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The Forest Sangha Newsletter

Forest Sangha Newsletter represents the monasteries founded by Luang Por Sumedho, with an emphasis on those in Britain. It is currently published once a year. To receive each issue by post, or to receive an email notification when it becomes available on the website, please request to be put on the Forest Sangha Newsletter postal mailing list or the Forest Sangha Newsletter email notification list by emailing fsn-mailer at amaravati dot org or writing to Forest Sangha Newsletter, Amaravati. To receive the Forest Sangha Newsletter in Thailand, please write to Amaravati.

KUSALA HOUSE RETREATS 2015

Meditation retreats at Aruna Ratanagiri are held at Kusala House, a lay facility located next door to the monastery buildings and are open to both men and women. Meditation instruction is provided by the senior monk leading the retreat, with periods of sitting and walking meditation typically scheduled for the morning, afternoon and evening. A Dhamma talk usually follows the evening sitting. So far for 2015 the following retreats have been scheduled:

**Mixed Retreat** 17–24 May (Eight Days)
Led by Ajahn Kalyāno

**Mixed Retreat: 26–30 June** (Weekend)
Led by Ajahn Nānarato

**Mixed Retreat 2–8 August** (Seven Days)
Led by Ajahn Abhinando

**Mixed Retreat 2–4 October** (Weekend)
Led by Ajahn Ahimsako

**Thai Mixed Retreat: dates and duration TBA**
Led by Ajahn Sawaeng

For more information or to book a place on any of these events, please contact Kath Jones on 0120 7283 361 (mobile: 0770 7621 717) or email: retreats at ratanagiri dot org dot uk

Kusala House, Aruna Ratanagiri Monastery, Harnham, Belsay, Northumberland, UK
www.ratanagiri.org.uk/retreats/

KATHINA AND ROBE OFFERING CEREMONIES – 2015

This year the Kathina season commences on 28 October, and continues until 25 November. Kathina celebrations or robe offering ceremonies scheduled to be held in the following monasteries are listed below:

**Amaravati (Hertfordshire)**
**15 November**

**Cittaviveka (West Sussex)**
**22 November**

**Aruna Ratanagiri (Northumberland)**
**1 November**

**Hartridge (Devon)**
**8 November**

**Abhayagiri (USA)**
**1 November**

**Bodhinyanarama (New Zealand)**
**TBA**

**Dhammapala (Switzerland)**
**22 November**

**Santacittarama (Italy)**
**1 November**

Anumodanā

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**Photographs** – Gratitude to all of the people who have contributed photographs of events held at our monasteries, some of which have been used in this issue. Photo credit page 18: Chinch Gryniewicz.

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Contact – Write to Newsletter Editor, Amaravati, or email: editor at amaravati dot org
I don’t like to consider those five volumes of my teachings, that I have been able to offer people today, as Ajahn Sumedho’s teachings. They are just reflections on Dhamma. Just to make it clear, they are the Buddha’s teachings, and not original and personal.

I often times refer to how I dealt with emotional problems like anger or fear. These are just encouragements from somebody you know, some person who is alive now, sharing how they deal with anxieties, worry, fears and neurotic tendencies. Sometimes the scriptures seem too idealistic when you read them; you don’t feel they may apply that much to your own particular personal problems at the time. I always found it very helpful and encouraging when Luang Por Chah would talk about how he dealt with very strong emotional blocks or problems. When I first met him I idealized him. I thought, well, he is an enlightened master, he probably never had problems like I do. He was born and walked on seven lotus flowers, was pure, and never had to deal with anger or fear or anything of that nature. We can idolize and project onto teachers as if they were perfect from the beginning. And when we look at ourselves we see that we suffer from a lot of self-consciousness. So much of modern neuroses are just anxieties we create around our own lives. Even in modern affluent societies such as this one, which does everything to try to create security, or the illusion of it anyway, there are increases in anxiety. This is a common human problem.

The Buddha put the Noble Truths, based on dukkha or suffering, in his first sermon. You can translate dukkha as anxiety, or fear; it is a mental state we create ourselves, which makes our lives very unhappy and full of fears and anxieties. I have always tried to be very faithful to the Four Noble Truths, as many of you are aware, because I found it to be such a profound and useful teaching. It always impressed me that the Buddha explained them in his first sermon after enlightenment, and it is a perfect teaching. If all the other scriptures, the rest of the Tipitaka and so forth, suddenly vanished out of sight, and all we had left were the Four Noble Truths, that would be enough. They are the way to non-suffering. They are a tool I encourage you to use.

You have to make the teaching work, though. Just to worship it, praise it, read it and analyze it is one thing; there is nothing wrong with that. But the main point of the Buddha’s teaching is the paṭipadā; put it into practice, make it work for you.

I don’t like to see any of you suffer. If I had a magic wand and could create this perfect understanding of the Four Noble Truths by waving it around, I would. But I can’t do it. I can only encourage you; I can’t make the teaching work for you. And of course the Buddha couldn’t either. He just gave a teaching which we had to take and apply to the reality of our own lives. It is a simple teaching based on the common factor of suffering. This is the common bond that we share with all creatures. We all have birth, old age, sickness, death. We have fears, desires, jealousy, greed, mental confusion and so forth. There is no mystery or any particular emphasis that applies more to one group or another. They are the common factor, no matter what religion, race, or nationality you belong to. This teaching of the Noble Truths is about our human condition and how to understand it. And I’ve had the good fortune to have this opportunity to put it into practice, learn from it, and be able to resolve my own personal problems, fears and emotional habits that I have had to live with and experience.

(Continued on next page)
Monastic life is not a magic formula, but it is a helpful form that keeps reminding us to wake up, pay attention and not get lost in all the problems the world creates, or that you create about yourself in the world. After all these years of using this teaching, I have trust and faith in it. It is an absolutely perfect formula that can be applied to anyone, because it takes this common factor of suffering and, just by changing your attitude towards it, makes you begin to understand what it is to be a human being. You begin to understand what it is to be a sensitive form, to be afraid of death, wanting pleasure and success, not wanting pain and fearing failure and loss. And then there’s wanting something to be what it can’t be; trying to create an illusory world, a utopian dream that can never really happen because it is not based on Dhamma, on reality, but only on high-minded ideas.

I think this particular teaching has a great and important message. It is particularly valuable at this time when there are so many problems. The world is a very confused place. There are problems caused by destruction, war, injustice, power struggles, racial prejudice … These problems are created by the human mind, out of ignorance and not understanding the Noble Truths.

Here at Amaravati and at other monasteries there is this opportunity to learn, to study, to practise the teachings. They are not about ancient history, or about some exotic country in Asia. They are about the reality of here and now.

The Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta that you chant, the teaching of the Four Noble Truths, is the Pali version of the Buddha’s first sermon. On my eightieth birthday, my gift to you is this encouragement to see the power, practicality and usefulness of this particular teaching which the Buddha gave to us 2557 years ago. And the proof of its validity is that it is still a pure teaching. It has not been corrupted. To put it into practice is the paṭipadā. Even before I knew the Thai language I had to sit through hours of listening to Ajahn Chah give Dhamma talks, and one word I kept hearing was patipat. He said, ‘This is the monastery for patipat.’ This is the Thai way of saying the Pali word paṭipadā, which means practice, making it work. It is not about belief, or a confused teaching that you hope you understand. It tells you how to do it. It is a way of taking the most common experience we have, dukkha, and using it for the investigation of the present: suffering, fear, anxiety, worry, whatever it might be in the present, is like this. Through this simple practice you have the insight, understanding and wisdom that guide you in your life, rather than just struggling with ideas, trying to improve your personality or suppress your feelings or emotions. It is about understanding this realm that we are experiencing with wisdom.

I offer this as my present to you on my birthday.

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Anumodanā: With Gratitude

People appreciate the offering of Dhamma teachings, and many people still prefer a physical book to an electronic publication. The Kataññuta Group of Malaysia, Singapore and Australia continues to offer great support for the physical printing of Dhamma texts and the distribution of books, calendars and CDs throughout the world.

This year, as in the past few years, the Kataññuta Group has once again made an immensely generous offering to enable our global sangha to make Dhamma publications available to the greater community. The titles listed below are those offered this year. Hard copies of these books, and books printed in previous years, are available at many of the monasteries. Some titles are also available by mail.

Please visit fsbooks.org for more information and also if you wish to download titles as e-books.

Collected Teachings of Ajahn Sumedho (five-volume set)
Individual volumes of this anthology are as follows:
Vol. 1 Peace is A Simple Step
Vol. 2 Seeds of Understanding
Vol. 3 Direct Realization
Vol. 4 The Sound Of Silence
Vol. 5 The Wheel of Truth

Clarity and Calm (Ajahn Sucitto)
Meditation: A Way to Awakening (Ajahn Sucitto)
Pāramī: Ways to Cross Life’s Floods (Ajahn Sucitto)
Forest Sangha Calendar in English, Italian and Portuguese.

Other titles offered this year but not available through the post or as e-books are:
Nine Monasteries (picture book)
An Uncommon Wisdom (a biography of Ajahn Paññavaddho by Ajahn Dick Silaratano)
CD-ROM: Talks from Thailand: Luang Por Sumedho
Intuitives Gewahrsein (German translation of Intuitive Awareness by Ajahn Sumedho)
The Buddhist Monastic Code Volumes I and II (Ajahn Thanissaro)
Luang Por Sumedho was born on 27 July 1934, a day which also happened to be the Asūlha Puja of that year – this is the full moon day that is considered to be the anniversary of the Buddha’s first teaching, on the Middle Way and the Four Noble Truths. More than eighty years have now passed since that auspicious day. During Luang Por Sumedho’s visits to the UK this year (in May for the International Elders’ Meeting and in July for his birthday) he commented that as that chronological landmark approached, his mind turned to reflect upon the Buddha’s own reaching of eighty years. He said: ‘The reclining Buddha is now my Buddha-rūpa of choice,’ as the eighty-year mark was also the time of the Buddha’s Parinibbāna, his final passing away.

According to some traditions this ‘time of a thousand moons’, when a person has lived for a thousand lunar months, is of unique significance because those of that age have definitely reached the final chapters of their lives. It is a time for recollection and reflection upon the life that has gone by; it is a time to recognize achievements and to celebrate them, and to receive the heartfelt gratitude of those one has benefited; and it is a time for consciously letting go of all burdens.

History and Teaching

After attending the Universities of Washington and California, and stints in the US Navy and the Peace Corps, Luang Por Sumedho entered monastic life in 1966 at the age of 31. He became a sāmanera in the north-east Thai town of Nong Khai and received acceptance as a bhikkhu there in 1967. Soon after becoming a bhikkhu he went to study and practise with Venerable Ajahn Chah, in a province to the south of Nong Khai called Ubon. He committed himself eagerly to the training, and since he was the first Western monk at that monastery, at Ajahn Chah’s request he started teaching other newly-arrived Western monastics in 1973.

As it turned out, Luang Por Sumedho was discovered to have a great gift for communication and leadership. He was invited to establish a monastery for Westerners near the local village of Bung Wai, and since that place (Wat Pah Nanachat) opened he has never stopped teaching, first in Thailand and then, once invited to settle in the West, all round the world. Cittaviveka Monastery was the first forest monastery that he established in England. In subsequent years a further seven monasteries have been founded under his guidance – in the UK, Italy, Switzerland, New Zealand and the USA – with other off-shoots from these, such as those in Portugal and in New Hampshire, having sprung up since his retirement.

After some twenty-five years at the helm of Amaravati Monastery, his last place of residence in England, Luang Por Sumedho decided it was time to step down. In late 2010 he handed on the abbotship and became a ‘free agent,’ currently spending most of his time in Thailand. He lives quite independent of any formal responsibilities, yet still teaches on a regular basis. Thus for half his long life he has been expounding and explaining the Dhamma.

Preparations and Offerings

On account of these decades of instructing and inspiring others, and the worldwide recognition this has brought him, when it was being considered how best to honour the occasion of Luang Por Sumedho’s eightieth birthday, the idea of creating an anthology of his collected teachings was hatched.

The plan met with approval, so Ajahn Sucitto and I began compiling material in the summer of 2012, two years in advance of the planned release date. We gathered the most well-known books (such as Cittaviveka, Mindfulness: The Path to the Deathless, The Four Noble Truths, Now is the Knowing, The Mind and the Way, The Way It Is and The Sound of Silence), and combed journals such as The Middle Way, The Forest Sangha Newsletter and Fearless Mountain for other teachings given by him.
In addition there were old typed manuscripts tucked away in drawers, little long-forgotten pamphlets hidden away on bookshelves, interviews rendered by typewriter and dot-matrix printer, together with edited and unedited transcripts provided by the Buddhist Publishing Group and others which had sat on various ‘to be used one day’ lists for years. There was indeed a treasure-trove of material. When it was all added up there was a grand total of eighty-five separate books, articles and transcripts, about fifteen percent of which had never before been published.

Over the ensuing months many hands and critical faculties were put to the task, with the final five-volume set being designed and crafted by Nick Halliday, and put into print and delivered in good time by the generous donors in the Kataññuta Group of South East Asia. That same group of supporters, having seen Eight Monasteries (a very limited edition coffee-table book that had been produced to describe the monasteries in the West established by Luang Por Sumedho), asked permission to print more copies so it could be distributed widely. Furthermore, they suggested that Wat Pah Nanachat could be added to the book. So several thousand copies of Nine Monasteries were included in the shipment from Malaysia.

A third book, a reprint of The Four Noble Truths, was sponsored by a grateful student of Luang Por Sumedho, Evan Hirsch of Pasadena, California. He had had the book reprinted in England (again with Nick Halliday nursing and midwifing the process), but although the delivery only had to come from Watford rather than Kuala Lumpur, it squeaked through the gate with only a couple of days to spare before 27 July.

To add to the array of items dedicated for this occasion, Luang Por Sumedho requested that a portrait be painted of Tan Ajahn Paññāvaddho (the late senior Western student of Luang Ta Mahā Boowa), to be hung in the Temple at Amaravati. He proposed this because Ajahn Paññāvaddho had played a very significant role in establishing the Theravada teachings in the UK and had been personally very supportive of Luang Por Sumedho’s development of forest monasteries in the West. A biography of Ajahn Paññāvaddho, Uncommon Wisdom, had been written by his brother monk Ajahn Dick Silaratano (another Western student of Luang Ta Mahā Boowa), and the Kataññuta Group of Malaysia and Singapore had kindly printed this one too.

The final offering created especially for this occasion was Talks from Thailand, a CD of forty-three Dhamma talks by Luang Por Sumedho. Wat Pah Nanachat organized this and produced many copies, which were on hand as well to pass out to everyone on the big day.

The Event

Just before the Parinibbāna of the Buddha, as he lay in the forest outside Kusinārā, he said: ‘Ānanda, the twin sāla trees are in full bloom, though it is not their season of flowering, and their blossoms rain upon the body of the Tathāgata in worship, so too celestial coral flowers and heavenly sandalwood powder. The sound of divine songs and music fills the air out of reverence for the Tathāgata. Never before has the Tathāgata been so honoured, revered and worshipped. Yet it is not thus, Ānanda, that the Tathāgata is paid the supreme homage. ‘Rather, Ānanda, whatever monk or nun, layman or laywoman, dwells practising the Dhamma properly, and perfectly fulfils the Dhamma way, it is in such a manner that the Tathāgata is paid the supreme homage. Therefore, Ānanda, your watchword should be: “Let us dwell practising the Dhamma properly and perfectly fulfill the Dhamma way”’.1

It was with this injunction in mind that it was decided to craft an event to honour Luang Por Sumedho which would bring the broader community together for a number of days, but would create an opportunity and an encouragement to listen to the teachings and meditate together rather than just having one single day of ceremonies and allowing the rest of the time to drift towards less useful forms of socializing.

Luang Por Sumedho had been at Amaravati for a month, from mid-May to mid-June, attending the International Elders’ Meeting, which is described in a separate article in this Newsletter. Following that event, which was grand and rich in many ways, Luang Por had been to Canada and the USA to visit the branch monasteries of Tisarana, Abhayagiri and the Pacific Hermitage, and especially to spend time with his sister Virginia, now aged 83, in Vancouver, Washington. On his return to England in late July he had a few days to rest after these extensive travels. During those days many sangha members and laypeople from around the UK and Europe, and even South East

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Asia and the USA, gathered at Amaravati to be part of the celebrations. The vihāras and the Retreat Centre were filled to capacity, with dozens of the lay visitors and a number of monks camping out in appointed areas of the grounds. The kitchens were abuzz with activity by the many who came to provide sustenance for the assembly, while car-parking monitors did their best to keep the flow of traffic in and out of the monastery smooth and safe for everyone.

**Conviviality and Contemplation**

The intention to encourage a contemplative environment for the festive period was brought into being through creating a semi-formal retreat mode for Amaravati. Thus for three days during the mid-week period Luang Por Sumedho offered reflections every morning at 9:00 in the Temple, while the afternoon schedule was open and pujas were held every evening. Luang Por was in residence throughout this time and made himself available for informal meetings almost every day.

Though people were encouraged to refrain from engaging in a lot of pointless chatter there was nevertheless an atmosphere of conviviality, as Luang Por Sumedho has encouraged in the past (for example, see ‘Trusting in Simplicity’ in _The Sound of Silence_, pp. 292-302). The warmth of spiritual friendship between those who had been Dhamma practitioners with Luang Por for decades, those who were new visitors and those who had not seen each other for thirty years was an ongoing, joy-filled presence.

Saturday 26 July was a New Moon day and Ajahn Sucitto was invited to give the evening talk. This was both because we wished to give Luang Por Sumedho as much of a break as possible before the big day, and because Ajahn Sucitto had been Luang Por Sumedho’s longest-standing and closest student in the UK over the past thirty-six years. It was a profoundly moving and inspiring offering, embodying the depth of Ajahn Sucitto’s gratitude for Luang Por Sumedho’s presence in his life, and almost unique in the number of anecdotes he used to illustrate the lessons he had learned, and how. (See article on page 10.)

**Celebration Day**

On the morning of Sunday the 27th Luang Por Sumedho, together with about 200 monastics and laypeople, gathered in the Amaravati Salā (see photo on page 8). The generous breakfast offerings included several substantial cakes, causing Luang Por to remark: ‘This is what I dreamed of for my birthday when I was ten years old.’ Along with the table-straining amount of food available that morning, this was also the time for the books that had been especially printed to be distributed. Piles of the five-volume boxed set were made ready, along with the five-volume boxed set were made ready, along with other for thirty years was an ongoing, joy-filled presence.

... a thousand lunar months ... is a time for recollection and reflection upon the life that has gone by ...

Chiang Mai, was unveiled by Luang Por and now hangs beside the shrine dedicated to Luang Pu Mun Bhuridatto, our spiritual grandfather, and Luang Ta Mahā Boowa, Tan Ajahn Paññāvaddho’s teacher. (See article on page 9.)

The ceremony of _ācariya-puja_ followed the unveiling. The sangha, led by Ajahn Tiradhammo, bowed and joined together to formally ask for forgiveness, as is the ancient custom in the Theravada tradition. This is a way to honour and revere an Elder by expressing gratitude and respect. The request is accompanied by the offering of candles, flowers and incense, on this occasion these were in the form of a magnificent, hand-crafted _bai-see_ (a traditional Thai decorated offering, often made of banana leaves and flowers – see photo on page 8), made in Ubon on the commission of a different Khun Mettā, who is a regular supporter of Wat Pah Nanachat. By this time many more people had gathered in the Temple to participate in the paying of respects, with about 800 being counted by the end of the day.

In the afternoon Luang Por contributed to the series of Sunday talks with his reflections on _The Way It Is_, a theme we had taken the liberty of assuming he’d be happy to speak on. Just as the talks he gave earlier in the week had been, his teaching that afternoon was alight with Dhamma, both inspired and inspiring; it was so spirited it was hard to believe that the speaker had just reached his eightieth birthday and had been on this world for those thousand moons.

The celebrations drew to a close with a final batch of book distribution (see photo on opposite page), a formidable queue stretching down the centre of the Temple, but we managed to free Luang Por to enjoy some well-earned
beneath the iconic portrait of Luang Por Chah, painted by Gerry Rollason between 1977 and '79. The discussion was seeded with the question: ‘What was the cause, what was the reason, Luang Por, why you decided to open a huge and complex place like Amaravati – this less than five years after Chithurst had been founded?’ The conversation that ensued was rich and revealing (George admitted he had thought Luang Por was crazy at the time), and it was a beautiful way to acknowledge what has evolved here at Amaravati and where it all came from in the first place.

And now …

At the end of this year Luang Por Sumedho plans to continue his joyful giving by leading a group of laypeople who have asked to sponsor this year’s Kathina ceremony, on 2 November. This gesture looks towards the next thirty years, since the Kathina offerings are being dedicated to supporting the Amaravati Long-Term Plan, involving the replacement of all the old wooden buildings with redesigned and energy-efficient structures. This generous gesture was Luang Por Sumedho’s own initiative, for which we are extremely grateful, and it will go a long way towards helping his legacy to be preserved over the decades to come.

After his visit here for the Kathina festival, Luang Por intends to further his reflections on his eightieth year by going on pilgrimage to Kusinārā. He promises he has no intimations of his imminent demise, rather, his interest is out of gratitude for the Buddha’s own legacy and an empathy with the Buddha at that age. The time of a thousand moons is the time of unburdening, so what better spot to contemplate such liberation than the place of the Buddha’s realization of Final Nibbāna? 

1 Dīgha Nikāya 16.5.3, abridged.

Photos: above, Luang Por Tiradhammo (hidden from view), with Ajahn Sucitto and Ajahn Munindo in the foreground, offers Luang Por Sumedho the bai-see. Left, Luang Por Sumedho offering books and CDs to friends and supporters.
As an American by birth, a common question I am asked here in the UK is why I chose to come to England rather than go back to the United States. I never actually thought I’d be living in England; it was not one of my expectations.

My parents lived in Southern California. In 1976 my mother was very ill; there was a swine flu epidemic at that time. Thinking that she was critically ill, my father wanted me to come home. So I went back to the United States for the first time after having left in 1963. During that time, of course, I was in contact with my parents through the post. But other than that I had determined to stay as a Buddhist monk.

Thailand at that time was in a critical state. Laos and Cambodia had become communist. Americans had fled Vietnam, and it was thought Thailand might fall next; there was the domino theory. I was living in Ubon in North East Thailand, bordering on both Cambodia and Laos. There was a strong communist movement in Thailand at that time and a terrible panic had gripped the whole country.

My first thoughts of returning to the West occurred that year. Then there was the necessity to go back to the US to see my parents. I had in mind at the time that I would keep open to the possibility of establishing a monastery, but I had thought it would be in the United States.

At that time we had about twenty-two Western bhikkhus living at Wat Pah Nanachat. I remember sitting there looking at them, thinking, ‘What is going to happen to all these monks if Thailand goes communist?’ I also thought that if I established an Ajahn Chah branch monastery in the United States, I could rescue Ajahn Chah if necessary. But during my time in the States, people did not seem to have the slightest bit of interest in anything other than wanting me to be a meditation teacher and give retreats. There was no interest in monasticism.

My mother’s health recovered well enough, so I went from Southern California to New York and Boston. Then I flew to London to take a Thai Airways flight back to Thailand, because at that time Thai Airways did not reach America. I had to wait there for three or four days. Some of you might remember that in 1976 there was a very hot summer. I stayed at the Hampstead Vihāra and walked up on Hampstead Heath. London looked really beautiful in the sunlight. Ajahn Paññāvaddho, a British monk who was very well-known in Britain, had left the vihāra in 1961 and gone to Thailand, where he found his teacher Ajahn Mahā Boowa, in Udon Thani in the North East. He never really wanted to come back to England, though many of his disciples here were waiting for his return. Before I left Thailand he had given me George Sharp’s telephone number and said, ‘If you need a place to stay, phone George.’ In those three brief days I phoned him and stayed at the Hampstead Vihāra. Thus I met George Sharp due to Ajahn Paññāvaddho.

During those days George would come every evening and talk to me about practice, and establishing a monastery in England. I suddenly realized that the English Sangha Trust was set up for the support of Theravada bhikkhus, without any strings attached. It was clear that it could support monks to come and live in the UK. Then I found out that Ajahn Paññāvaddho and Ajahn Mahā Boowa had been to the Hampstead Vihāra two years before, and George had taken his training from them. But at that time the English Sangha Trust had had twenty years of failures. Nothing seemed to work, and by 1976 it was closed. They had the house in Hampstead, but other than that there was nothing. So Ajahn Paññāvaddho had encouraged George, and George had taken his advice, to just close the vihāra and wait for somebody to come along. That somebody happened to be me. I was very impressed because I had never, either in the States or anywhere else, encountered anyone so ready and so eager to support Theravada monks in the Western world.

Ajahn Paññāvaddho had spent most of his monastic life with Ajahn Mahā Boowa, and died about ten years ago. He is very highly regarded in Thailand; they had a magnificent funeral for him. He also influenced

From a reflection given by Luang Por Sumedho

Luang Por Sumedho unveils the portrait of Ajahn Paññāvaddho.
I’ve been asked to give some reflections about my time with Luang Por Sumedho. I don’t normally offer a lot of anecdotes, partly because memory can only offer a fragment of the truth. But reflection on my teacher does offer a sense of what I have valued most about him. These memories and perceptions remain as fragments that I put on my shrine, the shrine in my mind. And inspiration arises, because of course the things that one learns and really takes to heart come not from books, but from other humans.

I think it’s really important to recollect one’s teachers, both ordinary teachers and Dhamma teachers, as well as one’s parents, because they are all carried into and become part of our citta. This mind is like a stream that absorbs influences from other people. But it’s important to hold this process in the right way. As Luang Por himself would say, ‘Luang Por Sumedho is a perception in the mind’ and ‘There’s no real fixed person there.’ Perceptions of people are impermanent formations that arise in our minds. And yet they can serve as guiding influences. In this way we can intimately absorb the skills of our teacher and fellow practitioners. And as we live our lives, we can also give helpful impressions to others. This field of human manifestations of Dhamma is a valuable resource to share in.

Luang Por Sumedho has been a major feature in my life for nearly thirty-eight years. His is a very meaningful presence. There’s a strong sense of someone who embodies integrity in terms of Dhamma-Vinaya. Firstly, an aspect of Luang Por that comes to mind is that he’s big. Not just physically: if he comes into a room, his energy and presence fill the room – there’s a lot of nothing, or a huge amount of a something, that’s not just a person. That is a support. If I go to his kuti and see him individually, he’ll say things like, ‘I haven’t done very much,’ or ‘I haven’t got much to teach. There’s nothing to make a big deal out of.’ And in a way that’s also true. But that personality is also the channel through which tremendous pāramī can manifest. And we definitely need that personal form. Try living with a book and see how good that feels after a few years. Try feeling really miserable, getting disillusioned with practice and going to a book and asking it to help you. See what it does. Try asking a book to build a monastery. It’s not going to do it.

Another thing about Luang Por is that he has tremendous valency. Valency refers to atoms and signifies how many others they can bond with. Hydrogen can only bond with one other hydrogen atom. Oxygen can bond with two, and Luang Por Sumedho is like uranium – which takes a hundred and twenty-eight! A lot of people can have access to him and find something they can connect to. He has the ability to represent something good and true and accessible to a wide range of people. He has the capacity to present something that’s universal and yet not lose contact with his primary inspiration, Luang Por Chah, the Forest Tradition and Theravada Buddhism in Thailand. He has the ability to send down a tap root and be able to branch out without losing the connection to the earth.

As regards branching out: he could relate to many forms of practice. He established a strong connection with Master Hua, the Chinese Ch’an Master – and that was one of the primary conditions for the establishment of Abhayagiri Monastery in California. Then there was the Dalai Lama, as well as the Zen and Tibetan monks with whom he taught a Summer School in Leicester for eighteen years, as well as Christians.
and contemplatives of no specific faith like Douglas Harding. And how many of the community assembléd here were penniless students when Luang Por Sumedho came and gave a talk to their local Buddhist society or meditation group and were inspired? And now, fifteen or twenty years later, they’re ajahns too!

When we talk about Luang Por Sumedho, we also acknowledge the origins of the Nuns’ Order. Of course it came with Ajahn Sundarā and Ajahn Candasiri, you can’t deny their pāramī – but there wouldn’t have been a nuns’ order without Luang Por Sumedho. Who else made the connection to Thailand? Who else gave that its ground? With the nuns’ order, I did a lot of the detailed stuff. But the pattern with this and many other sangha developments was that Luang Por would establish the basics and then attract others who’d do all the detailed stuff, like Ajahn Munindo, Ajahn Vajiro, Ajahn Amaro, Ajahn Jutindharo, Ajahn Attapemo. We all did a lot, but without him there wouldn’t have been any basis or ongoing support for the details.

One can say much the same with George Sharp and the English Sangha Trust. They’ve done a lot. But what was happening before Ajahn Sumedho? Nothing. The vihāra was empty. The notion was that it was impossible for bhikkhu to live in Britain. The last bhikkhu, round about 1972 or so, said, ‘You just can’t do it in this country. It’s impossible.’ Then one American bhikkhu turned up in Hampstead who pulled it all together. By doing what? As he said, ‘I didn’t come to teach Buddhism or bring it to the West. I did this all day for three years. I got very intense! I don’t say that’s the way it was, but in silence. That was the event, and then it was ‘back to your hut’. We were following an intensive meditation practice in which you’re supposed to make a mental note of everything. So when you hear a sound, you note ‘hearing’; or while lifting your hand, note ‘lifting’. You do everything very slowly, noting: ‘intending, about to lift, lifting, moving, touching, feeling something, placing.’ There’s a voice in your brain reporting on everything that’s going on. I did this all day for three years. I got very intense! I don’t say that’s the way it is for everybody or that that’s the right way to do it, but that’s the way I was doing it. One thing I did in order to get really focused and mindful was to take an alms-bowl, fill it with water until the water stood above the rim of the bowl, and then try to pick it up and walk without spilling a drop. You try it. The meniscus of the water stands above the rim of the bowl, so with just the slightest tremble it’s going to flow over. That was meditation to me, that extremely intense concentration on a point.

In the middle of this I was sent off to a monastery in Chiang Mai to do a super-intensive period of prac-
tice for six weeks. Some time in the middle of that the monks there knocked on my door and said, ‘Oh, you'll have to come, you'll have to come.’ ‘What? I'm meditating.’ ‘No, you have to come see Sumedho.’ ‘What's Sumedho?’ ‘Ajahn Sumedho is coming to town. You must go see him.’ ‘Oh. Sumedho? Who's that?’ They replied that he was an American monk who lived with Ajahn Chah. I'd seen a single photostatted sheet going round about Ajahn Chah which talked about how austere his monastery was, so I thought, ‘Oh my goodness, I'm intense and miserable enough already, and I'm going to meet someone who's been doing this for ten years, and is austere as well. This is not going to be much fun.’ I imagined someone like a Marine sergeant, but also tight and emotionally shrivelled. However, I felt I had to go because I was these monks' guest and they'd been so nice in offering me a place to stay.

They took me to a house where Ajahn Sumedho was sitting on a big chair with Ajahn Pabhākaro sitting next to him on the ground. So we went in and we paid our respects, the Thai monks had a chat, and then they disappeared. Ajahn Sumedho said, ‘I've been asked to come here and give a talk, but nobody's turned up.’ So there I was with Ajahn Sumedho, and I spent three uninterrupted hours with him.

The impression I had of him was warm, open, steady, and gentle. I can't remember now what we talked about, but that wasn't the point anyway. It was his presence: I hadn't experienced anything like that before. Firm, grounded and yet modest and courteous. They brought in some tea, and he insisted on pouring and offering me a cup of tea first before he took his own. There was a huge presence of something very warm and simple and steady. This was around December ’76, and he said, ‘I've been asked to come here and give a talk, but nobody's turned up.’ So there I was with Ajahn Sumedho, and I spent three uninterrupted hours with him.

The bhikkhu community there comprised Ajahn Vīradhammo and Ajahn Ānando; Ajahn Vajiro was an anagārika then. I think there were two or three other anagārikas and three sāmaneras. Ajahn Vimalo was around as a lay person, with his humour and spontaneity. The vihāra was a very human scene. We were doing things like eating together and talking with each other and going out. I thought that this was wonderful, coming out of the tight box of my intensive practice and sensing that being a bhikkhu is something livable! We were going pindapāta on Hampstead Heath. Before then I'd really just been a person meditating wearing robes. I hadn't been a bhikkhu. I thought, ‘This is new, this is fresh, this is interesting, this is alive. This is not something you're doing with your attention, this is something that wraps around you and carries you. It's lived, and you can share it. I'll stay with this for a while.’

I'd only decided to come to Britain for perhaps difficult because I'd been three years in solitude without speaking, apart from reporting briefly to my teacher. I went from sensory isolation out to a non-Buddhist country, trying to manage legal and family details while dealing with the death of a parent. After about six weeks I felt completely lost. My intensive notting wasn't much good on that level. I remember going out somewhere and standing in the rain, trying to get grounded, because I was just so blown away by it all. I think I might not have stayed as a monk. It was very touch and go. I just couldn't see how this Oriental tradition could relate to twentieth-century British society. Then I knocked on the door of the Hampstead Vihāra on Haverstock Hill, and the door opened. It was quite a small vihāra and this big figure almost filled the door frame. ‘Oh, hello.’ He recognized me and invited me in. And the perception was that ‘Ajahn Sumedho is the door.’ The door opens, and you walk in.

The bhikkhu community there comprised Ajahn Viradhammo and Ajahn Ānando; Ajahn Vajiro was an anagārika then. I think there were two or three other anagārikas and three sāmaneras. Ajahn Vimalo was around as a lay person, with his humour and spontaneity. The vihāra was a very human scene. We were doing things like eating together and talking with each other and going out. I thought that this was wonderful, coming out of the tight box of my intensive practice and sensing that being a bhikkhu is something livable! We were going pindapāta on Hampstead Heath. Before then I'd really just been a person meditating wearing robes. I hadn't been a bhikkhu. Then I thought, ‘This is new, this is fresh, this is interesting, this is alive. This is not something you're doing with your attention, this is something that wraps around you and carries you. It's lived, and you can share it. I'll stay with this for a while.’
six weeks. But then I asked to stay for the Vassa. The Hampstead Vihāra, although it was a refuge, was cramped. I think Ajahn Ānando and Viradhammo, who were very junior then, were suffering from being stuck in London. Fortunately we went out to Oxfordshire for the Rains Retreat, as a devout Burmese family, the Saws, had offered us a place in their country house with lots of land. We stayed in various rooms and huts that they’d built in order to do retreats.

During that Vassa our group was Ajahn Viradhammo, myself, Ven. Araññabho, three sāmaneras and a few anagārikas. And people were going through their ups and downs, because when people take on the holy life it’s a radical overhaul, and all the things that normally hold people steady, like relationships, or the ability to go places, or various comfort zones are taken away. People start to have strong mood swings. Getting up early in the morning, sitting still, means that difficulties start emerging. People become moody, people collapse and people argue with each other.

None of us had developed the skillful monastic etiquette that Thai monks have. We were direct and raw. There was Anagārika Jordan who later became a monk, who was larger than life, and there was Anagārika Shaun, who became Ajahn Jayasāro. And we were all relatively untrained. I think Ajahn Viradhammo (the next senior to Ajahn Sumedho) only had three or four vassas, so there was no sense of there being a stratum of senior experienced people holding it together. Luang Por himself had twelve vassas at that time. There he was, starting in a country that he’d never lived in before and that didn’t really know what Buddhist monks were about, with a bunch of newcomers. And it was all resting on him in a very uncertain situation. We didn’t even have a monastery; we were just guests in somebody’s house. We had morning and evening pujas every day and daily work. I think he gave two talks a day throughout the entire Vassa. Every morning a talk, every evening a talk, and it was always the same steadying tone. One thing that I’ve noted about Luang Por is that he’ll pick up a particular theme and return to it again and again and again. When I say he only says one thing, that’s not a put-down. That’s the steadiness, and continuity: repeating the message, because you don’t really get it in one go. You get the words, but his offering was to bring you back to the same point again, and again so you really get the message. That Vassa it was, ‘All compounded phenomena are impermanent, arising and passing away.’ Through all the ups and downs, ‘It’s another impermanent phenomenon, arising and passing away.’ He was unwavering. I said to him one day, ‘Don’t you get bored with all this Buddhism, don’t you get fed up with it all?’ And he looked at me and said, ‘No, that’s another impermanent phenomenon!’

The beauty of it was that in those days there were only half a dozen of us. We could all just bundle into his kuti and have tea together, we’d go pindapāta together, rubbing up against each other all the time. He was the one thing that we all could rub up against and receive something from. And he’d just take it and take it, and stay steady, and laugh, and stay steady. I’d come up with things like, ‘Why can’t we drink milk in the evening though we can eat cheese? This is silly!’ His answer was: ‘It’s a crazy world.’ He wasn’t defending, he wasn’t justifying, he was just laughing at it: ‘Crazy world.’ You were becoming tangled up and infuriated, and he’d say something and suddenly you could see what you were doing. All right, another impermanent phenomenon – let it go. I picked that up and tried to do the best I could to follow it.

We had an alms-round every day, and it was tough at times because I only had sandals and in the wintertime it was thick snow. I remember walking three-mile alms-rounds (with no donors, of course) through two feet of snow with freezing feet. But somehow I was carried by the discipline and his continuity and steadiness: ‘You just do this. It doesn’t have to make sense, you just do it.’ He was very strong on going beyond the justifying mind that would always want to bend things round. The teaching was simple, but the presence and the ability to absorb the various amounts of conflict and silliness that were going on, without wavering – that was something else.

During ’78 the forest at Hammer Wood had been offered, but there were various pieces of legal procedure to be tied up. I went down with Luang Por Chah and Ajahn Sumedho and we looked around this forest. But there was nowhere to live. The property in Somerset had been snapped up while everybody discussed whether it was worthwhile having it or not, so when Chithurst House became available George Sharp thought, ‘This one, I’ll just get it. We won’t talk about it. Just get it.’ He got some flak for that, but he got us somewhere to live. So the next year we bundled down to Chithurst House and tied up the legal arrangements around Hammer Wood. Suddenly we had this place and it was wonderful, spacious – and a mess; a complete ruin. For all the time I was there apart from morning and evening pujas and all-night sits on the Wan Phras, we worked. And Ajahn Sumedho gave talks every day. While all the mopping up and grubby work happened around him, he maintained the central axis of Dhamma.
The first year we were there his theme for the Vassa was, ‘What is it that Buddhas know, that unenlightened beings don’t know? Everything that arises passes away and is not self.’ He repeated this almost every day and you’d think, ‘He said that yesterday! So what?’ But then you’d find out that you hadn’t really penetrated the fact that everything arises, passes away and is not self because you’d taken something very personally, become stuck on it and hadn’t let it pass away. So with that kind of teaching, living in that situation became a practice. That’s the difference between a teacher and a book. With a book you just turn the page to the next idea. But a teacher puts out the reminders that act as a Dhamma mooring post while life washes over you. You keep checking that same teaching out against the flow of life as it hits you, and you contemplate whatever you’re holding on to, such as some sense of what you think you are or should be. Aha, do you understand?

The first four nuns were living in one room in the house; four of them, trying to realize that everything that arises is not self! The rest of us were all crammed in little rooms with the rain coming in through the roof. Then Ajahn Amaro turned up, and fell through the floor into the basement and broke his arm. All that was not self either. We didn’t go pindapāta at first. Luang Por didn’t want to do that because he was concerned that the conservative mind-set of West Sussex would get alarmed if we made too public a presentation. Some neighbours had already made negative remarks. So we had a meeting in the village hall where he tried to present the sangha, and he brought the English sangha members along so he wouldn’t say things that might offend the sensibilities of West Sussex.

We worked from eight in the morning until five at night, and then we’d have the evening puja. On the Wan Phra we’d sit until four, get up at six and then go back to work! And I was learning the Pātimokkha at that time as well. There was a lot of energy around. Luang Por seemed to generate faith and energy. During that time he was also going out to just about anybody who invited him to teach: Women’s Institutes, Buddhist Societies, White Eagle Lodge, Theosophical Society ... whoever. He was making contacts and presenting the image of the bhikkhu as being someone who was what he was. He wasn’t hammering Buddhism into them, but just being his own presence and speaking very directly and humorously. He was on a TV programme called ‘The Gods of War’, where various religious leaders were interviewed about their attitude towards war. So Ajahn Sumedho said, ‘We don’t do that sort of thing.’ Somebody asked, ‘What about that Vietnamese monk who poured petrol over himself and set himself on fire?’ Ajahn Sumedho replied, ‘That’s personal, that’s his choice. Fortunately they don’t expect me to do that.’ He was always bringing it down from the doctrinal, the ideological, to the human quality. And I think that’s the thing that people really welcomed: someone who wasn’t just mouthing the official line but talking as a human being, and always with a smile or laugh after it.

Ajahn Sumedho would take on just about anybody for training. And there were some very strong characters. He’d also push us out. I think I’d been in Britain two and a half years, just past my fifth vassa, and he said, ‘Go and teach a ten-day retreat up in Northumberland.’ So I went up there; and then the local people wanted to start a vihāra. He said, ‘Well, you go up there and start it.’ I only had five vassas! I went up there with Ajahn Chandapalo, who was an anāgārika then, and Venerable Thānavaro; just the three of us working in this freezing dump up in Northumberland, which is now a very beautiful monastery, Aruna Ratanagiri. There was no book, there was no ‘this is what you do’; there were no guidelines. There was just practice: do the morning and evening pujas, stay simple, do the work, stay as a community. That was it.

Then we started Amaravati, and that again was a huge leap in the dark. He took a group of us there, and the nuns walked from Chithurst. It was set up to be their centre. He wanted to have a retreat centre, events for families and a place where many laypeople could come and practise, because Chithurst didn’t have the permission and it was too small. So we went up there and found a place which was like every other place we’d started – cold and derelict – and started working on it. Here’s where he seemed to gain further confidence in his vision of practice. His theme was, ‘The doors to the Deathless are open.’ He still chants that when he begins a Dhamma talk: open up, bring everything in, we’ll take it on. We just followed and did what we could to support the energy and persistence he had, both in teaching and also in his own practice.

A standard day for Luang Por Sumedho would be: get up at two o’clock, work out for an hour or so on his rowing machine, take a shower, have a cup of coffee, meditate. So by morning puja at five o’clock he was incandescent. He said, ‘You really prepare yourself for the morning puja.’ This is his favourite moment of the day. He’d structure his day around coming to that morning puja as if he was going to meet the Buddha. He would be there, often giving ‘stream of consciousness recollections’, reflecting on Dhamma out loud as it was arising in his mind. We’d let it wash over us, and whatever bits landed opened us up. It was a very open channel, with him letting it flow. That was probably the main event of the day for him. And the example was: prepare for the morning puja; you’re going to meet the Buddha, you’re going to meet the Dhamma. It’s not just ‘Here we go again, another day’, but a rising up into the Dhamma, setting things up for a day of practice.
Luang Por would give another reflection over breakfast, and we’d sit there with our various mind-states. Sometimes, I must confess, I’d be looking at my tea and thinking, ‘I wish he’d shut up so I can drink my tea.’ But he kept going. And eventually I’d think, ‘Let go, it doesn’t matter’, and just be with it. He’d carry on all day, see people after the meal and continue until the evening puja. Then he’d go back to his kuti at nine or ten o’clock and retire.

He had the attitude of making himself available; preparing his body and mind to carry things through for the resident community and anyone who turned up. That took huge generosity and patience, because there were some crazy people turning up, and they’d ask him crazy questions. He’d sit there and listen. A husband and wife were having a quarrel, and they’d ask him questions. He’d sit there and listen. A husband and wife were having a quarrel, and he’d sit and listen to it – her side and his side. He’d give advice. I’d be thinking, ‘Why bother with these people? Tell them to sort themselves out.’ But he would say, ‘I’m just throwing out seeds. Some time a few will sort themselves out.’

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With all that, he’d still make a point of at least once a year going back to Thailand, to pay respects to Somdet Buddhajahn and the Sangharajja and, obviously, go to Wat Pah Pong when Luang Por Chah was still alive. After Luang Por Chah passed away he’d still go every year, to stay connected, bring up any topics which needed discussion and listen to concerns. He’d do that for his own practice, but also to maintain that connection for the sangha in the West: to indicate that we hadn’t split off, we wanted to maintain our sense of kinship so that things could develop properly. He’s still doing that, and it’s important. As with a tree: what you see are the trunk and the leaves and branches growing upwards. The tree’s growing bigger and bigger, but every time it grows upwards it also has to grow deeper and deeper roots, otherwise it’s not going to last. This kind of practice isn’t mystical; this is work. It takes patience, generosity, and energy. It also takes equanimity, and there’s no such thing as a smooth path to equanimity. To develop equanimity doesn’t mean everything’s going to be wonderful. Equanimity means you have to experience the rocky stuff, the disappointments, the praise and the blame, the success and failure, and accept it all.

I remember the year when Ajahn Ānando, Kittisāro and Pabhākaro disrobed. They are all people whom Luang Por had nurtured and with whom he had strong companionship. So there was a feeling of trying to hold something together while people were breaking down in it. That’s always part of sangha life – not just physical death, but also the disillusionments and conflicts; senior people growing disillusioned, not just juniors, and quarrels within the community. If you’re the leader of the community you’ve no choice; handling the fall-out and flak is your responsibility. If you’re going to be a leader you’re going to suffer, because you can’t control things. You’ll feel a sense of responsibility for everyone, but you realize they’re not going to be the way you want them to be or able to do what you want them to do. Some will leave, some will stay. Of course there’ll be good ones and inspiring ones. But you’ll also see ones who become disillusioned or find fault with you.

Sangha life is turbulent, and we manage to contain it because of a very important example like Luang Por’s. We could become ideological about the rights and wrongs of meditation, but he offered simplicity and commitment to openness and presence. He loved the holy life, but was also quite tender-hearted. He’d be profoundly affected by people becoming disillusioned with what he thought was so beautiful and valid, and which worked for him. But he came through it and eventually said, ‘I recognize people are just working out their kamma. Some will do monastic life for a lifetime, some will only do it for a year. They’re doing what they can. And you have to let it pass. You have to let it fail and fall apart sometimes.’ That’s equanimity. Take Amaravati, for example. When Amaravati started people were naturally complaining and criticizing because it wasn’t what it should be, and he’d say, ‘Well, we try, and if the whole thing fails, so what? It’s been a good experiment. It’s been an interesting attempt. If we don’t try, why bother? We try, and it works for some people and for some people it doesn’t. We still do it. And if the whole thing folds up, well, never mind. The Dhamma persists.’ He’d always have that attitude.

I remember when Ajahn Ānando was organizing a tudong on the South Downs and inviting everyone to go. I said, ‘Well, I don’t know whether I should go, surely we need to be responsible and look after Amaravati and make sure it’s running.’ Ajahn Sumedho replied, ‘Look, if you want to go tudong, it’s good. We’ll just hang a sign on the door saying “Gone tudong”. Come and sit here if you like.’ He said, ‘I want to be able to run it like that. We can say, it’s like this. It’s what it is. It’s not super-tranquil, it’s not well-organized. You’re not guaranteed to have brilliant teachings every day. It’s this. It’s an open door. If you want to be open and you want to practise, it’s here. But don’t bring your expectations.’ So he practised with equanimity as to whether people liked what they found or were disappointed by it. Not that he didn’t feel anything, but he was able to maintain awareness of those feelings as, ‘that which arises, passes’, and ‘being the
Luang Por said, ‘The world is like this. Wanting it to be another way is suffering.’

When Amaravati was still developing, on many evenings local hooligans would drive up in their cars, screech around the courtyard and make a noise. Sometimes they’d smash the donation or post boxes, or scream and howl, ring the bell and so on. We’d say, ‘How could they do this?’ And Luang Por Sumedho would say, ‘The world is like this. This is the way it is.’ We tried all kinds of things. We had a night vigil where we’d take it in turns to walk around the monastery to intercept people. One monk had the bright idea of having a ‘potato brigade’, whereby you were given a potato and if you saw a car parked, you stuffed the potato up the exhaust pipe, so that when the driver tried to drive the car away the engine would fill with exhaust and break down. We were all armed with potatoes on these vigils.

One time the hooligans pushed over a bronze Buddha standing in the courtyard. This was the day before Wesak. We came out the next morning and there was the Buddha-rūpa lying on its face in the dirt with a massive dent in its shoulder. I looked at it and was so upset, ‘How could people do this?’ Luang Por said, ‘The world is like this. Wanting it to be another way is suffering.’ He had that ability to catch the points where you’re about to get wound up about something. He would prick the bubble.

I’ve been asking a few people what their recollections of him were, and one monk mentioned how at one time he was involved with a building project … And then Ajahn Sumedho came up and just took hold of his arm and squeezed it, and gave him a big smile, ‘Hello.’ That’s it. You’re getting into your little bubble, and then, ‘Hello, here we are’, and you could feel the mental landscape suddenly change.

In those early days you could still gain access to him easily, and I was privileged to be able to serve. I like serving. So I’d go and massage his feet every day: get hot water, bathe his feet, massage them and squeeze his swollen foot. We didn’t talk very much, but it was good to feel that I was doing what I could for my teacher in this simple human way. That’s a memory on my shrine, too.

When you live with Luang Por Sumedho or in monasteries that have known his presence, you take it for granted that this is Buddhism and it’s set up for you. Maybe you don’t reflect on how it got there. How do you think this temple got here? He pulled in the energy, the intelligence and the finances to make it happen. How do you think you’ve been able to come from all these different countries in the world, and be immediately accepted? You go to America and they say, ‘Ajahn Sumedho’s monks, they’re the ones you can trust. They’re really solid.’ How do you think that happened? Where does it all point to?

We’re gathered together for this being, this non-self presence, to use his birthday as a recollection. Who knows who this person is? It’s an impermanent formation. But I think it’s huge pāramī that brought this special occasion about. Where would we be without that? I don’t know where I’d be. It wouldn’t be as good, I’m pretty certain of that. And just consider in your own life, all of you who’ve come here, I’d say you’ve been part of something unparalleled in Western Buddhism. How many other monastic foundations are there? Where do you think all this came from?

So this is what I recollect – this amazing development that’s happened for all of us; something we’re part of and can carry in our minds and hearts. I hope you all have some anecdote for yourself, some occasion when you heard something he said or noticed something he did, and thought, ‘Aha!’ Maybe there was only one thing, but it’s an important one. Just take those one, two, three or four things and ask: ‘Where would I be without them?’

1 Four requisites: clothing, food, shelter and medicine.
2 Somdet Buddhajahn was the acting Supreme Patriarch of Thailand, as well as a good friend and mentor to Luang Por Sumedho, having met before Luang Por’s entry into the Sangha. Sangharāja is a title given in many Theravada Buddhist countries to a senior monk who is the titular head either of a monastic fraternity (nikāya), or of the Sangha throughout the country. This term is often rendered in English as ‘Patriarch’ or ‘Supreme Patriarch’.
For Friends and Supporters of Amaravati in Thailand

We realize that there are many people in Thailand who are both familiar with Amaravati Monastery and who would like to support it. We also realize that the process of trying to send funds from one country to another can be complicated, time-consuming and sometimes expensive.

A group of supporters in Thailand has therefore set up a bank account for Amaravati Monastery in Bangkok so that donations can easily be made there and then, periodically, forwarded to the Amaravati account here in the UK.

This account is with the Bangkok Bank and it is being administered by Khun Anintita Posakrisna, a good friend of this community. The account number is 179-473420-0, account name is Amaro Bhikkhu, Banchak Branch. (The account is under the name of the Abbot simply because Amaravati Monastery is not a registered institution in Thailand; please note therefore that this is not a personal account for Ajahn Amaro but rather that his name is simply here to represent Amaravati Monastery.)

This account has been established for the convenience of those people in Thailand who wish to make donations to support Amaravati. We hope that this will accordingly bring the joy that comes from giving to those who wish to make a donation, while also helping to meet the many expenses of running Amaravati Monastery. If you would like any more information please contact Khun Anintita Posakrisna or M.L. Pakamal Kasemsri, Siamsaamtri School, Telephone numbers 02-311-0134 and 02-331-6258-60.

ข่าวถึงญาติโยมในประเทศไทย
เนื่องด้วย ทางวัดตระหนักดีว่า ญาติโยมทางประเทศไทยจำนวนมากที่คุ้นเคยรู้จักวัดอมราวดี มีความประสงค์จะทำบุญกับทางวัด แต่การส่งปัจจัยจากประเทศไทยไปยังอังกฤษนั้นไม่เพียงแต่ยุ่งยาก ต้องใช้เวลา และบางครั้งมีค่าใช้จ่ายสูงด้วย

ญาติธรรมในประเทศไทยกลุ่มหนึ่งได้เปิดบัญชีธนาคารสำหรับวัดอมราวดีขึ้นที่กรุงเทพฯ เพื่อให้สะดวกต่อการบริจาคปัจจัย และปัจจัยส่วนนี้จะโอนเข้าบัญชีเงินฝากของวัดอมราวดีที่ประเทศอังกฤษเป็นระยะๆ

ทางวัดเปิดบัญชีเงินฝากไว้กับธนาคารกรุงเทพฯ สาขาบางจาก เลขที่บัญชี 179-473420-0 ชื่อบัญชี Amaro Bhikkhu, Banchak Branch. (The account is under the name of the Abbot simply because Amaravati Monastery is not a registered institution in Thailand; please note therefore that this is not a personal account for Ajahn Amaro but rather that his name is simply here to represent Amaravati Monastery.)

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LUNAR CALENDAR 2015

These days are traditionally given over to quiet reflection and meditation. Visitors are welcome. Please enquire at the monasteries, as routines vary.

January
- 4 (Sun.)
- 12 (Mon.)
- 19 (Mon.)
- 27 (Tue.)

February
- 3 (Tue.)
- 11 (Wed.)
- 17 (Tue.)
- 25 (Wed.)

March
- 4 (Wed.)
- 12 (Thur.)
- 19 (Thur.)
- 27 (Fri.)

April
- 3 (Fri.)
- 11 (Sat.)
- 17 (Fri.)
- 25 (Sat.)

May
- 2 (Sat.)
- 10 (Sun.)
- 17 (Sun.)
- 25 (Mon.)

June
- 1 (Mon.)
- 9 (Tue.)
- 15 (Mon.)
- 23 (Tue.)
- 30 (Tue.)

July
- 8 (Wed.)
- 15 (Wed.)
- 23 (Thur.)
- 30 (Thur.)

August
- 7 (Fri.)
- 14 (Fri.)
- 22 (Sat.)
- 29 (Sat.)

September
- 6 (Sun.)
- 12 (Sat.)
- 20 (Sun.)
- 27 (Sun.)

October
- 5 (Mon.)
- 12 (Mon.)
- 20 (Tue.)
- 27 (Tue.)

November
- 4 (Wed.)
- 10 (Tue.)
- 18 (Wed.)
- 25 (Wed.)

December
- 3 (Thur.)
- 10 (Thur.)
- 18 (Fri.)
- 25 (Fri.)

1 Māgha Puja
2 Vesākhā Puja
3 Asālāhā Puja
4 Pavāraṇā Day

Please note that, at Amaravati Monastery, generally there is no evening puja on the evenings before and after the lunar day, unless that day falls on a Saturday. Also, there is no morning puja on the lunar day and the day afterwards.
The Art of Meditation

by Ajahn Munindo

Adapted from a talk given at Aruna Ratanagiri Monastery, Northumberland, UK

I expect many of us have read some of the scientific articles around these days that extol the benefits of meditation. Research into the effects meditation practice has on the brain has produced evidence of considerable benefits. I’ve also come across articles disparaging and discouraging Buddhist meditation. Some people who have tried, but after a while given up, claim it can be unhelpful, dangerous and maybe even life-destroying. These claims are not necessarily by people who haven’t tried hard, who have just, say, done one Vipassanā course in India before giving up – sometimes they’re from people who have hammered away at meditation for years, but eventually become disillusioned.

I’m not really surprised by such results. As the Abbot of a monastery I naturally hear a lot about how people practise and the results. When we first come across these teachings, they present us not just with something to believe in, but something we can actually do about our consciousness, and this gives us a hope. So we enter into the experience of meditation with enthusiasm, confidence and energy. We throw ourselves into practice and maybe we get some results. What do we do next? Once we’ve had some experience, especially some sort of ‘special’ experience, it’s easy to cling to the memory. If it was pleasant we may try to repeat it. If it wasn’t pleasant we may still cling to the memory, afraid that it may be repeated.

Sometimes the way meditation is taught over-emphasizes technique. And clinging to technique can lead to clinging to results. In the beginning we learn from the techniques. But the idea that that is all there is to meditation is regrettable. It took me a long time to realize that a technician’s approach wasn’t working for me. I eventually noticed how preoccupied I was with the ‘form’ of practice and that I was losing touch with the ‘spirit’. The point of practice, the spirit, is to deepen in understanding and ease. Worrying about stages to pass and skills to accomplish was conditioning rigidity of heart and mind. If I took the attitude that something was wrong with me and these techniques would fix it, attention became exclusive and limiting. It fed into the gaining mind; the idea of never being good enough; always having to get somewhere.

How we pick up the techniques determines how we relate to experience. Over-emphasis on the forms can lead to more clinging, not less. In the West, with our strong wilful attitude to life, this can be particularly pronounced. Not everybody in the world views life as we do. In Asia people are generally more relaxed and trusting. In their cultures mystery, myth and faith still have relevance. In our culture we tend to distrust everything; we’re taught to doubt, to question. That does, of course, have benefits. It also has limitations. ‘Myth’ has become synonymous with ‘false’. Rituals are for primitive people. We need to be careful that we don’t bring our wilful manipulative tendencies into the most important aspect of our lives. Good health, warm relationships, money, food and shelter are all important, but when we die the most important thing will be the state of our consciousness. So the way we enter our inner exploration is most important, and we are not obliged to assume a technical approach to it.

I have found the contemplative life is better viewed as an artistic exercise. In the beginning we need to learn the skills involved in an art form, like playing a musical instrument. Inevitably, applying ourselves to these techniques can be boring; becoming adept calls for repetition. To play a violin we must learn how to
move our fingers, how to hold the wrist. If we don’t hold the instrument correctly, many beautiful possibilities are not available. Hours and hours of exercise are required to learn to play an instrument, use the medium of paint or handle a camera. But once we’ve internalized those techniques, once they’ve really become ours, we can let the spirit of the artist flow.

I suggest it’s similar with meditation. If you are thinking that you are not artistic, perhaps consider in terms of being agile. One of Ajahn Chah’s teachers used to advise: if obstructions appear high, duck under them; if they appear low, jump over them. Agility is essential. If we feel we must adhere solely to what a beloved teacher has taught us initially, we may not progress. We may find we lack the creativity to deal with the complex obstructions we will encounter. Unfailingly respect and gratitude to those who helped us get started, yes; but also daring to go into the unknown with interest in discovering something new.

So perhaps the authors of these commentaries on the perils of meditation hadn’t felt allowed to experiment in their practice. Maybe they felt practice was all about one single technique. But because a respected teacher or tradition tells us what we should be doing, that doesn’t mean they truly know what’s right for us. What’s needed is to locate the in-between ground where we can respectfully listen to the teachings given by the tradition, at the same time listen to ourselves. The middle way: not grasping at our own ways of doing things, and not grasping at the teacher’s way of doing things either; studying both.

Early on in practice I had some delightful experiences, concentrating on the breath and dropping into pleasant states. But did they really help me deal with the obstructions which I, this deluded, confused character, had to face? Only up to a point, and then they failed miserably. I suspect this happens to many people: they come to a point where they feel they’re banging their heads against a brick wall. I would like to encourage us all to listen more carefully to our own intuition. We attend to that which comes from outside: books, teachers, traditions; but let’s also feel and listen to what comes from inside us. I am not advocating grasping the view that ‘my’ unique and amazing approach is absolutely the way, but let’s not assume it’s not relevant.

On my first meditation retreat the teacher taught ānāpānasati, mindfulness of breathing while sitting; also walking meditation. I remember how on the third day of this retreat, a wonderful experience, a sudden perception of inner peace, inner calm arose. There was just quietness, like nothing I’d experienced before. I was out in the countryside, walking up and down on a gravel road in a remote part of Australia called Nimbin. With this perception was an inner voice – the chatterbox who likes to have an opinion about everything – commenting, ‘There’s just awareness’, or perhaps it was, ‘There’s just knowing.’ Then a question rapidly followed, ‘But who’s aware?’ At that point the mind dropped into a deeper, even lovelier place. I can’t remember how I reported this to the teacher, but he didn’t seem to appreciate it as a useful key for unlocking my practice. Indeed, it took a long time and a lot of struggle before I recognized it for what it was.

Conscious questioning as a form of meditation is nothing new. Lots of people use it as a way of directing their interest and travelling the inner journey. Asking the right question, your own question, is an important part of practice. There are times when concentrating on a meditation object is a pleasant, agreeable thing to do; but maybe we should see it like Ajahn Thaté. He used to tell monks that for them entering samādhi was like going on a holiday; he would encourage it. But going on holiday is going on holiday, it isn’t work.

Some of the most interesting work I do is asking questions like, ‘Who’s aware?’ It’s pleasing to think about the architectural plans for developing the monastery, but the more valuable work is asking inner questions: ‘Who? ’ ‘Who’s asking the question?’ That’s an extremely interesting question, if it’s asked in the right way and not because I or somebody else told you to ask it.

The mind is longing to ask such questions. Many people see their mind as an enemy. All they want to do is make their mind shut up, so they concentrate, concentrate, concentrate, in pursuit of peace. It’s true that quietening the mind and concentration are part of practice, but only part of it. There are other aspects as well. Maybe you can make your mind your friend. Your friend the mind might really want to share this journey with you and have interesting contributions to make.

There are traditions where teachers specifically encourage asking questions. Again, we need to take care that we don’t turn this into another technique applied in a perfunctory manner. Asked in the right way, at the right time, in the right direction, our heart-question will begin to tease out the tangled threads of contracted egoity. Master Hsu Yun, the great Chinese Ch’an meditation master, used the technique of asking ‘Who?’ called in Chinese hua-tou, the profound question practice. When Ajahn Fun, a disciple of Ajahn Mun, was caught up in fear in practice, he went to consult Ajahn Mun. Ajahn Mun didn’t just say, ‘Go and concentrate on your breath.’ He asked Ajahn Fan, ‘Who’s afraid?’

Remember these ‘pointings’ to the way are not to be grasped. If they are clung to they will be deluded ego building itself yet another shelter. Don’t grasp the idea of asking the question, ‘Who?’ It’s not the mind itself that is the problem; what we need to deal with is the deluded ego, self-centredness. That’s our issue; all our energy is be-
ing gobbled up by this construction. So how do we release that energy, how do we undo it? There’s certainly a stage where learning to bring the mind to one-pointedness, to steadiness, is needed. That’s one aspect of our training, but do we take it all the way? Not necessarily, not everybody. Some people may take that form of meditation nearly all the way; and I’m told that at the very last stage of practice, at just the right time, they ask some very subtle questions and the whole tangle unravels; they find the freedom they’ve been seeking. But that may not be the way for all of us. Indeed, I suspect it’s not the way for many of us.

Let’s consider that maybe our mind is not our enemy. Maybe we need not tell it to shut up all the time. Maybe we can make friends with it and listen to it. Christians say, ‘Ask and ye shall be given.’ When I was a Christian I used to ask all the time, but I didn’t get the results I was looking for. Only years later did I meet a Christian monk who pointed out that it matters how you ask. If we’re not asking from the right place we’re not going to get the right answer.

If we are fortunate on our inner journey, we might discover our own personal question which succeeds in untangling us, but we need to be careful about the energy which drives our questioning. Our questions need to be accompanied by a humble recognition that we don’t know. I have a clear recollection of my first year of meditation, when I was applying this questioning practice but using it like a sledgehammer attacking an enemy. That didn’t work very well. It didn’t help at all, actually – I became very sick. We need to ask our questions gently, respectfully, as if we had the Buddha. How would we talk to the Buddha. How would we talk to the Buddha if we met him, if we asked him a question?

While I was on retreat alone in Scotland some years ago, I felt something wrong with my eye. It itched painfully, and eventually I realized that I had a tick on my eyelid. In order to remove it, I had to hold my glasses in such a way that I could see the tick and remove it without harming my eye. Without a mirror I would have been in trouble.

So we can benefit from forms which reflect back to us. We can use Buddha images like that, or the wheel symbol, things that remind us of the Buddha and the potential for perfect wisdom and perfect compassion. The Buddha image itself, though, is not perfect wisdom and perfect compassion. I feel sorry for the Taliban who destroyed those gigantic Buddha images in Bamiyan, Afghanistan, but they weren’t the Buddha. Likewise, a meditation technique is not the Dhamma; it is a form that helps us relate to the Dhamma. The concept of awareness is not the Buddha. We use concepts of awareness, or the model of space with specks of dust floating around in the empty space that is awareness.

Maybe the effort you put into practice takes you in the direction you want to go, and you have a few moments of opening up to the experience of abiding as awareness; you see with a new perspective. But later on you no longer have direct access to the actual experience of abiding as awareness. What you have is the memory of it. You have to be careful not to grasp that memory; the memory is not awareness. Memory is activity, it is content of awareness. Awareness is like the context; all that arises and ceases is content, like specks of dust floating around in the empty space that is awareness.

We might use a technique in the hope that it take us back into that experience of abiding as awareness. We don’t reject such a technique, it may help us, provided we don’t totally believe in it. However, there is always the risk that techniques become idols, just as Buddha images can become idols. Some Buddha images are beautiful and uplifting. The Buddha didn’t encourage such images himself; he did recommend the Bodhi tree. Only when the Greeks arrived in Afghanistan and came across Buddhism did Buddha images appear, modelled on those of Greek gods. But though there weren’t Buddha images around in the time of the Buddha, we do have them now, and they’re there to remind us of the potential pointed to in the Buddha’s teaching. The Buddha image in itself does not have much more than what we project onto it. However, it can be helpful to have a Buddha image to project onto, just as it can be helpful at times to have a mirror.

So we can benefit from forms which reflect back to us. We can use Buddha images like that, or the wheel symbol, things that remind us of the Buddha and the potential for perfect wisdom and perfect compassion. The Buddha image itself, though, is not perfect wisdom and perfect compassion. I feel sorry for the Taliban who destroyed those gigantic Buddha images in Bamiyan, Afghanistan, but they weren’t the Buddha. Likewise, a meditation technique is not the Dhamma; it is a form that helps us relate to the Dhamma. The concept of awareness is not the Buddha. We use concepts of awareness, or the model of space with specks of dust floating through it, as images to remind us of the work we need to do.

We are fortunate to have these tried and tested tools and techniques to apply in formal practice, and also techniques that help in daily-life practice, like the Five Precepts.3 ‘I undertake the training to refrain from killing living beings;’ those are words, form, that symbolize the spirit, which is to inhibit any intention...
to cause harm. The form is useful; it points to that spirit of harmlessness, something which matters to us. Without that form we might forget. So the Five Precepts are definitely a useful technique, a useful form.

Another technique aimed at bringing us back to mindfulness in the moment, I learned from the teacher Ruth Denison. It involves having people stand on one leg. I have used it when talking on the telephone to someone who is disoriented – tears, grief, confusion: ‘OK, come on, let’s both get up and stand on one leg.’ Maybe they think I’m kidding: ‘I’m serious. We’ll talk about your problem, but right now, let’s stand on one leg. If you want to talk to me we’ve got to be standing on one leg first.’ So there you are in the middle of the room, with your telephone at one ear, standing on one leg. That’s a very useful exercise, as to do it you have to come back into the body. After standing on one leg for a while you tend to be drawn back into the head, but then you’ll wobble, and when you’re about to fall over you’ll have to come back very quickly into the body again. They might say, ‘But I can’t think about my problem while I’m standing on one leg!’ I could reply, ‘Well, that’s good, because that’s why you rang me up, because you can’t stop thinking about your problem.’ I’m not being flippan when I talk to someone like this; this exercise is useful if you find yourself lost. And of course I’m not talking here about grasping someone like this; this exercise is useful if you find your-...
HAVING GIVEN TWO YEARS’ NOTICE, ON 26 OCTOBER THIS YEAR I formally handed over the responsibilities of Abbot of Cittaviveka, along with my blessings, to Ajahn Kāruniko. He has served and supported both myself and the Cittaviveka community quietly but resolutely for over twenty years, and has managed well during my many periods of absence. Having said this, I would add that the abbot’s duties may very well adapt, as we currently have several theras living here who are interested in sharing the responsibility for community leadership. Hopefully this will make the abbot’s job easier, and also allow people to develop skills with regard to coming to consensus decisions.

It has been over twenty-two years since I accepted the role of abbot on the request of Luang Por Sumedho. Towards the end of 1991 he felt that Ajahn Ānando needed a break, and that if Ānando and I swapped places for a couple of years or so – he to Amaravati and me to Cittaviveka – that would be beneficial. I must admit that I had never wanted to be an abbot, but out of loyalty to Luang Por I immediately accepted the position. As it happened, Ajahn Ānando disobeyed on 6 June 1992, the day before I was due to go down to Chithurst and receive a six-week transmission on supervising the community there. I had a teaching engagement on the evening of my leaving Amaravati, so I arrived at Cittaviveka after that to find the resident community in a state of shock at the previous abbot’s sudden abandoning of the holy life. For their part, they had not chosen me to be the leader; for myself, I had no knowledge of how the place ran.

So this was a less than fortuitous scenario in which to take up the duties. Fortunately, Ajahn Vajiro was there, stolidly holding the wheel and offering his support; and the monks and nuns were friendly. However, one of the key lay managers also left, and as far as I could make out there was no clear management system. The monastery had been carried along by the Abbot’s understanding and the support of people like Ajahn Vajiro, Ajahn Candasīrī and Ven. Jutindharo. The only guideline I had was Luang Por’s recommendation that I offer reflections to the community. This I could do, but when Ajahn Vajiro and Ven. Jutindharo left in the next year, things became more difficult.

The monastic culture I had grown up in had operated largely around each community having a strong central figure, among whom Luang Por Sumedho held the centre for us all. He would send senior monks and nuns to manage various vihāras for a couple of years, and the duty would be rotated. Moreover, most sangha members were quite junior, and the understanding was that as a junior monk your main responsibility was to meditate, learn to follow the Vinaya and support the seniors; then after two or three years you moved on. Naturally monks would like to move on to get a change of scene, but very few returned as mature samānas. Consequently the culture didn’t encourage learning how to manage a monastery, make long-term commitments, or to handle a transmission of duties. Admittedly the monasteries were much simpler then: they were managed on a day-at-a-time basis, with details being sketched out in informal meetings. Nothing much was minutéd – all of which was fine if you knew the situation. I sensed that this had to change, and that my personal task was to figure out, and have recorded, how the place should run; and above all, considering Ajahn Ānando’s departure, what an abbot should do and be. I thought that it may take four or five years, after which I could pass on the duties. So my role in the ongoing succession of abbots was going to be to define what Cittaviveka Monastery was about, and what an abbot was supposed to do – and how.

The first part, of defining Cittaviveka, was easy enough. Struck by the monastery’s natural beauty, I thought: ‘Let the place speak for itself.’ To me that meant bringing people much more into contact with Nature, and focusing on training samānas in the ways of the Forest Masters. For a start: as we were in possession of over 150 acres of land, why live coopered up in a house on half an acre of it? For my first vassa there as Abbot there were seventeen bhikkhus, plus nuns and anāgarikas. This meant that everyone except the Abbot and his deputy shared living spaces. The Hammer Wood had two kuiṭis in it, and there was a small abbot’s kuiṭa in which I slept next to a filing cabinet and another hut in the grounds, the ‘Western Paradise’. So the first project was to create woodland groves in the grounds so that people would spend more time outdoors; and then to build more kuiṭis in the Wood and adopt forest dwelling by rota as a part of our way of

Abbituary

Ajahn Sucitto, who has recently resigned from being abbot (in Ajahn Chah’s phrase ‘the rubbish bin’) at Cittaviveka, offers some reflections on his period of tenure.
life. As for the House, it had been adequately rebuilt under Ajahn Ānando and Munindo – but our meditations were held in the Shrine Room next to the office and the main entrance. It was noisy. There had been plans to build a new Dhamma Hall, but the funds had been spent on purchasing Amaravati. With Ajahn Vajiro’s help I drew up new plans for a Dhamma Hall, but we didn’t want to do any fund-raising until Amaravati had built its Temple. So that development waited until 1998. Meanwhile Nick Scott offered to serve as a project manager and we went ahead with building kutis and a proper workshop. His other main offering (apart from working on the Dhamma Hall for ten years!) was to help generate committees of laypeople to manage the monastery and take some of the weight off the Abbot. Like many things that occur in the holy life, his offering was a gift out of the blue, for which both I and Cittaviveka remain thankful. I can’t imagine how the sangha could have flourished without the committees’ support. And of course, however diligent managers are, they can only steward the resources that have been freely offered by many people out of faith in the Triple Gem.

Sadhu, sadhu, sadhu anumodanā!

For the ‘Abbot’ role, development has also taken many years. It seemed imbalanced to invest so much authority in one person; also, the projections of praise and blame that occur when someone is in the spotlight are a distraction. Things have changed, but slowly. Sharing responsibility has become a trend in all the monasteries, and twenty years after I formulated a scheme for electing abbots we have arrived at a model of a dual election, by the community and the Elders. However, sharing responsibility depends on others who are willing and capable of committing to it. As they matured, monks have tended to go wandering, or to seek situations that offered more opportunities or a looser format than that of a training monastery.

Another factor may have been my own disposition: I readily and even impulsively take on responsibilities, and I can sustain those responsibilities – which may give the impression that I want to hold them all. Also, sensing that an abbot has to teach by example and be always present for the community, I generally attend all the meetings, pujas and management activities. So one arrives at scenarios such as getting up at 3:30 for the 4:30 meditation, attending to community business in the morning, seeing guests after the meal, then sitting in on a management meeting for five hours and then, after a cup of tea and a shower, giving a Dhamma talk and sitting in a vigil until midnight. However, this model may not be such an attractive example! And it means that there have not been so many chances to relax and just be with other monks as I would have wished. That might have detracted from greater communality.

Meanwhile I took the opportunity of my twentieth vassa in 1995 to take a six-month sabbatical, but the only conclusion that I came to was to offer another five years of service. The ‘rotating abbots’ system had changed to one of indefinite tenure, no one was offering to take my place, and the monastery needed management. Then the Dhamma Hall project started, and that needed to be seen through to completion. In 2005 Luang Por Sumedho offered to shepherd the community for a year so that I could have another break, but when I returned the development of Rocana and the nuns’ community was taking place, and it seemed best that an experienced abbot should be there to hold things steady as the changes were integrated into the way Cittaviveka functioned. Hence it wasn’t until 2012 that I felt I had done all that I could for the monastery in this role.

The abbot’s position is of course a privileged one; but I don’t think that privilege is what one needs. My personal inclination in community life is towards small informal meetings, and to be relating straight from the heart. However, the duties of overseeing an entire community and its extension, the lay community (and of eventually being part of a body that oversees all the European monasteries) set one apart from the people one is living with. When this is combined with the role of training the others and teaching overseas, the gap widens. This brings a sense of isolation, which is both unpleasant and a basis for misunderstanding. I’ve needed to look into that. The painful bit is when one takes it personally, but the situation is universal: we are all born into a separative form. We may try to compensate for this through status, friendships and activities, but death reveals the unresolved sense of separation in the turmoil of grief. Contemplating aloneness, on the other

(Continued on page 53)
Kathina at Amaravati

On Sunday 2 November a Kathina ceremony was held at Amaravati. Every year since 1985, the lay community has initiated and organized this inspiring and supportive day of ceremonies, centred around the offering of robe-cloth and other requisites to the sangha at the end of the Rains Retreat or Vassa.

This year was once again a Royal Kathina, with the Royal Kathina Robe being graciously offered by His Majesty, King Bhumi bol Adulyadej of Thailand, through a representative, Mr Sang-Korn, Minister Counsellor at the Royal Thai Embassy in London. This was followed by John Stevens and Ruki Shillam offering robe-cloth on behalf of the Kathina sponsors.

The occasion was particularly special because Luang Por Sumedho, teacher and founding abbot of Amaravati, returned from Thailand for his third visit this year. He was welcomed with delight and gratitude by the sangha and supporters worldwide about Amaravati and its long-term plans. In response to his efforts, the generosity that came forth from people in Thailand and other countries around the globe, as well as the UK itself, was presented to Ajahn Amaro in the afternoon.

Luang Por Khemadhammo, Abbot of the Forest Hermitage in Warwickshire, was also present and offered the anumodanā blessing for the His Majesty the King of Thailand.

It is estimated that despite the rainy weather, the day was attended by approximately 900 people, and it passed well. The day closed with Luang Por Sumedho generously offering a Dhamma talk – a precious gift from our beloved teacher and something we can reflect on long after his return to Thailand on 10 November.

GLOSSARY

Some of the Pali and foreign terms used in this issue of Forest Sangha Newsletter are included here. Please note that these are brief descriptions of how these words are being used in this 2015 issue; they are not full definitions.

Ajahn (Thai): senior monk or nun; literally ‘teacher’; used for those with ten vassas or more.

anagārika/a: male or female postulant.
anattā: ‘not-self’, i.e. impersonal, without individual essence.
anicca: impermanent, inconstant, uncertain.
anumodanā: rejoicing, satisfaction, approval, thanks.
arahant: a fully enlightened person.
bhikkhu: alms-mendicant; the term for a Buddhist monk.

Buddha-rūpa: an image of the Buddha, generally a statue.
citta: mind; heart; psyche.
dāna: giving, liberality; offering, alms.
Dhamma: the way it is, reality; the Buddha’s teachings.
dukkha: suffering, stress, unsatisfactoriness.
farang (Thai): a generic word for someone of European ancestry.
kamma (Sanskrit: karma): conscious intended action.
kuṭi: a monastic house, hut or cabin.
Luang Por (Thai): a title of affectionate respect (lit. ‘Venerable Father’).
majjhima: used to denote a monk or nun with between five and ten vassas; middle; appropriate; just right.
pabbajjā: ‘Going Forth (from home to the homeless life)’; become a sāmanera or sāmaneri (or novice mon or nun).
pārami/pāramītā: ‘perfection’; skills and virtues that deepen the mind. In the Theravada there are ten: giving, morality, renunciation, wisdom, energy, patience, truthfulness, determination, loving-kindness, and equanimity.
Pātimokkha: the basic code of monastic discipline.

Pha Pah (Thai): alms-giving ceremony; literally, ‘forest cloth’.
ipññapatā: alms-round, wandering in search of food offerings.
pūjā: devotional observances such as chanting and offering incense.
sādhu: ‘It is well’; an exclamation showing appreciation or agreement.
samādhi: meditative concentration, equanimity.

samaṇa: renunciant, contemplative (term for ordained monks or nuns).
samaṇera/i: literally, a small samaṇa; a novice monk/nun.
sākhārā: ‘mental formations’; impulses, reactions and psychophysical ‘activities’ that generate kamma; also the resultant habits that they create.
satiyā: foundations for mindfulness; body, feelings, mind, and mental events, viewed as they occur.
siladhara/ā (singular/plural): a Buddhist nun from the community of Luang Por Sumedho.
simā: a boundary or territory within which the monastic Sangha’s formal acts must be performed in order to be valid.
stūpa (Sanskrit): a dome-shaped mound or monument.
sutta (Sanskrit: sutra): literally, ‘thread’; a discourse or sermon by the Buddha or his contemporary disciples.
Tathāgata: the ‘Thus-gone-one’, i.e. the one who has transcendent knowledge; an epithet of the Buddha
Tan (Thai): venerable; a title of respect used for Buddhist monks.

thera/therī: ‘Elder’; an honourific title automatically conferred upon a monk or nun of at least ten years’ standing.
tudong (Thai): travelling from place to place, most commonly seeking quietude and staying in the wilderness.
Vassa: Rains Retreat. A period from July to October, corresponding roughly to the rainy season in South East Asia.
vihāra: a monastic dwelling.
Vinaya: the monastic discipline.

Wan Phra (Thai): Buddhist holy days, held on the lunar quarters.
Presented with a deadline to write an article about Hartridge Monastery for the Forest Sangha News-letter, my initial reaction was to tell myself that writing has never really been my thing, and anyway, what to say about Hartridge?

For a few days, while other matters occupied most of my time, I could push debilitating thoughts – ‘I can’t think what to write about’, ‘I don’t know what to do’ – into the shadows. But that left a sense of stuck-ness, which most meditators, maybe most people, will recognize. And sooner or later that feeling can’t be ignored. It may be true that we don’t know where to start, or what’s the ‘right’ move, because that’s what going into the unknown is like, but sometimes it doesn’t really matter … we just need to start somewhere.

As a reaction to this feeling, and thus to avoid needing to create something new, I’d thought that I could use some text from our website; I could give an update on our Dhamma Hall project, and illustrate the text by including a few photos of the work getting underway.

Looking for some photos, one that I liked showed the building site as it was when we were levelling the site after removing the pre-existing structures (a wooden workshop, an old mobile home, and an annexe to the old cottage). Ah, yes, the stuck place begins to melt, the image speaks to a place inside. Here was the theme for what’s been happening this last year and more at Hartridge … Creating a Suitable Space.

It’s really not so different from when we sit on our meditation cushion.

We notice old worn-out mental structures which perhaps have served a purpose for a time, which can occupy attention and shape how things are now perceived.

The structures can seem very real and enduring, but just like our old caravan and sheds, they’ve only been there so long … before that there was something else, and before that something else …

... and beneath all of them the ground, which underpins everything else.

Yes, coming back to that sense of the ground is such a relief.

Here is the place where we can allow things to come and go.

The space where the old dies and the new emerges.

Always new.

Not just buildings, but people, perceptions, sensations …

My mum died late last year.

Recently I revisited her grave, and that of my father.

Tears of grief and gratitude.

When my granny died, at the cemetery the funeral cortège was led to the burial plot. It came to where my granddad was buried, but then continued past the adjacent plot. After a few moments, confused, my mum asked, ‘Where are we going?’ Muffled consternation and hasty consultation established that the grave had somehow been dug in the wrong place. We had to postpone the burial and come back later. It was somehow very fitting for granny that this solemn event should become a shambles, one we could laugh about later.

I’d hoped the new building work would be well advanced as 2014 came to an end, but that’s rarely the way with buildings. Generosity has been flowing, and greatly appreciated, but it’s more involved than that.

Just like meditation practice.

Fortunately there’s been no real need to hurry.

Better to do the preparations carefully, and then follow through with the work.

And expect that it won’t all go quite as planned.

Just being with the process each step of the way.

This is the Suitable Space.

You can follow the progress of the building site on our website, www.hartridgemonastery.org under the Dhamma Hall section.

The inner work is also ongoing. ♡
Amavati: Thirty Years On

On 1 August 2014, Luang Por Sumedho and George Sharp, along with Ajahn Amaro as facilitator, took part in a Q&A session reflecting on both the past and future of Amavati.

Ajahn Amaro: It’s very lovely to see a grand crowd gathered for yet another special occasion. As everybody is aware, this is the thirtieth anniversary of Amavati. Thirty years ago today the first monks from our community came through the gate and were handed the keys. Over the next few days the group of nuns arrived by foot from Chithurst, and Luang Por Sumedho and other members of the sangha arrived to take up residence here.

We thought it would be appropriate to mark the occasion by asking Luang Por to offer some recollections, along with George Sharp who played a very pivotal role in the invitation to the sangha to come to Britain in the first place. As the former Chairman of the English Sangha Trust, which is the charitable organization that looks after all the legal and financial affairs of the community, he also helped the sangha get established here. So George was very much involved in the earliest days of the sangha, inviting Ajahn Sumedho and Luang Por Chah to come to England to reside at the Hampstead Vihāra, and helping to support this ancient tradition from South East Asia and India become enmeshed into the English culture of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century.

What I’d like to do is first of all ask Luang Por to reflect: what were the causes that inspired you to start up Amavati when it was only about four years after Chithurst had opened up? What was on your mind that inspired that courageous, if not audacious, move to open up this new place?

Luang Por Sumedho: When we moved to Chithurst we had permission from the local authorities to develop it as a Buddhist monastery, and we had promised to limit the amount of residents and visitors because of the narrow road from the A272 to Chithurst House. Within five years, just as the house was becoming liveable, we were overflowing; the number of monks and nuns was increasing very quickly. Some of the nuns were living in closets; one even lived out in the pig-pen. So we had the idea of establishing a branch monastery. Also, I thought I’d like to keep Chithurst as a more secluded forest monastery because of its natural setting. I didn’t want it to become a teaching centre, I wanted to keep that kind of forest atmosphere so the residents would not have a busy place to deal with.

The idea was to look around for a new place, especially to the north of London. This was before the M25 was completed, and it was a hassle to go through London, and people from London or north of there complained how dif-
difficult it was to get to Chithurst. I asked Barbara and Peter Jackson who lived in Bedford at the time to keep their eyes open for suitable property, so they took me to several places. At that time Mrs Thatcher was closing down institutions right and left, and so there were a lot of empty schools. I even looked at a borstal, prisons and other things that were really depressing. Then they found this place, which belonged to Bedford County Education Authority. It was a school for children in Bedford with learning difficulties who couldn't operate within the ordinary school system, so it had a pleasant ambience even as a school. Chithurst House was a Victorian house that had been derelict. It's quite beautiful, but to get another stately home or something elegant was not what I wanted. I wanted a place where you didn't have listed buildings and you could pretty much do what you wanted with it. This place suited that perspective. With these wooden huts it didn't look all that beautiful. It was like a military camp in fact. But it's in a beautiful location and these were not listed buildings, not national treasures.

The first time I saw Amaravati, the perception was of looking up at the sky. This was what really impressed me. You have this huge dome of sky above you because it's at the top of a hill. At Chithurst you're in the forest, and you're looking at trees. We finally purchased the property, and thirty years later here we are.

AA: George, did you have any thoughts at the time about this adventurous move being proposed by your teacher?

George Sharp: I was really taken aback, actually. We'd been in Chithurst House four and half years and the house was habitable, but there was a great deal more money that needed to be spent, more work to do. Then Luang Por takes me for a walk and tells me about his idea. I said to him, ‘Why would you want to make your life a misery?’ It seemed to me that Chithurst and the forest was about as ideal as you could get. The monasteries I'd been to in Thailand, they were all pretty small, and there was still quite a lot of work to do every day. Wat Pah Nanachat was quite a wonderful place to be. Chithurst was emergent and everybody was working so hard, and they seemed to be quite happy for bhikkhus. So to be told that Chithurst wasn't sufficient was a bit startling. But I've got a very simple way of dealing with problems such as disagreements. I said to myself, ‘Well, I know Luang Por. But what do I know?’ I thought, ‘OK we'll do it, whatever it is.’ Then one morning he rang me and said, ‘Peter Jackson found somewhere and we should go see it.’ I think we went the next day, and it wasn't a terribly nice day. Peter and Barbara were here, and one of the great things was that Peter was not only a surveyor but also a valuer, so he was ideal to look around the property with. It comprised 55,000 sq. ft of buildings, thirty-seven and a half acres of land, including the woodland across the lane which is seven and a half acres. We didn't look around that long and I said to Luang Por, ‘I think this is probably what you want.’ He said, ‘I agree.’

Because Peter was so skilled at these things he could actually put a price on it, which turned out to be very accurate. He said it was probably worth £200,000. Remember, this was 1983. These days, of course, that'll buy you a rabbit hutch in London. But we didn't have £200,000! Peter did the initial negotiations with the local authorities, but they wanted to keep the playing field for some reason, and the rest was for sale. In the end, the authorities, who were desperately anxious to get rid of this place, decided to sell the whole thing.

The next thing was money, so I rang the bank. The bank manager at Petersfield had been with us from the beginning. We hadn't borrowed any money throughout that
period of four and a half years, and he had been astonished and impressed by the way the place had developed. But only months before the bank manager had moved to a branch in Bedford. I gave him a call and told him about the plan, and he said, ‘OK Mr Sharp, how much do you want?’

‘We want all of it, please.’

‘Ah. How are you going to pay it back?’ he replied.

‘Well, as the money comes in, then we’ll pay it back.’

He laughed and said, ‘Well, the way it went at Chi-thurst was so remarkable, I’ll go along with that.’

So we got the money and made a firm offer to the local authorities. Because this property was 50% owned by the Health Service, it had to go to a national governmental office to be approved for sale. That took nearly a year. It all went OK, but the political party that managed the Bedfordshire Council had changed and I got a message to say that there was a problem: the councillors were claiming it had been sold too cheaply. It was very amusing, because I rang the chief executive of the local authorities and said, ‘OK. I’ve got to put an end to this. Can you do a deal with me on the phone?’

‘I’m sorry Mr Sharp, I can’t do that.’

‘Well. You’re the chief executive, you can do anything!’, I replied.

He laughed. ‘But this is political, I’m afraid, so you’ve got to speak to the councillor who’s in charge of these things.’

I rang the Chairman and said, ‘Can you do a deal with me on the phone?’

‘I can. Being the Chairman, I have that prerogative.’

‘Well, 10% more, and that’s it,’ I replied.

‘That will do it Mr Sharp. This is a political thing.’

He didn’t really care about the money. One of the major reasons why the authorities wanted to sell the property was the heating system, a big huge boiler that fed all the heating through pipes under the ground, all of which were without lagging. Of course, that meant all the heat was going into the soil, and the buildings were like iceboxes in winter. It was costing £40,000 a year to pay for heating and hot water. No wonder they wanted to get rid of it.
up, and there was the thought: I wonder what he'll call it?

Many years before at Chithurst, Luang Por had said as an off-hand remark, ‘One day I’m going to found a great Buddhist city and call it Amaravati.’ I think he’d come across the name in Thailand when visiting Suan Mokkh Monastery. He saw copies there of the Amaravati reliefs and a book of drawings from the British Museum about the Amaravati stūpa. The symbolism in the carvings was such that the Buddha was never represented in human form: an empty chair, a pair of footprints or space under the Bodhi Tree. So when we were coming down from Harnham I thought, ‘I wonder if he’s chosen that name Amaravati for this new place?’

At that time I’d been reading a book called The Splendour of Enlightenment, which is a translation of the life of the Buddha from the Pali Canon and other commentaries and scriptures, done by Phra Khantipālo. It begins with the passage, ‘Four incalculable periods and a hundred thousand aeons ago, in the city of Amaravati, there lived a Brahmin called Sumedha.’ Sumedha hears there is a Buddha in the world, has the initiative to go forth as a wanderer and seeks out the Buddha Dipankara. Having finally found him during the rainy season, the Brahmin Sumedha throws himself down on the ground to fill up a large puddle in the road, so the Buddha Dipankara would not have to get his feet wet. The Buddha Dipankara says, ‘Please get up, Brahmin. Tathāgatas do not willingly tread upon living beings.’ And so then the Brahmin Sumedha got up and said, ‘Please Venerable Sir, you are Buddha, and I wish in the future to become a Buddha. I want to know if that will be possible?’ Dipankara then says, ‘Yes, indeed. In the future, Sumedha, you will be the Buddha Gotama, and you will be born in the city of Kapilavatthu. Your chief disciples will be Sāriputta and Moggallāna.’

So when I was reading this book I thought, ‘I wonder if he will call it Amaravati? He is a Leo, and Leos have a lot of self-confidence, but that would be a bit cheeky …’ I was assuming that Luang Por would have known that story. Down at Chithurst Ajahn Sucitto had made a very beautiful poster of the new place, ‘Amaravati opening, 1984 … ’ I thought, ‘He did choose that name. Ah hah, that’s interesting!’ One day during that week Luang Por and I were out walking across Iping Common towards a layperson’s house, and I said, ‘I realize where you got that name from.’

‘Oh, where’s that?’

‘Well, you know, in the story of the Buddha from a previous life.’

‘What?’

‘You know, when he was the Brahmin Sumedha and he met the Buddha Dipankara. The Brahmin Sumedha came from Amaravati.’

Luang Por stopped dead in his tracks and went absolutely white, completely blanched and said, ‘I didn’t know.’

So those of you who might have heard or seen in the stories that Sumedha the Bodhisatta came from Amaravati, Luang Por chose the name without knowing the story. But also, after I saw the poster, the first thing he said to me was, ‘I named it after you, Venerable.’ Little did I suspect that thirty years later I’d be in the driving seat!

If I can ask then, having arrived here in August of 1984, part of the initiative behind establishing Amaravati was to provide a bigger place for the nuns. As you said, some of them were in the cupboards under the stairs, some were in the pigsty, like the ‘old woman that lived in a shoe,’ I think you used to say.

LPS: Yes.

AA: ‘She had so many children she didn’t know what to do.’ There were nuns spilling out of the cupboards, out from the attic and everywhere, so part of the purpose of Amaravati was to give the nuns’ community a bigger place to develop, and also to establish a retreat centre. Perhaps, Luang Por, you could talk a little bit about those earliest years of getting it established. When it was still a bunch of scout-huts that were freezing cold; what was the spirit of the place? Those first years were heroically rough.

LPS: Actually, I didn’t want to come here myself. I really liked Chithurst. It was very beautiful and just becoming liveable when I left it. Up to that time we were always living in a kind of construction site, repairing, rebuilding, refurbishing this derelict house. But then I thought, ‘The community is growing, maybe I’ll just stop, Chithurst is enough. We’ll take in so many people and then close the doors. I rather liked that idea because it would save me from having to get involved in another monastery. But my role model was Luang Por Chah; when I first went to stay with him in 1967 there were only twenty-two monks at Wat Pah Pong. It had no electricity; a very basic place. But over the years I saw it grow, and the number of branch
monasteries increased every year. He would accommodate more and more, give more opportunities for monks to be ordained and practise meditation. Luang Por Chah was a very generous monk, opened the doors wide and gave opportunities to many people. That was my model of what I should be doing: not to be self-centred and just think of a nice lovely place in West Sussex for myself, select a few people I particularly liked and close the door, even though that was a rather tempting idea! But I knew this wasn’t what I was supposed to be doing. So Amaravati was an extension of that. Also, it’s not far to the north of London or from Heathrow Airport. It has so many advantages. It was a school, so it had big halls, several kitchens and bathroom facilities. I knew you could accommodate lots of people here at one time. You could never make Chithurst into a big centre because it was very limited in its buildings, and it’s in a very highly protected area of England.

Amaravati was to be the ideal situation. When I came here I’d been away from all the worldly problems for many years. I didn’t understand much about money, regulations or any of that business; I was quite naive, actually. But it was a period in the ’80s when the price of oil sky-rocketed. Oil heating was so outrageously expensive, we couldn’t afford to run the central heating system and none of the buildings were insulated. The place was built by the Canadians in 1939 with the idea of bringing children from poor areas of London out into the countryside so they could look at a cow and a tree, something natural for a change. The buildings themselves were quite nicely made out of Canadian cedar, and that’s why they’ve lasted so long, it doesn’t decay. But you knew they were buildings you could tear down, change the situation any way you wanted.

When we came to live here it was summer. It was good weather, but I knew the English winter would be quite difficult, and this is on top of a hill and a very windy place. So we started insulating the buildings. By winter it was really dreary, and it was very cold that year. The roads froze; the plumbing froze. We were living with these little electric fires, paraffin heaters and things like this, just trying to keep warm; wearing lots of warm blankets and whatnot. There was a fireplace here in the Sālā where the shrine is. People would build a fire for me and I could sit right up next to it; the rest were freezing. During the Winter Retreat, when it snowed and froze, the whole place was like an ice-skating rink. There were these yellow lights outside which cast a sickly colour on the ice. I remember walking jongrom [walking meditation] outside. I was cold and there was this yellow, jaundiced light on the frozen ice, and I thought, ‘Life couldn’t be worse than this!’ Then I had this feeling of joy because I didn’t really mind it, I wasn’t creating suffering over it. Everything I saw was miserable, cold, and there was a lot to complain about and create misery around. But I wasn’t doing that and I felt this kind of joy. I remember that was one of the memorable insights I had during that first winter, and I realized that physical misery is bearable, it isn’t suffering, the First Noble Truth. Suffering is the stuff you create around the misery.

There were so many things we had to do, like insulate and re-roof the whole place. But we never really got into debt. People were very supportive and a lot of funds were sent from Thailand to help. Ajahn Paññānanda, who passed on many years ago, was a famous monk in Thailand; he was very interested in helping and was incredibly generous. So it wasn’t depressing. We established the Retreat Centre, which was another big move because I’d never done anything like that. Thai Forest monks don’t run retreat centres. At the time I was scattered all over the place, taking on too much. Finally I began to see I had to narrow my duties to establishing a monastery, rather than following my idealism and trying to help everyone in every way. I realized I have a special ability that laypeople don’t have: I can establish monasteries, and I had been given permission to act as a preceptor or upajjhāya. So I could do these things as part of my monastic duties, where being President of the Buddhist Society or involved in the interfaith movement and visiting meditation groups all around the country ... That was all with good intentions, I quite liked doing it, but I realized I couldn’t carry on like that because the important thing was actually the training of monastics.

AA: If I can ask George, Ven. Kapilavaddho established the English Sangha Trust back in 1956, and you were with him in the ’70s and saw things through until the founding of Amaravati. In particular, I am intrigued about how Ven. Kapilavaddho influenced you in understanding the nature of what a forest monk really was, how that informed your contact with Luang Por Sumedho and Luang Por Chah, and how you gathered that vision, initially from Ven. Kapilavaddho and then from Ven. Paññāvaddho. Also, what were your impressions as things were unfolding with
Amaravati, how things were taking shape and how that fitted with the vision that you received from your early teachers?

GS: Well, I didn’t get that vision from Ven. Kapilavaddho, because the view that gripped everyone there at the time was that the most important thing was spreading the Dhamma. Everybody was obsessed with it, like in the case of Ven. Kapilavaddho, Ven. Paññāvaddho and the other two monks that had been there. They went to Thailand, got ordained, and without any training at all came here to teach. Two of them didn’t last very long, because they disrobed shortly after arriving. And I’d no sooner met Ven. Kapilavaddho, than three months later he died.

I wasn’t interested in Buddhism; I just wanted to meditate. I didn’t understand the first Dhamma talk I went to by Ven. Kapilavaddho, had never heard anything like it. At the end he said, ‘Any questions?’ and I asked, ‘Is the Buddha saying that this thing I spend all my time trying to protect doesn’t exist, this self?’ and he replied, ‘Exactly.’ In all the philosophy and religions I’d read about and encountered in the world, nobody had said that. It was remarkable. That was what got me truly interested, because I knew about dukkha, I knew about anicca, but I didn’t know about anattā. Afterwards I learnt how to meditate. Then he died. On the evening he died I sat up all night and just meditated.

There was a point at which I decided that what he had tried to do, which was establish the Sangha here in England, had failed. I thought, ‘Well, I’m young and strong. I’ll do it.’ I didn’t realize it at the time, but in Buddhism that’s described as adhisthāna, which is very serious intention. That’s what drove me on; it worked for twenty-five years.

After a few years of all this – the different views – I began to get really disenchanted. I thought it was a bit of a mess. At one point I actually got the Trust deed out, which said what the Trust should be doing: providing accommodation and facilities for the Sangha. Nowhere did it mention spreading the Dhamma. We had no other duty to fulfil but to serve the Sangha. At that time I was Director, so I thought the best way of dealing with this was to call a meeting at which I read out the Trust Object Clause. I said, ‘If anybody can’t vote for this they must resign,’ and everybody except Maurice Walshe resigned.1 Finally, I had to go around and mop up, write nice letters to people and then close the place down.

In the meantime Ajahn Paññavaddho was living in Thailand. I wrote and told him what I’d done, and he was absolutely delighted. He used to write to me about once a month. He was teaching me, but it wasn’t Dhamma he was telling me about, it was about the life of a monk; this was fascinating. That corresponding went on for a year or so. Then he decided that he and his teacher Ajahn Mahā Boowa would come to London. That gave Ajahn Mahā Boowa the opportunity to check out the property, check me out, and generally see what was going on. During the time he was there amazing crowds came from everywhere, and for the first time serious chunks of money came. At that time it was just something you’d do when you were in Hampstead: go to Everyman Theatre, go see the Buddhist monks and then have dinner somewhere. Suddenly all these devoted people turn up and they leave cheques and money, which I was astonished by. Formerly, Hampstead people didn’t give to the Trust. At the end of it I asked Ajahn Mahā Boowa what he thought I should do, and he said, ‘You should just wait for the right monk to come along.’ What I didn’t know was that Ajahn Sumedho had met with the two of them in Thailand, and Ajahn Paññavaddho had said, ‘If you’re in London and you need somebody to look after you, ring this man – me – and he’ll look after you.’

During the time of Ajahn Mahā Boowa’s presence we got the assistance of Gerry Rollason, the painter of the portrait behind us here [this interview took place beneath a large painting of Luang Por Chah – see photo on page 26], who is now seriously ill. He was a great stalwart at the Hampstead Vihāra at that time. I don’t know how we would have managed without him as a resident caretaker. So it was simply a question of waiting. In the meantime the place remained closed.

Anyway, I had got an idea about what monastic life was like, and decided very firmly that this business of the English Sangha Trust spreading the Dhamma was simply not something I would listen to. I would make it a point to stop people talking about it. From then on I would never have committees. Even at Chithurst we didn’t have committees, and here we didn’t have committees. I’d learnt this from Hampstead, because what you saw there was the variety of bewilderment and opinions that become evident with committees; absolutely endless. When Ajahn Sumedho turned up with three bhikkhus, it seemed to me the only way you could proceed was without a committee. Rather, you need somebody wise. I decided that in the absence of a committee I would simply ask Ajahn Sumedho to decide. I put all the decisions required before him, he would decide and I would do it. That was really quite simple, not that everybody liked that. It meant an awful
lot of people with very serious views were excluded from discussing matters. It's true to say that in a way it was a kind of benign dictatorship. But the thing is, it worked. For example, at the time all this work was going on here at Amaravati, there were sufficient amounts of money to pay for everything here and also keep Chithurst going. But Luang Por came to me and said, 'The thing is, the laypeople who give all this money, they see nothing for it; all this money is going in the ground. We have to do something.' If I remember correctly, Luang Por asked me for £30,000 to create this Sālā and do something about the kitchen, to provide the supporters with some evidence that their money was actually having some effect.

AA: Perhaps it’s a good time to open things up, if anybody has questions about particular aspects of this continuing story.

Q: I would be grateful to hear about the Temple. How did it come into being?

LPS: It was opened on the 4th of July, 1999. The idea came in the 90s. Khun Wanee Lamsam had been living in England for many years. She was a very shy person and would come on the sly. Her husband and eldest daughter had died suddenly in an Alitalia plane crash. Khun Wanee was devastated, so she brought her other five daughters to England and bought a home in Kingston. She was very interested in supporting a plan to build a temple, but we had to take down several buildings for meditation classes, but it was a very grim place. So those two buildings were removed and we were allowed to build this temple. I know nothing about architecture but I trusted Tom Hancock. He had very English ideas and the authorities didn’t want an exotic temple. They wanted it to blend into the local architecture and not be like a colourful Thai temple suddenly appearing in the Chiltern Hills.

The wonderful thing about this place is that the location of the Temple is perfect in terms of having the shrine facing east. You could develop a plan where the Temple would be connected to this building, the Sālā, which had been renovated, and the cloister. It naturally worked out quite well without having to make a lot of spectacular changes. Tom Hancock had ideas like green oak construction, which is an old European form of building that had almost become non-existent in Britain because it was the first industrialized country. They still used it on the Continent and it was being revived in Britain. So we decided on this traditional pre-Industrial Revolution way of construction. Tom had the idea of building it like a barn. It wouldn’t be an ornate or highly cosmetic structure, but one using simple natural materials. With the green oak beams they used pegs …

AA: Mortise and tenon.

LPS: Yes, mortise and tenon. Ajahn Amaro knows all the English words. Living with him you don’t need a dictionary … [laughter] The bricks were handmade, not mass manufactured. The tiles on the roof were also handmade. The eight oak pillars in the centre and the structure that connects them, that’s Tom Hancock’s genius, because it wasn’t part of the old traditional style. He was extremely proud of that.

GS: Well, I actually saw that being put together. I was staying with Tom one weekend, got up at about 5 o’clock that morning and was wandering through this big house, nobody around. Then I heard some sound and thought he was in his studio. When I got there he said, ‘Good, good!’ There was a model on the table made of thin balsa wood, like when you make little aeroplanes, all put together with glue. I’m sure he’d been up all night. He said, ‘There, put your hand on it, push down,’ and so very gently … He said, ‘No, no, no, push, push, push!’ It would not give. And that was the design you see in the Temple today, virtually unchanged. I’d never seen anything like it, and he’d never done anything like it. It had come about because of the references Luang Por mentioned earlier; also the need for these eight pillars which would form the outline of the simā. It’s absolutely lovely. I thought it was a brilliant piece of work. There were modifications, including a slight modification to the roof, because at some point I said to my friend Freda, ‘What do you think of the Temple?’ She said, ‘It looks like a Tesco.’ Now, I take notice of Freda. Anyway, it was a great success. Tom actually did say at the end that it was the high spot of his career, and he’d had a very, very successful career.
LPS: But also, I didn’t want it to be just European. Our lineage is from the north-eastern part of Thailand called the Isaan, which borders on Laos and Cambodia. Luang Por Chah was born there, Ajahn Mun … all these Thai forest ajahns that are now so highly revered. It is the poorest part of Thailand, but it also had a reputation for producing the wisest monks, and still does. One symbol for Thailand is Thätt Phanom, a famous stūpa and place of pilgrimage in Nakhon Phanom province, which is north of Ubon. It’s a very beautiful narrow stūpa with four sides, quite graceful, whereas in Sri Lanka stūpas are domes, and in Central Thailand they have a particular shape. The stūpa at Thätt Phanom was the symbol for North East Thailand. The original stūpa was quite beautiful, but it fell over before I came to England. They rebuilt it, so today it looks grand. My upajjhāya, the monk who ordained me in Nong Khai, he’s from around that area. He retired from his position as a head monk in Nong Khai province and took on the Thätt Phnom Temple. So with my love for North East Thailand, for Luang Por Chah, I wanted to have a visible sign for that. The spire of the Temple is taken from the Thätt Phnom stūpa. It’s not English at all, but we got away with it.

GS: And Tom liked it.

LPS: Tom liked it, yes.

AA: Luang Por, maybe it’s a good opportunity to consider the possibilities for the future. Any reflections or visions for the next thirty years, durst I ask?

LPS: The Buddha passed away at eighty, exactly the same age I am. But also, because of the generosity of so many people for my eightieth birthday, a fund has been set up. I will be coming from Thailand and sponsoring the Kathina here in November, and the funds offered then will go to Amaravati for the plan to redevelop the site. This was always an idea we had planned, because obviously these wooden structures need replacing. But after building the Temple I didn’t want to build anything. It was, ‘That’s it, that’s all I’m going to do.’ Ajahn Amaro, without any hints from me, has taken on developing the project to improve the conditions here, because it’s very expensive to run, a lot of waste in terms of heating and so forth.

I was recently visiting Abhayagiri Monastery in California, which was started many years ago by Ajahn Amaro along with Ajahn Pasanno, who is still there. It’s in a very beautiful place called Redwood Valley in Mendocino County, north of San Francisco. But it’s all steep hills, very mountainous. I call it a vertical monastery. There’s absolutely no flat land, so it’s a very difficult place to build anything. But they developed some beautiful buildings there, built into the hills, and you get these lovely views. They’ve developed things using the green movement, utilizing the sun and various other sources of energy so that running the place is very inexpensive. But the actual construction of the buildings is quite expensive. It’s not easy to dig through mountains in an earthquake zone. But minimal running expenses, that’s what you have in mind here, isn’t it?

AA: Low maintenance.

LPS: Yes. I think that’s the ideal. Ajahn Pasanno’s done a really good job of carrying on since you left.

AA: George, any thoughts for the future, given that you’re a similar age to Luang Por, and having seen the fruits of your labours taking shape as they have done so far?

GS: Well, no, I don’t. I just like to watch. I’m even older than Luang Por, and I don’t really think I’m going to live that long. No Sharp of this family has ever lived longer than eighty, so I’m doing rather well. I’m so impressed by what you’re all doing; it’s absolutely terrific. I’ve looked at the plan, and that looks amazing. If I could write you a cheque for thirty million you could have it tomorrow.

LPS: You’d have to win the lottery first.

GS: And Tom liked it.

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1 Maurice Walshe was both a scholar in mediaeval German language and literature, as well as Pali. He was one of the early supporters of the EST and stayed involved until his death in 1998.

2 George Sharp is a gifted and well-known painter.
International Elders’ Meeting

From 25–31 May 2015, Amaravati hosted the International Elders’ Meeting (IEM). This was a major gathering of abbots, monks and nuns (both senior and junior) from the Western branch monasteries of the Ajahn Chah tradition, as well as a number of monks from Thailand, who all met together for a week of sangha discussions and meetings. Over one hundred monastics took part in this event. Many participants commented that it had been a great success on all levels, but most importantly on the level of communal harmony or sūmaggī. What follows is a small collection of reflections by various Elders who attended this inspiring gathering.

The Wheel Continues to Turn
by Ajahn Punnadhammo, Arrow River Forest Hermitage, Canada

Twenty-six hundred years ago the Buddha taught the Four Noble Truths for the first time, speaking to his five ascetic companions in the Deer Park at Isipatana, near Varanasi. By doing so, he set turning the Dhamma Wheel that ‘no human or deva or māra or brahmā can stop.’ The Wheel turned at first within the bounds of the ‘Middle Country’, the Ganges Valley. Before the Buddha’s parinibbāna or final passing away, it was already turning beyond those bounds, finding listeners in the furthest corners of Northern India. In the subsequent centuries the Wheel continued to turn, spreading to Southern India, the island of Sri Lanka and the ‘Golden Land’ of South East Asia, into China, Tibet, Mongolia, Korea, Japan, and on and on. The Wheel continues to turn today. Beginning a century and a half ago, a few curious Europeans began to investigate the teachings of the Buddha. In the early years of the twentieth century a few of them even journeyed to the East to seek the going forth. Now, in the early twenty-first century, the Buddhist Sangha is well established in many countries far beyond its traditional home in Asia. In May of 2014 we were privileged to witness a wonderful manifestation of this age-long Turning, when the international elders of the Ajahn Chah tradition gathered at Amaravati Buddhist Monastery. Theras and Therīs assembled from four continents and at least twenty separate countries. There were more than eighty bhikkhus in attendance for the recitation of the Pātimokkha or monks’ rule. If you add up all the Rains Retreats which all the participants have observed, you get more than sixteen hundred rains. Lined up end to end, that many vassas would take us back to the time of Buddhaghosa.¹

The Theravada Buddhist Sangha is probably the oldest organized social formation on the planet. We are all linked by chains of personal human contact to that momentous first sermon in the Deer Park. Now we are spread over the face of the globe, but we try as best we can to faithfully preserve those original teachings. We are living anachronisms; we even dress as if it’s 600 BC. And yet no one could witness the assembly at Amaravati and doubt that this is still a vibrant living form. The teachings are timeless, whether they are spoken in Magadhi or Thai, or English or Russian; whether they are scratched on palm leaves or downloaded to a Kindle, they are a sweet fresh breath of liberation.

There is a phrase that occurs in the Vinaya texts; ‘the Sangha of the three times and the four directions’. Now we have a sense of just how vast those dimensions are. Some of us live and practise more than ten thousand kilometres (what’s that in yojanas?) from Isipatana; indeed, in far lands undreamed of by the inhabitants of old India. And the timescale is vast too; empires have come and gone, whole ages of human history passed by since the first Turning of the Wheel. But looked at another way, the human connection is surprisingly close. Consider that each new bhikkhu is ordained by a sangha headed by an upajjhāya (preceptor) who was himself ordained by another such body. This is a chain of direct human contact, and there are probably only seventy or eighty links between the new bhikkhu going forth in California or London or Bung Wai, and the Buddha’s first utterance of the phrase, ‘Ehi, bhikkhu’: ‘Come, monk’.

All things are impermanent, and we know that the Buddha’s teaching will one day pass away and be forgotten. But events like the International Elders’ Meeting make me think that time has not yet come. Many sādhus and anumodanaś to Ajahn Amaro and the Amaravati sangha for hosting this inspiring and marvellous event, and to the generous lay donors who supported us for this meeting. May the merit of this endeavour be for your lasting happiness and benefit in this life and the lives to come. 🌹

¹ Fifth century Indian Theravadin Buddhist commentator and scholar, notably author of the Visuddhimagga or Path of Perfection.
Warmth, Care, Honesty and Sharing

by Ajahn Ratanavanno, Amaravati Monastery

When I was a young monk, starting to learn about forest monasteries, I had the opportunity to join a Wat Nong Pah Pong ceremony in the year that Luang Por Chah passed away. At that time I knew little about monastic life, but one thing that remains engraved in my mind is the warm hospitality received from the sangha and the lay supporters. I remember that my group had arrived late, when the sangha had already collected their meal, so someone made an announcement to ask the lay supporters to wait for us to get our food before they started eating. This may seem like a minor courtesy, but many people would overlook such a gesture of hospitality. To a newly ordained monk like myself it gave a feeling of warmth and belonging. Something deep inside my mind realized that I wanted to stay with and learn from this group of people.

A sincere Buddhist practitioner cannot overlook such acts as stealing and fraud, because they are very gross acts. The knowledgeable folk in the north-east of Thailand compare this behaviour to a crow that acquires food from snatching and stealing, and then eats alone without sharing it with his fellows. This epigram portrays such a person: ‘A crow is eating bananas, face down with its tail in the air, bending the banana stalk and swaying the tree.’

Or in plain English, ‘Seeing no friend with which he wishes to share.’

This type of behaviour is completely inappropriate for one who is seeking puñña or merit, because the first thing such a practitioner should think concerning food and shelter is to share it. This is true for both monastics and laypeople; sharing food and possessions is the easiest way to attract good-hearted friends, and to create a warm, welcoming atmosphere. So on any occasion when one has planned to be a host, the first thought should always be ‘How will my guests feel?’ If one helps them to feel at home, most of the time joyful feelings will arise.

Earlier this year a number of very special events occurred which resulted in many senior monks and monastic friends staying at Amaravati. There was the International Elders Meeting, Luang Por Sumedho’s 80th birthday, the 30th anniversary of Amaravati, and the first returning visit for Luang Por since Ajahn Amaro relieved him of his burden as Abbot. In anticipation of these rare and auspicious occasions, my first thoughts were about how to make the visitors feel warmly and heartily welcomed. I was confident that monastics and friends would share my wishes, and this quickly became evident from the beginning. There was much arranging, organizing, coordinating and planning of finances for the travelling costs, accommodation and food offering to be done. It is very rare to have such a large number of monastics visiting Amaravati at the same time.

The hospitality we tried to offer was one that was genuine, heartfelt and warm. The organization of accommodation in the Retreat Centre was a complicated and delicate operation because of the limited amount of space. We wanted to avoid any miscommunication with guests, and didn’t want them to feel pressured into leaving sooner than they wanted. The lay supporters of the monastery provided transport and food with great enthusiasm, working energetically from very early in the morning.

Working closely with others often causes problems that are difficult to avoid, perhaps from tiredness or from misunderstandings. Instead of perceiving these as obstacles that make the mind weak, it is more skilful to see them as sources of paññā or wisdom: a whetstone for concentrating, developing and perfecting more and more puñña-kusala, the accumulation of wholesome merit. When the results of so many wholesome actions appeared, especially the smiling faces and the expressions of gratitude and appreciative words from guests, all tiredness immediately vanished. What remained was a feeling of delight, joy, happiness, and warmth, which drew us closer to each other.

Truth: the sweetest word
Sincerity: the closest intimacy
Honesty is a warmer resting place than an embrace
Increase happiness with warmth, delight and care

Luang Por Sumedho offers new robes to the senior members of the Sangha.
A couple of firsts for me: my first visit to England and my first visits to Amaravati and Chithurst Monasteries. In my mind they were mythical places that I have conjured up over the last quarter century. The whole visit was delightful, full of good company and enhanced my sense of connection to the Sangha. The atmosphere of the meeting of Elders which was the reason for my visit, was convivial. I think the theme of the meeting was renewal and retirement. Many of the abbots are growing old … me too, surprise, surprise. And this means the question of how one retires into a more purely spiritual life comes up more often, but we have no heritage of example in the West for this inevitability. We have to invent the last chapter of the book, A senior monk’s life in the West. I look forward to reading that last gripping chapter myself.

During our discussions it was asked whether everybody had made a will. Not many of us had. But it turns out that life is a wee bit complicated here in the West at the beginning of the 21st century. There are a lot of legal formalities, and cultural expectations and, getting back to that ageing issue, a lot of inevitable demises coming up. I really must get around to that will thing … next month for sure! It was helpful to have a decomposing body in residence for much of the meeting. Rocana was her name, I believe. She gave some great teachings. 1

Renewal came up. The ageing buildings of Amaravati need replacement; a thirty-year project, perhaps. I felt sympathy for most of the monks at the conference; we have hardly known anything but construction projects for the last thirty years or so, and there are more really worthy projects underway at the moment.

Finally, the theme of ‘green building’ and the environment came up as well. This is an issue that won’t go away for the foreseeable future … in fact, unless we all tackle it, there may be no foreseeable future. But we seem to be all on the same page, and sharing some hard-won experience and knowledge between our monasteries about this topic. Buddhist communities may also be examples for the world in this area of life, lived ‘simply and sustainably’. 1

Renewal, Retirement and Green Living
by Ajahn Sona, Birken Forest Monastery, Canada

A casual glance at the group photograph taken during the spring-time gathering could lead one to assume that it was a meeting of monks – many monks. However, closer scrutiny reveals, at the right-hand edge of the picture, the presence of some dark-brown robed figures: representatives of our nuns’ community, smiling, honoured and welcomed as part of the International Elders’ Meeting that took place at Amaravati this year.

In a sense it was the very gathering together of sāmanas from almost every continent that was most significant. Among the injunctions of the Buddha for the lasting welfare of the Sangha is that it should meet regularly, in large numbers, honouring the elders of the community and attending to the business of the Sangha in a respectful and harmonious manner. 1

This is indeed what happened at Amaravati in May 2014. The highlight each day was the assembly of the sangha and lay supporters in the Temple for some words of encouragement from Luang Por Liem or Luang Por Sumedho before the chanting of the anumodanā. And there were many other occasions for meeting in different configurations and in different spaces of the monastery: Wat Pah Pong Abbots/Abbots and Senior Nuns, or all the monastics together, met to consider matters of interest and concern to each group. For me, as a visitor to Amaravati, the days appeared to flow by effortlessly. It was only when speaking with members of the Amaravati community that one could have a glimmer of the enormous amount of planning and effort that had gone into enabling this gathering. Sādhu! Sādhu! Sādhu! – to both monastics and the countless lay folk whose generosity of heart made this propitious event possible. 1

1 This refers to the seven conditions leading to the welfare of the Sangha, as outlined in the Mahā-parinibbāna Sutta, Dīgha Nikāya 16.

For the Lasting Welfare of the Sangha
by Ajahn Candasisai, Milntuim Hermitage, Scotland

From left to right, Luang Por Sumedho, Luang Por Liem (abbot of Wat Nong Pah Pong) and Luang Por Khemadhammo (abbot of the Forest Hermitage).
Walking quietly into the early morning Temple, with Luang Por Sumedho holding the space — usually just a few monks and nuns on either side — framed my time at the IEM. The gradual ebb and flow of people, meetings, offerings, tea gatherings, and walks in the countryside seemed to occur on the periphery of those early mornings, that quiet space at the centre of a rich experience of good will, congeniality, and skilful discussions.

Hard to say what is the most remarkable thing that I have taken away. Maybe just a sense of immense gratitude and appreciation for being a small part of a beautiful living tradition, holding a steady thread of path and practice through history, with the promise of real freedom.

Photo captions: opposite page (bottom), Tan Chao Khun Bromasiddhi (seated centre), abbot of Wat Saket and administrative head of the north-east region of Thailand, with an entourage of around thirty bhikkhus (seated right). This page top left, the sangha and lay communities gathering in the Temple for the Anumodanā (meal-blessing); top right, Tan Chao Khun Bromasiddhi, with Luang Por Pasanno on the left and Ajahn Amaro on the right; below, Tan Chao Khun Bromasiddhi meets informally with the nuns’ community.

In May 2014 a large gathering of Luang Por Chah’s international monastic and lay sangha from all around the world met at Amaravati. This exceptional occasion was a demonstration of the power of the sangha refuge, beyond the limitations of our human condition, in maintaining harmonious links between all the Ajahn Chah monasteries and lay communities in the world.

Throughout the meeting, the kindness, respect and mutually appreciative friendliness that manifested were very inspiring. The lay community of Amaravati too tirelessly offered generous support to the monastic sangha and lay visitors. The whole place teemed with activities, but resonated with a joyful and peaceful atmosphere. The sight of this extraordinary coming together of hundreds of friends and long-term disciples, who each day came to express their love and gratitude to our teacher Luang Por Sumedho and to the Elders who had trained with Luang Por Chah, was a constant source of awe and wonder.

Many group meetings and various forums were held to address current issues of the monastic sangha in the West. The exchanges during those meetings offered a rich array of creative approaches to the future development of the sangha and confirmed our confidence that our inheritance from the Buddha, in the form of a way of life whose sole purpose is to bring about liberation from the suffering of ignorance, is indeed a precious jewel and a blessing for the world.

A Thread of Path and Practice
by Ajahn Karunadhammo, Abhayagiri Monastery, USA

Maintaining Harmonious Links
by Ajahn Sundarā, Amaravati
Arriving at Milntuim in late autumn 2011, with the intention of establishing a hermitage for nuns of our communities, was a step into the unknown. I had no idea how things would unfold: whether the local people would be sympathetic; whether there would be support; indeed, whether I myself, would find a way to flourish in rural Perthshire, away from the companionship of my Sisters and Brothers of the larger monastic communities. Our nuns’ community was severely reduced in size, and it was clear that no other siladhārā or anagārikās would be free to reside at Milntuim for some time. At first even my own presence at the hermitage could only be very part time, with lay friends kindly spending time here and attending to innumerable tasks during the times when I needed to be elsewhere.

The vision for Milntuim Hermitage has always been that it should be a source of blessing, rather than burdensome in any way at all. So, having resolved to enjoy the search for a suitable property and now the settling in, it has been my practice to notice, along with the sense of wonder and delight, the inevitable arising of less wholesome states: the anxiety, confusion or doubt – and to transform them. From the start I sensed that the years of practice under the wise guidance of Luang Por Sumedho, Ajahn Sucitto and many other kalyāṇamitta, together with the resources at hand, material, financial and personal, could be sufficient for the ‘project’ to succeed. All that was needed was the willingness to give it a go!

Having been blessed with a tendency to optimism in the face of life’s ups and downs, it was natural for me to proceed, even though, given the state of our community and the extent of the property being purchased, some people voiced concerns (which others may also have harboured). ‘Oh, that’s a lot you are taking on!’ was an exclamation uttered by several sisters and friends. Yet somehow it seemed right to go ahead, carefully, one step at a time, trusting that the paññā faculty (wise discernment) would come to the fore should a serious change of direction clearly be suitable.

The sisters were generous. It was the voice of muditā (gladness) that predominated, and a willingness to offer encouragement, even though it meant yet another senior nun moving away from the main community. It seemed suitable, in response, to avoid making further demands, and, instead to be available at the other end of the phone to discuss matters of concern (either personal or relating to our nuns’ sangha as a whole), and to travel south regularly for festivals and meetings held at our other monasteries.

Three years on, ‘So far, so good ...’ are the words that come to mind. The wide open space of Glen Artney is lovely. This remote hermitage with its woodland and waterfalls is an excellent place for quiet practice; the local people are extremely kind and friendly; and support is adequate. Furthermore, people seem to derive benefit from staying to provide practical support, attending pujas, festivals or the monthly days of practice, or simply coming by on some errand: to offer food, drink tea or walk in the woods. Most importantly, sangha members, including each of the nuns and anagārikās, have been able to visit, some on several occasions. They like it; and now Sister Tisārā, having completed her fifth vassa, will be spending the three month Winter Retreat time at Milntuim.

Looking around at the house and grounds, it is clear that physically they are a work in progress. Some improvements have already been made, including the construction of a porch and other measures to improve the comfort of the house. There is still more that could be done, and there will always be the ongoing maintenance of the outbuildings, fences, bridges and abundant plant life which, left to its own devices, would soon be overwhelming.

Along with this is the inner work, also a work in progress: cultivating patience, discernment, kindness and other positive qualities; using the regular pujas and meditation to brighten the mind, and times of retreat to attune to the subtler patterns of conditioning that can be let go of; polishing the mirror of the heart. This is something all of us can do, and the intention of this hermitage is to provide encouragement and a place where the teachings of the Awakened One can be contemplated and applied for the lasting benefit of all beings. 🌼
Adapted from a talk by Ajahn Kusalo at the end of the Labour Weekend retreat, 2014

It has been two and a half years since I returned to New Zealand to take up the position of abbot of Bodhinyanarama Monastery. While the monastery was quite familiar to me, the leadership role was new, and as with anything new there is a learning curve which invariably presents a range of unexpected, unfamiliar scenarios. For a builder like me the practical infrastructure has been no problem; the known rarely is. We see it coming, we know what it is, what it needs, and we saw a bit off one end and bang a nail in the other. Sorted! But a monastery is in essence a living organism, an assortment of body parts with various brain-mind bits bounding and bumbling in and out of forest fogs and mountain mists and other allegorical alliterations. Most activity is relatively neutral; calm and benign. But it is the unfamiliar, the unknown, the weird and wild that throws us.

I have seen myself standing at the ready, metaphorical chainsaw in hand, the weirdness pinging as green blips on the radar. 'Incoming!' And they bound in, bumbling and swishing ... I saw a bit off one end and bang a nail in the other. What a mess. Blood everywhere.

And then, just when I thought all was clear ... 'Incoming!' But, perhaps a different approach: patiently listening? The plaintiff speaks. My compassionate heart is open and boundless. The defendant speaks. My compassionate heart is open and boundless. Both feel my love and both presume my approval of their presumed rightness. So, no resolution, no harmony ... no blood, but lots of bruising and pain.

And again – perhaps the pre-emptive approach? Make EVERYTHING clear. Lots of announcements and notices: 'Turn off the lights, replace the empty toilet roll, close doors quietly, etc., and generally do everything Ajahn wants.' Nice try – no banana. And the variety of human personality is endless. And the range of possible control mechanisms enormous. Pick a strategy, choose a technique. And to help me do so I Googled 'control' and found that a commonly associated word in management planning is 'risk.'

And then I sit in meditation and observe the same variety of ‘beings’ – benign, and bounding and bumbling – and the same ‘Ajahn’ seeking for the same balance and harmony amidst the worldly dhammas, in the eight winds of change, in saṅkhāras – in ME! I sit in meditation and wonder: who/what else can all this stuff be but ‘me’? This assortment of various brain-mind bits: it’s all the same placating nice guy, control freak, who wants ... who wants? And how easily is the target of ‘what it’ wants’ projected outwards in blaming: the mother, the father, the fluoride in the water ... Or projected inwards: poor me. Don’t they know all the problems I have? And I work so hard and I deserve better and ... the scope for suffering is endless, the range for dukkha enormous.

It’s somewhere amidst all this machination that the movie director steps in and yells: ‘Cut ... CUT!’ The actors look about slightly bewildered, even a little sheepish. Oh yes, they know. Their guise and lack of substance, their ephemeral condition is so visible once the camera pulls back and the full context of stage and scene are seen. And the writer?

What a hack! But wait – oh no – that’s me too.

In Māra’s movie culpability is singular – the buck stops here. And where exactly is ‘here’? Where is the place of knowing? Where do I know that I know? There is no regression, no place. Awareness stands between two mirrors as a singularity with its seemingly repeated appearance the endless replication of conditions borne in various lights. But where does the light land? The Atthi Rāga Sutta uses the simile of the sun entering a house window, landing on the wall. If there were no wall, it would land on the ground. No ground? On the water. No water? It does not land. And the Buddha concludes ‘In the same way, where there is no passion, no delight, no craving, then consciousness does not land there.’

Similarly in the Kevatta Sutta: ‘Consciousness without feature (viññāṇaṁ anidassanaṁ), without end, luminous all around: here the elements have no footing.’ It seems to me that in the first quote, consciousness is unborn by not landing; whereas in the second there is nowhere to land because consciousness is already unborn – yet there is clearly no lack of luminosity.

And there is a risk. Letting go of control is an act of trust, a movement into the complete unknown. The willingness to allow, tolerate, love absolutely anything, everything: enlightenment, insanity, joy, greed, generosity, kindness, anger ... And Māra’s movie is just that, all that: an interplay of the full spectrum of light on the mirror.
Are You Enlightened Yet?

by Ajahn Khemasiri

A few years ago a fellow monk who teaches Buddhism from time to time at a Catholic college was asked by a female student: “How many years have you been a monk now?” “Twenty-five years”, was his reply. “And?” she probed further: “Are you enlightened yet?” After a few moments of getting his breath, considering the directness of a very personal question, he replied equally directly: “Ah ... no!” The young student hesitated for a moment and then burst out: “What? Twenty-five years as a monk and not enlightened? How can that be?”

With regard to the results of his spiritual practice, I don’t know if this direct confrontation led him to feel embarrassed, or if he was simply amused by the innocence of the question. But when he related this incident to me he chuckled and shrugged his shoulders in mock despair, as if to say: ‘Well, what can I do?’

One can only give one’s best and stay closely connected to the Triple Refuge, and that over a period of decades. One practises the Dhamma and lives within a wholesome environment during the entire time. One gives much of one’s time and energy to all the people with whom one comes into regular contact on the basis of spiritual friendship – and that’s more than a few during an extended period of time of monastic life. Nevertheless, such considerations shouldn’t lead to complacency and smugness. In one of his shorter discourses – the Dasadhamma Sutta, which is toned in a kind of pep talk style – the Buddha required his monastic disciples to regularly question themselves as follows: ‘Has my practice borne fruit with freedom and insight, so that at the end of my life I need not feel ashamed when questioned by my spiritual companions?’

The inquiry after the fruits of our spiritual practice has its place, even though it’s often downplayed or even ridiculed within the contemporary spiritual world. And a way of bypassing this inquiry is to philosophize it away with smart Zeitgeist statements like: ‘The path is the goal’ or even: ‘There is no goal, because you are already enlightened, but just don’t know it yet’. The objective of Buddhist mind and heart training is nothing less than complete liberation, and that does not normally occur without putting in some effort. Especially for a ‘homeless one’, there should be an intense commitment to take this training all the way. But who amongst us can claim such lofty levels of consciousness for him- or herself without the slightest doubt and in full conviction?

So what is ‘enlightenment’ anyway, or maybe better: what constitutes an awakened heart? Is it a special state of consciousness in which all troubles and problems are miraculously dissolved? Or is it maybe a deep state of oneness and the feeling of being completely connected with the whole universe? Most people seem to use the not so ideal term ‘enlightenment’ by imagining a very special state, which of course they have never experienced before, and therefore cannot assess what this state would be like. During longer meditation retreats one often meets people who – more or less consciously – are expecting some special state to occur, or who try desperately to work towards such a state. That can be endlessly frustrating if it is not understood that the awakened heart is not a state of mind, but is rather a stage of consciousness beyond all states, and cannot be reduced to the level of arising and passing phenomena. Each state is by its very nature conditioned and therefore not reliable. It cannot be maintained and, if once lost, cannot be recreated. All states of mind are liable to their own laws, and our control over them is very limited indeed. Emotionally we tend to hold on to pleasant states and demand that they stay with us forever. And when they are blissful or even sublime, then we’re prone to overrate and misinterpret them. We are convinced that this temporary bliss must be enlightenment, because it feels so good!

The unpleasant impressions and experiences in our life we don’t even want to let near us, and we invest a lot of mental-emotional energy to suppress them or to try to get rid of them in the most effective way. And yet it is exactly this strategy of either holding on to or resisting which is responsible for the fact that we are being trapped in the dualistic tension between our likes and dislikes. Thus the awakening heart cannot manifest.

If one tries to implement the goal orientations which the Buddha left us in his legacy, it is much more helpful to proceed on the assumption that the development of the heart-mind (bhravana) is a long-term process. But paradoxically, it has to be applied continuously within the timeless, present moment. On the basis of increasing mental clarity and presence one can then begin to see things as they really are, instead of wanting them to be in a way which corresponds with our deluded beliefs, ideas and perceptions. Those ‘things’ are what flit almost uninterruptedly through our field
of perception, in the form of mental objects, impressions and activities. The ignorant mind has the inbuilt tendency to identify blindly with these impressions, and to take them for real. This usually results at some point in frustration and disappointment, and can even culminate in agitated compulsiveness and despair. The aspect of the knowing mind which is always ready to be aware cannot be deceived by the endless procession of mental objects. Within each moment it is acutely aware that this is only a matter of impersonal goings-on. But as soon as one interferes by wanting something or trying to get rid of something, the whole affair becomes very personal. Impersonal processes turn into ‘my feelings and emotions’, ‘my thoughts and memories’ and ‘my perceptions and sense impressions’. We become possessed by our own creations. We literally take ownership of all these fleeting mental events, and are genuinely convinced that this is who we are: either each impression in itself or all of them together. The Buddha spoke in this context of the me-and mine-making habit – an inconspicuous and continuous activity of the mind, but with fatal consequences for ourselves. Once we have observed these inner processes accurately, and also felt them with an intimate detachment, we may arrive at a very important step of insight. Maybe for the first time in our life, we have recognized that we are not the mental objects or activities, but rather that which is aware of them all. And that which is aware of it has no form, no colour, no voice, and in itself is completely empty, open and vast, but in a completely vibrant, alive way. It is a place of quiet receptivity and a consistent, reliable refuge. With this newly acquired perspective we will no longer classify our experiences blindly, because we have looked through the limitations inherent to all states and experiences. We are no longer fascinated by their instability and conditionality, which previously led us into various forms of dependency.

Luang Por Sumedho often spoke about the importance of being awake or enlightened in the present moment, instead of projecting enlightenment as a huge event into the future. He had noticed that many people practise the Dhamma, and even live their whole lives, as if the present moment is an obstacle one has to overcome. They unconsciously tend to hurry all the time towards the next moment, onto which the final fulfilment we all long for is projected. Curiously enough, our fundamental belief, our conviction, lies in the expectation that reliable happiness will always be in the future, even if that future is only a moment away. But if we miss each moment or step on the way, we might in fact be letting our whole life pass by. So the decisive question is not: ‘How do I get enlightened quickly in the future?’, but: ‘How is my connection with the present moment? Is there a quality of consciousness present, in which each impression can be received as it is? If that is the case, then, on the basis of a firm ethical integrity, we have the freedom to choose which impulses of speech or action to follow – namely, the wholesome, the good, the wise and compassionate – and which ones to let go back to where they came from. If such an attitude pervades our whole life, we can really speak of the fact that the awakened heart is manifesting. Whether the level of that awakening corresponds with the traditional Theravada four-stage system is less important here. Instead of wanting to become a stream-enterer, once-returner, non-returner or even arahant in the future, it is far more effective to mobilize the highest degree of present moment to moment, in order to be awake, present and compassionate right now, instead of projecting oneself time and time again into the future.

Seen in this light, the question of monks’ years or years of spiritual practice in general become irrelevant with regard to their final results, except if they are useful as information. In the history of Buddhism there have often been people who only needed a little encouragement and a few pointers to realize the essence of the practice and to also apply it directly. The majority, though, needed years or maybe even decades. But it is an expression of conceit (mâna) to be always comparing oneself with others, whether figures from the vast Buddhist past or spiritual geniuses of the present, in order to assess one’s progress.

Rather than considering the length of time factor in relationship to the spiritual path and practice, it is much more reliable and useful in the long run to turn one’s attention again and again to the heart of awareness, which is always with us. If this becomes a wholesome new habit and steady refuge in the course of our life, our trust in the awakening capacity of our own heart becomes increasingly deeper. Thus we live ‘enlightenment’ constantly, rather than being overly concerned with becoming enlightened within a certain time span.

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1 Aṅguttara Nikāya 10.48.
2 ‘homeless one’: See definition for ‘pabbajja’ in the Glossary.
Today is the last Wan Phra day before the end of the Vassa. Traditionally this is a time when Buddhists determine to practise more diligently, to put more effort into their commitment to the precepts. So it’s not a particularly easy time. When we don’t follow the way of our desires, our likes and dislikes, we challenge the habits of mind and body. So we have to be quite courageous to go through this experience, consciously renouncing sensual desires, anger, hatred, impatience. Some people practise in silence. Some go on solitary retreat. Some go for periods of time without food except for juice or water. That is the value of our life here at the monastery. This way of practice is not something you can do just anywhere. Our way of life offers us the encouragement to abandon attachment to ‘self’; to abandon the fear that life won’t give us what we want; to give up the fear of losing control.

In monastic life you soon discover how little control you have. You get up at a certain time. You work and eat at certain times. You go to bed at a certain time. It’s quite a stringent timetable. This is the beginning of renouncing the life of doing what I want, getting what I want, asking for what I want. When people come here for the first time and see how many restrictions there are in the monastery, they find that very difficult. But I think it’s amazing that there are so many people who can understand that those limitations, boundaries, monastic standards and rules are very helpful and supportive conditions for our practice.

It takes a lot for the mind to sustain the awareness and the capacity to live fully awakened to the moment. We encounter this when we go through the Vassa or another period of greater austerity. So we may have an enormous amount of resistance to waking up to things that are more difficult, until we discover that what we thought was difficult is actually quite OK. For a long time we’d faced the conundrum that the Buddha says we should renounce something, but we think, ‘Actually, I quite like it.’ We’d thought it was very difficult to renounce something, but suddenly realized that what we were renouncing was actually a burden we never really wanted in the first place. It is a process of letting go; of abandoning what is unnecessary in our life.

This is not something we can achieve through force of will. Usually it is not as simple as thinking, ‘Well I believe it’s bad, so I’m going to give it up.’ The Buddha saw this very clearly when he realized the Four Noble Truths through his experience of complete liberation. It’s very difficult to give up something unless you have truly seen that it is unsatisfactory. Why would you give up something you think is satisfactory? That would be going against nature. The Buddha says, ‘This is unskilful’, but I notice that my habits seem to really thrive on these unskilful actions, whether by speech or body, or just through thoughts that are not immediately apparent.

When we come to a Buddhist monastery we may have read many books on Buddhism, and the teaching of the Buddha may be congruent with our philosophy or view. It may seem very rational in a way that speaks to our mind and heart. Maybe we are very idealistic. But when we actually start practising, looking directly at the moment-to-moment experience of our daily life, we begin to encounter a different reality. It is not so easy to have the clarity to see the intention behind actions, thought or speech. Many of our intentions are either unconscious or very much caught up with unawakened tendencies to follow our likes and dislikes. When I say ‘unawakened’, that’s not a judgement. You’re not a ‘bad’ person because you haven’t woken up. It’s just that maybe you haven’t yet learned how to tap into that quality of wakefulness. But this is exactly what Amaravati is about. It is a place of wakefulness, a place where you are reminded to stay awake, and to be kind when you are not awake.
I marvel at the simplicity of the Buddha’s teaching. He points to the created and the uncreated. He teaches us to recognize the place where the world begins; in this ‘fathom-long body’. He is not concerned with the details of what kind of a world this is, or whether we are divine or human. He simply focuses on where the world is manifest, on how the mind creates. He also points to what it creates: worry, anxiety, fear, desire, needs, and even past and future through memories, anticipation, hope and imagination.

One of the beautiful things about the teaching of the Buddha is that there is no judgement in it. He invites us to see the Dhamma, truth. He doesn’t say the created world is good or bad. He just tells us to take a look at what happens when we identify with the world, when we give birth to something, when we create. Sometimes when you are caught up in creating, your emotional response is completely disproportionate to the reality of the situation. I remember that years ago we were allowed to have some chocolate after the evening meditation. My mind would be happy and quiet at the end of a few hours of meditation. Then the tray of chocolate would be passed round the room, and the kilesa or defilement of greed would zoom up and start playing its game. If for any reason the tray was not passed to me, my response would be utter fury.

Luckily, in monastic training you develop a sense of humour about yourself. You learn to laugh at the ridiculousness of our human response to things. It’s funny, but it’s also kind of sad, because we suffer through these disproportionate reactions to life. Somebody doesn’t like us and we think the whole world doesn’t like us, or we are doomed to never being liked. Or we are not good at something, and our emotional response and the memories that come up are completely out of sync; our mind creates some hellish realm where we’ll never be able to do anything in our life because we are a hopeless case. The mind has an amazing potential to create heaven and hell. We are in trouble as long as we think that those heavens and hells are what we are. But eventually we wake up. It takes a while. One of the nuns in training once told me she was having difficulties. I jokingly said, ‘Give yourself ten years.’ For some of us it may take even longer. But what I really mean is: just relax, stop trying to fit yourself into the box where your mind has imagined you should be.

Luang Por Sumedho demonstrated exceptional ease in the way he lived the monastic life. He was a constant reminder to relax: not to be lazy, not to fall sleep, but to find a sense of ease in which we can look at ourselves as we are. We don’t have to imagine some kind of perfected creature that we are trying to emulate. We all go through periods when we create an image of ourselves. Much of our suffering comes from feeling that we have to sustain that image, but along the path of awakening it will be destroyed again and again, because it is not real. It is just a picture in the mind, and if we are not careful we will create both pride and despair through trying to sustain it. But we still tend to live with images of ourselves, rather than with the reality of the here and now. That’s just what happens until we start seeing through the images with which we identify, and eventually let them go for good. And then we find we can survive the ordeal we thought letting go of them would be.

The Third Noble Truth is the experience of nibbāna, the end of suffering, peace. Luang Por Sumedho often asked, ‘Do you really want peace? We may think we yearn for peace, but what do we find when we look at our mind and body? A world of desire and contradictions, a world of opposites and confusion. Our mind has to be really focused on seeing ‘things as they are’ to be able to let go. When we look at life directly, it is clearly unsatisfactory. We want peace but we find restlessness. We get agitated about silly thoughts and desires that have nothing to do with what we want, what we would choose. The powerful force of Māra the Buddhist ‘devil’ is there to make you imagine you are ‘this person’ who has dreadful, nasty, undesired desires. It’s difficult not to believe our minds; we go on doing so for a long time. That’s why I advised a nun to give herself ten years.

Over the years I’ve noticed that my greatest suffering wasn’t so much what I saw within myself as this inner conflict. I was often upset about being stupid; I spent many years as a nun upset for being so deluded, as if I should be different. In a way this was pride: ‘I should be different because I know much more. I’ve had many insights.’ Indeed, I had the insight not to think that way, not to respond so stupidly, to be kind and generous. But my responses did not live up to my ideal, especially when things were unexpected, when I was unprepared. When something took me by surprise I would no longer have any illusions, and so I would feel really upset with myself. Rather than receiving life as it really was, my pride would get in the way and I would become annoyed with myself. Pride is a sense of self that is stiff. It can’t bend, flow or accept life as it is. It is caught up in ideals, maybe grand ideals, but it is not in touch with the basic texture of life. Life is a bigger picture than our ideals.

Sometimes when I have problems in my life or difficulties with practice, I think I’m not good enough. Then I remind myself that even the Buddha was followed by Māra throughout his life. So I say to myself, ‘Look at what is happening’, rather than believing in the thinking about it. That’s what being awake means.

Having problems is not a big thing in itself. It’s not unusual to have thoughts like, ‘I’m terrible. I will never reach enlightenment. I’m not meant to be awake. I’m just meant to be sleepy, with my feet up on the sofa for the rest of my life.’ All of us have gone through this. What
I n A p r i l 2 0 1 3 w e m o v e d f r o m t h e v i hār a i n L i s b o n t o P i n h a l d e F r a d e s . We moved to save on the rent and also to allow us to have a little garden and a small guest-house. The rental agreement means that we have had to arrange and pay for the extensive repairs and improvements to the two buildings we now occupy. The place is about forty minutes from the airport and the centre of Lisbon. It is on a main road with quite heavy traffic, and also surrounded by private houses, some of which have dogs. We have settled in well.

The routine of morning puja, pindaṭṭa (alms-round), small work activities, and evening puja has continued. People from outside the vihāra attend the morning puja at five a.m., and more regularly attend the evening puja. We have had regular meditation workshops for a couple of hours on Sundays, and to keep in touch with the people where we were staying in Lisbon, we have been holding an hour-long workshop on Saturday evenings in a yoga centre in Belém.

One pindaṭṭa route is to Ericeira on the coast, about four kilometres away. Some people offer something every day. If the weather is wet and windy, people sometimes offer the bhikkhu a lift back to the new vihāra. The people we meet on pindaṭṭā usually do not come to the vihāra for the pujas or the meditation workshops. We also go pindaṭṭa to the village of Achada, which is much closer.

We have become known in the area. The father of one of the neighbours caught his hand in the garage door, and his cry for help was heard by Anagārika Anderson, who quickly jumped over the wall and freed him. The neighbour and her mother now sometimes come to the evening puja. The mother has always loved Buddha-rūpas and has said she has fifty. The local council arranges for green waste from the garden to be collected from just outside the gate. Ven. Dhammiko has telephoned to arrange the collection so many times that the person who arranges the collection knows his voice immediately it is heard.

So we’ve settled in well. We are where we are because the place is close to a piece of land which Ajahn Sumedho saw in 2008. It was the proximity to that piece of land near Fonte Boa Dos Nabos which allowed me to discount the current property’s lack of seclusion. Since 2008 we have continued to look at the land, and nearly every bhikkhu who has visited Portugal has been taken to see it. The three Portuguese bhikkhus are confident that it is suitable for a monastery, and are also impressed that there is a place with such old trees and varied flora so close to Lisbon. It is also close enough to the village of Ericeira to go pindaṭṭa.

In July this year my mother, sister and a friend visited, and when I talked with them I thought we might be living in this rented property for another ten years or so, and that it was good enough. We could continue to save funds and keep an eye out for something more permanent. We certainly did not have enough funds to think of making an offer for the land which Ajahn Sumedho had seen. Some people think that property in
Portugal is cheap, and it is true that very rural property can be very cheap, but property close to Lisbon is much more expensive. But soon after that visit we checked our bank statement and saw that someone had made a large deposit. I had heard that someone was intending to make a donation, but had not thought it would be so large. I checked with that person and confirmed that the donation had been made from within Portugal.

This changed our situation. We were now in a position to discuss the purchase of the land at Fonte Boa dos Nabos. We contacted the owner, and after some discussion agreed and shook hands on a price, subject to permission to build a monastery. The owner then gave us permission to look over the land at our leisure and also to camp overnight on the land.

We are not sure what is happening.

In 2010 we had submitted a proposal to the local Camára (local authority) to develop the land as a monastery, and after they had considered it they gave us a letter which set out their agreement in principle. But of course things change and that permission was only valid for a year. So we arranged to meet the president of the Camára. He is familiar with the proposal because in 2010 his signature was on the letter giving permission, as he was then in charge of the development committee. He had a large folder of papers at his side during the meeting, which went very well. We were able to explain our proposal to look after the forest and our need for buildings. This proposal has now been submitted to the whole council.

The land is just forest with a small stream. We have had a good look at it, and at its flora and fauna. A proposal to reclaim the whole area for native species has been drawn up by a recognized forest manager. This plan allows for one non-native tree, a single specimen of Ficus religiosa (Bodhi tree), as they grow well in Portugal. We have asked to allow development of 2% of the ten hectares of woodland. We will also need to put in all the infrastructure: sewage, electricity and water.

As I write this report we do not know what will happen. The proposal has been decided upon and the notice of the decision is on its way to us. Once we receive it we will know if we should arrange for the local Buddhist Charitable Trust to purchase the land. If outline permission is given, we will next have to arrange a very full survey of the land. We will have to know the position of nearly every tree and bush, every contour and geographical formation. Then proper plans can be submitted for full and proper approval. And then work may begin.

So just now we do not know what will happen next.

I have been putting off writing something for the Forest Sangha Newsletter, thinking that maybe everything would be clear soon. But I truly realize that we never really know what will happen, and it is good enough to write that down.

We are not sure what will happen.  

Ajahn Vajiro
A bhayagiri Monastery had the good fortune to host Luang Por Sumedho for ten days in July. Though we encouraged him to spend as much time as he wanted in the secluded Elder’s Cabin, Luang Por was remarkably generous with his time. Most days he spent over an hour after the meal chatting with monastics and lay guests about the ‘path to the Deathless’ and how happy he is to have trained with Luang Por Chah. On 13 July he gave a public talk at the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas (CTTB), the large Chinese Mahayana monastery nearby, describing his early days of practice and how Master Hua, the founder of CTTB, had offered half the land that became Abhayagiri Monastery shortly before his death in 1995. In his introduction Rev. Heng Sure recalled Master Hua’s description of the land: ‘We have a piece of mountainside. It’s pretty rugged. It’s suitable only for monks.’

In the nearly twenty years since Master Hua’s gift, Abhayagiri Monastery has indeed become a suitable environment for monastic training. A total of twenty monks have ordained and trained with Luang Por Pasanno since the founding of Abhayagiri. Sixteen of these monks are still in robes, and four of them have over ten years as a monk. This year Tan Suhajjo took bhikkhu ordination, Sāmaneras Kashmiri and Gambhīro ordained as novices, and Anagārikas Doug and John took on the white robes. Abhayagiri monks typically spend their third year after ordination training in a monastery abroad, and this year Tan Khemako is dwelling at Tisarana Monastery near Ottawa and Tan Pesalo is spending the year at various monasteries in Thailand.

Reception Hall Construction

Although the community of residents and visitors has increased in size, we are still functioning with the original Dhamma Hall (a converted garage) and main building/kitchen (originally a small bungalow). While we have done our best to make use of these buildings, the monastery has outgrown them, and we have begun construction of a new Reception Hall as a replacement. The main floor of the new structure consists of a meditation hall, a commercial-grade kitchen and outdoor wooden veranda to accommodate overflow crowds. The lower floor contains a small shrine room, library, day room for visiting elders, laundry room, showers for male lay guests, food storage space and childcare facilities. The Reception Hall is the last building we plan to construct in the lower cloister area, and has been carefully designed to make the best possible use of the limited flat land available.

We are fortunate to be employing the same team of architects, project manager, general contractor, and heavy equipment operators who built the Cloister Offices (2006) and the Bhikkhu Commons (2010). The project will be completed in four phases whose timing depends on available funding. Hillside excavation and construction of a concrete retaining wall began in July 2013, and Phase I of the construction was completed with the pouring of the foundation and concrete floors in November. Phase II of the project will consist of finishing the exterior walls, roof, windows and doors, so that the structure is weatherproof. However, by late 2013 our financial stewards did not have enough funds to start Phase II, so construction...
was mostly on hold during 2014. Generous donors have now provided enough funds and Phase II will commence in March 2015. We plan to finish the interior of the building in Phase III and landscape the cloister area in Phase IV.

**Pacific Hermitage**

The Pacific Hermitage, Abhayagiri's first branch monastery, established in south-west Washington in 2010, continues to flourish. The Hermitage maintains the practice of a daily alms-round into the nearby town of White Salmon, and four days a week the monks rely solely on the alms received in that manner for their daily nourishment. The Hermitage is unique in that it consists of only three bhikkhus, with no resident novices or stewards. The town of White Salmon has been very generous and hospitable and has offered plenty of support. Ajahn Sudanto, the senior monk of the Pacific Hermitage, is currently taking a one-year sabbatical to focus on formal practice. He plans to return in April 2015.

In other news from this region, Portland Friends of the Dhamma, the Pacific Northwest lay group associated with Abhayagiri Monastery, recently acquired its own centre in the heart of Portland, Oregon. The grand opening weekend in June 2014 was attended by more than a dozen monks from our tradition, including Luang Por Sumedho, Luang Por Pasanno, Luang Por Viradhammo, Ajahn Preecha and Ajahn Sona. Luang Por Sumedho offered a day-long retreat as part of the weekend of festivities and ceremonies, which were attended by a large number of people. It was an inspiring gathering, offering an auspicious start to this new centre.

Opposite page: (top) completion of Phase I of the Reception Hall project; (bottom) Ajahn Dtun, accompanied by Ajahns Moshe, Khemavaro and Tejapañño, view the model of the Reception Hall with Luang Por Pasanno. This page: gathering of monastics at opening ceremonies of the new Portland Friends of the Dhamma premises.

**The Nuns Community at Cittaviveka** – by Ajahn Mettā

Rocana Vihāra and the female community at Chithurst are doing well. I have been living at Cittaviveka for about two and a half years. During that time I have come to appreciate this place very much, with all the wonderful resources that Rocana Vihāra can offer the sīladhāra sangha as a whole. Of course, right now the nuns are not able to make full use of all those resources. The community of sīladhāra is still rather small and, with sisters at both Amaravati and Mīntūin in Scotland, there have been times this year when I was the only resident sīladhāra at Cittaviveka. Fortunately, for most of the time I have been accompanied by an anagārikā. We had Ajahn Cittapālā staying with us on retreat for the whole three months of this Rains Retreat, using one of the kuṭis in our forest. Anagārikā Anna, Crystal and Varada also each spent a month here during the Rains, staying at Rocana or in the forest. Anagārikā Crystal will be staying here again in November and December. Anagārikā Anna has returned to Amaravati. Two laywomen are also living here as part of our community: one is spending the whole year here, the other joined us in July and will stay until the end of the Winter Retreat.

I am hoping that conditions will soon allow more nuns to live here with me on a long-term basis. I am also pleased that during the coming year it looks as though there may be at least one other senior nun here at Rocana Vihāra for part of the time.

Our accommodation consists of Rocana Cottage and Aloka Cottage (which is used as guest accommodation) as well as several kuṭis in the forest. The kuṭis are used mainly by sīladhāra or anagārikās who are either resident here or visiting for meetings or retreats. It is a joy to be able to offer such an opportunity to the sisters of our other monasteries.

The lay community associated with Cittaviveka has consistently been extremely generous in its support of the nuns’ community here. This is very much appreciated. Some come to offer dāna at the vihāra, usually once or twice a week. We also offer an evening Dhamma reflection and/or a guided meditation each week at the Aloka Shrine Room, and a Dhamma contemplation about twice a month on Saturday afternoons. These events are all well-attended by local friends, and also by the many guests who come to stay here for a few days or longer periods. This is very encouraging.

Of course, none of this would be possible without the generous support of the monks’ community and the constant encouragement of Ajahn Sucito and Ajahn Karuniko, whose unfailing commitment to making the nuns’ presence here at Cittaviveka possible is greatly appreciated. 🌟
Ajahn Sundarā reflects on current events in the nuns’ community at Amaravati.

From the very beginning the Sīladharā community faced many creative challenges. How to find a way to establish a traditional Eastern women’s monastic order in the West? How to develop the supportive conditions that would enable it to sustain itself through the ups and downs of experiments, trial and error, inspirations, disappointments, bewilderment and clear insight? Some years ago the continued existence of the community seemed in jeopardy after half of the more experienced nuns departed, leaving only a handful of sīladharā and one novice. This resulted in the junior nuns having to assume a lot of responsibilities very early in their training, while the remaining senior nuns had to come together and join forces to keep the nuns’ communities at Amaravati and Chithurst afloat. It also means that the number of nuns still remains small. It takes time to come into one’s own in the training, and the loss of guidance and companionship has been deeply felt.

Over the past few decades, through an unexpected process of creation, transformation, and adaptations several generations of women have joined the nuns’ community for a longer or shorter period, each bringing a particular flavour to our life. It is noticeable how that through a natural process of evolution, the ideals that pervaded the community’s earlier incarnations have now been replaced by a more pragmatic approach and greater ease with the monastic form. As well as Amaravati Monastery, where most of the nuns live, there is the opportunity to spend periods of time in the quieter environment of Milntuim Hermitage in Scotland, where Ajahn Candasisri has been resident since 2011 and at Rocana Vihāra in Chithurst Monastery, where Ajahn Mettā has been the senior nun since 2012.

Our daily life follows a simple rhythm of meditation, work, study and periods of contemplation and retreat. Sīladharā are regularly invited to teach, lead retreats and speak at conferences in the UK and abroad. Some are involved with running the family events at Amaravati, in the daily business of the monastery and in the preparations for all the large events that have taken place this year. Some continue the tudong tradition in various parts of Europe and the UK, travelling on foot, carrying their alms-bowl and a few belongings, not handling money, living on faith. Throughout the last Vassa we all enjoyed several weeks of solitary self-retreat in the nuns’ kuṭis scattered around the field at Amaravati. Weekly Vinaya study sessions provided a rich source of discussion and shared experience, as well as a deeper understanding of the challenges and benefits involved in a way of life regulated by a strict monastic code.

After the Vassa some nuns will be returning to Amaravati, whilst others will spend time away from the community. Ajahn Sundarā intends to spend three months in Thailand from January through March 2015. Ajahn Cittapālā, who has spent a year on sabbatical in Thailand, Indonesia, and a three-month retreat in the forest of Chithurst Monastery, plans to return to Amaravati in November. Sister Tisārā will spend the 2015 Winter Retreat at Milntuim.

Teachings by some of the nuns have been published through the generosity of supporters in Malaysia, Singapore and Australia, with many other friends helping in various ways to bring the books to completion. People have commented on the enriching Dhamma perspective offered by these teachings. The nuns’ point of view and understanding of the Dhamma offer a fresh approach to Buddhist practice. The nuns community currently consists of ten sīladharā and three anagārikās, with plans for two more women to join it soon. In 2014 Sister Brahmavarā completed her tenth Vassa and is now a therī, and Sister Tisārā finished her fifth Vassa, thus becoming a majjhimā nun.

Sometimes the mind struggles to make sense of this way of life, but we discover that in reality, the way is simply the life we lead each day, committed to harmony within ourselves and with others, to developing wholesome qualities and to letting go of suffering and ignorance. We are very blessed to be living close to the Dhamma. This gives rise to an understanding of the ephemeral nature of our human life and transforms our hearts with wisdom, compassion, and gratitude. Out of it arises an unshakeable peace.
When is a Problem not a Problem … (Continued from page 43)

cling to identity there will be pain and misery. It is the nature of things to sometimes give us pleasure, sometimes misery. The pleasure and the misery don’t come from ‘things’, they come from the mind itself, the mind whose structure is rooted in the pleasure/pain model. Something is pleasurable for a while and then it becomes painful. Even the most wonderful teacher is a pleasant experience for a time, but then you start noticing all the things the teacher does wrongly; you start judging and you think the teacher is the problem. No – the problem isn’t even your mind. It is just pleasure or pain activating itself in the brain; and I mean the brain here rather than the mind. These forces of wanting more pleasure and fearing pain are very powerful forces inside us, arising from the survival instinct, the desire to stay alive.

But the Buddha didn’t teach extreme ascetic practices to try to eradicate these energies. There are practices which aim to push all those forces down, to block out the mind, to create an ‘uncreated world’ – as if we could create an uncreated world by concentrating the mind, by pushing it into a place where it can’t think about anything. But that state is not the uncreated. It’s just a mind concentrated on the peacefulness of having only one thing to focus on. So what is the experience of the uncreated when it’s not artificial? Why does the Buddha say there is an uncreated, an unborn, unoriginated? From the point of view of a mind that creates, that’s slightly bewildering. You can’t think about the unthinkable. You can try to think about it, but the result is only supposition or imagining, an image rather than a reality. We could elaborate endlessly about the uncreated as opposed to the created. But the Buddha didn’t go into a lot of metaphysical detail about the uncreated. Instead he gave us an enormous amount of detail about how to relate to this world of suffering, understand it and let it go. Thus he showed us the Path to the uncreated, with its obstacles, its joys, what is skilful and unskilful, what is beneficial and unbeneﬁcial.

The Noble Eightfold Path with all its details is an amazing map. It’s about goodness. It’s about intelligence. It’s about wisdom. It’s about developing the mind. It’s basically about creating a good world, a happy world of generosity, kindness, love, compassion. It is about the ability to put in the effort to be awake, mindful, to be determined, to be wise. All these qualities are beneﬁcial mind-states, positive mind-states. The Buddha’s path is about developing those good qualities inwardly and manifesting them outwardly; integrating and manifesting them in our everyday life.

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1 Five hindrances: sensual desire, ill-will, laziness and drowsiness, restlessness and worry, and sceptical doubt.

Seven factors of enlightenment: mindfulness, investigation of mental phenomena, energy, rapture, calm, concentration and equanimity.
supporters of the Thai Forest sangha – arrived at a village lower down the valley for a skiing holiday. They were delighted one morning to be able to leave the village on a cable car and then ski down a slope that passes just below the hermitage, to pause and offer food into the monks’ alms-bowls. An unusual sight indeed in this part of the world. So much interest was aroused among the other skiers that there was a risk of causing a pile-up on the ski slope!

The islands of Sicily and Sardinia also receive regular visits from sangha members. With their sandy beaches, citrus groves and Mediterranean maquis, and their proximity to Africa, they are so different from the Alps it’s difficult to believe that they are in the same country. Ajahn Chandapālo has been leading retreats in Sardinia for about fifteen years now, always in late November or early December, when the weather can still be quite balmy. The retreat house used to be a mental hospital, has plenty of space for the forty or so participants and lies right at the edge of the beach in a small quiet bay called Solanas near the south-eastern corner of the island.

Our connection with Sicily is also long-standing. We are still making good use of a jeep that was offered by a young Sicilian man the first time he ever visited the monastery in the early days, having driven it all the way from Catania, a distance of more than 800 km. He has also hosted us several times at his parents’ house near the foot of Mount Etna, Europe’s largest active volcano, and we have been taken to see much of the island, led retreats and given public talks in a variety of places. Last year a series of talks and meditation classes was organized in a villa belonging to the local council right on the coast, just opposite three column-shaped islands called the Cyclopean Isles. According to local legend, these great stones are the ones thrown at Odysseus by the one-eyed giant Polyphemus in the Odyssey. There is so much interest in Catania...
that there are plans to open a vihāra there, and since many of the Buddhists living in the area are Sri Lankan, to eventually invite a monk from Sri Lanka to take up residence.

Over the years the Sri Lankans living in and around Rome have been regular and generous supporters of Santacittarama. One couple who have been in Italy since the ’80s helped to clean and prepare the small villa in Sezze Romano, ready for Ajahn Thānavaro to establish the first vihāra there in 1990. One of their four sons, Vidure, remembers visiting when he was about twelve years old. This last September, after completing a year of training as an anagārika, he requested pabbajjā from the sangha, taking the ochre robes and alms-bowl and ten novice precepts in a ceremony that was attended by an estimated 700 people. It was probably the biggest event we’ve ever had and fortunately the weather was glorious. He is now known as Sāmanera Vimutto, which means ‘freedom’ or ‘liberation’, reminding us all that the purpose of the religious life is not status or personal gain, but complete liberation from greed, hatred and delusion and thus freedom from suffering. Two months previously our Italian anagārika Diego took pabbajjā at Amaravati, taking the supremely auspicious name of Sāmanera Mahābodhi, meaning Great Awakening. After spending the Vassa there he rejoined us in November.

With the growing resident community and increasing number of guests and visitors, the need for a large meeting hall is ever more keenly felt. It is taking longer than expected to obtain the final authorizations for our Temple Project (described in the last newsletter), but as these mainly concern the building’s resistance to earthquakes, it is comforting to know that the safety factor is being given thorough consideration. It seems likely that work can begin in the spring of 2015. This delay has allowed us more time to give further attention to the details of the design, and our architects have produced a series of inspiring images of how the building should look once completed. A selection of these images, as well as regular updates on the project and eventually an explanatory video, can be found on our website.
Having arrived in July 2014, it has been inspiring to witness the countless blessings already coalescing to support this effort. Local Thais have been quick to find us, and many days at the monastery already include the kind of inter-cultural meal-time gatherings so common in our Western branches. They and others, Americans and interested people from farther afield, have combined to fill our empty houses with all kinds of necessary and useful things. And a Pha Pah was organized by supporters from Thailand, the UK, and locally, which was joined by many visitors and some monastic guests including Luang Por Viradhammo and Ayyā Medhānandī from Canada, and Ajahn Cāgānando from the Pacific Hermitage. Day-to-day, we’ve been getting to know the land and the area, and practising with a simple monastic routine of morning and evening pujas, morning work, the mealtime, and weekly Dhamma gatherings.

As to our nascent monastic community, during the Vassa I was fortunate to have the companionship of Ajahn Ānando, who has for some time been a partner in helping me guide this project. As he needs to care for his elderly parents in the UK, he has returned and will remain at Amaravati for now with a view to joining me in a role of shared responsibility here in Temple when conditions permit. Ven. Saddhammo, a five-vassa American monk from Wat Nana-chat has been with us also, as has Anagārika Zack Roberts, a local young man who started as a lay attendant and has now become our first anagārika. Ajahn Cāgānando plans to rejoin us next summer, after he has finished his commitments to the monasteries on the West Coast. We look forward to a cold and quiet winter, and the dawning of a new spring next year. More information can be found at forestmonastery.org

With mettā,

Jayanto Bhikkhu

Live free or die. Such is the state motto printed on every license plate on vehicles from New Hampshire – the state in the New England region of the north-east US where our community is taking root this year. (Perhaps ‘Live free: die before you die’ – as Luang Por Chah exhorted us – could be the Buddhist version.) We hope to live free, in the Buddhist sense of freeing the heart from dukkha, here at the site identified during last year’s Vassa when Ajahn Cāgānando and I stayed in Boston, and where we are gradually establishing a new monastery. Temple Forest Monastery is the name we are using – with our location being in the town of Temple, NH. Bruce and Barbara Kantner, the owners, have for the past thirty years stewarded the land and buildings that comprise the property with great care and sensitivity, and a commitment to finding a way that it can be of benefit to many. To this end they have reduced the price, and generously allowed us to begin by renting – we all now hope that a sale will be possible during the first half of 2015.

Photos top left and above: images from the Pha Pah held on 5 October 2014; bottom left, a typical gathering in the Shrine Room.

As to our nascent monastic community, during the Vassa I was fortunate to have the companionship of Ajahn Ānando, who has for some time been a partner in helping me guide this project. As he needs to care for his elderly parents in the UK, he has returned and will remain at Amaravati for now with a view to joining me in a role of shared responsibility here in Temple when conditions permit. Ven. Saddhammo, a five-vassa American monk from Wat Nana-chat has been with us also, as has Anagārika Zack Roberts, a local young man who started as a lay attendant and has now become our first anagārika. Ajahn Cāgānando plans to rejoin us next summer, after he has finished his commitments to the monasteries on the West Coast. We look forward to a cold and quiet winter, and the dawning of a new spring next year. More information can be found at forestmonastery.org

With mettā,
like screen of consciousness. At some time I must have bought a ticket. When? Why? I don’t know. What can I know? ‘What there is to be known.’ And whatever appears in consciousness can be known. And what doesn’t ... can’t. If there’s a script to be written, I can help, I can add my thoughts. If there’s acting to be done, I can recall Shakespeare’s As You Like It:

All the world’s a stage
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts ...

In many suttas the Buddha still encounters Mara and his reaction is always the same: ‘I know you, Evil One. But, Evil One, I have neither come into your hands nor have I come under your control.’ Then Mara the Evil One – sad and dejected on realizing, “The Blessed One knows me; the One Well-gone knows me” – vanished right there. And ‘vanishing’ is not extinction, merely a change of state. From unknown to known. From avijjā to vijjā. Conditions remain as they are. They do what conditions do – arise, exist, then cease – and they are thus: ‘impermanent, unsatisfactory and not-self.’ Well, yes, we all know (have an intellectual understanding of) that, but perhaps we don’t quite know it. Regularly entering silence and solitude helps us to see better, to know.

And the scriptwriting, the acting, the props, perhaps even a little make-up now and then? What of that? What of conditions? What of this body-brain-mind as an aggregate? This collection of bits amidst a collection of bits ...? It really is without control. The eyes contact form, initiating intention. The nose discerns odours, recommending selection. The hand chooses food, suggesting digestion. There is cooperation. Participation. And if the stomach disagrees with the choice, it may reject the offering. Don’t take it personally, that being is just doing what it thinks best. There are many other beings, each doing likewise. Don’t take any of it personally.

Amongst those many beings there are many who are similarly trying not to take it personally. Making their exits and entrances but with an increasing understanding of the contextual nature of scripts and props, of slings and arrows (of outrageous fortune). There are whole groups joining together to cooperate and learn how not to be a ‘landing place.’ Establishing the intention to: ‘keep the Refuges and Precepts, cultivate the Brahma Vihāras and to enliven the Four Noble Truths.’ Bodhinyanarama membership is doing nicely. You could start or join a local chapter or pay us a visit. Bring your own costumes and props, or we can supply. The next performance of another version of the same movie begins – right now.

Enjoy the show.

1 Atthi Rāga Sutta, Saṁyutta Nikāya 12.64.
2 Kevatta Sutta, Dīgha Nikāya 11.
3 Brahma-nimantanika Sutta, Majjhimā Nikāya 49.
4 Kassaka Sutta, Saṁyutta Nikāya 4.19.
AMARAVATI RETREAT CENTRE – 2015

Monastic Retreats (led by a monk or a nun)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Duration</th>
<th>Teacher &amp; Theme/Title</th>
<th>Booking Opens</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>3–7 April</td>
<td>5 Days Ajahn Dhammanando</td>
<td>Open</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>24–28 April</td>
<td>5 Days Ajahn Bodhipala</td>
<td>Open</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8–20 May</td>
<td>13 Days †Ajahn Amaro</td>
<td>Open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5–14 June</td>
<td>10 Days †Ajahn Vimalo</td>
<td>5 Dec. 2014</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10–12 July</td>
<td>Weekend Ajahn Ratanavanno</td>
<td>10 Jan. 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>17–26 July</td>
<td>10 Days †Ajahn Kalyano</td>
<td>17 Jan. 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>31 July–4 Aug.</td>
<td>5 Days Ajahn Ahinsako</td>
<td>31 Jan. 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11–20 Sept.</td>
<td>10 Days †Ajahn Amaro</td>
<td>11 March 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2–6 Oct.</td>
<td>5 Days Ajahn Anando</td>
<td>2 April 2015</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>16–18 Oct.</td>
<td>Weekend Ajahn Merta &amp; Brother Nicholas</td>
<td>16 April 2015</td>
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<td></td>
<td>6–10 Nov.</td>
<td>5 Days Luang Por Pasanno</td>
<td>6 May 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>20–29 Nov.</td>
<td>10 Days †Ajahn Sundara</td>
<td>20 May 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>27 Dec.–1 Jan.</td>
<td>6 Days Ajahn Nānarato</td>
<td>27 June 2015</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

†Previous retreat experience required.

New Booking Information

Due to the high demand for retreats, the Amaravati Retreat Centre is replacing the current postal booking system with an online booking system which will be easier and quicker to use for everyone, regardless of location. As well as booking retreats, the new system will allow you to update your personal details, to cancel your booking should you need to do this, and to check where you are on the waiting list. If you do not have easy access to the internet or a contact email address, the new system allows someone to book on your behalf.

Bookings for 2015: All bookings will now have to be made using our new online booking system at www.amaravati.org/retreat-centre/booking/. Paper forms will no longer be accepted for 2015 bookings.

Booking for each retreat will open six calendar months before the start date of the retreat, at 19.00 GMT. You can apply for up to three retreats in any one retreat year.

Bookings for 2014: This remains the same as it has been throughout the year, so you will need to download a booking form, available on the website, and then post it to us, or use one of the booking forms available at the monastery.

Please visit www.amaravati.org/retreat-centre/booking/ for booking opening dates, retreat status, or to contact the Retreat Centre.

The Retreat Centre managers only deal with bookings for the monastic retreats. The ALBA, Buddhist Women’s Network (BWN) and Family Events each have their own booking system.

Please note that the Amaravati Retreat Schedule is no longer published first in this newsletter. If you wish to receive the very first posting of each year’s schedule of retreats, please subscribe to receive Looking Ahead by email or post (see following page) or check via the Retreat Centre website at www.amaravati.org/retreat-centre/
Where to find news and announcements from the monasteries

Now that Forest Sangha Newsletter is published once a year, much of the news from the monasteries formerly provided here on the Grapevine is instead published elsewhere. Below is a guide to how you can get news from many of the monasteries. The postal address and contact details for each monastery can be found on the back page.

'Portal' website: www.forestsangha.org
www.forestsangha.org acts as a portal to Ajahn Chah branch monasteries with non-Thai resident sanghas. News and announcements can be found on the Current News page, as well as by following the links under Newsletters.

Books and audio: www.forestsangha.org
Visit www.forestsangha.org for free distribution books and audio from the monastic communities of Ajahn Chah.

Amaravati
Announcements can be found at www.amaravati.org. Amaravati has its own quarterly bulletin, called Looking Ahead (also available on the website). Subscribe to receive this by email or by post, at Looking Ahead, Amaravati, or at abmnews at amaravati dot org

Aruna Ratanagiri (Harnham)
Look under News on the website www.ratanagiri.org.uk for links to a blog and announcements. Look under Participate for retreats and more. Email sangha at ratanagiri dot org dot uk for details.

Cittaviveka (Chithurst)
For an email containing Cittaviveka's seasonal newsletter, write to the monastery or go to www.cittaviveka.org where you can subscribe on the News webpage.

Hartridge (Devon)
See the Announcements page on their website at www.hartridge-monastery.org. Hartridge periodically produces a newsletter: contact the monastery to sign up to receive it.

Dhammapala (Switzerland)
In addition to announcements posted on their German-language website at www.dhammapala.ch. Dhammapala produces an annual newsletter available in German, English, French and Thai. Electronic files of these can be downloaded from the website, or to subscribe write to the monastery or email info at dhammapala dot ch

Santacittarama (Italy)
Santacittarama has a website in Italian, with English and Thai versions as well: www.santacittarama.org. News can be found there as well as a digital newsletter. To subscribe to this, email the monastery at sangha at santacittarama dot org

Bodhinyanarama (New Zealand)
For news and announcements and to download their newsletter, please go to www.bodhinyanarama.net.nz. To receive the newsletter by email or post, write to the monastery or email sangha.nz at gmail dot com

Abhayagiri (USA)
Updated news and announcements can be found on Abhayagiri's website at www.abhayagiri.org

GROUPS & CONTACTS

The list below includes people who have had contact with the Sangha over the years, who in most cases sponsor regular sitting groups in their area. Please note that the Sangha does not explicitly endorse or take responsibility for any of these people or their activities.

England
Bath
Anne Armitage (01225) 859217
Banbury
Sarah Wallis (01295) 278744
Basingstoke
Alan Marshall (07425) 175974
email: malan231 at aol dot com
Bedford
David Stubbs (01234) 720892
Wokingham
Anthea West (0118) 9798196
Brentwood
Richard Burch (01277) 626225
Brighton – Bodhi Garden (www.bodhi-garden.org):
David Glendining (01273) 723378
Bristol
Lisa Dix (0117) 9350272
Cambridge
Meg Clarke (01223) 424357
Canterbury
Charles Watters (01227) 463342
Carlisle
Jean Nelson (01228) 546259
Chichester
Tony Halter (01243) 672126
Cookham, Maidenhead
Emily Tomalin (01628) 810083
Hemel Hempstead – Bodhiyana Group:
Chris Ward (01442) 890034
Kendal – Buddhist Group of Kendal (bgkt at etherway dot net):
Sumedha (01539) 729793
Leeds Area
Daniela Loeb (01132) 791375
Anne Grimshaw (01274) 691447
Liverpool
Ursula Haeckel (0151) 4276668
London Buddhist Society,
58 Eccleston Square, London SW1 (0207) 8345858
London Hampstead
Caroline Randall (0208) 3480537
Ann Booth (0207) 4850505
London West
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Stewards: English Sangha Trust

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www.hartridgemonastery.org
Stewards: Devon Vihara Trust

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Miltuium Hermitage
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Stewards: Miltuium Hermitage Trust
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www.abhayagiri.org
Stewards: Sanghapala Foundation

Temple Forest Monastery
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www.templeforestmonastery.org
Stewards: Jeta Grove Foundation

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www.bodhinyanarama.net.nz
Stewards: Wellington Thera-vada Buddhist Association

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Arrow River Forest Hermitage
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Canadian registered charity BN 89263 5483 RR0001

THAILAND
Wat Pah Nanachat
Bahn Bung Wai, Amper Warin, Ubon Rajathani 34310
www.watpahnachat.org

FURTHER RESOURCES
For a list of international monas-teries in the Buddhist tradition of Ajahn Chah, along with further resources and information, please visit the sangha portal website:
www.forestsangha.org

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