



News and Musings

From

The Forest Hermitage

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To Buddhists the world over this merry month of May means Visakha Puja, Vesak or Buddha Day. The Pali Tipitika has it that it was on a full moon of the ancient lunar month of Visakha that the Bodhisatta, Prince Siddhattha Gotama, the Buddha-to-be, was born; and then 35 years later, on another Visakha full moon, the Ascetic Gotama attained Full Enlightenment and became the Buddha; 45 years further on, on yet another full moon of Visakha, the life of Gotama the Buddha came to a close. For us Theravadans then, it is the Birth, the Enlightenment and the Passing of the Buddha that we remember at Visakha Puja, while Buddhists of some other schools commemorate the Birth only, and yet others focus on the Enlightenment. Since Vesak was declared an International Holiday by the United Nations in 2000, as well as the usual celebrations all over the Buddhist world, we now have one every year at the UN in New York and an annual World Visakha Puja Conference in Bangkok. Unfortunately, word of an invitation to the latter arrived too late for me to go this year but then I thought, there are plenty of monks in Thailand and few here and rarer still are English monks in England, so I was pleased to stay and to be here to celebrate in prisons, at Wat Pa Santidhamma, the Forest Hermitage, and on two occasions in London.

Had you been out and about in London's West End shortly after midday on Saturday, May 6th you might have spotted Phra Manapo and me in the unlikely setting of Leicester Square. I think it was probably only the second time I'd been there since I left England in 1971. Up to then, in the glorious sixties it had been familiar territory. I used to frequent the bookshops in Cecil Court, go to classes in West Street and occasionally lunch at the Vega in Wardour Street, and it was at the Queen's on Shaftesbury Avenue that I began my first season with the National Theatre. That was a long time ago and it's a bit different now from what I remember of it then but London and especially this part of London has always been home to a multiplicity of cultures and unusual and exciting things and in that respect not much has changed. We were there of course for the Bathing the Buddha Ceremony organised by the London Fo Guang Temple. This is a charming occasion that begins with a procession through a part of Soho that is now China Town. It's an annual event and I was invited for the first time last year and happened to say then in my talk that I had never been before because I'd never before been invited, so now, I'm afraid, they feel rather obliged to keep on asking me. Prominent among the honoured guests and walking in the procession with the Abbess was the Deputy Lord Mayor of Westminster who amongst such an exotic and colourful gathering, I couldn't help thinking, looked a bit out of place in morning dress with a huge chain of office around his neck. After the procession and back in Leicester Square Gardens in the tent where an elaborate Shrine had been created, we witnessed first some formal offerings by ladies in traditional Chinese dress and then respectfully stood for a lengthy Chinese rendition of the Prajna Paramita Heart Sutra. That was followed by short talks by the Mayor, myself, a monk from the London Buddhist Vihara and the Abbess, Ven. Chueh Yann Shih, Head of the London Fo Guang Temple. This of course was a Mahayana occasion and as such celebrated just the Birth of the Buddha and so, as far as I can remember, we all had something to say about the origins of Buddhism and its growth and presence in this great capital. I concluded my talk by reminding my audience that always keeping the precepts with them, including abstinence from alcohol, would protect them wherever they went, even in the West End of London! With the Deputy Mayor sitting in front of me perhaps I should also have mentioned our concern about the inappropriate and offensive use of the Buddha Image for commercial purposes, and to sell alcohol in particular, especially as it is Westminster that licenses establishments like the Funky Buddha Club in Mayfair. Then came the ceremony of bathing images of the Baby Buddha, really the child that was to become the Buddha. Afterwards while other guests went for lunch we strolled down to the Embankment, taking in as we went a glimpse of the giant mechanical elephant that was thrilling the crowds in Trafalgar Square. Then as the rain began we returned in time for me to help with the cutting of the ribbon that launched the first showing of a

musical version of the Buddha's early life. We didn't stay for that, for one thing the Vinaya doesn't permit it, and for another I have my reservations about attempting to portray the Buddha on stage or film, and besides musicals have never been my cup of tea.

So we moved on to something more in keeping with a kammatthana monk's day out, the Bodies Exhibition at Earls Court. This was really fascinating. Here all was revealed, the human body dissected and stripped down so that you could clearly see how it is put together and how it works, what happens, what muscles and sinews and so on are involved, when certain actions are performed. You could see various bits and pieces separated from the rest, including a complete human skin lying there like a body stocking that someone had just slipped out of. These bodies and their parts were all dead, at one time they had lived and functioned as ours do, but not any more. Viewing them we could reflect not only on how our bodies are composed but on their fragility and eventual demise. This is a valuable experience which in a Buddhist country like Thailand is better understood and there monks often have the chance to see corpses in states of dismemberment or decay and contemplate and focus on them as described in classical Buddhist texts like the Satipatthana Sutta. But in this country it's more difficult, so this was a great opportunity to view and reflect on the nature and makeup of the human body – the only thing missing was the smell.

Speaking of decay and death, I don't read newspapers but I have heard that euthanasia has again been in the news and one night at Warwick University Buddhist Society we had a long discussion that began with suicide and went on to include euthanasia and abortion. Because all three are forms of intentional killing, which means that life is deliberately taken and that in the mind of whoever does the killing there is bound to be aversion, Buddhist teaching holds them all to be unacceptable.

I think that probably most religious people from all the main faiths oppose euthanasia, although those who believe in God will have a different reason from us Buddhists. I agree that it is not right for religious people, or anyone else for that matter, to impose their beliefs on others but religious people do have a right to express themselves and if nothing else their beliefs and moral values might challenge the way in which others think and act and that is both useful and healthy. With morality not exactly fashionable these days, it's probably hardly anyone apart from religious people who mention it and then many of them bend their various codes to suit themselves, including some who class themselves as Buddhists. True, we may not be able to impose our morality but we can challenge the views of others and even the Government view of what is right and what is wrong.

So why are we who do not believe in God and who therefore don't see our lives as having any kind of divine meaning or connection concerned about legalising the taking of human life? Well for a start, for much the same reason that we should be concerned about any taking of life: because life once taken cannot be given back or restored. And that means that all that that person or being might have done is cut off and any chance of their working out the effects of past kamma, of improving themselves, of growing in wisdom and understanding, and even attaining perfection is denied and at the very least postponed. Worse, for a person to give some form of consent to the deliberate ending of their life is tantamount to their participating in their own killing, and because willed actions carry consequences for those who do them, to have deliberately done that and acted with that degree of aversion for yourself, there are bound to be strong and lasting effects that could persist through the next life and beyond. As a Buddhist monk, I am sometimes asked to comfort people struggling with awful and apparently pointless and inexplicable suffering. I cannot know for sure why this happens, and to some and not to others, but I don't think things happen for no reason and to me it seems perfectly credible that past actions could be the cause and that the consequences of our actions will have to be borne sooner or later. As the Buddha realised during the night when he attained Enlightenment, dependent on one thing follows another, in other words there's a constant renewal from moment to moment, with what we willingly say and do influencing what comes after, even

when the relationship between body and mind is severed and we die. In Buddhism, death and rebirth are inseparable, only Buddhas and Arahants don't come back, for the rest of us dying heralds an important transition that needs to be managed as carefully and skilfully as possible.

Our Visakha Puja Celebration on May 14th at the Forest Hermitage passed off very nicely. We had a good crowd, mostly young and swollen with a healthy contingent from Warwick University, and the rain managed to stay away both for the alms round and the traditional circumambulation of the Chedi and Buddha-Rupa in the Pagoda Garden. The photo on the front of this newsletter was taken as we concluded the circumambulation.

A week later I dashed through pouring rain to London to East Ham Town Hall to give a short sermon at the Joint Buddha Day Celebration being held there on behalf of the Thai, Mynamar, Indian (Ambedkar mission) and Sri Lankan temples, and the Bangala community, of East London. It was a long way there and a long way back for me so I couldn't spend much time with them but I was glad to see these Buddhist communities cooperating and making their presence felt in East London and later I was pleased to hear that they felt it had been a very successful day.

On my News & Musings page at <http://my.opera.com/Luangpor%20Khemadhammo/blog/> you can find more pictures as well as some latest news and announcements. It's a handy way of keeping in touch, so if you have the chance I hope you will go there and take a look from time to time.

There have been the usual comings and goings at the Forest Hermitage and Wood Cottage, which has I hope enabled those who've stayed to further and deepen their practice and has brought us some help with the many jobs that need to be done to care for our two properties. Since the beginning of April, Steve has been at Wood Cottage as our manager, and his arrival has been a very timely and welcome development. But we still need you, as I hope you need us, and we do still want you to take an interest in what we do and to help the Forest Hermitage if you can. We are grateful for all that is done for us and for all your contributions. Anumodana!

THE DIARY

PABBAJJĀ (Going Forth) Ceremony, June 11th at midday.

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 Midsummer's Day, June 24th.

The one following will be in September but depends on the date for the Springhill celebration which has yet to be discussed with the Governor.

ASALHA PUJA, July 10th. ENTRY TO THE VASSA (KOWPUNSAH) July 11th.

Public Celebration at Wat Pa Santidhamma, the Forest Hermitage, Sunday July 16th.

From 10 a.m.

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

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