
News and Musings

from

The Forest Hermitage

March 2552 – 2009



Coming Soon:

SONGKRAN

The 'Water Festival', Thai, Burmese and Sri Lankan New Year, we will celebrate on Sunday, April 19th from 10 a.m.

ANGULIMALA WORKSHOPS

At the Forest Hermitage at 10 a.m. on June 6th, September 12th and December 5th.

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

BHAVANA DHAMMA RETREATS

Ven. Manapo will lead a number of one day, weekend and five and seven day retreats this year.

Details can be found at www.foresthermitage.org.uk/bhavanadhamma/retreats.html

Places are few.

To apply or inquire, email enquiries@foresthermitage.org.uk or phone 01926 624564.

MEDITATION, A DHAMMA TALK and a cup of tea

at The FOREST HERMITAGE.
Every Monday & Friday at eight o'clock.

On Sunday, February 1st, as Flight TG916 taxied to a standstill after its 9000 mile long journey, peering out of the windows while we braced ourselves for a reduction in the temperature we'd become accustomed to, it seemed a typically ordinary dark winter's night. But by the time we had cleared Immigration, collected a mountain of luggage that consisted mostly of Ajahn Chah books, found Rob and the car and were being driven out of the car park en route for Warwickshire, Heathrow was rapidly disappearing under a thick white blanket. The snow didn't immediately follow us up the M40 but it was at the Hermitage by morning and for more than a week I only ventured out of our grounds to walk Ben, my beautiful Hungarian deer hound. That first week back the weather was so bad that we considered calling off our Magha Puja celebration planned for the following Sunday but in the end decided to go ahead with whoever took their chance on getting here safely and then possibly being snowed in with us. Fortunately the day dawned bright and sunny and we had a good turnout and an enjoyable day. One thing that especially pleased me was the positive and enthusiastic response when in my talk I contrasted the considerable and hugely generous help and support the Sangha and our wats enjoy in Thailand with the struggle it often is here to keep things ticking over. We just don't have the numbers and therefore the helping hands we need, especially on our lay management committee. I could hardly believe the response, people queuing up to join and our Buddha-Dhamma Fellowship meeting that followed the best attended and most enthusiastic ever!

Magha Puja commemorates a celebrated occasion when while the Buddha was staying on the Vultures' Peak, below in the Bamboo Grove on the full moon of the ancient month of Magha one thousand, two hundred and fifty arhant disciples of his, all of whom he had personally ordained, gathered to see him. He went down from the Vultures' Peak and there in the midst of that great assembly the Buddha recited the Ovada Patimokkha, the most well-known verse of which goes something like this: 'Avoid all evil, cultivate what is good and purify your minds; this is the teaching of all the Buddhas.' And it was at Magha Puja in 1985 that we launched Angulimala, the Buddhist Prison Chaplaincy Organisation, which is why I always include it on the Buddhist calendar that we distribute to prisoners, usually with a brief explanation that this year I accidentally left off.

Our trip to Thailand followed what is now becoming a fairly well-worn pattern and included days in Bangkok, a week or so in the North East that took in the annual Ajahn Chah Memorial Day and visits to old friends and favourite places, like that pictured at the top of the page where I was sitting overlooking the Mekong and Laos, with lastly a few days on Phuket. The one distinct difference this year was a drive down from Ubol to Khao Yai National Park just below Korat for a couple of nights at Wat Ratanawan, Ajahn Nyanadhammo's new monastery. This has developed amazingly since we were last there and I could scarcely believe my eyes when the huge chromium plated gates slid open to reveal what I can only describe as a vision of heaven, a cascade of beautifully landscaped lakes, with brightly coloured lotuses and a background of huge ancient trees. The days in Bangkok enabled me to catch up with more old friends and to have a couple of check-ups, one at a wonderful eye hospital and the other at capital's state of the art Bangkok Heart Hospital where for those of you who may at times have doubted it it was confirmed that indeed I do have a heart and that moreover it is in the right place and for what is not quite the latest model it's functioning adequately well.

And so rested and overhauled we returned. But then as we say, it was one thing after another! As I said for the first two weeks after we got back I couldn't do very much because of the weather, then I caught a virus that I seemed to shake off pretty quickly, but that was followed by toothache and when I went to the dentist I came away without two old friends that must have been with me for well over fifty years. The next day I felt dreadful and so then I had more than a week of coping with an infected cavity. But all that's history and now I am frantically trying to catch up.

Since I've been back and trying to get up to speed we've had a very lively and useful Angulimala Workshop for Buddhist prison chaplains that took place as is customary at the Forest Hermitage. It was very well attended and appeared to go extraordinarily well, especially as there

was no guest speaker and they had to put up with quite a lot from me. Amongst other things and partly prompted by a new programme that the Prison Service Chaplaincy is developing, we talked over the concerns some of us are beginning to have about how mindfulness and similar Buddhist techniques are being taken up by psychologists and therapists and are being lifted out of their traditional Buddhist contexts and dropped into doubtful mixes with cognitive based therapies, with which mindfulness in particular then becomes confused. There is also a consequent concern, which might seem a bit over the top but nevertheless shouldn't be disregarded, that the therapists and the courses they are developing may compete to take over and try to own these precious Buddhist practices, especially if they are licensed to teach them in institutions like prisons and hospitals. On the day I was at pains to point out that what Buddhism teaches is not just mindfulness but Right Mindfulness, which is mindfulness as an integral part of the Noble Eightfold Path, skilfully directed and invested with both Wisdom and Virtue.

Then the following week Birmingham Buddhist Vihara hosted the March meeting of TBSUK, the Theravada Buddhist Sangha in the UK, our organisation of and for Theravada monks and nuns. Last year we decided that there should be two full meetings a year, one in March and another in August. The August meeting this year will be on August 12th, again in Birmingham but at the Maha Vihara. The first subject of discussion was the new Immigration Points Based System (PBS), which means that temples wishing to invite monks and nuns from overseas or renew visas for those already here must register as a sponsor with the UK Borders Agency. Unfortunately the registration process has not turned out as straightforward for some as we might have hoped. Next we discussed the unacceptable exploitation of the Buddha Image and the word "Buddha" in bars and night clubs, as decoration on women's clothing and in advertising and wondered what we could do and how we might explain how wrong and inappropriate this is. Afterwards I chased down to Heathrow to meet Ant who has been working in France and who that evening was off to Thailand for a computer science conference on Phuket. I had some things for him to take for Sister Khema who used to be with us but is now in the NE of Thailand staying in a remote forest wat under the care of my old friend and mentor, Luangpor Dang.

A Buddha Bar, one of an international chain that started in Paris, opened in London last July under Waterloo Bridge. From the pictures I have seen it's like all the rest with a huge Image of the Buddha in meditative pose apparently enjoying the heavy music and presiding over the eating and especially the drinking. I don't know what we can do. I certainly don't have any time for the growing tendency to see offence in the slightest thing and obviously I believe that followers of the Buddha should be training themselves to overcome that as well as all other defilements. But I do think we have a duty to protect and care for what is so precious to us otherwise we might suddenly find Buddhism terribly misunderstood and the Buddha associated with the very opposite of what he taught. In fact, thanks to the Buddha Bars, that is what is already happening. To counter that I have thought of trying to leaflet its patrons as they go in and out with an explanation of the fifth precept. Protests outside the Buddha Bar in Jakarta by Buddhists burning incense and chanting have led the Government there to call for a change of name or closure. Of course I know that some Buddhists would argue that it's best to ignore these places and leave the people responsible to the fruits of their own bad kamma, which doesn't seem to me an entirely responsible and compassionate attitude, and I am mindful of that well-known principle, 'For the triumph of evil it is only necessary for good men to do nothing!'

Something else that I have been involved with, practically since it was first mooted, has been the Buddhist chaplaincy to the Armed Forces. Some of you may remember that this was a real hot potato and something that many felt that Buddhists shouldn't touch with a barge pole. But I supported a Buddhist chaplaincy to the armed forces because I argued that the members of the armed forces are people first and sailors, soldiers and airforce personnel second; and as people they should be cared for and why shouldn't that care include the opportunity to learn and practise the Dhamma? So I was pleased to join a small committee to endorse and

support a suitable person as Buddhist chaplain to the Armed Forces that was being put together by Ron Maddox who had once been the General Secretary of the Buddhist Society in Eccleston Square and who we are now told the Ministry of Defence had appointed as its Buddhist Adviser. I took part in the interviewing and the appointment process of the Buddhist chaplain and gave the whole thing a certain amount of time and effort. Eventually, when our committee numbered six, as an independent body we properly and legally constituted it as The Buddhist Chaplaincy to the Armed Forces: Endorsing Authority. And we continued to meet quarterly for another two years until we decided to call an Annual General Meeting to revue our position. Unfortunately, on the day Ron Maddox refused to hold the AGM and a few days later tried to get rid of four of us even though the Constitution gives no one the power to dismiss anyone else, let alone practically the entire membership. Since then the four of us strengthened by the addition of Ven. Lama Jampa Thaye continue to meet under my chairmanship but without any contact with the Ministry of Defence or the Buddhist Chaplain to the Armed Forces and without Ron who the MoD continues to insist should be their Buddhist Adviser. A number of senior monks from fourteen temples, as well as senior representatives of prominent Buddhist organisations, together with Lord Avebury in Parliament have all written in protest at what has happened and the response from the MoD has been that it is for the Buddhist communities to agree on the provision of an Endorsing Authority. And in a recent letter from the Minister it was stated that Ron Maddox had been appointed on the advice of the Buddhist Society which had been recommended by the Home Office as the Buddhist primary point of contact.

This letter raises the serious point about how the Government should contact and consult the various schools and organisations that together make up the Buddhist Community in this country. It is unclear how long ago the Home Office considered the Buddhist Society of Eccleston Square, London SW1 as the Buddhist primary point of contact and whether even then other Buddhist groups knew about it and would have agreed. Right now it is obvious that such an arrangement whereby a lay group of limited membership like the Buddhist Society, or indeed any single Buddhist organisation, should be the Government's primary point of contact for Buddhist matters is unacceptable and must most urgently be reviewed.

I must mention that my friend Lord Avebury was a joint winner this year of the Secularist of the Year award, which is presented annually by the UK's National Secular Society to someone considered to have made the greatest contribution to secularism in the previous year. The presentation was made this year at the National Secular Society's "200th Birthday Party for Charles Darwin" to the joint winners, Evan Harris MP and Lord Avebury, for their success in getting the blasphemy laws abolished. Richard Dawkins made the presentation.

Still with Lord Avebury, as co-chair of the Chittagong Hill Tracts Commission he visited Bangladesh and the Chittagong Hill Tracts in February. It's unfortunately not well-known that the Buddhists in Bangladesh and particularly in the Chittagong Hill Tracts are having a pretty awful time. This was the CHT Commission's second mission in Bangladesh and focused on engaging the Government to include concrete and time-bound actions for the full implementation of the CHT Accord of 1997 in its work programme, and to address ongoing human rights concerns in the CHT. While he was there Lord Avebury was particularly struck by the work of Moanoghar. Founded in 1974 at Rangapani in Rangmati Hill Tracts by a group of socially engaged Buddhist monks and laypersons, Moanoghar provides shelter and education to children in distress and misery. Its message of tolerance, compassion and mutual understanding reflects the traditions and heritage of the CHT and its indigenous people. If you would like to know more and offer them some support a Google search will give you all you need to know.

Lastly I'd like to add that so far this year I've also been to Imperial College Buddhist Society to give a talk, attended the opening of the Multifaith Building in Send Prison where I enjoyed a little gossip about our mutual old friends with Penelope Keith who was there to cut the ribbon, been to a consultation called by the Racial Equality Action Group (REAG), attended a meeting of the Prison Service Chaplaincy Council held in Holloway Prison and I've managed a few prison visits.

This Newsletter is from Ven. Chao Khun Bhavanaviteht (Luangpor Khemadhammo) OBE of

The Forest Hermitage & Angulimala, the Buddhist Prison Chaplaincy Organisation

The Forest Hermitage Lower Fulbrook nr Sherbourne Warwickshire CV35 8AS United Kingdom

For Ven. Ajahn Khemadhammo & ANGULIMALA - direct telephone: 01926 624385 mobile: 07941 013319

Email address: Lpkhem@foresthermitage.org.uk
THE BUDDHA-DHAMMA FELLOWSHIP, Reg. Charity No 289913

Websites: www.foresthermitage.org.uk & www.angulimala.org.uk
ANGULIMALA, Reg. Charity No 294939
