



On the first Saturday of last December as an Angulimala Workshop for Buddhist prison chaplains drew to a close I was whisked off to Heathrow in time for the evening flight to Bangkok. I knew that when I arrived I had little time to make it through the airport to Domestic and catch the last flight of the day to Ubon so a note was put on my booking that I required assistance which meant that once out of the plane I kept being offered a wheelchair when all I needed was help in finding my way. Happily, thanks to Thai staff, I didn't get lost and by Sunday evening I was soon in the air again on my way to Ubon, where I was met and driven to Wat Pah Nanachat, which is where the meeting that I was going to attend was supposed to start the next morning. When we arrived I was met and quickly ushered into the main meeting sala where a lot of monks, novices, anagarikas, a few lay people and one solitary nun were sitting, apparently waiting for something to happen. I took my place next to Luangpor Sumedho and to pay my respects, bowed to him three times. Everyone else then bowed to me and when Luangpor Leeum, the Abbot of Wat Pah Pong, walked in, we all bowed to him. That then was how we commenced this unusual gathering of abbots and senior monks from the Wat Pah Pong branches around the world.

For at least one person present who'd never seen anything like it before it was an impressive and inspiring spectacle to see so many monks, and senior monks at that, bowing to each other. But bowing, emphasised so strongly by Ajahn Chah in his lifetime, is at the very heart of our monastic life and practice for it expresses two vital principles not well understood or appreciated by those who criticise us: renunciation and respect. It was ironic that what had brought us together that evening and for the next few days was a failure elsewhere by some who should have known better to honour and practise those very principles.

I came back for a month for New Year and some snow and then on January 10th, Tahn Manapo and I set off for Thailand. As usual we were going to attend the Ajahn Chah Remembrance Day on January 16th, the anniversary of Ajahn Chah's death in 1992. We spent one night in Bangkok and then the next day a former Warwick student with another in attendance drove us at high speed to Wat Pah Pong. Most people think of this as an eight to ten hour drive but we did it in five hours and forty-five minutes!

With time to spare before the big day we were able to organise a day trip to Sakon Nakhon to the museum dedicated to Ajahn Mun, the famous and highly respected monk who revived the Forest Tradition and who died in 1949. I had been there a few times before but I hadn't ever visited the place nearby where a remarkable nun had lived and died. Mae Chee Kaew had been a disciple of Ajahn Mun and by the time she passed away in 1991 she was recognised as an Arahant. Her nunnery is on the way to Sakon Nakhon and so we took the opportunity to stop there and admire the tasteful Mae Chee Kaew Memorial Stupa in which her relics are enshrined and where images of her are displayed. From there we went on to the Ajahn Mun Museum and after that we eventually made our way to a small temple that I last visited with Ajahn Chah in 1977, just before we came to England. This was where Ajahn Kinnerley,

one of Ajahn Chah's teachers, used to live. He was still alive when I went there with Ajahn Chah and I well remember him on other occasions visiting Wat Pah Pong. Ajahn Kinnerley was famous for having walked all the way to India to visit the Holy Places where the Buddha lived and taught and then walking all the way back! After we left there we headed towards the Mekong and the huge, highly venerated chedi of Phra Taht Panom, which as the light changed provided an utterly stunning finale to our day.

On the 16th we took part in the circumambulation of the Ajahn Chah Chedi and then a couple of days later we went to stay with my old friend, Luangpor Dang at Numyeun. He lives with a handful of followers in a very simple and not especially well supported temple set in a large forest. Life there is pretty basic and that together with his direct, no nonsense and humorous approach was very refreshing and made me wonder whether I wouldn't like to stay longer. But we didn't and after short stops at Wat Pah Nanachat for a night and Bangkok for another we soon found ourselves on the island of Phuket where once again we were welcomed and cared for at Sri Panwa. There I planned to shut the gate on our villa and have a few days complete rest but we did venture out on a couple of short excursions.



On our first evening we went to pay our respects to Luangpor Supah who must be the oldest monk in the world. His birth certificate says he is over 113 years old but he says that actually his birth wasn't registered until he was two and so he is in fact a hundred and fifteen! I must say I hope I'm as sharp as him at 115, or even at 113!

Our second trip was an afternoon boat ride that ended on an uninhabited island that we could see from our villa. This little island, I couldn't help thinking, was the perfect setting for a tiny, one monk, retirement temple!

Magha Puja this year fell on Sunday, February 28th and we celebrated with a very impressive turnout on such a cold day. It was especially pleasing to see so many students, mostly Thai, from Warwick University. As usual we began with those who wished paying their respects to the Triple Gem and then taking the Refuge and Precepts. Our alms round followed and as is the custom people gave us a portion of what they'd brought and then shared the rest amongst themselves. After everyone had eaten and after various expressions of generosity that included the offering of requisites and a substantial cash collection, I made them listen to a few of my stories of



Hundreds and thousands of monks, nuns and laity paying their respects to Luang Por Chah at his Memorial Chedi.

our latest trip to Thailand and then retold the story of Magha Puja. I reminded everyone that Magha Puja commemorates an occasion when the Buddha was residing on the Vultures' Peak and when without any prior arrangement a great company of 1,250 monks, each of whom he had personally ordained and all of whom were Arahants assembled at Veluwana, the Bamboo Grove. It was the Full Moon of the month of Magha and the Buddha came down from the Vultures' Peak to sit through the night with this great assembly and recited for them the Ovada Patimokkha, which contains that celebrated verse, 'To avoid all evil, cultivate the good and purify the mind: this is the teaching of all the Buddhas!'



It was at Magha Puja in 1985 that we launched Angulimala, the Buddhist Prison Chaplaincy Organisation, which means that for twenty-five years we have been working together, Buddhists of various schools and different groups, to make Buddhism available in our prisons. My own involvement in prison chaplaincy goes back to 1977 but it wasn't until 1985 when such was the demand that we decided to organise and try to make proper provision in the prisons for Buddhists and those who might be interested in Buddhism - and so Angulimala was born.

Almost since the very beginning Angulimala has benefited enormously by the loyal and constant support of Lord Avebury who when I asked him all those years ago readily accepted to become a Patron of Angulimala.

I think that with Angulimala we have a lot to celebrate. We've worked hard, people have been marvellously generous with their time and resources and over the years we have gathered and for the most part kept a remarkable team of very good people who have put up with and overcome all sorts of difficulties and obstacles to make sure Buddhism was readily available in the prisons they were appointed to.

So we decided that at our recent Angulimala Workshop that fell just a week after Magha Puja we would celebrate our

twenty-fifth anniversary and launch Angulimala's Silver Jubilee Year. We were delighted that Lord Avebury was able to join us for the day and not only give us the benefit of his vast experience but cut the cake as well.

For a week or so in March it was a bit like the legendary London bus, none go by for hours or even days and then five come along together. I hardly ever go to London but in seven days I was down that M40 and back again five times. One Friday it was an evening trip to give a talk, an annual event, for the Buddhist Union at London University's Imperial College. Two days later on the

Sunday morning it was down there again for my monthly date with a Thai restaurant in Marylebone where I've accepted an invitation for the first Sunday of every month to eat and give a talk. Then the following day, on the Monday, it was another evening run, this time to London University Union to be one of the speakers at a Buddhist and Christian forum arranged by the University of London Union's Buddhist Union (ULUBUDU) and the Christian Union. On the Wednesday after that I had a meeting of the Theravada Buddhist Sangha in the UK (TBSUK)

which I chair and which this time was held in the Burmese Buddhist Vihara in Wembley. Then the next day, on the Thursday, I had to go to Westminster, to a meeting of the Prison Service and National Offender Management Service's Chaplaincy Council. It was all good stuff, a good mix of interesting things, people, presentations, conversations and ideas and I enjoyed it all.

What I haven't mentioned was that most of those journeys were not done using the temple's car. When the car was collected after its last service the garage asked for it back when it had done another 500 miles. With my prison visits, that takes us about a week. So back it went and then they confirmed that repairs were required that they priced at around £2,220. Well, at a fraction under 120,000 miles and nearly 8 years old, that's more than the car is worth. It's back with us now but for how far and for how long it will run before it breaks down we don't know.

Coming Soon:

SONGKRAN (The Water Festival) The Thai, Burmese and Sri Lankan New Year. We will celebrate on Sunday, April 11th from 10 a.m. & at **Yod Siam** in Nottingham, April 17th at 10 a.m.

ANGULIMALA WORKSHOPS

At the Forest Hermitage at 10 a.m. on June 5th, 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.

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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