



FOREST SANGHA

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Sense Contact - The Fount of Wisdom

The following piece is an extract from a talk given to monks and novices at Wat Ba Pong in North-east Thailand. The entire talk will eventually be published as part of a collection of Ajahn Chah's talks, entitled Seeds of Understanding.

We look for peace in peaceful places, where there won't be sights, or sounds, or odours, or flavours . . . thinking that living quietly like this is the way to find contentment, that herein lies peace.

But actually, if we live very quietly in places where nothing arises, can wisdom arise? Would we be aware of anything? Think about it. If our eye didn't see sights, what would that be like? If the nose didn't experience smells, what would that be like? If the tongue didn't experience flavours, what would that be like? If the body didn't experience feelings at all, what would that be like? To be like that would be like being a blind and deaf man, one whose nose and tongue had fallen off and who was completely numb with paralysis. Would there be anything there? And yet people tend to think that if they went somewhere where nothing happened they would find peace. Well, I've thought like that myself, I once thought like that.

When I was a young monk just starting to practise I'd sit in meditation and the sounds would disturb me. I couldn't get peaceful. I'd think to myself, 'What can I do to make my mind peaceful?' So I took some beeswax and stuffed my ears with it so that I couldn't hear anything. All that remained was a humming sound. I thought that would be peaceful, but no, all that thinking and confusion didn't arise at the ears after all. It arose at the mind - so right there is the place to search for peace.

To put it another way: no matter where you go to stay, maybe you don't want to do anything because it might interfere with your practice. You don't want to sweep the grounds, don't want to do any work - you just want to be still and find peace like that. The teacher asks you to help out with the chores or the daily duties but you don't put your heart into it because you feel it is only an external concern.

If we think that peace lies where there are no sensations, would wisdom arise?

I've often brought up the example of one of my disciples who was really eager to 'let go' and find peace. I taught about 'letting go' and he accordingly understood that to let go of everything would indeed be peaceful. Actually right from the day he had come to stay here he didn't want to do anything. Even when the wind blew half the roof off his kuti [hut] he wasn't bothered. He said that that was just an external thing. So he didn't bother fixing it up. When the sunlight and rain streamed in from one side he'd move over to the other side. That wasn't any business of his. His business was to make his mind peaceful. That other stuff was an interference, he wouldn't get involved. That was how he saw it.

One day I was walking past and saw the collapsed roof. 'Eh!?' Whose kuti is this?'

Someone told me whose it was and I thought, 'Hmm. Strange. . . .' So I had a talk with him, explaining many things, such as the duties in regard to our dwellings. We must have a dwelling place, and we must also look after it. 'Letting go' isn't like this, it doesn't mean shirking our responsibilities. That's the action of a fool.

If we think that peace lies where there are no sensations, would wisdom arise? Would there be causal and resultant conditions? Would we have anything to practise with? If we blame the sounds, then if we sit where there are sounds we can't be peaceful. We think that place is no good. Wherever there are sights we say that's not peaceful. If that's the case, then to find peace we'd have to be one whose senses have all died, blind and deaf. I thought about this...

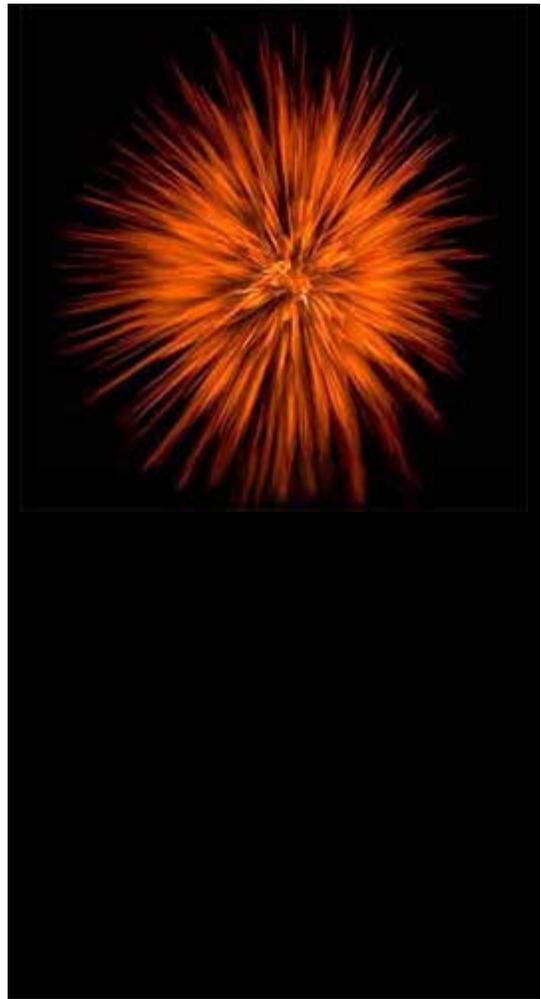
'Hmm. This is strange. Suffering arises because of eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body and mind. So should we be blind? If we didn't see anything at all maybe that would be better. One would have no defilements arising if one were blind, or deaf. Is this true?'

But, thinking about it, it was all wrong. If that was the case, then blind and deaf people would be enlightened. They would all be accomplished if defilements arose at the eyes and ears.

Actually, the sense bases of eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind are all things which can facilitate the arising of wisdom, if we know them as they are. If we don't really know them we must deny them, saying we don't want to see sights, hear sounds, and so on, because they disturb us. If we cut off the causal conditions, what are we going to contemplate? Think about it. Where would there be any cause and effect? This is wrong thinking on our part.

But most of us are afraid of contact. Either that, or we like to have contact but we develop no wisdom from it: instead we repeatedly indulge through eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body and mind, delighting and getting lost in these sense objects. This is how it is. These sense bases can entice one to delight and indulgence or they can lead to knowledge and





wisdom. They have both harm and benefit, depending upon the person's wisdom.

So now let us understand that, having been ordained and come to practise, we should take everything as practice Even the bad things. We should know them all. Why? So that we may know the truth. When we talk of practice we don't simply mean those things that are good and pleasing to us. That's not how it is. In this world some things are to our liking, some things aren't. These things all occur in this world, nowhere else. Usually whatever we like we want even with fellow monks and novices. Whichever monk or novice we don't like, we don't want to associate with - we only want to be with those we like. You see? This is taking only what one likes. Whatever one doesn't like, one doesn't want to see or know about.

Actually the Buddha wanted us to experience these things. Lokavidu* - look at this world and know it clearly. If we don't know the truth of the world clearly, then we can't go anywhere. Living in the world one must understand the world. The Noble Ones of the past, including the Buddha, all lived with these things, they lived in this world, among deluded people. They attained the truth right in this very world, nowhere else. They didn't run off to some other world to find the truth. But they had wisdom. They restrained their senses, but the practice is to look into all these things and know them as they are.

**Lokavidu: One of the nine epithets of the Buddha that are chanted as part of the regular service in Theravadin monasteries. It means 'the Knower Of the World'.*

Therefore the Buddha taught us to know the sense bases, our points of contact. Where awareness arises is where we should look and see things as they are. If we don't know these things as they really are, we will either fall in love with them or hate them. Where these sensations arise is where we can become enlightened, where wisdom can arise.

But sometimes we don't want it to be like that. The Buddha taught restraint, but restraint doesn't mean we don't see anything, hear anything, smell, taste, feel or think anything. That's not what it means. If those who practise don't understand this, then as soon as they see or hear anything they squirm and run away. They don't deal with those things. They run away, thinking that by doing so those things will eventually lose their power over them, that they will eventually transcend those things - but they won't. They won't transcend anything like that. If they run away not knowing the truth, later on the same stuff will pop up to be dealt with again.

So we understand with wisdom right here and now; we don't run away anywhere. We must

work, must associate with things. For instance, living in a big monastery like this we must all help out to look after the place. Looking at it in one way, one could say that this brings about worldly defilements. Living with lots of monks and novices, with many lay people coming and going, many defilements arise. Yes, I admit it . . . but we must live like this for the development of wisdom and the abandonment of foolishness. Which way are we to go? Are we going to live in order to get rid of foolishness or to increase our foolishness?

Really contemplate. Whenever eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body or mind make contact, be collected and circumspect. Then investigate when suffering arises: who is suffering? Why did this suffering arise? One must know suffering when it arises. If we are afraid of suffering and don't want to face it, where are we going to do battle with it? If suffering arises and we don't know it, how are we going to deal with it? This is of utmost importance - we must know suffering.

Escaping from suffering means knowing the way out of suffering. It doesn't mean running away from wherever suffering arises. Doing that you just carry your suffering with you. When suffering arises again somewhere else you'll have to run away again. This is not one who transcends suffering, it's one who doesn't know suffering.

So the practice must be unwavering and persistent. They call it *viriyambha* - putting forth effort constantly: when suffering arises in our hearts we must have the unwavering resolve to try to uproot the defilements, to give them up. This resolve is constantly there, unremitting. Eventually the defilements will fall into our hands where we can finish them off.

Before I started to practise, I thought to myself, 'The Buddhist religion is here, available for all, and yet why do only some people practise while others don't? Or if they do practise, they do so only for a short while, then give it up. Or again, those who don't give it up still don't knuckle down and do the practice? Why is this? I don't really know.' But I resolved to myself: 'Okay, this life of mine . . . I'll give up this body and mind for this lifetime, and try to follow the teaching of the Buddha down to the last detail. I'll reach understanding in this very lifetime, because if I don't reach understanding I'll still be sunk in suffering. I'll let go of everything else and make a determined effort. No matter how much difficulty or suffering I have to endure, I'll persevere. If I don't do this then I'll just keep on doubting.'

Thinking like this, I then got down to the practice. No matter how much happiness, suffering or difficulty I had to endure I would do it. I looked on my whole life as if it was only one day and a night. I gave it up. 'I'll follow the teaching of the Buddha, I'll follow the Dhamma to understanding - Why is this world of delusion so wretched?' I wanted to know, I wanted to be adept, so I turned to the practice of Dhamma.

The Dhamma is *paccattam*, meaning 'one must know for oneself'. If you want to know for yourself that means that you must also practise in yourself. You can depend on a teacher only fifty percent of the way. Even the teaching I have given you today is completely useless of itself, even if it is worth hearing, if you were to believe it all just because I said so, you wouldn't be utilising it properly. If you believed me completely then you'd be foolish. To hear the teaching, see its benefit, put it into practice for yourself, see it within yourself, do it yourself and cultivate relinquishment yourself . . . this is much more useful. You will then know the taste of Dhamma for yourself.

Our sense organs must be constantly working. Know content and discontent, be aware of like and dislike. Know appearance and know transcendence. The Apparent and the Transcendent must be realised simultaneously. Good and evil must be seen as co-existent, arising together. This is the fruit of Dhamma practice.

Letter to the Editor

Dear Editor,

I thought it might be worth drawing your attention to a leader by Professor Marks in the British Medical Journal for 4th May 1991. It describes a form of treatment of phobias and anxiety by what is termed 'behavioural exposure'. In this, 'the patient is persuaded to confront the hitherto avoided situations that bring on his or her typical fear, panic. . . . Exposure may also have to be to avoided thoughts. . . .' Professor Marks says that this procedure allows 'irrational automatic thoughts' to decline spontaneously. About three-quarters of those who start a course of treatment complete it, which is much better than in many other methods, and most experience benefits.

It all sounds very familiar to any one who has attended meditation instruction or retreats at Amaravati! Could it be that modern psychiatry is beginning to rediscover something that has been known to Buddhists for the last 2500 years

Yours sincerely,

Anthony Campbell

Swiss Vihara's New Home

Extracted from the Dhammapala Newsletter:

On May 4th we celebrated our third anniversary in Switzerland, and this year there was much to celebrate! After nearly five months of negotiations, we have now purchased a new monastery - a 22-bedroom, 85-year-old former hotel, situated in the Alps, 65 km south of Bern.

The nearby village of Kandersteg is served by direct trains from Bern, Basel and Zurich, as well as from northern Germany and Italy. The monastery is only one kilometre from the train station in a very quiet corner of the valley.

Purchase of this property was made possible by several generous donations (from HRH the Princess Mother of Thailand and from two of our long-time supporters), as well as other donations from close friends. Nonetheless, the Dhammapala Association has undertaken a substantial bank loan to cover the remaining costs.

This is indeed a 'leap of faith' for us. Our intention is to convert seven of the bedrooms into a large meditation hall which, together with the already fully-equipped three kitchens and nine toilets, will provide facilities to serve the needs of greater numbers of people.

We now have the ideal external environment for a fully-fledged 'forest' - or 'mountain' - monastery; together we can continue to establish the right inner environment for the realisation of Dhamma.

We cordially invite all to join us in this new venture and welcome everyone to visit or stay awhile in this peaceful place.

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Another Going Forth

Ajahn Pabbakaro, formerly the abbot at Harnham Monastery, disrobed in March, a few months before he would have begun his twentieth Vassa as a bhikkhu. Disrobing, especially after such a long period of time, can be very traumatic for those staying as well as for those leaving. In the following interview, Joseph Kappel (as he now is) talks about his decision.

You've been a monk for nearly 20 years. What are the things that made you want to disrobe?

When I first came in contact with the teaching of the Buddha, it had a powerful effect on me, and I had a strong desire to pursue it in as whole and complete a way as possible. I was aware that one could become a monk and that was something that I was really inspired to do. Thinking back, that inspiration always carries you for a time and then there comes a time when that starts to fade and you're dealing with the problem of the struggle to live a life of restraint, restriction and a very high standard of discipline.

I think that's when you really begin to practise and are challenged with the discipline and I feel that if that isn't happening, certainly from my personal perspective, there would be room for concern. I see now that the discipline entails nothing less than complete and total surrender of your personal preferences, worldly pursuits, pleasures, everything. The beauty is, of course, that we have the space and time to go at our own pace, to see what level of commitment we feel and so a gradual deepening of the commitment can occur. I remember in Thailand people used to ask me about disrobing and would say, 'Do you want to disrobe?' and I would answer, 'I don't want to disrobe.' That didn't mean that I was committed for life. I never felt right in saying in that way; one, because I didn't really know and, two, because it just didn't feel like an honest thing to be saying.

So, as time goes on there is constantly this challenge. You have to see whether your level of commitment is deepening. It's easy once you've learnt the form and how to fit in; you can get along quite happily and kind of stagnate - especially this last year Ajahn Sumedho has been really clobbering people for settling in to this kind of stagnation.

As the years have gone by, staying as a monk has always been the right thing for me to be doing and the staying power and the strength has almost been a daily renewal - although it wasn't like I had to sit down every day or every morning and think, 'Can I make it through another day?'. It wasn't that kind of thing. It was more like 'This is the right thing for now' - and that in itself had a momentum of a daily renewal. Then, of course, I was challenged.

It was just too painful, so I had to put it all down and wait. And it was after that that the decision just appeared.

We're all challenged - having doubts and problems with certain aspects of the discipline and so on - and, of course, it's in coming through those periods of great struggle and difficulty that

one gains great strength and staying power. So this constant renewal and deepening of commitment is something which has really carried me through all 20 years. Things had never come to the point where I had to ask myself whether it was right to leave. I was never challenged or backed into a corner where I really had to make such a decision.

Things only came to a head during the last six months, when I was faced with having to make a decision. I feel strongly that every monk and nun is faced at some point with this decision in monastic life. I'm sure it applies to other lifestyles - commitment in marriage, occupation or whatever. You come to a point of 'This is it'. I think it is much more intense in monastic life, because it is such a complete commitment. Your focus is very clear. You know why you're living this life and that there's nothing else that really interests you. And that has such strength that doubts and longings are really peripheral, and not seriously pulling you in any direction.

During the very challenging period of this past winter retreat I was pushed into a corner, and I forced myself to stay in that corner until something gave. It was either I had to stay or I had to leave. There could no longer be a 'one foot in, one foot out' kind of situation. It hadn't always been that way, but it came to where I saw that I did have one foot in and one foot out, and I had to either get both in or both out . . . there could no longer be this vacillation. I was wobbling with indecision and looking back at all the time I had invested ... and then looking ahead, 'What will I do?' And at the end of the day, I could nor consciously make this decision. I couldn't do it.

But I had to struggle for a good month, and go through a stressful and really horrendous period of trying to decide - and it was the pain of that trying to make a decision that took me to a place of surrender. It was so painful, it was thrashing me so severely that I could no longer follow that doubt. It was just too painful, so I had to put it all down and wait. And it was after that that the decision just appeared. It kind of unfolded, as it were; I quit trying to rationalise and look at the benefits of staying - all the time I had invested and all the people I would be letting down. And in the end I realised that I had to take responsibility - and that I couldn't be staying because I wanted to keep people happy. I had to be staying because my heart was in it. And with that, everything took care of itself.

So, over a 24-hour period, the solution whether to stay or to leave just unfolded. I had a meditation and it just said, 'Yeah, it's right. I'll be all right.' I just needed to feel that I would be all right, because there was such a kind of . . . guess a fear, of stepping into the unknown. I'd be leaving something I feel very secure in and something I have given 20 years of my life to, this institution that I really love and respect - and a part of me didn't want to leave. But overall, the rightness in leaving overruled everything else, because this was the next phase of my life.

This is now. . . .

I have certain skills in life that I can now take and use in something else. Looking back to 20 years ago when I left America to go off to Thailand to become a monk: all I knew then was that it was the right thing to be doing and I really trusted that - even though I didn't have a clue what I was letting myself in for. And with this move there's that same kind of confidence and faith that this is what I should be doing but, then again, not knowing what I am letting

Life is truly a dream.
All of its trouble I alone create.
When I stop creating,
the troubles stop.
With a single mind,
with an unbounded heart,
we can wake up to the wonderful
existence
in true emptiness
that we are in the middle of right now.

When all in the world ceases to exist,
only the wonderful
remains.

Bhikshu Heng Ch'au
(City of 10,000 Buddhas)

myself in for.

So, how do you feel about the Sangha? Do you feel that you deserted them or that some kind of gulf has appeared between you and the monastic community?

Maybe I could answer that by relating an experience I had on the first morning after I disrobed. I was doing the breakfast dana in memory of my father's suicide, and I got into puja at 5 o'clock in the morning and I was at the back, for the first time. It was quiet, just a nice time of the day. Sitting there . . . the chanting started, and I was really feeling good, and as I started to chant, I just started to look at the Sangha and I wasn't seeing personalities . . . I was seeing human beings in robes. I was looking at the Sangha and the Buddha-rupa, and all of a sudden I just started to get incredibly emotional, and it was a combination of sadness and joy.

A very profound and deep sadness and joy welled up in me, and it was like I was seeing the Sangha for the first time. By the end of the Recollection of the Buddha [the first section of the chanting], I lost control, and I ended up on the floor weeping. The whole profundity of what this community means, with its lineage going back to the Buddha, the Enlightened One, just started to overwhelm me . . . and it was like - if this 20 years has been for this moment . . . if that's it, it was enough.

There was a second aspect that was a bit more mundane, but just as profound in its own way: I was crying, really weeping, and all of a sudden I was completely uninhibited, I wasn't self-conscious, it was not bothering me at all, and I thought, 'Until you can cry, you're not a man' - and it reverberated in me. There are these things that are a sign of manhood - you know, strength, with fortitude and aggression - but here was the softness, the more yin side of a male that softens men and makes them into sensitive human beings. So for me this weeping experience was one of the true signs of manhood.

So I had these two things just come up spontaneously in the first morning puja, and I think they sum up my feeling about the Sangha. Now it's like I've got this family, and it's like I have a 'lifetime membership'. You know, I've been a part of this community, and it's been such a part of me, that I feel I'm a member of it for life. There's no way that you can, after 20 years, say: 'So long, it was nice knowing you. See you around some time.' These are my brothers, my sisters, my friends for a lifetime. And that really sums up how I feel. It's still very early days, but having severed myself from the Bhikkhu Sangha, in some ways I have rejoined it in a way that gives me a perspective.

I can only feel a great sense of gratitude for having invested this time in my life to something of such nobility and profundity. One of the things Ajahn Sumedho put his finger on was when he said to me: 'Well, now you have a proper education to go into the world.' And that really rang true, because we go to university, or we do different apprenticeships, or get a trade, or whatever but what do we have in our culture that actually prepares us for life itself, and its knocks and its difficulties? So I have a great sense of gratitude. I guess it's early days, but I just feel this strength, in everything that I do. There's something in me that has grown, been cultivated, blossomed.

It's really lovely to know what these ordained people are about. If I'm anywhere and I see a bhikkhu or a nun its like you know that these people live in a way that they require help. So that immediately triggers the response to help them. And it's so lovely to know how to help these people. You know, I will probably be the best kind of supporting lay person because I will know all the subtleties of what monks and nuns need and like!



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Why I Became a Nun, Pt. II

This is the continuation of a talk (originally given at 'The Joys of Monastic Life' conference last year) that appeared in the lost issue. Unfortunately, this concluding section was not printed because of an editorial oversight. Here, Sister Sundara is reflecting on her experiences as a nun during the early days of her monastic life.

I have found a wonderful sense of gratitude has developed over the years that was not apparent at the beginning. At the beginning, whenever I would hear the word 'gratitude' I could say to myself that it was a wonderful thing to feel, but it never dawned on me that it was supposed to be a constant practice. It was not a practice of becoming somebody who is grateful but a matter of recognising when gratitude was present - and it was, most of the time. The thing that kept me going through the difficulties, the trials and errors, the desert plateaux and valleys of despair was this lovely sense of gratitude. We can't always acknowledge that gratitude because we believe so much in the stuff that is going on at the surface level; we forget that we have a heart right here that is peaceful, grateful and compassionate. We need to tune into it. Sometimes this is painful because we have to die to a lot of ideas; and dying is not the most easy thing to do.

Nature balances itself harmoniously and you begin to
know its flow. You don't mind going up and down
because you know that is how Nature works.

Sometimes I would be so resentful of people and of situations, even of my teacher and the reaching . . . I could be really horrible. At first I felt that I should not be a resentful person. It was a struggle because although I knew how to practise, my mind was so identified with the idea that I should not be a bad person who has nasty and awful thoughts about life that I automatically believed what I was thinking.

To recognise the feeling of gratitude and peace in the heart, I would question myself: 'What do you want to do, Sundara, carry on living resentfully - or die to yourself in a dignified and beautiful way?' It was for me a real existential question. Ajahn Sumedho named me Sundara ('the beauti- ful'). It is fortunate he gave me that name: I had such horrible mind states sometimes that I had to attune to my name and remember: 'Yes, I do want to live in a beautiful way and to die to myself gracefully.' This sense of gracefulness arose from devotion, from bowing, from gratitude and being thankful for what had been given. I knew that the only way to lead this life was not because 'I' decided it.

This 'me' that was always screaming away had some restful time too. Nature balances itself harmoniously and you begin to know its flow. You don't mind going up and down because you know that is how Nature works. It is important to recognise that the mind and body have a life of their own. To feel good or bad, to have what you like or dislike,

is nor a problem anymore. To be with the way things are is to be with the enlightened mind.

To come to that place of 'not knowing', I would ask myself: 'What am I going to do? I don't know what's going to happen to me.' People would ask me: 'What about the bhikkhuni order?' And I would say: 'I don't know.' I did not know; and that felt very peaceful. I did not come to the monastic order to become anything anyway, so it was not a problem. To be free is what is important. It is not important to become somebody, because becoming is suffering, and it is clearly stated in the teaching: becoming anything - becoming happy or unhappy, becoming a monk or a nun - is suffering.

So you bow, and feel a real sense of devotion towards a teaching that speaks directly to you and to the truth that you know from your own experience. You do not have to believe the Buddha or what he taught. He himself said: 'Inquire, find our for yourself.'

When you go beyond doubt, it's because you see the suffering of ignorance, and of holding onto ideas, views and opinions. Even when I could justify and feel right about what I thought - 'It should not be like this. It is not right' - I could surrender to that reality. I would be really frustrated because I knew that the teaching did not give me the space to be ignorant or stupid any more. I could hear these voices and feel really hot. . . . I had a real issue, a real problem that needed to be solved.

Yet I knew that I could bow to what I had heard and trust what would happen when it had ceased. Trusting the heart, the silent mind that does not know, brings us to the point where things are transformed and renewed. Then we are freed from the idea that we are endlessly bound by our fears, desires and insecurities.

Realisation

You've got to be stabbed to the heart
by babies hands.
Stopped in your tracks by the brooms
flame glow.
And deafened by the green shouts of
praise
At the tips of the pine boughs.
There is as much symmetry
In the thousand mares tail fronds
As in a tiger.
And quite as fearful.

Sue Yardley



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Harnham Monastery Anniversary

Ten Years on the Hill: An Anniversary for Harnham Buddhist Monastery 'Ratanagiri', the monastery at Harnham in Northumberland, was established in June 1981. Here are a few impressions of that first decade.

go
to

- Richard Hopkins
- Nyanaviro Bhikkhu
- Ajahn Sucitto
- Ajahn Munindo
- Ajahn Tiradhammo

Richard Hopkins lives in Newcastle, and was one of the original supporters of the monastery. He is the chairman of Magga Bhavaka, the charitable trust which looks after Ratanagiri.

Ten years ago the first bhikkhu came to live at Harnham, and brought the teachings of the Buddha to Northumberland. It all started with a small group of about five people who used to meet weekly for yoga and meditation. Two of the group went to a retreat being held by Ajahn Sumedho at Oakenholt near Oxford in the spring of '78 and decided to invite him to lead a retreat in the North. From this contact with the Sangha, the group gained a unity of direction, and an appreciation of a lifestyle based on Dhamma practice. But most of all it gained an appreciation of the need for a teacher.

They talked with Ajahn Sumedho, and made a formal request to be allowed to support a small branch monastery in the North-East. He gave his consent in principle, saying that the type and condition of the building was unimportant, the only essentials being adequate shelter, a water supply, and sufficient lay support to provide the other requisites of the simple monastic life.

After six weeks of fruitless searching for the 'perfect place', an advert was placed in the local paper: 'Retreat house wanted, will accept repair lease.' There was only one positive reply, from John Wake of Harnham, with the offer of a semi-derelict cottage. When it was viewed on a wet May Saturday, the prospect of the cottage seemed dismal and disheartening

But the unique character of the hill was impressive. As a fortified hill farm, people have lived at Harnham since the twelfth century or earlier. In its atmosphere, time seemed to stand still, bringing both an awareness of the present moment and a strong feeling of the history of the hill. There was even a tomb inscribed with a particularly Buddhist message:

My time has passed as now you see
 I viewed the dead as you do me
 'Or long you'll lie as low as I
 And some will look on thee.

Two weeks later, Venerable Sucitto was passing through Newcastle, and was invited to give his opinion on the prospective site. He pointed out the obvious; 'It's perfect; I don't know what

you're waiting for!'

Ratanagiri ... has developed from a simple vihara into a monastery, becoming the centre of a strong spiritual force in the Worth.

For most of the following year, the little group met at Harnham on weekends to try to bring the cottage up to the required minimum living standard: laying a proper floor in the kitchen over the previous dirt floor, installing a toilet and sink with drains, repointing the stone walls and carrying out basic repairs to the roof. The most difficult thing was the uncertainty - not knowing whether a bhikkhu would indeed come, whether the group would get enough support, or even if they would be able to negotiate terms of rent and be able to stay on the hill at all! Slowly they gave up worrying about it and decided that it didn't matter. It was a lovely place to meet each weekend and they could use it for retreats for themselves.

Of course, just as the sense of acceptance came, there was a phone call from Chithurst to say that a bhikkhu and an anagarika were on their way. As fate would have it, it was Venerable Sucitto, to be the first to test his own judgement. It was far from perfect! But his stoical patience and great sense of humour helped him to endure the austere conditions. Through the Sangha working with the supporters and providing guidance, they gradually learned how to work and live peacefully with insecurity. Harnham Vihara was formally opened by Ajahn Sumedho on 23rd June 1981, although two important secular formalities were still to be completed. Firstly there was the need to obtain a proper lease on the property. This finally happened in May 1982 with signing of a fifty-year lease. Secondly there was the need to form a charitable trust as a framework for the administration of the Vihara. The trust deed, appointing eight lay trustees with Ajahn Sumedho as spiritual director, was signed in August 1984.

Since then there have been many changes. Most important has been the change from being a vihara towards becoming a proper monastery. As a vihara, Harnham provided a place for one or two bhikkhus to live and serve the increasing interest in the teachings of Theravada Buddhism in the North of Britain. Bhikkhus from Harnham have been invited to teach at many meditation retreats in Yorkshire, Cumbria, Northumberland, Scotland and Northern Ireland, and there are now many well-established lay groups in these areas which are associated with Harnham. An important development at Harnham for these distant groups was the renting of the cottage next door to the vihara itself, to provide accommodation for lay visitors, and also to allow lay retreats to be held at the vihara.

Over recent years, Ajahn Sumedho has emphasised Harnham's suitability as a location for a 'monastery', that is, a place for the training of monks. Taking on that role, whilst continuing to provide a source of teaching for lay groups and a place where lay people could stay, would be dependent upon substantial physical expansion. It would be necessary for Harnham to house a larger monastic community, of both junior bhikkhus in training and more senior bhikkhus, to undertake the teaching commitments. It would also be necessary to have a separation between public and private areas of the monastery.

The movement in this direction started about five years ago. There was clearly sufficient support to sustain a larger monastic community, and the 'Sanghamitta Project' was instigated to raise funds for the required developments. The generosity of supporters in donating funds, and of Farmer Wake in offering properties at bargain basement prices, enabled the purchase of three properties on the hill. One of these is the 'byre' which was being used as workroom/coalshed and has now been converted to provide the main accommodation for the resident Sangha. Next to this is the long barn and the land behind, on which the new Dhamma Hall has been built. Finally, further down the hill is a row of completely derelict buildings, one of which was the birth-place of Farmer Wake.

Now, there is sufficient accommodation for five bhikkhus and two anagarikas and the Dhamma Hall is almost completed. With this, the inspiration of the Sanghamitta Project is

well on its way towards becoming a reality - much to the amazement of those who had doubts about support being forthcoming to sustain two residents in a £10-a-week semi-derelict cottage!

This rapid growth and establishment could never have happened without the great generosity and devotion of people from traditional Theravada cultures, who are now living in Britain. These people, mostly Thai and Sri Lankan, have also helped the British supporters understand that they too are part of a living and continuing spiritual tradition of more than 2,500 years. We come together each year in November to celebrate our diverse unity with a Multi-Cultural Fair, which also raises funds for the monastery.

There have now been five senior bhikkhus guiding the growth of Harnham, and inspiring the lay supporters each with their own individual perspective or emphasis on how the Buddha's teachings can be used to enrich our lives. From Venerable Sucitto - patient endurance and faith; Venerable Viradhammo - loving-kindness to ourselves as well as others; Venerable Anando - awareness of the karmic effects of our actions; Venerable Tiradhammo - greater intellectual understanding; Venerable Pahhakarō - appreciation of the form in Theravada practice. It seems as if each teacher has come at the time we needed their particular message.

From its small and humble beginning, Harnham - or 'Ratanagiri', as Ajahn Sumedho now calls it - has developed from a simple vihara into a monastery, becoming the centre of a strong spiritual force in the Worth. The little group who first met on this hill has grown to such a number as have come together today in celebration of the first decade. There is a strong sense of history in the making, and of gratitude for the opportunity to participate.

go
to

- Richard Hopkins
- Nyanaviro Bhikkhu
- Ajahn Sucitto
- Ajahn Munindo
- Ajahn Tiradhammo

Venerable Nyanaviro spent six months at Harnham as an anagarika (1982-1983), and three years there as a junior monk (1987-1990).

It's very enjoyable to call up images of Harnham in my mind. A warmth accompanies that memory, which goes beyond mere affection or longing.

The first time I visited the Vihara was as a layman for the opening ceremony - June 1981. A friend offered to drive, and when we got to the other side of Newcastle and the view of Northumberland opened out before us, I thought: 'Wow, this place is really out in the sticks, in the absolute middle of nowhere!'

When we finally got to the monastery it was almost like we had made a pilgrimage; the sense of arriving was quite strong, having got all the way to the top of this hill and finding the tiny cottage. In those days it was extremely simple, with no real decorations, just the original structure or a shepherd's dwelling - thick stone walls, rather dusty, a bit dingy because the windows were small, and hard floors.

But on entering I knew that this was no ordinary cottage. My contact with the Sangha had been minimal, yet on coming into the hastily-made shrine-room I was struck by the presence of the monks, the colour of their robes contrasting with the dark grey stone walls. With these orange-brown robes, the sense of calm and peace was immediately obvious. There was also a perceptible desolation to the place, a wildness, an almost other-worldly quality, which I found not a little disturbing at the time. It was not something that I knew how to be at ease with, and it reflected back to me that unknown side of myself.

Harnham was the first monastery that I visited regularly, and it eased me into the Buddhist way of life. One had to get used to being simple, and relinquishing one's comforts. It was rather cold. Everything was basic: a naked light bulb hanging from a ceiling, a toilet, wash basin, the food, the smell of the place, the barrenness of the shrine-room and the almost ghastly simplicity of the monks. Long periods of meditation, sounds from an occasional

tractor outside, or Farmer John Wake walking by in his wellington boots. The dry stone walls, the greenness of the grass and always, always, the long view that dropped away from the hill stretching off to the horizon. It was an environment which did not encourage complexity. And all these became wonderful constituents for the beginning of my Dhamma-practice.

Returning the following year to stay as an anagarika, the experience continued to develop. It's a very elemental place. The ruggedness of Nature feels unspoilt, and this feeling calls you back to your heart, to the source. Ajahn Anando, shortly after his arrival as the new abbot, remarked that if you made an effort you could hear the sound of silence during the course of the day, just being there and going about one's duties. One was always close to the edge of that silence.

To be honest, when I was an anagarika there I sometimes felt like I was doomed, that it was all too much. Once during a 10-day retreat, I had a glimpse into the emptiness of things. But rather than being an inspiring insight, it was like the bottom had dropped out of my world - I was nobody, my life was nothing, and this truth hit me so hard it was undeniable. For a while after that, getting up every day and going through the anagarika's duties was a weighty experience, like having a death sentence. Only after a long time did the understanding dawn that it was just a reaction thrown up by my ego, which could not bear to gaze into the depths of the open mind - that signless expanse was too frightening. But I had been shown - and there would always remain the dark remembrance - that all the creations of my mind and belief about myself were based on nothing.

And yet the nothingness, the spaciousness which Harnham's environment seems to reflect is not cold or harsh. It doesn't punish us. Rather it turns one back to the source, the rhythms of nature. The light and dark are very noticeable at Harnham, much more extreme than in the south of England. The sharp chill of the winter, the busting out of the spring, the length of the summer days when you are going to bed in the light and getting up in the light.

If you live on the hill for any length of time, you can't maintain the feeling that you are somehow separate. You're standing on the Earth and that energy flows up and moves through your body and mind, impelling thoughts and moods which are aligned with Nature; you become part of the landscape. Awareness can open to this, and there is nowhere I have found which is more conducive to that than at Harnham. The thick walls of the cottage can absorb everything, all of your pain, all of your loneliness, all of the petty struggles - they are nothing compared to the age and strength of the stone. It just takes everything and muffles it all in quietude. And that's a support, it



becomes a friend.

I think over the years the monastery has softened. It's like the presence of the monks has humanised those stones, that landscape, because of their willingness to be human, which is what the practice asks. The monks and anagarikas who have lived there over a ten-year period, along with the efforts of many sincere lay- supporters, have made this offering of human heart-energy, which is what has bestowed a sense of sacredness on the Vihara as a physical environment.

Sacredness comes from sacrifice, and many people have sacrificed time and energy in responding to the physical work that has had to be done, and the work of giving up; giving up of the anger, sadness and passion of our individuality. Just offering it all to that lonely little place on a hill in Northumberland.

■ Richard Hopkins
■ Nyanaviro Bhikkhu

go ■ Ajahn Sucitto
to ■ Ajahn Anando
■ Ajahn Munindo
■ Ajahn Tiradhammo

Ajahn Sucitto was Harnham's first senior incumbent.

Wind blowing through the stone walls and driving snow into the house under the decayed front door; one cold water tap; snow on the toilet seat: some memories of the old days at Harnham a decade ago. We three incumbents felt like castaways, occasionally visited by Virginia with food and building materials during her lunch hour.

I drilled 700 14-inch-deep holes in those granite walls to provide a damp course. My stomach vibrated into the evening sittings from pushing on the drill. Those holes are the only remaining visible signs of the toil of that first incumbency. I point them out (with pride) as the signs of the humble hard work at the foundation of what is now a beautiful maturity.

The bleak looks have also disappeared off the faces of the Sangha and the Trustees during that decade, to be replaced by something more welcoming. A place of Dhamma is such a clear mirror!

■ Richard Hopkins
■ Nyanaviro Bhikkhu
go ■ Ajahn Sucitto
to ■ Ajahn Anando
■ Ajahn Munindo
■ Ajahn Tiradhammo

Ajahn Anando was abbot during most of 1983 and 1984.

We don't have to do anything. I just want you to take it easy and settle in.' I was grateful to Ajahn Viradhammo for being so considerate. I was feeling very tired, from the long drive up to Harnham and as a result of the many things I had to finish before leaving Chithurst.

We were planning a leisurely walk, when the telephone interrupted. Ajahn Viradhammo came back looking a little embarrassed and concerned. 'That was Pete. He has a week between jobs, so he will be coming tomorrow to start plastering the meditation hall.' So, the next week we spent stripped to the waist working like Trojans trying to keep up with this giant-of-a-guy-Pete while he transformed the hall with rapid and expert strokes of his trowel. Ajahn Viradhammo had to leave during our plastering experience, which added to his discomfort at the way things had unfolded. Thus started my stay at Harnham.

Compared to Chithurst, Harnham is small - which has a wonderful effect on certain types of people. Interestingly, those people weren't always part of the community there, which naturally added to the richness of my experience, the first time I was ever in charge of a monastery. But by far the most cogent and poignant memories are of the many, many times people helped and encouraged us through their gifts and acts of generous support.

■ Richard Hopkins
■ Nyanaviro Bhikkhu
go ■ Ajahn Sucitto
to ■ Ajahn Anando
■ Ajahn Munindo
■ Ajahn Tiradhammo

Ajahn Munindo took over the duties of senior monk in the spring of this year.

Settling in at Harnham in its tenth year feels something like moving into a house with an already established garden: the soil is well dug, the stones have been removed and a good variety of things have been planted. All sorts of fresh food is available. Some of what is

appearing is familiar and some is not. Some plants are large, strong and healthy, and some so small that one can't quite tell what they will turn out to be. Occasional weeds are easily pulled or dug back in, and with pleasant anticipation one waits to see what will come up next.

Monasteries, like gardens, change with the seasons and at Harnham I would say we are going through spring - there is quite a lot happening. It seems these days that the psychological distance between here and the rest of the U.K. has lessened. Although we are regularly at least seven rest-dents, we are usually more. Friends from other parts, Sangha and laity, often come to visit. As senior monk I try to be here as much as possible whilst Venerables Vipassi and Khemasiri conduct the meetings at groups in Leeds, Edinburgh and Glasgow. Also the visits to the prisons continue. In any traditional Buddhist culture monks at their age would be testing their samadhi by wandering in tiger-infested forests and mountains. Here in the North-East of Great Britain it's the frustrations of British Rail and city thugs that serve as their teachers.

One clear source of recent enthusiasm has been the opening of what is variously referred to as 'The Newcastle Buddhist Centre', 'The City Centre', or 'Pink Lane Group'. A weekly Wednesday gathering takes place in a large room above the Loy Krarhong Thai Restaurant in central Newcastle (Pink Lane, opposite Central Railway Station). The meeting begins with chanting and meditation, then offers time for group discussion on how to apply the teachings in daily life. Along with the yoga classes on Monday and Friday nights, there are stronger links forming between the complex 'worlds' of the city and what is happening here on 'the Hill'. For some, the differences are disappearing

As we have often been told by our teachers, when we are awake we see things as they are, when we are asleep we dream up all kinds of problems. Consciously sharing a recognition of the predicament of unawakened beings can be a major step on the path to making that Right Effort which brings about awakening. The Dhamma discussion groups and the pujas at the monastery are circumstances where this kind of acknowledgement is taking place.

Ten years of hard work by a good many people is showing how daily life practice is possible; it is worth the effort to see everything in terms of Dhamma. When this kind of effort is made, things flow smoothly. Even the mundane details of running this place are further aspects of practice. These days, the Trustees oversee the developments from the perspective of experience, and a 'Monastery Committee' attends to the day-to-day details. The committee - three monks and three lay people - meets every two weeks to talk over matters ranging from how to get the council to replace the 'Harnham' road-sign (missing for five months) to the moral implications of our contract with the Electricity Department.

So, going back to gardening, anyone who has kept one knows that as it matures the gardener need no longer be so concerned with what to plant or whether things will actually grow. In this garden one feels the roots are well taken, the fruits are plentiful and those eating from it are well nourished.

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- Richard Hopkins
 - Nyanaviro Bhikkhu
 - go ■ Ajahn Sucitto
 - to ■ Ajahn Anando
 - Ajahn Munindo
 - Ajahn Tiradhammo

Ajahn Tiradhammo was Harnham's abbot from autumn 1984 to spring 1987.

I remember Harnham as an exceptionally peaceful and spacious place. Its isolation and wide-open vistas provide an ideal contemplative environment. However, my time there was also very challenging for me - both I and the Vihara were going through a sort of spiritual adolescence: I was 'growing up' into the role of the senior monk of a Vihara, while the Vihara was 'growing up' as the centre for a Buddhist community stretching from Yorkshire to

Scotland to Northern Ireland.

Due to the labours of my predecessors, I had inherited a very well-renovated and comfortable residence. Most of the 'building work' was building up a support group of interested people throughout the North. Teaching engagements increased considerably, and, as Harnham became appreciated by more and more people, an organised effort - the Sanghamitta Project - gathered momentum to develop the facilities on Harnham Hill.

However, any kind of growth has its highs and lows. One can ride high on the enthusiasm of dedicated people, and then the practical matters of organisation and planning quickly bring one back to earth!

I look back to this time with genial and lively memories, thanks to the support and encouragement of the many Sangha members and dedicated lay people with whom I shared the friendly, open spaces of Harnham.

