



Yes, April has come and gone again and now we're in the merrie month of May. In April we were celebrating Songkran, the Thai, Burmese and Sri Lankan New Year and now in May it's time once again for Vesakha Puja.

Songkran Day always falls on April 13th but in the UK, like many festivals it may be celebrated at any time conveniently close to the proper day. So for instance, when I was in London for my monthly date with Khun Peter's Thai restaurant in Marylebone on the first Sunday of April, we concluded with the traditional Songkran bathing of my hands. Then a week after at the Forest Hermitage we held our Songkran celebration here and finally six days later we were in Nottingham to celebrate Songkran at Khun Yod's YodSiam Thai restaurant in Beeston (pictured below).



Buddhists are generally pretty good at celebrations, so all the New Years get a look in: January 1st, Chinese New Year, Songkran, the lot. And at these festivals which together with birthdays, weddings and funerals are symbolic of change, I usually talk a lot about birth and death, beginnings and endings and the need to keep on beginning again, remembering every time you stumble to pick yourself up and start all over again, never giving up but steadfastly following the Buddha's example and transforming yourselves utterly. Because we fail time and time again to match the colossal aspirations of Buddhism we might easily feel they've been set impossibly high and then be tempted to drop the bar. But that way you simply remove the challenge and bend things to suit yourself, to suit your defilements - the very defilements you're supposed to be

trying to rid yourself of. When you give into them, well that way you never improve, never let go of your defilements and never know real peace and happiness.

There have been times during this Songkran season when going on about change I've caught myself sounding a bit like one of the three political party leaders in the recent Election. The difference between me and them of course is that I am not speaking about how to organise your worldly affairs and neither am I pandering to your kilesas, to your defilements, to your greed, aversion and delusion. Politicians are there to represent you and make sure society is properly organised and although some are inspired by religious and moral ideals, to win your support they invariably appeal to your hopes and fears, playing on desires for better schools, housing and jobs etc as well as aversion for criminals, terrorists and anyone or anything else that you might fear or dislike. These are worldly and understandable concerns that most people don't realise are symptomatic of much deeper and more serious problems that lie buried in their own hearts and minds. Unfortunately that ignorance leads to fighting fire with fire, greed with greed and hatred with more hatred.

Now imagine something radically different. Imagine a world without greed and without aversion. Imagine if you can, never locking your doors, never being frightened for your children's safety, never not getting on with your neighbour. And I don't mean suddenly acquiring a lovey-dovey mask of false smiles and platitudes. I don't mean acquiring anything. But I do mean stopping and letting go. There is an interesting verse in the Dhammapada

where the Buddha says of hatred that it doesn't end with more hatred but by not hating. Trying to generate feelings of liking and loving can be just too much, even repulsive to the mind already in the grip of aversion, but allowing oneself to cool down and letting the anger slip away and out of one's mind is surprisingly not nearly so difficult. Try it.

Yes, try it. Try letting go of greed and attachment, letting go of self and other, letting go of like and dislike - in short, letting go of everything. That is real change and that is the message of the Buddha. That way lies freedom, that way lies no more suffering, that way lies true peace. As Ajahn Chah once said, if you let go a little you'll have a little peace, if you let go a lot you'll have a lot of peace, if you let go absolutely you'll have absolute peace!

Like all our Buddhist festivals,

Coming Soon:

VESAKHA PUJA The anniversary of the Birth, Enlightenment and Passing of the Buddha. At The Forest Hermitage we will celebrate on **Sunday, May 30th from 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.



Vesakha Puja falls on a Full Moon, not as many people think on the Full Moon of May but on the Full Moon of the ancient lunar month of Vesakha, which does usually fall in May but can sometimes be in April or June. It was on just such a Full Moon of Vesakha that the Buddhist scriptures tell us the child who was to grow up and become the Buddha was born. And it was on another Full Moon of Vesakha, 35 years later, that he sat beneath the great Bodhi Tree and won Full Enlightenment to become the Buddha. Then when another 45 years had gone by, on another Full Moon of Vesakha, once again in the open, under the trees, we are told the Buddha passed into Parinibbana. For Theravada Buddhists then Vesakha Puja, or Buddha Day, or Wesak, as it's variously known, celebrates these three great events: the Birth, the Enlightenment and the Passing of the Buddha.

It's almost 22 years since Sayadaw U Thilawunta (Aung Ming Aung Sayadaw) came from Rangoon to the Forest Hermitage with his young assistant to build a pagoda or chedi in our garden. Apart from the foundations and painting, the main structure took them eight days and was finished on the eighth of the eighth, eighty-eight! Sayadaw named it the English Shwe Dagon Pagoda after the great Shwe Dagon Pagoda in Rangoon. Unsurprisingly, since then we have had occasionally to repaint it and make some minor repairs. Chief amongst them have been problems with the steps which for the last few years have been covered with wood. But of course the wood deteriorated and by the end of this winter our Pagoda was looking decidedly the worse for wear. So for a week a cement mixer was hired, a marquee was erected to protect everything and Tahn Manapo set to work. And after making steady progress in true Buddhist fashion, one step at a time, one step a day, the newly cast steps were finished. Then after waiting another couple of weeks the whole thing was repainted and on Sunday, May 9th the covers came off and the marquee was dismantled and put away. Thank you Tahn Manapo for a good job well done.

Attendance at our Open Evenings on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays isn't that high but I've been reminded that there are people who while appreciating what goes on here just can't be with us very often. It's not just people in prison, of whom I say that as they can't come to the temple we must take the temple to them, but others who are either just too far away or don't have the means to get here. After all we're not like a forest wat in Thailand that draws its day to day support from a scattering of small villages roundabout. We have no Buddhists living within sensible

walking distance and our support is spread nationwide, even worldwide. So, if you can't or won't come to us, we're coming to you! At least that's the idea. Not actually, not in person but in a very modest way electronically, to your computer screens, so that you can sit with us, listen to or join in with the chanting, hear the few words guiding the meditation, benefit from the reading or talk if there is one and end your evening sitting with the sound of our bell. This new service from the Forest Hermitage is already up and running. All you have to do on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays at 8p.m. BST is go to the Forest Hermitage website and click the link to Live Meditation Sittings on the right of the page, then sit up straight, close your eyes, open your ears and in no time at all it will be as if you have been transported and are sitting with us in the Forest Hermitage Shrine Room. So now there's no excuse.



With a Buddhist chaplain to the Armed Forces in the pay of the MoD it's hardly surprising if it's questioned whether or not it's possible to be a soldier and a Buddhist or if being in the Armed Forces can ever be Right Livelihood. And you don't have to look very far for the answers. After all, what is the first precept? And did the Buddha ever speak in praise of killing? I leave you with this, words of the Buddha from the Dhammapada, Sathienpong's translation:

'All tremble at punishment;
To all life is dear;
Comparing others with oneself,
One should neither kill nor cause to kill.'

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