



Āsālha Pūjā is the anniversary of the Buddha's very first sermon when he set rolling the Wheel of the Dhamma in the Deer Park at Isipatana near Benares. His audience were the five ascetics who had left him shortly before his Enlightenment when they mistakenly thought he had given up on the search for truth. In that sermon the Buddha spoke of the Middle Way and the Four Noble Truths. Afterwards the Sangha was born, as first Kondañña and then all of them had a major awakening and as Sotāpānnas asked for the going forth and full admission which the Buddha granted with the words, "Come, bhikkhu, well proclaimed is the Dhamma. Live the holy life for the complete ending of suffering." The day that follows Āsālha Pūjā is the day on which begins the Vassa, the three-month long retreat during which bhikkhus undertake a vow of stability to one place or monastery. This was originally ordered by the Buddha in those far off days before paved roads and pathways in response to complaints made by farmers about the damage done to their crops by so many bhikkhus wandering here and there. The Āsālha full moon usually falls somewhere between the middle and the end of July.

Of course, as usual we opted for the nearest Sunday as the most convenient time for people to gather and on July 17th, which also happened to be my birthday, we were blessed with a wonderfully sunny day for our celebration of Āsālha and the beginning of the Vassa. That was also the day chosen some two or three months previously by two good Thai ladies who had decided to help us, Khun Rumpai and Khun Dang, for a *tort pah bah*, which amounts to an offering in which many people join of practically every conceivable thing that a monastery might need, including funds and the discarded cloth, *pah bah*, or forest cloth from which the occasion takes its name. Joining them to offer the fruits of his own efforts was another Thai supporter, Khun Praves of the BBC, who had been back to Bangkok for three weeks and in that time had organised a monastery bank account as well as raising funds to put in it. A tremendous effort was made to prepare and decorate everything, including the lane, which had balloons and Buddhist flags at intervals all the way from the main road. So after the chanting, and all the good food – we were eating birthday cake for weeks afterwards, and the circumambulation of the Chedi, we gathered in the Shrine Room for the offerings to be made and in response some words of Dhamma from me. Khun Rumpai and Khun Dang's group had raised just over £4,600 and Khun Praves' more than £2000, although his was still being added to and the last I heard there was 187,661 baht in the monastery bank account in Bangkok. It was a tremendous occasion and most memorable for the sheer joy people

took in being here and making it happen. And I must add that as far as I can remember it was the best birthday I've ever had. Anumodana.

I'd better tell you that that healthy injection of funds has enabled the Committee here to knock another £10,000 off the Wood Cottage debt. So from £425,000 two and a half years ago when we bought Wood Cottage we are down now to owing £159,000, which is still a way to go but a tremendous achievement nevertheless. Wood Cottage is an annexe to the Forest Hermitage on the other side of Hampton Wood and currently provides some lay and especially female accommodation.

While we're still basking in the success of the last big occasion and wondering whether it can ever be bettered it seems almost too soon to be talking about the next but in a few weeks time it will be twenty years since I came to live at The Forest Hermitage. We found this property in the spring of 1985 and the purchase was made during the summer but not in time for me to enter the Vassa here, so I stayed on at Banner Hill near Kenilworth and then at the earliest opportunity as the Vassa ended I came over and moved into the old caravan. It was at the end of my 14th Vassa and now I am about to complete my 34th. So it's been decided that on October 23rd we will celebrate twenty years of the Forest Hermitage.

Every year but one since it was opened on November 1st 1992 we have organised a celebratory event at the Buddha Grove in Springhill Prison on an evening in September when members of the Thai community in the UK have cooked for the entire prison and we will be doing it again this year on September 25th. Traditionally the meal is preceded by chanting and speeches and the evening ends with a candle-lit circumambulation of the Buddha Grove by prisoners and guests. If the weather is kind it can be a beautiful event and it is very important to us because it is a chance for Angulimala, the Buddhist Prison Chaplaincy, to show itself off and draw attention to our deeply felt commitment to making Buddhist teaching and practice available to prisoners. It is also an opportunity for prison inmates to sample two of Thailand's finest attributes, the Buddhist practice of Giving and excellent Thai food.

Here at the Forest Hermitage every so often things turn up unexpectedly: books, magazines, things that we're usually very grateful to receive and which people send with the best of intentions and often for our use in the prisons. Recently a book arrived called, "Buddhist Reflections on Death, Dying and Bereavement," and quite frankly, leafing through it, it didn't strike me as very good at all. It was made worse by the title. Had it simply been called "Reflections on

THE DIARY

ANGULIMALA WORKSHOPS

These are primarily for Buddhist Prison Chaplains, attendance otherwise is by invitation and for Angulimala members only.

At the Forest Hermitage at 10 a.m. on **Sept. 24th** (inc the AGM) and then on December 10th.

SPRINGHILL BUDDHA GROVE CELEBRATION

At HMP Springhill at 6 pm on Sunday, Sept. 25th. Ask for an invitation.

SOCIAL EVENING & POT- LUCK SUPPER at WOOD COTTAGE

October 1st at 6 pm.

END OF THE VASSA & PAVARANA DAY

October 18th (Also called Sangha Day)

20th ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION of The FOREST HERMITAGE

At The Forest Hermitage on Oct. 23rd from 10 a.m.

MEDITATION, A DHAMMA TALK, A READING

& a cup of tea at the Forest Hermitage.

Mondays & Fridays, 8 p.m.

Death, Dying and Bereavement,” it would not have been as bad. The note that accompanied it invited comments and so a comment was sent, though it appeared afterwards that criticism was not what they’d had in mind. It was the title particularly that we didn’t like because much of the content was not Buddhist, some came from other sources and some would certainly have been described by the Buddha as wrong view.

When anything is described as Buddhist, the presumption surely has to be that it has a clear relationship with what the Buddha stands for and with his teaching but a lot in this book has nothing to do with either.

In the discussion that has followed, we mentioned that bereavement, or rather the sadness, sorrow and suffering that often accompanies bereavement, derives from kilesa, from mental defilement, from craving and attachment. This didn’t go down too well and we were accused of lacking compassion. But doesn’t the second of the Four Noble Truths state that the defilement of Craving causes suffering?

Ajahn Chah once held up his cup and said it was cracked. All right, he admitted no crack was then visible but sooner or later it would be and the cup would break. That was its destiny. And in the same way our bodies have a crack in them. You may not see it but it’s there and it’s called our future death. That’s our destiny. He went on to say that because we know we will die that is why we must care. Understanding death teaches us to care for ourselves and for each other. And if I might add, it’s through understanding suffering and its cause that compassion is learnt.

To be truthful, from the moment we were born we’ve been dying. Whether happy or sad, your life after a time ends. And whatever your gains, wealth, or fame, it all has to be left behind. We may not want to but it’s better to face up to that instead of trying to avoid or deny it and then later having to face the shock of a loss, or, perhaps, the sudden news of one’s own imminent demise.

Then you may well ask the question, “What’s this life all about? What’s the point? What’s the purpose? What am I doing here?” That sort of thinking is what prompted the Buddha-to-be to embark on his search. While still unenlightened and living the care-free and pleasure-filled life of a prince he woke up one day to old age, sickness, and death and then had to ask himself what all his royal wealth and privilege was doing for him when soon it would all come to nothing.

When we are sad, when we are unhappy, when we suffer - why is it that we suffer? I asked this question of some youngsters recently who have been locked up for some criminal or unreasonable behaviour. “Why do you suffer?” I asked these girls. And they quickly responded that not to have what they wanted, not to be where they wanted to be, all of that caused them to suffer. In other words, they could see that craving brought suffering.

When you have lost someone who is close to you, when someone you love dies, then naturally you grieve. But why do you grieve? Let’s be honest. Isn’t it because you would like to have that person back? You want to be able to put the clock back. Isn’t that because of desire and attachment? There’s nothing uncompassionate about stating that. It’s true. But, of course, faced with someone who has recently been bereaved you will be caring and cautious how you put that to them, you listen and only when you feel you can you speak about craving and attachment.

That the people who put this book together, a book that purports to be a book of Buddhist reflections, don’t appear to understand the very basic message of the Buddha leads me on to a growing concern that some of us feel for the future of Buddhism. When these remarkable teachings of the Buddha are no longer appreciated but diluted and changed, it means that slowly the Buddha-Dhamma is slipping away from us.

The truth is often unpalatable. This practice can be difficult and there will be times when you want to give up. It can be a bitter medicine, but it is a sound medicine and it works. Although you may sometimes want to have things easier, those of you who are used to this practice will know that the truth has to be faced.

One who did that and who with great courage took the news that he had only a very short time left was Andrew. For years, he used to come here, sit, then afterwards get up and go, sometimes favouring me with a curt nod as he left but hardly ever speaking. In June last year I needed someone to drive me and Andrew, who by then was unable to work, said he thought he might be able to help with some short runs. In a few weeks, he was taking me everywhere. Dudley, his dog, would come along and while I was in some prison or other they would be off exploring and when I came out there they’d be, sitting in the car, both of them, one behind the other, looking out for me. But then in July cancer was found and after a relatively short but very painful illness, he was gone. I shall never forget him, nothing was too much trouble and the miles we shared were such fun. To Andrew, my gratitude and hopes for better things through the rise and fall of whatever is to be until with the stilling of all conditioned things will come true peace.

Although I obviously haven’t read all the hundreds of books on Buddhism that are around my advice is to be cautious and careful of books about Buddhism and prefer instead to read so far as is possible what the Buddha himself had to say. I truly regret that anything at all to do with the Buddha and his teachings should ever be bought and sold and available only to those with the money but accepting that for the most part that’s the way it is here in the West let me recommend that if you must spend your money on a Buddhist book, spend it on one of the excellent translations that Bhikkhu Bodhi has produced and which are published by Wisdom Publications and see for yourself what the Buddha taught.

I’m just back from the Prison Reform Trust’s annual lecture where we heard the Home Secretary set out his stall on how he plans to reduce re-offending and improve our prison system. Not bad, some worthy and encouraging ideas but as someone said to me the other day, never mind what they say, watch what they do.

THIS NEWSLETTER IS FROM VEN. AJAHN KHEMADHAMMO OBE (CHAO KHUN BHAVANAVITAY) OF THE FOREST HERMITAGE & ANGULIMALA, THE BUDDHIST PRISON CHAPLAINCY ORGANISATION

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