



News and Musings
from
The Forest Hermitage

June & July 2554/2011

**Featuring the Visit by Ven. Chao Khun Rajabhavanavikrom
(Luangpor Liam) Abbot of Wat Nong Pah Pong**

and

Visakha Puja at The Forest Hermitage

This year, far from being the merrie month of traditional folklore, May was for us a most unusual and demanding time. First there was the transformation of the kitchen, then the arrival of a party of monks led by Luangpor Liam, Abbot of Wat Pah Pong, and thirdly and most spectacular, our Visakha Puja celebration, the largest gathering we have ever had at The Forest Hermitage.

It was on the second Wednesday of May, as I talked to a group of prison chaplains, here to learn something of Buddhism as part of the Prison Service's World Religions Course, that a series of thumps and bangs from the other side of the wall heralded the destruction of our old kitchen. In the next few days that miserable and barely fit for purpose place was cast into outer darkness and the stage set for a new beginning. In all it was two weeks of disruption, during which we went to eat every day at Bhavana Dhamma, our annexe on the other side of Hampton Wood where Sister Khema and Maureen live and where occasional retreats and women visitors are accommodated, before the curtain rose on our bright, shiny and beautifully appointed new kitchen.

While that work was going on some other repairs and redecoration, a slight modification to the Shrine Room and the installation of a new sound system, were also put in hand. These, together with a great deal of lively discussion were all part of our preparations for a visit by Luangpor Liam and Luangpor Anek with three other monks, Ajahn Kevali, Tahn Moshe and Tahn Asoko in tow, and the mammoth Visakha Puja celebration at which they would be the guests of honour that we'd been planning for weeks. One of the important questions we had to address was where to put them for the four days they would be with us. As anyone who has spent any time here knows, we are woefully short of accommodation and we were expecting some students to stay and help as well as Ajahn Cittagutto, the first monk to be ordained at The Forest Hermitage who now normally lives in the North of Thailand. Fortunately, Sister and Maureen generously volunteered to absent themselves from Bhavana Dhamma for a few days so that our guests could be comfortably accommodated there. Maureen booked into a local Bed and Breakfast place and one of our Thai supporters gave Sister her spare room to sleep in. Inevitably not all our preparations went entirely without a hitch, one of the marquees we'd ordered didn't show up in time and the mobile toilet was only with great difficulty and some skill manoeuvred through our gate and into position. But we made it and by the evening of Saturday, May 28th, just in time for their arrival, we were ready.

Now here I must digress for a moment to mention a special occasion earlier on that day. It was the naming ceremony for the great-grandson of an old friend of mine. Way back when I first discovered Buddhism and started attending the Hampstead Vihara there was another actor who used to be seen there. He was twenty years older than me and a much more experienced Buddhist. His name was John Garrie. When I returned to Hampstead with Ajahn Chah in 1977, John reappeared and became quite a favourite with Luangpor Chah. By then John had become a Buddhist and meditation teacher in his own right, he'd established the Sati Society and become known as John Garrie Roshi. When I had a place on the Isle of Wight John came to stay and later visited me here and remained a good friend until his death in 1999. That morning of May 28th John's daughter, Gail, was here and with her her big son and with him his little son. I am so delighted to retain this contact with John and his children and it was such a pleasure to have them here, to have Gail cook for us and offer the meal and for me to perform that simple but important ceremony.

Now back to the evening and our dash from the Hermitage through the forest to be ready and in place at Bhavana Dhamma to receive our guests. Scarcely had we got the call that they were only a little way away, somewhere near Junction 15, the nearest junction of the M40 to the Forest Hermitage, when hurriedly adjusting my robe, I looked from an upstairs window and there, across the fields in the lane was their blue bus. In a few minutes it had turned and wound its way round the bend and into the track that leads down to Bhavana Dhamma. Coolly, we sauntered out to greet them.



We welcomed them inside and paid our respects. Then showed them their rooms and introduced them to the two Thai laymen who would be staying to look after them, Khun Yod who had postponed his holiday by a few days for the privilege and Khun Art who had only just got back in time from Thailand. Then, although some were ready for a rest, a walk was suggested and so with Luangpor Liam we strolled across the field and down the lane and into Wat Pah Santidhamma, The Forest Hermitage.

Next morning it was all systems go. Three coaches were expected from London, another from Warwick Uni and we had no idea how many cars might have to be parked in the lane. Into all this was injected the possibility that a local farmer might be driving his sheep past at any moment! Thankfully the rain was holding off, the marquees that we'd put up the previous afternoon were still up, the mobile toilets were plugged in and all then that was left was to see if our elaborate plans for the food, the rice pindaht, and the events of the afternoon would work out. Well, I'm very proud and grateful to be able to say that they did. We must have had over three hundred people here and it was marvellous how well organised it was.

On the pindaht, the almsround, the line of people waiting to put rice in our bowls stretched all the way round the Pagoda garden and through and out into and around the rough field garden, past the Ajahn Chah tree and into the car park where the food tent was. One of our visiting monks counted 274 people putting rice in our bowls. This was by far the biggest event we've ever had here.

When everyone had eaten we came out to pay our respects at the Buddha-Rupa under the Ajahn Chah Memorial Tree and then with candles, flowers and incense we processed around and into the Pagoda garden, around the Chedi and up to the Walking Buddha Image where we laid our offerings. Then we came inside and before hearing a sermon performed the forgiveness ceremony: the lay congregation asked forgiveness of the Sangha and presented ceremonial offerings to the three senior monks and then Luangpor Liam granted the forgiveness and in turn asked the laity to forgive us and followed their acquiescence with the recitation of a blessing. It was then Luangpor Anek's turn and he gave a fine sermon in Thai which Ajahn Kevali translated. And the afternoon concluded with more chanting and the sprinkling of the holy water over the heads of the congregation.





Monday, which also happened to be a Bank Holiday and not a day for travel, was fairly relaxed. A crowd came in the morning to offer food but it wasn't until the early evening that we went anywhere and then it was only to Stratford for a look at the Butterfly Farm. The husband of a couple who come here is manager and part owner and he and his Thai wife kindly opened up specially for us and gave us a fascinating guided tour.

Afterwards we crossed the river to the church where Shakespeare is buried and walked slowly back along the river bank past the new theatre and gardens. As you can imagine the photo opportunities were legion and far too good to miss. Later, looking at this shot of us in front of the theatre, I couldn't help thinking that way back in 1966, when with the National Theatre I'd spent a week at Stratford on tour, I never dreamt that one day I'd be appearing in a scene like this.



Again on Tuesday we had a small crowd bring food in the morning and then in the afternoon we took a short drive to Baddesley Clinton for a look round this famous old moated manor house and gardens. It was something to do although I don't think they were terribly interested and I missed my chance to point out the priest holes and tell them of England's turbulent and bloody religious past.

Wednesday was the Uposatha and early in the morning before the meal we heard Patimokkha. Ajahn Manapo was the reciter, the first time he'd done it for some years. Then they went to pack so that as soon as the meal was over and the last photos taken they could be on their way to Leamington Spa Railway Station to catch the train for Newcastle and the North. We'd thought about their visit and planned for weeks and suddenly it was all over.

My gratitude and congratulations to everyone who worked so hard and contributed so generously in so many ways to help us and make a success of this visit and our Visakha Puja celebration. Anumodana!

More photos can be found at <https://picasaweb.google.com/lh/myphotos>.

On Monday, June 13th, in the company of Sister Khema and Dharmachari Sunanda I nipped down the M40 for an evening at Admiralty House in Whitehall. The event we had been invited to was billed as a reception to celebrate the contribution of the Buddhist community to the UK and the invitation had come from the Rt Hon Baroness Warsi PC. What it was all about we couldn't quite understand and when we got there it seemed we weren't the only ones.

It was back in April when Lord Avebury emailed me to say that the Baroness' office had been in touch with him and asked his help with drawing up a guest list for a reception that would be

attended by the Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister. Since then there had been various conversations and tweaks to the programme. The PM and Deputy PM had both dropped out and the military presence toned down. I still hadn't been terribly happy about it and at one stage I thought I wouldn't go but in the end there I was that Monday evening, the three of us in Whitehall trying to get past the security lady on the gate. She wasn't of the brightest I'm afraid and seemed to have great difficulty manipulating her glasses and reading her two versions of the guest list. In the end we took the sheets of paper from her, pointed to our names and that was it, but we could have pointed to anyone's name and in fact Sister Khema's was already ticked off but it didn't seem to matter.

By the time we got in such non-alcoholic, liquid refreshment as they could afford at a Government function in these straightened times had practically run out and you could see why, the place was packed! Buddhists of all shapes and sizes, types and schools, robed and not – the dress code by the way had been lounge suit or national dress! – were mingling in animated conversation. Such cocktail party type events have never been my thing so I hung about on the fringes and avoided the main room, which meant I missed Baroness Warsi's words of welcome and her mangling of some reference to me and Angulimala. Profuse apologies followed later when we were introduced. But before then and perhaps the best part of the evening for me was meeting again Ricky Hyde-Chambers who I hadn't seen for forty years. I also ran into Dr Biddulph of the Buddhist Society who several times said he would come up to Warwickshire and see me as though he could hardly bear to live another day without doing so.

The most grotesque part of the evening had to be the military presence: uniformed and bemedalled, the Armed Forces Buddhist Society if you please. This goes to show how far some of what currently purports to be Buddhist has moved from what the Buddha taught. A few years ago when the then Government decided to appoint a Buddhist chaplain to the Armed Forces I supported the idea, not because I support the Armed Forces or in any way, shape or form condone warfare or support violence, but because I recognise that in the Armed Forces are people, men and women, suffering humanity who might benefit by hearing about and practising Buddhism. The mistake was for the Buddhist chaplain to be directly employed by the Ministry of Defence. I was part of the original committee set up to endorse and monitor the Armed Forces Buddhist Chaplain, a committee that still exists but for the time being has no influence and I remember saying at the MoD one day that if Forces personnel converted to Buddhism they would have to resign. Why? Because what people in the Forces are trained to do and expected to do is incompatible with what the Buddha taught. Sunil, the Armed Forces Buddhist Chaplain, once disagreed with me when I said that being a soldier was wrong livelihood, he insisted that only trading in weapons was wrong livelihood! How he managed to work out that it was not all right to sell them but all right to use them beats me. Some of those medals so ostentatiously on display that evening must have been campaign medals, some might have been for extraordinary acts of bravery but I'll bet that none were for keeping the Five Precepts on the battlefield. However splendid the uniforms and glamorous the marching bands, however stirring and romantic the tales of valour and of past campaigns, the sad and undeniable reality is that the Armed Forces and the men and women in them are there to impose the Government's will by force and if necessary by killing, wounding and maiming fellow human beings and damaging and destroying their property. There's no getting away from it, when the army goes into action the five precepts go out of action.

I'm glad the Government took the trouble to acknowledge our presence and the contribution we make and I'm sure that were there more in British society observing moral precepts and practising the Noble Eightfold Path it would have a profound effect and make of us a much happier, kinder, fairer and more contented nation.



THE DIARY

**ASALHA PUJA (Commemorating the Buddha's First Sermon)
& THE ENTRY TO THE VASSA will be celebrated at The Forest Hermitage
On Sunday, July 17th from 10am as usual.**

ANGULIMALA WORKSHOPS

The next will be on Saturday, September 3rd.

And the following will be December 3rd.

(These are for Buddhist Prison Chaplains only, attendance otherwise is by invitation only.)

**MEDITATION, A DHAMMA TALK & a cup of tea at
The FOREST HERMITAGE. Every Monday, Wednesday & Friday at eight o'clock.**

**This Newsletter is from Ven. Chao Khun Bhavanaviteht (Luangpor Khemadhammo) OBE of
The Forest Hermitage & Angulimala, the Buddhist Prison Chaplaincy Organisation**

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