



# FOREST SANGHA newsletter

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Number 24

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**Cover:** ■ Luang Por Chah's Funeral; Ajahn Sucitto  
**Articles:** ■ Reflections on Luang Por Chah's Funeral; Sangha  
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This is a special commemorative issue in honour of the passing away of Luang Por Chah and featuring reflections and reports from those who attended his funeral in Thailand in January.

## The State Funeral of Luang Por Chah

*It is difficult for us to imagine the level of devotion of the Thai people towards such a teacher as Luang Por Chah. Though his love and compassion touched only a limited number of people in person, his recorded Dhamma talks, together with the practice exemplified by his disciples, have allowed his teaching to live in the hearts of millions. Ajahn Sucitto takes us back to the historic occasion of The State Funeral of Luang Por Chah which took place in January, one year after his passing away.*

We knew that the funeral of Luang Por Chah would be a special event: it had been a frequent topic for discussion at Wat Pah Pong during the last few years of the Master's illness; it would bring disciples from all over the world and it would (most likely) be presided over by either H.M. King Bhumipol, H.M. Queen Siriket, or even both.

These three factors seemed to heighten both the auspiciousness of the occasion and its potential difficulties: who would attempt to organise such an event - and amongst so many possible views, how would one plan emerge to accommodate such an indeterminate but certainly large multitude of visitors with their needs for food and shelter? What kind of style and standard - given Wat Pah Pong's noted and principled austerity - would be appropriate for a Royal Funeral?

The Sangha in Europe were not involved in any of the negotiations and decision-making. We only heard that Ajahn Liam (the acting Abbot of Wat Pah Pong) and Ajahn Passano (acting Abbot of Wat Pah Nanachat) were devoting all their time to making the arrangements, that Sangha gatherings at Wat Pah Pong were held to ensure harmony and mutual support, that a new sala, dining hall and chedi (stupa) were being constructed, that monks at Wat Pah Pong were labouring for 10-12 hours per day on building projects, that bhikkhus were coming from branch monasteries to help with the work, and that the tentative

estimate of 200,000 guests, itself staggering for a forest monastery that might accommodate 100 or so in a full Rains Retreat, could turn out to be an underestimate.

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The mind stretched to accommodate the superlatives as smoothly as the monastery stretched day-by-day to accommodate 1,000 ... 1,500 ...3,000 ... 5,000 bhikkhus.

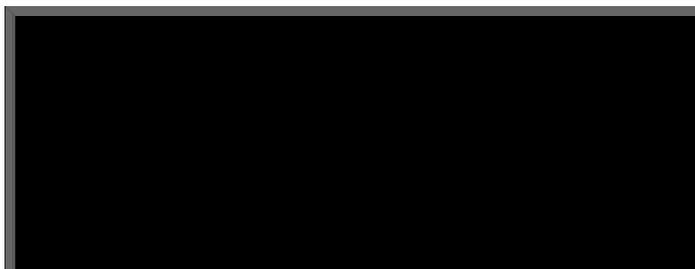
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On arriving at Ubon, the Western bhikkhus and siladhara (Luang Por Sumedho, Ajahn Khemadhammo, abbots and senior monks from the branch monasteries in the West; Ajahn Viradhammo and the entire Sangha from New Zealand; Ajahns Jagaro and Brahmawangso from Western Australia; Sisters Sundara and Candasiri) were taken to Wat Pah Nanachat, about 10 kilometres from Wat Pah Pong. Residents gave up their kutis to the gathering of 60 Western bhikkhus, samaneras and nuns, opting to sleep out on bamboo platforms under their mosquito net umbrellas. Graciousness, quiet hospitality and ease were the order of the day and the dark forest absorbed everyone. After morning chanting brought us together, alms rounds introduced us to the local villagers who provided ample food, enthusiastically, for all their new guests. Things seemed capable of stretching beyond rational expectation.

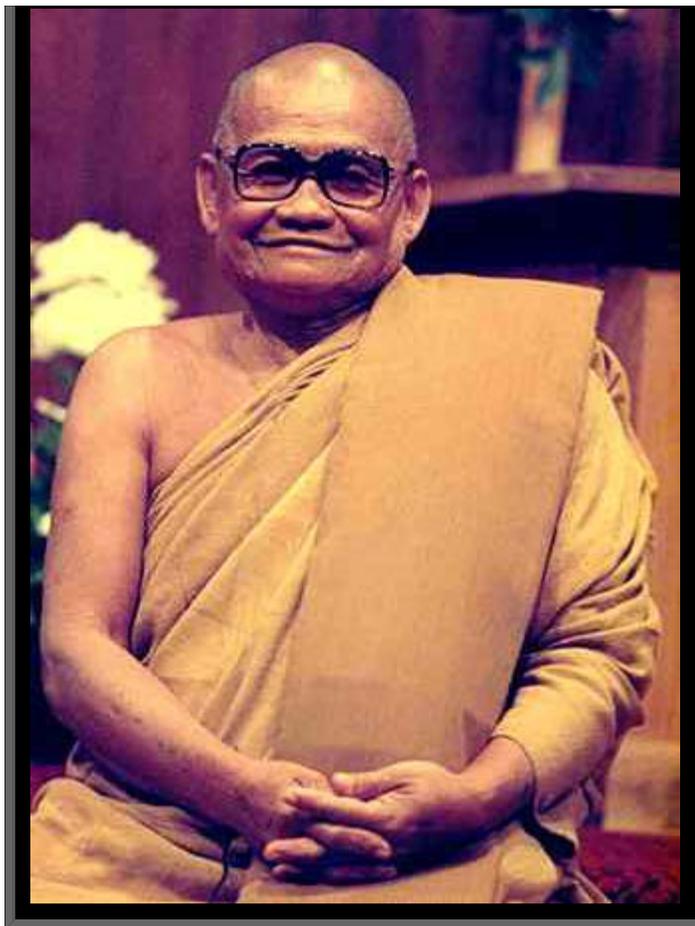
On the 9th, the first day of funeral proceedings, the Sangha of Wat Pah Nanachat travelled to Wat Pah Pong to join in the occasion of moving Luang Por Chah's body to the chedi. It was another time for the mind to stretch. After the buses dropped us off at one side of the monastery and we had walked through the gate, we were stopped by the spectacle of a large and extremely graceful pure white chedi. Its inverted bowl base straddled a broad grass mound and its tall sinuous column climbed into the bright blue tropical sky - with broad avenues proceeding from it in four directions.

The stupa is modelled on two of the most sacred shrines of Thailand; the base echoes that of Wat Phra Pathom Chedi, the oldest stupa in Thailand and the spire is a replica of Wat Phra That Phanom in Nakhon Phanom, the major shrine of the North East. The entirety - 32 meters high, 50 meters broad - was constructed in six months, mostly by the Sangha at Wat Pah Pong. The gold-painted domed ceiling inside the chedi was supported by two concentric circles of pillars, also painted in gold; the inner circle of four pillars representing the Four Noble Truths, the outer of twelve representing the structure of Dependent Origination. In the centre of these circles was the crematory, a large metal box covered with boards which were decorated with gold wax arabesques and floral designs that gave it the appearance of a giant candle.

In front of the crematory was the



shrine which would bear a life-size painting of Luang Por, his bowl and robes and later, his relics. The floor on which we knelt to pay our respects was of polished black granite whose mirror-like surface reflected the pillars so that one seemed to be suspended inside the matrix of a Dhamma mandala. This mandala was to be the setting for Luang Por's funeral casket. For a week people would be filing through this sacred place paying their last respects; here a round-the-clock meditation vigil would be held and his body would finally return to the elemental state. After the cremation, when the crematory was dismantled, a new shrine bearing his relics in a crystal bowl would be established in its place as a lasting memorial, a focus for devotion, reflection and meditation.



About 900 bhikkhus were present in the huge new sala - and how many nuns and lay people? The effect of so much uniformity made it impossible to count. There were only two colours in this vast devotional mural - the ochre brown of bhikkhus and samaneras, and the white of the nuns, anagarikas and lay disciples - it was almost hypnotic, with features like the occasional head of hair, or the dark brown robes of our two nuns almost reassuring the eye that it was not fixated in some surrealist trance.

After the chanting and the asking of forgiveness, the casket was borne out by two groups of 16 disciples, laymen who had shaved their heads and taken the Eight Precepts for the entire event. The casket - a fantastic creation of polished dark wood spangled and braided with mother-of-pearl nagas, devatas, and Buddhas - was made, fantastically enough, by a man serving life imprisonment in Ubon, as an act of devotion to Luang Por Chah. With Ajahns Liam and Pasanno carrying a life-size portrait of Luang Por Chah at the front, followed by a gathering of the most senior monks, the casket was carried out of the sala and around the centre of the monastery followed by the rest of the assembly, and brought into the shrine in the chedi.

And so it began. The mind stretched to accommodate the superlatives as smoothly as the monastery stretched day-by-day to accommodate 1,000 ... 1,500 ...3,000 ... 5,000 bhikkhus: bhikkhus being bused off to surrounding villages for alms rounds, eating en masse, bowl washing en masse, chanting and meditating en masse and peacefully abiding. And there were about 1,000 nuns, and over the days nearly a million lay visitors (500,000 on 16th January alone) passing through, filing into the chedi to bow three times to the shrine, or camping out in their thousands in the grounds under umbrellas, and gathering as a congregation around the chedi for the evening chanting, meditation and Dhamma talk. Thousands of books were given away: over forty free-food kitchens provided food for everyone. (Any form of buying and selling was firmly but politely forbidden as inappropriate within the monastery grounds.) First-aid posts were established and nurses were freely available for anyone who felt ill or faint in the 30 degrees plus heat.

At times it seemed that everyone one had ever even thought of in this Sangha life was there - particularly on the cremation day itself. On the 16th of January the gathering included the Sangharaja (the Supreme Patriarch, Somdet Nanasamvara) Somdet Buddhajahn, Tan Chao Khuns Debvedi, Pannananda, Dhammarajanidesa; Ajahn Maha Boowa and all the teachers and abbots of Wat Pah Pong's 130 branch monasteries; occasionally even the face of a lay disciple from England would catch one's eye in the flowing stream of humanity. By 4 pm bhikkhus, nuns, former bhikkhus, villagers and ministers were seated silently around the chedi; then a distant fanfare, a ripple of excitement in the crowd, and eventually two figures walking under ceremonial black umbrellas, well attended by men in uniforms, ascended the steps into the stupa to initiate the ceremonial climax of the occasion. Their Majesties the King and Queen had come to pay their respects; having presented ten sets of robes to ten Tan Chao Khuns, they offered candles, incense and flowers, knelt on the granite floor of the chedi and bowed.

After the royal couple it was everyone else's turn; from the Sangharaja, senior Mahatheras, government officials, and the bhikkhu Sangha, to the nuns and the laity. Evening meditation at 6pm was followed by chanting, meditation, and desanas from Ajahn Maha Boowa, Ajahn Sumedho and Tan Chao Khun Debvedi. At midnight, the majority of the bhikkhu Sangha managed to squeeze into the chedi to ask forgiveness of Luang Por, to take the coffin from the casket and commit it to the flames. We stood back to open our hearts to this final moment.

But the actions of humans, however superlative, are never final. Chance and circumstance have a way of surpassing us. And so it was - the effect of all the offerings of sandalwood on the coffin, and maybe too much charcoal, caused the fire to burn too fiercely - scorching the wiring that was to open the vents in the chimney; the heat was therefore all contained in the crematory which split open ... flames licked out to catch the wax decorations, smoke billowed out and filled the chamber, the boards crashed down ... people stood back, some began to bring water, fire trucks appeared.... From outside the chedi as it glowed in the spotlights against the dark sky, the spectacle had the quality of a vision - the Four Elements dramatically manifesting within the place of purity as some final image of the life of a Master.

But everyone remained cool and peaceful; the fire was extinguished, people began mopping up, some found places out of the cold night wind to meditate, some began to walk home. The mind was allowed to contract to more mundane considerations. All those people - following a routine that began at 3 am with morning chanting, a day filled with meditation sittings and Dhamma talks until 10 pm; hours sitting on the hard concrete or the hard earth, not in rigid order, but peacefully, reflectively. Reading the moment-by-moment stabbing twinges running through this soft Western body, watching the Thais huddling under blankets in balaclavas in the cool night wind, contemplating the amount of effort put in by the organisers of the ceremony, one recognised the common quality that even a monarch bows to. We all had a

chance to unhook in some small way from the persistent nagging of desire. Here were the remains of a person who let go of a lot more - of all of it, some believe. This point is not worth debating - but there is no doubt that he did enough to show us that that was the Path and that it could be consistently and beautifully practised.

After three days, a chosen number of bhikkhus presided over the extraction of the relics from the crematory. Most were locked up for safe keeping; three large relics, white and honeycombed like coral, were placed on the shrine for public view. When we left, the Sangha were still using the chedi for their group meditation practice.

## MATURITY

Maturity  
Sunshine and shadow  
immutably must blend,  
and be together  
cheek to cheek until the end

This poem was written by Sister Uppalamuni some 40 years ago when she was still a laywoman named Elaine Beth Tregaskis.

### **Chao Khun Sumdehacariya**

On March 7th at the Magha Puja gathering at Amaravati, the investiture of Chao Khun Sumedhacariya (Luang Por Sumedho) was formally acknowledged by the Sangha.



## Reflections on Luang Por Chah's Funeral

*Ajahn Amaro, Ajahn Munindo, Sister Candasiri and Medhina were all present at the funeral. Here they share some of their impressions of that time.*

■ Ajahn Munindo, ■ Sister Candasiri, ■ Medhina

### Ajahn Amaro

I took my seat one day in the new eating hall, finding myself sandwiched between old friends, some of whom I had not seen for nigh on fifteen years, and surrounded by an enormous sea of monks.

The hall was filled, as was the entire central area of the monastery, up to where the forest began. One brown wave amongst some 2,000 others that day. As we ate, I thought of where I might escape to wash my bowl afterwards - to avoid all the rush and confusion - but then I realised 'Why do you need to be so clever, to always be different? Why not just jump in and be like all the others?'

And how delicious that was; surely there was a great bustle and a blur of water splashes, soap powder, brown robes and bodies, but we moved around each other with good humour and deference, and one could see right there, that if we take the trouble to go into the rough and tumble of life with mindfulness and a good heart, peace, joy and the delight of communal harmony are the qualities that can be coaxed forth from it.

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It was like an epic movie unfolding in slow motion  
before our eyes ...

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■ Ajahn Amaro, ■ Sister Candasiri, ■ Medhina

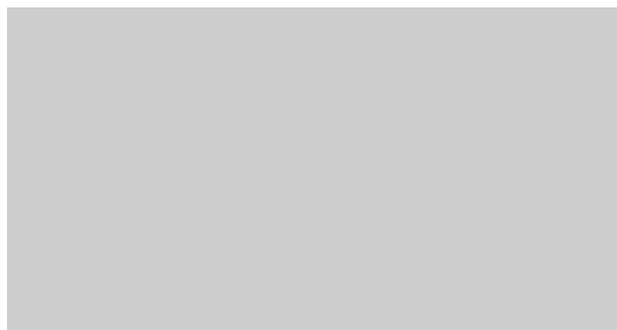
### Ajahn Munindo

In the Ajahn Chah style, we can hear teachings whenever we are ready to listen, and as the flames and smoke billowed out of the chedi, it caused me to reflect. When the heart is properly prepared with patience, resolve and restraint, there is the strength to contain the power of the passions as they flare up. But with uninspected cracks, or weaknesses in the system, we end up with an enormous mess. One was reminded to prepare the 'container' of the heart with as much skilfulness as one can muster. It is true that we can't afford to take our time over practice, but it is also true that we mustn't try to rush it.

■ Ajahn Amaro, ■ Ajahn Munindo, ■  
Medhina

### Sister Candasiri

We sat among the women on a mat on the sun-baked earth. Having been told to be there early, we arrived at 10 am (6 hours before the expected arrival of their Majesties, the King and Queen of Thailand). Even then it was



hard to find a place, but we squeezed our way in just behind the white-robed, shaven-headed maechees and in front of the white-clothed upasikas. People sat quietly. There were occasional questions: 'Where do you come from?' 'Why are you wearing brown?' The reply: '10 precepts, Amaravati, disciples of Ajahn Sumedho,' seemed to satisfy most. From time to time, Thai herbal sweets were passed around, and at midday some of the laywomen brought out picnics of sticky rice and vegetables. And we all just sat. When more people came, space was made somehow. We all squashed up together - no-one seemed to mind. In front, hundreds of maechees: behind, as far as the eye could see, thousands and thousands of women ... a few lay down to rest (many had been up at 3 am for morning puja) - most just sat. It was hot, but there was a breeze and when the sun came through the trees at the hottest part of the day, two of the maechees lent us an umbrella, and themselves shared one in front of us. It was like an epic movie unfolding in slow motion before our eyes: the splendour of the chedi; thousands of bhikkhus; the stewards in white; the soldiers; the journalists with their official armbands; the first-aid team in their starched white aprons ... Then, at 4 pm - the King and Queen with their retinue! A surge of delight went through the crowd, as they appeared and quickly ascended the steps into the chedi itself - and was repeated as they re-emerged to take their places in the pavilion opposite. Then it was time for everyone to start moving and pay their respects to Luang Por Chah and place small offerings by the entrance to the chedi.

■ Ajahn Amaro, ■ Ajahn Munindo, ■ Sister Candasiri,

### Medhina

At 10 pm I laid down to sleep on the marble floor of the sala, and my bones were so sore by 1.30 am, I got up and walked around. By 2.30 everyone was gathering in the sala for early morning puja at 3.30! No more sleep. I felt quite ill, dizzy, hungry, hot, and short of sleep.

When the bhikkhus set off on pindabaht I'd never in my life seen so many. It was like the London Marathon at a slower pace. Thousand after thousand. No order of seniority; small boys mixed in with Ajahns etc. (No nuns). I watched them go past for two and a half hours and only saw one face I knew.

Lay people are fed once a day in one section of the 150 acre monastery where no less than 42 food kitchens have been set up by various companies or extended families. They have giant cooking pots in each one which they continually refill as the people come. It's a free-for-all - any kitchen will feed you and the queue is usually very short. So many different kinds of food; plates, spoons, drinks, all found.

## The Abbot Departs

The night wind arrives,  
as the abbot departs.  
Forest leaves pour down  
like tears or monsoon rain,  
confusing the moths.  
In a monastery without monks,  
old women sit through the night.  
After the chanting  
and the observances,  
long after the monks return,  
old women sit through the night.  
The wind races on.  
Patches of moonlight moving,  
becoming dancing ghosts  
on the forest floor.  
Bamboo and branches snapping,  
and around one small light  
the moths circle on.

Daniel Barnes

Wat Pah Nanachat 16.01.93

This poem was written the night before news of the passing away of Luang Por Chah was known.

There is not a baht (penny) changes hands within the monastery walls. The cooks all have a whale of a time calling something that sounds like 'here! Try mine, it's good.' Whole families are cutting, chopping, boiling, frying and washing dishes, from grandma to toddler; and young adults carry trays of free sweets and chewing gum.  
Medhina: from a letter to her family



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## The Lotus Falls Silent

*Sister Uppalamuni (1902-1993) died a most remarkable death. On the morning of February 6th, the full moon day, the nuns community and several Bhikkhus stood around her bedside in the nuns' vihara chanting the Four Brahma Viharas. Just as we finished, she breathed her last. She had been an anagarika at Amaravati, faithfully cared for by the nuns for the last eight years, and had received her new name, 'The Silent Sagely Lotus', with her Siladhara Going Forth in December of last year. Sister Candasiri shares some intimate memories of the nuns' life with Sister 'Uppala'.*

When she was 60, Sister Uppala discovered Buddhism in a book in the local library, and never looked back. It was this teaching that enabled her life, which was beset by severe and chronic mental instability, to be transformed into something of beauty which brought joy into all of our lives. She practised initially under the guidance of Ven. Kapilavaddho and at one time, when support was badly needed, she sold her grand piano (having been a concert pianist) to enable him to continue living in London.

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What you know, you know. What you don't know, you don't know. That's all.

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Her generosity knew no bounds. It came to be referred to as 'Uppala's fun'. Every birthday was noted in her diary, and a card would appear, 'Venerable Sir, (or Ayya so and so), please may I have the pleasure of making an offering. Think of something really special ...' And visitors to her room would be greeted with, "What may I offer you?" and she would list the refreshments in her cupboard. She called it "Maravati", the realm of temptation!

Life was not easy for Sister Uppala, but her immense devotion to the Triple Gem and determination to practise had the power to rally support from all directions to carry her through the more difficult moments. Until her final year she would attend every puja. On dark winter evenings and mornings, her bowed figure enveloped in a white cape would be a familiar sight walking along the pathways with her "taxi" (as she called the person accompanying her), the wavering torch beam lighting the way. In the rain we'd carry an umbrella - "But you keep it over you, I have a radiator in my room to dry my cloak."

Through practice we come to see that each of us manifests simply as a set of ever-changing conditions. Sister Uppala was no exception: the melodramatic, tyrannical: 'FIND an anagarika to take this letter to

Luang Por IMMEDIATELY! (whether it was daytime or midnight was of no consequence); the tortured, crazy: 'What can I do about these alien energies which have nothing to do with my life as a Buddhist nun?'; the humble unassuming: 'Please, are there any corrections, any ticking off, any advice about practice?'; the mischievous: 'Let's see if there are any good biscuits in that tin!'; and the wise: 'What you know, you know. What you don't know, you don't know. That's all.'

She came. We cared for her. At times she drove each of us to the point of total exasperation, but the more we gave, the more we received - I guess that's how it is with Dhamma ... Thank you, Sister - and goodbye!

### **Sister Uppalamuni's funeral**

Sister Uppalamuni's body was laid out in the centre of the old nun's shrine room which was redecorated with a large golden Buddha, flowers, candles and all her favourite pictures and holy objects. The candles and incense burned constantly as we gathered frequently to chant for her, to sit with her body, to meditate, contemplate death and actually witness the body's transformation.

Arrangements were made for a funeral at Amaravati which included making the coffin and digging the grave between two yew trees in the Buddha Grove. Many friends gathered with the community and processed to the grave side chanting as the nuns carried the body and lowered it into the earth. Wreaths of flowers were laid and we each took turns filling in the grave. After the ceremony, we listened to reflections and memories about her including some of the poetry that she had written in her early years.



Ajahn Sundara helping Sister Uppala to the evening puja.



The nuns lowering Sister Uppalamuni's coffin; February 1993



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## The Still Point of Change

*The past year at Amaravati has witnessed many comings and goings. From the outside, it may appear that there has been little change. The following piece, however, provides a glimpse into the actual effect of these changes on the life of the community and the practical ways in which we have adapted to new circumstances.*

Change is all around us - it is the way of nature and we can appreciate this fact when we can be honestly present with life - whether we like it or not! We even honour it as in the cremation ceremony of Luang Por Chah, and the burial of Sister Uppalamuni.

In the last year and a half, both at Amaravati and its fellow monasteries, we have seen a continual parting of good friends: Ajahns Anando and Kittisaro, Venerables Javano and Anigho, Sisters Thanissara and Cintamani and David Babski - to mention but a few. Words hardly do justice to emotions, which range from respect and gratitude to anger and sadness. Change is something we feel. Practically, change implies putting down the old and picking up the new, but, for the reflective mind, change is venerated as a characteristic of Universal Truth.

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The heart of the practice, then, remains constant ...  
 living with awareness, skilfully guided by the precepts,  
 honouring the legacy of the timeless wisdom that Ajahn  
 Chah exemplified in his own life.

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There have been other movements at Amaravati that have stimulated the community to completely readdress its underlying needs. Ajahn Sucitto went to replace Ajahn Anando as Abbot of Chithurst, Ajahn Amaro continues with his annual teaching tours of America and Sister Jotaka will soon be leaving for an extended stay overseas. Although this has left us feeling stretched, it has made us realise the need to listen to one another - as altering structures alone is not a solution.

It has been a time of consolidation. We have changed our name to Amaravati Buddhist Monastery instead of "Centre". Implicit in this change is a greater attention to refining our individual and group practice within the guidelines of the Vinaya. Paying attention to the detail of the daily monastic routine: the eating of almsfood, washing the bowl, working in the garden or simply walking across the courtyard - take us to that still point within change.

And it has been a time of renewal. Every aspect of the monastery has been scrutinised. Previously established systems that worked well will continue, such as outside teaching engagements to already established groups. But some changes are happening. We hope to encourage retreatants to take a greater role in the maintenance of the Retreat Centre which would allow the Sangha to concentrate on making improvements to

Actually, in truth there isn't anything to human beings. Whatever we may be it's only in the realm of appearances. If we take away the Apparent

their own lodgings. The offices have been completely restructured, and the production of some of our leaflets and smaller publications is now being shared with Cittaviveka.

We have also looked at the daily schedule of chores, alms round and work to see whether they can better reflect the rhythms of Amaravati. Invitations for traditional pindabahts on a twice weekly basis have been made from local supporters living in Berkhamstead. Many of the resident Sangha will have the opportunity to go on Tudong during the summer months. As we are able, the ongoing refurbishments to the site will be scaled down to maintenance and gardening work. Community work days will be introduced on a bi-monthly basis, alternating with group meditation afternoons.

The heart of the practice, then, remains constant ... living with awareness, skilfully guided by the precepts, honouring the legacy of the timeless wisdom that Ajahn Chah exemplified in his own life. Our real work continues in bringing the Dhamma to each moment. Meanwhile, more people are coming forth to commit themselves to the Holy Life, the schoolgroups trickle in again for their annual visits, the newsletter goes to press, planning the family camp is underway, weekly meditation classes begin and the breath continues to go in and out.

and see the Transcendent,  
we see that there isn't  
anything there.  
There are simply the universal  
characteristics - birth in the  
beginning, change in the middle  
and cessation in the end.  
This is all there is.  
If we see that all things are  
like this, then no problems  
arise.  
If we understand this we will  
have contentment and peace

**Luang Por Chah**

