



News and Musings

September - October 2549 / 2006

The Forest Hermitage

If you've never lived here, just visited occasionally, you probably think that nothing out of the ordinary happens along our lane but you'd be wrong. Some pretty amazing things can be seen out round Lower Fulbrook. For instance, if you'd been driving this way late one night around the middle of October, in the fading moonlight you might have spotted a big dog followed by a Buddhist monk, hopping! Well, what could I do? It wasn't very dignified but then neither was measuring my length in a wet field, face down in the mud with my foot in a badger hole, and I had to get back somehow. I'd been out with Ben, my big Hungarian Vizsla, on one of our midnight rambles that we enjoy so much, when it's quiet with no one about but the animals, and over on a high bank overlooking the river that we call Badger Bank, I took a tumble and badly sprained my ankle. It took ages to get back and I hopped the last bit along the lane. It's already been over two weeks and it looks like it might be a few more before I get up to Badger Bank again. At first, after it happened I was pushed around the monastery in a wheelbarrow, then for a Warwick University Buddhist Society meeting I graduated to a wheelchair and then it was a Zimmer frame! And now I'm managing with a stick but I can't go far and so all my prison visits are suspended for the time being. I'm sorry about this but hopefully normal service will be resumed as soon as possible.

Speaking of Warwick University Buddhist Society, I'm pleased to say that this year we are meeting in a specially allocated room instead of a classroom that has to be cleared first and then after we've finished put back ready for lectures the next day. I see this as the first step on our way to establishing a Buddhist temple on campus. At the moment we're sharing this room with the Jains and the Hindus and perhaps others. I hope not too many others because it's pretty small but it's a beginning and let's hope it will herald grander and greater things to come.

Something else that I hope will prove to have been a good beginning and will help protect the development of the Buddha Sasana in this country was an afternoon Sangha Conference that we organised at Amaravati in September. Ever since the time of the Buddha, as well as giving men and women the opportunity to go forth and deepen and develop their practice full time, the Sangha has been responsible for protecting and maintaining the Buddha's teachings and for providing the Buddhist laity with moral and spiritual guidance. To this day in traditional Buddhist countries and communities, it is to the Sangha that people still look for leadership. By the Sangha of course I mean the Orders of monks and nuns established by the Buddha. I am well aware that in the sense of community, the term sangha is often now applied to all who consider themselves Buddhist but this is a recent development here in the West and is often muddled with the Buddha's reference to the Fourfold Parisa or Assembly meaning the assemblies of monks, nuns, male and female lay devotees. The Sangha has been established in this country for many years but with its growth and spread and with no central authority or point of contact it's been understandably difficult for such as the Government and others to consult with us. We presume that that's why in its recent round of consultations with the so called 'Faith Communities' instead of coming to the clergy as would be usual when contacting most religions, the Government has in its consultations with Buddhism gone instead to lay societies and organisations.

I did consider convening representatives of the Sangha from the Mahayana and Vajrayana as well as the Theravada as has been done in the US and on the other side of the world with the Australian Sangha Association. But in the end it seemed to me best to begin with those closest and proceed slowly, step by step. So, on Wednesday, September 13th we managed to bring together bhikkhus from more than twenty temples, with eight nationalities represented, for a short afternoon conference at Amaravati. It's almost twenty years since we last had a gathering like this and of course in the interval the number of monks and of temples has increased making it more necessary than ever before that we facilitate a means of networking and keeping in touch. To do this and to respond to the increasing pressures of interest and consultation from such as the media and the Government we decided to form a group to be known as the Theravada Buddhist Sangha in the UK (TBSUK). For the time being I have the honour of coordinating its development. We aim to meet

twice a year and the next meeting will be towards the end of April next year. With the establishment of the TBSUK there is now a point of contact for the Theravada Sangha and we believe that with its long history and traditions, its close ties with the ethnic Buddhist communities and a membership that includes monks of learning and experience, it is well placed to offer informed and authoritative opinion on Buddhist matters in this country.



On the following Saturday, at the Forest Hermitage we held one of the quarterly workshops for Buddhist Prison Chaplains organised by Angulimala, the Buddhist Prison Chaplaincy, and we were



privileged to have Anne Owers CBE, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Prisons, to speak to us. I was up and about early of course, and had walked Ben and had my meal of the day well before anyone arrived. By 10 a.m. most people were here and we went to the Shrine Room to pay our respects to the Triple Gem and sit in meditation until shortly before 11:00. Then the committee met for a few minutes before we all gathered in the small Shrine Room for Angulimala's AGM. By the time the three cooks from Warwick Uni

were ready to serve lunch, Luke had been to the station and met Anne Owers off her train from London. I must say I was relieved that she hadn't been delayed by leaves or work on the line. At a quarter to two we gathered again and Anne began with an overview of the Inspectorate, what they do and how they go about an Inspection, before opening things up to a fairly wide ranging discussion with the 26 Buddhist chaplains present. It was a terrific afternoon and I am so grateful to Anne for taking the trouble to spend time with us. When she had left and after tea we continued with the report-in session, which went on till about 6 o'clock. Then we had to have a committee meeting and finally everything wound to a close at about half-past seven. It was fantastic day and to all those who came and those who worked so hard to make it a success, thank you all very much.

The day after, Sunday the 17th, a group of Thais, including restaurateurs and students, took over the kitchen at Springhill Prison to produce a sensational Thai buffet for all the inmates in the gaol and all the guests at that evening's Springhill Buddha Grove Celebration. As every year, we were honoured with the presence of Lord Avebury, as well as Tim Newell, the former Governor, now retired, who allowed the Buddha Grove to be built. He asked *me* if he could take photos! Peter Bennett, the present Governor, began by welcoming everybody and monks from five temples chanted the Parittas. After the speeches the Thai feast was served in the canteen and the evening was rounded off with a spectacular candlelit circumambulation of the Buddha Grove. Naturally, my gratitude goes to everyone who contributed to make such a success of this very special occasion, especially Khun Yod, Khun Monchai, Khun Ting, Khun Mali, all the cooks, staff and inmates and anyone and everyone who did anything at all to help - Anumodana!

I announced that evening the launch of a way that I hope we can help advise and support Buddhist ex-prisoners in maintaining their practice of Buddhism after release, a sort of Buddhist version of Unlock. Unlock is an organisation for ex-offenders, run by ex-offenders, that supports



ex-offenders in rebuilding their lives. The man now in charge of it, Bobby Cummines, I used to visit in some pretty cheerless places twenty years ago. We hadn't seen each other since then until this year's Prison Service Chaplaincy Conference and I was delighted when he accepted my invitation to Springhill to help me launch Let Go. Let Go is what I am calling our Buddhist version of Unlock and my vision is that eventually, like Unlock, Buddhist ex-prisoners will run it. Let Go, the title, plays on being let go from

custody with a reminder to let go of attachment, including attachment to the past and attachment to views and opinions. Truly we should all learn from past mistakes, but then we must move on. Thinking particularly of those leaving prison who have embraced Buddhism, I hope that Buddhist practice will have made a difference, that they will be able to let go and leave behind them past attitudes, habits and actions that made them prisoners and move on to better things; and I hope too that everyone else will let go of their view of them as what they were. There is the prison of locks and bars and there is the prison of views and opinions, and of the two it is the second that can be the harshest, the longest lasting and most difficult to escape. No one is just a prisoner, or a murderer, or a bank robber, or anything else for that matter and I believe we have a duty to give everyone the chance to better themselves, to be free and to be happy.

Back at the Forest Hermitage, we've had two gatherings here to celebrate the end of this year's Vassa. The first was the day after when a really nice crowd turned up without anything being organised and the second was a fortnight later when a coachload of students from Warwick and a few of our other supporters combined to make merit with a very generous almsgiving that made another welcome dent in the Wood Cottage debt. Anumodana!

We have no more special occasions this year but the weekend retreats at Wood Cottage continue and over the New Year period a five day retreat is offered. Details are below in the Diary. These are great opportunities to take your practice a little further and I recommend them to you.

THE DIARY

WOOD COTTAGE RETREATS

Ven. Manapo will lead a weekend retreat at Wood Cottage from 1st – 3rd December, and then to see out the old and bring in the new there will be a special 5 Day, New Year Retreat from December 29th to January 2nd. Next year he 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

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

The next will be the Forest Hermitage at 10 a.m. on Saturday, December 9th.

The one following will be on Saturday, March 3rd, 2007.

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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