



THE FOREST HERMITAGE NEWSLETTER

JULY 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

At this time of the year with the festival of Āsālha Pūjā coming round again we are once more reminded of the Buddha's first sermon. Just two months after his Enlightenment, the Blessed One set rolling the Wheel of Dhamma in a deer park at Sarnath not far from Benares. Having spent seven weeks savouring the bliss of his new found freedom, the Buddha recognised that some 'with but little dust in their eyes' would appreciate hearing what he now understood and so he set out to wander by stages until he met once again five former companions who had left him when he stopped fasting. Once he'd found them and persuaded them to hear him, he outlined for them the message he was to repeat and elaborate on again and again. He began with the principle of the Middle Way and then enumerated and briefly explained the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path. To this day that teaching remains the bedrock of all that came later. The techniques and devices, elaborate rituals and advanced teachings, the entire range of skilful means that have been developed and adopted since can all be reduced to this simple but profound message: suffering, its cause, its ending and the way to end it.

The great events in the life of the Buddha are all recorded as having taken place on a full moon and the consequent festival is named after the month in which it falls. In the Buddhist lunar

calendar the full moon always ends each month. The day following the full moon is then the first day of the next month and so the day following Āsālha Pūjā is the first day of the first of the three months that make up the Vassa or Rains Retreat. In his lifetime the Buddha responded to complaints about the inevitable damage done to the rice fields by bhikkhus wandering from place to place by ordering a period of stability. For usually the first three of the four months of the Rains all bhikkhus must remain resident in one place. This is known as the Vassa. With the building of roads and modern methods of travel and the spread of Buddhism to lands where the climate is quite different the original reason for this period of stability has lost its force but the Vassa must still be observed. The Vassa has played an important part in the establishment of Buddhist monasticism or the more settled, stable and communal way of life observed these days by most bhikkhus. It also plays an important part in a bhikkhus' training especially in the formation of new entrants because this is when there is generally greater opportunity for formal and systematic instruction. With the two, Āsālha Pūjā and the Vassa, falling so close it's not uncommon for both to be celebrated together on the same day.

Buddhist festivals ought to be times not just of rejoicing but also of contemplation when whatever is being celebrated is honoured, remembered and thought about. In another deer park not far from Warwick, or at least what was once part of a deer park, where the Buddha image pictured above sits in the grounds of The Forest Hermitage we will be doing just that on July 16th, when we gather to celebrate Āsālha Pūjā and remember the Blessed One setting in motion the Wheel of Truth.

The Buddha's First Sermon is important to us because it was the very first teaching the Buddha ever gave and because of its content. It marked the beginning of a dedicated mission that was to occupy the Buddha for the remaining forty-five years of his life. In this discourse we have a succinct summary of the knowledge and understanding discovered by the Buddha, that he had cultivated and made his own and which had made him the Buddha. This is real Buddhism, the essential message with no frills, no bells or whistles. It may take you only a few minutes to read but the rest of your life to practise and really understand.

Now, if I may, I suggest you be careful not to use the concept of the Middle Way as an excuse to avoid the hard work and the uncomfortable issues that need to be faced. The Middle Way is not an invitation to be soft but a principle to help you balance your

THE FOREST HERMITAGE DIARY:

ASALHA PUJA & ENTERING THE VASSA
Celebration on July 16th from 10.30 am



ANGULIMALA WORKSHOPS

(mainly for Buddhist Prison Chaplains)

June 24th & September 2nd from 10 a.m.



A DAY RETREAT

September 23rd. Enquire for details, please.



MEDITATION, A DHAMMA TALK

a reading & a cup of tea

Mondays & Fridays at 8 p.m.



practice. Understand too that the Four Noble Truths address the most fundamental problem facing any of us. And recognise that the Way to End Suffering, the Noble Eightfold Path, includes a version of morality that is underpinned by harmlessness, a mental training that gathers the mind and suppresses or extinguishes distraction, and a wisdom that commences with an appreciation of the problem of life, one's responsibility and potential and progresses to a full-blown

realisation of the True Nature of things.

A few weeks ago settled in front of your television sets you might have been surprised to see on the BBC's Nine O'clock News a feature on the growth of Buddhism in Britain. And you might have been even more surprised to see after a spectacular display of martial arts by the Shao Lin monks of China, my brief appearance with a group of inmates at Grendon prison. Ours was a much less active contribution than the Shao Lin monks, in fact we were sitting quietly in meditation, which was just as well as I wouldn't have liked the general public to have been left with the impression that all Buddhist monks do is fight! Although this is probably why when kids shout things out at us they tend to do so from a safe distance. Violence is not the protection and solution to violence that a Buddhist monk should even dream of. This is just the sort of wrong view to be got from watching too much television.

Another example of how confusion can be sown by the media was an article about meditation published the other day in a national newspaper. Although there was no attempt to pass off anything it said as Buddhist, it was about meditation and people know that Buddhists meditate and to a lot of people meditation is meditation and they probably think that it's all much of a muchness, but is it? 'Meditation' is an English word that can mean anything from Wordweb's 'a calm, lengthy, intent consideration', which comes conveniently close to what we mean by samādhi, to more general and imprecise suggestions of focusing the mind on a subject or exercising the mind in contemplation. The article described children apparently meditating and after a breathing exercise being asked to imagine themselves in a rocket being shot into outer space. The stories they reported afterwards showed that not surprisingly they had clearly been fantasising. Now this may have kept them quiet and may have calmed them down but it was taking them in the opposite direction to the one that we as Buddhists expect meditation to take us. When you are practising samādhi, when you are developing Buddhist meditation, you are supposed to be both gathering the mind and diminishing or dealing with distractions until such concentrated, penetrative awareness

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is capable of showing things up as they really are. The direction that Buddhist meditation will take you in is that of Truth.

Some time before the vassa I had hoped to ordain my two novices as bhikkhus, in fact the ordination had been tentatively arranged for early in July. However, when it seemed as if we might be rather short of help to look after the Forest Hermitage this summer both sāmaneras heroically offered to wait for a more

favourable time. There are a number of things that need to be done here that bhikkhus may not do but which novices can, like mowing the lawn - and there's more than one large lawn here.

So now the plan is for them to spend some of this vassa preparing for bhikkhu ordination and I will rearrange the ceremony for a bit later on.

This little crisis has highlighted again our vulnerability and how much we need people to be involved and playing a part in the life of the temple.

As well as my usual round of prison visiting I have been out to one or two schools. In fact there have been a flurry of enquiries from local schools wanting either to come here or for me to go to them. I'm afraid I have suspected that the need to occupy children at the end of the summer term may have had something to do with this but because I think that Religious Education is important and despite being pretty well occupied with my prison visiting I have tried where possible to accommodate these requests. At one school in Coventry when I invited questions some of the children held up a number of Buddhist sacred objects that I realised to my horror they had been quite inappropriately clutching or even dragging on the floor. I quickly had these items that included a Buddha Rupa, a Tibetan Thangka and a Dorje collected up and placed somewhere more suitable. Not only then but also whenever children or anyone else visits here I am very concerned to see that they treat with suitable respect what we consider to be important or sacred and that means anything at all to do with the Triple Gem.

I have also been up to Harnham monastery near Newcastle for their Vesākha Pūjā celebration and over to talk to members of the Western Buddhist Order in Birmingham about my life as a bhikkhu.

Sadly, two people whose support and presence we've been grateful for and enjoyed in recent years both passed away recently. One was Khun Tiam, a Thai woman from a part of Thailand that I know well who had married and made her home in Leicester. The other was Bill Hamilton, a much loved character who sometimes stayed with us. Both will be missed and both warmly remembered but we should reflect that such is the nature of life to arise and pass away, the only secure happiness being that of Nibbāna.

Time presses on at an alarming speed and again we are thinking about and planning the annual celebration of the Buddha Grove in Springhill Open Prison. We have set the date for Sunday, September 3rd. That's the day after the next Angulimala workshop, so some people may like to make a weekend of it. Springhill's Buddha Grove was the first of the outdoor Buddhist shrines to be built in a British prison and every year we have this impressive event, which includes a massive Thai buffet. Please put it in your diaries and let me know if you can help.

Please note that both The Forest Hermitage and the Angulimala websites can now be found on the World Wide Web under their own domain names, www.foresthermitage.org.uk and www.angulimala.org.uk. My email address has also changed.

| UPOSATHA OBSERVANCE DAYS | | | | |
|--------------------------|-----------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|
| | ☾ | ○ | ☽ | ● |
| July | 9 th | 16 th | 24 th | 31 st |
| August | 8 th | 15 th | 23 rd | 29 th |
| September | 6 th | 13 th | 21 st | 28 th |
