



FOREST SANGHA

newsletter

April 1988

2531

Number 4

THIS ISSUE

Cover: ■ Monastic Winter Retreat; Reflections
Articles: ■ Magha Puja; Post Retreat Stats
 ■ Life in the Sangha's Forest; Ayya Thanissara
Editorial: ■ Mask of The Great Unknown; Ajahn Sucitto

HOME ■
BACK ISSUES ■

Monastic Winter Retreat

A few reflections from one of the monks

Winter time in Britain is the natural equivalent of the Asian monsoon Vassa - the retreat Season. Things close down and wait for better weather. Following natures lead, Ajahn Sumedho has established a monastic retreat as the customary winter practice. This year Amaravati and Chithurst extended the retreat to two months, with Ajahn Sumedho using the theme of Paticcasamuppada for the Amaravati community,- and Ajahn Munindo offering reflections from the suttas to guide the practice at Chithurst. At Amaravati a resident community of about sixty received ample instruction and reflections ranging from the Sumedho Bhikkhu Psychiatric Counselling Service for depression and anxiety ("Snap out of it!! Five cents please!") to the goal of the religious path ("to be born anew, to be free from all that delusion, and the attachment to God, to doctrine, to the highest ideas, attachment to the finest values) through reminiscences of his early days in America, and his life as a Samanera, to the direct teaching of Ajahn Chah: "When monks would come to Luong Por and say "It's impossible to get enlightened now. there aren't any arahants left" he would ask them: "So why did you become a monk?' To get a free meal?":"

There's too much in those 56 retreat days to fit in this space, but here are a few fragments:

If you just let go of the ignorant view of "I am"; if you can see that, and understand the way of letting go - the way of non-attachment - then the truth reveal's itself...

In the human state, we must recognise that we have to learn to be totally humble by never succeeding in anything we're doing in this meditation: by never being successful, never getting what we want - and if we do get what we want, we lose it right away. We have to be totally humble to where any form of self-view is relinquished willingly, graciously, humbly...That's why in meditation the more it comes from will power based on a self-view and on "me achieving and attaining", then of course you can only expect failure and despair . . . Even a winner in the worldly plane is still going to be a failure because if you win something you're going to lose something too. Winning and losing go together, so winning is never as wonderful as it might look . . . It's more the anticipation of winning: when you've actually won

something - so what? You have a moment of elation: "I'm a winner!" - and then: Now what do I do?".

... More and more there is the letting go of the desire to develop and become anything. And as one's mind is freed from all that desire to become and get something, and attain something, then truth starts revealing itself: it's ever present, here and now. It's a matter of being able to be open and sensitive, so it is revealed. Truth is not something that is revealed from outside - it's always present, but we don't see it if we're caught up in the idea of attainments, of me having to get something.

The Buddha made this direct attack on the "me and mine". The only thing that's blocking you up is the attachment to a self-view. If you just see through that, and let go of that, then you'll understand the rest. You don't need to know all the other elaborate kinds of esoteric formulas and altruistic ideas of the human heart or anything; you don't have to go endlessly on into the complexities. If you just let go of the ignorant view of "I am"; if you can see that, and understand the way of letting go - the way of non-attachment - then the truth reveals itself wherever you are, all the time. But until you do that, then you'll always be caught in these problems, creating problems, complications - out of ignorance conditioning habitual desires that take you to old age, death, sorrow, grief, lamentation and despair. That's all you'll get for the rest of your life!! It's a pretty boring prospect isn't it? But that's all you'll get if you insist on being attached to the illusions of a self, and to greed, hatred and delusion - all that's possible is just despair.

But you can be free from that, here and now, through this right understanding, samma ditthi; seeing things in the right way, knowing the truth, no longer deluded by the appearances or by the habits or the conditions around us.

...and then eventually having to give talks, to Thai people, in Thai, and all this self-consciousness became apparent: of the highs you'd get when you felt you'd really given a good talk, and everybody said: "Oh, that was wonderful, you're really good Sumedho, you really can give good Dhamma". And then sometimes you'd give a really stupid talk, and you'd say: "Oh, I don't ever want to give another talk again, I didn't become a monk to give talks", and then you'd want to chicken out and disappear, run away. But the idea was to keep watching all this, to notice. Luang Par Chah would always encourage me to just keep aware of the pride and conceit and the embarrassment and the self-consciousness that I would feel. And fortunately, in Thailand the people are such that they're just grateful for a monk giving a talk, even if it's not a very good talk. So that made it quite easy actually.

One time I remember at a Kathina ceremony where we had to sit up all night, he said: "Sumedho, you have to give a talk for three hours tonight!" - and up to this time I'd only talked for half an hour, and that was a strain. Three hours! -



and with Ajahn Chah I always felt if he'd said I had to do something, then I would do it.

So I sat up on the high seat and talked for three hours. And I had to sit there and watch people get up and leave, and I had to sit there and watch people just lie down on the floor and sleep in front of me! And at the end of the three hours there were a few polite old ladies still sitting there!

So that wasn't Ajahn Chah saying: "OK Sumedho, go on in and bowl them over with some really scintillating stuff, y'know, entertain them, and really sock it to 'em. the real Dhamma." It was more that what he wanted me to do, was to be able to just look at this self-consciousness- the posing, the pride, the conceit, the grumbling, the laziness, the not wanting to be bothered, the wanting to please, the wanting to entertain, the wanting to get approval and attention and so forth. All these would come up during these talks over these past year. I've been doing this for over fifteen years! But the meditation itself was one in which just more and more one felt a real understanding of the suffering of the self-view, and then, through that, the abiding in emptiness.

When there's emptiness, personality still operates, there is still a quality that appears through these forms . . . It doesn't mean that we're all the same like ants or bees in a hive . . . there's still the myriad differences of character and personality that can manifest but there's no delusion ... and there's no suffering.

I observe that when there's no self, when there's no attachment, then the natural way of relating to others is through metta, karuna, mudita, upekkha. These are not from a self or from avijja, not from an idea that: "I must practise metta, I must have more metta for everyone, and I should have loving kindness for all beings and should have compassion . . . and I should have mudita for other people, I should be glad at other people's successes . . . and I should be serene too!" But the brahmaviharas as an ideal for a selfish person - that's not the real practice of metta, karuna, mudita, upekkha! As the illusions of a self fall away, this is a very natural way to relate. You don't become a vacuous zombie through understanding Dhamma: you still relate to each other, ' but it's through kindness and compassion, joy and serenity rather than through greed, hatred and delusion. Greed, hatred and delusion come from the "I am".



THIS ISSUE

Cover: ■ Monastic Winter Retreat; Reflections
Articles: ■ Magha Puja; Post Retreat Stats
 ■ Life in the Sangha's Forest; Ayya Thanissara
Editorial: ■ Mask of The Great Unknown; Ajahn Sucitto

HOME ■**BACK ISSUES** ■

Magha Puja

Extracts from the minutes of a gathering of the ordained community of all four U.K. viharas, plus Ajahn Brahmavamso on a visit from Western Australia.

After the first month of the Amaravati and Chithurst monastic retreats (and the end of the Devon and Harnham retreat) came a Sangha gathering of the ordained community of all four viharas, plus Ajahn Brahmavamso on a visit from Western Australia. The gathering of some 80 samanans and 20 lay people centred on Magha Puja, the traditional "Sangha Day" which commemorates the Buddha giving the Exhortation on Discipline (Ovada Patimokkha) to a spontaneously assembled gathering of 1250 arahants, Magha Puja itself was quite an event, with monks and nuns being invited to give talks on Dhamma throughout the all-night vigil. On the day afterwards, the Sangha met to discuss any matters concerning the training or the conventions of the Holy Life. It is from this meeting that the following minutes are taken:

Ajahn Sumedho opened the formal Sangha meeting on 2nd February with an hour of meditation - after which, as was to be expected, nobody had anything to say. However the Ajahns of the four monasteries were prompted into giving some account of the current state of affairs, and any future plans.

Ajahn Sumedho stressed the traditional form of
Theravada Buddhism and a loyalty to the clear and
practical approach of Luong Por Chah.

Chithurst:

Ajahn Anando mentioned the growing participation of lay people in the daily life at Chithurst. As at Amaravati, the present monastic retreat was made possible through the support of lay people in preparing the food and staffing the office. Mike Holmes has just taken up his post as Warden of Hammer Wood; there the most immediate project is the clearing of the trees damaged by last October's hurricane. This and the removal of 500 tons of logs for firewood should be done before the spring, otherwise the growth of the newly planted trees might get damaged by the work parties.

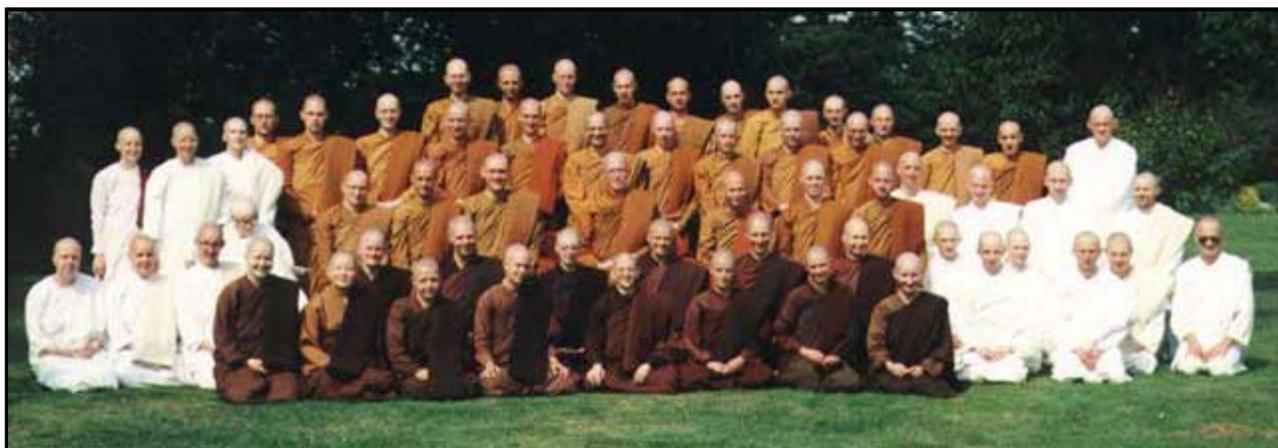
There are plans to convert the monastery walled garden into a meditation area with a cloister and seats; to afforest one of the paddocks; and to build more kutis in the wood and around the House. The project requiring the most planning, organisation and support is the reconstruction of the Coach House, which will serve as a main Dhamma Hall and residence block when it is completed. Plans are still being drawn up for this.

Harnham:

Ajahn Pabhakaro summarised development at Harnham as the growth from a residence, towards becoming a fully operating monastery which can have teaching functions on site and offer substantial accommodation for lay people. This involves a prolonged building project which has only recently left planning stages, and a lot of patience and sacrifice on all sides. The teaching tours of the North were being somewhat curtailed in order to spend more time on developing Harnham,

but would still include visits to the groups in Durham, Sheffield, Doncaster, Middlesbrough and Leeds in the North of England, and Glasgow and Edinburgh in Scotland. The work on increasing Sangha accommodation at Harnham was proceeding well, and the next stage would be to convert and extend the barn into a Dhamma Hall.

A project Of such a scale certainly needs a lay building manager to allow the teacher-builder-abbot the space to fulfill his more contemplative functions. As it is, the building project offers useful reflections on the patient efforts of bygone generations who had carved and fitted the huge stone slabs on the roof, and the four previous Sangha incumbents who had all put their energies into restoring the building. It all encourages a more humble view and a respect for the past, which mellows personal enthusiasm into a willingness to learn and adapt to the traditional ways. Ajahn Pabhakaro felt that he was just now becoming familiar with the situation; and could even understand the many dialects in his widespread parish. But new or old, and whichever side of the Border, what the Ajahn felt to be the most important foundation for the laity was the undertaking of the Refuges and Precepts.



Devon:

Ajahn Kittisaro presented his view of the Devon Vihara next. There were no work projects other than a monthly clearing of a small woodland which had been given to the Sangha to use, and the gathering of rocks from fields and packing the road with them to make it more serviceable. Venerable Subbato's building skills had so far only been employed to fix a light switch. The vihara was active though, but mostly as a haven for people to Visit for a few hours. Apart from his service as a teacher at the vihara, there were also regular teaching engagements with groups in Bath, Plymouth, Totnes; long retreats at near-by Golden Square-, and weekends at Sharpham near Totnes. Future dates worthy of note were a proposed visit of Ajahn Sumedho in April, Wesak on 22nd May and the first Alms- Giving Ceremony in Devon on November 20th.

Western Australia:

Ajahn Sumedho then asked Ajahn Brahmavamsu to give the community an idea of the situation in Western Australia. Ajahn Brahmavamsu gave a sketched account of the two centres which he and Ajahn Jagaro are involved with - namely the Dhammaloka Buddhist Centre in Nollamara, a few minutes' drive from central Perth, and Bodhinyana Monastery in the bush about an hour's drive out of town. In the past five years there had been a lot of effort put into the groundwork of establishing a sangha. This had born fruit in a well-fitted monastary complete with meditation hall, kitchen, guest house, ablutions block and twelve kutis; a sangha currently numbering seven bhikkhus, one Samanera and an eight-precept nun-, and the establishment of a proper sima for ordinations. The effect of the ample presentation of the Dhamma at the city centre had given the sangha a lot of support in a region which had equated Buddhism with some of the more licentious Cults which bear a superficial

resemblance to it. It was quite an auspicious sign that the Queen's representative, His Excellency the Governor of Western Australia, had presided over the inauguration of Dhammaloka last November.

The apparent isolation that one experienced in Western Australia could be seen in wider perspective within the Sangha, Venerable Brahmavamso commented. Having spent some time in Thailand, and in some of the monasteries in Britain, the harmony of the Sangha was clear. Guarded by its respect for Dhamma- Vinaya, the Sangha Refuge presented a place of unity where apparent separateness fell away.

Amaravati:

The meeting then reviewed some aspects of Amaravati. Ajahn Santacitto expressed his thanks for the skills of Sylva Simsova in helping to establish a library of some 7000-8000 volumes with a cataloguing system that will enable it to link with other libraries and provide a support to monastic and lay practice of Dhamma. Some new developments were the appointment of Anne Pryor as Librarian, and the completion of the Lay Peoples' Practice Questionnaire, which is the first stage of an exhibition on Lay Practice. This survey, conducted by Barbara Jackson, is aimed at providing a resource of ideas, skillful means, and a pointer at common difficulties or shortcomings as experienced by lay Buddhists. A Sense of community was thereby offered to those who otherwise might feel that they were "going it alone".

Ajahn Sucitto summarised the status of Amaravati Publications as being very much at the beginning. Most Of the work in the past year has been in establishing an editorial panel and finally in appointing a Manager, David Babski, to oversee productions. Regular production only involves newsletters, Rainbows and Looking Ahead; there is also an ongoing project to issue a Dhamma magazine - Forest Sangha Review - from time to time. The production of books was limited. The non-commercial nature of Amaravati Publications meant that one could only proceed in accordance with donations, which had mostly been through the generosity of Khun Vane Lamsam and friends in Thailand. There was a lot of material available but the future of such publications depended largely on the interest and support of lay people, as the Sangha accepted only the responsibility to teach and edit its teachings. Meanwhile, Mindfulness: The Path to the Deathless and Cittaviveka had both been reprinted, an Introduction to Insight Meditation was ready for publication and he was gathering material for a couple of books by Ajahn Sumedho which Wisdom Publications were interested in. The use of a commercial publisher (albeit a Buddhist charity) was to make the Dhamma available through a wider global network than the monasteries could provide; the Sarigha was not interested in any commercial gain.

Ajahn Sumedho:

Ajahn Sumedho briefly mentioned the likelihood of opening viharas in Switzerland and America, and then responded to questions. There were some comments on experimenting with a Puja in English on an occasional basis, but, in general, Ajahn Sumedho stressed the traditional form of Theravada Buddhism and a loyalty to the clear and practical approach of Luong Por Chah. This was not to deny the validity of other teachings, but to encourage the full use of a teaching by giving oneself to it rather than endlessly comparing and doubting. This tendency to look elsewhere was an escapism of sorts. The direct approach that he appreciated in Ajahn Chah -was a very suitable one in a world where the options were running out. The world now had no unexplored paradises left, and humanity had to realise that there was no escape from being responsible and mature by "getting away from it all": cloudy idealism was no substitute for a thoroughgoing training in what was universally moral, wise and benevolent.

Towards supporting the Sangha as a foundation in this practice, Tan Ajahn had determined to

spend most of this year in Britain rather than travelling. There was a possibility of furthering the wandering "tudong practice but this was not a matter of privilege. Actually privileges, personal rights and status were nothing to do with the spirit of the Holy Life, Even such conventional status as being an abbot was of no advantage in realising Nibbana - the only true goal for a monk or nun.

- o o o O o o o -

With such remarks everything that needed to be said was felt to have been said, at least at this time. . . The meeting loosened up a little with tea and informal conversation - during which we were joined by Ajahn Khemadhammo and Venerable Vicayo from the Forest Hermitage near Warwick. These bhikkhus, associates from the Wat Pah Pong tradition, have a small vihara which acts as the residence of Ajahn Khemadhammo and the shrine/meeting place for local supporters. It was a very pleasant surprise and one that echoed the Buddha's words: -

So long, O bhikkhus, as you will assemble frequently together and assemble in large numbers ...as you will meet in concord, disperse in concord, and tend to the affairs of the Sangha in concord, so long bhikkhus may be expected to prosper, not to decline. (Dialogues: Sutta 16)



THIS ISSUE

Cover: ■ Monastic Winter Retreat; Reflections
Articles: ■ Magha Puja; Post Retreat Stats
 ■ Life in the Sangha's Forest; Ayya Thanissara
Editorial: ■ Mask of The Great Unknown; Ajahn Sucitto

HOME ■
BACK ISSUES ■

Life in the Sangha's Forest

Ayya Thanissara reflects on some of the various aspects of Hammer Wood, Chithurst

It was ten years ago that a jogger on Hampstead Heath caught sight of Ajahn Sumedho on alms round and became interested in the possibility of the sangha acting as a Warden for a neglected woodland that he had purchased in West Sussex. In the ensuing months, he gave this wood, Hammer Wood, to the Sangha; this instigated the English Sangha Trust's purchase of the nearby chithurst House as a monastic residence. Over the decade, the Sangha's property was increased by the acquisition of Hammer Pond and Cottage and various projects to restore the woodland have been undertaken. At the end of last year Mike Holmes was appointed as Warden of Hammer Woods with specific responsibility to effect the restoration of native woodland and the establishment of Hammer Wood as a Nature Reserve and Monastic Sanctuary. Here is his introductory report:

In 1977 the monks came to London from the forests of N. E. Thailand and the Hampstead Vihara was re-opened. This was a very different situation to the simple rural environment from which the lineage originated, Strong affiliation to forests as part of Dhamma practice could not be followed In North London. Hampstead Heath was a poor substitute.

When, suddenly, they were given about sixty hectares of woodland in Sussex, the future of Buddhism in England changed. A house was found at the edge of this wood and in 1979 Chithurst Forest Monastery came into being. Here in rural Southern England, Theravada Buddhism as known in North East Thailand could take root.

Many people - members of the Sangha, their friends, and those visitinig the monastery - have enjoyed the quiet and beauty of the woods. They have been able to use the kutis for their retreats or just to walk peacefully amongst the trees. Some may have wondered about the history of the area, about the species of trees or the local wildlife. In this account, I will try to answer such questions, tell you a little about what we have done and our plans for the future.

The Buddhist idea of harmony with all forms of life means that the Hammer Woods must naturally be managed as a conservation area.

The name of this forest is Hammer Wood. Through it flows a small river known as the Hammer Stream and there is a lake called the Hammer Pond. Such a name shows that this was once part of the medieval English iron industry, which flourished in the area until finally giving way to the more efficient Midlands during the last century. Had this not been so, rural Sussex would not be the pleasant place it is, but perhaps a land of industry and urbanism like the Black Country around Birmingham today.

Hammer Wood is situated to the north of the Greensand plains of mid-Sussex. Here the land rises to the Wealden Hangers, as the broken hill country in the north of the county is called. A

great view stretches away to the Downs in the south. Here the soil is acid and the hillsides steep, so that the area was of no use for agriculture and has been thickly forested since the last Ice Age.

Our earliest historical records go back to the Iron Age. An ancient fort is situated above steep slopes overlooking the Hammer Pond and the valley through which flows the Hammer Stream. Archaeologists made excavations in the 1950s and a copy of their report is held in the Chithurst Monastery library. They found little, but made interesting observations about the ancient people who once lived there. These Celts were finally defeated by the Romans nearly two thousand years ago.

The Romans in turn left their mark with us on the road that they built between the cities Silchester and Chichester runs in a straight line through the edge of our woods, to cross the River Rother at a ford to the South.

We have another mark of history. The Western boundary of the property runs along a muddy track, which is called Moorhouse Lane. This is said to be an old coaching road, though looking, at its direction it is difficult to pick out what towns it must have joined in the old days, when stage coaches actually used it. Where it crosses the Hammer stream, there is a bridge marked on the map as the New Bridge, Carved in the brickwork of the bridge as the date 1797. One presumes that the actual fort must have been clear of trees to a certain extent, when people lived there, but they would have naturally regenerated through medieval times. Many were cut down to fire the iron smelting industry. This was followed by the destruction of forests in the, South of England, when all available oak was used to build the great sailing ships for the Royal Navy in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Later came the demand for timber during the two World Wars.

By now there was no natural woodland left in the South of England and the pattern of growth that we find today reflects this. All the trees that grow here now, have been planted by man for one reason or another. This reason is usually commercial. In our woods, one area was planted about eighty years ago. We do not know who by, but we can see that they had a good knowledge of mixed forestry and what needs to be grown in order to make the environment good for wildlife. The main trees are oaks, which are host to many kinds of insects, thus providing food for birds and some mammals. Their acorns are another food source. There is a sprinkling of other species; thus the resulting berries, nuts and leaf canopy produce more food, cover and nest sites. Unfortunately, the remainder of the forest is quite different. It was owned commercial companies until quite recently. They planted it with species that were only useful for their value as a crop and in many cases harmful to wildlife. The monoculture system was used. Large areas of sweet



chestnut were grown and coppiced. Such growth provides excellent posts, rails and firewood, but produces a thick canopy of leaves, which excludes the light from the forest floor. The leaves are large and when they fall in the autumn, take many years to break down. Thus no humus is returned to the soil and the nutrients are leached out. These leaves are also toxic and cause the soil to become even more acid. All this results in an almost total lack of plant growth beneath the chestnut. Where there is no plant growth, there are few insects and therefore few birds. Wildlife is almost totally absent and consists of little more than rabbits, whose main food is bark and young chestnut growth. They in turn provide food for foxes. The spring wild flower carpet, as seen in an oak wood, does not exist.

Furthermore, sweet chestnut is an introduced species. It is thought to have been brought to this country by the Romans from its home in Southern Europe. Introduced species are poor hosts to insects, which have their own hosts and do not move to a new environment. Hence, the insect life on chestnuts is minimal. There are very few birds present in such plantations and it is therefore a desert for wildlife. The commercial planting of woodlands means that few, if any, trees are allowed to grow to overmaturity. Old trees provide homes for hole nesting birds and mammals. Hollow trees provide roosts for bats. We have very few old trees in the Hammer Woods and this means an almost total absence of those species that require them for survival. Scots Pine had been planted close together in tight rows, as is necessary for their commercial cultivation. Once again, this keeps the light off the forest floor and stops any plant life beneath. We have ten hectares planted with these trees, which are now about thirty years old. About eighty percent of Hammer Woods was a desert for wildlife. This is the normal pattern in modern farming and forestry, but it does not go well with conservationist ideas and the Buddhist accord with nature. Plans were made to change the situation and bring Hammer Wood back to life. This can only be a long job. It will take many decades to complete, but it is fascinating and already the first changes are taking place. It is really a great privilege that we at Chithurst have this chance to work with Nature. There are small corners of the woods - an acre here and an acre there - that have not been spoilt. Starting from these, we are now working to bring wildlife back to all our lands. Our management plan has two aims, which must run in parallel. Firstly, the Hammer Woods must be a place of peace and tranquillity in which local friends and people visiting the monastery are able to go for walks; and in which members of the Sangha can further their meditation practice. Towards this end, three kutis have been built. Monks and nuns can stay in these, living quietly just as was possible for them in Thailand. This they do, staying in some cases for up to three months and only returning to the monastery for the meal each day. It is hoped that twelve more such kutis will be built.

Secondly, the Buddhist idea of harmony with all forms of life means that the Hammer Woods must naturally be managed as a conservation area. To achieve this, wildlife must be induced to return to those areas from which it was driven when the environment became impossible for survival. To do this, as much sweet chestnut as possible has to be replaced.

Wood is used for cooking and heating at both Amaravati and Chithurst. The chestnut is useful for this scheme as it can supply the requirements for both monasteries. We follow the coppice system that has been practised in English woodlands for centuries. When a tree is cut down, new growth springs from the stump. This comprises many shoots. They in turn are cut when they reach the size required for their intended use. Poles, rails and firewood take about seventeen years of growth; walking sticks take three. Forestry contractors know what the current market requirements are. They buy all the wood in an area of forest where there is a

sufficiency of the size that they need. They then clear that area of trees.

We manage our chestnut in this way. We sell an area to contractors. They cut all standing wood and sell it as the market demands. We buy back our firewood requirements. Should we cut our own wood using our untrained anagarikas we would face the certainty of chain saw accidents. This is obviously quite unacceptable.

Cutting is carried out in the winter; the area is cleared of all chestnut and we can then start bringing it back to life. Firstly, in the spring we must kill the chestnut stumps. This prevents a further cycle of growth. In May, when the first new shoots appear, each stump is treated with ammonium sulphide. This does not poison the ground; it just kills the tree and causes it to break down over the years, which in turn puts humus and nutrients back into the soil. With no overhead canopy, light reaches the ground and dormant seeds can germinate. Plants suddenly grow where for years there had been nothing. Then insects appear; life starts to move.

We want to make the woodlands resemble an old English broad leaved forest as much as possible. We plan our operations with this in mind. Tree planting costs money, so first we have to obtain grants. These we get from the Forestry Commission or various other country organisations. We have in the past also had generous help from the Royal Thai Embassy. Many other friends and supporters have given us young trees and we buy a wide range of species from a helpful tree nursery. Those that would have been natural in this locality in the past were mainly oak and ash, but many other species were present. These included the shrubs whose berries and nuts are so important as food for wildlife.

Each grew in its particular part of the forest according to its need: some at the edge or the middle, some at the top or the bottom of a hillside. Also, the proximity to water has to be taken into account. Planting has to conform to all these requirements.

Operations are planned well in advance and many people come to help us. In December 1987, during three afternoons, we planted two hundred and fifty trees. On the first day, thirty school children arrived. Their enthusiasm was marvellous and it was a very happy time for everybody. We have also had help from Thai supporters of the monastery and many local friends. During the winter of 1986/97 we planted eight hundred trees, but during the previous winter the total was eighteen hundred. Overall we have planted nearly four thousand. Our success rate of over ninety percent has been very encouraging, but, in spite of all our planting, it is a fact that from the conservation point of view, it is best to allow an area to regenerate naturally. This is being tried in a number of places, but rabbits and deer keep the growth trimmed. The cost of a wire netting fence is beyond us, but this is being looked into.

Already there is plant growth and this is bringing insects. Twenty three species of butterfly have been counted and there are more whose habitat requirements are such that it is only a matter of time before they appear. The small corners of the Wood where food plants still grow provide sources from which they spread: wildflowers grow in little pockets and must be induced to spread. The first to take in the newly cleared areas are foxgloves, which like the acid soil. Brambles grow, and both their flowers and berries are important food sources. Clumps of heather are starting to appear, but the rabbits keep these trimmed. Under the oaks grow wood sorrel, bluebells and wood anemone. A careful search will reveal golden archangel and in the grass along the forest roads grow scarlet pimpernel, tormentil and trailing St John's wort. All these and more show that life is there and will spread if we can give it the chance. In some places though, bracken is spreading. This can smother all other growth in the area and will prove a problem that must be kept in check.

The Scots pine are being thinned in a regular five yearly cycle. This means that the better trees are being left and the spacing increases between them. In time, there will be groves of strong

mature trees as in Scotland or the New Forest. They will provide food and nest sites for many mammals and birds.

We have counted fifty eight bird species. This is not many, but as with butterflies, there are now a greater number about as the habitat improves. Small mammals increase as more plants provide more food and ground cover. Tawny owls now hunt for mice and voles over our young plantations. Bats are another mammal that suffers from modern pesticides and farming methods. They have become an endangered species. We have put up bat boxes for them to use as day roosts and it is hoped that at some time in the future a hibernation tunnel can be built.

The Hammer Stream runs through a deep flat bottomed valley, which floods in winter, and in the summer is a tangle of broken Willows and alders. This, at present is unmanaged and could be left as it is. It provides thick cover as a sanctuary for deer and other wildlife where there is little disturbance. The stream then flows into the Hammer Pond, which has an area of about three hectares. This is a man-made lake built for the iron industry, years ago. It was formed by building a dam wall about one hundred and fifty yards long across the valley bottom. It runs out over a wire into a pool, beside which kingfishers have regularly nested.

Unfortunately, over the years, our lake has silted up and continues to do so because of the loose sandy soil. Leaves from countless autumns have fallen and helped to choke it. This means that there is little water plant growth and thus little food. Our population of birds is small, consisting of just a few mallard and teal. As it is shallow, diving ducks seldom visit us and then only stay for long enough to find out that there is not the habitat that they require. Swans also find no food and there is no grazing along the banks for the local Canada geese in the Rother Valley. It is hoped to remedy this one day but the task and the cost would be enormous.

There is great hope in our Hammer Woods and a great chance to work for conservation. Perhaps in this forest, we can help to turn the current tide of destruction which is so affecting life on our planet today. As is being done by other conservation organisations, We can make one more oasis for wildlife. Also, we can create a place of peace and tranquillity for both Buddhists and others to enjoy. Perhaps we can leave something for future generations.



THIS ISSUE

Cover: ■ Monastic Winter Retreat; Reflections
Articles: ■ Magha Puja; Post Retreat Stats
 ■ Life in the Sangha's Forest; Ayya Thanissara
Editorial: ■ Mask of The Great Unknown; Ajahn Sucitto

HOME ■
BACK ISSUES ■

EDITORIAL

Mask of The Great Unknown

In assembling a newsletter, one is always juggling with the uncertainties of the future and with subjective interpretations of the present and the past. There's a feeling that if you set it down in black-and-white and get it to the printers on time, maybe that will actually help recorded or proposed events emerge from their dreamlike reality into actuality. A similar process is experienced at the beginning of a year; when the mind has been sharpened by a long meditation retreat, one begins to understand what that compulsion is. It is the becoming that is in towards birth. 1988: what will happen? What are the plans? there's a scurry to get the year planned out before the actuality of the uncertain and the unpredictable merrily chews up the diaries and the projects and the visions. Someone is taken ill. Some machine breaks down, people and events arrive which weren't expected - and what we planned for doesn't get born. Then, if you haven't understood how things are, you suffer.

Even the best plans are only perceptions in the mind

In the spiritual life, the underlying intention is away from becoming and birth, but our situation in the world asks for plans, events and statements. So we prepare a framework for events to establish the right intention of bringing Dhamma into the world, and let things take their natural course. Even the best plans are only perceptions in the mind, but right intention means that whatever does arise will be conducive to Dhamma. There is so little that we can expect or control, but in that is the need for, and the discovery of, a pure heart.

So here is 1988: the current Mask of The Great Unknown. And here are the viewpoints of a Newsletter, based on the intention to keep in touch: can't do better than that - and at least it shows that someone is watching.

Ajahn Sucitto

Notices

Dhamma for Families: A Review

It is now three years since the first Family Day was held (a little timorously) at Amaravati and also since the first "homegrown" (to put it politely) edition of Rainbows was printed and handed out to a few local friends of the community. This was a beginning, and as in any new situation,

experimentation has taken place - amidst some uncertainty. The experience needed for such an undertaking could only be gained by trying things out and by reflecting on the results. Now, three years later, it is possible to determine a direction that will best serve families who are interested in having the Dhamma taught in a way that children can easily comprehend.



Over this time the Rainbows mailing list has increased considerably to include places such as New Zealand, Australia, Poland and America. This growth encourages the perception of a global community, which seems a more skilful way of viewing the human family than through cultural and national differences. In response to suggestions, ideas and criticisms, Rainbows has undergone various improvements, and no doubt will undergo more as the future unfolds.

The annual Family Summer Camp, held at Amaravati, initially grew out of the Family Days and, like Rainbows, has developed in an organic way. At present it is felt that the Camp is very worthwhile and has much potential.

The Family Days, which have been the source from which both Rainbows and the camp evolved, have been rather uncertain affairs. This is mainly due to the lack of continuity that individual families can offer. For many, the long travelling distances to Amaravati have allowed for only occasional visits. Running Family Days has always been unpredictable - there's no way of knowing who will come and what ages the children will be. A great deal of adaptability has been necessary to make the best of these days. Actually, in spite of the uncertainties, each of the gatherings have been delightful, with a sense of sharing and warmth amongst the people involved. However, until there are more interested families able to come on a regular basis, the idea has been put forward to hold these days less frequently.

So for this year, we shall hold three main Family Days with overnight accommodation available. This could stretch to a week-end event within which a wider scope of activities and more involvement with the community could be offered for both parents and children. There will also still be a few regular Family Days which will now function more as a "class" for children. This "class" would be from 1-3 pm on occasional Sundays and would comprise of a Small puja, story, discussion, reflection and some kind of activity. For dates and further information, see Looking Ahead or Rainbows, both available through SAE from Families at Amaravati.

A Distinguished Visitor:

Tan Ajahn Pannananda is one of the most loved and respected monks in Thailand. Very much one of the grandfathers of the Thai Sangha, his warm, benevolent and wise manner cannot help but impress all those who meet him. Like his teacher, Tan Ajahn Buddhadasa, he considers himself to be a servant of the Triple Gem: he has dedicated his life to helping people develop right understanding of Dhamma, and fearlessly speaking out against corruptions in Buddhism.

As abbot of Wat Cholapratahn, a large monastery in Nonthaburi on the outskirts of Bangkok, Ajahn Pannananda regularly teaches and has a Dhamma school. As well as attending to the duties as abbot of



his monastery, he is also invited to give as many as four talks a day to different sectors of society: students, teachers, civil servants and soldiers. He has the ability to make the teachings of Buddhism accessible to the understanding of a whole variety of listeners, and he regularly appears on National radio and T.V. His direct but fair comments on the ethical conduct of the nation - even of its eminent figures - make him a voice of Thailand's moral conscience. Because of his service to Buddhism he has been honoured by the King with the ecclesiastical rank of Tan Chao Khun; recently his official title was upgraded to Tan Chao Khun Depvisuddhimedhi. Like many monks however, he uses his ordination name, and people refer to him in affectionate respect as "Luong Por Pailfla".

Ajahn Pannananda is taking a very sincere interest in the Dhamma as it is spreading to the West. He regularly travels overseas to offer his support and encouragement to new monasteries in the United States, Australia, New Zealand - as well as here in England - and has put a lot of effort into speaking on behalf of our Sangha in Thailand. He first visited Chithurst in May 1983 and since then has made an effort to return regularly.

We are once again delighted to receive him as our guest at Amaravati and Chithurst for the latter part of June and early July. Although he speaks good and charming English, the Dhamma flows more naturally for him in Thai; so we have arranged two venues for him to give talks primarily to the Thai community: at Amaravati on Sunday June 26 (with English translation) and in Thai only at The Camden Centre in London on July 3rd.

