Kusala House Opens

... and more ...
Acknowledging uncertainty is a basic theme in Buddhist practice, and in a Buddhist monastery this gets expressed in various ways. One way that can come as a relief for those who enter the monastic fold (or it can be endearing – or exasperating – depending on your perspective) is how fully it’s accepted that the various things we do, uncertain as they are and not being our first priority, may not get done as planned – and that’s perfectly all right.

The Forest Sangha Newsletter is something we try to publish regularly, if possible on a quarterly basis. However, it remains dependent on the tides of time and energy available in the monastic community, and sometimes that may mean a particular issue just doesn’t get done. The currents have been such that this issue was nearly one of these … however, we’ve been able to tread water just enough to give it birth.

As in the past we’ve tried to touch in with some of the monasteries at the end of another year, whether that be in the form of a reporting of movements and events, or another kind of offering such as photos or reflections. There is also a vignette written by Ajahn Piyasilo, the Thai monk many of you will know who stayed at Chithurst, and who was back for a couple of months earlier this year.

On behalf of the Sangha, wishing you all blessings for the new year, with metta,

Bhikkhu Jayanto

Male samanas, both resident and visiting, gathered for the New Moon Day of October 2008, in the Dhamma Hall at Harnham
The image above was drawn by Ajahn Thitadhammo at Cittaviveka Monastery, Chithurst.
As usual, many things have been happening at Amaravati this year, and the monks’ and nuns’ communities have seen their share of activity, of comings and goings, and of opportunities for silent retreat.

This has included building the first of the kutis in the field for which we recently gained planning permission (four new kutis for siladhara and three for the bhikkhus). Below are some of the photos taken by the nuns as they managed their part of that project.

The male community was happy to host a number of monastic visitors, including the Sri Lankan bhikkhu Bhante Sudassi, who spent the Vassa with us and stayed on until December. Ven. Sudassi was a delightful member of our crew – we wish him all the best and hope he’ll have a chance sometime to return.

We also welcomed in to the community a new bhikkhu and samanera: Tan Paramito became a bhikkhu in July and Anagarika Antonin became Samanera Akaliko.
Images from the Amaravati Kathina, November 2008. Once again His Excellency the Thai Ambassador offered a Kathina Robe on behalf of His Royal Highness King Bhumibol Adulyadej, the King of Thailand.

Ajahn Anandabodhi takes a break

Within three days the contractors had assembled the kuti – a double-skinned log cabin with 10 cm insulation.

The first new nuns’ kuti is ready for the Winter Retreat.
This year the most significant event at Harnham, as far as material achievements go, was the completion of Kusala House, our new guest accommodation. We celebrated the occasion just before Kathina, inaugurating Kusala House’s new meditation room with a blessing ceremony for the grandchildren of Myint Su and Clive, two longstanding friends and supporters of the community here. Ajahn Sumedho and several visiting monks were able to participate in the ceremony, as they were staying at Harnham to join us for the hugely successful Kathina on the next day. And so we were able to offer and enjoy a resounding many-voiced Paritta chanting as it is seldom heard at Harnham.

Of course, this has not been the first event held at Kusala House, which has already been in use for a while. Thanks to the new facilities, this year we were able to host five meditation retreats, some of them led by visiting elders from Amaravati: Ajahns Anandabodhi and Candasiri leading women’s retreats, Ajahn Jayanto a mixed retreat and finally Ajahn Sumedho himself, arriving a good week in advance of the Kathina celebrations, leading a men’s meditation retreat which was enormously appreciated by all the participants, including the community at Harnham.

So far for next year at Kusala House we have scheduled four meditation retreats and a sutta study day with Professor Peter Harvey. Some of these events are already nearly booked out. And the lending library will be fitted with technology enabling the download of all materials available on the dhammathreads.org and dhammatalks.org.uk websites.

The inauguration of the shrine room has marked a significant point in the story of Kusala House, but as much as it did not mark the beginning of its use, it also did not mark the end of the work. We are now looking into the possibility of creating further fire escapes to lift restrictions on the use of the upstairs dormitories, as well as upgrading the surface of the car park; a crumbling boundary wall needs rebuilding, a telephone system will have to be installed, a storage room is still to be furbished….

The story continues, and may it remain a story of success and achievement as it has been until now. Not only in the physical establishment of Kusala House but also in the joyful involvement of the many lay people who have helped to make it possible by offering funds and many hours of work as well as taking on responsibilities. Kusala House is now run with the help of a committee comprising members of the monastic as well as our wider lay community, including our able and efficient Retreat Organizer Kath, and our resident Kusala House Manager, Andrew.

Another focus for our efforts to make the teachings of the Buddha available remains the use of the Internet to reach a wider audience of people interested in practising the Dhamma. Both the Dhammathreads and Dhammatalks websites continue to be popular outlets for teachings by elders of the wider community; we’ve added another website, www.aruno.org, to those managed from here. This site specifically provides for the distribution of teachings given at Harnham. Also Ajahn Munindo’s Moon Day email project initiated last year, called ‘Dhammasakaccha’, continues to grow, reaching now just under 300 subscribers (visit aruno.org to find out more).

But the heart of activity (and non-activity) at Aruna Ratanagiri and of what we can offer the wider community, naturally remains the practice of our resident community in the many ways recommended by Ajahn Chah. And so we are particularly content that we have kept our course through another year in harmony, with no one going overboard and a few new members joining the crew: Shramanera Do Gat and Anagarika Sebastian both became samaneras this year, known now as Samaneras Visuddhi and Suññato (pronounced soon-yat-toe) respectively; our new anagarika Michael might not remain on his own for long, as new candidates are already on their way to join us for the Winter Retreat; and Ajahn Puñño will have rejoined us by the time you are reading this, returning from Thailand in mid December.

So, all in all there will be at least nine of us here at Harnham looking forward to new challenges and blessings in the coming year. ☀
Top: The shrine in the newly-opened shrine room at Kusala House. The original Burmese alabaster Buddha image given to the monastery many years ago by a local council authority now sits in a traditional Burmese wooden shrine. First row: Luang Por Sumedho gives the Precepts at Harhnam’s Kathina; Aruna Ratanagiri supporters gather in the garden of Kusala House; Samanera Suññato goes forth at his ordination. Second row: The Kusala House garden and exterior. Third row: Sewing the Kathina Robe; almsround on the day; and the offering of the Kathina Cloth (helped along by Dad).
Chithurst is a tiny hamlet in the parish of Trotton in the county of West Sussex. Events seem to pass it by: in a local parish magazine, one’s attention is drawn to the annual best-dressed duck competition as being this year’s noteworthy happening. Chithurst is also an ancient place. The church dates from the 11th century, the manor house from the 14th, and Joan Budd’s house at the top of the lane carries damage from the Civil War of the 17th century. Older still a fortified encampment from the Iron Age, and remains from a road built by the Romans, stand in a stretch of woodland that is owned by – a Buddhist charity, the English Sangha Trust. Near to that are the properties that compose Cittaviveka, Chithurst’s very own Buddhist monastery, which although comparatively new (the main house dates from 1862) is so apparently uneventful that it has been happily accepted into the sociocultural landscape.

From the point of view of the *samanas* who live there, life is eventful enough. This is a place where the business and busyness of the mind are each person’s daily news, especially during the long retreat of the winter and the solitary meditation weeks of the summer. Meditation is the main way for each individual to integrate the Dhamma into their lives; it is the basis of our tradition. And in between those periods of deep introspection, the activities are traditional too: the daily meditation periods wrap around going on almsrounds to the local towns and villages, instruction in *Dhamma-vinaya*, and maintaining the considerable property that the community stewards. Apart from building repairs, each year we commit to forest maintenance, the high point of which is the forest work month. The ongoing forest project is to restore what was a near eco-desert of non-native chestnut monoculture to a mixture of wood and heathland where native plants and animals can flourish. However, the chestnut also serves a crucial purpose: it is the main energy source for heating the main house and Dhamma Hall, and it looks like, if the nuns’ area converts from oil to wood heating, it will also be needed for Rocana Vihara. So in keeping with the style of the place, even our newest projects envision a return to more traditional concerns and resources.

The major resource of any monastery, and the source of its events, is the Sangha. Cittaviveka is not a large community, especially when you consider the size of

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As good as a best-dressed duck

Some news from Cittaviveka
the property. Currently it houses about 22 men and women. The numbers fluctuate. New people arrive, which is gladdening; but also established people leave. In April this year, Ajahn Thaniya left the community, and Ajahn Thanasanti will be leaving in the spring of next year. The good news is that Ajahn Thanasanti will be continuing to live as a nun, and she will probably continue her practice and teaching in America. On the brighter side of things, Ven Narado will have returned from his time away in New Zealand by the time that this letter gets published, and we expect Ajahn Upekkha to spend the winter retreat with us.

Also an indispensable resource for any Buddhist monastery is support from the lay community. It is steady, with most people turning up around the weekend when the Dhamma talks and ongoing meditation instructions are given. In such a non-happening area, the Trust had to make an agreement with the local council whereby we would not host retreats for the general public and also not hold more than five festivals a year. This agreement acts as a template for the monastery and the limitation it imposes was a primary reason why Amaravati, with its retreat centre, was established. So Cittaviveka is more reclusive, but certainly not exclusive: generally there are between four and eight male and female guests staying at any particular time – and the numbers swell into the hundreds for the major occasions of Kathina, Ordination and New Year.

The most popular occasions, like Kathina, are those where generosity is the keynote. And for the past few years, there’s been an almsgiving ceremony (called a Tort Pa Ba) that has attracted many more people than inhabit the rest of the parish. This is the Cloister Project, through which people from near and far have offered money to sponsor the roofing of a walkway between the Dhamma Hall and the Main House. As is also traditional, the project serves to gather people together in harmony and build up the sense of community. Next year, the Pa Ba will occur on June 14th – and if you’d like a DVD (complete with musical score) of the last event you can obtain one by sending a SAE to David Glendining, Flat 2, 3 Westbourne Villas, Hove BN3 4GQ.
The last few months have been a time of rising uncertainty and anxiety in current affairs, and today most forecasters predict further turbulence ahead. It’s one of those periods in society when there seems to be more pessimism than optimism about the future. We face difficult challenges, and the possibility that rather than getting better – which is how we like to see the future – things may get worse. When our view of the future is optimistic, or things are going well then it can be exciting for us; when it is pessimistic and there are problems it can be frightening or depressing. And this happens on top of the everyday life events which can affect any of us at any time such as illnesses, accidents or bereavement. And even when there are no crises in our lives, there are the day to day frustrations, disappointments and dissatisfactions because the world around us simply isn’t the way we would like it to be, or hoped it would be. Or we ourselves aren’t the way we’d like to be or think we should be. These are just some of the ‘worldly winds’ which can so easily blow us around.

When the weather is stormy we need a safe harbour, or a strong anchor. The Buddha’s teachings point us to that place of refuge where we are better able to see through and relax around our fears and expectations. Whether it’s devotion to the Triple Gem, or confidence in our own practice – no matter how deep these may be – that helps us to bear with unwanted events and the unpleasant feelings that arise when they happen – when we let go, we allow something new to emerge which is a response from the heart. The heart can recognize that whatever is going on, whatever confusion, upset or longing we experience, there is also the capacity simply to be aware of this. And that in awareness free of assumptions and judgements, there is a peacefulness and willing acceptance. The heart is content simply to be, and in that being it is open, receptive and loving – even if not necessarily liking what is happening in ourselves or in the world around us. It is in this willingness to be that we find the strength and compassion to respond to life’s challenges.

This year Tan Adicco joined us from Amaravati and will stay on until the Winter Retreat. So, with Tan Subhaddo we were three bhikkhus for the Vassa here at Hartridge, along with Anagarika Chris who has now been here a year. Before Vassa Anagarika Yoshua came from Chithurst for a two-month stay, and we hope that Samanera Kondaño will come for December.

Over the summer we replaced the garden kuti near the cottage and work is almost complete to rebuild the hermit kuti in the woods. These new kutis are a bit larger than the old ones, properly insulated and altogether sturdier than the converted garden sheds that we were using before. Particularly over the winter months they will be much more welcoming and inviting spaces in which to stay and practise, and it looks as though we now have a waiting list to stay in them.

This year we were fortunate again to be able to hold a Kathina ceremony, this one arranged by Khun Noi and Khun Daeng. Luang Por Sumedho accepted our invitation to come for the occasion.

And finally, an architect friend has been working on drawings for a possible new shrine room and replacement guest accommodation. If and when things progress – applying for planning permission would be a significant step – we will of course publicize the proposals in more detail.

Ajahn Jutindharo

Icy fields above Hartridge Monastery
During the course of this last year we have been reminded of our strong connection and indebtedness to Thailand and its people. In January, at a formal ceremony in Bangkok, Ajahn Preechar Jutindharo was honoured with an ecclesiastical title in recognition of his Dhamma service overseas and received a special ceremonial fan and certificate. The title is Pra Kru (perhaps vaguely comparable to Monsignor in the Catholic tradition) and with it comes a new name – Santidhammavivet – which may be translated as ‘Messenger of Peace’. He has been in Italy almost 16 years and we are currently waiting to see if he will be granted citizenship. Perhaps he will be the first Italian Pra Kru!

In August we held a remembrance service at the monastery for Khun Natcharee Thananan, the wife of a former Thai ambassador to Rome who was instrumental in acquiring this property for the use of the Sangha, and who died ten years ago. Luang Por Sumedho came to participate in this event and to spend a few days with us. It was also an opportunity to remember with gratitude Vincenzo Piga, an important figure in the development of Buddhism in Italy, who donated the original vihara in Sezze Romano and who also passed away about ten years ago, while several of us were in Thailand for Khun Natcharee’s funeral.

Mario Thanavarwo, the founder and first abbot of Santacittarama, came to visit while Ajahn Sumedho was here and some of us went for a trip to nearby Fara Sabina, a charming and ancient hilltop town, and to Canneto, which boasts what is reputed to be the largest olive tree in Europe and is estimated to be 2,400 (!) years old. It’s remarkable to think that a tree so close to the monastery has been growing since shortly after the time of the Buddha, and that a tree and a religious tradition have survived while so many individuals, cultures and empires have come and gone. Just as the olive tree, despite its advanced age, continues to bear fruit, so does the Buddha-sasana (dispensation of the Buddha) continue to grow and offer spiritual nourishment.

The Kathina was offered by two groups of Thais from England, Khun Namtip and friends from Newcastle and Khun Chonlada and friends from London, with the participation of numerous Thais, Sri Lankans and Italians from all over Italy, from as far south as Sicily and as far north as Aosta. We were blessed with idyllic weather for the whole time that our guests from England were here, much to their delight as well as to that of our local Thais who came to help. Much of the day-to-day support we receive comes from Thai women living in the Rome area. Several of them visit nearly every weekend, bringing food, getting the kitchen in order and looking after the gardens.

Our three resident Thai monks – together with helpers of various nationalities – have been very active building things. As a result we have two new beautifully built and situated kutis, very well insulated and with small and efficient wood-burning stoves. The men’s guest house has been completely rebuilt, providing much improved conditions for guests. At the time of writing we are waiting to hear the results of our application for an area of the property to be designated for a temple building. If this is granted it will mean that the most difficult bureaucratic obstacle has been overcome, and we can then start working on a detailed design.

A large meeting hall would certainly be put to good use, not only for the major festival days but also for accommodating the regular meditation classes and workshops that seem to bring ever greater numbers of people, mainly Italians. In particular we are witnessing a noteworthy level of interest among young people in their late teens and early twenties, which is very encouraging. Meditation groups are being formed in various parts of Italy, and Ajahn Chandapalo has visited several of them as well as leading retreats in Sicily, Sardinia, Bari and Piacenza. And in the meantime we have been delighted to have both Ajahn Sucitto and Ajahn Amaro teaching retreats in a nearby Catholic institute.
If you approach our monastery in the dark on your first visit here high in the Kander Valley, when you step outside the next morning you’ll probably rub your eyes in disbelief at the sheer magnificence of the rock face stretching into the sky right behind the monastery. Often the monks get asked if they’re worried by this precarious situation. Their answers might be succinct, slightly bored or even humorous, and may involve commenting on the insubstantiality of all formations – to which of course even the hardest rocks belong.

This year, on an idyllic summer morning, the mountains responded. There was an enormous bang coming from the upper area of the cliff face, right next to the high waterfall near the monastery. A huge cloud of rubble and dust drifted into the valley, accompanied by threatening rumbling noises. After all the commotion calmed down an impressive trail of destruction became visible. On their way down huge boulders had cut trees to mid size, leaving deep craters when they hit the valley floor. Our neighbour’s house was badly damaged by falling rocks and debris – fortunately he happened to be on the side of his house that wasn’t flattened and he was not harmed. Some tourists nearby and the postman had to run for their lives. In the end the house and the postman’s car had been demolished, but miraculously no human beings were hurt.

In the Buddhist Canon there’s a simile where the image of mountains is used as a symbol for impending danger. The Buddha asks King Pasenadi of Kosala what he had been doing before he came to see him. The king speaks openly about his preoccupation with duties ‘as is customary for rulers, who get intoxicated by power and are possessed by greed for sensual things.’ The Buddha then leads King Pasenadi into a guided visualization, asking him to imagine trustworthy messengers coming to him from each of the four cardinal directions and saying, ‘Your majesty, there is a great mountain tall as the sky moving in our direction and squashing all living things in its path. Please do what seems fit.’ The Buddha asks the king what he would do in such a no-escape-possible situation. The king doesn’t hesitate: ‘What else is there to do when faced with such inevitable destruction but to orient oneself towards the Dhamma, by righteous living and meritorious conduct.’ The Buddha then confronts the king with the observation that ageing and death are approaching him just like those mountains. It dawns on the king that he is in dire straits and that only a way of living devoted to Dhamma can help. He recognizes that all his military might, all his strategic political advisers and well-meaning friends, all his immense wealth can’t help. Everything seems useless. The Buddha supports the king in his insight and points out that a wise person derives confidence from the Triple Refuge (Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha) and gives themselves to the practice of Dhamma.

When rock slides tumble unexpected down mountains and we’re able to step out of the way, we can still say, ‘Well, that was lucky,’ or ‘I’m sorry about the ones who got hit!’ Temporarily shaken out of our habitual perspective we may stop to consider our own vulnerability. But the sudden effect such an extreme event has on us usually doesn’t hold our attention long; after a phase of shock or wonder we go back to business as usual. However, in the same way the mountains from the four directions were approaching the king unnoticed, necessitating informants to make him aware of his situation, so the ‘divine messengers’ (devaduta) of ageing, sickness and death approach us quietly.

They are called heavenly messengers not because it feels divine to get old and sick but because they can make us aware of a reality that reveals itself completely only after we have established a direct relationship with them. A mental realization alone of ageing, sickness and death is not sufficient to fully comprehend their true message. But maybe we can suspect they are messengers from an unknown realm, pointing us to an altogether different dimension of being, if we include the fourth of the devadutas – the meditating monk, who in the Buddha’s life story appeared before him after the other messengers of ageing, sickness and death. Awareness of these first three – as representatives of our own fragility and transience – points to the limitation of a life in which we feel trapped by the futile endeavour to control processes of nature. The meditating samana as the fourth member of the team.
represents the human potential to realize in this very life the complete eradication of the suffering we experience in the face of ageing, sickness and death.

For the past two years, through regular visits I’ve had the privilege of accompanying my mother on the last ‘steps’ of her life. During this time she has become a divine messenger for me. For her, being in a care home means slowly taking leave of this world. And as if she had intended to prepare her loved ones cautiously for the inevitable, her mental and physical functions are only gradually winding down step by step. At the outset her diminishing eyesight turned into complete blindness. This impaired her physical coordination, leading to a fall and to disability of movement. This in turn led to less mental flexibility and a decline in her capacity to communicate, until she became almost totally silent. Her hands and feet remain in one crooked position, her fingers and toes having lost their ability to stretch. Her few modest movements, such as scratching her nose, are performed incredibly slowly but signify a last small act of self-reliance. Her skin is becoming darker and spottier and has lost most of its elasticity. Eating, excreting and body care are laborious. Her motionless gaze sometimes takes on the expression of being very, very tired of life. Now and then a deep sigh leaves her chest: an expression of release or of satiety? She leaves us uncertain, as explanations no longer seem relevant.

I’m surprised by her relative ease with all this, by the occasional sign of humour which she expresses in a characteristic way: a gentle hum, her last form of vocal expression. I’m grateful for how the slowness of this process urges me to stop, to look closely, to feel with and experience consciously every nuance of change in her well-being. Something natural is happening and there’s a strange perfection in it all, despite the unpleasant circumstances. Someone, close to me, is carefully, persistently presenting in front of my eyes what happens in the end to that which is born and grows. I give her permission to put down the burden, so that she can feel free to follow her kammic destination. For me she has already partly gone along her way, as she is no longer the person I imagined her to be. What is changing is not only an ageing body with its connected mental setup, but at the same time the dissolution of the last subtle resistances to this process, which I can detect in myself as her concerned son.

In the stories of the Buddha’s life the four divine messengers are in truth gods from a higher heavenly plane, who dressed up temporarily to fulfil an earthly mission. Their task was to awaken Prince Siddhattha, the Buddha-to-be, from his trance of earthly delusion. In his case this worked wonderfully, and after they had done their job the ‘fantastic four’ changed back to their divine form. Prince Siddhattha immediately followed the path of a meditating monk and became a homeless wandering ascetic. His aim was to escape those incessantly approaching mountains and the encroaching feeling of uneasiness, which he experienced just as we do when confronted with our own mental/physical finiteness or that of someone close to us.

Homelessness can also be understood metaphorically: when it dawns upon us that the house of our bodies cannot provide real safety. The Buddha used another alarming image by saying that this house is in flames – the flames of deluded identification with all appearances concerning body and mind. But when we listen carefully to the message of the fourth devaduta, who signals that there is a place of true refuge and safety, an open space, where the flames don’t find any more fuel and cannot survive – only then do we find release from the tribulations of human existence. When the processes connected with ageing, sickness and death have lost their threat and we have become fully aware that all internal and external creations don’t really have an owner – then we’re home. The deathless (amata dhamma) is our safe and reliable reality. Where death can’t get to there is no more birth – and where nobody is born, nobody dies. What is unborn, uncreated and without any origin is realized – nibbana – the indestructible peace of heart.

Ajahn Khemasiri ☛
Abhayagiri Monastery, California

News of the past year

Since the last report from Abhayagiri in the Forest Sangha Newsletter we have enjoyed a long, nearly endless summer and are now experiencing the slow yet clear shift into autumn and winter. The oak trees are changing colours, the days are short, but as these words are written in mid November we are still having very warm weather and clear blue skies.

Just prior to the Vassa we were glad to have had the opportunity to have Bhante Gunaratana here for a one-week stay, his third visit here. He generously offered three Dhamma talks, one of them at the pabbajja (novice ordination) of Anagarika Nic, who took on the samanera training and the Pali name Thitapañño. And that same evening Ian Hillard formally requested the anagarika training of the Eight Precepts.

Early in the Vassa Abhayagiri saw two more young men go forth as anagarikas; Louis Gegenhuber and Carl Braun. This brought the total number of samanas here to sixteen: eleven bhikkhus, two samaneras and three anagarikas. With lay resident Debbie Stamp this was the largest resident community we’ve ever had.

Towards the end of August the monastery hosted the annual Spirit Rock Teen Weekend. This is a two-night, three-day camping weekend for teens who participate in the full monastic schedule. It’s always a joy for us to be able to share our lives with these young people who are sincerely interested in the Buddha-Dhamma.

After Vassa ended the Kathina ceremony held at Abhayagiri was a joyous day attended by about 250 people from as far away as Thailand and the East Coast of the US. A week after that Samanera Kaccana formally requested the upasampada, or bhikkhu ordination, and only four days later, on 30 October, Samaneras Subharo, Dhammavaro and Suvaco – three novices from Sitavana (Birken Forest Monastery in Canada) had their upasampada. Ajahn Pasanno was the upajjhaya, or preceptor, for both of these ordination ceremonies. Sitavana’s abbot, Ajahn Sonra, attended the October 30th ceremony, and Ven. Pavarro, the ‘second monk’ at Sitavana, spent the month of November with us – his first time at Abhayagiri. Abhayagiri residents have been delighted in having more contact with our closest Forest Sangha branch monastery (a mere 1010 miles north). Late October also saw another change in the Sangha here when Ven. Sampajano left for Thailand to spend his fourth year as a bhikkhu at Wat Pah Nanachat and associated monasteries.

At present we are finishing off work projects as we wind down in preparation for the Winter Retreat. The two new kutis being built this year are nearly completed. One is a larger kuti, with a bathroom, which is suitable for visiting elders, and the other is of a more standard size. Ajahn Yatiko is overseeing a project designing and installing a hydroelectric system here on the land, tapping into the volume of water that runs down these steep hills and turning it into power. Once functional this should help with, among many things, heating the kutis in the upper areas of the forest.

Lastly, Abhayagiri has recently witnessed the deaths of two members of the lay community here. On Monday, 10 November, close friend and neighbour J. died after a year-long period of treatment for cancer. Almost anyone who has visited Abhayagiri since the summer of 2002 would have met J. He lived on the mountainside across the road from the monastery and generously dedicated his time to coming here and helping us with the upkeep and development of the monastery. During the past few years J. derived great pleasure from creating and tending a vegetable garden up at our friend Dennis Crean’s house. J. would use the food compost from the monastery to feed and nourish the garden, and then bring back copious amounts of vegetables to feed and nourish the Abhayagiri community. And on Tuesday, 18 November, Kondañña (Barry Kapke) died from colon cancer. He was one of the early monastery supporters here in California and was instrumental in creating both the Upasika Program and the original Abhayagiri website. He was also, in 1991, the creator of one of the first Dhamma websites, originally called DharmaNet International. Kondañña was one of the Abhayagiri lay ministers, having completed the CALM Program (Community of Abhayagiri Lay Ministers) training. We wish to express our appreciation for both of these members of our community. They will be greatly missed.
While visiting Thailand recently I was frequently reminded of one of the fundamental Buddhist teachings. In the Thai language this is *mai nae*, meaning *uncertain; not sure*—the living expression of the fundamental Buddhist teaching of *anicca*, or impermanence. This is how we directly experience impermanence in our daily life; emotionally, we experience impermanence as uncertain, unreliable, undependable, unstable.

When we make plans or have an idea about something, it seems to be so certain. Then we build our expectations and hopes on it, giving it even more certainty, often forgetting that it is merely a fragile, uncertain thought.

I think for many people contemplating impermanence usually relates to things, or occasionally to thoughts or moods. However, translating it as ‘uncertain’ can help us to see the direct emotional effect of impermanence in our everyday lives and thus come closer to a direct realization of its immediacy and universality.

On the practical side, a deeper contemplation and realization of this ultimate uncertainty of all aspects of our life helps to lubricate the inevitable tensions. We can easily get caught up in thinking that life should conform to some definite plan. But by keeping a close connection with the truth of uncertainty we can soften the resulting frustration and negativity when the plan doesn’t unfold the way we think it should.

We may even gain a clearer understanding of the real nature of plans: mere concepts about possibilities, rather than concrete programmes of actualities. Then whenever we find ourselves having to make plans we do it in pencil with an eraser in hand, and with the clear understanding that many other possibilities are available as well. The overall effect, is that we can relax more and flow with the inevitable changes of life.

Of course, in order to be of use it must be lived. Ajahn Chah would frequently remind us of *mai nae*. When someone would come to him enquiring about some pressing need or problem he would frequently respond with *mai nay*. And often that was more of a helpful answer than actually responding to the problem, since many problems are the result of us expecting that there should be a solution. When we can let go of the whole dynamic of problem/solution, the whole issue of ‘problem’ falls apart—it is not a problem but just the way things are, and they are all just passing phenomena.

In order to bring this teaching into our life it may be useful to often remind ourselves of uncertainty. Whenever we hear ourselves say ‘should’ or ‘must’, say instead: ‘uncertain’ and see what effect this has.

Sometimes you may notice the mind stop, a deeper level of relaxation is experienced and another way of responding may emerge. It is there all the time, but we have become so focused on ‘should’ we forget the ‘maybe’. Which is better for you, and which is more true?

*Ajahn Tiradhammo*
One day during my second month at Chithurst, two elderly ladies came to the monastery. I met them where the cars are parked while I was saying goodbye to friends. One of the ladies, wearing a bright blue dress and carrying a plastic bag, joyfully asked me if she could put the bag in the kitchen. Noticing that it contained vegetables, I said yes, assuming that they were familiar with the monastery. My assumption turned out to be wrong.

A few minutes later I met the ladies again in the front porch of the main house. They were taking their shoes off and putting on socks instead. I had a little chat with them. Hearing that I was from Thailand, their faces lit up: ‘Oh! That’s a lovely place!’ one of them exclaimed. Then they offered me the bag of vegetables and told me that they did not actually know anybody here. One of the ladies had come to visit the monastery a few times and usually brought some vegetables for the kitchen. This time she had brought along her friend who was from Devon to have a look around. She had never talked with any of the monks before. ‘I’ve just come to have a peaceful hour,’ she explained.

I asked them to please have a look around and heard the first lady tell her friend. ‘We will have to put something on our head.’ They then took out headscarves to cover their hair and started their little journey through the main house, from the reception room to the shrine room and on to the conservatory.

I took the bag over to the kitchen. Normally it could be left for our anagarikas to take care of, but this time I was so curious that I had to have a peek inside. They had brought us some potatoes, carrots, a cauliflower and some tea. Such typical English things to bring for the kitchen! It made me smile. I imagined that they might have stopped by the convenience store on their way, thinking of ‘what we could bring for the monks and nuns.’

I was bemused to see ‘the two little old ladies’ walking around the house wearing their headscarves. Maybe they thought this place was a bit like a Hindu temple or a mosque. Seeing the way they pointed at things in the shrine room, they did not appear to know much about Buddhism. However, I was very impressed by their way of showing respect. They did what to them seemed good and proper. They were also generous towards the ‘strange’ Buddhist monks. For me, generosity is a good quality which is universal to any human being. It was so nice to see this little example of such goodness in a ‘non-Buddhist’ land.

After some thought, I decided to tell the two ladies that there was no need for them to cover their heads. They were very surprised. ‘We don’t have to wear it even in the hall?’ ‘Certainly not,’ I assured them. They then quickly uncovered their heads. ‘Actually it’s quite hot, isn’t it?’ one of them said while putting the cloth back into her bag.

From our conversation, I learned that the lady in the blue dress lived about 20 miles from Chithurst. She was delighted when I suggested they go for a walk in Hammer Wood. Although she had visited Chithurst several times, she did not know anything about the lake and the walking path in our forest; it was completely new for her.

To me, the inner happiness derived from a peaceful environment is common for us all. Having a Buddhist monastery in the forest tradition seems to deliver this tranquility across cultures. This is a sanctuary that can be offered to many different people. The encounter with these two English ladies reminded me of our quiet contribution to the world and reconfirmed the goodness inherent in human nature.

That day I let the two ladies continue their journey and then went happily back to my room, hoping that we may meet again during their next ‘peaceful hour.’
INTRODUCTION TO MEDITATION

Workshops at AMARAVATI
Saturday afternoons 2–4 p.m.
Meditation instruction for beginners, with an opportunity for questions and dialogue.
Feel free to come along — no booking is necessary.
Classes are held in the Temple.

Glossary — Some of the Pali and foreign terms used in this issue of the Forest Sangha Newsletter

Please note: Due to typographical limitations, Pali diacritics have been omitted throughout the newsletter. Below are brief descriptions of how these words are being used in this issue of the FSN; they are not full definitions. Often used, many have not been italicized.

Ajahn (Thai): Senior monk or nun; literally ‘teacher’. Used for those with ten vassas or more, regardless of their role in the community.
anagarika: A male or female postulant in the preliminary noviciate stage.
bhikkhu: A Buddhist monk.
Buddha: Awakened One; the perfectly enlightened historical teacher of the Dhamma.
Dhamma: The Truth; the teaching of the Buddha.
Dhamma-vinaya: The Teaching and Training, or Doctrine and Discipline.
kathina: An almsgiving ceremony at the end of the vassa.
kuti: A simple hut for dwelling and meditation.
Luang Por (Thai): A title of affectionate respect (lit. ‘Venerable Father’).
metta: Loving-kindness.
parittas: Blessing chants; a particular collection of the Buddha's words.
puja: Devotional observances such as chanting and offering incense.

samana: One who has entered the Holy life; religious recluse or wanderer.
samanera: A novice monk.
Sangha: The community of ordained Buddhist monks and nuns; Those who have realized liberation (Ariya Sangha).
siladhara: A Buddhist nun from the community of Luang Por Sumedho.
sutta: A discourse by the Buddha or his disciples.
Tan (Thai): A common title of respect.
Theravada: The school of Buddhism mainly practised in Thailand, Sri Lanka, Burma, Laos and Cambodia.
Vassa: The three-month summer ‘Rains Retreat’; a mark of how many years (‘vassas’) a monk or nun has been in robes.
vihara: A monastic dwelling.
Vinaya: The monastic discipline.

Websites

(Please see the back page for individual monastery website addresses)

Monasteries (portal): www.forestsangha.org
Dhamma Talks: www.dhammatatalks.org.uk
Dhamma CDs: www.dhammathreads.org
Newsletter: www.fsnewsletter.org
Lay community: www.buddhacommunity.org
Family events: www.family.amaravati.org

Another drawing by Ajahn Thitadhammo, sketched while on walking pilgrimage in Devon
**SANGHA**

**Winter Retreat**
From early January, our monastic communities will be in retreat, most of them until the end of March. During this time overnight accommodation will not be available for guests. Visitors can still come during the day to meditate or to help with mealtime offerings. If you would like to offer dana, it is helpful to let the kitchen manager know beforehand. These and all family events can be downloaded from these and all family events can be downloaded at amaravati.org.

**AMARAVATI**

**Lay resident opportunities**

**Gardener needed**
A space has arisen for a lay resident at Amaravati: if you have gardening skills and an interest to live and practise with the monastic community as site gardener for up to a year or more, please apply to the Amaravati Secretary. Ideally, you would begin sometime in March. Please contact the Secretary by phone or through post at our address on the back page, or email: monasterysecretary@amaravati.org

**Family events 2009**

Rainbows Weekend: 26–28 June
Family Camp: Sat. 22 – Sun. 30 August
Young Person Retreat: 27–29 November
Creative Retreat: 18-20 December
Booking forms and further information about these and all family events can be downloaded from www.family.amaravati.org or contact: familyevents@amaravati.org

**Amaravati lay events 2009**

Amaravati Lay Buddhist Association (ALBA):

These events provide an opportunity to practise together and explore themes relevant to practice and lay life. Events are led by experienced lay teachers or the Sangha. All welcome.

- **Days of Practice (DoP)** – no need to book 9.45 a.m. for 10–5 p.m. (Please bring a ready-to-eat packed lunch)
- **Retreats** – advanced booking essential* 5.30 p.m. Fri. – 4 p.m. on the last day.
  - January: Winter DoP (Nick Caroll)
  - February: Winter DoP (Alison Moore)
  - March: Winter DoP (Martin Evans)

**CITTAVIVEKA**

**Ajahn Sucitto walk**
At the end of April 2009, Ajahn Sucitto will be going on a two-month walk around southern England, roughly from Sussex through Salisbury, Bath, and Gloucester to the Welsh borders, then down through Somerset and Devon. If you’re interested in supporting him en route, please drop a line to the monastery.

**DHAMMAPALA**

**Ajahn Nativiko departs**
This October the theme of farewell and separation became apparent for us all. Ajahn Nativiko, after a long period of scrupulous inquiry, had come to a decision to return his monk’s robes. He arrived at Dhammapala in July, 2006 and quickly became much appreciated by the monastic community and our wider network of friends. In the spring of 2007 he was diagnosed with a mysterious autoimmune deficiency, which has had a severe impact on him physically and mentally. Even with all necessary medical care provided there has been hardly any change. It can only be a matter of speculation whether there’s a causal relationship between the illness and the call he felt to move on to new pastures. In any case we wish that his life may continue on the same wholesome track whose strong foundations he built during his time as a monk.

**SANGHA WALKS**

**Crete Walking Retreat with Ajahn Karuniko & Nick Scott**
26 April – 2 May 2009
Alternating days of silent meditation and all-day walks in beautiful scenery. Morning and evening pujas, group Dhamma discussions and occasional reflections from Ajahn Karuniko. Simple accommodation in wilder ness areas. For experienced meditators only. For more information and to book contact: Sangha.walks@gmail.com

**ARUNA RATANAGIRI**

**Kusala House Retreats:**

- **Women’s Retreat 2–6 May**
  - Led by Ajahn Anandabodhi & Aj. Santacitta
- **Men’s Retreat 9–15 August**
  - Led by Ajahn Jayanto
- **Mixed Retreat 18–24 October**
  - Led by Ajahn Vimalo
- **Weekend Retreat 13–15 November**
  - Led by Ajahn Abhinando
- **Sutta Study Day – Sunday, 24 May**
  - Professor Peter Harvey from Sunderland University has kindly accepted our invitation to conduct a series of Sutta Study Days we hope to offer in the early part of 2009. The first day will be Sunday, 24 May, from 9.30 to 16.00. Prior booking is required as places are limited. Two more Study Days may be announced later, depending on the success of the first event.

Kusala House, Harnham, Aruna Ratanagiri Monastery. For information and booking contact Kath Ann Jones at: kusalaretreats08@gmail.com or by phone at +44 (0120) 728-3361 or see: www.kusalahouse.org
Places for Practice

**ENGLAND**

Bath
Anne Armitage  (01225) 859219
Banbury
Sarah Wallis  (01295) 278744
Bedford
David Stubbs  (01234) 720892
Berkshire
Anthea West  (01189) 798101
Brentwood Buddhist Society:
Richard Burch  (01277) 626225
Brighton
Sam Halter  (078888) 821524
Bristol
Lisa Daix  (0117) 935 0272
Cambridge
Dan Jones  (01223) 246257
Canterbury
Charles Watters  (01227) 463342
Carlisle
Jean Nelson  (01228) 546259
Chichester
Tony Halter  (01243) 672126
Cookham, nr. Maidenhead
Emily Tomalin or David Lillywhite  (01628) 810883

**Hemel Hempstead – Bodhinyana Group:**
Chris Ward  (01442) 890034

**Kendal Fellside Centre, Low Fellside:**
Sumedha  (01539) 729793
Leeds Area
Daniela Loeb  (01132) 791375
Anne Grimshaw  (01274) 691447
Liverpool
Ursula Haeckel  (0151) 427 6668

**London Buddhist Society,**
58 Eccleston Square, London SW1
(0207) 834 5858

**London Hampstead 1 Hillside (Rm. 6) NW5, (Entrance Highgate Rd)**
Caroline Randall  (0208) 348 5837
Ann Booth  (0207) 485 0505

**London West**
Nick Carroll  (07973) 372 391

**Maidstone – Alokabodi Buddhist Group:**
Shirley  (01622) 203751
or Bee  (01622) 726414

**Newcastle**
Jan Plagaroe-Neill  (0191) 469 2778

**Newent-Gloucester**
John Teiere  (01531) 821902
email: john.teiere at virgin dot net

**Newmarket**
Richard Prangnell & Rosie Hitchins  (01638) 603286
email: rprangnell at gmail dot com / website: www.bodhimanada.org

**Norwich**
Robert Coggan  (01953) 451741

**Penzance**
Lee  (01736) 762135

**Portsmouth**
Medhavi  (02392) 732280

**Redruth**
Vanessa  (01209) 246531

**Sheffield**
Greg Bradshaw  (0114) 262 1559
email: greg.bradshaw at btclick dot com

**South Dorset**
Barbara Cohen (Sati-sati)  (01305) 786821

**Southampton**
Robert Elliot  (02380) 612838

**Steyning, Sussex**
Jayanti  (01903) 821130

**Stroud**
John Groves  (07967) 777742

**Surrey-Woking**
Rocana  (01483) 761398

**Taunton**
Annie Fisher  (01278) 457245

**Teesside**
John Doyle  (01642) 587274

**Totnes**
James Whelan  (01803) 865667

**OUTSIDE ENGLAND**

**Co. Clare, Ireland: Sunyata Centre**
(+353) 61 367 073

**Cork, Ireland**
Paddy Boyle  (+353) 21 462 2964

**Dublin**
Rupert Westrup  (+353) 01 280 2832

**Edinburgh**
Neil Howell  (0131) 226 5044

**Glasgow**
James Scott  (0141) 637 9731

**Machynlleth, Wales**
Angela Llewellyn  (0165) 051 1350

**Pembrokehire, S. Wales**
Peter & Barbara (Subhadraka) Jackson  (01239) 820790

**A Coruna, Spain**
David Williams  (+34) (981) 432 718

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**Cumbria Moon Day Meditation**

Members of the three Theravada Buddhist Groups in Cumbria (Carlisle, Kendal and Keswick) have started meditating at the same time, 7–9 p.m., on the Moon Days (the full, new and half moons according to the Forest Sangha calendar). We all meditate at home, knowing that the other meditators in Cumbria are doing the same. Anyone not involved with the three groups is welcome to join us.

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**Amaravati Retreats**

**Retreat Schedule 2009**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>R1</th>
<th>10–14 April</th>
<th>5 Days</th>
<th>*Ajahn Thitamedha</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>R2</td>
<td>17–19 April</td>
<td>Weekend</td>
<td>*Ajahn Gandhasalo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R3</td>
<td>15–24 May</td>
<td>10 Days</td>
<td>*Ajahn Jayanto</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R4</td>
<td>29–31 May</td>
<td>Weekend</td>
<td>*Ajahn Kovidha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R5</td>
<td>12–16 June</td>
<td>5 Days</td>
<td>*Ajahn Anando</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R6</td>
<td>19–21 June</td>
<td>Thai Weekend</td>
<td>*Ajahn Ratanawann</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R7</td>
<td>3–7 July</td>
<td>5 Days</td>
<td>*Ajahn Thanuttaro</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**General Guidelines**

- All weekend retreats are suitable for beginners. It is advisable to do a weekend retreat before doing a longer retreat. Due to high demand:
  - There will be a limit of three retreats per person per year;
  - Places for Luang Por Sumedho's September retreat were allocated through a lottery draw which took place at the end of December. Any future applications will be considered for the waiting list.

**Booking Procedure**

Bookings are only accepted on receipt of a completed booking form, which can be obtained by:
- Downloading from the website
- Emailing or writing to the Retreat Centre

**Please note that bookings cannot be made over the telephone.**

**Start and Finish Times**

Registration is from 10.00 – 11.00 on the first day of the retreat. The orientation talk is at 19.15. Weekend retreats end at 16.00, longer retreats at lunchtime. Attendance is expected for the whole retreat.

**Donations**

No advance booking fee is required. The Retreat Centre is funded solely through donations. Donations are invited at the end of the retreat.

**Contact Information**

Retreat Centre, Amaravati Buddhist Monastery, Great Caddesden, Hemel Hempstead, Herts. HP1 3BZ  UK
Telephone: +44 (01442) 843 239
Email: retreats at amaravati dot org

Website (for updated information): www.amaravati.org

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**January 2009**
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ASSOCIATED MONASTERIES

BRITAIN
Amaravati Monastery
St Margaret’s, Great Gaddesden, Hemel Hempstead, HERTS. HP1 3BZ, England, U.K.

Hartridge Monastery
Upottery, Honiton, Devon EX14 9QE
Tel: (0140) 489 2840
www.hartridge monastery.org
Stewards: Devon Vihara Trust

ITALY
Santacittarama
Località Brulla, 02030 Frasso Sabino (Rieti)
Tel: +39 (0765) 872 186
Fax: +39 (06) 233 238 629
www.santacittarama.org
Stewards: Santacittarama Association

SWITZERLAND
Dhammapala
Buddhistisches Kloster Am Waldrand, CH 3718 Kandersteg
Tel: 033 / 6 752 100
Fax: 033 / 6 752 241
www.dhammapala.org
Stewards: Dhammapala

U.S.A.
Abhayagiri Monastery
16201 Tomki Road, Redwood Valley, CA 95470
Tel: +1 (707) 485 1630
Fax: +1 (707) 485 7948
www.abhayagiri.org
Stewards: Sanglapala Foundation

AUSTRALIA
Bodhivana Monastery
780 Woods Point Road, East Warburton, Victoria. 3799
Tel: +61 (0) 399 665 999
Fax: +61 (0) 399 665 998

NEW ZEALAND
Bodhinyanarama Monastery
17 Rakau Grove, Stokes Valley, Lower Hutt 5019, tel: +64 (0) 4 563 7193
www.bodhinyanarama.net.nz
Stewards: Wellington Theravada Buddhist Association

Vimutti Monastery
PO Box 7
Bombay 2343
+64 (0) 9 236 6816
vimutti.abta@gmail dot.com
www.vimutti.org.nz
Stewards: Auckland Theravada Buddhist Association

THAILAND
Wat Pah Nanachat
Bahn Bung Wai, Amper Warin, Ubon Rajathani 34310
www.watpahnanachat.org
Stewards: Wellington Theravada Buddhist Association

To receive the Forest Sangha Newsletter in Thailand, please write to Amaravati.