



News and Musings

NEW YEAR 2550 - 2007

The Forest Hermitage

As it turns and as it travels, the rim of a wheel is forever touching the ground at one point only. I've long since forgotten where that comes from but it's an image I return to again and again and now, as once again we mark the progress of time with the ending of one year and the beginning of another, it seems apt to recall it as a reminder that the past is already past, the future remains still yet to be and uncertain, and all we really ever have is now - right now!

Wherever you look at this time you find people reflecting on the year that has gone and speculating about the one they assume will follow. And hope for better things and better times springs eternal. In all probability 2007 will be the usual mix of good and bad, pleasure and pain and this time next year our memory of it will be of time and experiences coloured as usual by the contents of our imperfect minds. It's stupid to cling to the past but on the other hand we disregard it at our peril because right across the spectrum, from what has been thought and said and done before, there are lessons to be learnt. There are inspiring examples of good and fine things and there are whole catalogues of mistakes that are repeated time and time again. It used to be said that history was bunk but that's not true for history is an enormous encyclopaedia of facts and experiences, of actions and their effects, that in all humility ought to be consulted and learnt from over and over again so that the good and fine things are built upon and the old mistakes are never made again.

I'm not sure these days how anyone is supposed to train and qualify to govern and lead a country but in the Cakkavattisihananda Sutta, the Buddha describes how a certain successive lineage of kings governed justly and well, each having taken wise counsel of their retiring predecessor to honour, respect and live close to the Dhamma. Eventually, however, there was one who thought he knew it all and he did not take the advice of the royal sage, his predecessor. Disaster! In no time at all poverty had appeared in the kingdom and then because of that, theft. And from then on it was downhill all the way and all because the man at the top had been too stupid and arrogant to listen to good advice and to learn from the past. Eventually, when things in that country had hit rock bottom ordinary people found that by not harming each other they were happier and they rediscovered the practice and value of virtue and began cultivating wholesome states. Slowly, by no longer following their greed and aversion, but by reining in and restraining their defilements, things got better and peace and harmony was restored.

On New Year's Eve at Wat Pah Santidhamma, the peaceful Forest Hermitage, as the stroke of midnight approached, we were gathered in the Shrine Room. From about 11 o'clock I had begun reading some powerful Dhamma from a book of translations of Luangpor Chah's talks. Then at a quarter-to-twelve I invited everyone present to come forward, one by one, to take a stick of incense, light it and place it in the incense pot and as they did so I asked them to make some personal commitment, for instance to resolve let go of and give up the year that was gone, to live the time that was to come, that was left to them, as wisely and as well as they could. Something like that, but something of their choice and personal to them. The timing was perfect, at one minute to twelve, as the last person placed her incense stick and prostrated, we began chanting the Parittas and then when that and the blessing was over the first thing of the New Year that our little congregation did was to receive the Three Refuges and Five Precepts. Tea followed.

We were truly fortunate to celebrate the New Year so peacefully. Elsewhere it was not so, and not just because of torrential rain and high winds. Sadly, for so many bombings, violence, killing and all the attendant horrors of war are the order of the day and that's how they had to begin their New Year. It is so stupid and so unnecessary. All it needs is for the lessons of history to be learnt and the sound advice of the All-Enlightened One to be heard. Don't just wish this but show the way by learning and listening for yourself and practising what the Buddha taught.

The path of morality, meditation and wisdom is so very clear, all you have to remember is to bend yourself to the Dhamma and not try to bend the Dhamma to suit yourself. This is particularly

true of the precepts and especially the fifth of the five precepts for lay followers. I know, I've heard all about moderation but no one ever suggests breaking any of the other precepts in moderation. No one has ever said to me that it's all right to kill in moderation or steal in moderation, so why drink in moderation? The trouble is that when you drink or take drugs you flood your brain with chemicals that change your personality and destroy your mindfulness. How much you're affected depends on you and how much you take but it still happens and if you are serious about training yourself, raising your awareness, abandoning your defilements and overcoming your suffering you can't afford to risk any more confusion. That's apart from the horrendous social and material damage caused by drink and drugs. Just look around you. So, if you do still drink, there's still time to care for yourself, care for others and care for the Buddha-Dhamma by adding to your New Year resolutions a determination to stop and to take that fifth precept seriously.

I should quickly mention that in November we held a short, slick, and ever so efficient Annual General Meeting of the Buddha-Dhamma Fellowship (the BDF). To manage places like this and to do the things monks can't do a formal support body is required. Here it's the BDF and it's organised on sound Buddhist principles. The trustees, who must be full members observing the five precepts, are elected by the membership. Every year the accounts have to be inspected and approved by an Independent Examiner and then presented to the AGM to be formally accepted. Various reports are made to the AGM of what's happened to us through the year and we pay tribute to all the fine things that have been done and given and thank everyone involved. I know people dismiss AGMs as tedious and a nuisance but actually they can be quite fun and they are so very necessary. They make sure that everything is above board and done properly and they give everyone a chance to learn what is going on here and to be involved.

At meetings of the committee of the trustees we discuss any forthcoming events and anything that needs doing, such as taming the wisteria that like something out of *The Day of the Triffids* is threatening to envelop and consume the whole building. And we hear how much money there is and how much there is still left to pay off on Wood Cottage. That's down now to just £145,000! To everyone who's been helping that along, Anumodana!

I'm sorry to say that this year, mostly because of my accident, I can't report as many prison visits as last year. In the first full week of December I managed visits to Gartree, Onley and Wellingborough prisons. Then on the Saturday it was an Angulimala Workshop here for our Buddhist Prison Chaplains and that was a long but very enjoyable day. The following week I managed Long Lartin and Rye Hill prisons and a trip to London to Abell House where the Prison Service Chaplaincy has its office. After my meetings in Abell House I hobbled round the corner and with Khun Pie went into the House of Lords for tea with Lord Avebury. By the time we had had a walk through the Royal Gallery and visited the Queen's Robing Room and were due to come out, Hema Hirani had arrived at the Peers' Entrance and was waiting for a lift with us up to Warwick to join Warwick University Buddhist Society members on a trip to the Lake District. The next Monday, I was back at Abell House to discuss Restorative Justice. Then on the Tuesday I learnt that Venerable Vajiragnana, Head of the London Buddhist Vihara, had died the previous Friday. That meant I had to postpone my visit to Broadmoor until the following week and go instead to Venerable Vajiragnana's funeral on Thursday, 21st December.

Venerable Vajiragnana was of course very well known. He had first come to this country forty years ago and apart from a break of four years back in Sri Lanka had lived here ever since. Since 1984 he had been Head of the London Buddhist Vihara and unfortunately for the last few years he had been a very sick man, spending weeks at a time in hospital. The funeral on Thursday was in two parts, ceremonies at the Vihara from 12:30 - 13:30 and the service at West London Crematorium in Kensal Rise Cemetery from 14:30 - 15:30. I had intended to go to both but on

Thursday morning the whole country was under a blanket of heavy fog and when we got to it a section of the M40 was closed. It was a pretty miserable journey and by the time we reached the outskirts of London it was only practical to go straight to the crematorium. At least I was early for once. The crematorium chapel was packed to overflowing and there were several speeches including a few words from me. I had after all known Venerable Vajiragnana, off and on, for about thirty-eight years and he had been very kind and supportive of me. The hour was soon up and the next funeral queueing to come in. The coffin was committed to the flames and we came out to stand around chatting for a while in the freezing fog in the midst of that huge crowded Victorian cemetery with its 65,000 graves. Thinking back on it later, I was reminded of the line in the Kisagotami story in the Light of Asia, 'the dead are very many, and the living few!'

Not being able to walk properly for so many weeks there's been nothing else to do but wait to get better. Apparently, had I been younger and a famous footballer it might have been different and something could have been done but I'm neither. Anyway, not to worry, Venerable Manapo has been managing the Monday and Friday evening sittings very well without me. I have had to hobble in once or twice when he's been busy with his retreats at Wood Cottage and I've noticed on those evenings when it's been me that only one or two people have turned up, whereas when it's been him the car park has been packed! But there you are, we all need to learn that the world can go on without us – none of us is indispensable. Never mind. We are off to Thailand on January 13th to join in the Ajahn Chah Memorial Day ceremonies at Wat Nong Pah Pong on the 16th, the anniversary of Luangpor Chah's passing in 1992. Afterwards I'm not sure what we'll do but we're not planning to return here until February 2nd. By then, hopefully, I'll be fully fit and we'll both be ready to launch into another full programme and the improvements that we're planning.

A Very Happy New Year to One and All.

THE DIARY

MAGHA PUJA

The Full Moon falls on March 3rd and we will hold our celebration on **Sunday, March 4th** from 10 a.m.

WOOD COTTAGE RETREATS

Ven. Manapo will lead weekend retreats on 23rd – 25th February, March 30th – April 1st, and May 4th - 6th. Places are few. To inquire or apply, email enquiries@woodcottage.org.uk or phone 01926 624564

ANGULIMALA WORKSHOPS

The next will be the Forest Hermitage at 10 a.m. on Saturday, March 10th.

The one following will be on Saturday, June 30th, 2007.

(These are for Buddhist Prison Chaplains only, attendance otherwise is by invitation to Angulimala members only)

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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