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Question Time; with Ajahn Sumedho

Ajahn Sumedho replies to the question: 'What is the citta?'

This word 'citta' is used in the suttas for the subjective consciousness. If there's a citta from which the asavas (biases) are removed and a citta which is liberated, how does this fit in with the idea of self or no-self? How does one avoid self-view in thinking about the citta? If there's no self, who is it that's aware and what is it that becomes enlightened?

You want me to tell you? I mean you're aware aren't you? Why do you have to have a name for it?

Ajahn Sumedho:

This is where Buddhism excels. It totally frustrates that desire. The Buddha wouldn't give an inch on that, because that's the non-dualism of the Buddha's teaching. It's psychologically uninspiring. You're left with just letting go of things rather than holding on to the feeling of a God or Oneness or the Soul or the Subject with capital S, or the Overself, or the Atman or Brahman or whatever - because those are all perceptions and the Buddha was pointing to the grasping of perception. The "I am" is a perception - isn't it? - and "God" is a perception. They're conventionally valid for communication and so forth, but as a practice, if you don't let go of perception then you tend to still have the illusion - an illusoriness coming from a belief in the perception of the overself, or God or the Oneness or Buddha Nature, or the divine substance or the divine essence, or something like that.

Like with monism - monistic thinking is very inspiring. "We're all one. We are one - that's our true nature - the one mind." And you can talk of the universal mind and the wholeness and the oneness of everything. That's very uplifting, that's the inspiration. But non-dualism doesn't inspire. It's deliberately psychologically non-inspiring because you're letting go of the desire for inspiration, of that desire and need and clutching at inspiring concepts. This doesn't mean that those concepts are wrong or that monistic thinking is wrong; but the Buddha very much reflected the attachment to it. So, you're not an annihilationist saying there's nobody, nothing, no subject, but by non-dualism, you just let go of things till there's only the way things are.

Then who is it that knows? People say: "Then what is it that knows? Who is it that knows the way things are, who is it that's aware? What is it that's aware?"
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you? Why do you have to have a name for it? Do you have to have a perception? Why can't there just be awareness? Why do you have to call it mine, or the eternal essence, or whatever? Why do you have to name it? Why not just be that, be aware. Then you see the desire, the doubt, wanting to label it, add to it. It's avijja paccaya sankhara (creating conditions out of ignorance). The process goes on of wanting to complicate it by giving it a name, calling it something.

Just like the question "Can you see your own eyes?" Nobody can see their own eyes. I can see your eyes but I can't see my eyes. I'm sitting right here, I've got two eyes and I can't see them. But you can see my eyes. But there's no need for me to see my eyes because I can see! It's ridiculous, isn't it? If I started saying "Why can't I see my own eyes?" you'd think "Ajahn Sumedho's really weird, isn't he!" Looking in a mirror you can see a reflection, but that's not your eyes, it's a reflection of your eyes. There's no way that I've been able to look and see my own eyes, but then it's not necessary to see your own eyes. It's not necessary to know who it is that knows-because there's knowing. And then you start creating views about who is it that knows, then you start the avijja paccaya sankhara and on through the whole thing again to despair and anguish.



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Co-operation and a Different "Golden Rule"

Ajahn Santacitto, one of the Sangha co-ordinators for the Global Co-operation Workshop at Amaravati in August, contributed this piece. Fittingly, his own description is interspersed with comments from those who participated in the discussions.

Gotama Buddha: "So long as you will meet in concord, disperse in concord and tend to affairs in concord, so long may you be expected to prosper, not to decline."

This well describes the co-operative spirit of "A Day of Peace", the inspiring visit to Amaravati from the London Branch of the Brahma Kumaris - a spiritual community whose practice is founded on meditation, celibacy and community service. Even when the coming together is of different religious forms, when one shares a commitment to a life of spiritual practice, there is quite naturally a sense of mutual appreciation and friendship!

A Brahma Kumari commented: "The spiritual atmosphere at Amaravati was such that it allowed both group members and co-ordinators to extend themselves. "

The day also brought together members of many of the Buddhist meditation groups including Bedford, Billericay-Leigh, Brighton, Harlow and Reading-to explore the potential of the Creative Group Workshops as a means for developing the "quality of Sangha".

... create a 'positive' attitude rather than lingering with criticism on the negative aspects and facts of current injustices.

"As we are living in a rather big community, this workshop - concentrating on one's only way of relating to others and to oneself -becomes quite meaningful," wrote one of the nuns.

Representatives of the groups met informally beforehand to explore possible links with each other and the Amaravati Sangha.

Gathering for the workshop, there was a little hesitancy at first.

A monk noted: "Not knowing what it would be like, my participation itself was included as a contribution for a better world:'

The workshop involved over a hundred people dispersing into fourteen groups each guided by one of the Brahma Kumaris in the spirit of positive expression of one's vision, and cooperative effort.

"One man of the Brahma Kumaris introduced us to the theme 'Vision for a Better World', which we were to elaborate on and contribute towards, in small groups of eight to ten people. The Golden Rule in these discussions was to create a 'positive' attitude rather than lingering

with criticism on the negative aspects and facts of current injustices."

Though this Golden Rule may have at first appeared to many as being a game, experience proved otherwise.

A nun comments: "It could be a game. It is a game till your mind stops here: just where it hurts: just where it goes wrong. And you know you have to change the whole pattern. This is where the whole situation takes a completely different outlook. And you are alone -in the unknown -free to open up to whatever world, inner and outer you want to live in. This is all up to you. Was that a game"

A Brahma Kumari: "The most satisfying experience I had was one of transformation not only in myself but also of the group. It became an automatic process. As a result of the Golden Rule people disciplined their thoughts words and into thinking and acting positively for myself there was growth in self-respect and self-worth."

One first explored stepping into one's higher aspirations both for oneself, and in relation to others. The groups then considered how practically to better practise towards fulfilling these aspirations.

A Brahma Kumari: "At the beginning of the group session the ideas and visions were often wordy concepts which protected the individual rather than extended them. Members of the group however, co-operated with each other and through mutual support amid respect guided each other towards realising more of what their aim could be."

Upon reconvening after the workshop, a representative from each group shared the experience of the group. This was very inspiring and showed clearly that in all of the groups a high level of exchange had taken place.

An anagarika: "I saw the vast yet timeless gap between how I conceived my present position of relationships in the world, and how I'd like them to be in my highest aspirations ... A 'flip' of attitude - a change of lens and there was no waiting for my highest aspirations, my 'ideal world' to manifest; it was already here. I had just not realised that it was."

A monk: "It meant dropping and breaking through one's problems of thinking and using language. It actually felt a little like a 'breakthrough' because one feels so safe with all the vocabulary one is used to and one doesn't want to change. But the rules of the game allowed for that breakthrough to happen."

The gathering of all the visions and plans of action was then offered as a donation to the "Global Co-operation for a Better World" project, which is being co-ordinated by the Brahma Kumaris on behalf of the U.N. and which Tuhn Ajahn Sumedho supports as a patron.

In the Peace Vigil following tea, the communing in and communicating from silence seemed to conclude a very special day on a perfect note. However to our surprise, before breaking, Ajahn Sumedho requested the Sangha to chant the funeral chants for his father, of whose decease he had just been informed.



For us it was truly a joy to communally direct the power of all the positive energy accumulated on this wonderful day towards the memory and well-being of Mr. Clarence Jackman.

It is hoped that the Buddhist groups -both those participating and those unable to be present - can Use the workshop as a means of developing the "quality of sangha" within and between groups. If there is sufficient interest, the Brahma Kumaris will happily arrange a day to assist group Members III developing the role of co-ordinator. For further information, please contact Barbara Jackson, "Creative Group Workshops", C/O Amaravati Buddhist Centre.



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Arrive Where You Are: on Tudong

The practice of tudong, walking through open country on an extended pilgrimage, has long been a treasured aspect of the life of the forest bhikkhu: it presents many opportunities to live in insecurity and be confronted by difficult situations.

In this country bhikkhus and siladharas have had opportunities to undertake this practice and found it a helpful way of deepening their understanding of the holy life. This year there were three tudongs: Ajahn Anando led fifteen bhikkhus and anagarikas from Chithurst and Amaravati along the South Downs Way; Ajahn Pabhakaro trekked in the Scottish Highlands with a bhikkhu and two laymen; and Ajahn Kittisaro and the rest of the Devon Sangha whose report will be in the next Newsletter made the pilgrimage from Devon to Chithurst.

The walks differed in style, in accordance with circumstance, but the fundamentals were the same - backpacks, tents, blisters and as the following comments illustrate, insights into the meaning of the homeless life.

"The aim of the walk is not to get somewhere, but to be where you are."

Ajahn Anando

Ajahn Anando: When we began to plan the walk it was with a view of encouraging and inviting the lay people. So we first found places that would be suitable for stopping for the weekend, places which would be easily accessible and also having a pleasant ambience. From previous walks in Northumberland we found that it was a very inspiring way of meeting the lay people, who frequently went to a great deal of trouble to organise the food. I mean on this walk they were organising food for as many as fifteen people. (We wanted to see if it would be possible to go in such a large group).

On the weekends, or if time and place permitted, we would organise some kind of walk around the area- some beautiful place perhaps to go to. While walking we would have opportunities to get to know people who may have been intimidated by the perceived formalities that exist in the monastery. Many people commented how pleasant it was, and the fact that people came day after day indicated that they were enjoying it also.

The second week of the walk was a bit different than the first in the number of people that came to join us, because for the second week we were much closer to Brighton and the larger towns, and by that time the news media had found out about us. Newspaper articles had been published; the radio had broadcast a story about us and just as we got to Brighton the TV people found us.

"The reporting was quite sympathetic in all cases, and more often than not correct -which is by no means always the case. That had quite beneficial effects on the last few days. One family read an article in the newspaper, The Independent, and was waiting for us. The South

Downs Way runs right through their farm, and they came up to us and said: 'We've been waiting for you all day. Please come in.' And it ended up that the farmhouse had once been a monks' resthouse and so they were delighted to have the monks in the house. They were going to offer us dinner, and were rather disappointed that we could only have black tea (it was a dairy farm). They chatted with us, they were incredibly hospitable - showed all fifteen of us through the house, took photographs, invited us back. The final thing which happened because of the news coverage was that a man opened up his house to us at Burling Gap for our last meal of the walk. This turned out to be a rather wonderful occasion, and was certainly an unforgettable occasion for him. It was his birthday-I think there was a total of 55 people there! They'd come from Southampton, from Chithurst, Ajahn Sumedho from Amaravati - many more people than the man expected."

"The support, the generosity was so touching that it was quite humbling, and brought up as a response a reflection, a renewed commitment, to live this life as well as possible -which I think is a side of mendicancy that few people understand. One of our reflections is to be worthy of alms, and to be worthy -the way we understand that is not to indulge in any ill-will or greed or selfishness. So when it tests you, you have lots of reflection throughout the day -it's very a good experience."

Ajahn Pabhakaro: "It's really rugged country - you've got to have your wits about you out there. We were in a storm one day. We came down, and I was so weak I couldn't even open the paraffin bottle. It was about a quarter past twelve when we came down this glen, just completely shattered from the storm. It was only about two miles but it was through bog and heather in raging, driving rain and wind.



"We planned originally to go from East to West to Iona, but then Iona turned out to be a bit much in the summer, so we packed that in as an idea, and just wove around to where the people were coming - like Jodi's cottage up by Loch Tag, and Venerable Sobhano's mother, and some other friends. If there wasn't anybody to look after us, then Ross who was carrying dried dehydrated foods would just cook up whatever.

"Ross had a terrible time with his ankle - an old skiing injury - and so towards the end he had to drop out! So it worked out that on the last stage just Thanasila and I went on our own down the Highland Way. The Highland Way goes from North of Glasgow all the way up to Fort William, so people from Glasgow were able to come out and provide food. It's really quite challenging, but there's all sorts of people that walk it in the summer. When we got onto it we just came across and walked along the East side of Loch Lomond, and as soon as we set foot on that we were seeing people every hour, we were running into people, and people knew what we were. One guy said: 'Oh, I never thought I'd see monks out with all the high tech

gear,' and we met a chap and he said: 'Wow, it's was really lovely, people welcoming us to Scotland. Incredible country -I mean you can walk two or three days and not see anybody, there's just so much area up there to walk in, Scotland is so beautiful, even though we were in really pretty miserable conditions.

"It was so bad we had to come somewhere every other day to dry out: it would have been suicidal to go on in those conditions. When you're out there and you're in the thick of this stuff, and the midges are at you -I had this real insight into the whole Tudonga wandering nomadic tradition. It makes life Miserable enough that you don't think it is worth staying around! The point comes home - that this is something that it is worth working to get out of! And so I'm really keen for us all to go tudong, because we're creatures of habit and tend to get into secure situations.

"And a tent. A tent is the most lovely thing that's going. It's so lovely just to have a roof over your head for the night -a secure sort of little place out in the middle of nowhere. Venerable Thanasilo and I had a mountain tent that you could take up Everest. And you get that thing pitched - it's got about 10 guys on it and about 24 stakes to put in. Once you get the thing down, It's not going anywhere. We could actually squeeze four of us inside, we had puja in there-we did the itipi so and the karaniya metta in the morning and evening. I did 'mettancasabbalokasmim' as a mantra and the Refuges when it was really bad rain -it was a sort of focus. It is just so lovely to be out with the basics; life is so simple."



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Keeping it Simple

The Buddha allowed four basic requisites for monks and nuns; these are robes, almsfood, shelter and medicine. Ayya Candasiri reflects on this as a way to learn contentment with a very simple life-style and considers that we don't actually need that much to follow the Way.

For example with shelter: the standard for nuns is, a roof over the head for one night". The old paint store on Amaravati's campsite provides such shelter, and at the prospect of sharing this with another nun for a two-week period of retreat there was a wonderful opportunity to watch discontent - "What kind of retreat is this?" - arise in the mind ... to let it go, and return to the simplicity of NOW.

Sitting quietly, listening to the day begin outside - the dawn chorus, the sound of distant traffic -- it was very pleasant to be alive.

Well, the retreat began and it was quite delightful - to wake up at 3, 4, or 5 a.m., light a candle, bow, roll up the sleeping mat and replace it with a sitting mat. Throughout the procedure it was necessary to move very gently indeed to avoid disturbing my neighbour behind the thin partition ... (opening the door was always tricky), then walking out briskly in the clear night air to dispel the final traces of sleepiness. Sitting quietly, listening to the day begin outside - the dawn chorus, the sound of distant traffic -- it was very pleasant to be alive. Each day was punctuated by the monastery bell, which called the community to gruel, the meal and evening puja; the changing light, as the sun made its way across the sky, provided a more subtle and natural rhythm.

Having determined to look at the time only on first waking, the periods of rest and meditation were determined by what felt right, rather than the compulsive desire to clock-up so many hours of formal practice ... what a relief that was! What a privilege to step aside - if only briefly - from the tyranny of the digital alarm clock!

Some days were very hot; the well-insulated kutis became like furnaces. In the evening the air cooled but by closing the door, the stored-up warmth was preserved through the night. My kuti had a wood stove (the other had a basin!); on chillier nights newspaper, twigs and one or two small logs made a fire giving more than adequate warmth for several hours (it will make a marvellous sauna in winter).

One evening a mosquito came to visit; I noticed how



gently it settled down to feed, but the inflamed spots and itching remained for several days. On another occasion a large spider took up residence in my almsbowl; fortunately, we met 30 minutes before the meal offering. And I saw a lot of the cats; they seemed to like visiting the neighbouring cornfield: I'd notice one or other of them walking quietly by and through a hole in the high fence behind the shed, as I sat there at dusk enjoying the gradual transformation of the world as night fell.

There'd be a sense of lingering sweetness as I stealthily rolled out the sleeping mat and prepared to rest. Then bowing to the Buddha, Dhamma -and Sangha, I'd see the photograph-, of Ajahn Chah and Ajahn Sumedho deep in meditation; these provide a constant source of inspiration and encouragement to attend to the mind, to watch inwardly and attune to the silence. The heart resounds with wonder and gratitude -for those who brought me into the world, and my companions and teachers. May all beings be free!



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Ancient Meadows

The principle of harmlessness seems present in the growing social awareness of how our activities affect the earth. As well as providing a very pleasant area for future visitors to walk in, the "Wildflower Project" aims to reintroduce into the meadows adjacent to Chithurst Monastery some of the native flowering plants which have become rare in the area. The following are accounts by Dr. Barry Durrant, who moved to Chithurst early in 1988 and who kindly agreed to take on the project, and Ayya Viveka who helped organise the initial year of the project, final planting into the chosen site.

This year saw the start of the second phase of a three year conservation programme initiated by the Abbot and community of Chithurst Buddhist Monastery; a project to gradually convert fields around the monastery, hitherto let for cattle grazing, into ancient pastures".

In the good old days before farming became big - i.e., before the advent of "controlled environments", the intensive use of artificial fertilizers and herbicides, and grubbing up of thousands of miles of hedgerows to make way for the combines - the countryside was resplendent in many different wildflowers. Such diversity attracted a great number of insects, butterflies, birds and small mammals -all in a dynamic interrelated mini-world.

Sadly, such is progress, that that which brought economy of effort and greater production (and profit!) also brought a concomitant loss of many wild-flower species. Many species cannot tolerate an over- concentrated pasture or too frequent cutting, and they have gradually succumbed to their more adaptable and robust brothers.

I tried to think of the seeds as living beings, to prepare them with affection, and to work from a sense of offering to the Sangha.

Orchids, Hay Rattle, Great Burnet, Meadow Saxifrage -to name but a few - were, and are, all under threat. Buttercups, Plantains and Dandelions are clearly far more resilient! Only in inaccessible or idle areas of farmland do small pockets now manage to thrive.

It was therefore the plan to re-establish these meadows by the purchase and sowing of wildflower seeds, their nurturing over-the summer months and final planting into the chosen site. Initially the seeds (some 20 different species) were mixed with wet sand and placed in a domestic refrigerator at just above freezing for some 4 weeks. At the end of this time and by the early days of March, the seeds were thinly sown in compost in seed trays and placed in the walled garden. There were the obvious hazards from birds, rodents, wind and drought, but the boxes were kept covered by netting and regularly watered.

Astonishingly, many species started their germination within 5-7 days and gradually the dull brown compost became speckled by the green of fine young seedlings. As the seedlings matured enough to be handled, so they needed transplanting into tomato boxes filled with soil

and peat. This saw the start of a six-to-eight week challenge for those of delicate touch and keen eyesight. Each tender seedling was carefully lifted and replanted into its new home some 35 to a box -and in the process more and more boxes were moved from the coach house store, more and more earth was dug and sieved, and more and more peat purchased in huge bales from the local nursery.

Anxiety ran high as to whether there would be enough helpers to complete this important and delicate stage, but with help from the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers, Local conservation groups supporters and guests of the monastery, and the nuns, most of the seedlings were transplanted. Some species ran riot (the clover!), others did poorly (pignut) but nevertheless a useful and significant number thrived and await the autumn.

The ground became covered by rows upon rows of boxes each, as the summer months passed by, coming to display the especial characteristics of the plants within ÑLady's Bedstraw, Rest Harrow, Viper's Bugloss, Cowslip and Devil's Bit Scabious.

We shall be starting the final stage in September - transferring each young plant into the field -and this will prove the most labour intensive part of the whole process. The boxes must be carried from the walled garden to the site, the many differing species once more disturbed and randomly mixed as an assorted group, and finally the turf must be cut and each plant tucked up neat and secure to weather its first winter in the fields of Sussex.

Hopefully, enough volunteers will again miraculously materialise, each making their particular and vital contribution to conservation and posterity.

Deliberately cultivating "weeds" seems slightly ludicrous, although people interested in conservation are generally more enthusiastic. However, my own view is slightly different from both of these: I started the project in spring 1987 on Ajahn Anando's invitation, as part of my monastic training. Saying "yes" did take a certain degree of faith, as I had no experience in such matters, but Ajahn Anando seemed to think that I could do it. So I trusted in his ability to train people - and in my own intention, the willingness to help.

A rather bleak end of February saw the arrival of the seeds and I started working in the clammy darkness of the scullery at Chithurst, mixing them with wet sand. The Ajahn had been giving instruction on metta-bhavana, and looking at the sand the seeds and the scullery I wondered how I could relate such an inspiring meditation practice to this task. Then it became clear: maybe the energy of the heart could be put into this work. So I tried to think of the seeds as living beings, to prepare them with affection, and to work from a sense of offering to the Sangha. With this new attitude my perceptions altered: I noticed the differences in the



seeds-some species were very fine dust, some nearly as big as lentils - and each had its own distinctive smell, scents reminiscent of summer hay meadows. And I found that I enjoyed working on the project, the physical resources to do it were there and were coming from spaciousness rather than anxiety.

As they grew, there was a lot of work involved in tending the seedlings and it was essential to go back to that initial intention in the heart. More people had to join in and they needed to be organised. The year's plan which was in my mind did not allow for the moods that individuals might be experiencing so I had to learn to be more sensitive to others: to keep room both for what I thought had to be done and what was possible within the limitations of the human realm.

We received help from many people: Nick Scott gave invaluable advice -information on which species to grow, how to grow them and where to buy the seed; Khun Mudita supplied hundreds of boxes; the community at Chithurst helped in whatever ways they were able; and friends of the monastery made special efforts to come and spend a day or so to help with planting. I remember almost surreal afternoons when the walled garden and lawn at Chithurst were filled with people moving silently about their work, sharing time, energy and space in harmony.

My perceptions of the project are pleasant, and include a growing appreciation for the natural world's richness and power. Giving attention to the wildflowers each day I became aware of minute changes: the shapes of the leaves were familiar friends-, and tending and watering these plants I sensed the vibrant peace of the earth. Yet what stands out was seeing people draw together, working for no personal benefit other than the joy of giving, and the unity which arises when the compulsions of self are put aside. Cultivating the selfless heart, acting from inner stillness, is truly beautiful.



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Family Summer Camp

Ayya Thanissara, Medhina Frignt and several of the children report on events at this years family summer camp.

The light and blessings of the triple gem gave rise to a kaleidoscope event this year at Amaravati. Although more ordinarily known as the Family Summer Camp, the numbers from last year had almost doubled, so this year's camp blossomed into something that had a touch of the extraordinary. During the last week of July, different shaped tents and a colourful array of people (Mostly small sized!) appeared at Amaravati - as if out of the void. As the camp quickly gained momentum, it had the potential for experiencing both the peace of Dhamma and the turbulent nature of the six realms (states of mind that arise according to the results of thought, speech and action that are based in greed, hatred and delusion). The six realms became the main theme of the Dhamma talks and workshops, and it was also the subject for this year's children's play. Besides this, there were a varied number of activities in which the monastic and lay community shared their knowledge and skills with parents and children. One of the on-going projects initiated at the camp was the building of a stupa from stones which people had brought from all over, including some from Buddhist holy sites in India. The stupa is something that anyone can contribute to at any time: so if you are visiting Amaravati, please bring some stones from your home.

A fertile field of paramita is cultivated, providing the right soil in which such wonderful events as the Family Camp can grow and bloom.

Around each camp so far there has been an aura of vibrancy and experimentation, this year was no exception with such an increase in numbers, it was very much an experiment. In previous years people who have come have known each other-, this year many new faces came. So as the camp moved into a slightly new dimension, those involved in its organisation found it helpful to meet several times throughout the week to reflect on this new direction and the growth of interest. There was a general agreement about certain guidelines and principles that would be helpful in future camps. These would ensure smooth running of practicalities; create more opportunities for children to have closer contact with the Sangha; enable more formal Dhamma teaching to take place; Provide more creative and physical activities for the younger boys; facilitate a better communication system. There were many other positive suggestions put forward that could be incorporated.

The organisation of such a camp next year will need a co-operative effort of families with members of the Sangha. Meetings will be held in the Spring for those interested in helping. The dates for next year's camp are 20th-31st August. This longer stretch of time lends itself to spreading out the numbers of those attending, and also provides an opportunity for those who feel they would benefit from a longer stay.

So as the practice in Sangha life quietly continues throughout the year, a fertile field of

paramita is cultivated, providing the right soil in which such wonderful events as the Family Camp can grow and bloom.

Many thanks to Tahn Ajahn, the monks and nuns and all whose help made this year's camp possible.

Ayya Thanissara

- o o o O o o o -

"You went where?"

"To a monastery."

"On your own?"

"No, with about 60 other adults and 60 children."

"What on earth did you do with 80 children in a monastery?"

Well first of all one tries to accommodate and feed them all. This year the retreat centre was full of tents. A marquee had been erected into which the whole community poured three times a day in search of the giant pots of food prepared in the kitchen by half a dozen volunteers. Some sat at tables and many sat on a patchwork of carpets which had appeared like magic to cover the floor.

For many families it was a new adventure. The children participated in a number of workshops such as drama, nature, puppet making, Buddhist teachings, a Brahma Kumari Global co-operation workshop, needlework, yoga, calligraphy, cookery, kite making and printing. As people do, they responded in a variety of ways. Some wanted to sample every kind of activity, some chose a few on which to concentrate, and some wanted to do none. Some groups were large and some were small; some were quiet and some were noisy-, some worked for hours and some for a few minutes. A vitality bubbled throughout the place from the morning puja at seven-thirty to the dying embers of the camp fire at midnight.

Nor were the parents idle! Regular requests for practical help with washing up, carrying tea urns, cleaning toilets and looking after the babies creche competed with dhamma talks on the six realms and the four noble truths, conversation times with Tahn Ajahn,



yoga, massage, and meditation.

The pace changed on Friday, Asalha puja day, when the older children and some parents walked with six members of the Sangha the ten miles to Ivinghoe Beacon. A relative tranquility settled over the campsite while they followed footpaths through bean fields, woodland, villages and pasture. The tiny tots were brought with their parents by car to meet us at our destination with ice-creams and hot tea. Kites were flown and muddy feet rested for the last few minutes of clear blue sky before a cloudburst sent us scurrying home.

The week finished with the consecration of a new stone stupa the building of which was initiated during the camp; a presentation of the children's play, "The six realms"; a short melodic puja devised for the children; and the perennially propitious blessing. "I thought a monastery was a quiet, solemn place."

"And so it is ... sometimes!"

Upasika Medhina

- o o o O o o o -

Comments from the children:

I arrive at Amaravati, the timetable is packed. I spend all day rushing from one activity to the

next, not wanting to miss any of them. So many workshops, so many things to do, the whole day flashes by at the speed of light. A late night from the campfire, and early rise for morning puja. I began to feel like an excited machine robot, collecting skill, knowledge and information as I ran at full speed.

The week comes to a sudden end, everything slows down. We say goodbye. We go home. We fall asleep. We rest. I read a book. I watch a film. I walk like a zombie. My mind is blank. I've forgotten the monastery after the first day. I can't think of anything, just push thoughts aside and fall asleep. I slowly try to get back into life routine. The clock gradually ticks away the minutes. I watch the grass grow.

The week begins to happen all over again in my mind. People's sayings haunt my memory. The play of "The Six Realms" acts itself again.

I watch it all come and go, and I take my Buddha rupa from the cupboard, dust it, and put it in its place in my room.

I think the best workshop was calligraphy. It was great fun and I learnt it quite quickly. Somebody spilt some ink on a monk and he didn't lose his temper.

Poems from "The Six Realms of Existence":

Humans

Where I am going others have been, What I will see, others have seen, What I will feel, has been felt before, others have been happy, others have been sore. This is the place where I make up my mind, to be evil or good, to be selfish or kind. This is where I choose my way to waste my life or to make it pay!

Gods

Where has it gone? What happened? Flimsy paper palaces, collapsing at the slightest touch. Bliss while it lasted. I was so happy, R. 1. P. WHY?

Responses by adults to the camp:

"There is a inherent beneficial quality about Amaravati, because people are practising here."

"We especially enjoyed the children-orientated pujas." "Energy, space, inspiration: re-charging spiritual batteries" 0 "The contact with monks and nuns is something the children can recall in the future, or come back to in the future" "From this clear place you can see through some of the problems and vicious circles you cause yourself at home"

Improvements suggested for next year:

"The creche could use some more equipment" ~ "Know more about the etiquette between monks, nuns and lay people" ~ "I would like a more specific level of commitment to Buddhist practice. We are coming into a monastic community and our behaviour should tend to harmonise with it" ~ "There could be more of an approach to meditation for children"



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State of America

Ajahn Sucitto continues his reflections on aspects of Buddhism in America

The Way to Providence

One of the women on the retreat at barre was from Providence, Rhode Island; she had heard of the retreat through her local meditation group, the Unitarian Universalist Church. She enjoyed the retreat, and it was through her enthusiasm that we received an invitation to visit Providence and give a talk to the group. The minister, Tom Ahlburn, phoned up, gave us a very warm and hospitable invitation, and came to drive us down to Providence the day after the retreat ended. He was not a Christian minister, nor was the Church (which actually meant the group, not the building) a Christian organisation. Unitarian Universalism is an offshoot of Congregationalism; which means that every congregation has the right to choose its own form of worship. In true American fashion, Unitarian Universalism allowed each individual to choose their own religion. In this case, Tom was a Buddhist as were most of his congregation. Although originally inspired by Master Soen Sahn of the Providence Zen Centre, Tom currently associated with Ven Maha Ghosananda, a Cambodian bhikkhu who had a small temple that catered for the Cambodian refugees of Providence. Although Ven Maha Ghosananda's English was patchy, his delightful presence, and the plight of the refugees, had motivated Tom to get involved with the Wat Khmer. And when I gave my talk to the group, Ven Maha Ghosananda was there beaming with delight, as was normal for him. The district of Providence in which the Universalist Unitarian Meeting House was situated was the old town; and Americans being quite proud of their history, the city had taken some efforts to maintain it much as it must have looked two or three hundred years ago. The buildings are all wooden, the streets are rather narrow with pleasant gardens and they even made the electric, lights look rather like old-fashioned gas lamps.



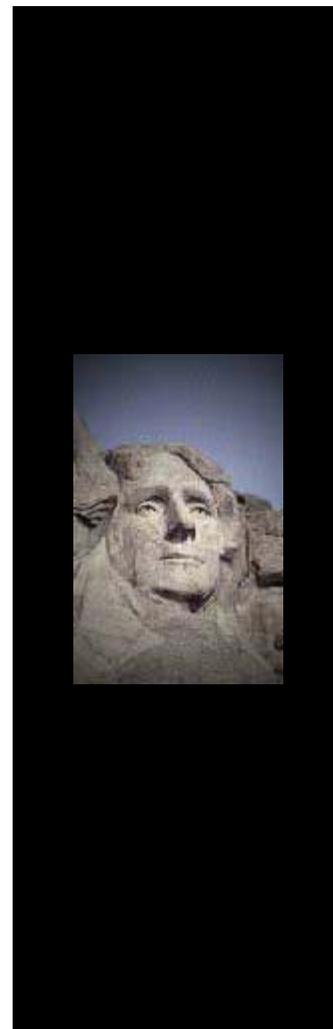
The problem, particularly for lay people, is not a lack of technique, but difficulty in finding a supportive environment. And people don't always know what to look for.

After the talk, Tom and his wife drove us over to the Wat Khmer on the "other" side of town where we were to spend the night. It was the rough side of Providence-broken-down streets, boarded up houses-and as we got out of the car Tom suggested that perhaps it wasn't such a wise idea to go pindabaht the next morning.

In the Wat itself, which was just a simple tenement house, there were posters giving notification of the plans to purchase a centre which would be a place for meditation and Dhamma teaching, for medicine, for education and for Khmer culture - it was quite a visionary complex. Ajahn Maha had found a suitable area of land outside Providence and was

asking people to make donations to the tune of half million dollars - which, from the impoverished state of the Wat, seemed way out of reach.

But Maha Ghosananda beaming with confidence was another story. Early next day he breezily suggested we go out on almsround, and despite Tom's initial apprehension, the matter was clinched when a local Cambodian man came in, lit up with glee and ran out to tell the nearby families that bhikkhus were coming. We put our bowls over our shoulders and walked out to the street - and things started to happen. People came tumbling out of their houses, rushing backwards and forwards bearing bowls of rice, loaves of bread, and fruit, and eagerly wedging them into our alms-bowls. Some people were putting envelopes with money in into our bowls, Tom was diligently collecting the money, the loaves of bread, and the things that wouldn't fit in or weren't suitable for monks to carry - and we chanted blessings and they chanted sharing of merit with the dead and we chanted some more, and all along this street in Providence, there occurred this Wonderful enactment of devotion to the Triple Gem. And for those few moments that back street in the rough side of Providence turned into something more like the Devaloka. Providence (the bounty of the divine) never seemed so rightly named as at that time. The refugees certainly weren't developing any great degree of tranquillity, there didn't seem to be much concern about practice, yet their lives had a foundation of faith in the Triple Gem that gave them a real strength. And one saw how it was going to be possible for them to get their half million dollars and establish their centre. I felt that if we, in our hearts, could learn from those people the transforming power of faith, it would have repaid the West ten times over all the foreign aid that has ever been given; because if we don't learn that, we will surely just wither away through lack of joy.



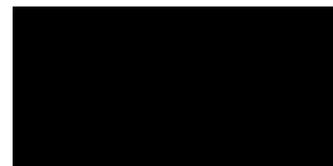
One thing it made clear in my own mind was that my basic offering as a bhikkhu was to go out on pindabaht every day in these barren cities of the West. The least you can do is to present a reminder of the spiritual life.

The Jungles of Massachusetts

The next day we were taken into Cambridge where I had been invited to give a talk at the Insight Meditation Center. IMC is a refuge for city folk; there's a nice sense of community there with people coming in for periods of the day to meditate and help out with the chores. Larry Rosenberg, who is the resident teacher there, has quite a degree of faith in the forest tradition style of practice; one part of the centre displays large mounted photos of the forest masters - Ajahn Mun, Ajahn Sao, Ajahn Khao, Ajahn Lee, Ajahn Waen, Ajahn Fuhn. They have all passed away and their forests are disappearing, but still one always appreciates the reflection of such masters. The dignity of their simplicity, and their direct experience of Dhamma calms you in a society that values having a lot of exciting opinions.

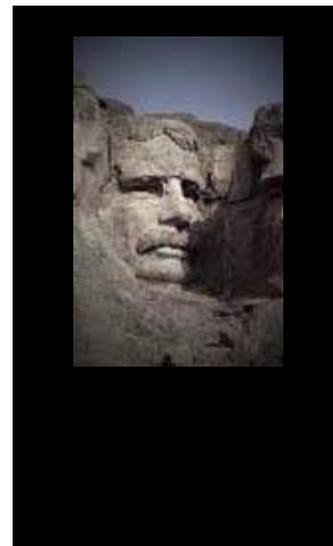
Our hosts in Cambridge, Hob and Olivia, gave us a characteristically American welcome: make yourself at home! And they meant it. The entire top floor of their house was ours; only too pleased to offer food, rest, showers, whatever we needed -and glad to have us to talk with.

Over the next few days we had some good conversations with Hob and the people who came round. Hob raised some points that were worth talking about. Like many Americans, he had an uncertainty about traditional forms, particularly monasticism, and how that



works with the freedom of the spirit. He also pointed to a conflict in his life between a refined meditation technique and a need to integrate Dhamma into a way of living. It had been much the same with me until I made a real commitment to Sangha and the training entailed in that. But when circumstances and behaviour were no longer subject to my personal motivation it allowed me the freedom to respond to life with mindfulness rather than habit. So it had become simple (not easy); in fact simpler to do it than to talk about it. The problem, particularly for lay people, is not a lack of technique, but difficulty in finding a supportive environment. And people don't always know what to look for.

Life is kinder to the choiceless: an chance invitation Venerable Karuniko and I found ourselves invited to the Wat Khmer in Lowell, and that presented a good perspective on our dialogue.



There are thousands of Asian refugee families in Lowell because its an industrial town and there are jobs to go around. In one of its homely suburbs stands the Wat Khmer, a large refurbished hall of little charm. Apart from samanera Dhammagutto, who had invited us and who is American, there were five bhikkhus resident there of various Asian nationalities. The abbot - Ajahn Khan Sao -and another monk were Cambodian forest bhikkhus. Dhammagutto gave us some accounts of the horrors of the Khmer Rouge days (the second monk hadn't recovered yet) but the monks themselves weren't talking about the past or the future, they were building the temple. Ajahn Khan Sao felt that his main practice was in helping the Cambodians to begin again. They would come to him with their problems, and sorrows and quarrels, and he would tell them to stop, forget and begin again -a very direct teaching. Dhammagutto talked about times when people would come for chanting on behalf of their dead relatives: the monks would start chanting at 6.00 in the evening and finish at 3.00 in the morning. It put some balm an the wounds.

Of course a lot of responsibility devolved to Dhammagutto, being the only resident American there and an expert in mechanics, Chinese medicine and acupuncture as well. Apart from undertaking all manner of manual work in the temple, Dhammagutto had decided to be the night watchman. He walked around the Wat at night with a big stick and through his wits and his quick tongue bluffed and challenged the people who threw rocks at the windows or tried to break in.

So the place, like Dhammagutto himself, was battered and not very tranquil, but had the features of a good environment for practice: commitment, morality, plenty of opportunities for giving and patience, and not much chance to think about yourself. You felt a glow in the heart at being there.

So on the next day when Hob took us to Logan Airport to fly to New York, I talked to him about the Cambodian temple, because it seemed to offer an excellent opportunity for the Cambridge folk to develop their Dhamma practice and help the refugees as well. He was certainly open to the idea, but the Khmer connection was not an obvious one to make; it only seemed obvious to me because I saw the Buddhist tradition as being a place for practice -and that's a rare view in America. Westerners can feel estranged from Asian conventions and the formalism of the Bhikkhu Sangha; and they can even look down on them as products of blind ritualism. How easy it is to dismiss it all as old tradition: we want the new, the improved; we don't want any of the old stuff. But the Asian tradition has preserved the teaching and practice of Buddhism for centuries, and one feels: isn't it time that we in the West repaid the nurses' fees for 2,500 years of custodianship? And isn't the concrete jungle a suitable forest for people to practise letting go in?

The Juice of the Apple

New York is the city that historically has absorbed the refugees and the emigres and reconstituted their national traits into a polyglot city state. There's plenty of juice in the big Apples earnestly materialistic, its mercantile energy seems to propel every building up to the sky and whittle its many nationalities into a shape that will fit. Or it dumps them on the street. Visiting Thai people in, and around New York gave some insights into the process: a few were trying to keep Dhamma practice going, but weren't optimistic about the community in general; many had only a cultural relationship to Buddhism (though still pleased to support bhikkhus); and the children were little New Yorkers, lacking the composure that I was used to seeing in Thai children. These are the emigres who have succeeded in fitting in. Ironically, the materialist conventions provide a more accessible common ground than the Buddhist ones. Asians tend to cling to Buddhist conventions as if they are Dhamma, Americans reject them as if they are obstacles to correct practice. The timelessness and restraint of a tradition would be wonderful if blended with American initiative, but right now that meeting can only occur around a monastic Sangha that relates to the old and the New World. Such a Sangha can create an interface for mutual reflection but in America at this time there isn't much sign of one.



One such pilgrim was Ward, who had been on the Barre retreat. He invited us to a meal at his home in Manhattan, which was three storeys up in a warehouse building in the shadow of the World Trade Towers. Their blank and mountainous aspect added an eremitic touch to his environment - surrounded by concrete and glass, not a human being in sight. The staples of Ward's existence were: early morning and evening meditation; a small and specialised craft; and getting out into the country on the weekends. It kept him steady and clear -but he was asking himself: "Where do I go from here?"

Looking for a place to grow together in Truth, the Pilgrim Fathers left home behind over two hundred years ago: their only mistake was not going far or deep enough. America's still big on aspiration and energy, but today's aspirants live in a world that has few places to start anew. They have to voyage beyond personal viewpoints, and in a country that promises you the freedom to choose, that's not easy. It only gets easier when you realise there's nowhere else to go.



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EDITORIAL

The Changing Faces of Sangha

Those attending this years upasampada at Chithurst may have noticed at the end of the mysterious and inaudible proceedings (Ajahn Sumedho has requested a PA system for next year) another earnestly attended process. It was the announcement of a samana labha avasa and if you're still guessing, that means that Amaravati, Chithurst, Harnham, Devon and the Swiss Vihara have agreed to act as a commonwealth, sharing greater and lesser possessions according to need. It formalises in material terms what has always been the spirit of our communities.

Community consciousness -where the group is the reference point rather than the views of the individual - is an evolved state that one sees as the only way towards skilful relationship with each other and the planet. It does require a maturing through individuals conforming to standards and precepts, and a sense of trust for those who make that commitment. To not be offended by the world - Ajahn Sumedho's current resolution -is the prerequisite for compassionate response. Then the views of the individual can be seen in the correct light, as steps towards acceptance of differences, and cooperation despite them.

Glad responses come up when we can explore the
aggrieved, the fantastic or the ordinary with an open
mind.

Am I trying to justify another Newsletter assortment of perspectives that not everyone's going to agree with? Well, more than that. Sangha life in general received quite a boost from a series of Global Co-operation Workshops as mentioned below - which presented opportunities to relax the critical instincts, the indignation at the world predicament and resolution (often made by Buddhists) to be completely hopeless. Glad responses come up when we can explore the aggrieved, the fantastic or the ordinary with an open mind.

Kathina season comes round again, so for Asian and Western lay people there is a special time to Co-operate around the themes of offering to the Sangha and helping to keep these monasteries going, for the welfare of the many. Then in January and February the monastic retreats bring the ordained community together around Dhamma on a moment-by-moment basis. This year, the Devon and Harnham sanghas, and we hope, Ajahn Jagaro from Down Under, will be merging into the Deathless at Amaravati. May we all learn to share what we have and accept each other's offerings with gratitude.

Ajahn Sucitto

