



# FOREST SANGHA

## newsletter

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## Mind Conditions the World

As you try to understand how to live your life, consider that how you actually live in a place has its effect on your mind. Like a monk's cell or room, if seen as just a place to crash out, then it becomes merely that. As you develop it into a place for mindfulness, you set up that which supports and encourages your practice.

So you begin to see that how you think and what you do, affects the space around you, either for the good or for the bad. One's isolated view is that somehow you are an independent creature that is living life for yourself, without it being influenced or affected by anything or affecting or influencing any- This is the total alienation view. We can see why in a society where samanas or holy people live, that society has a quality to it that is lacking in a country where there isn't any encouragement or interest in the holy life. Many of you have been to India, and you can see that in spite of the poverty and the many kinds of depressing sights in India, one thing that's always impressive, is the fact that spiritual life is highly regarded there. Because of that, India has a quality to it. In spite of the poverty and corruption, I personally would rather live in India than in a country that didn't allow religion of any sort, even if it was well organised and clean and efficient. I think that one really appreciates that which is uplifting the spirit, the inclination towards the divine. Then as you lift yourselves up from just the instinctual survival mechanisms of the body you find that strong aspiration towards the higher. We reach up to the light or to the sun, symbols of enlightenment, out from the amorphous dark, the nameless terror; away from hell toward heaven; aspiring from the bad to the good. So we determine to develop a life of virtue. This is uplifting the spirit.

In the Ovada Patimokkha, the Buddha says "Do good, refrain from doing evil, purify the mind." Do good is the first - that's the rising up, isn't it? In our lives, there's the active side - right speech, right action, right livelihood. To really perfect those three, the moral part of our path, is always a matter of rising up. You don't sink down to do good, you rise up to it. There is a lot of inertia, and just not wanting to be bothered and scepticism and cynicism and laziness and doubt and despair, all this pulls us downward. And so the way out is not to reject or just fight them out of fear or aversion - that pulls us down - but to understand the whole process of rising up.

Then you're not going into depression about washing the dishes or spending a lifetime of the same old boring reaction, because maybe your mother made you wash the dishes.

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Now if you contemplate the Buddha-rupa on the shrine, then you can see that that is actually a symbol of rising up. It's a figure of a human being who has an erect posture; the eyes are open, but they are not gazing at anything they are not seeking anything, they are not trying to find something to look at - but the eyes are open. So using the energy that one can generate within the body to bring it up, to a balanced posture. In Thailand, the word for going crazy is "thinking too much". And when you look at symbols of modern man such as Rodin's The Thinker, sitting with his head on his hand, looking utterly depressed - he's thinking too much.

When we think too much we can go crazy, we get depressed, we just get pulled into a kind of whirlpool vortex of thoughts, that always pull us downwards. Even though we might feel elated for a while, it always ends up in pulling us downwards, because thought itself is just like that: if you think too much you can't really do anything anymore, you have to stop thinking about it to do it. "Should I do the dishes? or shouldn't I do the dishes? Do I feel like doing them? Is doing the dishes really me? Should men do the dishes and not women or women do the dishes and not men or should both do them together?" And all the while we're just sitting there ... Whereas if you take the task and look at it in a different way, look at it positively: "What an honour to be able to do the dishes! they are honouring me by asking me to do the dishes!" Putting your hands in soapy water with bone china - all those are pleasant physical sensations, actually, aren't they. So if you start looking at the positive side, then you're not going into depression about washing the dishes or spending a lifetime of the same old boring reaction, because maybe your mother made you wash the dishes. These things hang on, just little things like this. You can see it with men sometimes, the way they react to women, "No woman is ever going to tell me what to do. No woman can boss me around." And these are the kind of male reactions that you develop when you are rebelling against your mother. And then women about men, it's the same thing isn't it? Rebelling against the father, "male chauvinism, trying to dominate and pull Us down and tyrannize women. grrr." Because sometimes women never outgrow their rebellion against their fathers. Sometimes We carry that on through a whole lifetime, without really knowing that we are doing it. In our reflections on Dhamma, we begin to free the mind from these very inadequate and immature reactions to life. We find in this "rising up" to life a sense of maturity and willingness to participate in it, and to respect people who are in positions of authority, rather than rebelling or resisting out of immature habits. When we are mature, when we understand Dhamma, we can work in the world in ways that are of benefit, harmonising, of Use to the society that we live in.

I remember in my first year at Wat Pah Pong, in Ubon Ratchathani, Thailand, with Ajahn Chah, I liked the monastery at first, but then I became very critical too. I wasn't going to give in too easily. I was going to keep my eyes open to see if it really was a good place or not. So when people tried to convince me about what a wonderful monastery it was, I'd be very sceptical. Many people would ask: "Don't you love Luong Por?" I thought: "No, I don't feel anything really." The idea of loving Luong Por at that time had never even occurred to me. Then they carried on about how it was such a good monastery - and my reaction when people tried to tell me how good something was tended to be to resist and look for what was wrong with it. That's an immature reaction, isn't it? I could see then that when somebody tried to convince me or convert me there was this kind of stubborn attitude: "I'm not going to do it, I don't care if it is the best, I'm not going to believe it because I don't want you to be right!"

I didn't know really very much

about Buddhist monasticism, but I still had strong views about what monks should be. And so I would very much be aware of that which I didn't approve of but then living there, I began to see what an opinionated, conceited attitude that was. So I began to let go of these things, I found that I fell in love with Luong Por Chah! This falling in love was coming from feeling a tremendous respect and trust. So you see the human heart itself is a heart of warmth and love, and it can bring joy and beauty into a situation. And when the heart is full of love and joy then that affects, not only our own happy states of mind but affects the people around us, and, the society we're in. When I first went to Ubon, I thought I wouldn't stay very long, but I spent nearly 10 years there, and to this day, I still look at Ubon as to a place I'd really love to go to. Not because it's beautiful because it's not particularly beautiful, but because I really began to appreciate it and what I received there: the support, the teaching, and the ability to live the holy life. So I very much connect with, that in the mind - my mind relates to Ubon Ratchathani as a holy place.



*The mind - the map - the world?*

We can see it in England now, as people are developing the holy life, here. It's no longer the England of the Colonial Era; we see a very different side, we've experienced something within this country, and in our mind - it connects with living in Britain. Being able to live the holy life through the openness and tolerance generated towards us in this country, one is pleasantly surprised and this is the rising up of the spirit too. Before I came to Britain I'd determined in my mind that I would only go and live in this country if I found I was offering something worthwhile to it. There was no point in just going to see it, or with a missionary attitude.. I didn't feel any enthusiasm in going to convert people to Buddhism. I thought that the idea of conversion was repulsive. But the idea of going to Britain to try to offer something beautiful, and something that would help people, was something I felt I could do. And so that remained in my mind as an attitude of coming to England to add more sweetness, rather than to come here to divide and cause trouble and create more problems for the country or to take advantage of it in any way.

These are a way of looking at your life here, at what you are doing as monks and nuns living

within this country. A way of looking at it no longer as being a kind of oddball or anachronism. When you are bringing something into the country that is delicious and beautiful, it may not seem at first that way, because it is different from what people are used to. Many people have that fear that we come here to make everything worse and poison the country. But to our own living of this life, in the right way with the right attitude, then the whole image changes from being freaky weirdoes who come here to cause trouble to being that which is worthy of respect, worthy of alms.

In the society we live in we begin to see that just the presence of good monks and nuns is making an offering to it by being examples. Then that gives great hope and inspiration to others if not necessarily to become monks or nuns but to live more skilfully and aspire towards higher than just getting along in the system. To me just floating along in the system is a hell realm. It is such a depressing idea, to use one's human life to just float along the easiest way. You don't do anything, you don't offer anything, you don't aspire to anything you just get by. So we can see in the holy life, the opportunity is here: at Amaravati and Chithurst, the occasion is here for that rising up.

With our contemplation of Dependent Origination we are actually being with the world rather than believing it to be the real world. We're aware of it and understanding of it as it is, without being deluded by it through the conditioning process of perception and culture. So the empty mind is the receptive, because in that way of mindfulness, there is no need to name or call anything anything, unless there is a conventional reason for it. Then as we begin to realise the cessation of the world, we can begin to refrain from frantically creating more worlds to cease. We're not trying to create anything because we are content and at peace with the way it is. Now really contemplate this, and know the attentiveness, mindfulness, before the opinions, views, desires and fears start arising. Now if you're doing it for the wrong reason - out of desire and fear and ignorance - then of course you only receive despair. You feel that you're always going to fail and meditation is going to be a lot of suffering for you. Even when you can get refined states of consciousness, you can't hold on to them. The more you try to convert and impose refinement on the world around you the more frustrated you feel by the inefficiency, corruption, brutality and mediocrity. You can see with very refined types of human beings how difficult life is for them. If you have very high standards and very refined tastes, then you're going to be upset even by the style of curtains on the wall.

Now the empty mind has room for everything: the curtains on the wall, the refined subtleties the beauties, the coarse and the gross. The empty mind is all-embracing. So there isn't that need to run about trying to pick and choose, control and manipulate. To pick and choose, control and manipulate is always such a frantic way to live, but when you appreciate the empty mind, the cessation of the world, then the mind is receptive to the totality of the whole of it. One begins to just look. Now this is like a child's mind. I remember as a very young child where I grew up, I'd been able to walk in the countryside in empty fields which had beautiful tiger lilies growing wild in them, and I remember being much impressed with these spring flowers. Such things are discoveries when you are a young child and you don't have perceptions and views about things. So you're with the way it is. Then you begin to forget about these things. Now how many people here think: "Oh, another grey cold English winter fog. I wish I were in Tahiti. I wish we could go to some place where there is lots of colour and sunshine." These are conditioned reactions. You see a muddy field and the fog and the grey sky and the mind goes: "I don't like it. I want to see something else, I want to see sunshine and million spring flowers and bananas and coconuts, mangoes, beautiful azure skies." And so while the eyes are focused on the muddy field, you're not seeing the mud anymore and there's just a total rejection of that. So when we talk about meditation, and people accuse us of avoiding the real world, you can challenge them and say: "Where is the real world? What is the world, what is real?" Because what is real to many people's world really has no reality to it. It is just a perception based on delusion - on prejudice, preference and memories.

That kind of mind is a mind that is conditioned to react in terms of despair and depression. The world that one is attached to and believes in is never satisfactory and one is never content with it. There is always something wrong with it and there is always going to be something wrong with it. So in the holy life we just realise that whatever happens, its just the way things move and change. We will learn from it, grow with it and open to it. And if difficult and unpleasant situations arise, than thats part of it; that's just the way things are. Sometimes its very bright and peaceful, sometimes its murky and confused. But if you begin to contemplate murky confusion and radiant bliss as just the way things are, there's nothing to get depressed or elated about, is there? Radiant bliss is that way, but its not me and mine, and it's impermanent. The muddy field or the azure blue sky, the heat of the sun or the cold wind of the north; whatever - it all belongs in the mind. There is room for everything, and so there is no reason to feel frightened.



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## Amaravati Exhibition

*Lay People's Practice*

The development of skilful means lies at the heart of Buddhist practice. In Buddhist countries there are everywhere sustaining reflections and support for practice: countrywide networks of viharas, the beautiful symbiosis of laity and Sangha, and the ever present nourishment of a Buddhist culture. Although the growth of the Sangha in Britain since the mid-1970's has been remarkable, Britain cannot, by any stretch of the imagination, be regarded as a particularly nourishing ground for practice. All too often the dull deceit of habit and the pressure of social conventions point away from mindfulness. In this environment, lay Buddhists may at times feel dauntingly isolated, lonely pioneers swimming against the current.

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The Exhibition is directed towards the heart of practice  
in lay life.

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The realisation that there are friends on the path encountering the same problems, or developing skilful means for dealing with them, can be vital for the sustenance of practice. It must be remembered that "Sangha" as a quality embraces all those committed to the realisation of Dhamma in their daily lives, not just the community of ordained monks and nuns. Indeed, the conviction that the laity have much to share with each other has provided the initial inspiration for the Exhibition on Lay People's Practice now taking place at Amaravati. Conceived as an offering by lay Buddhists for lay Buddhists, the essence of the Exhibition is directed towards the heart of practice in lay life, a comprehensive and open-ended offering concerned with people and practice rather than institutions. Its key themes are: Society, Family Life Practice, Giving, Devotion and Ceremonies, Formal Practice, and Helpful Resources.

Based on an extensive questionnaire circulated amongst some groups and individuals associated with Amaravati, the Exhibition has tended to develop in unimagined ways. A potentially very important development here has been Ajahn Sumedho's suggestion that the Exhibition be linked to the international effort for "Global Co-operation for a Better World" - of which he is one of the patrons, The Ajahn has suggested that the Exhibition might provide an insightful perspective on what the organisers of the Global Co-operation project are seeking to bring about, by providing a Buddhist reflection on the path of mindfulness in daily life. Such a reflection which might serve as an inspiration both for fellow Buddhists and for adherents of other





religions and likeminded seekers of Truth. The Exhibition will also undoubtedly receive a major new input of energy and reformulation at the time of the Summer Camp at Amaravati in the last week in July (25-31 July).

By the time your read this, the Exhibition on Lay People's Practice will already have begun to happen in the Dhamma Hall at Amaravati. Its success very much depends on your continuing contribution. Please send gifts of photographs, quotes and artwork relevant to the themes of the Exhibition. When visiting, you are invited to make offerings which might further enhance the Exhibition's ongoing development. Already considerable gratitude is felt towards those who have shared the commitment of their practice so generously and have been willing to reflect so openly on their experiences. Your contacts at Amaravati are Barbara Jackson and Anne Pryor.



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## View from Switzerland

*The Swiss vihara opened on May 15th with Ajahn Tiradhammo as abbot. He sends us this brief report.*

When we come to a new country things are obviously different -new countryside new residence, new people, etc. If we hold on to a particular view of things we are left only with comparisons: this is better than that, that is better than this.

Our way of practice though is about learning to see the view, learning to see the whole process of viewing. Whether it be English countryside or Swiss countryside there is still seeing, hearing, smelling ... liking, disliking, indifference. Our practice may be in a new place, but it is the same space!

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So far we have met only welcoming and friendly gestures.

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We have settled in to our second-floor Vihara flat of three bedrooms, kitchen and shrine-room-cumdining-room-cum-reception room, Work on two more bedrooms and a larger shrine-room progresses very slowly but we hope to be able to use them before the end of July.

Our new situation is somewhat atypical of the Forest Tradition as we are close to the centre of a large village on a busy street. However, there is a pine and beech wood only seven minutes' walk away; and a half-hour's walk away is a hilltop viewpoint with spectacular panoramic views of the snow-capped Alpine peaks thrusting up into the sky and the wooded hills of the Emmental and Mittelland rolling off to the horizon.

We have made many alms-round excursions through the surrounding countryside and villages, arousing much curious and friendly response. We have had a very cordial meeting with the local Catholic priest and the two Protestant ministers have come to the vihara. Two stories in the Bern newspapers appeared in a favourable tone and we will feature in next month's edition of a Swiss journal. So far we have met only welcoming and friendly gestures.

Visitors have been appearing in a slow but steady stream. In our second week we were honoured by the visit of the Venerable Somdet of the Marble Temple in Bangkok, and last week the Meditation teacher Godwin Somaratana dropped by for dana and for Dhamma discussion. We have received the first spontaneous alms-offering on the Burgdorfstrasse from



two Cambodians who journeyed several hundred kilometres just to offer pindapad.

Already many people have come forward with offers of support and help. One young man turned up at 7 a.m. Saturday morning to put in a day's carpentry work; an architect has offered his services; someone else has offered building materials; others have offered help with graphic design, printing and translations-we are amazed at the many kind and generous responses!

We also have invitations away from the vihara: Thai Wesak in Zurich, Vietnamese Wesak in Lucerne, talk in Bern, etc. The nearby Kalden Choling Tibetan Centre has offered the use of their centre for retreats and have arranged for us to meet His Holiness, the Dalai Lama, later this month. Several weekend retreats are planned for later in the year and monthly talks in Bern are being arranged.

Even though we have been here only a month it seems like ages-so it goes when there are so many good things happening. With such an auspicious beginning the Forest Tradition is starting to sprout a few blossoms in Central Europe.

*Dhammapala Buddhistisches Kloster,  
Burgdorfstrasse 9,  
3510 Konolfingen,  
Switzerland*



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## Emerald Buddhas

*Ajahn Amaro writes this account of a teaching tour made in Ireland in spring 1988, shortly after the funeral killings in Belfast He and Anagarika Jakob spent much of their first week in the company of Paddy and Linda Boyle and their four children.*

Things seem quiet in the city. After the uproar of the killings last week there was apprehension about our visit but once here we have found life carrying on regardless. There is tension and suspicion as ever. Nervous glances at the airport - eyes darting into the car as we drive past - everyone is watching everyone, but in a situation of danger this is only natural. People learn to live with the stress or survival would be impossible. Paddy mentioned yesterday that Tommy, a member of the Buddhist group, and his family had been right by one of the grenades which went off in the graveyard, I asked him -

"How are they coping with all that?"

"Oh I think they've forgotten it already. You just get hardened to it, you have to."

The Buddhist group's little - centre, The Asanga Institute, is a symbol for the situation here: inside a tall ragged house on the Antrim Road - the ground floor windows barricaded with sheet metal - the door armoured as well - up the battered stairway, in a small room at the top, is a clean bright peaceful place to shelter. A symbol of the heart, it is a place of warmth and brightness amidst the forbidding icewalls of suspicion and fear. It is a place to go and remember the possibility of quiet and illumination, where the powers of goodness can be recalled and cultivated. The symbol of the Refuges is very vivid here.

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I felt like I was with my oldest friends, which on reflection I guess I was - the presence of Truth, the great friend, how good to see you again.

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Paddy played videos of the two incidents which had ignited Belfast over the last week or so. These were very disturbing and it was good to have Tony (who had been at the first funeral) right there to talk it over with. It had been pretty hard to cope and he and Tommy had both been quite caught up with it all -

"We know all these guys, we were at school with them, how can you not be involved? If you live there, to a greater or lesser extent you are in it; these are the people you share your lives with, they are your folk y'know."

It is so easy to forget how much it is the tribal and protective instincts which keep driving this monster of destruction. A few days later I talked to Tommy about all this: he said the Falls Road area had exploded with rage that night - hooded men hijacking cars, throwing petrol bombs off motorway bridges onto the traffic below. He had ridden off to the mountains on his bicycle, hoping to burn off what energy and emotion he could. In trying to come to terms with it - and then the murder of the two soldiers - he said he kept thinking of Enniskillen, where an IRA bomb had killed eleven innocent people and injured many more on Remembrance day last year. He had never really accepted that his people had perpetrated that outrage - but he realised now that the people in that town felt just as he and his did in the Falls after the

graveyard killings. When he mentioned this to others most were sobered by the thought, realising that the situation was identical.

A day or two later we went to Enniskillen to give a public talk. Once we arrived in town and met up with Bob Kelly, we were whisked off to his family's lovely house, perched on a steep hillock above the church of this village, Ballinamallard. He and his wife welcomed us with great respect and cordiality. Their daughters were very shy at first but after we had eaten, as I was talking with Bob over a cup of tea, I noticed a small furry creature edging across towards me. Silently it inched closer and I recognised it eventually as a skunk. It tilted its little nose up and cocked its head in greeting - doing the job for the little girl whose hand was animating it. I greeted it and asked its name -

"Flower," came the whispery reply soon my conversation with the skunk proved unnecessary as the two girls became brave enough to talk to us direct.

This town has had a shadow on its name since the bombing here last year, but, far from being shot at - as some thoughts in England had predicted - the talk at the public library was a pleasant and calm event. About thirty people turned out, a massive number apparently, and the talk and questions seemed well received by all. These things are always a bit frosty at the start but if you keep pouring it out eventually things begin to melt. By the second hour I felt like I was with my oldest friends, which on reflection I guess I was - the presence of Truth, the great friend, how good to see you again.

The morning after the public talk Bob drove us to a large forest on the southern shore of Lough Erne. We followed a narrow lane through several miles of pines to a cliff edge high above the water. Below us was spread the great stretch of blue with large islets scattered here and there. We wove our way back to Ballinamallard through the long rolling roads, rapt in conversation on Buddhist life.

After packing up and farewells we took the long road back to Belfast, passing through Armagh and Newry down by the border with the South. Traversing this country there is the constant feeling of being in two parallel worlds: the land of perfect little hills and pocket-sized farms, ancient hedges, empty roads and crystal air; a land of unhurried and gentle folk, strong in heart and spirit. On the other hand it is a place of rain and black helicopters, police checks, barbed wire and bullet-proofing. We passed the church hall in Enniskillen where the bomb had exploded; like a headless corpse the whole of the roof and upper walls were as if they had been sliced off, the gaping innards of the place opened to the sky.

Running up to the retreat there was often the feeling - "These people are depending on me, it's their first long retreat and I have got to produce the goods to help them. What if I fail? - If



they all get fed up and leave? If it just becomes a crushing endurance test? Oh dear ... and it's all up to me!" - the proliferating mind burbling on. The sound of "I am", "me" and "mine", a resounding foghorn of wrong understanding. Listening to this kind of mental creation there comes a natural response of letting the self-centred elements dissolve. Why turn an idea about the future into a personal problem? I began to reflect: "I am not going to Ireland to zap these people with ethereal vibrations and entrancing Dhamma talks, nor to rescue a nation from the grip of savagery. I am not even going to try to teach anybody anything." I made the intention clear to just go and spend a week in the woods with some friends; the time would pass, efforts would be made to cultivate the good and what ever came out of it I would endeavour to learn from. As the retreat began I said all this to the retreatants and encouraged them to regard the forthcoming time in the same way - simply to be there and make efforts to learn from life, however it happened to be. It makes such a difference when life is viewed in terms of universal nature rather than self.

Clumps of celandine and saxifrage border the wellbeaten tracks of this forest and, from the brambleburied mass of an ancient log, a colony of wood anemones peeks out. The air is dense and still, full of the growing light of an April evening as spring roars into its full spate. In this land Of spirited and powerful people the imagination soars to convey the wonderful balances, formless, vivid patterns that spin out of each moment as it comes. So simple yet so mysterious awesome, testing, frightening, beautiful and terrible - familiar and safe, the oldest friend, yet a yawning, hungry chasm of possibilities. When you can't go forward and you can't go back and you can't stand still, what do you do? Vanish - the Truth supports itself.

I tried to guide the retreat so that there was not a "super-concentrate and get high" environment, but rather that of focussing the mind to see what is habitually done at the interface between the mind and the world. It seemed a crime to be on the edge of this lovely wood and not to take the chance to meditate amongst the trees: so, once people were well settled in, we spent most afternoons there. With the mind open - feeling the moment with the whole being - all positive and negative aspects would naturally fall into alignment. You would find yourself at the centre of some vast arboreal mandala - a spread of projection, perceptions, proliferations, all strung together in a web of intricate harmony. Leaves glittering in unison as a billow of wind would stir the forest. Love and hate, anxiety and hope all shimmering in their individual perfection.

The next couple of days were spent in and around Belfast, spending time with people from the Buddhist group. The presence of the troubles and divisions in the society made a continuous impact on the mind.

During the afternoon we walked up to MacArt's Fort, on top of Cave Hill, which overlooks the whole of Belfast. It was a shining day of vivid blue skies, arcing over all the land and sea below us, The city seemed so innocent from that height. The slate roofs of the Ardoyne, combed like a well-ploughed field, the gentle blue haze settling in still air, the thrum of engines from the motorway - who would have thought that the human mind could have turned such a haven into a horror story. From above there was no sign of anything but charming busy-ness; drivers and pedestrians, workers and children, as blameless and empty as wooden dolls. This distance epitomised the principle of detachment - with aloofness you could see all the drives and strains, compelling strictures and values of the system, were nothing but human creations. But it also echoed the insensitivity of selfishness - a person distanced from the feelings at the heart of the city.

North from Belfast the towns are more often decked with loyalist Union Jacks, red white and blue kerbs, well-tended murals of William of Orange, "1690" and "No Popery Here!", It is hard to believe how strongly we need to defend our identity against the foe; fear, suspicion, mistrust, centuries of aggression and catalogues of misdeeds all mingle to form the position-

taking of today. Rays of hope get extinguished as fast as they are kindled; however, it is for sure that peace is possible - in the wake of all battles the flowers return.

A day travelling around the countryside of the North softened the jarring images which had dominated the trip so far. This led us gently into the atmosphere of the retreat which was to be held in a woodsman's cottage, beside a large forest, at the southern end of Strangford Lough.

This house could not be much more perfect: a lot of work is required to keep the wood fires in, there is no electricity and only gas-light downstairs - this lends itself to the rousing of mindfulness in getting around in the dark, conserving batteries and developing general care and sensitivity for the physical supports.

Newcastle sits at the very foot of the Mournes so, after leaving Avril and family, we climbed solidly until we reached the tree-line below Slieve Donard, the highest peak.

Next morning we aimed to break camp quite early and climb to the top. By then the cloud had dropped to swirl around us but we could see a peachy glow beneath, showing the lowlands to be sunny and clear. Through the cloud we reached the pass below Donard and, although it was in the direction opposite to the one we wanted to take, we decided to climb it anyway. Now and again a break would appear and a sudden flash of the valley and mountain-sides would strike us.

We left our packs at the base, ascended through the thick white wisps and soon found ourselves at the summit. We sat at the foot of the cairn we had seen from so many miles away and could only make out a fifty-foot circle around us. This bore a striking resemblance to how it often is in the religious life: all the work can be done, but until the natural conditions come into line and support it, there need be no vision to bear witness to the Truth.

It was curious how all through the day - and to be truthful through the whole journey to these mountains - a song about the Mournes that I knew from years before, rang through the mind more than the feel of the mountains themselves. When we get used to thinking about life all the time, all we notice is our thoughts, not life itself. This also appears as a perpetual search to know - "Where are we?". "What time is it?", "What is this thing called?" - seeking for names and knowledge to capture the hidden spirit and fix, in this uncertain mysterious world, some vestige of permanence and solidity it is more inviting to drift into some sentimental idea about the hills, than to absorb the rocks and heather, the mighty crags, the whispers of grass bending to the wind. It is strange how the mind goes: we are more ready to worship our images of the Buddha than to realise Buddhahood itself.

"Don't you go followin' them fashions now Mary McRea, in the place where the dark Mourne sweeps down to the sea".

Our journey ended safely with a long drive back to Belfast, a good bath and a softer bed for the night. The next day our flight to England was due so we bowed out, taking many fond feelings with us.

Here, at the germinal stages of things is the promise of great goodness. I feel honoured in helping to set the seed and to cultivate the ground. As I leaned on the Mourne Wall up at Hare's Gap I felt my heart melting deep into this land - pouring in through the treasured jewel of these mountains, pouring through to permeate the nation. Ireland's good spirits have done us proud, this whole adventure has been a charmed and blessed event. In this land the spiritual life has long been valued and now this branch of the Sangha, having sprung from the forests of Thailand, has endeavoured to practise the Buddha's Way and offer it to the people here. This most precious of treasures now comes into Ireland, a fitting shrine for an offering from the land of the Emerald Buddha.

After the retreat Jakob, Nick and I headed off for a few day's walk, along the coast and up over the Mountains Of Mourne. The retreat had been good but I am sure it was hard work for everyone - as a first retreat, though, that hardly came as a surprise. To wish it otherwise would have been a frustration - what a relief we do not take unremitting success and happiness as our refuge.

It is evening now on Dundrum Bay. I write this leaning on some dry seaweed perched on the edge of a sand-dune. Perhaps we set too much store by the examinations which we create with our thoughts and then feel we have to bluff our way through with hypocrisy and deceit - maybe they do not mean so much after all. Does this cliff, this sea, these lichens, this seal who watches us at breakfast, do they really know or care about all the attainments and problems conjured into being by the mind?

Next morning the sky came clear and blue, the day warming to Mediterranean heat. The boots Paddy had lent me fitted well enough, but large blisters had appeared which I had swathed in padding protection - all to no avail - each step was painful. We turned off the main road, and joined an abandoned railway line which took us all the way to Dundrum town. Even though this was leafy and thick with the delights of new spring growth, I was quite blind to the bursting greens around me. I noticed my thoughts were becoming childlike and frustrated - a regression to simple self-hood followed pain, whining and complaining like a spoilt five-year-old.

"My feet hurt. I want to stop. It's not FAIR!!"

We reached Dundrum and, with a change into my sandals, the world took on a different face. The sands of Murdough Bay were completely empty. During the walk along the beach, amidst the vast open sunlit space, with the cloud-capped Mournes before us, all the negativity of the morning slowly played itself out. One step after another, the mind's additions to the moment became quite clear.

Avril, who had been on the retreat, had invited us to stop by her parents' house in Newcastle. We spent a while with her mother who chatted with us with great interest. Avril was utterly delighted that we had come, it turned out that it was her birthday, and she glowed with gladness at this brief visit. As Nick pointed out, for many people interested in Buddhist life, to introduce their families to what is so significant to them is very important.

*Paddy and Linda Boyle 75 Knutsford Dr., Cliftonville Rd. Belfast BT 14 Tel.:(0232) 754623*





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## The State of America Out West

*In March of this year, Ajahn Anando accompanied Ajahn Sumedho to California to teach a retreat and meet people involved with the prospective Dhamma centre, Insight Meditation West. IMW is inspired by and loosely affiliated to the Insight Meditation Society in Massachusetts, and there has been talk about establishing a monastic community in part of the 400-acre site of IMW. The freewheeling views of Californian society have produced some debate around such an orthodox establishment, as these comments from Ajahn Anando point out.*

*Seattle, Washington, apart from being Ajahn Sumedho's home town is the base of another group, the Heartsong Sangha, who have expressed a similar interest in a vihara, on a similar scale.*

The Angela Center in Santa Rosa is an Anglican retreat centre that many of the vipassana teachers who teach on the West Coast use: Jack Kornfield, Jamie Baraz, Christopher Titmuss, Vimalo - all of them have taught there. Many of those who teach at IMS also teach at the Angela Center, so the nuns at the Center were quite used to seeing people walking around in a rather unusual way. The surrounding landscape, which was grazing land on the side of a hill behind, lent itself to meditation practice - there were many walking paths. So, our retreat was set up by the vipassana teachers and it was slotted in during a break in the retreat schedule that they have. And there were people who are very, very devoted to Buddhism and Buddhist monasticism, and, on the other side, people who were very sceptical, not at all sure about monastics and who think that perhaps our role and some of the things we do are questionable.

One comment that a woman made to Ajahn Sumedho at the end of the retreat I found very inspiring, and I think to some extent expressed the feelings of many who were on the retreat in California. The woman said to Ajahn Sumedho that she came as a Vipassanini (Ajahn Sumedho had used that word): "I came as a Vipassanini, but I'm leaving as a Buddhist." And she found that that which had been lacking in her practice was discovered; and it had more to do with the ritual, the traditional forms, the practices such as chanting - which the people there were quite willing to participate in (once we got the sheets printed and the way of chanting was explained to them). The enthusiasm that many Americans can have was something quite unusual.

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You know, they were just standing by the sidelines making some suggestions. So, personally, I didn't feel the need to take a lot that was said as being terribly important.

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We saw Jack Kornfield after the retreat. On the way back down to San Francisco we stopped

to visit Jack at his home and he interviewed Ajahn Sumedho and me. He began the interview by reading a letter to us by a woman who wrote and said that with regards to the development of IMW, she felt that having Theravadin monks come and live there and be supported by the people who would be supporting IMW would not be really an appropriate use of funds, because we would be bringing into the country of America a sexist, Asian religious aberration that was not needed, not wanted in America. So that kind of set the tone for the interview, and Jack was playing the devil's advocate, because he's actually quite committed to supporting a monastic community in America, along with Joseph and Sharon Salzberg. But he, I think, felt -he needed to ask all the difficult questions - and he was very good at it. The questions were questions such as: couldn't we just have women taking ordination - have a precept ceremony - that had the same number of rules as the bhikkhus? What was pointed out was: well, one could do that - but it wouldn't be in the Theravadin tradition. And I mentioned that there were such groups like Kennett Roshi's, who did follow that particular way of training, but in the Theravadin tradition of course there was a lineage and a tradition. I felt personally, after the interview that it was, a little bit like - here a model came to mind - that here we had a vehicle which we knew from personal experience was quite dependable, it had been going for 2500 years plus and no one was saying that it was the fastest, the sleekest, the most comfortable - but it was dependable, it seemed to be suitable. And then someone comes along who starts suggesting modifications - you know - why don't you get a bigger engine, a different ratio in the transmission something like that. Maybe their suggestions might be quite right (they might be), but there didn't seem to be any reason for actually taking their advice because the vehicle was already suitable - and one wasn't quite sure that their suggestions would really work. And also one didn't know whether or not they were going to get on the vehicle anyway! You know, they were just standing by the sidelines making some suggestions. So, personally, I didn't feel the need to take a lot that was said as being terribly important. I commented that over the years there have been adaptations made, and there will probably be further adaptations made, from within the monastic community - but they've come from those who are living the life; and when the monks and nuns see for themselves that things need to be changed, and it's appropriate, it's timely, then it happens - a natural growing. So personally I didn't feel a need to be terribly concerned about what some of the people were saying. Ajahn Sumedho finished the interview by saying that he felt that it would be truly uncompassionate to give in to the women's demands; that that's not what they need. And Jack's comment to that was: "This is going to be a very interesting dance!"

There was a woman there who Ajahn Sumedho respects as a mature person, who's been practising Buddhaddhamma for a long time, and he asked her about the feminist retreats - what are they like. And she said that they have women who are mostly lesbians who, just by that kammic propensity, have a certain bias and a dislike, and sometimes a real hatred, of men; and it doesn't take too much imagination to see that monks are a real threat for them. Authority figures ... all of that ... And she said - herself she didn't find that the feminist movement had much to offer, and from her perspective what she felt was truly needed were wise virtuous people. She mentions later when we went for coffee, she was walking with her husband and she said to him: "It's so nice being around mindful people - why do we associate with any other type of person?" Very up-front, shall we say.

There's more committed, really grounded interest in



Seattle. The group that we met, who supported us and extended hospitality to us were in all ways delightful and seemed to appreciate very sincerely what Ajahn Sumedho was teaching. There seemed to be a real hunger for Dhamma and with that a sincerity and an attentiveness - to the point where, by the time we got back, we were both exhausted. Every waking moment there was someone to see, someone to be with, someone to talk to, some place to go, something to do. The only time we were in our rooms was to go to sleep.



It was extraordinary - we were in Seattle about two or three days and of course we knew that some people from Vancouver were coming down and we heard that they would probably be coming down by coach. Well, a coach can be a minibus, or a tour coach, and it turned out to be a 56-seater tour coach which came creeping very carefully down a fairly narrow residential road. And out of the coach filed ... There must have been 47-odd people who came - including some children -- and filled the house. I couldn't imagine what the neighbours thought when suddenly all these people piled out of the coach into the house, stayed for about three hours, and then got back into the coach and disappeared. And I noted some of the people looked very surprised to see Ajahn Sumedho and me sitting on the couch. They came into the room not knowing quite what to expect. The room was actually packed out, people sitting very close to each other. After Nan (the organiser of the excursion) talking with Ajahn Sumedho, breaking the ice a bit. I asked people - was this a little bit like a magical mystery tour? Did you actually know you were going to meet Buddhist monks? There was general laughter and someone said: "Well we thought that that might happen but we weren't quite sure." Nan had said something like - if you're in such a place at such a time a coach will come and pick you up and we'll go and meet some very interesting people. And she's so well-loved out there that people just came along. And four or five days later when Ajahn Sumedho gave a public talk in Seattle about a dozen people drove the three hours down from Vancouver for the talk.



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**HOME****BACK ISSUES**

## Old Insights in New England

*Ajahn Sucitto reflects on his travels through America*

I was invited to teach a nine-day retreat at the Insight Meditation Society's Centre in Barre (pronounced Barray) Massachusetts between May 6th and 16th this year. Bhikkhus had been coming and going to the States for years - I myself accompanied Ajahn Sumedho on his retreat at IMS in 1981, and he and Ajahn Anando have given retreats there subsequently. Since then new situations have arisen - more on the West Coast - including the Thai community in and around New York City who undertake to distribute this Newsletter throughout North America. Thinking to pay them a visit, and to be available for other invitations I reckoned a stay of three weeks - 4th to 25th May - would be suitable.

Geographically, I glimpsed a mere fragment of the country, but approaching it through the minds of the people offered more extensive reflections: themes common to Western civilisation are more clearly portrayed on the highly responsive canvas of the USA. Such responsiveness is in part due to American openness and enthusiasm, qualities that arise naturally in a country whose ideals are the freedom of the individual and the pursuit of happiness, and whose resources have always seemed inexhaustible. The materialism that blinds the West and has begun to encroach on Asian societies is given freest rein in America; mercifully that same enthusiasm makes it also a dynamic place for spiritual practice. In the brave New World, the crises underlying the sly Old World are manifest, loud and clear - and so are the possibilities for salvation.

The United States has a history of aspiration; its favoured images reach onwards and upwards. What unites the States are such reference points as the Pilgrim Fathers, the Constitution, the pioneering spirit - the appeal of the Space Program may even be because it reaches up and away to the limitless stars. Aspiration and experimentation in terms of religion have also always been popular in the States. Buddhism is a fairly sober example, but I would estimate that, whereas its appeal to English people is because it takes them back to something fundamental, to Americans it's the possibilities for new growth and less limitation that immediately engage the mind. The European boggles with incredulity at the eagerness with which Americans pursue charismatic and visionary cults from evangelical Christian fundamentalism (which has to be seen to be believed) to Rajneeshism and way, way beyond, millions of people and dollars seem to cluster around outrageous fantasies without anyone investigating the spiritual roots.

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Monastic community is not formed around everyone having the right to say and do as they see fit. Its unity comes from everyone letting go of their views and realising what is fundamental.

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This is a key: America's not strong on roots, its aspiration has always reached to the sky, but rarely touched 'the earth'. After all, the emigres who established the nation didn't go to the New World to find their roots, but to get away from the restrictions of meaningless conventions. The new society grew up in the 18th century Age of Enlightenment when

science and philosophy pointed to the absolute rule of the human intellect over Nature. Without cultural restrictions and with constant technological development, the emigres' engagement with the earth has been rapacious and manipulative. Native Americans (ironically distanced from their land by the appellation "Indians") were swept off the land, negro slaves planted onto it. Now that the frontier has been reached the emigres have nowhere to go; trying to consolidate into a society, they look for roots and find that they have none in common, Aspirations, yes, but those too are towards separation and individuality. So we have the Black community, the Jewish community, the Gay community, and many more - all asserting their own right to be independent and as good as the rest. In such a light, the Theravadin monastic community can seem like another divisive fragment, an imposition rather than a means of reflection.

The monastic community is not formed around everyone having the right to say and do as they see fit. Its unity comes from everyone letting go of their views and realising what is fundamental. The homeless life helps you to reflect on what you need, and leave the rest behind. It gets easier with practice on simple things: the night before I left Awaravati I thought I'd take the evening to pack, It took about twenty minutes - bowl, robes, books to give away, travel documents, clock, some editing work for the plane-and ten minutes of thinking there was something to remember. Then I remembered, in that strangely disquieting space of the mind: what is outside this moment is only anxiety or desire.

I don't enjoy aeroplanes, away from the earth you witness the frenzy of the rootless society as it tries to fill every moment. Ven Karuniko and I stoutly rejected the headsets, but being trapped in, seats right in front of the video screen with stewards bustling to and fro, imparts stressful rhythms on the mind. I flitted between screen, anapanasati and editing and was glad to see fingers of land extend to greet us and draw us into Logan Airport, Boston.

In 1981 the immigration officer had been a squarebuilt woman whose gaze bored through my retina, swept the inside of my skull and found nothing of note, signalled that I could enter. This time the officer was a pleasant man who kept a constant patter of wisecracks as he amiably took us apart. A real professional, he made you enjoy being searched ... "So you're a Venerable, heh? ... Well I used to be able to sit in full lotus ... ! What's in here, then?" We moved on to topics of Dhamma before he apologised for keeping us waiting and ushered us into America.

Dennis was there to greet us - a little nervously - and drive us out to the upstate rural backwater which is the setting for IMS. We eased into each other's presence on the way with conversation on practice and comparative environments. IMS was founded in 1975 by people who had practised Vipassana (Insight) meditation in the Buddhist meditation centres of Burma and India and wanted to establish a similar environment on American Soil. Teachers like Joseph Goldstein, Sharon Salzberg, Christopher Titmuss, Christina Feldman and Jack Kornfield teach there regularly; most especially Joseph



*Insight Meditation Society's  
Centre in Barre Massachusetts*



and Sharon - who are the nearest one could find to being resident in a situation that is always in flux. IMS is directed by a Board of members who change, and administered by a staff of volunteers who serve for a year or two. Retreatants - called "yogis" - come for weekends, ten day courses, work retreats or on a long term basis. Such long term yogis - inevitably referred to as LTYS - may stay for half a year or more participating in the taught retreats according to preference. It's quite a remarkable offer.

Joseph and Sharon paid me a visit before the retreat. One thing that they commented on, and which I had already noticed, is the lack of reference to the Buddha in the Vipassana community of America. In fact the point is right there: one hears of Zen schools, Vajra empires and sanghas based on Vipassana meditation practice. Rarely does one hear of the Buddhist community - much less the Theravada - and some elements of the Vipassana community draw a veil over the tradition, or reject it altogether. This is because any further engagement with the Buddha's teaching necessitates a broader reflection on living the Dhamma, and at that juncture people find it difficult to follow the Theravada tradition. The Buddha's use of conventions and precepts for daily life doesn't go, down well in a society that equates freedom with lack of restraint rather than transcendence. People also confuse the heart of the tradition with its cultural overlays, or misunderstand the monastic training; basically because they haven't experienced anything like it. So in the absence of a tradition and a Buddhist way of life, aspirants earnestly follow contemporary teachers and practice tends to fixate upon SITTING (a term that gradually and irritatingly acquires capitals).

Questions that the staff and retreatants put to me during my stay at IMS pointed to an uncertainty as to how to sustain practice outside the retreat situation. Without a structure for reflection and a Dhamma community, the staff tended to drift into a nether world. They lose touch with each other or a theme of practice, while attending to a constant flow of visitors and teachers who are SITTING.

Bhikkhus are always welcome at IMS; there is a genuine respect and openness to what their presence can illustrate. As much of an Amaravati bhikkhu's day is one of activity, I felt that I might offer some helpful reflections on that topic. I realised that the last thing people needed from me was another set of ideas or techniques to add to, compare or conflict with previous sets. (Also I don't have any that are worth teaching.) But if there was a willingness to follow the Buddha's way of reflecting on the techniques, attitudes and aspirations that one already has, it could be a valuable retreat. So I thought I'd set up a situation for contemplating the Way Things Are, using the Eight Precepts and daily pujas as a structure and the Great Discourse on Mindfulness for meditation instruction.

But we had a couple of days to settle in first. Barre is a village in wooded central Massachusetts with pitted roads, and white board houses (the norm in New England) spaced out alongside them. It's quiet; there's even a feeling of decline evidenced by tumbledown shacks, long-since abandoned agricultural machinery and stone walls in the forests that once divided cultivated land. They told me that these slender trees-white birch, maple, beech and conifers were all I could classify-have been here for less than a century. Now nothing much is happening on the land. I noticed a few sweetcorn patches, turned to stubble after the hard winter. The trees too were still stark and nearly naked. Numb from the shock of the winter, they were beginning to put on leaflets and buds for the spring season.

We had a few walks around the countryside with Ven Gandhasilo, a young Thai bhikkhu who had booked on my retreat. He brightened visibly at our arrival, and immediately we became



Sangha, did the pujas together and ate together. Within a day he was helping out by looking after my bowl and offering a nightly massage; all spontaneously and wonderfully unremarkable. Such is the experience of Sangha: so sensible and good you wonder why everybody doesn't pick up on it.

It was a good retreat. I enjoy retreats for the most part: I like to have the teaching of the Buddha flowing through my mind, a supportive situation with people looking for guidance provides a steady focus for the heart; and my own energies get channelled in a calm and reflective way. I knew Americans would appreciate having their attitudes probed and commented on with straightforward good humour (I remembered the immigration officer) particularly in contrast to my threateningly formal appearance. So I could just let the retreat happen, and learn something myself.

After a few days, smiles crept over people's faces, eyes brightened, features softened. People began bowing to the shrine and commenting in the interviews on the experience of gratitude. The Dhammic materialism that seeks to gain had been replaced by something more radiant. A sense of spirituality - a detachment from self and an opening to love had arisen where there had been just self-concern and the desire to gain; it was all a surprise, and yet totally normal. And the last surprise was on me when most of the retreatants voluntarily turned up after the retreat to formally take the Refuges and Five Precepts. That was a delight for me. What is important is what people leave with: with the Refuges and Precepts there's a foundation for life.



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**HOME****BACK ISSUES**

# EDITORIAL

## Off to Print

This Newsletter is principally for communication; hopefully it is also of some interest. Personally there are things I'd like to see in it that haven't appeared: I wish, for instance, that someone had written even a small piece to commemorate Ajahn Chah's 70th Birthday on June 17th. As it is, this reminder and the silence of that day's practice will have to serve.

This is how, within a couple of weeks, the Newsletter is created. People send in material, sometimes with a little coaxing (no good Buddhist thinks that what they're doing is worth communicating); notices and last-minute articles are created and the whole lot is typed out by one nun; it is proof-read, edited and retyped; then handed over to David on the computer for "typesetting"; then it comes back for design and paste up by a couple of people-and goes off to the printers. We chose these printers because although their equipment is old, they use the Newsletter as part of a training scheme and don't charge for labour. They're not keen on photographs, though.

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This periodical occurs through people getting together  
and giving what they can. It comes out of what comes in  
- the simplest law of nature.

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After a week or so, during which time the typist has assembled the mailing list and prepared the envelopes, the Newsletter comes back for mailing. Postage costs affect the size of the Newsletter and how quickly we can get it to you; in North America a Thai community in New York covers the costs of printing and posting, and similar situations exist in Switzerland, New Zealand and Australia. Like all of this sangha's life, this periodical occurs through people getting together and giving what they can. It comes out of what comes in - the simplest law of nature.

Recently we upgraded our out-of-print meditation booklet with a view to having something to offer wherever needed. We'd printed and given away about 10,000 of the first edition in the last couple of years, so it seems that people appreciate them. However, the new booklet will need to be sponsored, as publications expenditure has to be met independent of general funds. David Cowey covered the costs of the galleys; Barry Durrant heard about it and magnificently threw in GBP500, which sets the presses up and will produce 1,000; subsequent thousands cost about 9150 each - which compares favourably with The Daily Tabloid - so it makes sense to produce a few thousand at one run. A couple of other people have made a generous response, but a print run of less than 5,000 is not going to cover much ground. So if you've benefited from meditation instruction, you might like to consider what contribution you can make for the welfare of the manyfolk. The English Sangha Trust (Publications) at Amaravati will act as the bursar.

And for the Newsletter, we're going to allow another week to work on it in the future, so - contributions by September 3rd, please.

*Ajahn Sucitto*

