

News and Musings

JULY 2010

The Forest Hermitage



As time and our Buddhist calendar marches on we come this month to Asalha Puja and the Vassa. The lunar month of Asalha concludes with the full moon on July 26th, which is the anniversary of the Buddha's first sermon, the Setting in Motion the Wheel of the Dhamma. And the following day the four months of what are the Rainy Season in Northern Central India begins. The first three of those months the Buddha said should be observed as a period of retreat and stability by Sangha members and so for that time we must remain resident in one place and are not allowed to be away overnight except for very good and particular reasons and then for not more than seven nights.

This first sermon, the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, is a marvellously simple and straightforward exposition of the Buddha's central message. All that time ago, long before the gorgeous temples and wonderful Buddha images with which we so easily associate Buddhism now, had you passed the Deer Park at Isipatana on that full moon of Asalha you might have glimpsed five austere, weather beaten and poorly dressed men sitting on the ground listening with rapt attention to another, who, had you crept closer you would have heard speaking with quiet intensity of four noble truths he had discovered. So you might have heard him speak of suffering, craving as its cause, the ending of suffering and the way to end it - the Noble Eightfold Path. And really what more do you need? That First Sermon, together with the Entry to the Vassa will be celebrated at The Forest Hermitage on July 25th.

We've just had our annual visit by girls from Cheltenham Ladies College. They've been coming every year for several years now and spend best part of the afternoon with us, about an hour and a half with me, all sixty of them, crammed in the Shrine Room and the rest outside drawing and applying themselves to a prepared questionnaire. Unfortunately it's almost become the tradition for it to rain when they are here and there was an ominous five minute shower about an hour before they arrived but otherwise I'm happy to report that

we managed to break with that particular tradition and by the time they went outside it was hot and sunny.

In the centre of the photo you can see a nun talking to them. Yes, I'm delighted to report that Sister Khema has returned to us after fifteen months deep in a remote forest wat in North-East Thailand. She came back towards the end of June and I'm deeply grateful to everyone who made her return possible. She stays over at Bhavana-Dhamma, our property the other side of Hampton Wood.



Twenty-five years have passed since I was first driven down Fulbrook Lane to look at this place that now we know as The Forest Hermitage. Afterwards Richard Marriott and I drove on up the lane to get a feel for the location and I can remember the cow parsley on either side as we passed. I often think of that day when I see the cow parsley out again in the Spring. Of course we liked it here and decided to have a go for it. It was to be auctioned and inevitably there were others interested. One couple were

particularly keen and managed to persuade the owners to withdraw from the auction and sell to them, so then we thought we'd lost it. But a few weeks later when I was down south visiting the Isle of Wight prisons and staying the night with my parents Richard suddenly rang

me to say that the people buying couldn't sell their existing property and therefore couldn't complete on this place, so it was back on the market and for a quick sale sealed bids were invited by the end of the week. And we won. I suppose that must have been in June or early July 1985. There wasn't time for me to move before the Vassa began and so I had to stay where I was at Banner Hill near Kenilworth until the Vassa was over. Then as soon as I could, in October 1985 I moved over to the Forest Hermitage and my life here began.

The Grand Opening took place on November 2nd and I can remember waking up that morning to the first frost of autumn. In the last Forest Hermitage Newsletter of 1985 Grace Merchant wrote of that day: "Chanting and the Buddhist flag being raised over the little summerhouse signalled the official beginning of the opening of the Forest

Coming Soon:

ASALHA PUJA

The anniversary of the Buddha's First Sermon. At The Forest Hermitage we will celebrate on **Sunday, July 25th from 10 a.m.**

ANGULIMALA WORKSHOPS

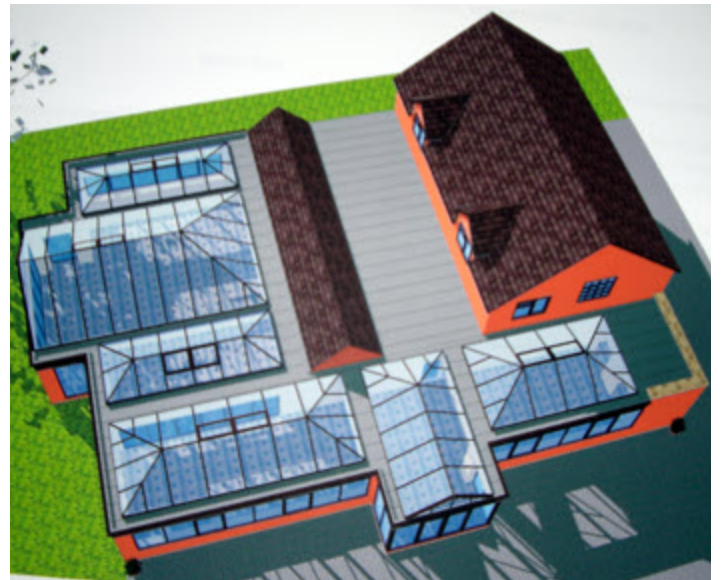
At the Forest Hermitage at 10 a.m. on September 4th and December 4th. (For Buddhist Prison Chaplains only)

BHAVANA DHAMMA RETREATS

Ven. Manapo leads one day, weekend and five and seven day retreats - details on the website.

MEDITATION & A DHAMMA TALK

at The FOREST HERMITAGE on Monday, Wednesday & Friday evenings.



Hermitage at Lower Fulbrook. Fourteen bhikkhus from Thailand, Burma, Sri Lanka, India, Switzerland, America and Great Britain, and many lay supporters circumambulated the cottage, completely surrounding the new Shrine with the scent of incense and chanted blessings. The procession ended inside in front of the main Buddha-Rupa and everyone then began to prepare for the giving and receiving of alms food. The monks seated themselves around three walls of the Shrine Room and food was presented by lay supporters of several nationalities and ages. Gradually everyone settled down to enjoy the mixture of flavours from the various countries represented. The meal finished and the clearing-up done, everyone gathered into the space and warmth of the Shrine Room feeling the presence of the monks and the optimism of the opening of this new place of retreat.'

That then was how we began here just twenty-five years ago. Since then a lot of water has flowed under the bridge. Many people, monks, nuns and laity have passed through our gate, some have stayed, some we've never seen again, some have become fixtures, giving oceans of time and energy to the place and what we do. In all that time we've kept up our Monday and Friday evening sittings, we've held retreats, visited and hosted school groups and provided a home for Angulimala, the Buddhist Prison Chaplaincy. And materially, we have not only raised all the money to pay off the mortgage but we have also bought the twin of this property on the other side of Hampton Wood, Wood Cottage or as we prefer to call it now, Bhavana Dhamma. And in a few weeks we expect to announce that we have finally cleared the outstanding debt on that property too. Not bad!

One evening recently, sitting in Spring Hill Prison, an inmate asked me where I thought I would be in ten years time. Probably sitting here I said. Well of course we never know where we'll be in ten minutes, let alone in ten or twenty-five years and I don't think we ought to worry too much about it but instead stay focused on what we have to do now. However, I think it's reasonable that we do make some provision for the future of what we feel is important and that is why when we've just done with one project we are going to launch another. My hope is that The Forest Hermitage will remain for a long time and continue far into the future to make available in the Heart of England the teaching and practice of Buddhism and to that end we hope in the coming months to make some well deserved and necessary improvements to the main building. Our plan is to knock down the ailing and leaky conservatory and replace it with a more spacious orangery that will link with another that will be built at the rear of the current Shrine Room. We still have a few hurdles to cross, particularly

planning consent but we live in hope. If we succeed our plans will give us a better and larger Shrine Room, a new reception room, a better entrance area, a large multipurpose room, extra toilets and an improved kitchen. We will formally conclude the Wood Cottage/Bhavana Dhamma appeal at Asalha Puja and then as we launch ourselves into the next twenty-five years we hope to inspire you with the vision of a larger and revitalised building for The Forest Hermitage. I think you will be as excited as we are by these proposals and relieved too at the prospect of enough room inside for everyone at festival times instead of huddling outside in the cold and damp of a draughty marquee.

I should think that everyone who has had anything to do with the Forest Hermitage knows Maureen who on the last day of June this



year turned eighty. She started attending my meditation groups way back before this property was found when I was still at Banner Hill, near Kenilworth. In those days she was a bit of a mystery but I remember someone thinking she was probably a school teacher. Then when we viewed this property the then owners talked about how they'd thought that their daughter might not have been able to go to the prestigious King's High School for Girls in Warwick because a parish boundary runs through the grounds that puts us for some things in Warwick and for others in Stratford, but it turned out she could and had and was shortly off to Oxford. Relating all that that

evening after the sitting I saw Maureen thinking as I spoke and of course soon after we found out that she was in fact Head of King's High. In 1987 she took early retirement and came with a small group I took to Thailand in December of that year and the following year she sold up and went to become a nun in Thailand. After about three years she disrobed and ever since has devoted herself to helping us here, moving into Wood Cottage, now Bhavana Dhamma, when we purchased that property in 2003. Fortunately Maureen remains very active and in good health and we depend heavily on her for all sorts of errands, as well as help with gardening, cooking, cleaning, you name it. We're very grateful to Maureen for all that she does for us and wish her good health, a long life and many more birthdays to come.

**This Newsletter is from Ven. Chao Khun Bhavanaviteht (Luangpor Khemadhammo) OBE of
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