



FOREST SANGHA

newsletter

May 1987

2544

Number 1

THIS ISSUE	Cover: ■ Communication Between Sangha & Friends	HOME ■
	Articles: ■ Obituary; Ayya Rocanna	BACK ISSUES ■
	■ Roots of the Forest, N-E Thailand, Ajahn Sucitto	
	■ Northumberland, Ajahn Tiradhammo	
	■ In the Footsteps of the Buddha; India, Ven. Bodhipalo	
Editorial:		

Communication Between Sangha & Friends

Some early definitions of what the Forest Sangha Newsletter is intended to be.

Having had the opportunity for a rethink about the Newsletter, we offer something of a broader focus than previously: a communications medium for the Sangha, not specifically moored to any one place.

We welcome contributions and comments to help it to develop. There are two main kinds of written material. Firstly, more extensive reports of narrative and documentary nature; and secondly, shorter notices and invitations, for the Grapevine. This need not be relevant to the U.K. alone as there are close ties, and frequent comings and goings between Sanghas in Britain, U.S.A., Switzerland, Australia, Thailand and New Zealand. It would be good if the Newsletter could develop into a means of communication between monasteries and lay people who feel a kinship via the teachings of Venerable Ajahn Chah.

As there is bound to be diversification over such a widespread community, notification of events, projects, debates and even failures, can provide us all with reflections on how the holy life should be lived in our contemporary world. Viharas that produce their own Newsletters are welcome to extract material from this one. Material that doesn't fit into one edition of the Newsletter may well find its way into another one, into Looking Ahead, or grace the pages of a so-far-unborn Annual.

One last and crucial point: the copy date (the time by which material needs to be here

at Amaravati) is about three weeks before the Newsletter is due to appear. So the next copy date is August 10th.



THIS ISSUE

Cover: ■ Communication Between Sangha & Friends
Articles: ■ Obituary; Ayya Rocanna
 ■ Roots of the Forest, N-E Thailand, Ajahn Sucitto
 ■ Northumberland, Ajahn Tiradhammo
 ■ In the Footsteps of the Buddha; India, Ven. Bodhipalo

Editorial:**HOME** ■**BACK ISSUES** ■

Obituary

Ayya Rocana passed away peacefully in New Delhi during her second pilgrimage to the Buddhist Holy Places. These personal reflections on her life are offered by Ayya Candasiri, with affection and gratitude.

On 14th February Ayya Rocana, together with a small group of monks and lay people left Amaravati to go on pilgrimage in India. This, her second pilgrim was dedicated to her twin sister (the first, undertaken twelve years previously, was for her father). Members of the community were naturally shocked and saddened at the news of her death, only three weeks later, although she had spoken often of the possibility that she might die. Having made a supreme effort to wind up her affairs, she had cheerfully announced to those accompanying her, that it was extremely auspicious to die on pilgrimage!

Bhante Dhammavara, who was staying in New Delhi, attended the cremation. He had been the first bhikkhu Ayya Rocana had met when, in 1973 she attended a weekend of meditation instruction given by him. This had been a major turning point in her life. Since then, studying first with Venerable Vajirinyana and later with Ajahn Sumedho, she never looked back. Early on in her Buddhist studies, she came across a passage in the suttas, which described dana (generosity) as the medicine which can cure all ills arising from desire. Rather hesitantly, she put this to the test, and found that it helped to ease the unhappiness she felt at that time.

Ayya Rocana realised that this teaching, which had helped her so much, could also be of value to other Westerners. She also saw the great importance of establishing the Sangha in the West. So, she began to devote every ounce of energy and ingenuity to supporting the bhikkhus in any way she could. She lived very frugally, in order to buy food for them, and would make a long journey across London in the early morning to offer it in the traditional way into their almsbowls -- to the utter astonishment of those passing by on their way to work!

In 1978 she took temporary ordination at Oakenholt. Then, in 1979 -- after visiting the nuns in Thailand to see how they lived -- she gave up her flat and her job at the homoeopathic hospital, arriving at Chithurst with all she possessed, ready to begin life as a nun. On the evening of 28th October she, together with the three other candidates, requested the Three Refuges and Eight Precepts. As the elder of the new anagarikas, she was the first to be given her new name -- 'Rocana', meaning 'Radiant'.

This name couldn't have been more fitting. Her welcoming smile and warm words of encouragement eased the natural timidity that many visitors must have felt, at their first contact with the Sangha. Often too, she would exercise her skill in homoeopathy to relieve their bodily ills, listening kindly to their troubles and offering remedies and guidance.

In 1983, she took the 10 Precept (Siladhara) ordination. It was not easy for so independent a

spirit to live within the confines of the newly formed Order of Nuns. So that year, Ajahn Sumedho suggested that she begin working to bring the Jataka Tales to life. This was a perfect focus for her abundant energy, deep love of children and vivid imagination, which were coupled with an extensive knowledge of Buddhist scriptures. Now, two volumes are complete and in the hands of publishers -- a legacy for young Buddhists growing up in Western society.

Fellow pilgrims have recounted how Ayya Rocana's generosity of heart and skill as a storyteller found expression, during her last days. Many were touched by the simple delight, with which she distributed gifts to the community of Tibetan nuns they visited in Kathmandu; while at Savatthi, the company were held spellbound by her account of the events which took place there, during the Buddha's life time.

So her death, untimely in a sense, also carried with it a sense of fulfillment. Ayya Rocana had seen the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha firmly established in the West. This is what she cared about most -- recognising that, it is these three gems that can help to remedy the ailments of our Western Society.



THIS ISSUE

Cover: ■ Communication Between Sangha & Friends
Articles: ■ Obituary; Ayya Rocanna
 ■ Roots of the Forest, N-E Thailand, Ajahn Sucitto
 ■ Northumberland, Ajahn Tiradhammo
 ■ In the Footsteps of the Buddha; India, Ven. Bodhipalo

Editorial:**HOME** ■**BACK ISSUES** ■

Roots of the Forest; N-E Thailand

Ajahn Sucitto spent ten weeks of the winter in Thailand, mostly in the North-East, which is the source of the monastic style of the monasteries of this Sangha. The North-East has produced many masters in the Forest Tradition, but naturally enough, it was Ajahn Chah and Wat Pah Pong that formed the fundamental reference point for the trip. It was Ajahn Sucitto's first visit to Wat Pah Pong and it provided some clear reflections on the heart of monastic practice....

In the middle of last year, Ajahn Sumedho invited me to spend the winter months in Thailand. I had no particular motivation in going, so there was a quiet space in my mind around the projected trip. I let the space be and watched to see how it would fill. A few days before my departure, I received a message from Ajahn Pasanno at Wah Pah Nanachat inviting me to go tudong with a group of monks in Kanchanaburi, a wild province on the Burmese frontier.

Hardly had I got kitted out with tudong equipment by the senior monks at Amaravati and given advice on malaria, than a phone call came notifying us that Tan Ajahn Chah had been diagnosed as having cancer, and tudong and any other supposed certainties were indefinitely suspended. So on the 20th November, in a sudden change of events, Ajahn Sumedho himself joined me on the flight into the who-knows-what at Wat Pah Pong. It was a good start, a reminder that in the spiritual life, every journey, and every day, should be experienced as a movement into the unknown.

It had been eight years since I had left Thailand. Being greeted with anjali by air hostesses and customs officials was something of a surprise. At Don Meungr Airport, the customs men took my bags, not to inspect them, but to carry them through, as they ushered us to the front of the line. Travelling with Ajahn Sumedho certainly presents some occasions for reflection; the way that people relate to you shifts your perspective from a physical location to a place in the ongoing spiritual tradition. Images of benevolence arise at every turn. Ajahn Pasanno and Venerable Sumano from Wat Pah Nanachat greeted us at the airport, with a car to take us to Yom Kesaree's house. There a kuti had been made ready and almsfood prepared for our arrival. Anonymous supporters arranged for us to be taken to visit Tan Chao Khuns Sobhana and Pannananda in the evening -- the unexpected continued to be welcoming. But it could only be a short stay with the thought of Tan Ajahn Chah on our minds, and the next afternoon we were flown off to Ubon, the nearest city to Wat Pah Pong.

Ubon is the capital of one of the seventeen provinces of the North-East which are collectively known as the Isan (pronounced Eesahn). The Isan is mostly a broad plateau extending from mountains 200 Km. east of Bangkok up to the Mekong River. Most of the land is given over to the cultivation of sticky rice. Without the technology to control nature, and without the resources to avoid it, people have to get used to being too hot in the hot season, flooded in the wet, cold in the cold, and hungry if the crop fails. Accordingly, Isan folk have developed

ample resilience and patience.

The Isan bears strong cultural and linguistic affinities with Laos. Until recently poor roads have made links with central Thailand tenuous, and villagers have always relied on their local custom and village traditions as social reference points, particularly when these have integrated with Sangha observances. When so much of the rest of life is uncertain, tradition exerts a far more powerful influence than changing governments. With the frailty of personal existence acknowledged and accepted, there is yet an unshakeable confidence in the spiritual life, in its conventions and essence. Complete commitment to it is for a few, and total fulfillment of it a rare attainment, but the holy life has been a vital presence in Thailand for about 800 years. It is to the sign of the holy life that customs men make *anjali*, it is to those who live the holy life that the villagers of the Isan offer rice every day. On special days some will bring food to the monasteries, while others will work in the kitchen -- preparing a meal for thirty, by 8:00 a.m. Through reflecting on this generosity of heart, the Sangha's incentive to practice is sustained, as well as its physical existence. From the villagers' point of view, supporting the Sangha is as much a part of life as planting crops or rearing children -- and as beneficial.

When we landed at Ubon, late in the afternoon, the whole Sangha from Wat Pah Nanachat was there to greet us and take us to Wat Pah Pong. In the tropics, night comes down as swiftly and impressively as a snowfall, and the lights around Ajahn Chah's special *kuti*/ infirmary were glowing to match the innumerable stars when we arrived. After formal greetings had been exchanged, we were invited in to Ajahn Chah's bedside. The face was hardly recognizable as that of the radiant master I had met 7 years ago at the Hampstead Vihara. Ajahn Sumedho squeezed his hand and gave his greetings: there was a movement in the eyelids -- nothing more -- but I quickly realized that Ajahn Chah's movements were measured in such fashion. A movement of the eyes, a slight tensing of the hand muscles of one hand, or a look of recognition were all the signs that one could expect. Ajahn Chah was hardly traceable within this physical form. How he was feeling and for how long he would continue to live were equally uncertain. All that was magnificently apparent was the total care and attention afforded to him by his attendant *bhikkhus*. They were operating his body for him with a tenderness and respect that makes the word 'nursing' sound bare: it meant saving his life, guessing as to the state of his comfort, being aware of the effects of sudden noises, or changes in light, and a lot of hard menial work. Yet, it was a practice of love, in which every occasion to move his body was preceded by the deferential gesture of *anjali*.

Every day, Ajahn Sumedho and I went to the *kuti* to join the Sangha from Wat Pah Nanachat in chanting *vipassanabhūm* -- the development of insight. There were always visitors from all over Thailand coming to pay their respects, so for these occasions, Ajahn Chah would be brought into the glass-walled reception room in his wheelchair. His face was often not visible through the reflection of the Sangha in the glass; a strangely fitting image of what one can most clearly trace of Ajahn Chah now. His presence seems more manifest in the sincere practice of his disciples than in a worn out body. 'Ajahn Chah' signifies a quality of practice, quotations, personal memories, and a well respected Sangha. It is through their efforts that his body survives, and it is through his teaching that Wat Pah Pong, and its 80 or so branch monasteries pulse with spiritual life.

Ajahn Chah's teaching has always emphasised a high degree of personal resourcefulness and respect for the traditions of the Sangha. It therefore fits very well with the principles that guide Isan society. The form of beautiful conduct that was apparent towards the Master is an aspect of the *Vinaya* that can readily be refined and extended, in a society that values deference and service to the elders, and in particular to those living the holy life. Such service benefits the 'servant' as much as the one who is served, because, if freely undertaken it brings joy into the mind. When the monastery and the teacher are established in *Dhamma-Vinaya*,

people take on the training with a sense of honour. I noticed how teenage novices applied themselves to their duties with cheerfulness and personal initiative; they really seek out opportunities to look after the monks bowls, and to do running repairs on worn robes. It sounds archaic, but it looked like a realistic way to channel energy in a spiritual direction. Comparisons with teenagers in the West who have no spiritual guidance arose naturally in my mind, and I couldn't help but think that my meditation would have been a lot more peaceful, if I'd been washing alms bowls at Wat Pah Pong in my teens...

Many of the down-to-earth applications of mindfulness that over-intellectual Westerners find so refreshing are highlighted by the forest life. You have to walk mindfully to avoid tripping on tree roots in a dark forest, or stumbling into a trail of biting ants; you bathe mindfully -- frogs like to congregate near water, and where there are frogs, there are hungry snakes. In the monasteries, people are trained to be very scrupulous about their needs -you have to seek out a responsible monk to obtain even modest requisites, like washing powder and torch batteries: and they might very well run out. There is a routine and there are duties, but things are not always spelled out you're expected to notice and find out. You may be sent off somewhere at short notice, or find that your carefully prepared trip gets cancelled. Life is uncertain in forest monasteries; but the way of the Buddha is defined in practical detail by the careful use of Vinaya and training conventions. So such places, particularly when blessed by the presence of a master, are sought out by those who look for good practice. There's not much else you can expect to get out of a forest monastery, but those who stay come to appreciate the training for what it can bring forth from the mind. If you can learn to live without holding on, you find it a wonderful door to the Dhamma.

Going into insecurity with mindfulness typifies Dhamma practice and extends it beyond any particular location. East or West, life is uncertain, and the Way invites us onwards. So we were only at Wat Pah Pong for about ten days before circumstances changed: Ajahn Chah's condition stabilised, Ajahn Sumedho had to fulfil a promise to visit Switzerland, and with things back to 'normal', I took up another invitation to go tudong. There was talk of hardships and tigers, but when I contemplated it, it didn't seem any more precarious than travelling in an aeroplane, or in a Thai bus for that matter. And, unlike most travellers, my wanderings would all be within the realm of Dhamma-Vinaya.

After a few weeks, Tan Ajahn Chah was examined again by doctors, who found no traces of cancer. Currently, his condition remains the same, with occasional crises when it seems as if he is about to die. Work on building the memorial building, composing a biography, and making arrangements for the eventual funeral are still underway.



THIS ISSUE

Cover: ■ Communication Between Sangha & Friends
Articles: ■ Obituary; Ayya Rocanna
 ■ Roots of the Forest, N-E Thailand, Ajahn Sucitto
 ■ Northumberland, Ajahn Tiradhammo
 ■ In the Footsteps of the Buddha; India, Ven. Bodhipalo
Editorial:

HOME ■
BACK ISSUES ■

Northumberland

Ajahn Tiradhammo has been the senior incumbent at Harnham Vihara for two and a half years. At the Harnham Wesak on May 24th, he will be handing over the incumbency, to Ajahn Pabhakaro and with it, the project to build a Dhamma Hall and more accommodation for Sangha and visitors at the Vihara. He offers these reflections.

As a residence for a small Sangha and focus for a small Buddhist community since 1980, Harnham has been very successful. However, life does not stand still. Over the years Harnham has begun to change, due to the increasing interest in meditation and Buddhism. With the completion of the extensive renovation work on the cottage, more energy was put into teaching and supporting groups in the North -- from Yorkshire to Scotland and Northern Ireland. From the initial Newcastle group and subsequent groups in Doncaster and Edinburgh, bhikkhus from Harnham have begun to teach at newly formed groups in Leeds, Glasgow, Durham, Middlesbrough, Belfast and temporarily, in Hull and Sheffield. This changing perspective has added a new dimension to Harnham, and called for some serious consideration of the longterm direction of the community.

In terms of numbers, the resident community has grown from two to six, and the number of support groups from one to nine; on major festival days the number of visitors has grown from a few dozen to hundreds. After several years of practice, the needs of the Buddhist community, have also expanded. Now there are monthly weekend retreats, more public gatherings such as wedding blessings and festivals, and an increasing number of visitors and guests. There is also the possibility of having nuns reside on a more permanent basis.

With the maturing of the Buddhist community, we have found that many people want to help, out of a sense of gratitude and appreciation. This is particularly relevant in the organising and support of vihara-activities. In the setting up of a vihara we have found that we need to explore ways of facilitating communication and co-operation between monastics and laity. Put simply, the monastics have the experience, to know what is needed to nourish the form of Sangha, while the laity have the knowledge and skill to make that into a tangible reality.

Our endeavours so far have culminated in the Sanghamitta Project to purchase and renovate further properties on Harnham Hill. A generous initial donation has given the impetus to make the project feasible. Besides providing more accommodation for Sangha, guests and retreatants, it is a focus for much co-operation, generosity and selfless service. The size of the project implies that few of the initial supporters will see its completion, but it is a joyful act of service to give towards something which will be of much benefit, to many people, for a long time.

This has been a major source of Dhamma practice for many of us. It hasn't been easy, but it

has been valuable to explore what aspects of Buddhism are workable and appropriate, and to learn how to apply them. In a way it is like learning how to separate the wheat from the chaff - the heart of Buddhism from the externals -- give it new soil to germinate, and watch it grow. In learning to co-operate and communicate on a much larger and more extensive scale, the extended Harnham community is becoming a focus for much, generous and noble energy, and a school for learning the practicality of spiritual fellowship. The main issue then, is not actually, building the vihara, but building people. With patience and care, people can learn how to apply spiritual principles in their lives, not only for their own benefit but also for the benefit of society. This will take time and energy, but it may well be the most valuable investment of time and energy that we can ever make for the peace and happiness of the many.

evam.



THIS ISSUE

Cover: ■ Communication Between Sangha & Friends
Articles: ■ Obituary; Ayya Rocanna
 ■ Roots of the Forest, N-E Thailand, Ajahn Sucitto
 ■ Northumberland, Ajahn Tiradhammo
 ■ In the Footsteps of the Buddha; India, Ven. Bodhipalo

Editorial:**HOME** ■**BACK ISSUES** ■

In the Footsteps of the Buddha; India

Venerable Bodhipalo came over from Thailand last year, to spend some time at Chithurst and visit his family. He decided to undertake a lone pilgrimage in India on his way back to Thailand. We received a letter from him a few months ago.

Here are a few extracts...

I had left Savatthi on 4th December. I'm glad I had the chance to see it. I wanted to walk to Lumbini but met with a lot of negativity from people. They told me all the terrible things that might happen to me -- I might starve, or get lost, or be robbed or killed, and it was too cold to sleep out at nights. It's easy to travel from place to place by bus with the pilgrims, and they're quite willing to take you if they have room, but I wouldn't have enjoyed that at all. I originally was not going to use roads but go cross-country from village to village, but this proved impracticable. Fifteen years ago the paddy fields were empty all winter, but now they're full of crops: winter wheat, rape, tapioca, sugar cane, vegetables, and here in Nepal they're still harvesting the rice in some places. . . .

Anyway, in spite of other people's negativity, I thought I should at least give walking a try. So I thought of all the good things that might happen, the kind, helpful people I might meet etc. as I decided to walk to Lumbini to see how it would go. . . .

On my first attempt at pindapata in Bulrampur, on my way to Savatthi, I did quite well -- not a square meal, but enough to keep me going. One problem was trying to explain to people that I didn't accept money or raw rice. I think perhaps also some people thought I was broke -- a hard up hippy. So then I got a monk to write a note saying something like (in Hindi) 'I am a Buddhist monk on pilgrimage to the holy places. I do not accept money. I depend on almsfood and eat only between dawn and midday. I am grateful for your help'. With this note things have been easier. I stand in front of a shop or house for a while, maybe half a minute, and if they don't say anything, I move on to the next. If they ask what I want then I give them the note to read. In most cases the response has been very good. Sometimes someone will walk along with me and chivvy his friends into giving me something. I usually look like the pied piper with a great gaggle of ragged children on my tail. One day I had quite a good meal of chapatis and sabjees and sweets. Other times I had small bits and pieces like samosas, etc. . . .

I've slept in a variety of places; by the road in a small copse of trees with a stream running through it (plenty of streams in this area, so no problem bathing); one night in a straw sack. The villagers wanted me to sleep in a house in the village, but there were too many women and children around, so I slept outside the village in the threshing area on a heap of straw, surrounded by straw, under a large mango tree. That was one of the warmest nights. Sleeping out is very cold and it is usually impossible to sleep lying down, but I remembered my experiences in Kanchanaburi, and found that sleeping sitting up I could make more economical use of my robes, and keep warmer. One night I found an abandoned grass hut near

the road. Daytime is pleasantly warm, but gets a bit hot in the sun around midday, if you're walking or exerting yourself. . . .

I regret I can't speak the language. I think it would be even more fruitful if I could. I've decided to carry on the rest of the pilgrimage in this way, going next to Kushinara, then Varanasi and Bodh Gaya. Of course, some of the dangers that people have pointed out might happen, but I'm sure they were just as likely in the Buddha's day, and I could probably more easily be killed by a taxi in London than by robbers in India.

I'm sure that my greatest protection is keeping the Vinaya. The parami of keeping good Vinaya is very powerful; especially important are rules about food and money. If I kept food or money, I could not go pindapat with a clear conscience. Many people have done their best to persuade me to accept money or carry food with me, but I know if I did that then pindapat wouldn't work, I would not get any of the help or respect that usually go to a samana. . . .

I'm now in Lumbini. I stopped at Kapilavastu for one day, but there's not much to see. It doesn't appear to have been a very big place, nothing like Savatthi, but it's hard to say as so little has been excavated. You can see the Himalayas from here. At Savatthi you couldn't see them. On the second day's walk I looked up in the late afternoon, and there they were; quite took my breath away. Green fields and trees stretching into the distance and beyond, the purple brown foothills, beyond this the snowcapped peaks against a vivid blue sky. The best time to see them is early morning, before eight; especially at sunrise, when the snow is bright pink. . . .

I could have gone into much more detail about the places I've been, the things I've seen and the things that have happened to me, but I've written more than enough already. I had a lot of doubts about doing this while I was in England, and after the possibility of doing it became more real. When I first arrived in India I had doubts too. Sometimes I thought I was completely crazy, or that it was just waste of time, a distraction, or an ego trip, but now I'm very glad I'm able to do this trip and consider myself very lucky to have the opportunity. I hope more monks will do the same. . . .

I hope all goes well with everyone at Chithurst. Excuse my terrible writing, but I'm not used to writing so small.

Metta, Bodhipalo

