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Puja

In this talk, given during a winter monastic retreat at Amaravati, Ajahn Sucitto describes how we can continue our act of devotion after the chanting is over by celebrating and honouring each moment of existence.

Every morning we start the day with a puja. It's a celebration of the Buddha's awakening, an act of praise and recognition. So even when we have completed the chanting if we stay with the puja and continue the act of offering, we can see this as a very good spiritual yoga. Whereas chanting some words and then going away, forgetting the puja as soon as the chanting finishes, is not a true exercise of the spirit. There might well be a fleeting arousal of energy but then we go away, we leave it. Maybe we go back to looking at the five khandas, and stumble around in thoughts, perceptions and feelings - not so much grasping them as being gripped by them. But if we pause to reflect on this teaching, this training in the Dhamma, then we realise that this is not a worldly teaching. It involves the activation of the five support faculties, the five indriyas, making them strong, in order to bring forth the spirit and faith. The puja, then, is a bringing forth, a waking up, an arousing, an activation of the spirit. We can activate the spirit with faith when we recollect the Buddha touching the earth, bringing Enlightenment into the world, into consciousness.

In our spiritual development, quite a lot is made of concentration and calming, but we still need to bring forth the right attitude - the element of faith - before we start concentrating and calming down. Without faith, we concentrate on the attachments and the old habits within the five khandas, just getting stuck in established perceptions and mind formations; not concentrating on the right thing. If the quality of mindfulness has not been aroused we remain fixated upon the old grasping, or being-grasped, experience.

When we undertake a puja then, without calming the mind and going inwards into some space beyond sensory impingement, then the puja isn't completed or fulfilled. If we just shut down and go away, without taking time to cultivate mindfulness of breathing, without due recollection, the entire experience becomes something we just slot into, without thought. Instead of mindfulness, we develop attachment to techniques, rituals, rules and systems. And

this is one of the great hindrances. Chanting, mindfulness of breathing - even meditation practice itself - can be just another ritual that we do blindly or automatically, without sensitivity. Meditation can become another habit, a way of not actually relating to or experiencing anything - a blind response, an escape from here and now. Then we are not being mindful but just 'dozing', falling asleep, or getting into a stale glutinous state of mind. Although we might imagine ourselves to be breathing, actually we fall into a perceptual mode that is far more likely to be one of stagnation than of calm; it is easy to mistake the two. Things may be still, but it is not the stillness of a clear mind, it's not an enlightened calm; it can be just stagnation in the mind, not feeling or hearing very much - a dull, dead state.

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The puja, properly used, has the effect of energising our faith - although, for all appearances, it is just an outward form which can be done in a more or less perfunctory and automatic fashion every day. We think, 'Well, this is what we do'...but when we've done it every day for five years or so, we can become completely anaesthetised and resigned to it, rather than giving in to it. Maybe we begin to feel resistance or negativity arising, but we have to realise that this is only because the puja is not being done properly. The offering of one's spirit is not happening so, instead, it's just a repeated meaningless activity, a sankhara of the mind.

So what is this faith that is said to arise? How can it be aroused? We need purposefully to make the puja into our offering to the Triple Gem - to the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha - and to stay mentally alert by activating and exercising the spiritual faculties. This is done by focussing first on the qualities of the Buddha, recollecting his enlightenment and his teaching of the Eightfold Path, giving him full recognition as the awakened one; and realising for ourselves the Four Noble Truths. At this moment too, we see arising within the world all the pain and pleasure, boredom and doubt, greed and so on - all the positive and negative forces of the mind. Then there is Dhamma, the ultimate truth - a quality that is ever-present, total, unifying and absolute; and which is within all conditions, whether they are painful, pleasant, subtle or gross, physical or mental. It is something we must realise for ourselves. We don't have to find it or become it, we just have to open to it. It's all-embracing and inviting; it welcomes us, it's not something aloof. It has a loving, expansive quality: "Please come", rather than, "Don't come in here with your grubby mind stamping all over me!" attitude. This 'hipassiko, opaniyiko' is something that we can all experience when faith is aroused. We are invited to reach up to it, the Dhamma. This is all one can say, because words themselves are unsatisfactory and changing. But if we can open to the here and now, if we can but bring this reflection into our hearts, we open ourselves to a great movement of the spirit. Then there is faith in the Sangha. That is the potential for the personal, localised kammic experience that we call our self to actually connect to, associate with and be resumed into the Ultimate. This is one of the many miraculous things - they are all miracles in the Triple Gem - that there can be occasions when one experiences a state of wholeness or completion, a fulfilment.

Most religions recognise and evoke this spirit of the Divine, the Sublime, the Brahma, the Atman or God the Almighty, but then it's always: "But how do we get to it?" The Sangha is a quality of faith and energy, a mindful reflection that we bring to the present moment, to recognise that even the aspiration to be with Dhamma, IS Dhamma. It already is it. We look at that which brings us here: what it is that actually moves us to come together for a morning puja, or to go forth in the

Holy Life? What is that? We might think, "I want to do it" or, "I felt like doing it" or, "If I didn't do it, I'd get blamed or feel negative about myself" or, "It seemed like a good idea at the time". All these attitudes and thoughts can come up, but this is just a screen of thoughts - often stained with self-deprecation.

So what is it that urges us to awaken? That, in itself, is an aspect of awakening. It, too, is an essential aspect of Dhamma; it is like the Dhamma seeking itself, or praising itself. When we participate in a puja, we're not particularly aiming to calm down - because it's a celebration, a recognition and a gladness for the world. In this way we can look at our ability to see and feel, as an aspect of Dhamma. We can note our embodiment - just sensations in the body - or the thinking quality of the mind: what are they? Who does it? Where do they come from? We get so caught up in self-view, into feeling good about this and bad about that, wondering what to do, trying to get away from this or that. But instead we can note that there IS feeling; there IS consciousness....So what is it? What is it that can actually see; what is it that can note seeing, or be aware of thoughts, moods and feelings, and note that they change? In the puja we are not trying to meditate in some preconceived system. It's a great shake-out. It's a celebration and sweeping around to establish and bring forth faith, energy and mindfulness. Why go anywhere - why retreat into the numbness of the mind? In this celebration and recognition of the wonders of the Triple Gem our spirit can come forth to hearing, to seeing, to the feelings in the body, sensations of coolness or warmth, or the breathing; while with its self view, our physical form remains just a limp 'bag of perceptions'. Even the mind itself can simply regurgitate habitual phrases, moods and feelings - repeating, like a weary old parrot nattering away on your shoulder, 'Polly wants a cracker!' But we can rejuvenate this somewhat limp, bedraggled 'bird' of a mind - preen it, brighten it up, make it dance, make it sing. We can mentally 'fly around', noting: there is a thought, there is a feeling - all changing, moment by moment. It's all just an immediate dance of the present moment. So why go away from this beautiful puja of the spirit, why not join it? Whether we listen inwardly to the silence in the ear (we can hear different tones in the perception of silence) or listen outwardly to silence or sounds, our perception changes. When these aggregates are not adhered to they are fields of arousal of the spirit.



The Buddha was awakened within the five khandas; for example, within perception, by noticing the way it changes and moves. Noticing our thoughts and drives is an arousing sign; we observe the energy arising, whether it's slow or agitated, or where it goes. When we don't

hold or grasp at the aggregates, they become a basis for the realisation of the momentary, dancing nature of experience. So when we find that the mind is bogged down, we can always turn to the five khandhas, the six sense spheres or consciousness. The eye, eye consciousness and the objects of the eye; the ear, ear consciousness and the objects of the ear - these are all available. There are plenty of possibilities for us to consider; rather than lying around being pummelled by some obsessive habit, mood, or dullness. We can actually 'step out' and go to our skin, to the bones, to the back, the head, the eyes - even to the fact that there is consciousness arising; consciousness moving and ever-changing. All these can be looked at, seen as miraculous - celebrated and observed clearly in their changing and evanescent qualities. Then, when we get stuck in stale perceptions we can work with them, by returning to a feeling. Is the feeling pleasant or unpleasant? Generally, when one is stuck, it is unpleasant, humdrum, boring and dull. Or we can go to the form: what actually is the feeling of a hand resting on one's leg? Which part do you feel - the palm, or the knuckle, the finger nail or the thumb? In this way we go back to form itself. What actually is this apparent material form that is being experienced with sensations arising in it? Where do they arise, and what do they do? What are the perceptions that are created around them?

These are exercises in mindfulness and application. There are many opportunities to investigate the almost limitless manifoldness that we are. All of them are avenues to the Unconditioned - because all of these things are changing, and none of them are self; when they are grasped they are all unsatisfactory. These three characteristics of being will always guide and steer us. If we experience unsatisfactoriness, it's because we are grasping. And with change, there is the vibration of feeling, the movement of thought, the ebbing and flowing of the emotions and so on. What is it that notices their changing, and can stay with that - with the seeing eye, the listening ear - with a patient heart, and the faith of the spirit? This is the Buddha, this is the Dhamma, this is the Sangha - an eternal, timeless quality which is outside of circumstances and yet, at the same time, totally involved with them. So for the welfare of the world, we can practise these ways of the spirit within this body and mind; within the five khandas and the six sense spheres. When this world of which we seem to be the centre, this world of consciousness, of forms and change, is rehearsed with the spirit - when the spirit moves through it - then it's a delight, a place of truth, love and boundlessness.



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An Invitation to Awaken

Venerable Chandako, an American born bhikkhu currently resident in Thailand, describes how contemplation of the body can be used to balance the mind and develop an appreciation of the three characteristics (anicca, dukkha, anatta)

I spent my first vassa under jet planes, with a housing development construction site outside my window, surrounded by seductive sights in the heat and smog of Thailand's capital city. Venerable Ajahn Piak now lived in the urban jungle as sprawling Bangkok had gradually engulfed his tiny, once remote, monastery. The airplanes roared and the neighbours snored. I struggled with mind states. And through it all Ajahn Piak radiated. Serenity. Loving kindness. He was not an average man.

One day the Sangha was given the opportunity to witness an autopsy at the police hospital. This traditional practice of contemplating a dead person is a meditation technique for taking an honest inquiring look at the ephemeral nature of our bodies and our infatuated identification with them. Undertaken with wisdom, corpse contemplation assists in reducing attachment to the body, setting down a burden of dukkha and giving rise to joy. Deeply accepting the inevitability of death helps us to make our priorities clear. Naturally we then develop an appreciation for the preciousness of our life and the opportunities it affords us to cultivate the Path.

On the car ride over I tried to arouse a suitably serious contemplative attitude as the driver blared rock music. When I first came to stay with Ajahn Piak, I had four or five different methods of meditation going, the patchwork result of years of spiritual shopping. One evening I went to consult with him and asked for advice on which direction to pursue. He stressed the importance of understanding the truth about the body through practicing kayagatasati (mindfulness of the body)[1] and asubha (meditation on the unattractive qualities of the body). He gave instructions on mentally dissecting it, reducing it to its component parts for objective analysis, and reflecting on its eventual demise. That was my first attempt at systematically developing investigation of this body. I was 'getting into' my body - really getting in there and it was enough to fundamentally challenge perceptions I had about who I was.

1: Kayagatasati Sutta MN 119

It is important to enjoy meditation, or else one will inevitably begin looking outside for enjoyment.

The car stopped. Six brown robes, four Thai monks, one young novice and a phra farang (Western monk), paraded past white walls. Greeted with the smell of formaldehyde I entered the autopsy room prepared for gruesome and sobering sights, and there she was - our corpse, a Bangkok woman in her mid 20's. Freshly dead without a mark on her body and not the least bit blue or bloated, she looked more like Sleeping Beauty than the rotting, Mara-combating

meditation object I'd expected. I feigned equanimity. The little novice had big eyes. I wanted to ask what suffering had driven her to hang herself, but the coroner and his scalpel interrupted. He made it clear this enchanted sleep was no fairy tale. With the monks standing on raised bleachers like the cheering section at a football match, the dissection began. The initial cuts shattered the perception of beauty. While retaining the mental image of her original condition for comparison, the subsequent dismantling began to take its effect. I remembered Siddhartha and his preoccupation when his enticing entertainers could not assuage his wise sadness. What is that quality that separates the living from the dead? Why do I give importance to this corpse I call myself?

Meanwhile Sleeping Beauty had looked better. I wanted a closer peek, so I climbed down from the bleachers to stand next to her, my mind rotating between the emotions of fascination, repulsion, compassion and a questioning peace. Then the smell hit me. My head began to spin, and I decided it was time to back off. As I stepped into the hallway my sight began to fade, blackness gradually coming in from the sides reducing vision to a dot and then extinguishing it altogether.

"I am not going to faint!" I determined. - It would simply be too embarrassing for everyone present if the pra farang faints. I was, however, completely blind. Holding on to a thread of consciousness with all the willpower I could muster, I could hear the others preparing to leave. I grabbed onto someone's robe to lead me out. Once outside, the others noticed I looked at least as pale as the corpse and gave me a seat. Within a few minutes vision returned.

Upon returning to the monastery the work began to integrate and internalize the day's experience. Without bringing the question of death home to bear on my life, I would be left only with another fascinating memory, my heart remaining relatively unchanged by the autopsy. I followed Ajahn Piak's advice to visualize the different layers of my body's composition. What would I look like without hair? (an easy start for the ordained) Without skin? Without organs, sinews or flesh? Gradually specific parts of the body stood out more clearly than the rest: a full set of lipless teeth, a rib, and the hair on the back of my hand. Focusing on a single tooth or hair, simply seeing without conceptualising, revealed physicality and mentality as interdependent yet distinctly separate processes, further unraveling the assumed notion of an inherent self. The world seemed turned upside down. A sense of spiritual urgency arose, as well as a seriousness which I found necessary to balance with regular development of loving-kindness.

The Buddha considered meditation on the parts of the body of central importance and it is included as part of the ordination ceremony for bhikkhus. These asubha practices are not an attempt to convince ourselves that all is ugly, but to balance the mind to see things as they truly are. The world is neither intrinsically beautiful nor ugly, but problems arise when projections of attractiveness on people, objects and ideas give rise to desire and dukkha.



In expounding the first Noble Truth the Buddha in no way denied that pleasure can be found in sensual gratification through the body. He did, however, point out that it is fleeting, carries a backlash of dukkha, and is inferior to the wholesome bliss of jhana and the peace of nibbana.

In developing kayagatasati an ability to concentrate the mind is essential to go beyond the superficial, and the contemplation of the body in turn conditions the mind to gather in one-pointedness. Even though one has seen the unsatisfactory nature of sensual pleasure, as long as one has not yet experienced the greater happiness of jhana it cannot be expected that one will be able to fully let go of attachment to those sensual pleasures.[2]

2: Culadukkhakkhandha Sutta MN 14

In the Thai Forest tradition kayagatasati is the mainstay for developing insight. Ajahn Chah's teacher, Ajahn Mun, recommended, "In your investigation never allow the mind to desert the body for anywhere else. You can examine the body's unattractiveness, view it as made up of elements, examine it to see it as aggregates or by way of the three characteristics [impermanence, suffering and not-self. When any of these aspects are fully and lucidly seen by one's heart, all other exterior things will clearly manifest there too.]"[3]

3: Autobiography of a Forest Monk, Ajahn Tate, page 150.

It was only Ajahn Mun who could convince his eminent disciple Ajahn Tate to investigate the body. Until his 12th vassa Ajahn Tate figured that once the subtleties of the mind have been mastered why go back to investigate a coarse object such as the body. However, it was precisely due to his taking up this practice that he had a deep realization of Dhamma.

I later had the opportunity to speak with Ajahn Piak, and he explained in further detail the meditations on the body.

"First have the mind rest still, internally gathered. This is a necessary first stage. As soon as it begins to move take up an object of investigation, whichever aspect of kayagatasati you regularly use and are skilled with. Suppose you investigate the earth element (solidity) [4] in

the body. If the mind is peaceful with enough strength it will seem as though the body disperses, dissolves and completely disappears. It will be anatta (not-self). Empty. Investigate whichever part of the body you choose. If you can't investigate all the parts of the body simply focus on one, but have it reach the point of anatta. Then reassemble it; back and forth, over and over, until it is seen very clearly: this body is only a collection of parts; it is impermanent; it arises, exists and passes away."

4: Mahahatthipadopama Sutta MN 28

I asked, "Do you recommend taking one part of the body, the skeleton for instance, as a fixed object of samadhi?"

"Yes, you can certainly do that. If at first you can't visualize your bones it may be necessary to go look at a skeleton. Remember what it looks like. Then imagine yourself as a skeleton. Take the skeleton out of yourself, then put yourself in the skeleton. With increasing skill, each time you are aware of yourself you can bring up the skeleton nimitta, (in this context) visual images of the body, either created or spontaneously arisen, or actually seeing into the body with the mind's eye, knowing 'you' are bones. Then when the nimitta is clear and stable, break it up and dissolve it into dust and anatta. If you use this as your main mode of investigation, each person you encounter or think of, you must see as a skeleton. When skilled, this will bring lightness and bliss. This is the way I practised as a young monk."

"Should one investigate in the same manner each time or follow wherever the mind inclines?"

"Any part of the body is fine. If the mind goes to a particular spot then contemplate there. If distracting thoughts begin to increase, let the mind rest by returning to concentration meditation. After it has regained strength continue with the contemplation. Whichever part is clear, a tooth for example, make that nimitta as big or as small as possible. I used to take a tiny single hair and make it longer and longer until it filled all space. Then I'd shrink it. It was good fun and I'd do it for hours. This type of fun is quite useful because you are playing with the meditation objects of hair, skin, bones etc. the entire time. It is important to enjoy meditation, or else one will inevitably begin looking outside for enjoyment."

In the following years the mental image of Sleeping Beauty's far from charming lineaments remained vivid and clear. And she taught: when the grand ball is over, the last dance has come to a halt and our mask is gently rolled back, what's behind our thin facade? The kiss of the coroner's blade invites us to awaken.



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Kiwi Practice

Ajahn Subbato, who is currently abbot of the Devon Vihara and a New Zealander by birth, uses a Maori legend to encourage meditators in their practice during a retreat given at Amaravati in 1994.

I thought I would tell you a story, a Maori legend.

A long, long time ago in the Land of the Long White Cloud - this is New Zealand, before the Maoris came there, when the islands were covered with very dense rain-forest. There was a terrible plague of beetles and grubs. They were eating at the roots and the bark on the trees and so were destroying the forest and it became very serious, as there grew to be more and more of these grubs and beetles chewing away.

So Tane, the God of the Forest, gathered all the birds together. As many of you will know, in New Zealand there were originally no animals. There were just lizards, and lots and lots of different birds. Tane, the God of the Forest, called all the birds together; they were just up in the tree tops singing and having a good time. He told them what the situation was, saying: "Look, the forest is in danger. Our very life is in danger from this plague of beetles and grubs. I need some of you to come down to the forest floor and eat them, and save the forest. It's a desperate situation." And of course most of the birds went, "Yuk! Grubs and beetles." The birds were used to living on ambrosia, nectar, beautiful wild berries and fruits. The idea of eating little grubs and beetles did not appeal to them, so there was a general turning the other way and whistling, trying to pretend that they hadn't heard.

So Tane decided that he would have to ask each of the birds individually. He asked each of them, "Will you please come down and eat the grubs and beetles, and save the forest?" And each one of the birds had an excuse, had a reason: "Well, no, actually I'm frightfully busy this week", "Sorry, Tane, I just can't fit it in this week". And they all had some sort of an excuse: one of the birds said, "I can't come down, I'll get my feathers all dirty", and the Tui said, "No, I'm too scared to do it - it's too dark and dingy and damp, and I just couldn't bear it". Another bird said, "I couldn't bear to be separated from my chicks, I need to stay on the nest and look after them." And so on it went.

We can ask ourselves, "What am I depending upon?" Is
it the next cup of tea, or tomorrow's breakfast, or the
bell ringing?

Tane, the God of the Forest, was getting worried about this. Finally, he asked the Kiwi bird. And, the Kiwi bird said, "Oh. All right. Gee, I suppose I could do it." Tane explained to the Kiwi bird, "When you come down to the forest floor you'll have to give up your beautiful

rainbow coloured wings, and you'll have to grow big feet so that you can stomp around in the forest in the thick leaves and undergrowth. You'll have to have a plain brown coat, and grow a long beak so that you can dig around in the leaves and in the ground and eat all the bugs and beetles." That didn't sound too great, but the Kiwi thought, "I have to go through with this."

So, bravely, the Kiwi came down out of the tree-tops and grew stout feet, and gave up his beautiful rainbow wings and wore brown feathers and grew a long beak and stomped around in the dark. The Kiwi became a nocturnal, flightless bird that creeps around in the dark eating grubs and beetles in the forest. Tane was a bit peeved at the response that he had got from the other birds, and so he punished them. He said to them, "Formerly you sang all day long, but now I shall allow you to sing in full chorus only at dawn and dusk. And, Tui, you can wear a white feather under your chin as a sign to all the other birds that you are a coward." And the God of the Forest gave each of the birds a different little punishment. But the Kiwis came down in their flocks to the forest floor and ate the grubs and saved the forest. The Kiwi became in Maori mythology a heroic symbol, and to have Kiwi feathers on your cloak meant you had a lot of mana, or prestige.

This story talks to each one of us about the kind of work that we are doing here. The work that we are doing is really important: it's not just a holiday we're having here (in case you hadn't noticed). Sometimes it feels like a holiday, and that's fine, but it is important work. Not everyone is going to do this particular kind of work. There are all sorts of ways in which we can respond to our life and to the state of the world as it comes to us, and this is just one way of approaching it.

This is not a casual thing we are engaged in, spending hours and hours meditating. The mind is really very tricky. We hear about the Venerable Sariputta saying that the sort of monk who would grace this world is one who in the morning would abide in this attainment, and in the midday would abide in that attainment, and in the evening he would abide in another attainment. For most of us it is a rather more of a hit and miss affair. We are breaking new ground, for most of us we are getting into a whole world of uncertainty, entering into a very mysterious and unknown realm of the heart and mind, and it is very tricky. We get caught in all sorts of subtle moods and wander down blind alleys, or we fall asleep for a whole session of meditation; we feel dull, or restless, and we don't feel as though we are achieving anything or getting anywhere. So it may seem that this is not a very effective kind of work - that we are not accomplishing or achieving anything very tangible. And yet, if you think about it, this is the nature of the mind; this is what we have to work with. This is the very stuff that we need to learn to work with - whatever it is that we are experiencing is where our work is. We work with the mind, the body, the heart, as it is - we understand that. Just because it might be subtle and not momentous - materially you aren't doing anything - we're just spending all day with ourselves, and it doesn't appear that we're doing a great deal for the world or for anybody else but in fact it's really, really significant, this work. We shouldn't be discouraged by all the subtle and devious ways of the mind: "It's not working for me", or "I can't do it" - these feelings obviously come up, but they are the grubs and beetles that we need to be pecking away at with our long beaks.

Two very important things to access, understand and strengthen our faith in, on a retreat, are our understanding of taking refuge in the Triple Gem, and a sense of what the Path is - a direct experience of what these both mean. Once we are established in the Refuges and Path-knowledge then they go with us wherever we go; they stay with us and even if we lose touch with them we can come back to them. All our chanting has been about bringing our mind in touch with the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha - the three Refuges - over and over again. Taking refuge in the Buddha, in mindfulness and clear comprehension, is something we are cultivating as we are meditating; we are practising being mindful of the body, of the feelings, of our mind, our consciousness. We are training the mind to abide with awareness. Most of the

time in normal, everyday consciousness we're identified with the body, with feelings of pleasure and pain, with the mood, state and colour of the mind; we're pushing and pulling with it all. Because we are busy in our everyday life and we are involved in this wrestling match, it is difficult to get a sense of what taking refuge in the Buddha, taking refuge in being clearly mindful, means. When we are on retreat, as things quieten down, and we relinquish the struggle, observe and keep trusting - staying with 'being aware' and 'being mindful'. We can stay open and receptive, feeling whatever it is that we are feeling; feeling the body as it is, feeling our mood, witnessing feeling, being fully aware of the flow of sense-consciousness. As things quieten down and we relinquish the struggle, we get a sense of that as an abiding, a sense of it as a real refuge. We are no longer taking refuge in the desire mind, the pushing and pulling the struggle with sensations. We're no longer trying to re-arrange our body, our feelings, our state of mind. We're no longer taking refuge in that active manipulation of body and mind in desiring or resisting, we are taking refuge in 'being-aware-of', in knowing and feeling openly, in listening and watching.

The Buddha had a pertinent simile for this: imagine if a man were to take a piece of wood out of water, and try to make fire by rubbing his fire-stick on that piece of wood. Would he make fire with that wet piece of wood? No matter how hard he tried, no matter how much discomfort he endured, he would not be able to make fire with that wet piece of wood. The Buddha likened this to the impossibility of seeing the Path and experiencing tranquility, and liberation, and knowledge of liberation as long we are involved in body and mind with desire and craving, wanting and longing, anger, resistance - in all kinds of delusion and ignorance. Then the Buddha described a man who finds a sappy, green piece of wood, and tries to make fire with it. It does not matter how hard he tries, he is not going to make a fire with that sappy piece of wood. The Buddha said that this is like the person who practises very diligently; who sweats and strains, gets aches and pains, who gets hungry and tired and cold, but who is, although physically removed from desire and craving, wanting and longing, anger, resistance, hatred, delusion and ignorance, still mentally involved and identified with these. There is no way, the Buddha said, that tranquillity, clarity, knowledge of the path, liberation and knowledge of liberation can arise. Finally, if a person finds a dry piece of wood with no sap in it, and rubs it with his fire-stick, yes, he will get a fire. The Buddha likened this to a person who, whether they struggle and strive, enduring pain and hardship in the process - when their body and mind are removed from sensual lust and aversion, from delusion, then tranquillity, knowledge of the Path and knowledge of liberation will arise.



This is a very clear statement of where the refuge we are cultivating is. We can ask ourselves, particularly when we are alone, "Where is my refuge?", "Do I have an inner refuge?". Because we cannot fail to notice what it is that we are relying upon, fail to know where we are abiding. We can ask ourselves, "What am I depending upon?" Is it the next cup of tea, or tomorrow's breakfast, or the bell ringing? This is not to disparage, but to notice what it is that we depend

emotionally on. Sometimes it IS the next cup of tea that keeps us going, we want to be aware of hat. Or it can be the group energy; when we are alone we're all over the place, but when we're in the group that buoys us up gives us energy - structure is a refuge for us, provides support that we can lean upon. What is it we are taking refuge in? It's not that we're already established unshakeably in an inner refuge, it's something we're cultivating. We can still get caught up in the desire mind but we're practising coming back and taking refuge, having confidence, in the Buddha. We can contemplate the Buddha, to get a feeling for that abiding; we can contemplate the Buddha, the Enlightened One, as the embodiment of the seven Factors of Enlightenment: mindfulness, investigation of Dhamma, energy, delight, calm, concentration, and equanimity.

These are all aspects of the enlightened mind - it's helpful to just think about these factors and arouse them. It may be hard to think of yourself as a Buddha, but these are factors of the mind, they're things that we can access, things that we can bring forth, things that we can feel. If we are willing to keep trusting and establishing ourselves in pure awareness, simply knowing, simply feeling body and mind, moment by moment, we get a clear recognition of that as an abiding. It's very subtle. We are taking refuge in a response, moment by moment, so it is a very difficult thing. You can't just take hold of the Buddha like a lump of brass and carry him away, but as the mind gets quieter and things settle down then we can get a clear sense of that as an abiding, as a refuge: the Buddha knowing the Dhamma, the Buddha contemplating the Dhamma. It is no longer a matter of trying to develop this and get rid of that, judging and manipulating our body and mind. Instead there is an open, full awareness; it is just knowing, and the Buddha represents that perfect knowing.

If we are taking refuge in this clarity, we can experience the mind in a struggle. Say, when we are sitting and we want something, our mind and our body are saying, "I must have this, I must hear that bell very soon." Our mind can be screaming at us, "I want it, I want it, I want it", if we can just stay still with that, and watch it, if we don't crush the desire with our will or with our judgement, but just feel it completely - it can take a long time to get the balance just right so that we're not pushing the desire away or following it and getting caught up in it - then the desire peters out or dissolves. The desire unwinds. We are still sitting here, we didn't get what we wanted, but the desire for it has gone and everything is OK, it's all right. Five or ten minutes ago, everything in us was saying that we had to have what we desired - that I'm not going to be whole unless I have that - but now we haven't got that thing, and the desire for it has gone. If we can just recognise that - if we can just recognise when the mind is filled with craving and longing and struggling - and hold that non-judgemental, pure, open, balanced awareness, and just stay with that refuge in Knowing, then there is ending of that desire. We haven't killed the desire or pushed it away, but it is no longer there; it's petered out, fizzled away. And we are still sitting here, and it's OK, and we have an insight into the Path - an insight into the way out of suffering.

Recognise there is a tremendous commitment in this, a tremendous commitment to patiently being with what we are feeling, to feeling it totally and completely; opening ourselves so that we are beyond where we feel comfortable and certain. If we are willing to be patient and diligent and trusting, then we have an insight into the ending of suffering, of conflict and struggle. That doesn't mean that we are not going to experience difficulty. There are still beetles and bugs gnawing at the trees that need to be eaten. The Kiwis are still there. Even though they've taken a bit of a beating they are still there, eating away at the grubs and the beetles. They are very quiet about it, doing their work at night. You can hear them squeak, and it is very comforting to know that the Kiwis are there, doing their work quietly at night, without asking anything for it, just taking care of the forest for all the birds. So we can remember that, when we are singing in the tree-tops: there is other work to do.

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Seeking the Buddha's Footprints

Returning to the source of the Buddha's life and teaching through the ancient practice of pilgrimage, Angela Coton explains how she was able to deepen her faith in the simplicity of her own practice back home in England.

Ananda, there are four places for faithful disciples to see, which may be their inspiration: here a Perfect One was born discovered the full supreme Enlightenment set rolling the matchless wheel of the Law here a Perfect One finally attained Nibbana.

The opportunity to join a pilgrimage "in the footsteps of the Buddha" through India and Nepal came just when I was beginning to involve my heart more in my practice and to develop a sense of gratitude to the man who gave us the Dhamma. It was a three week journey combining meditation, sightseeing and talks from the Buddha's life led by Shantum Seth, a disciple of the Vietnamese Zen Master, Thich Nhat Hanh. I expected a powerful emotional experience, something dramatic and overpowering - as if merely to sit beneath the Bodhi tree would shatter my greed, hatred and delusion, and propel me to Nibbana in a blaze of flashing lights! But of course the Buddha's footprints are harder to follow.

At dusk on the second day of the pilgrimage we walked up Vulture Peak, a hill near Rajgir where the Buddha often sat to watch the sunset. The view of the surrounding wooded hills must be similar to that of two and a half thousand years ago, and the steps are the same ones that were laid for the Buddha by the local king, Bimbisara. I took off my shoes as I climbed, in an attempt to bring me closer to the earth, to the Buddha who had walked here. At the top, where a shrine had been built for pilgrims to offer incense, we sat in meditation facing the glorious red sunset. I reminded myself that the Buddha sat here: but I felt remote from the experience, as if the pious monuments built by his followers separated me from the man himself.

Without the temple and shrine, and the long line of sometimes aggressive beggars, it would have been a lonely, barren place.

Just south of the modern city is the attractive Bamboo Grove - still containing bamboos - where the Buddha's first monastery was built. This park, peaceful amid India's customary noise and bustle, seemed much more as it would have been in the Buddha's day although the monks and monasteries were missing. We sat quietly to hear Shantum tell the story of the Buddha and King Bimbisara, who donated the grove.

Our visit to Bodh Gaya, next on our itinerary, by chance coincided with a Nyingmapa Tibetan festival which had drawn thousands of mainly Bhutanese monks. With every inch of ground around the main temple occupied by prostrating pilgrims and chanting monks, we were unable

to reach the base of the Bodhi tree. Shantum obtained permission of us to take the stairs to the temple's roof, where we meditated under the upper branches of the tree. The Tibetan chanting - a rhythmic, powerful sound - drowned all internal distractions. I began to realise the futility of expecting Buddhist shrines in modern India to be anything like the places the Buddha knew. What the places offered was the experience of Buddhism as a living, dynamic faith.

The Bhutanese pilgrims swirled like a river around the temple, circumambulating step by step or in full-length prostrations. They chanted quietly to themselves and turned their prayer wheels: each was totally absorbed in his or her devotions. It was impossible not to be awed by the intense concentration, not to be overwhelmed by the massed monks in their red and yellow robes.

The local people are Hindu and Muslim, but every Buddhist nation has at least one temple in Bodh Gaya. We spent an afternoon at the Root Institute, a Tibetan Buddhist organisation which tries to serve the material as well as spiritual needs of the local people. We visited the attractive Tibetan, Japanese, Thai and Bhutanese temples, the Vietnamese temple (closed), and the Burmese temple, (run-down and used as a dormitory), and wondered whether as the Dhamma spread there might one day be an "English Temple". I felt the power of the Buddha's teaching, whose many different traditions, sundered by time and geography, could still meet peacefully. Our own group of three Britons, five Americans and our Indian guide, represented at least four traditions. Two of us, Carol Williams and I, practise in the Theravadin forest tradition.

Before leaving Bodh Gaya we visited the hills nearby, where the Buddha-to-be practised austerities. The cave he was said to have used had been visited by other pilgrims before us, whose votive candles made it unbearably hot and smoky. Without the temple and shrine, and the long line of sometimes aggressive beggars, it would have been a lonely, barren place.

At Sarnath, where the Buddha expounded his teaching to the five ascetics, we sat by the ruined wall of a monastery while Shantum told the story of the First Sermon. In the evening the resident Sri Lankan monks held their puja and I managed to find space inside their crowded temple to listen. The unfamiliar form of the Pali - the monks amplified by loudspeakers, the voices of the lay people in the background - washed through the building like waves beating upon a shore. Although very different from the Tibetan chanting, it was equally moving.

Kushinagar, site of the Buddha's death, is a quiet town without the beggars and street merchants we had met elsewhere. The stupa built on the site of the Buddha's cremation is a venerable brick ruin festooned with grass, shrubs and even tiny Bo tree saplings which have to be constantly removed lest they tear it apart. At this peaceful stupa it no longer mattered that I could not feel the living presence of the Buddha: Kushinagar was after all the place where he died. It was a site that spoke powerfully of the transience and uncertainty of life.



The diversity of Buddhist traditions was very obvious here. We stayed in the Chinese temple, which is run by a delightful Vietnamese nun. Fellow guests included a Tibetan Rinpoche and a Japanese monk. In the town we met a Sri Lankan monk, a Thai monk, and a "phony monk" who wore the robes in order to attract rupees. The Rinpoche told us that one benefit of pilgrimage is that at the holy sites it is easier to meditate deeply; one brings the Buddha alive by being mindful. I saw that I would not find the Buddha by trying to recreate his historical setting. His humanity, although it reminds us that as human beings we too can follow him, is less important than his teaching. The facts of suffering and our human reactions to it, our craving and confusion, are the same today and they were two and half millenia ago, as is the path to their cessation.

The full moon occurred while we were in Kushinagar. That day Carol and I visited the Thai monk at his small outdoor shrine and requested the Three Refuges and Five Precepts. He spoke no English, we spoke no Thai: the Pali was sufficient. I felt it significant to reaffirm my practice in this way in this place. Then at the Chinese temple we offered the evening chanting from Chithurst in Pali and English, adding our own language to those in which the Buddha is honoured at the holy places.

At Lumbini, across the border in Nepal, we meditated each morning beneath the large statue of the newborn Buddha in the prayer court of our Japanese hotel. At the site of the Buddha's birth, which is being "developed" and currently resembles a building site, Taiwanese pilgrims chanted in Chinese at the Mayadevi temple which honours the Buddha's mother. In the Nepalese temple, the lone Theravadin monk told us that the Nepalese are "hubble-bubble Buddhists, all mixed up with Hinduism". In the Tibetan temple a man chanted, accompanying himself on a cymbal. Attracted by the singing I wandered in, camera at the ready. I looked up to see the Buddha-image gazing serenely down on me, and with a jolt remembered that Lumbini is not a collection of dead monuments for tourists but a place for pilgrims following a profound and enduring teaching.

The pilgrimage concluded at Sravasti, where the Jeta Grove given to the Sangha by the wealthy merchant Anathapindaka is still beautiful today, with its trees, flowers and silent brick ruins. Shantum told us about Anathapindaka's purchase of the grove by covering its ground with gold coins, and about the Buddha's conversion nearby of the murderer Angulimala. In the stillness we meditated, sitting and walking. We chanted in several languages. We shared the poems Shantum had asked us to write about our experience of the pilgrimage. I tried to convey the sense I had gained of India's deeply religious heritage, and the glory of the Buddha's living religion where all traditions can enrich each other.

The journey showed us more than the ancient holy sites left in ruins for centuries after the decay of Buddhism and now restored and surrounded by modern temples. Throughout, Shantum introduced us to the hospitable Indian people - many living in the same way as their ancestors had done in the Buddha's time. We saw the poverty many live in, and Shantum pointed out how similar scenes must have confronted the Buddha. This, more than monuments, brought him alive.

I returned home to everyday life without the flashing lights of "enlightenment", without a "peak experience": but with something more significant and more enduring, which I am only now beginning to find words for. Travelling as a small "Sangha" with other lay Buddhists and sharing our experiences has opened me more to what the Buddha really saw, beyond the wealth and poverty, beggars and street merchants, shrines and sacred places. After the colourful varieties of Buddhism I had encountered, basic Theravada practice seemed mundane and unexciting. But although it is important to have stood where the Buddha stood and seen the sights and people he saw, truly walking in the Buddha's footsteps means being present with the ordinariness of everyday life, practising his teaching at every moment, in all places.

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Upasika News

Three reflections on developments in and around the Upasika movement.

Diana Jones

....How good it is to be in contact with companions on the path. The experience of common aspiration and values, and difficulties is all too rare a treat for some of us....

..The heart is full of gratitude to the monastic sangha for existing. But it is easy to overlook what lay supporters can offer each other, and to think that the monastery is the only place where we can draw inspiration and insight, where we can be 'spiritual'. Yet, as was pointed out in our small group meeting, the practice in the monastery simply involves things like relating to that to which one is averse, examining it in the light of the Four Noble Truths - and this practice is available to us outside the monastery too! Admittedly it might be easier in the monastery where there is commitment to practice, but of course leadership in the monastery is important and neither that nor the commitment is a 'given'. Nevertheless the general atmosphere of peaceful and wholesome aspiration is undoubtedly beneficial to those who visit. But it can be fragile, for example when senior monks disrobe. Where else might we find support?...

By openly affirming their commitment, upasikas are making a public statement that is inspiring to others and also encourages them to stick to the practice.

...The importance of local groups was emphasised again and again as we attempt to practise in a culture that is not Buddhist. And even contact with Amaravati can be daunting at first...

Would developing a lay vinaya help?...In considering this, some voiced concern, since there is a variety of social milieus in which lay supporters operate - could there be a lay vinaya that could possibly cater for all? We have to be part of other lay communities: the work-place and family being the most obvious. However the point was made that our vinaya could essentially be simply a reflection on how the Five Precepts might be extended.

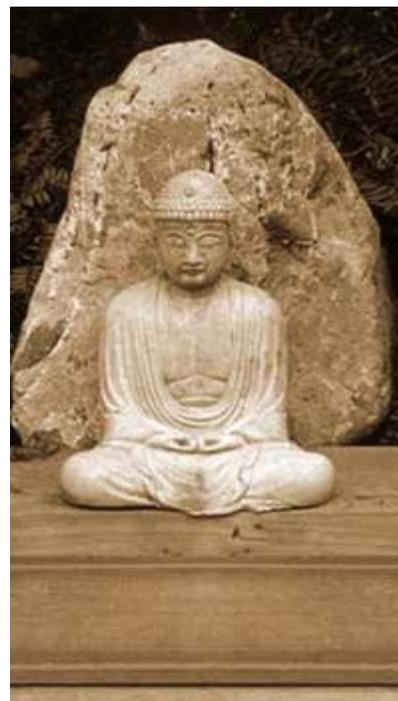
My hope is for more practicality. I like the idea of an advertisements column for example. My interest is to learn and practise chanting in Pali together, not only for the experience itself, but also as a route in to understanding Pali a little. I am also interested in exploring how lay supporters might set up a network of 'confessors' for each other. (Having heard that this is something done regularly by monks and nuns as a way of 'recharging the batteries.'

Jeffrey Craig

Time seemed to fly by, and two hours was just not enough to fully appreciate the different circumstances and challenges of

our individual practice. For both upasikas and Monastic Sangha to share together was a deeply nourishing experience. To hear and understand the need and struggle for solitary practice, and also for close intimate friendship was both moving and empowering.

...Ajahn Viradhammo's Dhamma talk on the Saturday night added a tremendous dimension pointing out that Upasikas and Monastics are 'in the soup' and practising together; that we all have knowledge and share similar difficulties and challenges, and that each really needs and can support the other. Bringing the weekend into mind, I have a warm recollection of shared space, of sacred space - the monastics, like us, were invited guests and we were, and are, all part of a wonderful living tradition, 2500 years old, and yet relevant, worthwhile and very precious today.'



Chris Ward

...Sometimes we may wonder whether the Upasika movement is divisive or elitist. In the West we are very suspicious of anything that seems to suggest authority or an elite - we see mainly the negative aspects. Concerns about elitism arise when people are excluded along arbitrary and often prejudiced grounds from joining a group. We can and have avoided this so far by ensuring that the Upasika Community is open to all who wish to be committed to the Triple Gem. But actually life itself is exclusive - we cannot be in two places at once; we cannot be simultaneously both committed to the Triple Gem and also not committed to it. We can be an ordained bhikkhu or a lay person - but not both at the same time. This is obvious, but sometimes forgotten.

...By openly affirming their commitment, upasikas are making a public statement that is inspiring to others and also encourages them to stick to the practice...

...Being a lay Buddhist means being open to questions about how we can combine family and work responsibilities with Buddhist practice. What are the limits? Do we have to deliberately forsake worldly involvements in order to be enlightened? Are we averse to worldly responsibilities and intent on escaping from these? Listening to Luang Por Sumedho, it is clear that the Forest Sangha Tradition encourages community practice and mindfulness in everyday life. Being mindful washing dishes and moving chairs; noticing our minds when dismantling shrines. ...So perhaps one of the particular challenges for lay Buddhists is in coping with diverse responsibilities without being deluded by them.

...And then there are our desires for comfort and good organisation. We might come expecting that the arrangements will work perfectly, that we will be comfortable warm and happy for the whole time; that we will be inspired by the wonderful people in our discussion groups. When faced with a cold shower, or irritation at another's comments, our feelings of inspiration and universal benevolence can reduce somewhat. Perhaps being mindful of our reactions in these circumstances is where the real practice is...

...I am left with a feeling of community with both lay and ordained Buddhists and much gratitude to all those who made the weekend happen, both behind the scenes, and in more leading roles. Especial thanks to Nick Carrol, who not only led the organisation of the event,

but also coped very well with facilitating a shrine room full of unruly Buddhists.’



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Ballad of Amaravati's Bridge (to the Deathless)

On 4th February, the day of Luang Por Jun's funeral, the roof-topping of the Amaravati Temple took place. Samanera Thitadhammo wrote this ballad to mark the occasion.

ONE

Afternoon and the days grey light encased inside this tapering frame of wooden space A challenge summoning the deathless now stands assembled like a Trojan Horse inside the gates of ignorance in the Kaliyung.

TWO

An upward sweep - a fretworked Himalayan Peak in anjali a beacon on the undulating Hemel Hempstead tide of furrowed hills - Brooding snowclouds churn - tumbling the skys singing timbers curve and brace as different darkneses of green-leaf and the cuckoos call pattern stillness in a geometric hollow of nothingness.

*... harnessed to a secret web of music moored to
stillness -
A spiritual sentinel ...*

THREE

Compressed in cambrian-rings - cohesed to silence now the woodland devas glide - the spirits know: the spirits of the air and fields those of the building site:- the trees and hedgerows here about convene

FOUR

as southerly - the chiming Namō Tassa wind-bells thread their brass-pearl beads into a bright rosary of flowing salutations - Out of the windstorm over the mist of April bluebells this acorn emissary in shaddowships - a temple to a shakyauni prince - upholding peace declaring generosity - rejoicing solitude - transcending prayer - we bow - released into the mould of the beautiful

FIVE

And so from the ebb - and into the flow of preliminary things to be done this tide arisen in the world by the business of men leaves in its wake - a gladiator - harnessed to a secret web of music moored to stillness - A spiritual sentinel - astride the roundstone esoteric alchemy aligning energy-awareness in the cantical of distant OM



SIX

The belfry crowsnest sways all aboard - a course is set a flag runs out - its one hand clapping in the wind - an ocean crossing raft is born the victory chant rings out - The leaning tower of forest-oak - embrace to form a pyramid of static dance its silent obeisance points the void - Tugging winds of Dhamma stretch and fill the silhouetted mast billowing the transparent sails of emptiness into the amber throat of twilight as the day goes over its furthest edge into the now eternity When I first came here I was expecting I would have to deal

SEVEN

Striding columns arch and lock above the Queens and Kings framed on the dark volcanic crystal blaze of sunset - This colossal gift - cradled in fixed form - buttresses loads of shifting stress disciplined onto the fulcrumbeam bound by cantilevered balance imploding-sonic-rapture - ascending on the vaults acoustic shell the hidden song invisible - has splintered into stars

EIGHT

Alpha Omega bridge into the deathless - a noble treasure granary of prayer to carry those who wish to cross the flood of life so difficult to cross - Ah! full moon of Ajahn Jun - its finger pointing and the trembling owlcall echo - asking - whoo ?



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EDITORIAL

Spring Fever

The English springtime allows us to witness the immense energy of nature, as tightly bound buds burst forth into brilliant green, ferns unfurl before our eyes, creatures everywhere are actively engaged in the perpetuation of the species, establishing territory, making provision for the future. It is a time of outrageous beauty with its wealth of colour and abundant fragrance of damp soil, flowering plants and the pungence of herbs. Within the realm of human endeavour a similar energy seems to manifest. It can be exciting and energising, or turbulent and deeply disturbing; old value systems are challenged and there is the space, the not-knowing what will come to fill their place. Perhaps it has always been like that. Political systems, social and community structures rise, and change, and fall, and rise again.

So we can feel grateful that the Buddha presented us with a teaching that was not dependant on external stability. The Path of Mindfulness can sustain us through every imaginable upheaval - within or around these physical forms; it can even encompass the reality of death itself.

Once one has set foot on the path there is no choice but to
continue on towards the end.

One might imagine that such a potent teaching would find expression in very grand and ultimate terms - indeed there is a place for such lofty declarations: "The gates of the Deathless are open; let those who can hear this show forth their faith", but the main pathway of transcendence is generally concerned with the most ordinary things of life: with little old 'me' - my body with its senses and suffering; my mind with its habits and preoccupations, its hopes, fears, expectations and moods. I am told to examine carefully what is closest in order to learn about human dis-ease and to find the cure.

It is often not a particularly glamorous or obviously inspiring sort of work in itself - dreariness and despair can be common visitors along the way - so we need to find ways to uplift the mind. Looking outwards we find the Buddha, his disciples and our contemporary spiritual friends. Looking within, we begin to develop and nurture spiritual faculties and enlightenment factors. We learn to observe the energy of the mind and body, and to adjust our practice accordingly: calming, when there is restlessness, agitation or confusion; arousing, in times of dullness or lethargy. Sometimes this has been referred to as 'enlightened self-interest'. But are we being selfish, callous - indifferent to the suffering of others and the state of the planet? Or is this in fact our ultimate responsibility - en-lightening our hearts, en-lightening our society, our world? For many of us, this is not even a question for, in a sense, it is so obvious that this is what is to be done. There is no choice. Once one has set foot on the path there is no choice but to continue on towards the end. and...perhaps just to dip one's nose into the pages of this newsletter is to set foot on the path...so be careful, maybe it's too late to stop, to step off or to turn back!

May we all realise perfect freedom.

Ajahn Candasiri

We shouldn't be overjoyed
or upset by the changes in
the world.

There is happiness and
then there is suffering;
there is suffering and then
there is happiness.

This is the way it is.

Luang Por Chah



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SIGNS OF CHANGE

A Branch in California:

A report from Ajahn Amaro.

On the full moon day of Vaisakha two auspicious and significant events occurred in the slow and gentle process of establishing a branch monastery of this community in California. A long-time student and friend of the Sangha, Tom de Maria, took the step of requesting the Eight Precepts and going forth into anagarika life - to pursue his monastic training on his native soil. Earlier that afternoon contracts had been completed for the purchase of the property adjoining the 120 acres of forested hills that we had been given in June of last year by the late Ven Master Hsuan Hua. The new property has a small house and garage, also an access road and water and electricity supplies - amenities that were lacking on the original site. In addition there are 128 more acres of very fine woodland, including the free flowing 'Goat Canyon Creek'.

The land is a bowl-shaped valley, near the source of the Russian River, in Mendocino County, about 120 miles north of San Francisco. It rises 1000 feet from the banks of the Russian River to the top of a ridge and looks out over miles of forest stretching away to the south. In the distance, 15 miles away, the town of Ukiah is just visible, and beyond it is located the City of 10,000 Buddhas - the monastery established by Ven Master Hsuan Hua in 1976. It is a peaceful, unspoilt area, and is also embellished by the presence of a Byzantine Orthodox Christian monastery, of forest-dwelling monks and nuns, bordering the northern edge of our land. The summers are hot and the winters wet in these parts, but the climate is generally temperate, the area being on the northern tip of the wine-growing region of California.

The main aim in creating this new foundation is to provide a supportive environment for those interested in participating in monastic life. California already possesses numerous opportunities for Dhamma instruction and meditation retreats (there are 20 vipassana meditation groups around the Bay Area alone) but there is little established so far for those who wish to practise according to the Theravada teachings in a traditional monastic environment. Thus our focus here is simply upon living the forest monastic life and creating a beneficial situation for those interested people. We will not be doing much more external teaching than once-a-month visits to San Francisco and occasional day-long meditations at Spirit Rock.

There is much work to be done in refurbishing the house, converting the garage into a meditation hall and setting up tent and kuti sites in the forest as dwelling places - besides setting up water tanks and toilets, and path-making through the dense undergrowth of manzanita and poison oak...The physical needs of the place necessitate a certain 'Dhamma in action' approach to meditation practice, but this is an excellent way of helping to generate and sustain the precious quality of 'Sangha' amongst both friends and supporters, and also the monastics. Experience in England has shown that working hard and getting grubby together whilst creating your place of Dhamma life is a great way of developing these qualities; it should also be said that we intend to live on the land as simply as possible at first, being with

it for a few cycles of seasonal changes, before deciding what major structures to put up, and where.

At present the resident community consists of Ajahn Visuddhi, Anagarika Tom, Mark Bullock (who helped on the last Rains Retreat) and myself. We expect Ajahn Pasanno to join us in December, after he has passed on all his responsibilities at Wat Pah Nanachat to Ajahn Jayasaro, who will be the new abbot there. As Ajahn Pasanno has long term ties and commitments in Thailand, he will probably be making annual visits back there, as I will also to England, to help sustain close relationships with the community in Europe. Already we have received donations of fine Buddha-images from England, Thailand and Chicago, as well as a Buddha-relic to bless the new foundation. We look forward to visits by several members of the Sangha during these first few weeks, including Ajahn Sucitto and Ajahn Jayasaro; we are also extremely honoured to host Tan Chao Khun Pannananda, who plans to come out to California especially to see us for a few days at the end of June.

So a new life begins. It has been a long and sometimes arduous process for all the elements to come together to bring this venture to life, but it looks like it's finally here. A sapling takes root and the young bright greens of its first spring come forth - where it will all go from here is the great Unknown, but so far the auspices seem good.

Italy:

Ajahn Chandapalo writes.

In April I was invited to join an 'Elders' Council' meeting of senior monks and nuns at Chithurst in England, and was asked about the present situation at Santacittarama. Assuring them that I was happy to remain here and that there are promising signs of continued support for the monastery and interest in Dhamma, the Sangha approved of my taking responsibility as the senior incumbent. It was also agreed that the project of establishing a new location for Santacittarama should go ahead. I have been encouraged to keep in close contact with the Sangha in England and to maintain as my priority the living of the monastic life, thereby offering a suitable environment for those who wish to share it, whether for short or long periods. Therefore I intend to limit any teaching activities to the Rome/Napoli area, and to invite those who have the opportunity and inclination to spend some time practising with us at Santacittarama.

This is something that two bhikkhus cannot do alone, it needs the goodwill and assistance of many people. All contributions, however humble, are much appreciated - such as requisites, help in the garden, cleaning, cooking, shopping, office work, translating, transporting and so on. Or just being a peaceful presence, someone who is skilfully using their time for developing the Path and being a good example for others.

Also appreciated would be help or any suggestions in this search for larger and more secluded premises for Santacittarama. Ideally, we hope to find several hectares of land, perhaps partially wooded, either with some building that could be adapted for monastic use or with the possibility to construct something suitable.

Having completed three years at Santacittarama my Italian, if not fluent, is now at least useable. I enjoy living in Italy, and am grateful for this wonderful opportunity to practise Dhamma with like-minded people in a country that is ripe for the teachings of the Lord Buddha. We hope that the presence of the Triple gem will continue to be of benefit for this generation and many to come.

Switzerland:

Ajahn Thiradhammo offers this reflection.

How then are we able to find a 'right commitment'? That is, the most skilful commitment to something beyond the range of selfish interests and goals - a commitment to Truth, or Dhamma. Dhamma includes developing spiritual exercises, but it is also 'trans-personal', it transcends the limitations of my personal ideas of practice, because Dhamma is the Truth of all things. It transcends the reactions to success and failure, because it includes both success

and failure, happiness and suffering, better or worse etc. The question then arises, whether we really want to commit ourselves to Truth, or do we wish to remain committed to success or happiness? Committing oneself to the Truth of Dhamma means that we have to transcend our usual sense of self in order to encompass everything. Success and failure, happiness and suffering are true, not as ultimates in themselves, but as the extremes which the self runs to in its endless wandering in ignorance. To see the Truth of Dhamma is to see the very nature of the self-centred activity for what it truly is. Even spiritual practice can become an area for self-centred activity! If we don't have something noble, such as Dhamma, to commit ourselves to then we inevitably end up committing ourselves to ourselves, with its successful 'ups' and failing 'downs'. This is the opposite of commitment to Dhamma, the spiritual practice which leads to the equanimous peace of selflessness.

.....Thus the passage of time rolls continually along. And even though we project plans onto the calendar, there is only the present moment, whether we realise it or not. The monastic schedule, woven into the fabric of important events, provides a steady but flexible point of reference, just as awareness of breathing does for the mind. Although we continue to live in the 'same' building, the 'same' is forever changing - the old gets older, even the new gets older. Are we also just getting older, or older and also wiser?'

