



# FOREST SANGHA newsletter

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## Living with Dying

*Death is one of the four 'heavenly messengers' that life sends along to tell us to practise the Dhamma. For people who really want to get the message, it's not always necessary to wait for the unique experience at the end of one's life, as Ajahn Munindo points out in this talk.*

It took me a long time before I could get round to consider the possibility of my own death. I have had a few near-brushes with death - a bout of meningitis, and a motor-bike accident in which I flew through the air for quite a distance without a crash helmet on - but somehow I managed to forget about them quickly. I was only 18 when I had the bike accident, and afterwards still enjoyed all manner of delights.

It is quite amazing that even though we do 'get the message' that death is a reality, we don't pay attention to it very much because we tend to view it negatively. It's an important message, a profound teaching, but we are slow in seeing and understanding it. These messages keep coming to us but we don't want to hear them. One puts a lot of energy into enjoying life, sometimes at the expense of right understanding. We condition ourselves to believe that when life is wonderful, that's all it's ever going to be - but we get these messages, and we know that it cannot always be this way. All sorts of very difficult and painful things happen, and if we're not wise or clear about the reality of death, then it could easily crush us. We've really got to get this message and stop forgetting about it.

Today, I was talking to the parents of a young boy who died of leukaemia, and hearing about the struggle that they've had. They were two doctors doing original research into a particular type of leukaemia - and their only child contracted that very disease. He developed this disease, and had a very long agonising time before dying before their eyes. Such a thing shouldn't happen; it was so painful. A lovely couple dedicated to work on leukaemia and then their only child gets it - that was too much. But they're working with it in a wonderful way, not pretending about anything. They've founded an organisation called 'Leukaemia Busters' and their little boy, Simon, designed the logo for it - a nasty leukaemia bug with a big red

cross across it - before he died. They also asked him how he felt about their using his name to do this particular work and to encourage people to be interested in it. He told them that they should use his name and photograph for that purpose.

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It is very demanding work and they could have turned away from it, preferring to have nothing to do with that painful memory. Instead, they've used the memory to encourage themselves to keep working.

We need to be encouraged, and the Buddha's teaching does encourage us. We have daily reflections in the monastery on ageing, 'We are of the nature to sicken, the nature to grow old and the nature to die'. These are the realities, and it begins to sink in after a while. We have the chronic habit of being life-affirming ... disregarding the message, even when it's coming to us loud and clear - but if we do take on the training that the Lord Buddha gave us and do these reflections, they work.

When I was twenty-four, I was living in N.E. Thailand with a wonderful teacher, Ajahn Chah. I felt so privileged to be living with him, but I was having a lot of trouble with the sticky rice, pickled crickets, fermented rat and so on. Somehow whatever food was offered, I seemed to have trouble with it. It was a beautiful monastery and he was a wonderful teacher, but I was having a terrible time in getting adjusted there. Since I couldn't eat the food, I would make up by having cocoa and sugar drinks in the evening. Sometimes, a few of the monks would get together and make fudge: we'd go into the dying shed and get sugar and cocoa and salt and water - and, if we were really lucky, a bit of butter - and made fudge. I used to indulge in this stuff and make thick cocoa drinks. The night before my birthday, I'd had a lot of this stuff and ... as you know, ants in Thailand are everywhere, and they really love sugar! They must have known I'd had a party because I woke up in the middle of the night with this sensation all over my body. They were stinging me. I lit my torch and everything was black - everything! The whole wall, everything was moving; it was all black, with stinging ants. They'd been looking for a hole to get in and eat the sugar, and when they couldn't find one, they made one. It was horrific. I tried to brush them off, but then of course, I was killing them - I was breaking my precepts, ruining my purity! I already had awful difficulties with my stomach and most of the rest of me, and then to have my sleep ruined by this was truly the end. It was a horrid, absolutely ghastly experience ... and it was my birthday - my 24th birthday, the end of my second 12-year cycle. I thought this must be auspicious, but it certainly didn't feel auspicious. Then it seemed that the best thing for me to do was die.

That was the first time I remember having a positive attitude towards death. I thought, 'I'll just go away and die.' I went off to the Sala, not really expecting to die, but in a terrible state of distress. These awful creatures were eating me - just gobbling me up - me, and my dwelling place too; my home! I knew I wasn't supposed to have such thoughts, but I did. When I returned to the kuti in the morning the walls were just as black; the ants had left stains everywhere. From that time onward, whenever I'd go to sleep at night, I'd dread waking up to find the same thing had happened again.

It was very painful, but I do remember that there was actually something positive about my willingness to surrender to it. I was beginning to get the message. There was dawning in me a willingness to surrender, which, in a way, is like dying. When life is not as I want it, that's when



I'm faced with death: 'I' can't get my way. When I can't get my way, I might struggle to get it, which is like struggling to live - struggling to be what I want to be. Then, when we can't struggle any more, we die, and we need to be able to accept that.

Although I was never so happy in my life as when I meditated, when I became a monk - a member of the Noble Sangha with my teacher a truly beautiful being - I was completely miserable, and it was really getting me down. One night, we were on retreat and there was no escape from the misery, no way of being able to go anywhere. It just went on and on and on. On returning to my kuti, I washed my face and went to dry it on a towel. But the towel was covered with stinging ants and I got them all over my face ... I didn't know what to do; I couldn't even complain to anybody - they didn't speak English. It was night-time and I just went up to my room. All I did was bow. I wanted to cry, but I don't think I could. So all I did was bow in front of the shrine.

Bowing also is a kind of dying, and when one becomes comfortable with this gesture, it is a way to lay down this rather arrogant unjustified stance of 'me' - of, 'I can handle it.' Some situations are so impossible that we are driven to a point of utter despair, and we have no option other than to bow. If we're able to make that gesture with the right attitude, we can learn from it. It's difficult to know exactly how this works, but there is a strength which comes from reaching that point. It's a soft gentle strength that comes from knowing that you don't have to pretend you can handle everything. You don't have to pretend that you're going to sort it all out. You know you can't, and there's the willingness to admit this with the humble gesture of bowing in front of the Buddha, the very symbol of Perfection - the Perfect Freedom from the false confidence and arrogance of Self.



I died once more on my birthday in Thailand. In the early days of Wat Pah Nanachat, one would occasionally get something special - like a banana or fried fish - and be infinitely happy about it, even though it wasn't very much. Another treat was to receive little peanut toffee slabs - boiled sugar with roasted peanuts. They were really delicious, one of the few treats in those days in the monastery cuisine. On one's birthday, the monks were really kind. They'd start at the top and bottom of the line, with one of those chipped enamel plates, and each monk would take a little something from his bowl, put it on the plate, and pass it along to the next monk, so whoever was having a birthday would get two of these plates full of everybody's goodies!

On my birthday these peanut toffees were the only decent treat, so I got two plates absolutely full of peanut toffee, and ate them all! They were the only thing vaguely interesting in the bowl that day. Everybody gave me the peanut toffee slab. I think I received 13 or 14 - and eaten 12 before I realised how far I'd gone. Anyway, then I thought, 'I'll leave one for the sake of restraint, for practice!' So I had one more, without difficulty, but then I just could not resist the temptation. I picked up the last one and ate it - and at that moment my top denture plate slipped and broke right down the middle. Oh, the shame - I died! I never had the guts to tell

anyone about it, and I had to go into Bangkok and wait about three months for new dentures.

This opportunity to 'die' happens all the time. Sometimes we make mistakes - like, say, making a goof during the chanting in front of everybody. I've been a monk for 15 years and still I get my lines wrong! We can feel embarrassed during these little moments of losing face and making mistakes. But if we have some skill in dying with dignity we can grow strong, because of these 'death' situations, rather than in spite of them. The trick is to be able to practise with death without being destroyed by it. We can very easily get destroyed by these situations; we can spend ages feeling acutely miserable about things we've done wrong in our lives. Or instead, we can just open up and say, 'Oh, I really blew it!' - and allow ourselves to die.

I've had this 'death' dozens of times, but it takes a long time before the meaning really sinks in. We need to find ways of encouraging ourselves to make this conscious; we can use this training, the contemplations and the formal meditations. In our mindfulness of breathing, we can build up skill in allowing the breathing to teach us the lesson of birth and death, arising and ceasing, the way of Saddhamma, the Way It Is. We allow the body to receive the breath, and we let go of it. We breath in, and we breathe out. We breathe in, and we're born; we breath out, and we die. Every time we breathe out, we die. This is absolutely normal.

I'm not saying that we should never make an effort to save ourselves, but if it really is our time to die, then to be able to die with dignity is to acknowledge and accept this. Then we can get the message - and when it's really our time we can be right there with it.



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## Questions & Answers - Luang Por Chah

*The second in a series of extracts from a conversation between Luang Por Chah and a lay Buddhist.*

**Question:** Does one have to practise and gain samadhi (concentration) before one can contemplate the Dhamma?

**Answer:** We can say that's correct from one point of view, but from the aspect of practice, panna (wisdom) has to come first. In conventional terms, it's sila (morality), samadhi and then panna, but if we are truly practising the Dhamma, then panna comes first. If panna is there from the beginning, it means that we know what is right and what is wrong; and we know the heart that is calm and the heart that is disturbed and agitated.

Talking from the scriptural basis, one has to say that the practice of restraint and composure will give rise to a sense of shame and fear of any form of wrong-doing that potentially may arise. Once one has established the fear of that which is wrong and one is no longer acting or behaving wrongly, then that which is wrong will not be present within one. When there is no longer anything wrong present within, this provides the conditions from which calm will arise in its place. That calm forms a foundation from which samadhi will grow and develop over time.

When the heart is calm, that knowledge and understanding which arises from within that calm is called vipassana. This means that from moment to moment there is a knowing in accordance with the truth, and within this are contained different properties. If one was to set them down on paper they would be sila, samadhi and panna. Talking about them, one can bring them together and say that these three dhammas form one mass and are inseparable. But if one were to talk about them as different properties, then it would be correct to say sila, samadhi and panna.

However, if one was acting in a unwholesome way, it would be impossible for the heart to become calm. So it would be most accurate to see them as developing together and it would be right to say that this is the way that the heart will become calm. Talking about the practice of samadhi: it involves preserving sila, which includes looking after the sphere of one's bodily actions and speech, in order not to do anything which is unwholesome or would lead one to remorse or suffering. This provides the foundation for the practice of calm, and once one has a foundation in calm, this in turn provides a foundation which supports the arising of panna.

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or a self or not, this is not the important point.

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In formal teaching they emphasise the importance of sila. Adikalyanam, majjhekalyanam, pariyoanakalyanam - the practice should be beautiful in the beginning, beautiful in the

middle and beautiful in the end. This is how it is. Have you ever practised samadhi?

I am still learning. The day after I went to see Tan Ajahn at Wat Keu-an my aunt brought a book containing some of your teaching for me to read. That morning at work I started to read some passages which contained questions and answers to different problems. In it you said that the most important point was for the heart to watch over and observe the process of cause and effect that takes place within. Just to watch and maintain the knowing of the different things that come up.

That afternoon I was practising meditation and during the sitting, the characteristics that appeared were that I felt as though my body had disappeared. I was unable to feel the hands or legs and there were no bodily sensations. I knew that the body was still there, but I couldn't feel it. In the evening I had the opportunity to go and pay respects to Tan Ajahn Tate\* and I described to him the details of my experience. He said that these were the characteristics of the heart that appear when it unifies in samadhi, and that I should continue practising. I had this experience only once; on subsequent occasions I found that sometimes I was unable to feel only certain areas of the body, such as the hands, whereas in other areas there was still feeling. Sometimes during my practice I start to wonder whether just sitting and allowing the heart to let go of everything is the correct way to practise; or else should I think over and occupy myself with the different problems or unanswered questions concerning the Dhamma, which I still have.

\* An elderly and highly-respected Meditation Master.

It's not necessary to keep going over or adding anything on at this stage. This is what Tan Ajahn Tate was referring to; one must not repeat or add onto that which is there already. When that particular kind of knowing is present, it means that the heart is calm and it is that state of calm which one must observe. Whatever one feels, whether it feels like there is a body or a self or not, this is not the important point. It should all come within the fields of one's awareness. These conditions indicate that the heart is calm and has unified in samadhi.

When the heart has unified for a long period, for a few times, then there will be a change in the conditions and they say that one withdraws. That state is called appana samadhi (absorption) and having entered, the heart will subsequently withdraw. In fact, although it would not be incorrect to say that the heart withdraws, it doesn't actually withdraw. Another way is to say that it flips back, or that it changes, but the style used by most teachers is to say that once the heart has reached the state of calm, then it will withdraw. However, people get caught up in disagreements over the use of language. It can cause difficulties and one might start to wonder, 'How on earth can it withdraw? This business of withdrawing is just confusing!' It can lead to much foolishness and misunderstanding just because of the language.

What one must understand is that the way to practise is to observe these conditions with sati-sampajanna (mindfulness and clear comprehension). In accordance with the characteristic of impermanence, the heart will turn about and withdraw to the level of upacara samadhi (access concentration). If it withdraws to this level, one can gain an understanding through awareness

"Practice is not dependent on any one posture, such as sitting or walking, it is a continuous flow of your own consciousness and feelings. No matter what is happening, just compose yourself and always be mindfully aware of that flow. Practice is not moving forward, but there is forward movement, it is not moving back, but there is backward movement, it is not stopping and being still. So ... practice eventually comes to a point where there is neither forward nor backward movement, nor being still - where is that?"

Ven. Ajahn Chah

of sense impressions and mental states, because at the deeper level (where the mind is fixed with just one object) there is no understanding. If there is awareness at this point, that which appears will be sankhara (mental formations).

It will be similar to two people having a conversation and discussing the Dhamma together. One who misunderstands this might feel disappointed that their heart is not really calm, but in fact this dialogue takes place within the confines of the calm and restraint which has developed. These are the characteristics of the heart once it has withdrawn to the level of upacara - there will be the ability to know about and understand different things.

The heart will stay in this state for a period and then it will turn inwards again. In other words, it will turn and go back into the deeper state of calm as it was before; or it is even possible that it might obtain purer and calmer levels of concentrated energy than was experienced before. If it does not reach such a level of concentration, one should merely note the fact and keep observing until the time when the heart withdraws again. Once it has withdrawn then different problems will arise within the heart.

This is the point where one can have awareness and understanding of different things. Here is where one should investigate and examine the different preoccupations and issues which affect the heart in order to understand and penetrate them. Once these problems are finished with, then the heart will gradually move inwards towards the deeper level of concentration again. The heart will stay there and mature, freed from any other work or external impingement. There will just be the one-pointed knowing and this will prepare and strengthen one's mindfulness until the time is reached to re-emerge.

These conditions of entering and leaving will appear in one's heart during the practice, but this is something that is difficult to talk about. It is not harmful or damaging to one's practice. After a period the heart will withdraw and the inner dialogue will start in that place, taking the form of sankhara (mental formations) conditioning the heart. If one doesn't know that this activity is sankhara, one might think that it is panna, or that panna is arising. One must see that this activity is fashioning and conditioning the heart, and the most important thing about it is that it is impermanent. One must continually keep control and not allow the heart to start following and believing in all the different creations and stories that it cooks up. All that is just sankhara, it doesn't become panna.

The way panna develops is when one listens and knows the heart, as the process of creating and conditioning takes it in different directions, and then one reflects on the instability and uncertainty of this. The realisation of its impermanence will provide the cause by which one can let go of things at that point. Once the heart has let go of things and put them down at that point, it will gradually become more and more calm and steady. One must keep entering and leaving samadhi like this and panna will arise at that point. There one will gain knowledge and understanding.

As one continues to practise, many different kinds of problems and difficulties will tend to arise in the heart; but whatever problems the world, or even the universe might bring up, one will be able to deal with them all. One's wisdom will follow them up and find answers for every question and doubt. Wherever one meditates, whatever thoughts come up, whatever happens, everything will be providing the cause for panna to arise. This is a process that will take place by itself, free from external influence. Panna will arise like this, but when it does, one should be careful not to become deluded and see it as sankhara. Whenever one reflects on things and sees them as impermanent and uncertain, then one shouldn't cling or attach to them in any way. If one keeps developing this state, when panna is present in the heart, it will take the place of one's normal way of thinking and reacting, and the heart will become fuller and brighter in the centre of everything. As this happens one knows and understands all things as

they really are - one's heart will be able to progress with meditation in the correct way and without being deluded. That is how it should be.



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## Dhamma Notes from Thailand

*As many readers are aware, senior bhikkhus and siladhara from Europe and the Antipodes will be going to Thailand for the funeral of Venerable Ajahn Chah on January 16th 1993. Ajahn Santacitto here gives us some idea of what to expect by describing his visit to the 50th day commemoration earlier this year.*

### Arrival

About to arrive in Ubon after six years away, and the predominant feeling after two nights sitting - car, plane, car, train - is just body-mind fatigue, making this familiar/unfamiliar scene happening all around me seem very distant. One thing does slip past this semi-insensitivity to my environment - the actual physical presence of the crowds of Thai people, which is in complete contrast to what I have become used to in the West. While the outward appearance of the people reflects the relative harshness of life here, compared to the West, there is also a greater softness and smoothness with which these conditions are gracefully negotiated - as though people have less internal baggage to carry around. There seems a greater denseness to the space taken up by the Western traveller, but the Thais - with the notable exception of some of the civil servants - seem to take up a lot less personal space, which makes it easier for them to be crammed together without getting in each other's way. Their movements around each other flow like water, reflecting a deeply ingrained social sensitivity.

Making these observations awakened a bit more energy to sit in stillness with the rhythm of the train on the track. With the mind more sharp and alert in the early light as we approached Ubon station, it dawned on me that it was just at this time exactly seven weeks ago that Ajahn Chah slipped away.

### Walking through the forest

Walking through the forest, on alms-round and other occasions, one feels an atmosphere of reverence and respect here, which has a deep and rich gravity. Being back in the forest monasteries of Thailand there is a sense of ease, like floating along on a deep, wide river which naturally carries along whatever drops into it. In simply walking through the forest, there is a steady joyousness which leads one on in cultivating this awareness here/now. The heart just feels good. It is a simple happiness - a sense of gratitude which draws forth the participation of positive heedfulness, which guards against the slippery slope of the ever-so-normal human tendency to make happiness a consumer commodity. By diverting this heedfulness to the ebb and flow of the sense of self, one finds that place where awareness settles and abides in naturally-relaxed alertness.

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concord is put to the test by such differences in  
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## **The 50th day Remembrance Ceremony**

Arriving at Wat Pah Pong: there is an incredible sense of 'presence' on entering the sala and approaching the coffin; bowing; not wanting to finish bowing ... nor to leave.

That afternoon a large gathering of abbots from the various branch monasteries was arranged to discuss issues concerning Luang Por's cremation. As the Royal Family will preside over the event, it will involve a certain degree of pomp and ceremony requiring suitable preparation. Several hundred thousand people might come to this place, which usually houses one or two hundred, so the mind boggles to think of the facilities needed: water, food, toilets, parking etc. Each of the 120 branch monasteries was asked to run, or help to run, a food kitchen to keep the atmosphere untainted by commercialism.

On the earth-mound already built for the cremation - which is several hundred feet across - there will be a metal funeral pyre in the shape of a stupa. Afterwards, an identically shaped stupa will be built on the same spot to house Luang Por's relics. When it was suggested that the relics should not be distributed amongst the branch monasteries but should all be kept centrally in the stupa, the tone of what had been a fairly routine meeting shifted. In a way characteristic of north-eastern Thai culture, a good-humoured yet slightly heated Dhammic banter ensued: the mike bounced around the room as the Ajahns expressed their opposing views on this highly significant and symbolic issue. Conflict ripens in frustrated desires, and genuine concord is put to the test by such differences in preferences and positions. It was over this very issue of distribution of relics that war between seven states almost ensued upon the death of the Buddha. So when it became clear that this particular question was not yet likely to be resolved, it was decided that patience was needed to wait for a time when a more harmonious conclusion could come about.

This test of concord left me feeling strengthened. No-one knows how things will evolve without Luang Por's physical presence to harmonise and stabilise it all, but as far as maintaining enough harmony and stability to enable continued growth in Dhamma-Vinaya is concerned, it seems that the Sangha is quite prepared to make a successful go of it.

## **The all-night sit**

The tastefully decorated and spacious new sala, together with a vast array of spectacular wreaths, gave a suitable sense of grandness to this tribute to Ajahn Chah. This was also reflected in the quality of the talks that were given. First, Tan Chao Khun Pannananda gave a wonderfully inspiring talk. Then a list was announced of eighteen further speakers to give talks through the night. My name was thirteenth. Despite suggestions from fellow monks to ignore this invitation and return to Wat Bung Wai, I felt determined not to be swayed.\* Even if my talk was not until 4 a.m., and if by then only a handful of groggy survivors remained, and even if they didn't understand my Thai all that well - still, having come all this way, an opportunity to share from the heart with fellow-disciples was not to be missed.

\* Ajahn Santacitto had not rested since leaving the UK.

However, in the middle of the first talk, one of the senior bhikkhus approached and informed me that Luang Por Jun had changed the order of speakers, and I was next. I felt a strong determination not to think about it at all, and to wholeheartedly 'go for it.' It is said that there were thousands of people there, but I didn't really notice - trying to speak and relate to the few people sitting directly in front of me. A super-sensitive microphone and sound-system offered control

as effortless as that of a sports car, and the talk felt as if it took off with almost instant acceleration. I didn't quite realise what was happening as the words kept coming. I gave up trying to find the right word and grew content with the way my thoughts flowed. The real satisfaction, though, was being able to express some feeling about our living and practising together in harmony and concord.

When we returned to Wat Nanachat at 5 a.m., the unusually high number of vertical survivors perhaps showed the highly-charged feeling that the day's ceremonies had carried.

### **Wat Keuan**

Wat Keuan is on a peninsula in an artificial lake with a thousand acres of natural forest well-endowed with wildlife, including monkeys and wild boar. Ajahn Puriso's efforts to protect the forest - not only from poachers, but also from forest fires (sometimes two or three a day in the peak of the hot season) - have been reported even in the international press. It's an environmental story with a happy ending. The self-sacrificing determination of the bhikkhus won the help of the authorities and the financial support which made it possible to build a defensive wall cutting across and protecting the peninsula. This beautiful and peaceful environment has now been transformed into a very fine forest monastery which, despite having an Australian abbot, is truly Thai - a good midway station for Western bhikkhus moving from the special support of the International Forest Monastery at Bung Wai to a greater freedom further afield.

There are two other special features of this site, one of which is the daily boat ride across the lake for alms-round. Contemplating the graceful flow of water yielding can quickly calm the mind. The other special feature is a resident human corpse. It seems that visiting him and, especially staying the night, has its calming effect!

On Observance Day the Sangha and about fifty white-clothed villagers did the all-night sitting out in the open in the full-moonlight, which was so beautifully romantic that it was worth taking pictures. Ajahn Puriso did just that, using a new technique which did not require a flash - even by moonlight. The story that the inspiring picture posters won't be telling though is that the community spirit was being empowered that night by patient endurance, as we were busy feeding hundreds, if not thousands, of voracious out-of-season mosquitoes.

### **Kanchanaburi**

Another branch of the International Forest Monastery is in Kanchanaburi - a province which is not without its similarities to the American Wild West, with its gun-toting villagers and air of lawlessness. Instead of the wholesale destruction of the American bison, the buffalo, here we have the utter devastation of endless miles of natural forest. So Ajahn Gavesako has asked permission from the Forestry Department to protect about 5000 acres of forest around the monastery as well as to re-forest some of the newly-devastated areas with ten thousand saplings.



Kanchanaburi was made world-famous by the movie 'Bridge on the River Kwai', which documented the terrible hardships endured by allied slave labour at the hands of the Japanese while building Death Railway. It earned this name from the nearly hundred thousand lives it cost, about one life per railway sleeper. Many years ago, a museum here full of artefacts, recording the whole horrific story, moved me so deeply that I walked pilgrimage on the fifty miles of remaining track in dedication to the victims. Now, ten years later and fifty years since the actual event, it seems curious to come back and find this the site of a monastery built by my Japanese bhikkhu friend, Gavesako. Here, Japanese, Westerners and Thais now live and practise together in a way that helps the horrors of the past reach true resolution and cessation.

I arrived to find Venerable Vimalo - our good-natured friend, ex-anagarika Paul Hendrick - and a Welsh bhikkhu. With the help of a Burmese bhikkhu and an Australian novice, they were working hard from 6 a.m. to 4 p.m. building a dam. They light-heartedly pointed out how difficult it was not to joke about certain curious similarities to the past with them slaving away (voluntarily, I hasten to add) under Japanese management. However, the power of peace overflowing from their practice, is healing not only the pain of the past, but also that of the future.

War they say is the scourge, the cruel tormentor responsible for all this horror. Let us remember, let it never happen again. Yes, but ... to me that doesn't fully resonate, doesn't quite ring true. I walk out of the door of the bamboo-hut replica of where prisoners slept, back into the real world: pretty objects for the tourists, pretty tourists, the beat of music, air conditioning ... 'Oh, Venerable Sir, you must take a taxi' ... Not so slowly, but ever so surely, the sacredness of remembering them is devoured by heedlessness; lulled into sufficient forgetfulness that memory can be expediently swept under the rug of this moment's comfort. Yet the pain in the heart can still be noticed when turned to; and when I do, I notice there is also a confusion about what's being felt. So I reach for a pen, for notebook, feeling there is something within which wants to speak and is asking me for a voice ... and now, said, it's time to return to my world - where there is still heedlessness and forgetting.



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## Journey to a Buddhist Kingdom

*Having received an official invitation from the Bhutanese Civil Service, Ajahn Pasanno and Ajahn Jayasaro, the two senior bhikkhus from Wat Pah Nanachat, spent two weeks in Bhutan in April of this year. The following is extracted from a conversation with Ajahn Jayasaro concerning the trip.*

**Question:** What is the present state of Buddhism in Bhutan?

**Answer:** Very healthy, I think. The Sangha is large in terms of the percentage of the population; the ten or twenty thousand monks and nuns represent a higher percentage of the population than even in Thailand. Monks are very much in evidence everywhere. There is a close liaison between the head of the Sangha and the government department which administers things like funding, and the monks play an important part in public life. There are ten monks in the Parliament and two or three in the Privy Council, so the monks' opinions and feelings about public affairs are closely heeded. No major bill is passed without the monks' approval.

The Head, the secretary of the monks' body, who is a direct liaison between the King and Sangha, is a very keen Buddhist reformer, and he has a cosmopolitan background with a broad vision of the way things should go in the future. He's pushing through things that the conservatives would find difficult to come up with themselves. One good example of that is the fact that nearly all the scriptures are in Tibetan, and when monks give Dhamma talks, they tend to read it from the Tibetan scriptures so that people don't understand what they're all about. It's more like a ritual. There are a small number of monks who speak in the vernacular, but not many. The secretary is trying to increase the number by encouraging monks to speak in the vernacular, getting the scriptures translated into Bhutanese. Previously, the difficulty was that the Bhutanese language did not have a script, so now they've solved that problem by just using a Tibetan script for Bhutanese words.

English tuition is also being encouraged in monastic colleges. English is the teaching medium in high school, so all Bhutanese who have been through high school speak fluent English, but the monks haven't learned English. Now, the secretary has initiated a change in the curriculum so monks and novices do one or two hours of English every day, in order to better propagate the Dhamma. So, I'm generally impressed with the state of the Sangha.

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It's pleasant to see such power not being abused for  
selfish ends.

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**Q:** Bhutan is making a determined effort to maintain its Buddhist culture; how did this impress you?

**A:** One of the reasons we were so keen to go was because, in running our monastery, we have a lot of invitations to teach people on all levels of society, and one of the major things that

comes up is trying to integrate Buddhist teachings in a society which is rapidly industrialising. So it was very interesting to go to a country which is making sincere efforts to maintain and strengthen its Buddhist culture and put Buddhist values first. This contrasts with Thailand, where Western capitalist values tend to be put first and then Buddhism is grafted on to that afterwards. We were very impressed by the dedication of people in power, especially the King himself. An example of this was the Lord Chief Justice, who is making efforts to develop the Code of Justice in Bhutan, to make it more Buddhist. From his readings of the Tripitaka (Buddhist Scriptures), he feels that cetana (intention) should be the foundation of a legal code, so we were discussing the practicalities of using intention in prosecuting a legal case.

It's not democracy as such, so the people in power do have a lot more ability to make radical reforms and change things without having to go through a lot of discussion and argument. It's pleasant to see such power not being abused for selfish ends.

**Q:** How much evidence is there of Western technology in the country? And is it being integrated in a balanced way?

**A:** Again, I was very impressed to see they're trying to be their own refuge, and not rely on huge amounts of foreign aid, or push for rapid development. Western technology is not so widespread, although admittedly we were in the mountains a lot. Electricity is to be seen pretty well everywhere because it's Bhutan's main export. They have many swiftly flowing rivers, a number of Hydro Electric Power projects and are exporting electricity to India, so the towns there have electricity. There are many Western agencies with various programmes in Bhutan, and the most obvious evidence of technology is Japanese vehicles, especially in the capital city of Thimpu. In Thimpu you also see a few fridges in shops and VCR's but there is no TV in Bhutan. One thing they were expressing concern about was the lack of control of videos, which are available on the market, but otherwise it's generally a very basic subsistence economy.

**Q:** The style of Buddhism is completely Tibetan, isn't it? How are the monasteries supported?

**A:** Yes, they're funded by the government, their needs are supplied by the government, so there is not so much intense contact between the laity and the monks as, for instance, you find in Thailand. It means that many monasteries are in very remote areas, far from villages, in very beautiful silent spots.

**Q:** What is the position of women vis-à-vis ordination?

**A:** There are quite a lot of nuns. We visited a nunnery outside of Thimpu, which was well-supported and had a lot of young girls training as nuns. I don't think they get the same support as the monasteries so they have to be a bit more self-sufficient. They have a samanera ordination; there is not a full bhikkhuni ordination: I think it's the same as in Tibet.

One of the things that would often come up when we were chatting with the monks about our monastic tradition, was that they would be quite shocked or amused by the fact that in Thailand people would become monks for short periods, and that ordination was not a lifetime commitment. For them, disrobing is almost unthinkable. It would be a major humiliation and even require paying a fine if one were to disrobe. Certainly in the case of a Parajika, an offence entailing expulsion from the Sangha, there would be a very



heavy fine to pay or imprisonment. So young boys enter the monastery from the age of seven upwards and then after ordination, they never consider disrobing; it's never a possibility; your life is dedicated to the religion.

One can see the value of temporary ordination in Thailand - if you have people that have been monks for a while and realise they don't have the vocation to give their whole lives, then they can leave. It becomes a problem when people feel they can't disrobe and stay against their will; especially if their sila is not so good, which causes a lot of difficulties in the monastery.

In Bhutan, one of the ways to deal with this problem is that there are many different kinds of occupation that monks can get into. You have monks who specialise in administration, in painting, in monastic arts and sacred dance, and monks who are studying or are into meditation. If you don't have the faith to go all the way, then you could become an administrator instead. So my impression was there was something for everybody.



**Q:** Did you talk to many of the monks about their meditation practice?

**A:** It was difficult. Firstly because of language - our translator was unsure of himself and afraid of mistranslating. Also, very few of the younger monks had really got that far, because meditation is put up on such a pedestal and there are so many preliminary practices that one has to do first. The feeling is that if one hasn't gone through the preliminary purification, and one hasn't had the blessing or initiation of one's Guru, then meditation will not bear fruit. It's quite a long time before monks get down to meditation as we know it.

One of the things we were stressing when we were teaching was bringing the Dhamma down to earth; although the more advanced Tantric practices might need a lot of preparation, surely it was not too much to be mindful of what you were doing and saying, and trying not to attach to things that arose and passed away in the mind. We encouraged the view of everyday life being a form of meditation.

**Q:** The preliminary stages in their practice also put a lot of emphasis on devotion, don't they?

**A:** Yes. It's stressed very much in the whole society.

**Q:** You mean more so than in Thailand?

**A:** Oh, yes! Buddhism in Bhutan is much more bound up with the whole animist tradition - even to the extent that local deities have their own side shrines in the main shrine room, complete with various weapons and shields and strange paraphernalia; there's a strange 'pagan' feeling. Of course the shrines themselves are very different from what we're used to. Padmasambhava is a recurrent figure as are Avalokiteshvara, Manjushri, and the group of sixteen Arahants. Often these compartments on the side of the main shrine contain the Tripitaka and the Mahayana scriptures, and then quite often the Tantric deities that couple in sexual union. As a Theravada monk, one feels a little bit uncomfortable the first few times being taken in and expected to bow to these deities, but one reminds oneself that these are symbols of spiritual truths which one is seeking to develop. This is the difference between idolatry and the Buddhist idea of Puja, isn't it, whether you bow to the thing itself or what it's pointing to.

**Q:** Were you invited to give a few formal talks while you were there?

**A:** Yes, we were invited to give talks in a number of schools. The first day we spoke to the

Secretary of the Religious Affairs Department, and he was outlining the programme they had set up for us, asking what we might like to do. I said it would be very interesting to go and visit a school and see what kind of questions they have. He said they'd try and arrange it.

After a few days, we went to the Central Province, which is the heart of Bhutanese Buddhism, with very old temples and historical sites. One day we passed a school and dropped in. It was evening time and they were still studying. We spoke to the teacher, and he invited us to come around the next day and speak with the people. We went, and the pupils - two or three hundred of them - were very interested and all spoke good English. We both gave a short talk on Buddhist principles, and then we were flooded with questions for over an hour and a half. The teachers were very happy and the translator was elated. So the next day we went to another province and the first thing he did was to arrange for us to talk at another school. He was anxious to repeat the success of the previous day, and it went even better. The pupils were older and the questions were more sophisticated. Then we were invited to another school, which is considered to be the top junior school in the capital, one or two days before we left. I really enjoyed that a lot.

We found that the obvious question was: 'What brought you, as Westerners, to Buddhism?' So we talked about the characteristics we saw in Buddhism that we felt were lacking in our own religious traditions, and we found that many of those things were not present in their own Buddhist tradition.

**Q:** Could you give an example?

**A:** For instance, the emphasis on self-reliance, which is not really stressed in their own tradition. They have the mythologies and deities, and - at least on the lay level, for most Bhutanese - that's what it's all about. The idea of teaching as tools for awakening was quite fresh for them.

**Q:** Are there any other aspects of your trip which have stayed with you?

**A:** Geographically, the country itself is spectacular. They keep very strict control over the number of tourists who enter Bhutan. The country is underdeveloped and there's very little deforestation - at least in comparison with the other parts of the Himalayas. It's a very awesome country and the monasteries are built way up in the mountains. We visited one at the end of our trip which was extremely high up. It's very hard to imagine how anyone could build a monastery there; a sheer rock face hundreds of feet high; just to climb up there was quite a trek, let alone carrying rocks and building materials. So I feel a lot of joy that these people are trying to maintain something of their traditions and are not just throwing them out the window.

I also remember something an old Canadian Jesuit monk told me. He'd become a naturalised Bhutanese and was working in the educational department teaching art to a group of students. He really wanted to bring out their creativity and individuality. Now in Bhutan, almost all art is religious, the artists never write their names on the paintings and all the religious figures are painted according to set rules of iconography. This monk tried to get them to paint a more original form of Buddha or Deity, to put their imagination and feeling into it. Afterwards, the paintings were sent off to a competition - but the one that won was painted in the traditional iconographic style. For me, it was a really good example of the Western and Eastern minds. For the Occidental, being different and expressing something particular and personal is stressed, whereas for the Oriental, this is not important. Instead, they give themselves to painting according to very set guidelines and harmonise with them, without feeling it a bar to their creativity.

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## The Rains Retreat - Ten Rains

The Rains Retreat, or Vassa, is a three month period during which time monks and nuns reside in one monastery. It is a time for quiet and reflection on the rhythms of spiritual life, the good work done, both inner and outer, and the cumulative effects of that work in nourishing one on the path ahead.

*Sister Candasiri was one of the first four siladhara (ten-precept nun or 'one who upholds virtue'), given the Going Forth in 1983 by Ajahn Sumedho. Here she shares her reflections on this auspicious marker in her monastic life.*

Today, I feel good about saying I have been in the community for 13 years and that this is my tenth Vassa as a siladhara. Six months ago, while on a brief retreat in the forest here at Chithurst, I felt differently; I wished that I could somehow alter those numbers. There was a strong inclination to lie about my age in the Holy Life as it seemed that, after all this time, I should surely be a lot holier, wiser, better at meditating, better at teaching, more disciplined than I was!... However, things change, and now it doesn't seem to matter at all. I can see that in this life there is no need to concern ourselves with our level of attainment, or to compare ourselves with others. True joy arises when we can live simply moment by moment, year by year, making a humble offering from the heart of all that one is - warts, pimples and all. The slight sense of apprehension at the prospect of Vassa has not much diminished with the passing years. Whereas, 'winter retreat' means, 'quiet time, chance to meditate', 'Vassa' conjures up a sense of hardship and striving which is not so appealing. At the start, 3 months seems like a very long time; by the end, one wonders where the time has gone. As with everything, the idea or anticipation has very little to do with actual experience. One anticipates; then there is the ceremony in which we each make a formal statement of intent to remain within the monastery for three months (quite painless) - and the form of Vassa is there to take up and use.

The nuns' community here at Chithurst has been very tiny, with two siladhara and three anagarikas, in relation to the monks' community of about twenty bhikkhus and anagarikas. We have been grateful for the precedent set over recent years of a considerable degree of autonomy - with morning pujas, most evening pujas, Dhamma discussions and Vinaya classes being held at Aloka cottage. This has done much to soften the impression which strict adherence to garudhammas might have created, both in the minds of the nuns themselves and of people associated with the community. The eight garudhammas (important observances) which, according to tradition, were established by the Buddha as a condition for the Going Forth of the first nun, define a relationship of dependency between the nuns and Bhikkhu Sangha. The first of these is that: 'Any nun, even if she has been ordained for a hundred years, must pay homage to, get up for, reverentially salute and respectfully greet any bhikkhu - even one admitted to the community that very day.'

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The mendicant life-style of a nun may seem austere in the extreme to comfortably-off people in Western society, but I felt that I was living like a princess.

This, outrageous as it may appear in the eyes of modern society, has actually presented one of the most insightful challenges for me in monastic life. For example: I could see a certain inner reaction when, on the morning after the bhikkhu ordination, another six bhikkhus along with other monks arriving to reside for the Vassa, took their places in front of me in the meal time queue; and I could barely endure the seemingly endless wait for the youngest monk to begin eating, before the nuns could start their meal. One can sense, and sometimes feel the dignity and grace of really not minding, but at times it can seem like a totally humiliating experience - how can one feel so outraged by something so trivial in ultimate terms?!... But that's what we're here for; to see that rage, to understand those plaintive voices of 'self' still hanging on in there, and then gently and patiently allow them to die away.

A short stay in the forest provided an opportunity for further reflection on the use of food. There was tremendous gratitude for the meal which each day sustains us in this life. There was also a slight sense of shame; it seemed so gross and unpleasant to complain about details of form, or the quality or quantity of the food offered, when so many people in the world are starving.

The mendicant life-style of a nun may seem austere in the extreme to comfortably-off people in Western society, but I felt that I was living like a princess. I stayed in a little hut (5'6" x 7'), which contained all that I needed: adequate clothing (including gum boots and a huge waterproof cape), umbrella, hot water bottle, thermos flask, mug - and an almsbowl, which each day would be filled. I had a shrine there too. For the first week there was a Buddha rupa, candles, incense, a small vase of flowers, and pictures of Ajahn Sumedho and Ajahn Chah. Then I remembered that after Luang Por Chah's death, I had been given several photographs of the body. I had put these away in a drawer. Now, I knew that it was time to find them and put them on the shrine....What was it about them that made me not want to have them there, not want to look at them - whereas I found the other pictures so attractive? So they came out, and for the remaining days I was able to contemplate the quality of death.... There is still much, in this life, to be done!

Walking in the forest, I'd notice the newly planted trees - mostly growing strong and healthy, but every now and then I'd find one in trouble, leaning over at a peculiar angle or with the bark nibbled by deer. I was glad that I could perform a minor rescue operation: finding a new stake and pushing it well down into the soil to support the ailing tree.

The Vinaya classes held two or three times a week, and adapted to suit the needs of the anagarikas in training, gave a wonderful incentive to delve into the Vinaya Pitaka (books on discipline). With less material to cover than would be the case for bhikkhus or siladhara, we were able to linger more on the stories behind many of the rules which were laid down during the lifetime of the Buddha. The extraordinary range of mistakes, misunderstandings and downright stubbornness, which the Buddha had to deal with among his disciples, made one marvel at his skill and patience in guiding the community. Although at times one might be depressed or feel dismay at the misdeeds of those monks and nuns, I personally found it strangely encouraging; somehow the whole life became much more accessible. One comes to appreciate that, while there were many enlightened disciples, the majority were people from a wide variety of



backgrounds, and who had differing levels of ability and understanding. They lived, breathed and experienced difficulties much as we do today.

As a community, the nuns and anagarikas have also spent time each week looking into aspects of Dhamma. There was a feeling of uncertainty at the outset, as it was not something that we had had much experience of; however, it seemed very clear that the only way to gain experience was to make the effort to do it. So we did. Our theme for the Vassa was the Paramitas, and we took turns to present our ideas and readings from relevant suttas on one of these perfections. It seems that such Dhamma discussion works best when we let go of the idea of having to give a 'grand performance' - a simple offering is enough to stimulate the minds and hearts of those listening. Each week we were nourished by seeds of reflection which were carried into all we did.

Perhaps the nicest thing about this Vassa has been the growing sense of ease and appreciation at watching and learning from others. The sense that one should be the best, know the most - just by virtue of one's age - is lessening. I smile inwardly as I listen while those 'younger' explain points of practice, and I eagerly gather up crumbs of Dhamma which they let fall. The pleasure of mudita (sympathetic joy) is surprising and contrasts sharply with the more familiar cramped defensiveness which one's misguided expectations have engendered over the years.

It seems that we in the West still have much to learn about the use of form and hierarchy. It is not like a nine-to-five job in which we assume a role just for that period of time; for us, 'monk', 'nun', 'senior' or 'junior' is there all the time. We can bind ourselves stiffly into such an identity, or we can see that the structure is there to help us be fully human. It was established by the Buddha for the welfare of all; to encourage beautiful, harmonious and respectful speech and behaviour, and to provide a framework within which understanding can grow. If we look closely at our conditioned responses - the fear of losing some position, or of being exploited or controlled by some power-hungry authority figure - we can begin to let them go. We can see our position, whatever it is, as a chance to serve and to encourage and respect the aspiration towards freedom, wherever it may arise.

I like to think of Venerable Anuruddha, when he was asked by the Buddha how it was that he and his companions were able to spend a Vassa 'living in concord, as friendly and undisputing as milk and water.' His response was, 'I think that is gain and good fortune for me that I am living with such companions in the Holy Life. I maintain acts and words and thoughts of loving kindness towards those venerable ones both in public and in private.... We are different in body, but only one in mind.'

Evam.

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## The Rains Retreat - First Rains

The Rains Retreat, or Vassa, is a three month period during which time monks and nuns reside in one monastery. It is a time for quiet and reflection on the rhythms of spiritual life, the good work done, both inner and outer, and the cumulative effects of that work in nourishing one on the path ahead.

*Ven. Sunnato was one of the six men who were accepted into the Bhikkhu Sangha at Cittaviveka (Chithurst) this year. Here he reflects on his first three months as a bhikkhu.*

They say that in a moment of impending doom, just before the axe falls, your entire life will flash before your eyes. A similar thing happened to me on the day of my ordination as a monk.

So much was happening, on Chithurst grounds and in my mind. There was a sense of rightness to it all, that what had been my preoccupation for most of my life was to become my occupation. The urge to spiritual growth which had kept me from remaining in countless jobs and relationships was to be my basis for living during the next five years.

The mind flashed through pages of personal history in moments between the preliminary requests. What had often seemed to be a threadless sequence of adventures through almost all the possible sectors of North American society now was an obvious journey to this one moment.

You might expect that after forty-one years of living, often in some very jaded parts of the world, there would not be much childlike enthusiasm remaining for anything, but not true. For a few weeks following the ordination I leapt from bed each early morning, filled with delight. Spiritual truths that, for years, I had struggled so ardently to discover in lay life were being dished out left and right; in conversation at morning gruel, in books of chants, instructions to new monks, and in evening Dhamma talks. I was 'a kid in a candy store'. The completeness of the Buddha's teaching which had revealed itself through Ruth Denison's\* skill in a somewhat unorthodox fashion was now, lump sum, placed in my lap in the very orthodox form of a forest monk's training. I knew the 'honeymoon' wouldn't last but decided to enjoy it while it did.

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There is a sense of finally living sanely in a world gone mad.

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It seems precious that I've arrived at a time of community renewal and recommitment. A number of changes in the last year have forced the monks and nuns to seriously examine their chosen futures, so this becomes a time of refocusing and gathering on spiritual themes.

Chithurst is under new leadership and it's a direction I can appreciate and trust. As Ajahn Sucitto assumed the position of senior monk, he offered us the opportunity to gather as a community in formal practice, with long periods of meditation throughout the Vassa as well

as two weeks of solitude in the forest. I was a little nervous that the good fortune was lasting so long and began to wonder when it would end.

During this time, some of the jewels of monastic life shine through. I enjoy my companions very much, the varied temperaments, approaches, and skills of people from around the world. Here I can talk to others about subjects like impermanence without watching their eyes dart nervously as truth gets closer, or without feeling as though they would rather talk about their new couch. Even in lay Dhamma centres where interest is strong, the main focus is often on how to use Dhamma to make life more palatable and not on what unhealthy behaviour patterns one may have to relinquish.

There is a sense of finally living sanely in a world gone mad. The crudely sensual appeal of a Los Angeles advertising hoarding is hardly conducive to the establishment of peace of mind and in that setting the word 'serenity' becomes the name of a car instead of a human possibility. Here in the monastery there is a sense of supporting life on many different levels. The moral standard that I am asked to live by does not allow sinking into old habits for false security. My psychological 'homes' are taken away as never before. My own previous attempts at this were strong but not to the constancy and detail of this tradition. I've found myself wondering why I had not been ordained sooner, but it's a foolish question. Lessons learned have been hard-won and they allow me to accept this training now.



Has the honeymoon ended? Yes, it happened about 3 o'clock on the afternoon of August 25 when a small voice whispered, 'This is for five years,' and another shouted 'Celebrate?! I thought they said celebrate!' The memory banks spewed forth the song stylings of Bruce Springsteen, Talking Heads, and James Taylor. They even threw in that Louis Armstrong piece, 'What a Wonderful World'. The emotions plummeted for a day or two, demanding foundation on firmer soil. I've had a growing appreciation for our one meal a day - or should I say expectation? - and the tedium of monastic life is now surfacing. Gone are the fireworks of newness, as they always have. Boredom will be one of my companions, and restlessness another.

Who can say what lies ahead. The underlying joy of spiritual life, as I've experienced it, is the freedom to face this unknown moment and the unknown future with grace and strength, the grace of quiet acceptance and the profound strength of understanding. Many religions present descriptions of their goals and processes and they can seem quite wondrous but I've never found any offering as beautiful as the Buddha's Ovada Patimokkha. It urges living simply, restrained in needs; being kind, patient, and supportive in thoughts, words and actions; and purifying the mind (ultimately by accepting and investigating life as it is). Spiritual 'bells' seldom ring as true. The sheer ordinariness of it is its power; with this attitude of living, I've come to know a release from life's confusions and constrictions.

Some spend their entire lives as monastics and I don't know whether I am one of them. But I do know that this life of a monk allows me to move wholeheartedly into the only way of living that has ever made sense to me. I am fortunate that such a situation exists. Right now I have only one problem. How does that old Bill Evans - Toots Thielemann tune go? The one that makes you feel like you are sitting in a Parisian café ... Oh well, never mind! I can let it

go.

\* Venerable Sunnato was for ten years a student of meditation teacher Ruth Denison at her centre in the Southern Californian desert.



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## Wildlife in Hammer Woods

*Much of the area of Cittaviveka (Chithurst) is taken up by forest, where a few Sangha members live from time to time. Mike Holmes, the Warden of Hammer Wood, reports on the other beings that inhabit the forest.*

Many people are interested in the wildlife of the Hammer Woods and I often get asked questions about it. One of our aims is to encourage it in all forms and make the area as environmentally suitable as possible. This is how a nature reserve is managed.

The term 'wildlife' covers all plants and animals; the necessity for their existence being a food chain and the correct habitat. A food chain requires a basis of native plant life. The insects which depend upon these then thrive and the predators will be there in their turn. However, much of the Hammer Woods has been artificially planted with only commercial interests in mind. The non-native tree species and the manner in which they are grown creates an environment in which our native wildlife cannot exist. For example, there are many areas of sweet chestnut - which is an important source of forest products, but non-native. Very few insects are dependent on sweet chestnut and plants do not grow on the forest floor. So there is no food chain.

Bio-diversity - to have as many different species as possible - is also important. An area planted with commercial sweet chestnut coppice or Scots pine is a mono-culture; in these areas, the overall wildlife count is low. One part of the Hammer Woods consists of hazel coppice and oak standards. This would have been managed until the Second World War in the traditional way, which created the cycle upon which our native wildlife depended. With no management over the last fifty years, the forest floor has become shaded and the area has become overgrown. Wildlife has decreased.

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Bramble is important.

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We are doing our best to gradually change all this and to bring the wildlife and native plants back. I have been able to clear our plantations of non-native conifers as markets for the timber arose. These areas are being replanted with native broadleaved species. Some areas of sweet chestnut have also been cleared and re-planted with native broadleaves. It will take many years for a broad-leaved forest to grow, but meanwhile, there is light on the forest floor. Seeds germinate and a food chain has been started.

We also have small corners where native plants have survived. They are easily seen by the profusion of butterflies there on summer days. The best places for wildflowers are parts of the forest roads which catch the sunlight and have grassed over. Trailing St. Johnswort grows in a number of such places; a mass of bugle flowers bloom early in the summer; Tormentil is

common, and Herb Robert and Scarlet Pimpernel may also be found.

Bramble is important. The flowers produce nectar for bees and other insects and their blackberries are food items for foxes and badgers as well as some birds. There are also small patches of wild daffodils, but the best show comes from the masses of foxgloves. Their seed remains for years in the soil and germinates when light strikes the forest floor after chestnut is coppiced. As the chestnut grows once more and the canopy closes, they no longer appear.

Occasionally I see Admiral butterflies, but our star is the Pearl-bordered Fritillary, of which we have a small colony. Together with the Silver-washed Fritillary, the food plant of their caterpillars is wild violet. I sow this seed whenever I can get hold of it. Another important plant for butterflies is the nettle. Nettles are a necessity for Peacock and Tortoiseshell butterflies; they are their caterpillars' food plant. Nettles should never be cleared. However, they are an anathema to gardeners and on two occasions, well-meaning gardeners staying at the monastery have got into the forest and cleared my beautiful nettle patches!

The Hammer Pond is disappointing. The Hammer Stream which feeds it is the runoff from the Milland Valley so the water is high in farm chemicals. The lakeside is also overshadowed by trees. This means that few water plants grow and thus it is poor for insects. Nevertheless, the habitat is good for some species of duck. Numbers of mallard grow to about forty each winter and those of teal to about half that; two winters ago, over fifty mandarins were in residence. They did not turn up last winter, but a few have arrived this autumn.

Nest boxes for owls, kestrels, woodpeckers and other hole-nesting birds have been put up and many are used. Kestrels usually spend the winter in the vicinity of their nests, but have ignored them in the breeding season so far. Altogether, the number of bird species logged is a little over sixty. This is not very many, but reasonable for the habitat available.

The real success story has been the creation of a circular pond about fifteen yards in diameter. This had been an area of boggy ground amongst derelict ash and alder coppice. Many trees including a fairly large oak had fallen across the wet patch and had to be cleared out. The coppice was cut to form an open space about fifty yards wide. This brought light to the forest floor and thus seed germinated. Also, the coppice cycle was re-started, which was a good thing in itself.

The muddy patch, having been cleared, became a pond. Plants and water produce insects, so throughout the summer there were many damsel flies about and dragon flies came to hunt smaller insects. Larger predators arrived. A colony of pipistrelle bats homed straight into the clearing. They hunt there every night. (Daubentans bats hunt over the Hammer Pond and there is also a colony of Whiskered bats in their vicinity.)

A few Roe deer live in our woods. Unless good protection is given, they cause a great deal of damage to our young trees



and first year coppice growth. However, it is worth it to see them.

Badger digging and baiting are on the increase through the South East so we must always be on our guard against this. Having people in the kutis and about the woods all the time is a great help.

Some years ago, we had hoped to have otters re-introduced into the Hammer stream. An otter survey is being carried out through Sussex at present and an initial survey has been made in our area. We will get advice from the experts before doing anything more about re-introduction. Although feral mink are fairly numerous, the only threat that they present to otters is the conflict for available food.

Autumn is the time for fungi. This year, with the help of a friend, I am trying to list all the species that I can identify. Mushrooms and toadstools are popping up in profusion. The beautiful red and white Fly Agaric is appearing under the birch trees, but its cousins, the deadly Death Cap and the Panther are more common.

If we work at the basis of the food chain and at habitat improvement, we will increase our wildlife population. It will take many years to make an appreciable difference, but we are slowly having an effect. It will be worth it and it will counteract the effect that intensive agriculture is having on the countryside.



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## SIGNS OF CHANGE

### Interreligious Understanding and Co-operation

1993 is the centenary anniversary of the World Parliament of Religions, held in Chicago 1893. It was the first time in modern history that nine of the major World Faiths had met on an equal footing, in America's, as yet embryonic, pluralistic society. Among the representatives of the Asian faiths were such figures as Swami Vivekananda and Anagarika Dhammapala.

The conference resulted in various declarations towards a vision of a society where the World Faiths could find a common cause in the service of humanity. Since then, there has been an imperceptible but persistent movement, from within all the faiths, towards a more open-minded dialogue. From the World Congress of Faiths in 1936, to the interfaith pilgrimage to Assisi in 1986, there are now many well-established links between the World Faiths.

More particularly, those of us who awakened to the spiritual life via an Eastern tradition, have often come to appreciate and understand the richness of the tradition that we left. So far from encouraging a kind of bland uniformity, the blending of cultures and faiths in modern society has amplified the power of each ancient form to enlighten and transform the individual from within. By appreciating and encouraging those things that are good within another's faith, the worth of our own chosen path becomes self-evident.

In particular, The Year of World Faiths is seeking to address the current predicament of the planet and the concern for the future. Secular groups, involved in ecological, planetary and humanitarian concerns, are beginning to recognise that the ancient religious traditions contain a vast storehouse of wisdom and practical advice that may be able to offer solutions to a world satiated with failed schemes to improve or annihilate problems and invent our way out of suffering.

The Year begins with a simultaneous launch at centres around the world. The British launch will be from Global Co-operation House on January 27th. This will be a full day of activities followed by workshops and multi-faith celebrations.

Throughout the year, different faiths will continue to hold a wide variety of events. In September, we will be hosting a conference here at Amaravati with a panel of distinguished speakers from monastic and spiritual communities of the Hindu, Buddhist and Christian faiths. The theme for the day will be the contribution that contemplative groups can offer to a world in crisis, entitled, 'Pathways for Mankind'.

Anyone who would like details about The Year of Interreligious Understanding and Co-operation should write to the:

Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University, Global Co-operation House, 65 Pound Lane, London NW10 2HH.

We will publish the details of our own event closer to the date.

### Amaravati Family Camp

**21 - 28 August 1993**

This year, with the increased commitments within the Sangha, we will unfortunately only be able to hold one seven-day family camp. To date, we have the minimum number of lay people to coordinate the camp: this includes housekeeping, bookings and activities. If there are experienced parents who would like to volunteer to assist in these activities, we invite you to attend the next planning meeting which will take place in April. Please contact Keith at the address below if you think you can help.

Bookings open on January 3rd ... close early April. If the camp is over-subscribed, we will try to give priority to newcomers or those who missed out last year. For bookings please write to: Keith Errey, 67 Stratford St., Oxford OX4 1SP. 0865 726582

### **Can you help?**

If you would like to help with teaching or running an activity or workshop (either Dhamma-oriented or general crafts, etc.), please contact: Jane Wheeler: 52 Tylney Rd., London E7. Tel: 081 586 0841

Or ... come and enjoy the Family Camp kitchen. Confident cooks and general helpers are needed to form a team. You should be free of other commitments to the camp. Older children or parents with older children may also be suitable. Please contact:

Sally Ash, Woodthorpe, Manor Crescent, Seer Green, Beaconsfield, Bucks HP9 2QX. Tel: 0494-671043.

For those interested in helping in either of the above ways, or as part of the lay coordinating team, there will be a meeting at Amaravati: Sunday, 4th April 1993, 1 pm. For details of organised activities for children over this weekend, see following page.

## **Amaravati Monastic Retreat**

### **Jan - Feb. Help Needed**

This year at Amaravati, since many of the senior monks will be away, we will continue with the ordinary monastic routine but with a greater emphasis on personal meditation practice in the afternoons.

In previous years, up to twenty lay people have spent the two month retreat here with us, acting in a supporting role so that the monks and nuns could take the opportunity to concentrate more on formal practice.

We would like to invite anyone who would like to come for a minimum of two weeks to help with the daily cooking, cleaning and general administration. In particular, the nuns would be grateful for additional help in caring for our elderly ones.

In the past, we have been able to distribute these responsibilities between Sangha members and lay supporters so that there is time for meditation practice in everyone's daily schedule, with Dhamma teachings and reflections at times when everyone is present. Chithurst and the other branch Viharas will be beginning their formal retreats in January and would also welcome help during this time. If you do have time during January and February and would like to support the community through your presence and willingness to assist in some of the general day to day work, your help would be most welcome and heartfully appreciated.

For further information please contact the Guest Monk or Guest Nun, c/o The Office Amaravati, Chithurst, Devon or Harnham.

Please Note: Ajahn Ariyesako will be senior incumbent during the time that Ajahn Santacitto is in Thailand.

## **Ajahn Chah's Cremation**

The ceremonies surrounding the funeral of The Venerable Ajahn Chah will run for ten days (Jan 10 - 20th) with the actual cremation taking place on the 16th of January. Throughout this time there will be morning and evening chanting each day, together with the meditation periods at 8 a.m. and 1 p.m.; also Dhamma talks will be given at 2 p.m. and 8 p.m. About 1,000 monks from the different branches of Wat Pah Pong, along with an estimated 2,000 laypeople will be present for this period.

On the cremation day itself, some 200,000 people are expected, including many highly respected elder monks, the King of Thailand, and possibly other members of the Royal

Family. It will be the King who ceremonially ignites the pyre. Much of the monastic community's energy over the past few months has gone into the construction of the Chedi, a 30 metre high Stupa, which will be both a cremation pyre and a permanent memorial.

As a gesture of communal spirit in devotion to Ajahn Chah's shrine, monks from all the different branches have come and spent six-day shifts helping with the building work before returning to their respective monasteries. The Chedi will be the centre of events, since at the start of the ceremonies, Ajahn Chah's coffin will be taken there from the Assembly Hall so that people can pay their final respects and make offerings of flowers and incense. Much other work has been done in preparing for this time: the area inside the monastery has been levelled to give more space for people to sit or sleep; improvements to the water and electrical systems have also been made, extra kitchens and toilets have been constructed and a sound system installed.

During this time, free-food kitchens will have been set up by groups of supporters and in order to discourage commercialisation of the event - nothing will be for sale. Books of teachings by Ajahn Chah - printed especially for the occasion - will also be available as a free offering.

