



# FOREST SANGHA

## newsletter

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### THIS ISSUE

**Cover:** ■ Devotion and Gnosis; Ajahn Sumedho  
**Articles:** ■ Metta and the English Problem; John Aske  
■ An Open Letter from Dharamsala  
■ On Returning to Ladakh; Ven. Sanghasena  
■ Indian Summer; Ven. Asabho  
**Editorial:** ■ The Highest Tantra; Ajahn Sucitto

**HOME** ■  
**BACK ISSUES** ■

## Devotion and Gnosis

This year is the centenary of the first Parliament of Religions, held in Chicago, 1893. In recognition of this, we will be printing articles edited from talks on religious themes. Below, Venerable Ajahn Sumedho points out a mode of practice that is common to, and transcends all, religious forms.

The words 'spiritual', 'holy', 'pure', 'good' and 'true', are important in any language because they remind us, of the aspiration of our human hearts.

We aspire to be good, and to be pure, yet we easily forget the whole purpose and opportunity of being human ... to realise the true, the beautiful and the good. Sometimes we can become cynical and think that these are naïve daydreams of people who don't know anything.

The purpose and importance of human life can get lost in the Western world of middle class values and affluence. We can get what we want these days, but even when we do get everything - or a lot - of what we want, in the end we feel a sense of the meaninglessness or purposelessness of our lives. Depression is a common experience in affluent countries. Why is this, why do we think that if we get what we want then we should be happy? At this point, our ability to reflect on the way things are makes it possible to open our hearts to spiritual enquiry.

You can see Religious Paths as being of two kinds. There's the Devotional Path of religion and the Wisdom or Gnostic Path. In Hinduism, Bhakti is the devotional path, Nana or Raja Yoga the path of knowledge, profound insight or wisdom. Theravada Buddhism in Sri Lanka, Thailand, Burma, Cambodia and Laos emphasises the Gnostic Path, and yet if you went to a country like Thailand you would find most of the people devotional. Modern Christianity has become very devotional and wisdom is not highly developed in modern Christian institutions. Yet, ultimately, devotion and knowledge meet. It's not that one cancels out the other; and yet, like everything, if we choose one and reject the other then something is lost. We can't just be wise without some level of devotion, and to be truly devoted means that inevitably we will become wise.

Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism are generally regarded as orthodox traditions, meaning they come from the revelations of prophets or sages. They have given powerful direction to human beings in realising and fulfilling their aspirations towards the immortal Truth, the Divine, the Absolute, or whatever one chooses to call the ineffable, Ultimate Reality. The definition of religion then is 'that which binds an individual being to the Divine', and thereby engages the whole life of that being. To be religious means that you engage your whole being with that one aim of Ultimate Realisation. It's not just a half-hearted, dilly-dallying with religious symbols, or ceremonies.

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Devotional practice aims at total commitment and engagement towards ultimate reality, and gnosis, nyana, is the ability of the human heart and mind to contemplate existence and the way things are.

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However, so much of what we call religion is a half-hearted adherence to culture or tradition. When you ask English people about the Church of England these days, they will usually say, 'It's part of being English.' Whether you believe it or not doesn't make any difference; it's more a matter of having a cultural identity to hold on to. But the aim of religion is to transcend cultural identity of any sort.

Even though as a religious seeker, the individual human being aims and aspires towards Ultimate Reality, that Ultimate Reality is not personal, not individual; it doesn't belong to any religion. It's not something that one religion has and another hasn't. This is where so much misunderstanding amongst religions takes place because of the tendency to think, 'Our Way is the only Way.'

This is our human blindness. However, we must have enough confidence in the religious form we're using to engage our whole being with it; we can't just think right now that it's a good idea, and make ourselves do it. We have to act from a level of trust and confidence in the convention itself. We need some trust or interest in it to start engaging our whole being, to give up everything for that Ultimate Truth. Then, when we have that measure of trust in what we're doing, we can devote our whole lives to Realisation. Once we've set our aim, then whatever happens on the worldly plane of conditions is part of the Path. We have to use the good fortune, the misfortune, the successes and the failures on this conditioned plane. We use those because we are no longer identifying with or demanding that the conditioned realm be anything; we recognise that whatever the condition is, it's part of our experience. We look into it, we bear with it. One has to bear with how things move and change. They may change in ways that we cannot control. But we no longer try to exert control, or hold onto what we want, and waste time trying to get rid of that which we don't want. We become trusting and confident because our goal is no longer a worldly conditioned goal. It's an Absolute Ultimate goal.

'Gnosis' is the Greek word: in Pali we use 'nyana', which means 'profound knowledge'. Any Gnostic religious form is a reflective, contemplative practice. Devotional practice aims at total commitment and engagement towards ultimate reality, and gnosis, nyana, is the ability of the human heart and mind to contemplate existence and the way things are. When we use gnosis, we are not starting with any a priori assumptions. We're not taking a position that 'There is (something)' or 'There isn't', but we're watching and witnessing what we're experiencing at this very moment. We're contemplating; we're thinking in a reflective way about the meaning of life. 'What is its purpose?' 'Why was I born?' 'What happens when we die?'

These are reflective questions. We can't answer them in the usual way. If we ask, 'Why was I born?' somebody might say, 'You were born to love the

Lord.' That's all right when you're a child, but when you grow up you start questioning: 'Why does the Lord need to be loved?' 'Why would He create so much misery?'

We develop a way of dismissing such reflective questions about existence and Ultimate Reality; we tend to say, 'Don't bother with that, you have to learn how to pass your examinations and become number one. You have to become a success.' We hold up all these worldly goals. As a boy I was given worldly things to aim at in life: Ultimate Reality and Enlightenment were not even pointed to as anything worth bothering about.

What do we have now here in modern Britain? The goal is to try to create the perfect society. On a grander scale this includes a harmony between all human beings, a United Nations built on ideas of justice, mercy, ecology and conservation, sharing and goodness; all aimed at life on planet Earth. Once we get everything right on this Earth then we will somehow be happy. Yet even then, taking our earth-bound ideals to a complete and totally successful manifestation, it would still be unsatisfying to the human heart. It would not be enough for us; we would still find something to complain about because discontent of the human heart comes from the basic misunderstanding of the human being, when the Ultimate Truth is not recognised or realised. Nowadays, modern material values tend to be more attractive to masses of people: yet underlying all that, there is still a recognition of that aspiration of the human heart; and that aspiration goes for all humanity.

The Ultimately True and Beautiful; these are words that point to that in each of us that aspires to something beyond the changing conditions of the sensory world. The sensory world is this way - it changes; and changing doesn't mean it gets better and better. Sometimes it gets better and then it can get worse and then it can get better again. But things just don't get better and better, and they just don't stay the same; they may change in ways that we cannot control, or in ways that we don't like.

The human body changes, doesn't it? It doesn't change in the way we want it to; it changes into the way we don't want it to - until we have perspective on the Ultimate Reality. Then, the changing-ness of the sensory realm can be perfect for us, rather than changing in a way that we don't like. We begin to open up to life in its totality, its pain and its beauty. We are quite willing to endure the pain, the misfortunes, the blame, the rudeness and the meanness of human existence when we realise it as change rather than as some personal threat or terrible disillusionment with God because 'God shouldn't have created the world like this. He should have created it perfect according to the way I think, where things don't change but they remain in a permanent or static state of beauty and pleasure'. But sensual pleasure - one moment after the next, to eternity - sounds horrible doesn't it ... because pleasure is unsatisfying. Imagine just being praised for eternity ... or being able to live for five hundred years - that's eternal enough - with a crowd of obsequious sycophants saying, 'You're wonderful ...' 'I love you ...' 'You're the best.' Five hundred years of that!

With gnosis or insight knowledge, we remember that the human experience is the experience of knowing. Consciousness is a way of knowing things; when we are conscious of something, we know it. Just like seeing an object with my eye; I know what it is. It's conscious where the eye contacts the object; that's a kind of knowledge, one of many levels of knowledge. But



gnosis takes the ability to know to an Ultimate position beyond interpretation.

For example, from the basic assumption that 'I am this body', and 'I am a person', whatever I know about my experience is interpreted from a very personal position: how it affects me; whether it pleases or doesn't please me. My ability to see and to know individual people on a personal level is tinged with infatuation or aversion, prejudice, opinion. All these come in and distort my knowing. Even though the eye sees, if there's 'me' and 'mine' and the assumption of 'me' and 'mine' accompanying that visual consciousness, then I interpret everything in a very personal way; various biases or prejudices influence that knowledge.

Gnosis, in Buddhism, is realised only through mindfulness. We can't study it in a book; it's not conceptual. We can't read a Gnostic text and suddenly become enlightened. The Buddhist teachings, as Gnostic teachings, are to encourage a total engagement with the Dhamma or the Ultimate Reality through reflecting on the way things are.

For example, we can reflect on the way things are within the limits and conditions of having a human body. What are the limitations of being human? The Buddha encouraged us to reflect upon old age, sickness and death, because this is what happens to every human being. Through a lifetime, from birth to death there is always a certain amount of pain and sickness along with the inevitable death of this body. From the personal position, we try to hold onto youth - because society adores the youthful, those who can do things and get things done. But if we reflect on the way things are, we see age as restraining. And anything that restrains and limits is helpful as a reflection. We can use age as Dhamma, rather than create suffering around it as a personal failure or problem.

Then on the emotional plane, what can I expect in this life as an individual being? Things are going to be good and bad; there's going to be praise, and I will be criticised. I will experience happiness, suffering, and the loss of loved ones. These are common experiences of all human beings whatever their cultural context.

So we can reflect, with wisdom using the limitations of our human experience; the limitation of masculinity, or femininity; the limitations of age. In monastic life, we use voluntary limitation as a form for restraint and relinquishment. We use it to reflect, to develop more and more of this profound insight into the Ultimate Truth, the Ultimate Reality, the Saccadhamma. The Saccadhamma is that which is ultimately true and real, Ultimate Reality. The sense of devotion is fuel to keep us going with loyalty and commitment and love. These come from the heart, so it is not just intellectual idealism. We feel it in our hearts; we long for and aspire towards realisation; we offer our lives to realise and be free from all delusions. We are willing to endure the inevitable changing process of this sensory realm in order to learn from it, from whatever happens: because whatever happens, is the Path for a Gnostic and a devotee of the Dhamma.



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**HOME** ■  
**BACK ISSUES** ■

## The Practice of metta and the English Problem

*Introducing your average Englishman to the practice of loving-kindness is all very well, but when directed towards oneself, as John Aske explains, the results can be traumatic.*

The Venerable Anuruddha had a problem. The tried and tested methods of teaching the metta (loving-kindness) practice did not seem to work with the English. There had to be a solution. The Venerable Anuruddha sat down and went over the facts.

The metta practice rests on the basis of loving oneself, or at least liking oneself. Without this step, no further progress is possible, either in the metta practice or in the practice of any of the Brahma Viharas (the Diving Abidings, that are - apart from anything else - the mortar of the holy life). And with the English - the men at least - this first step was proving very difficult, if not impossible.

For the English, the idea of an exercise which begins with 'loving themselves', or even 'liking themselves' for that matter, is almost anathema. We are heirs to a terrible affliction, unable to give our affection to anything but dogs, cats, budgerigars and back gardens. There is a deep, deep resistance against liking oneself. It's the veritable dustbin of emotion. The average Yorkshireman would commit hara-kiri rather than even speak of it. Anyone who would admit to a thing like that has reached the final appallingness. Narcissus did it, and you know what happened to him. It's the most awful indulgence known to the average Englishman - almost as bad (as the mayor of Bradford once memorably said) as kicking a dog.

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It is very hard to love ourselves. We should start simply  
with a cloud or a stone.

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I once attended a metta retreat run by a venerable bhikkhu, who by halfway through, had begun to address most of his remarks to the ladies on the retreat. When asked why this was so, he said, 'The men are just not responding to anything I say.' He was unaware that he had committed the unpardonable sin of telling a bunch of Englishmen to tell themselves 'I love you.' Most of them turned pale and one told me later that he found himself 'hating everyone horribly.' His mood was apparently not improved by Tiger - the monastery cat - who proceeded to dump a still living mouse in the midst of his meditation patch, kill it and then eat it.

The problem seemed insuperable, but the Venerable Anuruddha had been a master builder in Ceylon, and discovered then that 'Nothing is all that impossible if you give it a little time and

space.' He proved his theory by rigging up a pulley in the chimney of Biddulph Old Hall, where we were staying, to haul the massive iron top off the Aga. This weighed several hundredweight, and I had deemed it impossible. But it rose up the chimney like a bird. Later he repaired a broken broom so flawlessly that I marvelled at the almost invisible seam. Clearly a man so ingenious and painstaking would not rest until he found a solution to the English problem. And he did. 'In Ceylon we must do more wisdom practice, but here we need more metta,' he said.

'The practice assumes a little liking, but it is usually directed towards the self. Since you are unhappy with yourselves, we must start somewhere else.' It was years later that I ran across the words of a Greek philosopher, who said, 'It is very hard to love ourselves. We should start simply with a cloud or a stone.'

We were instructed to compile a list of all the little things for which we felt affection and regard. 'This may be hard,' he told us. It was, for me at least. It took me two days to present him with a comparatively simple list without feeling a little embarrassed, like a bank manager being forced to confess he still sleeps with his teddy. But at last it was done. How strange that it should have been so difficult. All my list had on it were things like 'summer evenings in the woods, kittens playing, the river on a spring morning', and so on. Such innocent things that I wonder they should have been so difficult to put down: perhaps because they were so personal and private, and the English are a very private people, if nothing else. I showed him my list and was told to go away and run all those things through my mind all day, and add to the list if I wished.

'How's it going?' he asked me later. 'A slight feeling of gold,' I said. 'Good, it's going well.'

Then we had to reflect that all the feelings and memories were already in our minds - part of them. And that the warmth and emotion they evoked were already present and did not need to be brought in from outside. They were already in us.

It was hard work, but never anything but natural. There was no being appalled or cringing before unacceptable emotional demands. I never forgot the lesson, or the skill of the teacher. For me it will always be one of the best examples of upaya - skill in means.

Years later, after too many reverses, I suffered severe depression, and friends advised me to look up a psychiatrist. I told them that most of the psychiatrists I had met looked more depressed than I was. There had to be another solution. When I examined my mental state, I found most of the problem was having blamed myself for everything that had happened, and a huge armament of self-dislike picked up in the process. If only there were some way to reverse the process. Psychiatrists didn't seem to know of one anyway.

At that point, I remembered the venerable bhikkhu from Ceylon. (And he always called it Ceylon.) I set aside a special fortnight for practice.

I made out the list - little changed over the years - bought a couple of favourite plants, and went to Kew Gardens nearly every day. Within a fortnight, the gloom was dispelled and I felt wonderful. One morning at the end of the fairly intensive practice, I went into a coffee shop. It was an early summer morning and the café was full of sun, although it was too early for other customers to have arrived. Then two girls came in. I expected them to obey the immemorial English custom and sit as far away from everyone else as possible. But they sat at the next



table to mine. I suppose it was the most comfortable place!



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**HOME** ■  
**BACK ISSUES** ■

## An Open Letter from Dharamsala

*Establishing an ancient religious form in a modern day western setting presents manifold challenges and problems for the fledgling teachers and communities that grow up around them. For the first time western teachers representing all the major schools, including our own Ajahn Amaro, gathered together in the presence of the H.H. the Dalai Lama to consider common difficulties in transmitting the Dhamma. The following is a jointly written declaration of intent which delegates were asked to publish in their respective Dhamma journals.*

On March 16-19, 1993, a meeting was held in Dharamsala, India, between His Holiness the XIV Dalai Lama and a group of twenty-two Western Dhamma teachers from the major Buddhist traditions in Europe and America. Also present were leading Tibetan lamas from the four main schools of Tibetan Buddhism. The aim of the meeting was to discuss openly a wide range of issues concerning the transmission of the Buddha-Dhamma to Western Lands.

After four days of presentations and discussions, there was general agreement on the following points:

1. Our first responsibility as Buddhists is to work towards creating a better world for all forms of life. The promotion of Buddhism is a secondary concern. Kindness and compassion, the furthering of peace and harmony, as well as tolerance and respect for other religions should be the three guiding principles of our actions.
2. In the west, where so many different Buddhist traditions exist side by side, one needs to be constantly on one's guard against the danger of sectarianism. Such a divisive attitude is often the result of failing to understand or appreciate anything outside one's own tradition. Teachers from all schools would therefore benefit greatly from studying and gaining practical experience of the teachings of other traditions.

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 trappings.

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3. Teachers should also be open to beneficial influences from secular and other religious traditions. For example, the insights and techniques of contemporary psychotherapy can often be of great value in reducing the suffering experienced by students. At the same time, efforts to develop psychologically oriented practices from within the existing Buddhist traditions should be encouraged.
4. One's position as teacher arises in dependence on the request of one's students, not simply on one's being appointed as such by a higher authority. Great care must therefore be exercised in selecting an appropriate teacher. Sufficient time must be given to making this choice, which



should be based on personal investigation, reason and experience. Students should be warned against the dangers of falling prey to charisma, charlatanism or exoticism.

**5.** Particular concern was expressed about unethical conduct among teachers. In recent years, both Asian and Western teachers have been involved in scandals concerning sexual misconduct with their students, abuse of alcohol and drugs, misappropriation of funds and misuse of power. This has resulted in widespread damage both to the Buddhist community and the individuals involved. Each student must be encouraged to take responsible measures to confront teachers with unethical aspects of their conduct. If the teacher shows no sign of reform, students should not hesitate to publicise any unethical behaviour of which there is irrefutable evidence. This should be done irrespective of other beneficial aspects of his or her work and of one's spiritual commitment to that teacher. It should also be made clear in the publicity that such conduct is not in conformity with the Buddhist teachings. No matter what level of spiritual attainment a teacher has or claims to have reached, no person can be allowed to stand above the norms of ethical conduct. In order for the Buddha-Dhamma not to be brought into disrepute and to avoid harm to students and teachers, it is necessary that all teachers at least live by the five lay precepts. In cases where ethical standards have been infringed upon, compassion and care should be shown towards both teacher and student.

**6.** Just as the Dharma has adapted itself to many different cultures throughout its history in Asia, so is it bound to be transformed according to conditions in the West. Although the principles of the Dharma are timeless, we need to exercise careful discrimination in distinguishing between essential teachings and cultural trappings. However, confusion may arise for various reasons. There may be a conflict in loyalty between commitment to one's Asian teachers and responsibility to one's Western students. Likewise, one may encounter disagreement about the respective value of monastic and lay practice. Furthermore, we affirmed the need for equality between the sexes in all aspects of Buddhist theory and practice.

The Western teachers were encouraged by His Holiness to take greater responsibility in creatively resolving the issues that were raised. For many, His Holiness's advice served as profound confirmation of their own feelings, concerns and actions.

In addition to being able to discuss issues frankly with His Holiness, the conference served as a valuable forum for teachers from different traditions to exchange views. Already future meetings with His Holiness are being planned and other colleagues who were not present in Dharamsala will be invited to participate in the on-going process. His Holiness intends to invite more heads of different Asian Buddhist traditions to attend future meetings.

The proceedings of the meeting will be disseminated to the wider public by means of articles, a report, a book, as well as audio and video recordings.

**The latter materials will be available through:**

The Meridian Trust,  
330 Harrow Rd.,  
London W9 2HP.  
Tel: 071 289 5443

**For more information and comments, please write to:**

The Network for Western Buddhist Teachers,  
4725 E. Sunrise Drive,  
Suite 137,  
Tucson, Arizona 85718,  
USA.



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**HOME** ■  
**BACK ISSUES** ■

## On Returning to Ladakh

*At the age of seventeen, Venerable Sanghasena left a peaceful way of life in Ladakh for the promise of success in the developing world. In 1979 he ordained as a Theravada Bhikkhu and has now returned to his homeland where he has started a Buddhist school, and is working to help his people in the face of poverty, modernisation and the erosion of their ancient Buddhist culture. During our 1992 winter retreat, he visited us at Amaravati. The following interview was recorded during the teatime break with lay guests who were staying at that time.*

**Q:** How did you come into contact with Theravadin Buddhism?

**A:** There is a little story behind this. In ancient times, before China occupied Tibet, many Lamas from Ladakh used to go to Tibet for higher studies. Then when China attacked Tibet many Tibetan Lamas and Ladakhi monks had to escape to India. One of the Ladakhi Lamas who came from Tibet searching for a place to live came into contact with my teacher, Ven. Buddharakhita, in Bangalore. My teacher told him that he could stay in his temple (which was of the Theravadin tradition), as long as he chanted the rules, wore Theravadin robes, and learnt a bit of the Pali Canon. This Lama agreed to that. Gradually my teacher began to inquire about Buddhism in Ladakh and came to understand the difficulties and the hard life of the Buddhist people there, and also the distress to the culture and to Buddhism in Ladakh. So he told the Lama to go to Ladakh and bring a few children to educate in Bangalore, and to train as Buddhist monks so that they could then go back to work to preserve Buddhism there. The Lama went and brought back the first batch of small kids - one of whom was my cousin.

After 3-4 years this cousin returned to Ladakh for a visit. At that time I was in the Indian army and was on leave. My cousin invited me to his house. I asked him, 'What have you been studying in Bangalore?', and he told me very interesting and inspiring things about Dhamma. This led me to decide about my future. Now I had been born into a very pious Buddhist family, but it was mainly a devotional approach. I would carry a picture of the Buddha and the Dalai Lama with me wherever I went, and every morning I would prostrate three times towards the pictures, then offer some flowers and incense. That was my Buddhism!

After hearing some Dhamma from this monk - my cousin - I thought that I was wasting my life in the army. It was not a Buddhist life. In the army we were taught and trained to kill, how to drop bombs, how to shoot guns, how to destroy others and save ourselves - whereas the Buddha taught how to sacrifice yourself for the cause of other people. I asked my cousin 'Is it too late for me to give up this life and to join the monastery?' (In Ladakh and Tibet men normally become monks at quite an early age.) He answered, 'It is never too late for Dhamma. If you are really interested in living the life of a monk, our teacher, Ven. Buddharakhita, will be very happy to help you.' I immediately resigned from the army and went to Bangalore.

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 different parts of the world to share their knowledge

and to educate our students in this sort of development.

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**Q:** Could you explain about your teacher - what his tradition is, and how he became a teacher in India.

**A:** Originally he came from a Brahmin family, and was very learned and educated. He was in the British Army, but after seeing a lot of bloodshed and killing he decided to lead the spiritual life. Having ordained as a Hindu Swami at the Ramakrishna mission, he lived there for one year studying and practising, and then left to become a Buddhist monk. He studied Pali and the Tripitaka and practised Vipassana meditation in Sri Lanka and Burma. Then he moved to India. Eventually, at the request of some Sri Lankan people, he went to Bangalore and started the Buddhist Society there in 1954. He was a very dynamic monk and a very good teacher. He also used to visit hospitals and homes for elderly people, and would often distribute medicine and clothes.

One day he saw a burns patient lying outside the hospital, and he found out that the reason he wasn't being treated was because the hospital was full - but the patient's condition was serious! So, he returned and collected funds and built a hospital especially for burns patients. Now it is run by the Government and 200 patients are getting treatment there. Then he built another hospital with the support of many Hindu followers, an artificial limbs manufacturing centre which provides limbs and crutches for the poor, and a school where we have 75 children who are given a free education. We also have our own printing press and publish a lot of books in the Indian language and in English.

**Q:** Do you have any industry in Ladakh, or any natural resources on which to capitalise?

**A:** No, the people don't have any industry, but they are very hard working people. The only income for Ladakh is tourism. There are some handicrafts. For example, they have beautiful painting, weaving and carving - they make many beautiful statues, but these would need to be developed as a source of income. So far our people have not thought in this way. They don't have any idea about this - how to make something, and sell, and make money.

However, we have an idea for the children in our school to do some handicrafts, Ladakhi art, and painting - they could make and sell them to earn money. We'd like to educate them in how to improve their standard of living by using more natural resources like greenhouses, and to learn how to make use of solar energy. Yesterday I told you about the tomatoes; nobody thought it was possible to grow tomatoes in Ladakh. Now in one part of Ladakh they grow plenty of tomatoes! There are many things that we don't yet know about, and we'd like to invite knowledgeable people from different parts of the world to share their knowledge and to educate our students in this sort of development.

**Q:** You must teach them commercial skills, too. It's important in the world of Samsara!

**A:** Yes. We have already planned this. It seems that only education can save us from exploitation and suppression, so we need to develop this. If people do not gain education, they will remain poor and will be easily exploited by other people, other communities. One time I went to visit a family Health Centre, and inside it there was nothing - not even a sheet on the beds. We asked if there was a doctor. They said, 'Yes, but he is not here'. We asked how long he had been absent. The person answered, 'One year!' - there is no doctor here!

**Q:** Do you get any help from the UN or W.H.O. etc.?

**A:** No. Ladakhi people have no education, they have no idea at all about these or the many volunteer organisations. They don't know so they haven't contacted them.

**Q:** It seems that Ladakh is a country which benefits from not having so complicated a society. There, although people may look as though they don't have very much, they can seem content with the little that they have. It seems strange that you, as a Dhamma teacher, are trying to bring these things from outside in.

**A:** There are many reasons. First of all, it is true that Western countries are

overdeveloped educationally and intellectually, so it was not our intention in starting the school for the children to become too dependent on being intellectual. People also say that if we create this school, it might lead to what is happening in big cities in California, New York etc. But there is nothing to worry about; it will take a few hundred years and even then, Ladakh will not become like big Western cities. Tourists can only go there for a few months each year. The rest of the time, Ladakh is Ladakh.

Many people say that Ladakhi villagers are simple and contented. They have to be contented because they are not developed. Our people don't have much comfort, but I think all people deserve a little bit of comfort that modern science and technology can provide - there is a minimum requirement to lead a dignified and comfortable life. You can't say that the Ladakhi people are happy and contented. If you go to the villages you will find that people seem to be happy and contented, but that is not because they have understood Dhamma - it's because they are totally closed. They are not exposed to the world, they don't know anything. You can't say that they have a peaceful and happy life, because they are ignorant. What you see is not real happiness, which arises from understanding of Dhamma - it is not wisdom.

We can share - there are some things you could learn from Ladakh, and there are some things we could learn from you. **Q:** Can you tell us about your first impressions of the Western world. What was it like when you left Ladakh to join the army?

**A:** At first I was very happy. I had prayed and desired to get out of Ladakh to see and know the world. I used to like all the modern things - travelling on buses etc. - I liked any modern technology. I wanted to go very much and was happy to see the big cities. In fact, I think most people in Ladakh or underdeveloped villages would be very happy to go West and experience modern life. Now you might be fed up with living in London but, in the beginning at least, most people in India feel that they are transported to heaven - all this comfort! If you press a button the tea is ready, press another button and you can see what is happening in America - sitting in a chair! These things are very interesting for them at the beginning. I felt that, but now I realise that I do not prefer to have these things and to live in the West. I like living in Ladakh. I want to go back and live in Ladakh. I realised that all the modern comforts cannot give us contentment or satisfaction or happiness.

**Q:** It seems that as a Theravadin monk, you are living like a Bodhisattva which is of course more the Mahayana ideal, as opposed to the aspiration of the Theravadin tradition to become an arahant.

**A:** It sounds very nice, but I personally think that it's not very practical. In Mahayana, they will not attain to Nirvana until all sentient beings are liberated from Samsara. Can you imagine!? Can you alleviate the suffering of all sentient beings? If you remove a stone you will find hundreds and thousands of ants - how can you alleviate their suffering? It's just not possible. That means that we are not going to attain Enlightenment.

Actually, real compassion for others comes only after you have known liberation through understanding Dhamma. From the beginning Buddhists are taught to help others. Now in what way can you help others? In order to give you must have first. You may want to become a Doctor, but in order to become a good Doctor you have to spend time studying and practising. You have to know first yourself - only then can you give treatment and help to others. Without knowing the medicine you cannot give medicine. I have seen many great monks in Theravadin Buddhism who have done a lot of good work for others, and also from the Mahayana tradition. So all the schools cover the same teaching. You can't say that just because we are in this tradition that we don't practise the Bodhisattva vow. Those who



understand the Dhamma are liberated from suffering, and this will give rise to real compassion. I think that the Bodhisattva is like this: someone is suffering so much that he tries hard and finds Dhamma, and attains liberation from suffering. But at the point when he is about to attain Nirvana he looks back and sees thousands of people suffering, so he thinks, 'I was also there suffering without knowing the Dhamma in the darkness. Why don't I wait and help these people?' - and he postpones his enlightenment in order to teach them Dhamma. This may be good, however not everyone who follows Mahayana adheres to the Bodhisattva vow, neither does everyone in Theravadin Buddhism penetrate Anatta!

**Q:** In this context, could you explain how you see your practice towards enlightenment in the light of the kind of work that you do - which is active in helping other people. How do you perceive your path to Nirvana by living like that?

**A:** Liberation from this wheel of samsara and the practice of sila, samadhi, panna are inseparable; that is why I really mustn't get lost in all these projects. I feel that it is very important to retire to the mountains and to have concentration and deep meditation to clarify one's understanding. If you are very good, but your mind is totally deluded and confused, you can't really see the subtle phenomena and understand the Buddha's teaching - to understand this you have to come to the depths of meditation.

I try to keep up a continuous practice of meditation, but I am not satisfied. I want to go to the mountains for 3-4 months and even more in the future. So if these projects are set up and I get people to help, I would like to do more retreats. Sometimes these projects can become an obstacle for meditation. When I am involved in a project and I sit in meditation, those things came to mind and I could consider it an obstacle; but these projects have their own value in helping us to understand the Dhamma. If you stop these activities, and go to the mountains, naturally concentration can arise quickly. It all depends on the individual - his present paramitas, his present thoughts, his present understanding - I don't think that there is one path, or method, one thing for everybody. I do think that these projects are very important for others, but at the same time - if I don't die - I would like to do a lot of retreats.

The Projects initiated in Ladakh by the Mahabodhi Society, under the supervision of Ven. Sanghasena include: a new Meditation Hall, a school and hostel for 25 children and a kitchen and dining block. A library, stupa and a 70 foot standing Buddha rupa are also planned. Further information about any of these projects and how to assist may be obtained from: The secretary,

Mahbodhi International Meditation Centre,  
P.O. Box No.22,  
Rde Wa Chan,  
Leh, Ladakh - 194101 INDIA.  
or: The Ladakh Project,  
21 Victoria Sq.,  
Clifton,  
Bristol B58 4E5, UK.  
Tel: 0270 744853; FAX: 0270 744853



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**HOME** ■  
**BACK ISSUES** ■

## Indian Summer

*Summertime at Cittaviveka presents an ideal opportunity for Sangha members to spend more time in the Hammer woods, occasionally undertaking self-retreats for several months. Below are Venerable Asabho's recollections of his three month sojourn, originally composed after the Vassa of 1991.*

Barely four weeks ago I have left a smoky canvas-tipi in Hammer wood and the atmosphere of a patch of young chestnuts, hemmed in by oaks and a few pines on three sides and the low dramatic skies over the valley; there I have spent the weeks of autumn. Thinking back on it now, the memories are already accompanied by a dreamlike sense of unreality. Four months ago, during the first days of my retreat in the forest, I remember having felt the same when trying to recall my previous two years at Amaravati, with its people, its scenery and activities. The equal sense of reality both situations held for me at different times has evaporated from the memory and seems unthinkable now.

Time is a bewildering perception; it hinges upon a strange process of the mind carefully forgetting and remembering its own old and already edited experiences. The forgetting seems almost more important than the recalling: the sense of "I" as a subject of experience can only arise through the discreetly forgotten self-contradictions this very "I" constantly undergoes.

Tan Varado, who was offered the privileged hut for his retreat, generously decided that we should share it both and each take a six week turn in using it, the other six weeks we would use the wigwam. Life in the forest has its own rhythms. After a few days the metabolism and sleeping pattern adjust and the senses begin to sharpen in a new and unfamiliar setting. Ear and nose suddenly play a more important part when living without artificial light and for most of the day far from people and traffic. The different sounds of an environment shared with a surprising amount of creatures, the scent of pine trees in a hot summer afternoon, or, at dusk, while walking along a familiar footpath, the sudden wealth of smells - all seems of an unprecedented immediacy and freshness.

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To reduce for some time all unnecessary interaction and devote oneself to very few activities in the physical solitude of a forest is in itself a healing experience.

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Our sense faculties are so often dulled by the massive sensory impact unavoidable in urbanized living and through the routine of domesticated lifestyles - including the monastic one. The suttas tirelessly suggest the sense faculties as the basis of the Buddha's teaching on how to learn to reflect properly on our situation, but to actually try this with our strained senses can seem strangely unreal. We don't really expect to find the truly important stuff by contemplating how mind and senses work amidst the tedium of ordinary life. But not

everybody gets hit off his horse and blinded on his way to Damascus, not every insight is accompanied by a showering of mandarava flowers and the quaking of all the world systems - even a short change of habitat can do wonders, make us look anew at the seemingly obvious or insignificant bits of our experience and help us out of ruts by bringing patterns to our attention that we would not have noticed before.

To reduce for some time all unnecessary interaction and devote oneself to very few activities in the physical solitude of a forest is in itself a healing experience, given the pace of most of our lives. For a meditation retreat a more ideal situation seems hardly conceivable: the space granted by the community, the forest, the support of several lay people who offered to feed us in the manner of a traditional almsround. Under those circumstances, my life quickly fell into retreat mode, in fact, it did so with an almost uncanny ease. I was stunned at the sheer beauty and the pleasure of simply meditating and living on retreat in a little hut under the blue sky over West Sussex woods. At first my enjoyment seemed too unabashed, and it took days until I could relax into being what felt shamelessly happy.

I had determined two things for my stay in the woods: to learn whether it was possible to trust myself deeper and be more of my own friend rather than being my judge - irrespective of what was going to happen; secondly, I planned to practice reciting the monks' Rule.

Despite the early daybreaks, most of my days began nightly: to be out of the forest and down at the monastery for the 4.30 am puja meant leaving the little hut on the hill while the chestnuts were still bathed in moonlight. Nothing matches the complete stillness of the forest at that time - even the last animal has finished its hunt or search for food; the silence of all things in the streaming moonlight touches the heart. After a few minutes of awe I rush down the slope through the fern and the low branches to make my way into the monastery. Once down on the road, the crickets' song awaits me unflinching; all night they sing, and even the first frosts in late October don't stop them. The puja with the community is followed by meditation and a short seminar on our discipline; after that I returned to the woods and spent the rest of the day meditating and practising the recitation of our rule.

The days were flitting by and time seemed to run through my fingers like sand through children's hands. The summer was hot, the skies unflinching high and blue - and after a short time, anything else seemed unthinkable. I began to feel a bit strange, almost disappointed by the lightness of my being. I had prepared myself for meaningful, existential anguish - but not this lightness and the cosy, boy-scoutish delights of forest-living. After all, I knew I wasn't enlightened and rather than wasting my precious retreat by basking in some fake conditioned happiness, this was clearly the time of getting on

## To a Venerable Tree

While living in the forest at Wat Pah  
Nanachat, my home was a bamboo  
platform near a huge ancient tree ...  
Sitting beneath your boughs  
and above your roots,  
Breathing in and breathing out -  
Your presence is strong

When engulfed by  
forest nightmare sounds -  
You are a refuge

When falling,

with the real business. I felt trivial in my ease and started seriously questioning the validity of what I thought I was practising. Was not the Buddha's teaching all about suffering and how to end it? Clearly, my persisting happiness could only mean that I kept insisting on delusion. The days passed and the questions kept coming back, yet the sense of enjoyment didn't fade and stayed with me. Slowly and incredulously, I felt my curiosity turning towards this voice which wasn't happy with me being happy.

It became evident, that I did not understand what was happening. I simply couldn't make sense of it. Yet vaguely I sensed that a change was working itself out and that I could only fail at understanding something which seemed to alter the very way of my understanding. The first wild cherry trees began to change colour and I moved into the wigwam. I kept asking myself whose expectations it was that my experience didn't live up to. It became obvious that I didn't find anybody I could seriously believe in. A contemporary Christian monastic insisted that one of the first things we needed to accept about our lives was the evident impossibility of giving everything a clear and definitive meaning. There are many more things we don't understand than there are we do - so obvious and, at once, so easily forgotten. I felt this to be true in a deeper sense than ever before. So, was our urge to be meaningful that which we use to assemble our vague initial notions into a solid self? Or was it the already fledged self-process that was in need of meaning and purpose simply to legitimate and maintain itself? I could not say. It slowly dawned on me that I needed to learn how to simply say, "I don't understand, I don't know what is going on here", and feel that this was alright, however imperfect, yet perfectly all right.

I learnt to live in my new home and began to appreciate the ancient intelligence behind the simple wood and canvas structure. Tipis are sophisticated dwellings and the people who developed them had a tremendous practical understanding of Nature and how best to co-operate with it. Once set up, and after some initial learning of how to negotiate the elements of wind, wood, fire and the occasional shower, it is possible to live very comfortably - after all, these wigwams were designed to withstand the winters of North America's Plains. The tipi in these weeks became the symbol of a spiritual sanctuary; I realized that it was very nearly halfway between the cult-caves of palaeolithic man and the medieval cathedrals: a few precariously perched posts on the ground, covered with canvas and held together with two ropes and some strings, one seemed to enter it through the doorway as if one entered the earth itself - just to find oneself with a single step suddenly in the twilight of a perfect canvas-shaped dome. A wigwam protects efficiently against wind and weather, yet despite even the open fire in the hearth, one is never really very far from what's on the other side of the canvas: light, sounds and small creatures travel easily; the skin which divides the inside and the outside is a thin one. I thought that this was a symbol of where 20th-century man needed to

drifting through boundless space -  
You ground me

When fiery pulses  
throb through the body and beyond -  
Your presence cools

When flowing with a river -  
You become an anchor

Sitting beneath your boughs  
and above your roots,  
Breathing in and breathing out -  
You magnify the knowing

*Jody Higgs*



return to on his spiritual journey: not to the magical caves and the innards of the great Mother, nor to the Gothic grandeur of a fatherly God's cathedral, but to this vulnerable and holy space between the few posts and some canvas, to the perfect mandala where the inside and the outside, where self and other seemed to intersect.

The Buddha's Teaching on change is often enough taught and understood as the frailty of all we love and cherish, the fickleness of all our securities and the grim imminence of our own undoing: Cronos with hour-glass and sickle, the reaper with his scythe - the images are familiar. There is another aspect to it all. We are not just mortal by the law of change - we are also alive by its power. Change is not only not the final threat to life but it's the very basis for living. If our organism decided to stop changing, stopped maybe just a few of its continual metabolic exchanges - say, stopped burdening those wretched red corpuscles in our lungs with fresh oxygen on their outward journey after just having cleared the poor things from CO2 after coming in, to give them a bit of a break - the effect on our lives would be vital, and pretty soon lethal. (One of the problems of our afflicted ozone layer is precisely that CFC's don't change - did they break down at a faster rate, they would be far less threatening to our atmosphere.)

Our world of experience and its perceptions work on the basis of change. The senses pick up their impressions in terms of differences and comparisons: a lasting sound at the same pitch very quickly fails to be registered; smells which fill the room we enter - and which delight or insult us - we will be completely unaware of after even a few moments; visual stimuli unmovingly stared at, we literally lose sight of within a minute or two. We need things changing to become aware of them: melody, the interval of sounds and silences; the intensity, the contrasts and tones in light which teach us to appreciate colour; the before and after of a mood or situation; the differences of position by which we recognise movement; the stretching out of an arm to become aware of gravity; and most of all our ideas and the whole of our inner life, which we keep comparing with the memory or the fantasy of a happiness other than the one now: all experience, all of what we call life implies change. And seen in this light, change suddenly looks more like a cosmic grace than the linchpin of man's suffering.

The days and weeks go by; it seems difficult to measure up insight or understanding - a lot of retreat experiences often don't fit into an understandable pattern. Once more I realise that I have not learnt to answer most of the questions which haunt the heart. But instead of frantically trying to resolve them, the heart almost imperceptibly has learned to live with them a little more patiently, a little less compulsively, a little more gracefully. In a beautifully strange way, the sign of a good authentic question seems to be that very fact: there is no resolution to it - the resolution to it has to be lived, not stated; lived continually in every moment of our lives in full awareness and acknowledgment of all imperfection and yet complete surrender to the perfection of the suchness of that very moment.

All that seems so unresolved and inconclusive about my life only detracts from the fact that the mind's insistence to create coherence of experience is yet another attempt to continue creating the existence of a protagonist in the play of this life.

The forest teaches me a reality different to my habitual one. After a while, the mind calms down in a natural way: there is nothing much excessively stimulating; almost everything teaches one to listen, to quieten down, to tread softly. Meditation, I became convinced, must be as old as man is: the circling of a hawk, the stare of an owl, the motionless presence of an adder seem to speak of it. As I have learned that the silence under an ash is not the same as under a yew (however meaningless the attempt to describe such a difference or even name an ash 'an ash' and the yew 'a yew'), so the first people must have learnt that all sound emerges from silence, all movement from stillness, all reality of things from a reality which has no

need of things any more: the message of the Unconditioned that underpins the whole tapestry of phenomena rings through and resounds in all things.



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**HOME** ■  
**BACK ISSUES** ■

# EDITORIAL

## The Highest Tantra

At a symposium of Western teachers of Buddhism that met at Dharamsala in March, one of the questions that was posed to H.H. the Dalai Lama was: "What are the signs that indicate that the Dhamma is properly established in a country?" To this, His Holiness responded with the traditional reply that when someone born of that country Goes Forth into the Sangha then one can say that the Dhamma is truly established. This could sound condescending to lay practitioners, who may have a profound degree of experience and skill; but the comment may help us to consider what it is that supports the transmission of the teachings. The preservation of the teachings is one thing, which can be done by people or even by scriptures: but what is it that actually generates and sustains the aspiration to transcendence? That is a magical, or better, a sacred process.

The Dalai Lama visited Britain this year to give some talks, and demonstrated some of the magic of the monastic form. His words were clear, but as teachings perhaps deliberately unremarkable. One felt that what he had in mind was to reach a wide range of people with broad Dhamma teachings that appeared as straightforward common sense. The main "teaching" was unspoken: a human presence that expressed understanding and compassion in a totally matter-of-fact and unassuming way. You were caused to wonder why everybody isn't like that; let alone someone who had every reason to feel embittered and care-worn. One was led to believe, not that Buddhist wisdom was special, but that you already had it and it was just a question of integrating that into daily life. The freedom to be fully human was the message; not just for Tibetans, but for everyone. What was also interesting was how that arose in the mind.

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Bearing the "Buddha's skull" (the alms bowl) and wrapped in his "skin" (the robes), what powerful Tantra is present there at the very entrance to the Holy Life!

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It has been calculated (by those who calculate) that in spoken communication, only 7% of the message is conveyed by the words: the rest is done by the tone of the voice, and by the language of bodily appearance, posture and gesture. These elements are deliberately attended to by monastic training and environment to increase mindfulness. The Dalai Lama had a shaven head and was wearing monastic robes - which make a statement about the relinquishment of self-image that can't be verbalised. (Try saying how selfless you are, and notice the reactions you get.) Then the gentle demeanour, and upright ease brought about by the samana's friendly and spacious relationships, speak persuasively of the value and naturalness of such a way. What we should and could be is presented as obvious and apparent, if we were only to let go of our personal world. This is the teaching on which all realisation of Dhamma rests.

Tantra is commonly regarded as a rarefied and even suspect offshoot of the Middle Way. If you look into it, the principles of Tantra are that one transforms one's body and speech into a sacred space through, for example, visualising oneself as a Buddha. Of course it could go horribly

wrong without a teacher and a discipline to eliminate self-view. It smacks of magic. Yet, when you compare this idea with the ordination ceremonies and the Vinaya training, there are striking similarities. Anyone who has contemplated the ordination ceremonies can't help but feel a certain shock of recognition: one may not hear or understand the words (which are not so magical anyway) but the body language of the candidates in the Dhamma theatre of the ordination precinct speaks unambiguously. This is a human sacrifice. At that time they are offering themselves totally to the Triple Gem as represented by the present assembly. Bearing the "Buddha's skull" (the alms bowl) and wrapped in his "skin" (the robes), what powerful Tantra is present there at the very entrance to the Holy Life! If only that vision could be sustained.

To sacrifice is to make sacred, to transfigure not to destroy, and like Tantra, that doesn't happen in a moment. Ordination is a symbol of that process and the presentation of the means, not a recipe for enlightenment. The transfiguration has to be wrought over years of walking like a son or daughter of a Buddha, eating like one, talking and lying down and serving others like one. That supreme Tantra is the foundation of what will transmit the Dhamma naturally without resource to rhetoric or personal claims (and the ghastly mess of "who is more enlightened than who?"); it is called the Vinaya.

Vinaya takes the consecrated space out of the ordination precinct and impresses its boundaries onto the heart of the practitioner. Within that sacred space one can indeed contemplate the processes of thought and feeling, of wilfulness and letting go, of the known and of the inconceivable - as not-self. Yet it hurts; and it can only be sustained through one's own sense of honour. Wisdom helps! And also the moral support of others - and a timeless good humour.

The transmission of the Dhamma requires pragmatic love for the heart that Goes Forth in ourselves or others, near or far, past, present or yet to come. When we give it, it awakens and supports our own life. This is the giving and receiving of the fourfold assembly (monastic and lay) that gives rise to the Sangha Gem. When we support it, it uplifts us. More reason for all of us, lay or ordained, to support this; more auspicious the opportunity to witness this enacted in an ordination wherein the treacherous energies of body and speech assume a form that is a vehicle of Dhamma.

*Ajahn Sucitto*

What is this?  
Birth life on earth  
and to see  
with a pure clarity  
the birds riding a gale  
across the blue cloudless  
winging space into space  
with a soundless intensity  
the leaves from trees  
rustling along stone walls,  
along and over and away,  
playing their colours  
greetings Venus, silver harmony

rising in the sky, nights descent  
and the old gate blows shut,  
that familiar sound of the catch,  
screwed, on to the rotting post,  
made of a dead mans hands  
wordless the wet creeping of the flesh  
cold bites  
and blues notes, once again, the wind  
carries on the breeze,  
angels no doubt, cup the air, gorgeous,  
is the deep rainbow, that out curves  
the minds of men - look on stranger -  
blissful, the consent of pure unknowing  
that cracks the bone of our hearts  
a flutter  
with the delight of a falling vastness ...

*Mahesi Bhikkhu*  
Ratanagiri December '92

