can see there are exceptions and for me this was definitely one of them. It was marvellous that so many from different cultures and faiths were able to meet and spend time together with such confidence and in such a spirit of goodwill. That was particularly evident in the robust Sacred Space workshop that I attended which certainly made you realise the sensitivity and diversity of views about symbols and the like. But if we can only keep talking and listening and listening well, we might get somewhere.

Speaking of symbols, one of the Thai young mothers who comes here complained to me that when she had helped her daughter with her RE homework about Buddhism the teacher had said that she was wrong. The homework had asked for a drawing of the Buddhist religious symbol and the girl's mother had confidently told her to draw a picture of one of the several Phra Buddha Rupas or Images of the Buddha in their home. But no, the teacher had said that was wrong, it should have been the Wheel! Well, of course I've come across this before. The education people and some others in Britain have latched on to a wheel of eight spokes, sometimes looking like a wheel and sometimes not, as the Buddhist symbol. It is perfectly true that a Wheel, sometimes of eight, sometimes of twelve or even of hundreds of spokes has been and still is an important Buddhist symbol but it's equally true that ever since it's emergence in the Buddhist artwork of ancient India it has been the Buddha Rupa, that wonderful expression of the Enlightened Attitude, that has predominated and been special to followers of the Buddha and so I told the young lady to tell her teacher that her mother was not wrong.

Before I left and again on the Sunday after I returned we had some wonderful gatherings of Thai students here to make merit and offer us the means to do what we have to do. These were enjoyable occasions not just because it's always good to feel the energy and enthusiasm of youth but because clearly the temple and Buddhism has a place in the hearts and minds of these young people. For that I am grateful and with that I have hope for the future, even in these dark days when

news of the terrible destruction in Thailand, Burma, India and Sri Lanka and elsewhere is still unfolding as I write.

We live in a world of great suffering where lives can be lost or changed in an instant. To deal with suffering I commend to you the teachings of Buddhism and, with that, I offer you my blessings for a Happy New Year.

Ven. Manapo and I will be away in Thailand from January 14th until February 3rd.

Uposatha Observance Days				
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January	3	9	17	24
February	1	8	16	23
March	3	9	17	24

Magha Puja - February 23rd

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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