

News and Musings

December 2011

The Forest Hermitage

Here we are again at the end of another year and so what follows, since I haven't written one of these newsletters for ages, is a quick summary of some of the things that have occupied me and The Forest Hermitage over the last four or five months and a suggested resolution for the New Year ahead. I'd better say before I go any further that a number of things and events, like our Monday, Wednesday and Friday public evenings, like my visits to Khun Peter's Thai restaurant near Baker Street where I give a talk on the first Sunday of the month, and like the quarterly workshops that we organise for Buddhist Prison Chaplains, all carry on pretty much regardless and so may not get a special mention.

On July 17th we celebrated Asalha Puja and the Entry to the Vassa. It also happened to be my birthday. We had an absolutely marvellous day and a very nice turnout to celebrate the Buddha's first sermon on the first Asalha Puja and to launch us into another Vassa, the twenty-sixth Vassa of The Forest Hermitage, my fortieth as a bhikkhu and Ajahn Manapo's eleventh. We did all the usual things: first thing after they arrived most people took or reaffirmed the Refuges and Precepts, then there was an abundance of wonderful food and the rain stopped conveniently while we did the pindabaht. Then after everyone had eaten I gave what I hope was an encouraging talk that focused on the message of the Buddha's First Sermon and as the rain conveniently stopped once again we managed to process three times around the Buddha Image in the garden. Later in the afternoon the Thai Ambassador who was on his way with friends to visit Stratford-upon-Avon called in to pay his respects and wish me a Happy Birthday, which was very kind of him. Then as he was leaving and I was walking him to the door, who should make his entrance but my dear friend from days long past and veteran of all the Beatles films, the one and only Victor Spinetti. We worked together many years ago and



have been friends ever since. Inevitably when we meet we can't help gossiping about old times but we also talk of the importance of living in the present and loving and caring for what's happening now: always, now! That's why we've remained friends for so long. It was a great day and one of the best birthdays I've ever had.

A couple of weeks later I had another visitor from the past. Raundej Simuni was once a Thai monk living and studying in England and in 1971 when I arrived in Thailand he'd just come back to do a study of a Thai village and so after he helped me with my ordination as a samanera in Bangkok I went with him to Ubon to help him with his work. For me the ensuing glimpse of traditional life in a remote little village called Ban Pai Yai was an invaluable experience. He also took me to a couple of Wat Pah Pong's branch monasteries and eventually to Wat Pah Pong itself, where he introduced me to



Luang Por Chah. Three or four years later he disrobed. He was a very nice man and I've always been grateful to him for his kindness but I've heard little of him since until the second week in August when he showed up here with his wife and niece and her husband.

In August our organisation that represents Theravada monks and nuns in the UK (TBSUK), met under my chairmanship at the London Buddhist Vihara. As usual, the meeting was dominated by concerns about the Points Based System recently adopted by Immigration. It's making it virtually impossible for monks from South-east Asia to stay for any length of time, particularly to replace those already here who want to go back. The main stumbling block is the high level of English competence required. If something isn't done it's only a matter of time before some temples have no monks.

It's a tradition, usually at the beginning or near the beginning of the Vassa to go and pay respects to any elder monks who might live nearby. This year, Ajahn Amaro, the new Abbot of Amaravati, came with a group of monks from Amaravati to see me, to pay their respects and to ask forgiveness. This is a lovely ceremony and I deeply appreciated their going to the trouble to come all the way here for it.

I'm really sorry it's taken me so long this year to write up anything about the Springhill Buddha Grove celebration on September 18th. It's been very remiss of me, especially in view of the time and trouble so many good people went to to make it happen. Once again, as has happened year in year out with only one break since 1993, Thai people gathered at Springhill Prison to cook a marvellous Thai meal for all the inmates there and the Buddhist inmates in nearby Grendon Prison. The Buddha Grove was actually built and opened in 1992 but that first year there was only soup made by the inmates, it wasn't until the next year that the Thais started to do the cooking. Every year's the same, first a ceremony with chanting and speeches at the Buddha Grove, then the food for everyone and after the food we process with candles, flowers and incense three times around the Buddha Grove. The whole occasion is a marvellous act of generosity and faith in the decency and goodness that all human beings are capable of and I am so proud and grateful to everyone who takes part and who makes this extraordinary occasion possible. Anumodana! Note that next year will be the Springhill Buddha Grove's twentieth anniversary.

I was delighted one Friday afternoon in early October to welcome to the Forest Hermitage Dr Desmond Biddulph, Chairman of the Buddhist Society and Editor of the Middle Way. He was very charming and we had a pleasant and frank discussion. Now I have an invitation to give a public talk next year at the Buddhist Society about Angulimala.

The Vassa this year ended on Wednesday, October 12th and the following Saturday we had our celebration. Once again we had a good crowd with a couple of coaches coming from Khun Peter's in London and another with students from Warwick University. Our Shrine Room was packed. And we were honoured by the presence of the Minister from the Royal Thai Embassy, M.R. Adisorndej Sukhasvasti, and his wife. It was a very happy day and people were so generous.

It seems that I have a bit of a reputation for not going to events at other monasteries. True, I suppose, but if there's a reason and something to do, well, that's different. At a Thai monastery if there's a Royal Kathina, that is where the Kathina Robe is offered by the King of Thailand or a representative on his behalf, there's supposed to be a monk with the rank and title of Chao Khun present to recite the blessing for His Majesty. It was for that reason that I was invited and went to the Kathina at Wat Buddhavihara at King's Bromley. I was delighted to be there, honoured to officiate and pleased to be of use.



At the end of October, I and the Forest Hermitage had to cope with a fairly radical tectonic realignment following Ajahn Manapo's departure for Thailand. He's been here with me for eleven years and my right hand for about nine of those years. Of course, not being entirely unaware of the way things are and how people grow and change I've lived for some time with the thought that sooner or later he would probably want to spread his wings and go off in search of more experience. And now it's come. Well he's been marvellous to me and I'm ever so grateful to him and for the time he's been with me. I'm confident he goes with a good foundation and will be a credit to the Forest Hermitage and I hope that wherever he is he'll keep learning and growing and be amongst the best of monks.

The other day I had an invitation to attend a lecture by Crispin Blunt, the Prisons Minister, on Restorative Justice. It was hosted by the Archbishop of Canterbury at Lambeth Palace before an odd mix of the great and the good who had something to do with either prisons or religion and sometimes both. The former Bishop to the Prisons replied and then it was briefly opened to the floor.

It was a very interesting and enjoyable evening and courageous I thought of such prominent public figures to stick their necks above the parapet and argue in favour of a better way of tackling the damage that crime does. We haven't quite still got rotting hulks moored in the Thames estuary crammed with prisoners waiting to be shipped to the other side of the world but the attitudes and policies haven't changed much since we did. The fuss is still about exacting revenge on the perpetrators with the main idea to deport or exile them to where they can't do any more damage and then forget about them. It's really about time our society grew up and started understanding something about what people do and what makes them do it. Then recognising the mess that even one simple unskilful action can make for so many let's try to clear it up. Understanding, it's all about understanding! You can read the transcripts here: <http://bit.ly/vIG8oA>.

Afterwards I had a quick chat with Archbishop Rowan and rather off topic I mentioned our concerns about the Points Based Immigration rules. 'Tell me about it!' was his reply and he went on to say that Christians, especially the smaller foreign churches are having the same difficulties. He said that perhaps it was time for him to speak up about it again.

At a recent Angulimala Workshop, Katherine Lam, who is an economist working in the Treasury, asked me if I would teach a lunchtime meditation group there. What could I say? So one Wednesday morning it was an early meal for me and then down I went to London in time to meet Katherine at 11:20. Christmas lunches had rather taken over the Treasury by then so it wasn't a very large

group but good nevertheless. At the end when I was asked for tips on how to deal with the stress and pressure they're under I just told them it's all rubbish really and not to take it too seriously. After all as the Economy is so firmly rooted in greed, hatred and delusion there's no hope of it ever coming right anyway.

In the evening of Thursday, December 22nd, we finally got around to holding the AGM of the Buddha-Dhamma Fellowship, the body that supports and administers the affairs of the Forest Hermitage. One reason for the delay had been my decision to recommend that the Constitution be amended to simplify the membership by abandoning the two tiers of Full and Associate membership, so making all members eligible to serve on the Committee as Trustees. That was done at an Extraordinary General Meeting on December 11th along with other amendments that have updated the Constitution to allow for on-line banking, meetings by video-conferencing and communication of meeting notices by email. We've also added a clause that requires that in the event of needing to appoint a successor to me the Sangha at Wat Nong Pah Pong should be consulted. Our AGM successfully accepted the properly and independently examined accounts and as a result of the committee elections we have a revitalised committee of nine. David King is now the Chairman, Aung Soe is the new Treasurer and Anne Hurst is the Secretary. Membership of the BDF is open to anyone who would like to support the Forest Hermitage.

A few months ago, I happened to complain that I have been here so many years and still so few keep the Precepts. Then I was reminded that many years ago at Wat Pah Pong Ajahn Chah had said much the same, so at least I was in good company. But why is it that so many who purport to be Buddhists and who love Buddhist teachings and who are respectful of all things Buddhist find it so hard to live by those simple standards of morality? In many places in the Suttas you will read of someone who having listened to the Buddha then declares that they will go for refuge to the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha for as long as life lasts. That, followed by a determination to live and train within the Five Precepts is repeated daily as a private, personal commitment in Buddhist homes all over the world and in public on practically every conceivable Buddhist occasion. The simple ceremony of asking for and receiving the Refuges and Precepts is in effect a gateway to Buddhist training. But why is it that even though they hear and repeat the precepts so often, so many don't take them seriously enough to practise them? It's a shame, especially when you consider their impact, not just on individuals but on society as a whole. Just imagine how it would be if everyone kept the Five Precepts. There'd be no police needed, no army, no prisons and everyone would be so at ease and contented!

Now I know it's unlikely to happen but it never hurts to hold up a picture of what could be to inspire and encourage. Without a doubt, if every lay follower reading this would make a New Year resolution to live by the Five Precepts the effect on society would be staggering. If you've been shocked and dismayed by the riots this last year or the greedy bankers or the dishonest MPs, stop being angry and upset with those people and start thinking about what you can do to put things right and if you're not doing it already, the first thing you can do is determine to keep those precepts properly.

Peace, good will, and a Happy New Year!

Coming Soon:

MAGHA PUJA

We will celebrate on Sunday, March 11th.

ANGULIMALA WORKSHOPS

At the Forest Hermitage at 10 a.m.
On Feb 25th, May 26th, Sept 1st, & Dec 1st.
(For Buddhist Prison Chaplains only)

MEDITATION & A DHAMMA TALK

at The FOREST HERMITAGE at 8pm on
Monday, Wednesday & Friday evenings.

**This Newsletter is from Ven. Chao Khun Bhavanaviteh (Luangpor Khemadhammo) OBE of
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