



# News and Musings

From

# The Forest Hermitage

July • August 2549 - 2006

Asalha Puja, the anniversary of the Buddha's First Sermon, fell this year on July 10th. I spent the afternoon in Broadmoor leading a small celebration for a group of Buddhist patients and then got back just in time to make a little more of our regular Monday open evening, which was as close as we could get to a public celebration on the actual day. We entered the Vassa, the three month long Rains Retreat, the day after.

Our public celebration was on the following Sunday, which also happened to be the day before my birthday. Our celebrations always feature Dana (giving), Sila (virtue) and Bhavana (mind cultivation). People bring offerings, reaffirm their commitment to the precepts and listen to the Dhamma. On occasions like Asalha, with candles, incense and flowers we perform a triple circumambulation of the Chedi and Buddha-Rupa in the Pagoda Garden. And as well as the food put in our bowls at the alms round, other offerings may include supplies of various kinds and a collection in support of the temple or something special, like paying off the debt on Wood Cottage, which is what it was on the 16th when a generous few pounds short of a thousand were raised. That only leaves £149,000 left to go!

In my talk I reminded everyone that back then when it all began there were no gorgeous temples and had you passed by that deer park near Benares that full moon day so very long ago what you would have seen wouldn't have been all that impressive, just six emaciated looking men sitting there under the trees, one speaking and the others listening. But what was being said and what they were hearing was very special, the very essence of what is known to us here in the West as Buddhism: the Middle Way, the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path. The other less obvious message of Asalha Puja points to the very nature and purpose of Buddhism. Those five ascetics had previously rejected Gotama for giving up on ascetic practices and apparently abandoning the quest but then when as the newly Enlightened Buddha he came to see them their decision to have nothing more to do with him fell apart because he had changed. That was why they could be seen there listening to him. Such is Buddhism, such is its nature and its purpose: it changes you, it transforms you. Following those simple steps of the Noble Eightfold Path life just gets better and better.

Another feature of our celebrations is friendliness and I'm happy to say that despite the serious things we had to do and talk about, our Asalha Puja was a very jolly occasion. Not least when anxious to wish me a happy birthday for the following day this largely Thai gathering suddenly burst into a spirited rendering of 'Happy Birthday'. It was very moving and I haven't been serenaded like that since I can't remember when!

I can't help being a bit cynical about conferences and usually, unless I feel I really have to show my face, wild horses won't get me to one. Therefore when I heard of the Piprahwa Conference it was quite out of character for me to want to go and not only that but to really look forward to it. It was all because of that wonderful book 'The Buddha and the Sahibs' by Charles Allen, which tells of the rediscovery by an extraordinary bunch of characters, most of whom were in India as servants first of the British East India Company and then the Empire, of India's lost past, its Buddhist past. It's a fascinating story and one that I can't stop dipping into. So when I read that it was Charles Allen who was organising this conference and that it was about Piprahwa, one of the stops on our pilgrimage four years ago, about what might or might not have been discovered there and whether it really was the site of Kapilavatthu, the city in which the young Buddha-to-be grew up, I had to go.

It was on July 8th and hosted by Viscount David Lascelles at the newly created Courtyard Conference Centre in what had been the rather grand stables of Harewood House. Tahn Manapo and I arrived just in time to join in the stroll by the lake to the Himalayan Garden for a short ceremony and circumambulation of the Harewood Stupa, which had been built under the supervision of a Bhutanese lama and opened only last year in the presence of the Prince of Wales.

To set the scene for us, the conference opened with a paper read by Professor Gombrich on 'The

Dating of the Historical Buddha' followed by another by Lance Cousins on 'The Early Development of Buddhism in India'. Charles Allen then gave us some background to the Piprahwa excavation of 1898 and the grandson of W.C. Peppé, the landowner who carried out that excavation, described for us what his grandfather is supposed to have found. More information, speculation and papers read by eminent scholars followed – I've never quite understood why when the medium is obviously the live spoken word you have to be read to, there was even one chap who'd come all the way from India to not only read his paper but display it as a PowerPoint presentation so we could read it as well! It was all very interesting but a bit staid and you might have wondered why you didn't stay at home and read it in a magazine, that is until after tea when the day suddenly burst into life with two dramatic presentations: one from Terry Phelps in which he produced a copy of a letter proving that the infamous Dr Führer, an archaeologist active in the area at the time and later exposed as a fraudster, had in fact a year before Mr Peppé's excavation been selling bogus relics just like those later found at Piprahwa; and the other from Andrew Huxley, a riveting performance in which he presented, but did not read, a paper that argued that the mysterious disappearance and probable suicide of the great Indologist, Georg Bühler, was because of Bühler's involvement with Führer and his unwitting implication in Führer's forgery of the Piprahwa Urn Inscription.

When we reconvened for the final session, the Open Forum and Conclusions, the scholars weighed the evidence and decided that they were unconvinced by the findings of Terry and Andrew. But I wasn't convinced by the scholars and I'm pretty sure this is going to run and run. Especially when you read what Terry has to say about Führer's involvement in the discovery of the Asokan pillar and inscription at what is generally believed to be Lumbini, the Buddha's birthplace. I've always thought that pillar inscription looked a bit amateurish.

This was a very different day for me from how I usually spend my time and it was fascinating to dip into the world of academia. But afterwards I couldn't help thinking how much time had been spent on what is unlikely ever to be known for sure: we may never know the precise dates of the Buddha, we may never know for certain how Buddhism developed in India following the Parinibbana and we may never know exactly what happened at Piprahwa in 1898 or where Kapilavasthu was or indeed whether the relics supposedly discovered there – some of which incidentally are housed in the Golden Mountain at Wat SraKet in Bangkok - are genuine or not.

And does any of this matter? Well, yes and no. Knowing the Buddha is not a myth but that he really did live and knowing at least some of the places where he lived and taught obviously boosts confidence; and questioning the relics might get some with a bit too much faith to refocus on the Buddha's essential message and remind them that this world is full of uncertainty.

By the way, it has been suggested that my support and involvement in the appointment of a Buddhist chaplain to the Armed Forces could be understood to imply that I approve of warfare and armed intervention, so I had better make it clear that I do not and neither does the Buddha-Dhamma. Even from Buddhists I have heard it said that there can be difficult decisions, that there may be occasions when there is no alternative to war or armed intervention, but while that may well be a personal opinion it is not the teaching of the Buddha. Buddhism never supports defilement but always challenges it and aims to remove it. Yes I know that we live in an unsatisfactory world and for many there seems no other way than violence to resolve differences but that does not make it permissible or necessary. Sadly, hundreds of young men and women who thought they were signing up to smart uniforms and marching bands, to playing games on Salisbury Plain and learning a trade, have had a nasty shock in the Falklands, or Bosnia, or Afghanistan, or Iraq, when their mates have been blown up beside them and they themselves have been bombed and shot at and expected to kill other young men and women. Being a soldier is unskilful and a wrong livelihood. War is always brutal and it never ends there, the defeated live in pain and that nearly always means more violence.

No, I don't support or sanction war but I am concerned for the people who get caught up in it.

We had a very successful Angulimala Workshop on Midsummer Day. The car park was packed and we needed nearly all our chairs so that proves there was a good turnout. Praang and Luke did a wonderful job with the food and in the afternoon we had an excellent session with Dr Peter Bennett, Governor of Grendon and Springhill Prisons, who admitted to being a bit nervous being on my territory rather than having me on his. Peter and I had just agreed that the annual Springhill Buddha Grove Festival will be on September 17th. So, if you're interested in coming or helping, please get in touch. I'm also hoping then to launch LetGo, a support group for Buddhist ex-prisoners that I hope will eventually be run by Buddhist ex-prisoners. And I'm really pleased to announce that Anne Owers, the Chief Inspector, will be our speaker at the Angulimala Workshop the day before.

We've been offered a log cabin for the garden at Wood Cottage, which will give us a more peaceful and undisturbed space away from the house for the Shrine and meditation room. The first job was the relocation of the greenhouse and then a concrete base. The ready mixed concrete was delivered by lorry and had to be barrowed speedily into place before it went off. Fortunately there were enough members of WU Buddhist Society past and present available who willingly abandoned their Phds or whatever else they might have been doing for an afternoon to come and help. I went off to Gartree Prison and missed all the fun. Hopefully it will be usable by the weekend retreat that starts on September 1st. We will have an official opening ceremony on Sunday, September 10th.

It's been far too hot to be indoors, so for some of our Open Evenings on Mondays and Fridays we've sat outside. So far no one has been concussed by falling apples and there have been only minor complaints about mosquitoes, and it's been very pleasant. Sitting in the open and close to nature can be very peaceful. Sitting close to nature, steady and peaceful you will watch any disturbance come as it comes and go as it goes and thus may you see all this fleeting world as it is, as impermanent, unsatisfactory and without self, soul or substance.

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## **THE DIARY**

### **WOOD COTTAGE SHRINE ROOM OPENING.**

At Wood Cottage, **Sunday September 10th**. From 10 a.m.

### **ANGULIMALA WORKSHOPS**

(For Buddhist Prison Chaplains only, attendance otherwise is by invitation to Angulimala members only)

**At the Forest Hermitage at 10 a.m. on September 16th.**

**The AGM is in the morning and we have Anne Owers CBE, to speak to us in the afternoon.**

The one following will be on Saturday, December 9th.

### **WOOD COTTAGE RETREATS**

These will be on the first weekends of September, October and November from Friday evening until Sunday afternoon. Places are few. To inquire or apply, email [enquiries@woodcottage.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@woodcottage.org.uk).

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

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**This Newsletter is from Ven. Chao Khun Bhavanavitesa (Ajahn Khemadhammo) OBE of  
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