



News and Musings

from

The Forest Hermitage

October 2550 – 2007

At this time of the year our Buddhist calendar brings us to the completion of the Vassa, the three month retreat period that we have to observe every year. Friday, October 26th is the Full Moon that ends the Vassa for this year and at the Forest Hermitage we will celebrate the following Sunday. The proper name for the last day of Vassa is Pavarana Day, the day when bhikkhus *pavarana* or invite fellow members of the Sangha to tell them of their faults. It may surprise some of you to hear that this is regarded as a privilege. Probably most people think their faults are better concealed but then most people are not in Buddhist training. I don't suppose anyone is particularly proud of being angry, bad tempered, greedy or whatever but if these defilements aren't seen and paid attention to you're going to have a bit of a job understanding them and being free of them. Mental defilements are movements of a mind that doesn't yet know the true nature of things and it's only by watching and seeing that none of these thoughts and feelings have any lasting substance that you can begin to wake up and learn to start living without them. So, if you're serious about getting better and serious about Buddhist training, it can be a real help to be reminded of what you're doing wrong.

Ironically, just as the Chinese rape of Tibet and the flight of the Dalai Lama and thousands of refugees spread Tibetan Buddhism to all parts of the world, so the brutality with which the Burmese military answered the peaceful marches of thousands of monks has spread their message of loving-kindness into the homes and workplaces of millions. And just as the Dalai Lama's unremitting refusal to embrace violence in defence of his beloved country and culture has won for him universal respect and admiration, so the monks and nuns of Burma who took to the streets

armed only with their robes, their upturned bowls and their faith in the power of Metta, of Loving-Kindness, have won for themselves an acclaim that the plump little generals who ordered their murder and abuse may unfortunately never comprehend.

But sadly, they're not the only ones. The world embraces and glorifies greed, hatred and delusion and many followers of various religions accept or justify and sometimes even promote violence. Many who to me have voiced their support for the Burmese protestors have



complained and questioned why no other power has mounted some kind of military rescue operation. But that's not what we want. The teachings of the Buddha will have none of that. It's a hard one but the challenge the Buddha has laid down for us is to learn to live without desire and without anger, and to meet hatred and aggression not with violence and more hatred but by not hating, and with loving-kindness and compassion.

There have been two sets of marches and meetings in London in support of the monks' protests in Burma. The second I unfortunately missed when I couldn't get a lift but the first, at the Peace Pagoda on the South Bank of the Thames in Battersea Park, we three, Tahn Manapo, Sister Khema and I, all attended. Several Burmese monks were there and we joined them for the chanting of the Metta Sutta, the Buddha's discourse on Loving-Kindness. There were a lot of people looking on, British and probably various nationalities as well as Burmese, and offering their silent support. A Burmese monk spoke briefly and then it was my turn to follow in English. What could I say? What can we do? At least let us not give way to anger, nor to despair, but let us hope for better things and put our trust in the Buddhist Path and particularly in the power of Metta, of Loving-Kindness, to overcome the dreadful things that we've heard of happening to the monks in Burma. What can we do? Not much, unfortunately but we can show we care and we can make sure that the monks and people who have paid such a price are not forgotten and that their cause is neither lost nor abandoned.

Here in this country we are so lucky. Yes, we have to do more for ourselves and for the care of our monastery than we might in a traditional Buddhist country but that doesn't hurt us. Unlike though in many parts of the world we can live and practise our Buddhist life unhindered, with no more harassment than the occasional carload of yobs making a late night commotion at our gate. Even in our prisons the right of prisoners to observe the religion of their choice is upheld and we probably lead the world with our Prison Service Multifaith Chaplaincy. Only the other day I nipped down to London for a meeting about an event that we're planning for Prisons Week this year. Originally known as Prisoners' Week when it began in 1975, Prisons Week is a Christian initiative to pray for, and raise awareness of, the needs of prisoners and their families, victims of crime, prison staff and all those who care. I have often wondered why all faiths didn't join in and do this together and one year I remember I did try to have it observed by Buddhists. Now this year we are organising in Prisons Week a multifaith event to be held in the chapel at Wormwood Scrubs on November 21st with up to two hundred invited guests. And I have been asked to give the address.

At the most recent of our quarterly Angulimala workshops for Buddhist Prison Chaplains, Phil Wheatley, the Director General of the Prison Service, (with me in the picture) kindly spent a couple of hours with us talking about the current state of the prisons and answering questions and

responding to what our Buddhist chaplains had to say. It was very kind of him indeed to give up a Saturday afternoon for us and it was much appreciated.

On a wonderfully balmy evening in September, another prison event was our annual celebration at the Springhill Buddha Grove. There were fewer guests this year



and for the first time we were without Lord Avebury who was enjoying a well deserved break somewhere in France, but Tim Newell, the former Governor who had generously agreed to the building of the Buddha Grove all those years ago, was there with his wife, and so was the present Governor, Peter Bennett, and Khun Bancha, the First Secretary from the Royal Thai Embassy. Dominic, an officer at Brixton Prison, brought Venerable Sangthong Dhammacaro from Wat Buddhapadipa who teaches meditation at Brixton and two Thai monks came from the Oxford Buddhist Vihara. As usual we began at the Buddha Grove with some speeches and the chanting of the Parittas, which brought tears to the eyes of one prison officer. A surprised inmate standing nearby couldn't help remarking that he'd always thought prison officers didn't have feelings. Well, just as prisoners aren't only prisoners, so prison officers aren't just prison officers and like prisoners are people too, and suffer as well. Once again I told the story of the building of the Buddha Grove way back in 1992 and how the men who built it, determined that no one in their right mind would ever try and move it, filled the Buddha Image with concrete and then had to commandeer a JCB to lift and lower it into place. While we were enjoying our little ceremony at the Buddha Grove an army of Thai cooks and helpers were down at the kitchens perfecting the banquet they'd spent the afternoon preparing. So as soon as I'd shut up, down everyone trooped to the dining hall where the Thais were ready to feed the entire prison and guests. Everyone who spoke to me afterwards said how delicious the food was, and I'm sure it was with some of the best Thai restaurants in the country represented in that kitchen. Later, as it was getting dark, we returned to the Buddha Grove for the candlelit circumambulation.

A thank-you letter from one inmate included these words: "On behalf of the prisoners of HMP Springhill I would like to thank you for making the Buddha Grove Celebration such an outstanding success. We were very appreciative of the efforts that went into creating the wonderful meal and for the work that went into arranging the whole event. ... We would also like to thank the people that did not get a mention on the night. There were many guests who were willing to speak with us without reservation. We felt truly honoured to be so readily accepted."

Once again it wasn't just the food that impressed the inmates but also the tremendous kindness of everyone who made it possible. If ever anyone wants to see Buddhism in action, let them come to the Springhill Buddha Grove Celebration.

Now back to the Forest Hermitage. It had been six years since it was last done, so we decided that this year the Shrine Room really had to be painted. We agonised over the colour scheme for what seemed forever, ending up with a subtle shade of off white with a hint of gold, a special mix which I'm happy to say has turned out to be rather splendid. It took only two days to do the actual work.



I went down the other day to the Bahá'í Centre, a rather fine house hidden away in a leafy backwater of Knightsbridge, to attend a presentation to honour Lord Avebury for his lifelong commitment to the defence of human rights and at which he received the Blomfield Award given in memory of Lady Blomfield, a philanthropist and social reformer in the first half of the 20th century. She was an early member of the British Bahá'í community. Lord Avebury of



course is a Buddhist and Patron of Angulimala and we've been friends for many years. It was both moving and inspiring to hear the speakers, who included Ann Clwyd MP, praise his outstanding and tireless commitment to human rights and the defence of the persecuted, which in some countries includes the Bahá'ís. The whole thing was very well done and red and white grape juice was served throughout. Lord Avebury had mentioned the Alcohol Harm Reduction Strategy debate that he would soon be speaking in and later when I was chatting with one of the Bahá'ís he told me how surprised he'd been to find Buddhists he'd met apparently picking and choosing which precepts to keep. This chap said of the Bahá'ís that abstaining from alcohol is one of the things that you do as a Bahá'í and which makes you a Bahá'í and of course I said it ought to be one of the things you do as a Buddhist and that makes you a Buddhist.

THE DIARY

IN CELEBRATION OF THE CONCLUSION OF THE VASSA

The Vassa (Punsah) concludes with the Pavarana Day on October 26th,

At the Forest Hermitage we will celebrate from 10 a.m. on Sunday, October 28th.

ANGULIMALA WORKSHOPS

The next will be at the Forest Hermitage at 10 a.m. on Saturday, December 8th.

The one following will be on March, 8th, 2008.

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

The ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING of the BUDDHA-DHAMMA FELLOWSHIP

November 11th at 2 o'clock in the afternoon.

BHAVANA DHAMMA RETREATS

Ven. Manapo will lead weekend retreats on Nov. 2nd - 4th, Nov. 30th - Dec. 2nd, Dec. 28th - Jan. 2nd. Places are few and offered at the discretion of the Abbot. To apply or inquire, email enquiries@foresthermitage.org.uk or phone 01926 624564.

MEDITATION, A DHAMMA TALK & a cup of tea

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

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

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