



FOREST SANGHA newsletter

January 1996

2538

Number 35

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Don't Get Off The Train

Magha Puja commemorates the spontaneous gathering of 1200 arahants, around the Buddha, on the full moon of March. Ajahn Thanavaro reflects on his own journey into the Mandala of Sangha during a talk given at Amaravati on the 8th of March 1995.

By actually entering consciously into the Mandala, we are making a statement - a conscious statement - whereby we take full responsibility for what we are doing. Since I have been given the opportunity to speak tonight, I would like to bring your attention back to a word that has been very helpful in my own practice. It is not a very common word in the Theravada tradition, but nevertheless we do actually experience at all levels the meaning of the word that I will present to you tonight. It is the word 'Mandala'.

I came across this word back in 1979, when I was working in the walled garden at Chithurst. At that time I was a novice, and I was asked to put the garden in order as it had been neglected for a number of years. It was full of nettles. I spent about a week pulling these nettles - they were taller than myself; I gave the very top of the leaves to the kitchen staff. In those days we did not have much food so we used to have nettle-soup, which was delicious and very nourishing. It brought back the story of the famous Tibetan Yogi, Milarepa, who had spent nine years living in solitary retreat in the mountains.

Entering the Sangha, the Mandala, might be mistaken as a quest for leadership whereby we view the practice as a way to gain power and authority over other people.

He was a layman who wanted to purify himself. After having spent a number of years developing psychic powers, he attacked and killed his relatives using black magic, to avenge the disinheritance and rejection of his mother. He wanted to purify his mind because he had

realized the negative effect of that act. Part of his training under his master, Marpa, was undertaking to build a tower. But then, every time that Milarepa had actually built the tower, Marpa came along and said: "Who told you to build the tower here?" Milarepa was completely flabbergasted by this, but as he was very devoted to his Master, he would obey his orders and start to build a tower in another place that Marpa located. Then, after building the tower in the new place, Marpa would come along and say: "Who told you to build the tower here?" So in the end Milarepa had actually built this tower seven times. You can imagine how much devotion and giving up was necessary at that time to give himself to the practice of service.

As an anagarika here, the practice is also very much the practice of service; one becomes worthy of the teaching by giving one's energy. So I think it is important to bring back into our mind the very motivation that brought us to make that step of entering, of giving ourselves to the Sangha, the group of samanas. We are admitted into this Sangha society, so that we can associate with wise people, by means of a ceremony - the Precept Ceremony. For those of you that have taken the Eight Precepts (or the Siladhara or 227 Bhikkhu Precepts) this ceremony is an important step in the life. It is the process of entering into the society of samanas. In Sanskrit the word for group, or society, is 'Mandala'.

As in any group of society we are called to follow some rules; we are also given some guidance so that our behaviour conforms with the purpose of our coming together. All of this requires discipline; it requires a kind of integrity and a sense of responsibility. By actually entering consciously into the Mandala, we are making a statement - a conscious statement - whereby we take full responsibility for what we are doing and what we are here for. This should be very clear for all of us that have taken that step. Every time we forget that, we will be reminded by our spiritual companions. Entering into the group of samanas, the outer Mandala, leads to a journey of exploration of consciousness - towards discovering the inner Mandala.

As you know, any society or group of people is structured in a certain way, and usually there is a centre to that structure. People in societies usually refer to a leader, and throughout history the quest for leadership has been a predominant quest in the life of many people. Entering the Sangha, the Mandala, might be mistaken as a quest for leadership whereby we view the practice as a way to gain power and authority over other people. But fortunately that is not possible until we have gone through a process of breaking down. This is the safeguard of the society of samanas. We won't be given the power to teach and to guide other people unless we have renounced the egocentric view. Without such renunciation there comes to be a collapse of the energy which is entrusted and given to us through that very process of transformation. So, before you are opened up to the practice of meditation and receive that transformation energy, you will need to get out of the way because if you interfere during this process, you discover sooner or later that you got into a sinking ship and you are destined to perish.



I remember reading a book way back in the seventies. And in this book by Suzuki Roshi, 'Zen Mind Beginner's Mind', there is a clear statement about this. Suzuki Roshi said: "Remember and consider well before entering and beginning your spiritual journey. Because it is like getting on a train; it is terribly difficult, and truly most dangerous, to try to get off while the train is still running." Throughout our monastic life we will be confronted with the dilemma: When is the train going to stop? When will we arrive at the next station? We don't want to endanger ourselves, we don't want to get injured, but of course, if it were up to us, the train would stop every time we had a doubt. If we would be the driver, we would stop that train and get off. But there is a surprise. The surprise is that we discover that we are just another passenger, and that the train will keep going until it gets to the destination - with or without us.

So, we have to consider that we are not indispensable, none of us here is indispensable to the society or to the Sangha. The Sangha throughout the ages has been the vehicle that has taken those who have relaxed to the destination. I think that is a very good description of the state of relaxation meant by the expression, 'letting go'. That very phrase, that very advice given so many times by our teachers is in fact indicating that all we need to do is to relax, to just enjoy the scenery - because the train keeps on going anyway.

I think this advice is very helpful, and it is important to remember it, because the practice is that simple: just to give oneself to the vehicle and relax. But of course, we are not the only passengers on that vehicle and, as you know, living together requires also some interaction. As we are being driven to our destination, we need to find ways to enable our journey, our common journey to be pleasurable and harmonious, to be a happy one. I don't know, if you have used the train or travelled through Italy - but what happens on the Italian trains perhaps happens almost everywhere in the world - most of the time people going on a long journey engage in conversation. That is the way they kill time; or else they read a book or some newspaper, or they eat, or sleep. In our monastic life we might be involved in similar activities - reading, studying, as well as eating, talking to each other, all that kind of thing. Those activities are all fine. In some situations we may be more drawn to one kind of activity or another, but what is most important is not to engage into those activities out of avoidance, the need for escape. In other words, it is important not to isolate our individual journey from an active participation with the journey of another person. But in fact that is what happens every time we talk, and don't really listen to the other person; or we just go to sleep, and therefore

live in an unconscious state. Although we might be here physically we are kind of asleep, very much in our own world; there is no real conscious participation and awareness of where we are, where we are going and who we are travelling with.

I think we are all at one time or another faced with the difficulty of relating to an object. It may be an inner object, a state of mind, or an outer object - something that is perceived through the eyes or through the ears, the nose or the tongue. The problem of addiction arises when the craving for a particular object is so strong, and so repetitive that it takes over and disempowers us from looking away or not picking it up, from being mindful. Every time we are heedless, in fact we fall under the spell of a certain mental state; we are enslaved by a sense experience. We can be enslaved by the eyes, the ears and the nose, the tongue, the body and the mind. And the mind is the most clever trickster. It can really fool us. It will try time and time again to take away the energy of attention. Now, without that energy, without the ability of focusing the mind, we are done, we are finished. The match is already over. We are completely impotent to stand on our feet or to make right decisions, right and conscious decisions about our life.

Some of us may approach the Path with that very feeling of inability to decide for ourselves what we do; we come to the Sangha already in that state. We knock at the door, somebody opens the door. Somebody will tell us that if we can follow certain rules, we can be admitted into this group. Now we might be willing to do that, but not out of conviction - only because we are not able to stand on our feet and work for our living, make our own decisions, engage in relationships, suffer and be creative. So because of that feeling of impotence we give all our wealth, all our spiritual wealth, to somebody else: 'Dear Master, please enlighten me; please guide me; please empower me. Please allow me to enter into the sacred circle of initiates.'

This type of dependence is also a form of addiction, and truly is the most dangerous one. Such an association will support your life, to a certain extent, but will never make you free. On the other hand, it will make your master - whoever that may be - a great person. But that means you will never be great. That means, that you will never know for yourself what is right, what is wrong, what is the right decision, where you are going, what you will do with your life. In this way you are defeated from the very beginning. Your potential for awakening is forgotten, disregarded, is not clear, and not important.

No doubt most of us have felt a bit like that at certain times in our spiritual quest - a bit too weak to make the conscious decision to be awake, to be joyful, to be truly ourselves. Sometimes it's very difficult. However, if we become aware that there is much more to spiritual practice than just giving up our own discernment to somebody else, then we'll take up responsibility for the praise and blame that we receive.

We also take responsibility for what we are doing to our fellow human beings, to the people that are involved in this journey; beginning with our wise adviser. Are we prepared to kill the image that we ourselves have constructed and projected onto the wise adviser? Are we prepared to go through the grief of being an orphan? If we want to grow up as children, from children to adulthood, we need to kill our parents. Of course not the physical body, not the sense of respect, but we need to kill the false image and the umbilical cord that creates an emotional dependence. Well, if we are prepared to look carefully to our well being; if we are prepared to look honestly, and recognize firstly our own mistakes and weaknesses and also those of our fellow human beings, then we discover the kind of confidence that gives us the strength to work; to work seriously on ourselves.

You might say or ask yourself: where is the joy and happiness in all of this? It seems so terribly hard and difficult. Well, for those who have the curiosity and the courage to investigate the dark areas of consciousness, there will be a very nice surprise. We discover

that the joy and the happiness is another grain of sand, buried away under a mass of sand, not too different from the others. That is why it requires a great deal of attention and insight to be discovered.

Usually we are not able to see it because we play the game of the ostrich - the game of avoidance. So whenever we can't handle a situation, we put our head into the sand, like an ostrich, hoping that the particular situation will pass. And of course, it eventually will pass but if our eyes have been closed, we won't have seen it for what it is, we won't have learnt the lesson, so that very situation will come back. Instead we have to face it; we have to come so close, that we see it for what it is: empty of self nature. Any energy structure, any pattern of behaviour, any phenomenon, any mental formation is empty of self nature. This means that it is supported by and exists only in relation to causes and conditions. Whenever we identify with the mental formation, whenever we react to it, we are entering into a pattern that produces kamma. It produces another effect, another cause; it creates a continuity of becoming.

What enables us to resolve the problems that come up in our minds is an acceptance of their presence. For instance when we are troubled by something, we are already in the midst of the hurricane and we cannot extricate ourselves from it - unless we step out of it. The only way we can do that is by being increasingly more aware of what is happening; that ability to be aware provides us with a greater perspective on what is happening. But it is not happening any more to us, because we are not to be found anywhere, whether above or below or in between the two. So, by not reacting to what is perceived, the problem of relationship is being resolved at its root, and we can relax in an open awareness. Then we can enjoy life as it presents itself.

So, these are a few words I wanted to share with you perhaps to provide you with some considerations and some insights about the nature of your commitment.

I wish you all the best and, please, don't fall off the train!



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HOME**BACK ISSUES**

Vision and Focus

Sister Thanasanti reflects on the joys and sorrows of practice in the sometimes challenging environment of Amaravati.

One of the functions of a healthy Sangha is that it has the ability to assess its needs and limitations and bring in specialized people when there is need. This is intelligence functioning. So in a place like Amaravati with a library, publications department, office, workshop and retreat centre; and building projects that are going up almost as fast as other buildings are falling down; in terms of one's practice, where does one begin? How does one integrate the huge amount of work, organisation and communication this situation requires into our daily practice?

When I came to Amaravati at the beginning of this vassa, I was asked if I wanted to do the workshop chore. And figuring it would be a challenge as well as something lovely to offer the community; I accepted. A few days after arriving, I was taken around the workshop and shown what needed to be done. It took two hours to tell me the things that were required as a part of my responsibility; general workshop tidiness, ordering supplies, maintenance of the machines, wood racks, glass, paint, electrical and plumbing department. At the end of this transmission, I was told it would probably take six months to a year to feel comfortable with it. I remember feeling overwhelmed with information and thinking that if it only took a year to familiarise myself and feel comfortable with it all, I'd be doing great. So with all of these responsibilities, and lack of knowledge where does one begin?

One of the blessings of living in a monastery is that you
get to live through your worst nightmares.

It seems that the key to the practice is maintaining vision and focus. Vision keeps an overview of what one is doing and the greater context in mind. Focus is concerned with the specific task at hand. The whole thing is too big to focus on at once but I can start with one simple thing, the floors. I like sweeping the floors. I know how to do it. I don't feel anxious about it. I find it relaxing. And most days, people haven't taken away the dust pan and broom so it is actually possible to do. When I'm sweeping the floor, I enjoy it. I relax into the movement, feel my body and breath and focus on the bit of floor I'm sweeping. But I keep the whole floor in mind. So the vision is the whole floor and the focus is the little bit I'm working on.

Now, people who have been using the workshop recently have been very good about sweeping up at the end of the day. So I come in in the morning and the floor is swept. But there are all the other things to do as well; I pick one and focus on it for a few days. So the overview or vision is the whole workshop and the focus is the individual task that is at hand.

In fact, most of the workshop chore I don't know; there is maybe 10-15% that I feel comfortable with. So when the floor is swept, there is an anxiety in the heart - what next?

Don't know. Will I make a mess? Will I have the strength? Will I throw out something valuable? So the heart trembles slightly. And I can see even in the simple act of doing a chore, how easy it is to stay in one's comfort zones - to just keep sweeping the floor. In this case, the responsibility supports the practice by edging one out of comfort zones and into things that bring up fear, uncertainty or anxiety.

This then is a good chance to see how worldly confidence and spiritual confidence work and relate to each other. Worldly confidence is having the knowledge, experience and the answers for a particular situation. So, when I'm tidying up the paint store, worldly confidence would have the relevant information; what's good, not good, needs throwing away, belongs in a different place etc. But I go into the paint store and can feel my heart trembling. I don't know what is what. Or maybe I know just 10% of the materials and how they should be sorted and used - and this makes me feel anxious. This is where spiritual confidence supports. Spiritual confidence is the ability to rest in pure awareness, to know what one is feeling, to trust that which is unborn, uncreated and undefined. This trust makes it possible to relax through the anxiety, keep breathing and move slowly trusting one's intuition and the few threads of information that one has.

This also applies in meditation. 'Worldly' refers to the tricks and remedies one applies to certain mind states in order to bring about balance - contemplating metta when angry, death or decay when there is attachment etc. The familiarity with one's habit patterns and mind states, and skilful responses brings about a certain confidence in knowing how to deal with each experience. But spiritual confidence, in this case, comes from resting in bare awareness of the actual experience without asking it to change. It is a trust and relaxation into the Refuge.

I remember one of the first retreats I was on, where the teacher liked to poke fun at himself and all other meditation teachers, to help keep people's projections and adoration in balance. I remember him saying that meditation teachers were completely useless, the only thing they could do was teach meditation. I remember listening then and saying to myself, "I never want to be like that! I always want to be useful." As it happens, I have wonderful parents and as a child I remember very clearly their encouragement. They told me from the time I was tiny that I could do whatever it was that I wanted. If I put my mind to things, I would be able to accomplish my goals.

I got the same affirmation and acknowledgement when I went through school and university from my friends and teachers. It was a joy to learn swimming, chemistry, physics and be able to teach them. I studied acupressure massage and enjoyed rock climbing, and going on long bicycle rides. As far as conditioning and opportunity goes, it was about as good as anyone could have. And still, underneath the gifts, talents, abilities and strengths was a huge cavern of anxiety and fear. The fear of being useless. So for each of us we have to examine what it is that drives us to do things. Yes, we may have gifts and skills but what is underneath that? This



Sister Siripanya exercising a little vision and focus.

is our work here. To know these caverns and black holes, and not be driven by them.

One of the blessings of living in a monastery is that you get to live through your worst nightmares. Another blessing of living in a monastery is that every single characteristic that drives you nuts or that you can't stand in everyone else is something you must experience in yourself.

When I first came to this monastery several years ago, I couldn't understand what I observed. I thought to myself: "What's wrong with these people? They can't cope. They can't do things or get anything done." Often they burst into tears or burst into giggles, often they seem to be fainting or feeling weak. And if you ask anyone to do something, they shrink in fear and say, "I can't." Then I had my turn. I got sick, my body was very weak, my brains were scrambled and I couldn't think straight, and this went on for months. I remember the work nun coming to me once and asking if I could sweep the floor. I looked blankly at her, and didn't say anything but went back into my room and burst into tears. Not only could I not cope with sweeping the floor, my brains were so scrambled I couldn't even explain that I wasn't feeling well.

But these opportunities, even though they are ones you wouldn't wish on your worst enemy, are invaluable for the practice. What is it then that doesn't change, that is reliable? What is refuge and trust all about? What does meditation mean when your body is sick and your brains are scrambled? This is the work we are doing here; understanding the fears, black holes and crevasses, opening up to them and finding a way through. This is done in the same way that one does a chore. Trust makes it possible to relax through the anxiety, keep awareness open and move slowly being guided by one's intuition and the few threads of information one has.

One of the gifts of a community is that we help each other to remember. If we are successful or gifted, this is what we experience, rather than who we are or why we are here. If we can build and design great things, fix stuff, know about the workshop, the kitchen or the office, this is what we experience - not who we are or why we are here. Or if we are going through a rough patch, sick or feeling depressed or hating ourselves, this again is what we are experiencing - not who we are. But if we forget, then the Sangha helps us to remember. A healthy Sangha upholds the vision of mindfulness and pure awareness, and the individual is able to use it to respond to anything they experience.

One of the problems with vision and focus is that they can get out of balance. When there is too much vision, then you get stuck in ideas. There are the floors and windows that are rotting, the electrical work, the roofs, the gardens, the stores, the tools - not to mention the Sutta and Vinaya classes, teaching engagements etc. And the mind gets so stuck in everything that needs attending to, it becomes worn out just from thinking about it; there's no energy left to do anything. On the other hand when there is too much focus, the mind gets obsessed with the particular task at hand, like repairing something or building something, and the whole world becomes separated into that which helps me do my job and that which obstructs me. So if someone interrupts by asking a question, it's easy to snap or to dismiss them because; - they're interfering with my work. - People are growled at, pujas get missed, sometimes people can't even make it to the meal because they're too busy getting their work done. But one thing is for sure, the work is never done; there are always more things that need attending to.

So the challenge is to work in a way that keeps the vision alive, maintains the aspiration as well as the buildings, and strengthens faith and confidence in the practice. When we keep the vision alive, our hearts rest in the purity of pure awareness. There, one finds joy, peace and easefulness of heart. This is the real work we are doing here.



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HOME**BACK ISSUES**

Saving Forests So There Can Be Forest Monks

Ajahn Pasanno is the Abbot of Wat Pah Nanachat, the monastery for Western monks set up by Ajahn Chah in Thailand. He recently spent a year on retreat in the forest at Chithurst Monastery. It was there that he was interviewed by Nick Scott.

Nick: Ajahn, you have been a forest monk in Thailand for over twenty years now. In that time what have you seen happening to the forests?

Ajahn Pasanno: Basically, I've told Thai people that there just isn't going to be any more forest in Thailand if they don't act soon, the devastation is so complete. About fifty years ago around 70% of the country used to be covered in forest and now the government estimate it to be 20%; in reality it's more like 5% or 8%.

The big logging companies are partially responsible, but that's actually a small part of it. Logging is banned nowadays. And even when they used to come in, they only wanted the big trees and then they were out. What happened was that they opened up areas of forest, and after they left, people came in. Round where we are they cut the smaller timber for furniture - you can get that out without being seen - and a lot goes as charcoal. The government allows people to sell two sacks of charcoal, so everyone has two sacks at the front of their house for sale.

Nick: What about National Parks?

If the people in the area have a different way to make a living, then they won't have to destroy the forest. They need to learn about the forest. In order to have a sustainable livelihood they have to live harmoniously with the environment.

Ajahn Pasanno: The area of the country that has been made into National Park is a much higher percentage than, say, America. But the trouble is they're not protected. One of our monasteries is in a new National Park. The director of the park has got a budget for just one civil servant to act as his assistant - and one gun for his protection. Luckily, where this branch monastery is, the director is a young guy, really honest and dedicated. But many of the others are crooked. Like the park at one of our other branch monasteries - the monastery protects not only its own area but the whole forest around it. But in order for the director of the park to sign the piece of paper which would allow that project to be submitted to the forestry department, it cost the monastery five hundred pounds - which goes to him personally! You'd think he'd be keen to help. So if he's expecting bribes from the monastery to protect his forest, you can think what else he must doing, you can imagine the scams.

Nick: Ajahn, in that case you have got a small monastery with a large amount of forest being protected. How does that work?

Ajahn Pasanno: The dynamic, particularly in the N.E. of Thailand, but generally throughout the country, is that people respect monks - especially the disciples of Ajahn Chah. And if you respect people, you respect the place where they are at. So if the monks ask people not to encroach on an area, they respect that - generally.

There are several hundred monasteries in Ajahn Chah's tradition and they're all in forest - for some it's only a small area, but whatever, the forest is respected by the people and left alone. At Wat Pah Nanachat, before we finally got a wall around the monastery this last year, the villagers used to keep an eye out for fires during the dry season. Sometimes they would notice fires coming near the monastery. Many trees had been planted, so if a fire swept through there, three, four, five years of work would be wiped out. An alarm would be sent out, the villagers would come and put it out, and I would only find out about it later. They were really watching out for the monastery.

But you have to be careful in some places. When we first started one monastery I told the monks not to bother the people who were coming to poach logs from the forest; it was too dangerous to obstruct them. It was being done by the local village headman, the representative of the government. He was supposed to be looking after such things, but he was cutting down the forest right round the spring which was our water source. So I suggested to him that that area should be left undisturbed for future generations. He was very polite, there was nothing aggressive about him, "I can't do that", he said, "I've already paid the police, I've already paid the forestry. I'll lose a lot of money."

Nick: Am I right in thinking that other abbots have got into real problems with conservation projects?

Ajahn Pasanno: Oh sure. You have to be careful. There was a large area of good forest along the Cambodian border and the military and local merchants were trying to get it all. It was a big scam. They called it a 'reforestation project' - but what they were doing was cutting the native trees to plant Eucalyptus, so they were making money both ways! However, the abbot there was getting in the way, so he had grenades thrown at his monastery, the roof of his hut was splattered with M16 shots. He was harassed a lot. He ended up being taken to court - that's a big thing taking a monk to court in Thailand - and he finally ended up disrobing. We started Nature Care when we set up a retreat place in Poo Jom Gom - that's the monastery in the National Park. I specifically chose that area because it is very rocky and the forest isn't very nice - we didn't want the hassle.

Nick: You deliberately chose it because there wasn't good forest left?

Ajahn Pasanno: Yes, it can be pretty distracting when you're practising, and then there's the struggle with the system to try to save it. But then when you see how things are - you feel that with a little bit of input, it's not that difficult to protect what's left.

If the people in the area have a different way to make a living, then they won't have to destroy the forest. They need to learn about the forest. In order to have a



sustainable livelihood they have to live harmoniously with the environment. They also have to feel in control of the situation, and not just pawns in someone else's game. One of the things we focus on most is getting people involved from different backgrounds. Previously there was no communication there. We're also providing a bridge between the administration, which means well, and the villagers. There can be so much corruption. For example, there was this project making toilets. It was a good project. In the local village there were 120 families and only 16 toilets.

Nick: How many televisions?

Ajahn Pasanno: About 40! So it was a great project, and the government had the budget for it. It started off with a roof and bricks to build the cubicle, a tank to hold waste and a toilet. But by the time it got to the village, you've got the toilet bowl, eight bricks and a bag of cement! So the villagers don't take the government very seriously.

Nick: So what kind of practical things have you been doing?

Ajahn Pasanno: Nature Care has been focusing on providing alternative means of livelihood. You look at what they have already and consider how to use it more effectively. For example, they grow a lot of bananas. They take them to the market and they get beat every time by the merchants. They don't have the confidence to bargain. And, of course, if they can't sell them, they can't take them home again because they would go bad. So we help them to change what they're doing. Rather than taking the fresh bananas to the market, they make different products out of them; dried bananas, sweets, roasted bananas. Things that they can keep and sell for more. They can store them and wait till they get a good price. So they get more from their crop. Also they grow cotton, but it's always been sold raw. So we have given training in weaving and dyeing using natural dyes. And there's a good market for that.

Nick: Are you doing anything more direct for the forest?

Ajahn Pasanno: One of the ways of protecting forest is to be involved in education, so that people can see the benefits of the forest. This involves stimulating interest, getting people keen to help. It's quite obvious to the people that there is a big difference in their lives and the quality of life around them, compared to 20, 30 years ago. In that area, you could walk around and be walking in shade. But now a lot of it has been cut for tapioca plantations. Most of it was just cut and burnt - it wasn't logged at all - just to plant cash crops. But then the soils degraded very quickly, the cash crops don't grow and they find that their livelihoods are threatened. They used to rely on the forest. Before cash crops they didn't actually use cash that much, because everything they needed they got from the forest. They were very self-sufficient.

Nick: Yes, but how do you go about improving things?

Ajahn Pasanno: Things like taking them out to see other projects - both places where there are natural forests well preserved and they can see the benefits for the people living nearby; and also seeing places that have been destroyed and where they are starting to work replanting and protecting, so that they can see what other people are doing. That's very successful. It stimulates many ideas and it gets them thinking. It inspires them to realise, "We can do that". Also working with children, getting children involved is important. The children are at the heart of the family structure in Thailand, very well loved. If you get the children involved you tend to pull the parents in as well. So we've been putting on plays and skits in schools, taking children out into the forest, having fun, getting the children to love the forest.

In Thailand, the words that they use for forest are usually words that imply dangerous, messy, tangled - language which has a negative connotation. Also, somebody who goes out, clears the forest, makes fields and builds houses for themselves is someone who used to be praised. So that conditioning is there. The language and the way we talk about something is very ingrained, so now you're having to work against those values. It's going to take a while.

You have to see what's meaningful to them rather than have all these plans. Their needs have to be understood. Also, as a monk, you have contact with all levels of society, so that if the villagers have a need or desire or hope, you have the opportunity to bring it to the attention of other people from different strands of society who could give them a hand. That does happen a lot - the monks creating a bridge between people.

In Thailand, monks are regarded as leaders in society. What we're doing isn't new. It is a function that monks have played traditionally and will continue to do so. You notice at Ajahn Chah's funeral, when the King and Queen came they bowed to the remains of Ajahn Chah - just the same as ordinary people who came to pay their respects. You have got to be able to preserve the purity of the life to deserve that - but when you manage it, it's very powerful.

Monks are able to draw in different people and provide a harmonious focal point for them to work together; they act as a catalyst. Say, like myself for instance, it's not that I'm all that directly involved, I'm more in the background providing advice, support and encouraging them.

Nick: Is anyone employed by Nature Care?

Ajahn Pasanno: Yes. They started with volunteers, people who were interested. At first it was manageable for the volunteers, because in the beginning they weren't doing all that much. But as they got involved in more projects, got more interest from the villagers and made more contacts, it needed more continuity, so that we have asked four of the volunteers to work full time.

Nick: So how is it funded?

Ajahn Pasanno: Well, we've got very good at scrounging and everything is done very cheaply - we've one motorcycle between everybody. So far we've got by on donations from a few individuals and some small grants from the Canadian and Belgian embassies. The salaries for the workers are being paid at present with some money offered for my travel to come to do this retreat in England.

Nick: Would you say, Ajahn, that by looking after the forest that you are looking out for the Sangha and future monks?

Ajahn Pasanno: Yes, definitely. Because if we don't have forests we're not forest monks! We're definitely protecting areas where monks can practise within a forest setting, because you need to have a stable and quiet environment for practice. If monasteries are set up in areas which are being encroached upon by settlements, or in degraded areas where there is no longer water or shelter, these are not conducive places to practise in. So definitely, I'm looking out for myself. Our tradition has always been connected to the forest. I can remember walking with Ajahn Chah around the monasteries when he would point out different trees and plants, telling us their uses for medicine or food or their special characteristics. It was always interesting being with him. The old forest monks really relied on the forest for everything.

Nick: Through my work in conservation, I've come to realise that it is this kind of small scale effort that you are making which is important, rather than trying to 'save the world'.

Ajahn Pasanno: Yes, an example needs to be set. The project demonstrates what can be done with a small number of people, a small amount of effort. But if it's done in the right way it can be effective. I try to keep it very practical, keep it centered on a couple of issues, which actually starts to expand into others, but it provides something for others to consider. So we're planting seeds that will get more people involved.

If you push people into a corner, they'll defend themselves. You have to give people the space to back out. One of the problems oftentimes is the kind of confrontation you get into between the people who are destroying the forests, the vested interest, the civil service, people who want to preserve it. If you're not including everybody in the process, the forest just isn't worth it to protect. Everyone has to be included, seeing that this is something which belongs to all of us, that we also have a part to play in it.

In the Theravada tradition there's always been a very close relationship between the society you live in and the monastic community. In Thailand, as a monk, I don't have the amount of free time or space that you'd expect. You're actually so much a part of the community that the monastery is an open space. That's why I had to come to England to do this one year retreat.

Nick Scott adds: I am very impressed with what Ajahn Pasanno has been doing for the forests in Thailand. I know from having worked in nature conservation that projects based on a wise perspective are rare. It is also rare for us to have the opportunity to save forest in the third world without much of our donation having to be spent on marketing and administration. If you would like to contribute to Nature Care, you can send a cheque, made out to: English Sangha Trust (Nature Care), C/O Nick Scott to Chithurst Monastery and we will forward it.



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The Retreat of Light

For the first time, Ajahn Amaro and 3 other bhikkhus of our samvasa have spent the three months rains retreat together in California. Here they give some of their impressions.

Ajahn Amaro:

For several years, since 1988 I have always found myself either managing or leading the Winter Retreats at Amaravati or Chithurst, and consequently have had little time for kaya viveka (physical solitude). Although I knew I could just soldier on regardless with teaching and administrative duties both at Amaravati and here in America, I also felt a distinct hungering in the heart for a breather from immersion in human contact.

One of the members of the Sanghapala Foundation, Daniel Barnes, had a very suitable retreat site for us to use, and California seemed to be a good place for such a retreat. Firstly, it would provide several bhikkhus an opportunity to practise in seclusion; and secondly, providing the Buddhist community of California with the chance to take part in a more classical form of forest monastic life - rather than just going to listen to Dhamma talks in the city, or participating in retreats at local venues.

The monks all lived separately from each other at one end of the 170 acre property - each of us tucked away in our own little gulley - three of us had large dome-tents; Ajahn Thanavaro used a caravan that was already on the site. We met once a day for the alms-round up to the cook-house; other than that we were left quite alone to pursue our meditation practice. On the lunar quarters we would gather up at the shrine room (it was a mongolian yurt actually), and spend the night in meditation and Dhamma discussion together. On the full and new moon days the four bhikkhus would gather together at my tent and we would recite the Patimokkha.

Nature teaches in a very direct way, earthy in her lessons. If we could only listen to her we could learn a lot.

The retreat site, known as Bell Springs Hermitage, was at 3,800 feet; and commanded spectacular views over the local countryside in all directions. Throughout the retreat the weather was very kind to us (it can get extremely vicious up here) and we enjoyed still, bright days and clear nights most of the time. Often the sea-fog would roll in from the west and fill the valleys below us with an ocean of undulating pearl; somehow we were almost always high enough to be above it, and could look down across the new white landscape from sunlit heights. In the last month of the Rains there have also been strange and beautiful atmospheric effects almost daily: coloured haloes around the sun and the moon, and even a white rainbow - two days running.

In entering upon such an open period of time there is always the question: "What should I do?" I had no special aims in mind with regard to meditation practice, however, I did wish to

make some use of the time to go more deeply into the Sutta Teachings. Studying the scriptures in such an environment had a profound effect. I often found the mind full of sheer delight in the genius and clarity of the Buddha's wisdom, and a profound love and gratitude for him and the legacy he bequeathed to those of us who have come after. This sense of vandana entered into many areas, and I found that simply chanting, 'Namo Tassa ...' could bring tremendous joy - the delight of revering the Holy.

There were also a few future projects and plans in the air for the time following the retreat - a book, completed, but stalled at the printers; travel to Asia with Luang Por Sumedho over the winter; the gift of land in Redwood Valley - so towards the end, I made a particular point of meditating on desirelessness: both to witness the beauty of the mind when no desire is present, and also to enter into that place of faith that does not need the future to be formulated in any way.

When we arrived here it quickly became apparent that we were coming to a place that was already occupied - being such a remote location (13 miles down a dirt road) the land had many animals and birds either living on it or passing through. One of the most common sights for all of us was that of a mother deer and her fawn grazing at dusk and dawn, and even by the brightness of the moon - they became so used to us that they no longer ran away but would carry on happily eating nearby; finding what nourishment they could in the moss on the oak trees and the tired summer grasses, or crunching on the multitude of acorns littering the ground.

We also found stone chips dropped from the shaping of tools and, on one occasion, an arrowhead - remnants of the previous human occupation. Ven. Sugato (formerly an archeologist) reckoned it to be about 900 years old. Such findings would evoke a strong sense of the simplicity of those lives and the culture of those who had lived here peacefully for hundreds of generations, before the white man came.

It was something of an act of faith to set it up like this - deliberately arranged without any formal teachings - and it was very gladdening to see the positivity of the response of the Buddhist community; those who came were not coming to 'get' anything, but simply for the opportunity to give and to help. Every weekend, 2, 3 or 4 people would make the long drive up from the Bay Area - many of them 'city folks', not used to country ways or the lack of stimulation. No electricity, the 20 mile drive to the nearest town, the feeling of remoteness and the apparent dangers of the dark were difficult for some, (somewhat ironic for folks coming from towns where rape, muggings and drive-by shootings are not uncommon!). But, in the end, people were enormously grateful for the chance to be away from the speediness of urban life and for the opportunity to practise meditation in such a beautiful sanctuary for a while.

Ajahn Thanavaro:

My sixteenth Rains Retreat is closing tonight with a beautiful full moon. The sun has brightened our days for the last three months, so in fact this Vassa will remain in my memory

*Tumbling oak-children
beat
upon the drum
my roof.
Smaller seeds
trickle
in gentle scurries
down my walls.*

*Already the fawn
has lost
the sun dapplings
of infancy*

*One summer
gone already.*

as the retreat of light. It has been a very valuable time, in that it has provided me with a precious opportunity to rest from the increasing pressures of life, both offering teachings to a fast growing lay Buddhist community and also as Abbot of Santacittarama Vihara in Italy. The many days and nights spent in meditation and solitude in this beautiful natural surrounding had a very healing effect on the heart, allowing me to get in touch with my emotions and to explore difficult areas of my life with a greater capacity for self-reflective awareness. It has been a time for bringing in the harvest of my efforts, and for gathering the strength to step out into the world with a compassionate heart once more. As with the seasons of nature, our spiritual life goes in cycles following a pattern of achievement, rest and contemplation.

Ajahn Chandapalo's and Tan Jutindharo's willingness to take care of things in my absence allowed me to offer support to Ajahn Amaro. Although we had not spent much time together during the past 12 years, we both felt a strong bond of friendship, having spent our first four years of monastic life sharing the same room at Chithurst and Harnham. Knowing very little about where and how the retreat would happen, I trusted that things would work out. In all respects my faith in the benevolence of the universe was well founded. In spite of various organisational problems the retreat was well set up and ready to start by the time we arrived.

The morning fog rising from the valley and disappearing into the air gave me an insight into the insubstantial nature of all things. The innumerable grasshoppers mating in the fields under the warm sun urged me to overcome lust once and for all. Almost stepping on a rattlesnake reminded me of my impending death. The fear of being attacked by a bear or being sprayed by a skunk at night allowed me to notice my identification with the body. Nature teaches in a very direct way, earthy in her lessons. If we could only listen to her we could learn a lot. Visiting the Redwoods on the day of my 40th birthday felt like entering into a cathedral for a religious service. The tall trees, more than 100 meters high, were the perfect columns of a church roof.

What sadness reflecting on the ecological disaster of our age! One day the sky was overcast with the smoke of a fire. 12,000 acres of a nearby wildlife sanctuary were burnt due to the negligence of some campers who left their fire unattended. A moment of heedlessness can destroy the entire planet just as a moment of anger can burn up the benefit of many weeks of spiritual practice. The opportunity to be silent for most of the time and to relax breathing deeply the fresh mountain air enabled me to dissolve any accumulated tensions and anxieties. In the acknowledgement of my own loneliness and grief, I embraced countless sentient beings with a boundless heart. Looking at the dry grass moved by the wind I asked, "Where is this force that moves the universe coming from?" I did not get a reply from the wind and I did not force my mind to find an answer. To want to end the suffering of birth, ageing, sickness and death requires courage. To want the truth without love is a kind of arrogance. To learn humility is to die in love. As a traveller on the way on this trackless mountain-top looking down at the heart-shaped hill in the valley below, I found out that the earth cares if we respect her. I have benefitted from the life lived in simplicity and in nature and in the unsurpassed Dhamma. I once again took refuge vowing to walk the Path of the Buddha.

Venerable Sugato:

Living simply in tents drawing water from a spring, and subsisting on one meal a day has been a powerful way to reconnect with the earth that sustains us. Having little or no formal schedule and so much time and space for solitude affects the mind in very positive ways. It is easy to relax in such surroundings and for awe and wonder to be a common disposition. Quite naturally the senses open up and you become more alert and aware of what is happening both internally and externally. Peace is never very far away.

At night, the silence and brilliance of the stars made palpable a stillness and presence beyond all words. Gazing up at the stars and learning my way around the various constellations helped expand and broaden the mind to a sense of vastness and marvel. In that space it is possible to drop our worries and fears and preoccupation with self and to feel unabashedly connected and involved with the process of life and all its mysteries.

Our support has been generous and bountiful in many ways; our situation has been superb for practice and we are grateful to have had such an opportunity. Now we're all wondering where we can sign up for the next one.

Venerable Khemarato:

The first impression was one of the struggle of the mind to adjust to a new environment and conditions. I could observe a kind of 'hang-over' in the first week of the retreat. Memories of previous encounters would flush through the mind, and the separation from dear ones brought up a sense of longing. Then there were the adjustments to the physical surroundings - we are not allowed to use any candles - which limits the times for walking meditation for example, and generally letting a suitable routine establish itself.

To live in nature like this brings us closer again to our connectedness with it, and we become a part of the place that we are living in. Little by little for example the deer are accepting more and more our presence here; very often we share the same paths, that wind along the slopes following a direction which nature dictates by the shapes and forms of that terrain. The weather, wind and clouds or 'my' mind are all inter-connected aspects of nature. When the mind settles down by letting go of the past and the future (to some extent) and relaxes into the present moment, it naturally becomes joyful and delights in being closer again to its own pure essence. The concept of self dissolves into a feeling of oneness with nature. Whenever feelings of loneliness come up and they are not associated with any dear ones, then it becomes obvious that this deep longing we carry in us is for overcoming the sense of separatedness and to find our way home to this oneness.

Remembering some words from a Chinese master:

Whatever is spoken of, is not true; and whatever is true, that cannot be spoken of.

Mark Bullock:

Together with Greg Scharff, Mark was there in support of the Sangha and offers this account of their vassa retreat:

HOW I SPENT MY SUMMER VACATION

Or, (For the English reader)

WHAT I DID ON MY HOLS

by Mark Bullock (aged 51 1/2)

I went to a Buddhist Retreat called the Vassa or 'Rains Retreat' for three months this year in Bell Springs Hermitage. Sometimes we called the place "Bell Springs Bed and Breakfast" or the "Bell Springs Motel" because lots of people came there at the weekends.

It was a kind of camp but I didn't stay in a tent like the others. I stayed in a camper. My friend Greg and I helped take care of four monks and everything else there. People called him the "Vassa Captain". I don't know what they called me. We cooked food (I like lasagne), pumped water, cut wood, answered the telephone, and worked really hard.

We got to be country people at Bell Springs Hermitage. The city people came and visited us. They brought food and other things. They were very funny and very busy. They had many special needs and hidden disabilities, like having to eat and sleep at all times of the day and being afraid of the dark and the sounds of nature. They talked a lot, always saying how beautiful it was and asking what we did all day. They thanked us all the time too and said we were making lots of merit.

We didn't play any sports or go swimming or listen to music. We didn't have any campfires either, but we did get roast marshmallows from the wood-burning stove on the last night. We sat and walked and listened to the wind and the trees and looked at the stars and watched all the critters. We had a rattlesnake, a frog, some skunks, some deer, and lots of different kinds of birds around. We caught three mice and took them to live a few miles away. We also saw a bear, a bob- cat, a coyote, rabbits and other animals. I liked watching the grasshoppers and lizards.

The weather was beautiful almost every day. Sometimes it was cold and windy and foggy,

but it never rained (just like Ajahn Thanavaro predicted). I don't know why they call it the 'rains'. I think it was some kind of joke.

I had lots of fun and I hope that my mother and my sister let me go again next year.

The End



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Sutta Class: Morals and Ethics

Ajahn Thiradhammo

The word sila has several meanings depending upon the context in which it is used. Thus, it can mean, 'nature, character, habit, behaviour', or 'moral practice, good character' (PED.712), or a body of training precepts, such as the five, eight or ten precepts. Most teachings concerned with ethics affirm the non-doing of evil and the cultivation of good. The Buddha's teaching, however, adds a further dimension to the realm of ethics, that of purification of mind.

- The non-doing of all evil,
- The cultivation of the wholesome,
- The purifying of one's mind -

This is the Teaching of the Buddhas. [Dh.183]

This means purifying the mind of selfishness - of all tendencies and references to self or selfhood. This is accomplished through the sequential development of morality, which gives rise to collectedness of mind, which in turn gives rise to liberation.

Ananda, kusala sila (wholesome conduct) gives freedom from remorse as its gain and advantage; freedom from remorse gives delight as its gain and advantage; delight gives joy; joy gives tranquillity; tranquillity gives well-being; well-being gives collectedness; collectedness gives knowledge and vision of things as they really are; knowledge and vision of things as they really are gives disenchantment and dispassion; disenchantment and dispassion gives knowledge and vision of liberation as its gain and advantage.

So indeed, Ananda, wholesome conduct gradually leads on to the highest. [A.V,2; cf.A.III,19-20]

Although technically only the three qualities of Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood are grouped under the heading of morality - sila, in practice all eight factors of the Noble Eightfold Path function as supports for morality.

Thus there are different forms of moral training, which are voluntarily undertaken - depending upon individual circumstances, abilities and determination - by those seeking to be free of suffering. They are not absolute commandments from some higher power, who then stands in judgement over them instilling a fear of punishment; such an approach inevitably gives rise to guilt, since human beings invariably fail to live up to ideal standards of perfection. It is interesting that guilt is unknown in Buddhist countries, whereas remorse, a perfectly natural response to wrong-doing, is recognised as an important moral force - its penetrating sting prevents the repeating of unwholesome behaviour. The impersonal and automatic Law of Kamma is what judges a Buddhist's actions, so rather than trying to cover up wrong-doing, the most that can be done is to do good actions to counteract the wrong.

Supports For Good Conduct:

The most important support for good conduct is Knowledge, or Right View. At [M.9], Bhikkhu Sariputta says to understand both the unwholesome and wholesome, and their roots is to have Right View. Elsewhere, [M.III,71], Right View is defined as understanding that there are results to good and bad actions. This inclines one to follow good conduct in body, speech and mind, and to avoid misconduct, seeing in unwholesome states the danger, degradation, and defilement, and, in wholesome states: the blessing of renunciation, the aspect of cleansing" [M.I,114f].

From this follows:

right intention; right speech; non-opposition to noble ones; convincing another to accept true Dhamma; and avoidance of self-praise and disparagement of others. These wholesome states thus come into being with Right View as their condition.

It is said that Right View arises from these two sources: another's speech or from wise attention. [A.I,87; M.I,294].

Personal & Social Conscience - hiri-ottappa

Ignorance, bhikkhus, precedes and gives rise to unwholesome states, lack of personal and social conscience follows after. Knowledge, bhikkhus, precedes and gives rise to wholesome states, personal and social conscience follows after. [It.Vut.40]

Personal and social conscience are called in the Pali Canon the world protectors [It.Vut.42;A.I,50].

Personal conscience - hiri is that moral quality which is founded upon personal integrity; it aims at preserving an honourable and praiseworthy standard of conduct, which we can feel comfortable with within ourselves. A further explanation is that:

[It] has the characteristic of disgust with evil, is dominated by a sense of self-respect, and manifests itself as conscience. [MLDB,nt.416]

Social conscience - ottappa is that moral quality which is concerned with maintaining an honourable and blameless reputation in society, free from other people's recrimination and criticism.

[It] has the characteristic of dread of evil, is dominated by a concern for the opinions of others, and manifests itself as fear of doing evil. [ibid.]

The Noble Eightfold Path:

Although technically only the three qualities of Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood are grouped under the heading of morality - sila, in practice all eight factors of the Noble Eightfold Path function as supports for morality. At [M.III,76], the Buddha is quoted as saying that one with Right View has right thought, from right thought comes right speech, and thus all the



factors of the eightfold path come into being, and from Right Concentration follow Right Knowledge and Right Deliverance for the Arahant - cf. [A.V,212ff].

Right Thought:

During the Buddha-to-be's striving for Awakening, he divided his thoughts - vitakka, into two categories: thoughts of sensual desire, ill-will and cruelty, and thoughts of renunciation, non-ill-will and non-cruelty. He then reflected upon such thoughts, thus:

This thought of sensual desire has arisen in me. This leads to my own affliction, to other's affliction, and to the affliction of both; it obstructs wisdom, causes difficulties, and leads away from Nibbana.

When he thus considered, the thoughts of sensual desire subsided. Whenever they did arise, he abandoned and did away with them - and similarly with thoughts of ill-will and cruelty:

Bhikkhus, whatever a bhikkhu frequently thinks and ponders upon, that will become the inclination of his mind. If he frequently thinks and ponders upon thoughts of sensual desires, he has abandoned the thought of renunciation to cultivate the thought of sensual desire, and then his mind inclines to thoughts of sensual desire.

Likewise with thoughts of ill-will and cruelty. Contrariwise, thoughts of renunciation, non-ill-will and non-cruelty do not lead to affliction but to Nibbana. [M.I,114f]

Right Livelihood:

Right livelihood is incumbent upon both homeless and householder disciples. The household disciple is able to cause benefits in various ways from wealth he has gained by

- rousing energy,
- accumulated by strength of arm,
- earned by sweat,
- lawfully and justly acquired.

He is able to make himself, his parents, family and friends happy; is able to ward off misfortune; is able to make the fivefold offering to relatives, guests, the departed, leaders and celestials; is able to make offerings to noble religious persons which lead to heaven. cf. [A.II,67-8; III,45]

This is how wealth is properly used.

Wrong livelihood is generally explained as:

Scheming, talking, hinting, belittling, pursuing gain with gain. [M.III,75 = MLDB,p.938]

Right Livelihood is explicitly detailed as:

refraining from cheating with false weights and measures, from bribery and corruption, deception and insincerity, from wounding, killing, imprisoning, highway robbery, and taking goods by force. [D.III,176 = THIH,p.458-9]

The five trades which should not be plied by any lay-follower are:

Trade in weapons, trade in human beings, trade in flesh, trade in intoxicants and trade in poisons [A.III,208]

Right Effort:

The way of practice for the cessation of unwholesome and wholesome behaviour is the four right efforts:

Here a bhikkhu awakens zeal for the non-arising of unarisen evil unwholesome states; for the abandoning of arisen evil unwholesome states; for the arising of unarisen wholesome states; for the continuance, non-disappearance, strengthening, increase, and fulfilment by development of arisen wholesome states. So he makes effort, arouses energy, exerts his mind,

and strives. [M.II,26 = MLDB,p.651]

Right Mindfulness:

Here a bhikkhu understands mind affected by lust as a mind affected by lust, and mind unaffected by lust as a mind unaffected by lust. Similarly with the mind affected by hate or delusion. [M.I,59 = MLDB,p.150]

Right Concentration:

Right concentration, ie. the four jhanas, leads to the suppression of the five hindrances, including greed and aversion. Thus one can experience the bliss of renunciation from the five strands of sense pleasure.

Various beneficial qualities are mentioned as causes for the arising of wholesomeness and the ceasing of unwholesomeness. These various qualities are: earnestness - appamaado. cf. [It.Vut.23], putting forth effort, satisfaction with little, contentment, wise attention, clear awareness - sampajanna and good friendship - kalyaanamitta [A.III,419] (A.I,11f).

Further Practices of Good Conduct:

Generosity - dana is one of the three bases for making merit, together with sila and mental development; it is also one of three things encouraged by the wise (along with going forth into homelessness and support of parents). [A.I,151]

One with faith: ... dwells at home with a mind free of the stain of stinginess, given to liberality, pure handed, fond of giving, open to requests, fond of offering generosity. [A.I,150]

The Buddha realised himself the value of this virtue: Bhikkhus, if beings knew, as I know, the result of giving and sharing they would not eat without having given, nor would they allow the stain of meanness to obsess them and take root in their minds. [It.Vut.26: Ireland trans.]

It is said that by giving food, one gives four things to the receiver: long life, beauty, well-being and strength, and that one also partakes of them oneself. [A.II,63]

Regarding the manner of offering:

It should be done with faith, deference, timely, with satisfied mind, not harming oneself or others.

Two kinds of generosity are mentioned: the giving of material things - aamisa, and the giving of Dhamma. Of these, the giving of Dhamma is the superior. [It.Vut.98,100; A.I,90].



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EDITORIAL

On the Road

Sister Candasiri trades in her editorial "L" plates and takes to the open road.

For over a decade I have been privileged to watch the Forest Sangha Newsletter come into being. With Ajahn Sucitto always there in the driving seat, my role has varied over the years. At the beginning, I was there as the chief mechanic - typing, cutting, pasting it all together, as well as keeping an eye out for obvious grammatical errors, and writing the occasional article. Then the Sangha became familiar with computer technology, and D.T.P. (desk top publishing) came to the fore; scissors and paste became things of the past, and what was needed more was help with editing and proof reading. In 1991, during Ajahn Sucitto's pilgrimage in India, I was even responsible for assembling an entire issue or two; this was accomplished through carefully following instructions he had left, and with considerable help on the technical side... But now something more dramatic has occurred: Ajahn Sucitto - after 16 years of editorship - is taking a lengthy and well-earned sabbatical. And I find myself, with the encouragement and support of the Sangha elders, settling gently into the driving seat. It feels very different. The understanding is that it will be for at least a year, although it could be for much longer. What is clear is that right now the ball is in my court, the buck stops here. There is responsibility, there is authority and, inevitably, there will be praise and blame. After years of supporting and doing what has felt comfortable (most of the time), there is an awesome new feeling... and it's not at all the way one imagined it would be - sitting in the driver's seat feels different. The mood seems to sway between feelings of confidence and uplift at the opportunity to perform the grand gesture of serving in this way, and a sense of inadequacy, timidity and fear of failure. Rather than struggle with these, I recall the words of Luang Por Chah:

"We cannot run away from feeling, we must know it. Feeling is just feeling, happiness is just happiness, unhappiness is just unhappiness. They are simply that. So why cling to them?"

It's necessary to be clear about the purpose, then to map
 out the course to be followed in order to achieve it.
 Cruising along, there is a need to keep eyes and ears open
 and the heart light, alert and watchful.

Up until now, I have been able to focus on the detail: the comma, the apostrophe, the awkward phrasing - now, there is a need to consider the vision. It's necessary to assess the whole purpose of the undertaking - just to get a sense of how effort should be directed. Of course, I could just potter along following exactly the same style and format as that established already, without even thinking why it might be that way - but that doesn't feel quite right. So it's necessary to be clear about the purpose, and then to map out the course to be followed in order to achieve it. And the journey begins. Cruising along, there is a need to keep eyes and ears open and the heart light, alert and watchful: How's it going? Is it still fulfilling a need? Should we adjust things a little, or change direction altogether? This is often where friends are able to point out to us if we are driving erratically, or have missed a turning; so we need to be able to respond sensitively to

these signs. The samana Sangha and training was established by the Buddha with two main aims in mind: firstly, to support the practice of those living within it and, secondly, to be a source of encouragement, inspiration and example for those who practise in the household life. The Patimokkha, or Vinaya discipline, also provided a structure, a vessel, within which the Dhamma could be clearly seen - that would support the realisation of Nibbana. It is interesting to note how the Buddha himself expressed these aims in his response to situations where bhikkhus were behaving inappropriately:

"Foolish man, it [...such behaviour] is not for the benefit of non-believers, nor for the increase in the number of believers, it is to the detriment of non-believers as well as believers, and it causes wavering in some."

So, as a forest Sangha, we can ask ourselves: What can we do that will be of benefit - that supports both our own practice and the practice of others?

Well, since we are spread out all over the world, a newsletter such as this can be useful. Through it, we can reflect on the traditional teachings of the Buddha; we can tell one another how we practise, sharing our understanding of certain principles; we can communicate about what we are doing in our different communities, how we structure our lives - there is always something to be gained from hearing of other people's ways of doing things; we can look at how the fruits of our practice can extend out into the society in which we live - encouraging one another to keep the heart open to the cries of the world; and we can learn how particular experiences, for example, solitary practice or going on pilgrimage or tudong can bring new dimensions into our understanding of what it means to be a disciple of the Buddha.

These are some ideas that have come to mind as this issue has taken form. There is a place for silence in our lives, there is a place for skilful communication. With many samanas practising in monasteries in different parts of the world, there is surely much we can share, much we can offer to one another - perhaps this is why this newsletter has come into existence. May it help to nurture the faith and practice both of those who live in or close to a monastery and of those who live far away.

And please let me know if I'm driving too fast, too slow, or too close to the kerb!

Sister Candasiri

Seeing

The peace which arises
from wisdom is not
happiness, but is that
which sees the truth of
both happiness and
unhappiness.

Ajahn Chah

THIS ISSUE**Signs of Change:**

Cover: ■ Don't Get Off The Train; Ajahn Thanavaro
Articles: ■ Vision and Focus; Sister Thanasanti
 ■ Saving Forests; Nick Scott interviews Ajahn Pasanno
 ■ The Retreat of Light; Reflections from California
 ■ Sutta Class: Morals & Ethics; Ajahn Thiradhammo
Editorial: ■ The Open Road; Sister Candasiri

HOME**BACK ISSUES**

SIGNS OF CHANGE

The Temple Update:

The new temple building at Amaravati is really beginning to take shape, with the walls in place and the oak frame soon to go up. Much of the messiest work has been completed, although the central area of the monastery compound will continue to look very much like a building site for some time to come. This had initially caused a bit of inconvenience for both residents and visitors, but everyone seems to be taking it in good heart. And despite our cramped facilities, this year's Kathina was as well attended as ever.

Financial support has continued to be very generous, with many people responding enthusiastically now that work is finally under way. Of course, as the majority of people who support Amaravati are not well-off, many can only afford small contributions. But every little bit helps and reinforces the sense of owning and participating in something which will be for the benefit of all.

As we discovered when the foundations were installed, putting down firm roots is a substantial investment. As of late 1995, it looks as though there will be sufficient funds to effectively complete the main hall itself by mid-1996. However, we will probably have to wait longer before seeing the whole of the cloister and some of the finishing touches inside the temple itself.

Luang Por in Asia

Ajahn Sumedho will be away from Amaravati for a period of more than four months, having gone to Thailand on November 21st

Initially, he was in Bangkok, where the Buddha-rupa for the Amaravati temple was being cast. In late November, he and Ajahn Attapemo visited the foundry in Bangkok to chant parittas and then set in motion the process of creating the clay mould for the rupa.

It is customary in Thailand, whenever a Buddha-rupa is made for a well-known monastery, for the casting to be a big public occasion, attended by respected elders and many laypeople. Although our casting on December 10th was a somewhat smaller event, many elder monks in Thailand who have been supporters of our Sangha from its beginnings came to participate in the ceremony together with a number of other bhikkhus including the abbot of Wat Pah Nanachat, and many of our lay supporters.

Whilst in Bangkok, Ajahn Sumedho led a short retreat and gave public talks and interviews. He then spent some quiet time in the environs of Wat Pah Nanachat and Ubon, where he attended the annual memorial ceremonies for Luang Por Chah in the middle of January. As well as this being a time to venerate a much-loved teacher, the anniversary of Luang Por's passing was also a valuable time for his remaining senior



A model of the new Buddha rupa being cast for the Temple.

disciples to gather together.

In early February (1st - 4th), there will be a second Sangha gathering, this time for the cremation of Luang Por Jun who passed away last year. (See the obituary by Sister Sanghamitta in the last Sangha Newsletter).

In February, Ajahn Sumedho will teach retreats in Chiang Mai and then leave Thailand to take up an invitation to Indonesia. In March he will be in India to attend the third Conference of Western Buddhist Teachers, held in Dharamsala with H.H. the Dalai Lama.

Upon his return to Amaravati in April, he will spend one month in self retreat for a well- deserved rest before rejoining the monastic community in its daily activities.

Amaravati Support Network

Thanks to the kind offers of so many of our supporters, the Amaravati Support Network is ticking over at a steady rhythm. In the office, we have a team of helpers doing a variety of tasks from accounting to posting letters. Our tape library assistant comes rain or snow in his bicycle all the way from Watford!

We could use more assistance in the main library on a regular basis to help maintain our wonderful collection of books on all the major religions. And, come spring-time, there is much garden work to be done.

So, if you can come in to assist, especially in the library of the garden for a day or even just for an afternoon, weekends or during the week, please drop us a note!

