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Is Buddhism A Religion?

This is the first chapter in The Mind and The Way, a forthcoming book of Ajahn Sumedho's talks to be published by Wisdom Publications in 1995. It was edited from a talk given at Lancaster University in 1989.

It is tempting to think that we understand religion because it is so ingrained in our cultural outlook. However, it's useful to contemplate and reflect on the true aim, goal or purpose of religion.

Sometimes people regard religion as belief in God or gods, so religion becomes identified with the theistic attitude of a particular religious form or convention. Often Buddhism is regarded by theistic religions as an atheistic form, or not even a religion at all. It's seen as a philosophy or psychology, because Buddhism doesn't come from a theistic position. It's not based on a metaphysical or doctrinal position, but on an existential experience common to all humanity - the experience of suffering. The Buddhist premise is that by reflecting, by contemplating, and by understanding that common human experience, we can transcend all mental delusions that create human suffering.

The word religion comes from the Latin word *religio*, which means a bond. It suggests a binding to the divine, which engulfs one's whole being. To be truly religious means you must bind yourself to the divine, or to the ultimate reality, and engage your whole being in that bond, to the point where an ultimate realisation is possible. All religions have words like "liberation" and "salvation." Words of this nature convey freedom from delusion, complete and utter freedom, and total understanding of ultimate reality. In Buddhism we call this enlightenment.

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Understanding the Nature of Suffering

The Buddhist approach is to reflect on the experience of suffering, because this is what all human beings share in common. Suffering doesn't necessarily mean a great tragedy or a terrible misfortune. It just means the type of discontentment, unhappiness, and disappointment that all human beings experience at various times in their lives. Suffering is common to men and women, common to rich and poor. Whatever our race or nationality, it is the common bond.

So in Buddhism, suffering is called a noble truth. It is not an ultimate truth. When the Buddha taught suffering as a noble truth, it was not his intention for us to bind ourselves to suffering and believe in it blindly, as an ultimate truth. Instead, he taught us to use suffering as a noble truth for reflection. We contemplate: what is suffering, what is its nature, why do I suffer, what is suffering about? An understanding of the nature of suffering is an important insight. Now contemplate this in your experience of life. How much of your life is spent trying to avoid or get away from anything that is unpleasant, unwanted? How much of our society is dedicated to happiness and pleasure, trying to get away from anything unpleasant and unwanted? We can have instant happiness, instant absorption, something that we call "non-suffering"; excitement, romance, adventure, sensual pleasures, eating, listening to music, or whatever. But all this is an attempt to get away from our own fears, discontentments, anxiety, and worry, things that haunt the human mind until it is enlightened. Humanity will always be haunted and frightened by life as long as human beings remain ignorant and don't put forth effort to look at and understand the nature of suffering.

To understand suffering means that we must accept suffering rather than just try to get rid of it and deny it, or blame somebody else for it. We can notice that suffering is caused, that it is dependent upon certain conditions: the conditions of the mind that we've created or that have been instilled into us through our culture and family. Our experience of life, and that conditioning process, start from the day we are born. The family, the group that we live with, our education, all instill into our mind various prejudices, biases and opinions, some good, some not so good.

Now, if we don't really look at these conditions of the mind and examine them for what they truly are, then of course they cause us to interpret our life's experience from certain biases. But if we look into the very nature of suffering, then we begin to examine things like fear and desire, and then we discover that our true nature is not desire, is not fear. Our true nature is not conditioned by anything at all.

The Conditioned, The Unconditioned, and Consciousness

Religions always point to the relationship of the mortal, or the conditioned, with the Unconditioned. That is, if you strip any religion down to its very basic essence, you will find that it is pointing to where the mortal, the conditioned and time-bound, ceases. In that cessation is the realisation and the understanding of the Unconditioned. In Buddhist terminology, it is said that "there is the Unconditioned; and if there were not the Unconditioned, there could not be the conditioned." The conditioned arises and ceases in the Unconditioned, and therefore we can point to the relationship between the conditioned and the Unconditioned. Having been born into a human body we have to live a lifetime under the

limitations and conditions of the sensory world. Birth implies that we come forth out of the Unconditioned and manifest in a separate, conditioned form. And this human form implies consciousness.

Consciousness always defines a relationship between subject and object, and in Buddhism consciousness is regarded as a discriminative function of the mind. So contemplate this right now. You are sitting there paying attention to these words. This is the experience of consciousness. You can feel the heat in the room, you can see your surroundings, you can hear the sounds. All this implies that you have been born in a human body and for the rest of your life, as long as this body lives, it will have feelings, and consciousness will be arising. This consciousness always creates the impression of a subject and an object, so that when we do not investigate, do not look into the true nature of things, then we become bound to the dualistic view of "I am my body, I am my feelings, I am my consciousness."



Thus, a dualistic attitude arises from consciousness. And then, from our ability to conceive and remember and perceive with our minds, we create a personality. Sometimes we enjoy this personality. Other times we have irrational fears, wrong views, and anxieties about it.

Aspiration of the Human Mind

At the present time, for any society in the materialistic world, much of the human anguish and despair arises from the fact that we don't usually relate ourselves to anything higher than the planet we live on and to our human body. So the aspiration of the human mind towards an ultimate realisation, towards enlightenment, is not really promoted or encouraged in modern society. In fact it often seems to be discouraged.

Without this relationship with the higher Truth, our lives become meaningless. We cannot relate to anything beyond the experiences of a human body on a planet, in a mysterious universe, all our life really amounts to is putting in time from birth to death. Then, of course, what is the purpose, what is the meaning of it? And why do we care? Why do we need a purpose? Why must there be a meaning to life? Why do we want life to be meaningful? Why do we have words, concepts, and religions? Why do we have that longing or that aspiration in our minds if all there ever is, or all there ever can be, is this experience based on the view of self? Can it be that this human body, with its conditioning process, simply lands on us fortuitously in a universal system that is beyond our control?

We live in a universe that is a mystery to us. We can only wonder about it. We can intuit and

gaze at the universe, but we cannot put it into a little capsule. We cannot make it into something in our mind. Therefore, materialistic tendencies in our minds encourage us not to even ask those questions. Or else these tendencies make us interpret all life's experience in the realm of logic or reason, based on the values of materialism and empirical science.

The Awakening Experience

Buddhism points to the universal or common experience of all sentient beings, that of suffering. It also makes a statement about the way out of suffering. Suffering is the awakening experience. When we suffer we begin to ask the questions. We tend to look, investigate, wonder, try to find out.

In the story of Prince Siddhattha (the name of the Buddha before he was enlightened) we hear of his life as a prince in an environment where there was only pleasure, beauty, comfort, social advantages - all the best life could offer. Then, as the legend goes, at the age of 29, Siddhattha left the palace to look outside, and he became aware of the messengers of old age, sickness and death.

Now one might say that he must have known about old age, sickness and death before the age of 29. In our way of thinking, it is quite obvious to us from an early age that everyone gets old, gets sick, and dies. However, this was something that the prince was merely aware of as a fact. It was something that did not awaken his mind until he reached the age of 29.

Similarly, we can live our lives, here in England, and we can assume that everything is all right, and even the unhappiness or the disappointments that we might normally experience may not necessarily awaken us. We may wonder about them a bit, but there are so many opportunities to not look at it, to not notice. It's easy to blame our unhappiness on others, isn't it? We can blame it on the government, on our mother and father, on friends or enemies, on external forces. But the awakening of the mind to old age, sickness and death happens when we realise that it is going to happen to us. And that realisation comes not just as an abstract idea but as a real gut feeling, a real insight that this is what happens to all human beings. What is born gets old, degenerates, and dies.

The fourth messenger that the Buddha saw was a samana. A samana is a monk, or a religious seeker, someone who is devoted solely to the pursuit of the ultimate reality, the truth. The samana, as portrayed in the legend, was a shaven-headed monk wearing a robe.

These are the four messengers in Buddhist symbolism: old age, sickness, death, and the samana. They signify the awakening of the human mind to a religious goal, to that aspiration of the human heart towards realising the ultimate reality, which is freedom from all delusion and suffering.

Buddhist Practice

Sometimes modern attitudes towards Buddhist meditation tend to portray it as leaving the world and developing a very concentrated state of mind dependent upon carefully controlled conditions. So in the United States and in other countries where Buddhist meditation is becoming increasingly popular, people tend to develop strong views about it being a concentrated state of mind in which technique and control are very important.

This type of technique is all well and good, but if you begin to develop the reflective capacities of your mind then it is not always necessary, not even advisable to spend your time trying to refine your mind to where anything coarse or unpleasant is suppressed. It's better to open the mind to its full capacity, to full sensitivity, in order to know that in this present moment the conditions that you are aware of, what you are feeling, seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, thinking, are impermanent.

Impermanence is a characteristic common to all phenomena, whether it is a belief in God or a memory of the past; whether it's an angry thought, or a loving thought; whether it's high, low, coarse, refined, good, bad, pleasurable or painful. Whatever its quality might be, you are looking at it as an object. All that arises, ceases. It is impermanent.

Now what this opening of the mind does, as a way of practice and reflection on life, is allow you to have some perspective on your emotions and ideas, on the nature of your own body, as well as the objects of the senses.

Getting back to consciousness itself: modern science, empirical science, considers the real world to be the material world that we see and hear and feel, as an object to our senses. So the objective world is called reality. We can see the material world, agree to what it is, hear it, smell it, taste it, touch it or even agree on a perception or a name for it. But that perception is still an object, isn't it? Because consciousness creates the impression of a subject and an object, we believe that we are observing something that is separate from us.

The Buddha, by his teaching, took the subject-object relationship to the ultimate point. He taught that all perceptions, all conditions that go through our minds, all emotions, all feelings, all material-world objects that we see and hear, are impermanent. About all of it, he said, "What arises, ceases." And this the Buddha kept pointing out over and over again in his teachings: this is a very important insight that frees us from all kinds of delusions. What arises, ceases.

Consciousness can also be defined as our ability to know, the experience of knowing. The subject knowing the object. When we look at objects and name them, we think we know them. We think we know this person or that person because we have a name or a memory of them. We think we know all kinds of things because we remember them. Our ability to know, sometimes, is of the conditioned sort, knowing about, rather than knowing directly.

The Buddhist practice is to abide in a pure mindfulness in which there is what we call insight knowing, or direct knowledge. It is a knowledge that isn't based on perception, an idea, a position, or a doctrine: and this knowledge can only be possible through mindfulness. What we mean by mindfulness is the ability to not attach to any object, either in the material realm or mental realm. When there is no attachment, then the mind is in its pure state of awareness, intelligence, and clarity. That is mindfulness. The mind is pure and receptive, sensitive to the existing conditions. It is no longer a conditioned mind that just reacts to pleasure and pain, praise and blame, happiness and suffering.

For example, if you get angry, right now, you can follow the anger. You can believe it, and go on and on creating that particular emotion, or you can suppress the anger and try to stop it out of fear or aversion. However, instead of doing any of these, you can reflect on the anger, because it is something that we can observe. Now if anger were our true self, we wouldn't be able to observe it, this is what I mean by reflection. What is it that can observe and reflect on the feeling of anger? What is it that can watch and investigate the feeling, the heat in the body, or the mental state. That which observes and investigates is what we call a reflective mind. The human mind is a reflective mind.

The Revelation of Truth Common to All Religions

We can ask questions: Who am I? Why was I born? What is life about? What happens when I die? Is there meaning to life or purpose? But because we tend to think other people know and we don't, we often seek the answers from others rather than opening the mind and watching through patient alertness for truth to be revealed. Through mindfulness and through awareness, revelation is possible. This revelation of truth, or ultimate reality is what the religious experience really amounts to. When we bind ourselves to the divine, and engage our

whole being in that bond, we allow this revelation of truth, which we call insight, profound and true insight, into the nature of things. And revelation is ineffable too. Words are not quite capable of expressing it. That is why revelations can be very different. How they are stated, how they are produced through speech, can be infinitely variable.

So Buddhists' revelations sound very Buddhist and Christians' revelations sound very Christian, and that's fair enough. There's nothing wrong with that. But we need to recognise the limitation of the convention of language. We need to understand that language is not ultimately true or ultimately real; it is the attempt to communicate the ineffable reality to someone else. It's interesting to see the number of people who now seek a religious goal. A country like England is predominantly Christian but now has many religions. There are many inter-faith meetings and attempts within this country to try and understand each others' religions. We can stay at a simple level and just know that the Muslims believe in Allah and the Christians believe in Christ and the Buddhists believe in Buddha. But what I'm interested in is getting beyond the conventions to a true understanding, to that profound understanding of Truth. This is a Buddhist way of speaking.

We have now, in a country like England, an opportunity to work toward a common truth among all religions, because we can all begin to help each other. It's no longer a time when converting people or trying to compete with each other seems to be of any use or value. Rather than the attempt to convert others, religion is the opportunity to awaken to our true nature, to true freedom, to love and compassion. It's a way of living in full sensitivity, with full receptivity, so we can take delight and open ourselves to the mystery and wonder of the universe.



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Images of Sri Lanka

The second and final part of Sr. Siripanya's account of the visit she and Sr. Upekkha made to Sri Lanka last Autumn to attend the International Conference of Buddhist Women. Following the conference, they were invited to visit various places of Buddhist interest.

It was time to move on to Kandy, in the interior hill country. Susheela Ranasinghe collected us one afternoon. Eventually emerging from Colombo's urban sprawl, we passed through a succession of roadside villages and towns. A string of open shops and stalls in each crowded main street would usually display the local speciality: at Radawadunna, elegant cane furniture and baskets; elsewhere, coir matting and rope; at Cashew ...cashews. The economy in other areas seemed largely dependent on pineapples, or coconuts, or bananas.

Graceful white chaityas (stupas) could be seen on rocky outcrops or glimpsed through temple entrance ways. We passed many roadside shrines and Bodhi trees, usually surrounded with railings, sometimes with prayer flags, and always the focus for much devotion. The presence of religious minorities was evidenced by ornate Hindu temples and the occasional mosque or church.

The surroundings grew increasingly rural. A patchwork of paddy fields, mud and emerald, alternated with swathes of palms and fruit plantations and scattered farming villages. As dusk fell the road began to climb abruptly. No longer able to see the passing scenery in the failing light, I turned to cultivating maranasati, contemplation of death. This was the natural theme induced by being driven on Sri Lankan roads. The basic policy for overtaking seemed to be: If in doubt, have a go. As most of the vehicles on the crowded road were ancient buses or trucks, our hired driver had frequent opportunities to try his hand. He produced many heart-stopping moments, launching out on hidden bends and blind stretches, honking furiously. If there wasn't another oncoming vehicle, the chances were high that there would be a cyclist (no lights), or buffalo-cart, or pedestrians, or a stray dog or cow. Amazingly, as everyone, even the dogs, seemed to be in the conspiracy together, disaster was usually averted, though we did come upon several accidents.

For contemplation of anicca to bear the greatest fruit it should be focused on specific aspects of experience, such as the body or feelings, rather than being too general.

Finally, seventy miles and six hours later, we arrived. Exactly where was uncertain. "Please be careful of the leeches," warned Susheela. Perhaps the explorations could wait till morning...it was time for a much-needed rest, anyway. We fell asleep almost immediately to a loud night-

symphony of jungle sounds.

Almost as immediately, it seemed, I was awake again; was that someone calling? I checked the clock: 3.55am. The sound of voices became unmistakable now, at least twenty people were approaching, shouting heartily in rhythmic unison. Improbable images flashed through the mind, struggling to create an explanation. A local dispute? Exorcism? The yells were fierce enough, but with light-hearted undertones. Gradually the crowd drifted past and faded back into the early-morning darkness. After a brief lull they were back, enthusiasm undiminished, heading in the opposite direction. Quiet returned. Suddenly loud music started blasting fiercely from a loudspeaker. This was a noisy jungle! For the next hour we were treated to a succession of what sounded like love-songs, interspersed with, could it be?, bhikkhus chanting traditional pirit blessings. This unlikely combination continued intermittently through the morning.

Over breakfast Susheela's husband, Ajith, explained: "That was the local Kathina procession." [Kathina is the Buddhist festival at the end of the Rainy Season when, traditionally, cloth and other requisites are offered to the Sangha] "The custom is that the cloth must be taken to the temple before dawn." Presumably, the yelling wards off any inauspicious forces on the way. And the songs? Ajith shook his head: "They play them to try to attract more people to the temple."

Later that morning we went for a walk, armed with soap to ward off unwelcome attention from leeches. A meandering track threaded its way through lush forest, alive with insect-life and monkeys and jewel- coloured birds. The air was refreshingly cool after the humid heat of Colombo. Soon the view opened out to reveal a breathtakingly graceful panorama of hills. It was easy to understand why, in these beautiful surroundings and with its perpetual spring climate, nearby Kandy remains the cultural and spiritual centre of Sri Lanka.

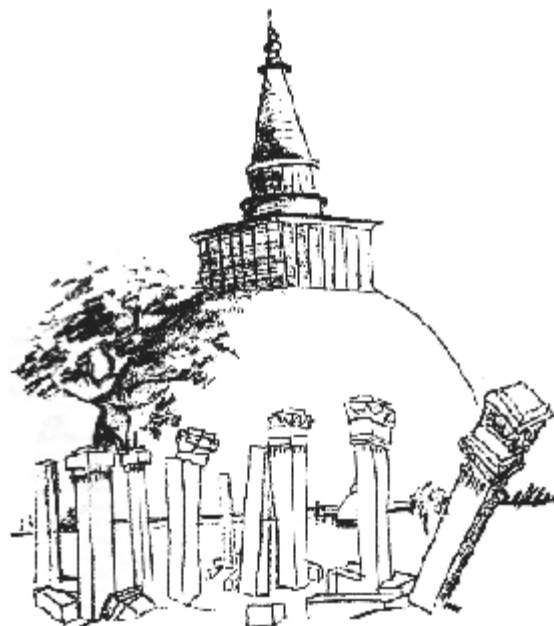
During the next four days we enjoyed several excursions to various historic temples, including the famous Dalada Malingawa, the Temple of the Tooth, which houses Sri Lanka's most sacred Buddhist relic. Upon request, we were granted a brief glimpse of the relic, or rather, the gold casket which contains a series of smaller and smaller caskets and eventually the tooth itself, within a specially built chamber guarded by monks of imposing girth.

One afternoon we visited the Forest Hermitage to pay respects to Venerable Nyanaponika and Bhikkhu Bodhi. I was particularly pleased to have this opportunity as Venerable Nyanaponika's classic book, 'The Heart of Buddhist Meditation' had been an inspiration for me upon discovering Buddhism. Bhikkhu Bodhi's name was familiar in connection with his fine work for the Buddhist Publication Society in Kandy.

The Hermitage was a modest building set in the middle of an extensive government forest reserve. Inside, Venerable Nyanaponika sat in the reception room, dimly lit and half-filled by a large desk and many dusty books - a suitable setting for this renowned German scholar, writer and meditation monk. He is over ninety now, and unable to do much, due to failing sight and hearing, but obviously still strong in body and mind, with a fine sense of humour. With the help of a voice amplifier and occasional interpretation from Bhikkhu Bodhi, we talked of meditation and impermanence. Venerable Nyanaponika suggested that for contemplation of anicca to bear the greatest fruit it should be focused on

specific aspects of experience, such as the body or feelings, rather than being too general. As we left, another young Western bhikkhu arrived on foot to pay his respects to this monk whose enthusiasm for the Dhamma has brought so many to the Buddha's teachings.

We spent a day at Nilambe Meditation Centre, one of several places in the Kandy area where visitors can learn or practise meditation. The centre is spectacularly located high in the hills, amidst a large tea plantation. To our delight, we found several friends from the conference there, including four nuns from Tibet, Nepal and Bhutan. We both felt a strong affinity with these students of an impressive American Bhikshuni, Karma Lekshe Tsomo, who is one of the main guiding forces of Sakyadhita. Lekshe Tsomo trained for a number of years alongside monks in Dharamasala, and, with the encouragement of the Dalai Lama, set up several nunneries which now offer excellent training for women. At the conference she gave an inspiring slide show about her work. The four nuns we met exuded an air of bright ease, self-confidence and natural composure. I spent the afternoon swapping experiences with Bhikshuni Wangmo from Bhutan, who told me, in flawless English, how she and some friends had recently initiated and taken part in the first four-year meditation retreat for nuns in her country for forty years.



Sr. Upekkha taught the nuns walking meditation (which is not part of their tradition) while they in turn explained some of their many practices, including tumo, the concentration exercise in which inner bodily heat is generated. (I wish I'd got more details on that one!) All too quickly we had to leave before a monsoon downpour made the steep descent from the hill impassable. Soon after, it was time to return to Colombo.

Mignon Perera had organised a two-day tour of Anuradhapura and other holy sites. As we set out, I eyed the garland hanging from the mirror of our hired van. It was an offering to the god who protects drivers, and I couldn't help hoping we wouldn't require his services. (Indeed, we didn't - Mr. Dharmadasa turned out to be possibly the best driver in Sri Lanka.)

Anuradhapura was the Buddhist capital of Sri Lanka for over one thousand years. Its ruins cover several square miles and cannot be fully appreciated in one visit. We managed a high-speed tour of five of the eight main pilgrimage sites. These included the frail Sri Maha Bodhi tree, the oldest historically authenticated tree in the world. It has been tended by an uninterrupted succession of guardians for over two thousand years since being planted as a sapling brought from Bodhghaya in India (site of the Buddha's Enlightenment) by Sr. Sanghamitta.

We also had time to circumambulate several of the massive chaityas; the largest are seventy-five metres (245ft) high. A British guidebook calculated there were sufficient bricks in one

alone to make a three- metre-high wall stretching from London to Edinburgh! Truly an impressive statement of faith.

The night was spent with a dasa sila mata [ten precept nun] we had met at the conference. She lived in very basic accommodation beside her father's house. To our amazement, during the evening she pulled out professional blueprints for a large nuns' training centre, to be built on the surrounding land. "Mr. Premadasa give...free architect," she explained in her limited English. This had been before the President was assassinated last year, but she still hoped to realise her dream.

A final memory stands out: we stopped at a rural roadside cafe, where Mignon decided to offer the dana meal. As we ate, a young mother with several children - obviously very poor - walked up and stood smiling silently at us. She then left, to return shortly afterwards with several more women and children, who stood looking on as we finished. One of the older women shyly came forward and offered us a freshly-picked bunch of bananas. Almost immediately the cafe owner appeared with another bunch, remonstrating in Sinhala with Mignon for not letting him know we were coming beforehand. "He says, next time he will offer you the meal himself."

The assembly sat down for the anumodana blessing chant. A comfortable silence followed, in which East and West came together in the space beyond all cultural differences. Then, hesitantly, I tried my only Sinhala: "Niduk veva; nirogi veva; suvapat veva - may you be free from Dukkha; may you be free from illness; may you be truly happy." They smiled delightedly, and we smiled back, and no more needed to be said.



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The Dhamma School

The Wheel Comes Full Circle

The value of education for the young is in no doubt, but in a competitive, commercial world just what standards and methods are realistically valid? Here are two articles by Medhina Fright & Peter Carey reflecting on various philosophical and practical aspects of the new Dhamma School.

Since the raison d'être of the Dhamma School will be its grounding in Buddhist morality and the teachings of the Buddha on the nature of reality, it is appropriate here to stop for a moment to consider what we can possibly offer in our school which is lacking in mainstream education. Here the words of the last Archbishop of Canterbury, Lord Runcie, are a good starting point:

We are training young men and women with minds as sharp as razors and about as broad! This points to the heart of one of the central dilemmas of our educational system, the way in which our schools and universities are demanding ever greater specialisation, ever more detailed knowledge of more restricted field of enquiry, but an almost complete lack of vision of the true purpose of learning.

It is this challenge of creating an educational environment in which both knowledge and wisdom can balance each other which lies at the heart of the Dhamma School. In searching for this balance of heart and mind, one can bring to mind a new version of the three Rs, which we could define as reciprocity, responsibility and reality.

The starting point must be the realisation of reciprocity or inter-connectedness. No knowledge stands 'by itself', everything has a relationship with everything else. "What is the purpose in my acquiring this knowledge?," "Where does it fit in the broader scheme of things?," "What responsibilities does it entail?" These are some of the questions which should be asked time and again throughout the learning process, both by children and teachers. All too often education is a profoundly alienating experience, a form of intellectual 'joy-riding' which isolates rather than connects.

For wisdom to grow, there must be a willingness to lay oneself on the line, to be open, and to see the pursuit of knowledge as being in essence about the realisation of one's own inner being.

The original statutes of the University of Oxford, conceived in the early Middle Ages when knowledge and wisdom were seen as intimately connected, referred to it as a place of 'religion and learning' (the order is important). Religion in its original Latin sense of re-binding [re-ligare] points up the relationship of the individual to the wider whole which lies at the heart of all true learning. It precedes the acquisition of specialist knowledge and renders it truly humane. An education which is dedicated to the path of wisdom, should be about the realisation of this profound interconnectedness between human beings and fields of

knowledge they acquire. The ability to set this knowledge, and the insights it brings into the wider human condition - into a constantly broader context is thus essential. This is not just the case of developing the capacity for 'lateral thinking', although that might be a part of it, but the nurturing of a more profound ability to open up to the integrity of human existence.

In practice, this means constantly being challenged and forced to consider and reconsider the relationship between what we know, or think we know, and what others know, or think they know; namely, our differing perceptions of reality. In order for this not to be just an intellectual exercise, schools should be places of genuine community, centres which encourage and facilitate constant interaction at all levels, teachers to teachers, teachers to pupils, pupils with each other, and everyone to the wider world outside the school. For wisdom to grow, there must be a willingness to lay oneself on the line, to be open, and to see the pursuit of knowledge as being in essence about the realisation of one's own inner being. The Buddha once said that one could travel the world, but yet find no more suitable place with which to begin the practise of metta (loving-kindness) than one's own body, the fathom-long length which we occupy but briefly, and which is one of the cells of the totality of manifestation, the Dhammakaya. Similarly, with knowledge, the true enquiry begins with ourselves. There can be no division between outer and inner. One's existence as a person, how one thinks, acts and speaks, has a relevance for our existence as social beings endowed with various forms of knowledge. This has been beautifully expressed by the Jewish Rabbi, Abraham Joshua Heichel:

Let young people be sure that every deed counts, that every word has power, and that we can all redeem the world despite all its absurdities and frustrations and disappointments. Let them remember to build a life as if it were a work of art!

Peter Carey

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Over the past few years we have been hearing of the project to start a school whose educational methods are grounded in Dhamma. After a lot of effort and commitment, this year the Dhamma School opens.

The Dhamma School opens its doors in a year when the education of children has, once more, a very high profile. The National Curriculum was introduced by this government in an attempt to raise academic and social standards, and was found to be unworkable by teachers all over the country. Now in 1994, SCAA (the Schools Curriculum and Assessment Authority) have brought out the new slimmed down version. The priorities of those in power are defined in its compulsory units, and a degree of freedom (equivalent to one day a week) is allowed for the teaching of further material felt to be important by the teacher.

The Dhamma School recognises the need for high academic standards, and clear social awareness. We also endorse the view that the values transmitted during those childhood years in school will have a great effect on the skills and attitudes of a child, and therefore of the nation. When those values are echoed between home and school they have an even greater effect than when there is a conflict between them.

The National Curriculum requires that every school should have a policy for "social, moral and cultural development" and that it should include "a daily act of worship broadly Christian in nature". This attempt to mould the character of the growing generation flounders



on the shoulders of teachers who in the main have little empathy with spiritual practice. (Virtually all the staff of my current school would describe themselves as atheist or agnostic, and there is a recognised national shortage of Religious Education teachers.)

The National Curriculum gives emphasis to the economic needs of the country by making Science and Technology compulsory at all stages, alongside maths and English as core subjects; and relegating expressive subjects with much more discretion left to the teacher. When faced with compulsory testing of core subjects at regular intervals, the teacher is much more likely to use their discretion in their favour, though many mourn this restriction to their choice. Now competitive team games are to be made compulsory to develop that ambitious drive so essential in the market place.

The Dhamma School aims to bridge the gap between the laudable aims of raising academic standards and social behaviour, and the needs of the whole developing child. We are part of contemporary society and interdependent with it, while remembering the wisdom of the Dhamma tried and tested over thousands of years. The National Curriculum will be taught at the school with a sensitive and discriminating eye, and discretionary time will be spent on giving children the opportunity to explore and develop those talents that recognise the whole child and his/her place in the universal picture.

The way we work will give value to each moment of the day; to the learning process and not just to the end results. It will value the contribution of every child and not just those who achieve high test results or win races. The values of the home will be reflected in the school so that harmony is demonstrated and experienced, not just preached. The teachers are ready, the premises are ready, the legal framework is ready, and so is the support of many Dhamma guides. Now we shall see if the initiative is taken up by those parents practising the Dhamma in this country. I have three children of my own, and though I would have been inspired by the opportunity for such an education when they were that age I would have thought very carefully about a new school untried, untested. It takes a certain kind of courage to be a pioneer when the most precious thing in your care is involved. Be assured that we shall take the greatest care to give your children the best education possible.

Thanks to the unexpected and generous support of one of our donors we are able to offer a few free places, fully paid for three years (from September 1994) to children who are currently aged between four and seven. Enquiries should be sent to me. It is not in the nature of Dhamma teachers to evangelise. This opportunity is offered to meet the needs of families practising the Dhamma.

Your thoughts are also welcome.

Medhina Fright

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A Tudong Letter From Macedonia

Venerable Sobhano writes from the Monastery of St. Metamorphosis, Preobrajea; 25 April 1994.

Dear Friends,

I am sitting here writing this letter on an antique Singer sewing machine, looking out of the window at a huge cherry blossom tree in the monastery courtyard overlooking the vast expanse of the valley below.

We are about 50 km north of Prilep in Macedonia and we are on our fifth day in this country. Before we arrived, all the Greek people told us we were crazy to go into Macedonia - nobody wants to go there, it's a terrible place. Well, it is about 30 years behind Greece in terms of technology, stuck somewhere in the late fifties.

What has been preserved is the humanity of the people. The pace of life is slower, the people almost always friendly. They always wave as we walk by. The few cars that pass by honk and flash. People are curious. When we are going through villages all the children gather round and stare at us like in India. I have never seen such poverty as in the south here, but equally I have never experienced such hospitality and sense of community among the people.

Human kindness meets human need and a renunciant is
always a renunciant and is respected as such.

Like everywhere there are two worlds, those that have been educated, and with good jobs, and those living off the land. But there isn't the class bias you find in England. The two worlds mix easily, one isn't so far removed from the other.

The old nun here, who has been ordained for 40 years, is from Bosnia and came here as a refugee. Her father was a famous soldier apparently, and all her brothers are also in monasteries in Serbia. She lives here about 300 metres above the village in a haven of peace with a priest who came from Bosnia with her to look after the 13th century church.

The priest is a burly man, about 5 ft. 6 inches tall, who is constantly working around the small farm here. He has kindly eyes and is a little more backward in coming forward. However, like everyone else he has taken on board this monk from a strange tradition, without hesitation.

The nun is a great character. She has a withered right arm, deformed at birth and has made it her personal responsibility to make sure that I am overfed and "satisfied". She thinks I am like one of the apostles, and seems to pick up on all the signs of simplicity of the monk's robes.

Being a monk is an automatic passport to

respect, and having been to Mount Athos is the trump card. We make sure to keep quiet about the monks on Mt. Athos's views about non-Orthodox messengers of Satan, and the Buddhist view of God. And the rest looks after itself. Human kindness meets human need and a renunciant is always a renunciant and is respected as such.

This morning the sun is shining for the first time in three days. We will be leaving Marija, a Buddhist from Skopje, who has been our guide since we have been in Macedonia. Not being able to communicate is obviously a severe handicap but by the end of the week we are expecting to meet up with Ven. Nyanamangalo's mother who will be coming out here to walk with us for a while. Jeffrey Craig may also come out to Ohnid on May 1st but I haven't yet heard whether this is the case.

Being on Tudong has been an occasion for much reflection on the practice. The refuge in emptiness is one's strength, not necessarily physical strength, although I am still blessed with plenty of that. But being alone to accommodate changing conditions, and all the consequent frustrations that go with that, changing moods, impossible people, incomprehensible discussions about your future, fussing mothers and disgruntled companions...sounds familiar.

If I had hoped to escape the Dukkha of life by leaving Amaravati for a few months I would have been severely disappointed. But keeping one's mind turned towards Dukkha, whether in the body or the external conditions going wrong, plans changing, etc., allows the heart to stay open and responsive. This is one benefit to be gained by Tudong. To see how effective the practice is in real life. To be able to sit at the end of the day and let the mind rest, to be able to simply be with the walking and the weight of a pack in the midday sun, to have nothing to worry about but where today's meal is coming from and how we're going to stay warm tonight, these are the blessings of the life on the road.

But none of it would be possible without the background of the monastery. Much gratitude arises at the thought of you all keeping the whole thing going, and to Luang Por and Ajahn Chah for the teaching. Of course the heart grows fonder as we move away from the familiar. But to see how the experience of practice benefits all beings is an inspiration to continue.



I am still at the beginning of the journey, and of course there will be many perils to endure, so I thought I would get this down while I can, and share with you all what I am experiencing.

With best wishes from all the forces of goodness in Macedonia.



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Obituary:

Greg Klein (Ajahn Anando)
3rd November 1946 - 11th May 1994

Ajahn Sucitto remembers Greg Klein whose ashes were interred at Cittaviveka on 17th July and a plaque that he had had made was laid.

By all accounts, Greg died well. He went into a coma on the morning of 11th May and died in the evening. Although he had been weakened and disabled by the brain tumour for many months, he had remained good humoured and peaceful throughout. Even in the last days pain-killers were not necessary; and being Greg, he had made all the arrangements, his ashes would be interred near a tree at the front of Cittaviveka.

The record of a samana's life can be a revealing thing: there may be very little to show in material terms - no great discoveries, no masterpieces, no acts of legislation to be remembered for; however, a samana, particularly an Ajahn, makes a strong impression through the quality of their being, including both their wisdom and their flaws. Greg's particular history and his striking character heightened the personal impression that he made. Whatever way you choose to sum him up (and all summaries are inaccurate), Greg/Anando will stay in people's minds for a long time to come.

The bullet that took a lump out of his head and got him out of the Vietnam war probably set up the conditions both for his decision to go forth in 1972 and the brain tumour that killed him exactly twenty-seven years later. After the return from Vietnam and a few years free-wheeling, going forth as a samanera, and later as a bhikkhu, was a pretty dramatic turn-around. Ajahn Sumedho, and later Ajahn Chah, made a deep impression on him, and it was in accordance with their wishes that, after only three years of training as a bhikkhu, he was asked to make up the foursome that would be the nucleus of the English Sangha in the Hampstead Vihara. Despite the difficulties he had in being cooped up in a small town house in London, his loyalty to Ajahn Sumedho, a characteristic throughout his bhikkhu-life, kept him going until the move to Chithurst in 1979. There he was Ajahn Sumedho's chief assistant, acting as abbot when Ajahn Sumedho was away teaching, and, together with Venerable Viradhammo, directing the reconstruction of Chithurst House. His tremendous energy and interest in learning new things found a worthy outlet. He spent a year or so at Harnham as the Ajahn in 1983 occupied in a similar task before returning to Chithurst to take over as abbot when Ajahn Sumedho left to start Amaravati.

Is the relationship between the abbot and the rest of the community a healthy one where personal matters can be shared, or do our functions as teachers and administrators seal off authentic dialogue?

The shift to being the senior incumbent of what then became primarily a monastery for

training newly-ordained bhikkhus moved him steadily further into a teaching role, where his direct influence on the spiritual development of samanās as well as lay people was expected. Being a spiritual teacher is not an easy job: the projections and relationships with disciples become a major factor in what you deal with, where you make your mistakes, where you do your learning and where you assume an identity. Some of the monks found Ajahn Anando's style too demanding. He could be very exacting in terms of how he expected people to conduct themselves, and a battle of wills would almost certainly result in the junior bhikkhu having to back down. Approached in another way, confided in and asked for help, Anando would take someone under his wing and be tremendously solicitous. Like anything that he put his mind to, he lavishly gave of his time and energy. That came across. When what a person really needed was just that kind of attention, he gave it and it was deeply appreciated.

And the personal approach, relating to individuals rather than giving talks to groups, interested him too. It was where he felt most at ease. It may come as a surprise to the numerous Buddhist societies and meditation groups that he taught to know how awkward and nervous he felt about giving talks: he must have given hundreds of discourses, and, to his own disbelief, many people loved them.

To some of us, he would mention the fear that couldn't be detected under that ever-bright countenance. He attributed it to the Vietnam War. Maybe that was why metta-bhavana and acceptance became the hall-mark of his teaching in the later years. That, and psychotherapy, and, with Anando's energy and love of getting into new things, healing, astrology and paranormal means of straightening out the warps in the mind. The Sangha in general was uneasy about some of these interests, particularly because of their effects on the monastic community; this dis-ease seemed to be borne out by a wave of psychic and psychological upheavals at Chithurst in 1991. Anando felt very bad about that for months. He told me that even in Vietnam he had not experienced more emotional pain.

Luang Por Sumedho felt that the best thing for Ajahn Anando would be for him to come to Amaravati where he could get involved in the planning and construction of the proposed temple, get away from Chithurst for a while and not have to be in a position where his personal stuff was so exposed. I was to go to Chithurst and take over for an undetermined period. It didn't work out so smoothly. Instead, there was another dramatic turn-around.

A few months before the transfer was to take place, Anando walked across France, accompanied by two other monks and an anagarika. When they arrived in the Swiss vihāra, they had a convivial evening with the resident bhikkhus and retired to their rooms. In the middle of the night, Anando walked out of the vihāra to a pre-arranged meeting with a friend in a car and was driven off. The letter conveying his disrobing arrived at Amaravati by special delivery the next morning.

The abrupt way in which he left raised many questions that the Sangha has been working with since. Is the relationship between the abbot and the rest of the community a healthy one where personal matters can be shared, or do our functions as teachers and administrators seal off authentic dialogue? Do we live in a situation of trust or not? Greg/Anando left us some good questions: a fair amount of the cut-back in Sangha activities, and the increase in dialogue, is a response to the need to find living answers.

He wrote briefly, said that for him it had become time to move on; there were things he wanted to do that didn't fit into the bhikkhu-life.



He married someone whose spiritual path matched his new interests, and people who saw him said how happy and relaxed he seemed. Then a year later, the tumour was diagnosed. He returned to Amaravati and Chithurst to a warm welcome, weakened but cheerful again, to put his affairs with the Sangha in order before he died.

In spiritual terms, an individual's personality leads to no conclusions. All we have are our memories and perceptions. I remember Greg as Anando, with his generosity and loyalty, his energy that could be playful or forceful, his love of excellence that could seem discerning or demanding, his need to be on top of things, yet his willingness to serve. And I try to look through and past these personality factors and learn about myself.

Something he wrote about his time helping to nurse Luang Por Chah in his terminal illness not only reflects his own interests but sums up the life mystery well:

I like the early morning, the night shift as they call it, very much, because one can spend time alone with Luang Por. From 2 am until maybe 5 am is a time that he seems to sleep the most peacefully. Then a rather busy time follows; depending on what day of the week it is we might clean part of the room, very quietly, and then prepare things for waking him at 5.30 to bathe and exercise him. Then, the weather and his strength permitting, we put him in the chair, the one that was sent from England with the money offered by people in the West. It's a really superlative chair, it does everything except put itself away at night! I had a look at what they had made for Luang Por before. It was quite good for the materials they had, but the wheelchair that he has now is in a class by itself.

There is a sense of great respect and affectionate caring that goes into the nursing. Although he has been bedridden for almost six years, he has no bedsores. The monks commented that visiting doctors and nurses are quite amazed at the good condition of his skin. The monks who are nursing him never eat or drink anything or sleep in the room. There is very little talking; usually you only talk about the next thing you have to do in his care. If you do talk you talk in a quiet manner. So it is not just a room we nurse him in, it is actually a temple.

One of the senior Thai Ajahns asked me how I was feeling about being with Luang Por. First I expressed my gratitude for the opportunity. He said, "But how are you feeling?" I said, "Sometimes I feel very joyful, and sometimes not so joyful." I realised that this was going to be a Dhamma discussion. He was using the opportunity to teach me something. He went on to say how there is a lot of misunderstanding about what is happening to Luang Por.

"Actually, it's just the sankharas, the aggregates, going through a certain process." He said "All we really need to do is just let it go, let it cease; but if you did that people would criticise, they would misunderstand and think you were heartless and cruel and that you would let him die. So, because of that, we nurse him, which is fine also". He then went on to say that the reason we perceive things the way we do is that we are still attached to our views and our opinions. But they are not right, they still have the stench of self. He said that Luang Por practised metta bhavana, meditation on loving kindness, very much, and that is why people were drawn to him; but that has a certain responsibility. "For myself," he said, "I incline quite naturally towards equanimity, serenity. There is no responsibility there, it's light."

On the last morning, when I arrived at Luang Por's kuti, he was lying on his side, and I just spent a long time sitting facing him, very consciously directing thoughts of loving-kindness and gratitude towards him, expressing my happiness at having had the great blessing to spend some time with him, to have heard his teaching, appreciated it and incorporated it into my life. The morning went by

very easily and rapidly. I was sitting looking at him comfortably asleep, and considering how best to use this very special time. And the message was: see it all as anicca, dukkha, anatta - something impermanent, imperfect and impersonal. That's what takes one beyond; it's all right.'



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EDITORIAL

More an agreement than an Order

Recent discussions concerning the formalisation of training principles for lay Buddhists have been interesting to sit in on. Reviewing the situation of practice in the household life, we hear common concerns about the lack of support, and the vulnerability to the worldly melee that erodes the conviction and commitment to practice. Spiritual friends can be few and far between, and monasteries, for all their benefits, are used more for formal meditation, talks on Dhamma, and training in the Dhamma-Vinaya for those who have Gone Forth. So the question arises: is there some form, some more clearly defined convention, that will support and train people living the household life?

In the last Newsletter, Ajahn Amaro presented some options that had been tried elsewhere, and invited discussions to occur in the monasteries in Britain. A certain congruity materialised after the reports of the meetings were circulated: there was a great interest in communication and fellowship, yet widespread reservations about undertaking formal membership of an Order. Expressed simply, people liked the idea of belonging, but didn't want to belong to Some Thing.

When the Dhamma- Vinaya is held as the focus, rather than a particular place or a position in an Order, there is a guard against the human tendency towards institutionalisation.

It was revealing because those sentiments would probably be echoed by many of the samanans who are my colleagues in what appears to be a highly formalised and tight-knit Thing, the Sangha. Fortunately for us, the Sangha is not quite what it might appear to be, having been established in a way that cultivates both communality and homelessness. On one hand we praise the value of solitude and lonely places, and the need to be self-reliant and self-motivated; on the other we train in living together in harmony and sustaining way-places for the welfare of those who practise the Dhamma. The value of commitment is extolled, yet the Going Forth asks for no life-time vows. Commitment has to be sustained by the individual out of faith and insight, not out of group pressure. In fact the Sangha is more of an agreement than an Order, shaped by a continual commitment to an individually validated teaching and way of training.

Monasticism, as Westerners understand it, is more of a Christian than a Buddhist reference. The Buddha certainly allowed monasteries to be built, in a few instances there were great arama like Jetavana and Veluvana; in other cases temporary settlements, called avasa, for the Rains Retreat. Both of these would have had a shifting incumbency. Since then, because of the advantage to the society of having a long-term stable community of spiritual seekers nearby, and the advantages to the samanans in having centres to meet in for exhortation and discussion, monasteries have developed into the normal residence for the Sangha. However, it must also be admitted that along with their benefits, monasteries have been fertile grounds for a host of worldly attitudes, such as the accumulation of power and wealth, inter-monastic rivalry, and

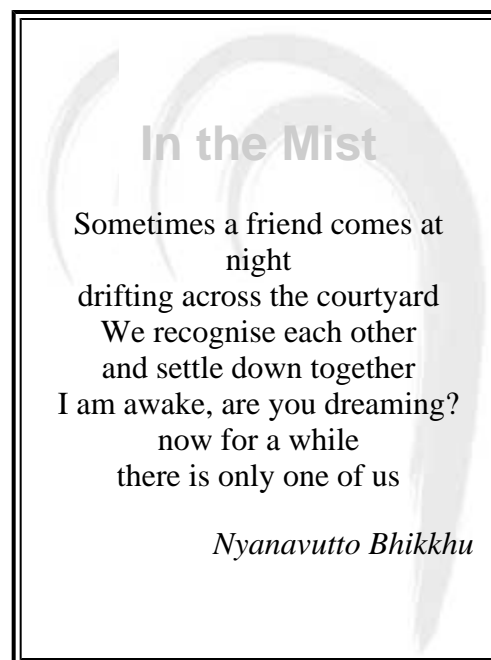
even political manipulations. Getting it right seems to depend on whether one seeks security and position, or whether one take dependence on, and therefore seeks to abide in the presence of, a virtuous and competent teacher. If that focus is kept in mind, communality and homelessness fit together. When the Dhamma- Vinaya is held as the focus, rather than a particular place or a position in an Order, there is a guard against the human tendency towards institutionalisation.

This tendency can lead to people regarding our Sangha as some organisational complex that monitors and determines all manner of things. There can be speculation or concern about Sangha policy as regards opening viharas, teaching, publishing, etc. Actually the rationale behind Sangha activities operates more in terms of the way things are than through policy; first, because it would be too much trouble to run such an organisation, and second, because it goes against our own wishes for individual responsibility and flexibility. Generally we don't even plan our talks, let alone have attitudes about teaching or social activity. Everybody naturally feels that teaching is a beneficial thing: sometimes there are people around who can give talks, sometimes there aren't. Sometimes we have to do some building work, sometimes the money or the skill isn't there. Similarly, we don't have a recruitment plan: people get interested and ask for the training, some subsequently lose interest and leave. We're not trying to create an Order and a system that will be perfect and suit everybody's character - any more than the Buddha was.

So, as regards the possibilities of a lay Order; it may be instructive to investigate to what extent is there a 'monastic Order'? An alertness to the possibility of liberation, an agreement to practice, a realistic adjustment of lifestyle to back that up, and dependence on a teacher: maybe those are the themes that people should be thinking about. Are we prepared to move out of the 'homes' that we have made of our habits, and take refuge in a practice that encourages just that?

Living the Dhamma is a living process. Use the teaching to give up belonging to anything else, then the form of the Order takes care of itself.

Ajahn Sucitto



Sangha Movements

Tan Ajahn Anek will be joining the Amaravati community. He is the Abbot of Wat Sai Ngam in Ubon, a bhikkhu of 27 vassa, and long-time disciple of Luang Por Chah. He intends to stay at least one year and possibly up to five years. Venerable Kusalo has left New Zealand and taken up residence at Amaravati as well. He will be a member of the community for at least a year.

Obituaries

Tan Chao Khun Rajaviriyabharana, the abbot of Wat Buddhapadipa since its establishment in Wimbledon, passed away at Wat Mahadhatu on May 21st. Luang Por Sumedho and Ajahn Sucitto were among the bhikkhus invited for the seventh day of the memorial chanting.

Tan Chao Khun, a much-loved and central figure, will be greatly missed.

Reumah (Roma) Dwarkasingh Bernard died on the 18th June 1994. She came to Buddhism in the early 70's and was devoted supporter of the Sangha. Her greatest joy was to give dana to the monks and nuns. We will remember her devotion to the Buddha, her compassion to all, but most of all her distance lack of piousness and her sense of fun.

Temple at Amaravati

Discussion have resumed between the architect and the Sangha to finalise the design of the building. Preparatory work, including the construction of a new workshop, are likely to begin in 1995, with the temple itself hopefully beginning construction in 1996.



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SIGNS OF CHANGE

Leaving New Zealand

Ajahn Viradhammo shares a few reflections on leaving Bodhinyanarama, New Zealand, the monastery that he founded, built, and has been abbot of since 1985. He will be taking up residence at Amaravati.

We've had some fierce storms these past two days. Autumn has arrived with the magnificent gales that give Wellington it's infamous reputation of Windy Welly. After nine rewarding years, I am leaving this lovely valley and returning to England. My thoughts and feelings are a mixture of sadness in leaving behind many friendships, and curiosity about what lies ahead. Underlying it all however, is gratitude; to the monks, anagarikas and lay folk who I've shared time with, and to our lineage of teachers from the Buddha to Ajahn Chah and Ajahn Sumedho. I'm particularly indebted to Ajahn Sumedho for he has moulded my practice and trusted me in areas where I lacked confidence. It seems appropriate now to return to England and soak up a bit of his Dhamma before one of us kicks the bucket.

Thinking back to the early days in N.Z. when we had no buildings, I often chuckle at the mad enthusiasm we managed to muster to get this thing rolling. I couldn't do it now but at the time it was appropriate. At the beginning of 1986, Ven. Thanavaro, Ven. Subbato, Gary and I used to commute every morning from a flat in Wellington to Stokes Valley. After a forty minute drive from the city we would tumble out of the mini at Aunty's place and then get on to the property for a full day's work. Bowls, robes, saws, hammers, wellies, bits of building material, monks and Gary, would magically emerge from the impossibly small space of our old mini. Now, a few years down the line and Bodhinyanarama is a comfortable monastery fully equipped with all the mod-cons these places tend to acquire. It's a great space for contemplating the BuddhaDhamma.

The heart of the monastery is the sala and the heart of the sala is space/silence/stillness. But this of course is the heart of all monasteries, so when you close your eyes you could be in Chithurst, Amaravati, Perth, or Switzerland. Open your eyes however, and you'll see lots of golden wood. It's a very special sala, and in fact, Hugh Tennant, our architect, has just won a prestigious architectural award for the building. The process of creating an uplifting and contemplative space has taught me a lot about the use of architecture and good craftsmanship as skilful means in the religious life. I fully understand why Ajahn Sumedho is so keen to build something inspiring amidst the military architecture of Amaravati.

One of the joys of creating a monastery in this country of abundant land and low population is that we have been able to start from scratch. We've not had to compromise our plans by needing to work around existing buildings. Each of the monks and lay guests have their own kuti. We have tried to make very good paths for walking meditation and several kutis have wooden board walks for this purpose. I've always felt that an inviting walking path encourages the gentle practice of silently walking to and fro.

The surrounding bush in the monastery grounds is quite dense and ever-green. Wellington has

a mild climate. We get a bit of frost only once or twice a year so the native trees stay green all year. The smells of the bush are wonderful. Whenever I've returned to the monastery from the city, my nose goes into over-drive as it sniffs the fragrance of the Kamahi and Pine trees; the smell of the stream as it gurgles by the sala or even the occasional drift of salt air blown in from Cook Strait on a fierce nor' Wester.

On a clear night it's the sky that grabs me. The air is so clean that the stars reach down to touch the horizon and I realise that I'm floating through space on Planet Earth. In the late afternoon when the sun descends over the Western wall of the valley a soft light paints the bush a golden yellow. The bush itself is green on green; varieties of green that dance with the wind that blows much of the year. Normally, as I look down the valley from the deck of my kuti, I can see the houses of Stokes Valley below. During the winter a fog will sometimes settle lower down the valley, and in the morning my kuti may be bathed in sunlight while the houses below are lost in the mist - like living in some exquisite Japanese landscape.

It's time to leave this behind and see if I've taken refuge in Stokes Valley or in the Buddha-Dhamma. Ajahn Vajiro has arrived, and his talents are just what the place needs to consolidate what has been created so far. Ajahn Nyanaviro has been here for over a year and his heart-practice is much appreciated by many. The other members of the Sangha, some newly arrived from Thailand, are all mature so I feel at ease with the continuity of the Sangha's presence.

Perhaps the most rewarding aspect of my nine years here is the building of community. I suppose it reflects on my refugee kamma*. My mother would often lament the loss of her extended family due to the disintegration of Latvian society in the years of the Second World War. Here I am now with a family that extends throughout New Zealand and beyond.

**Ajahn Viradhammo was born in Germany of Latvian parents who had fled Latvia when the Soviet Union took over. While he was still very young the family moved to Canada where he was raised.*

This doesn't fit the early models of monastic life that I imbibed from North-East Thailand. I thought that I would live out my days in some remote cave developing refined states of samadhi and eschewing all worldly complexities. And yet, Ajahn Chah asked me to stay in London and Ajahn Sumedho gently nudged me into teaching and other responsibilities.

From all this I realised that my practice is complexity, people and responsibility. What a perfect way to watch self-consciousness and abandon the strategies of ego suffering. Perhaps I shall have some time for solitary practice in the future but in the meantime this way of developing the Path works fine. I'm curious to see if I change my tune with the increased complexity of a far bigger scene.

In 1985, when I was about to depart for N.Z. I asked Ajahn Sumedho what I should do when I got to Wellington. "Get out of the way," was his reply. Getting out of the way within the demands of responsibility seems to be my sadhana this lifetime. I suspect this practice will be fruitful for a few more years at Amaravati.

News from Harnham

The winter period has been fairly quiet here at Harnham.

Ajahn Munindo was away in Thailand at Wat Pah Nanachat, and several of the other resident monks were over-seas visiting their families. The coming of spring, however, has seen a marked increase in the level of activity, and once everyone returned we started another phase of our building work.

The new Dhamma Hall has so far been concealed behind the two hundred year old barn onto which it was built but, over the last year or so, work has moved on to the barn itself and this has undergone quite a transformation. Handsome new doors now grace the main entrance,

fronted by a beautiful and elaborately carved slate, stone and bronze threshold. This gives a very different character to the front of the monastery, which for a long time has been masquerading as an old Northumbrian farm cottage.

During the last month Ajahn Subbato has been assisting with the final section of the Barn re-roofing and the vestibule area of the Dhamma Hall has been nearing completion. After the work month is over the community will be finding more time and space for exploring other aspects of contemplative life; building work will be put on the back burner for a few months until we have another work project in the Autumn.

Inside the Hall, Pang Chinasai has been putting the finishing touches to the traditional Thai-style mural depicting the Buddha conquering Mara. Pang has been with us since the end of February, and was expecting to complete the picture in six weeks, however the addition of delicate and refined detail is taking much longer; whenever he is asked when he'll finish he always seems to say another six weeks!" During the visit of Ajahn Sumedho in August, however, we hope to be able to have a ceremony of dedication, at which the Thai ambassador is being asked to officiate.

Many people have been following with interest the progress of our legal difficulties; a settlement has been agreed upon in principle, but has yet to be ratified and signed. Until this happens, the Magga Bhavaka Trust feels that it would be premature to launch an appeal to raise funds to cover the outstanding legal costs, but it is hoped that the Trust will be in a position to do this in the near future.

We will be holding another eight-day retreat during the first week of August for which there are still a few places left. Those who might be interested to attend should telephone Caroline Leinster on 092-657-829.

