

The Amaravati *Upāsaka* and *Upāsikā* Association (AUA)

A Brief History

The Amaravati *Upāsaka* and *Upāsikā* Association (AUA) was formed in 1994 by a group of laypersons and under the auspices of Ajahn Amaro. Initially the movement was called ‘*Upāsikā* Training’ (with ‘*Upāsikā*’¹ treated as a collective term for all devout lay-Buddhists, although in Pali it actually means pious laywoman. The Pali term for pious layman is *Upāsaka*). The initial reasons for setting up the AUA were primarily an overloaded monastic *Saṅgha* who wanted to establish a trusted group of lay practitioners to fulfil some of their public and teaching engagements, and the recognition that a number of lay-people had been sincerely practising for a long period and would benefit from creating and running their own development programmes.

These reasons continue to be relevant. The AUA has established a regular series of ‘days of practice’ and weekend (and longer) retreats at Amaravati for all who are interested. There is usually a mix of around ten such events each year. These are planned, delivered and taught by lay-people, although a member of the monastic *Saṅgha* may be invited to give a talk or take part in a question and answer session.

The membership of the AUA now stands at around 400, with a Committee of 18. The AUA has a website (www.buddhacommunity.org), a constitution, and publishes a newsletter two or three times a year. AUA events regularly attract between 20 and 50 participants.

Initially, and for several years, those who attended were regarded as implicitly taking part in the *Upāsikā* Training programme, and supporting its guidelines and aims². For the first six years of the AUA, this included the voluntary participation in a public and individual ceremony of taking the three refuges and five precepts and becoming ‘an *Upāsikā*’.

However, the early idea of a lay-training framework has gradually faded and with it the public *Upāsikā* ceremony of taking the refuges and precepts. This was partly a response to perceptions by a few of the *Upāsikā* Training as an elitist movement and also the observation that the *Upāsikā* guidelines did no more than restate the basic precepts and behaviour of any committed lay-Buddhist.

Gradually, the centre of gravity of the AUA shifted from a self-development vehicle with the implicit idea of a new set of guidelines for more committed practitioners

¹ *Upāsakas* and *upāsikās* are mentioned in many Pali *suttas* as ‘white-clad’ laypeople, committed to the *Dhamma*. In China, becoming an *upāsaka* or *upāsikā* entails a solemn lay-ordination ceremony and the taking of a religious name (Harvey, 2000:81).

² These are published at the website www.buddhacommunity.org and in summary are: Establish a community of lay practitioners; Develop experience of Buddhist practice; Disseminate basic Buddhist teachings; Support contact with the monastic *Saṅgha*; Evolve a framework to support lay practice.

engaged with the ‘training’, to one where the AUA became a vehicle supporting a practice of offering service and *dāna* to laypeople and the monastic *Saṅgha*.

This differentiates it from those UK lay-organisations that have deliberately adopted longer sets of precepts and limited forms of ‘lay-ordination’ as an indicator or motivation for a deeper level of commitment.

Approaches to Meditation and Study

Those attending AUA events may be any combination of newcomers to Amaravati, meditation, or Buddhism, or may be long-term practitioners. The events provide a mix of chanting, meditation (teaching and practice of calming, *mettā* and insight techniques in addition to walking practice), and discussion around a Buddhist teaching or theme. *Sutta* study is usually given and there may also be Yoga or Chi Gong sessions, especially on AUA retreats.

The themes for each year’s programme do not currently follow a syllabus but are agreed by the AUA Committee on the basis of perceived needs of those attending, and the current interests of those leading an event³. A glance at recent AUA themes shows that these have included cosmology, merit, rebirth and *kamma*, the *jhānas*, the seven factors of enlightenment, as well as meditation practice.

Over the past six years, *Sutta* study in the AUA has come to be seen positively. Study is approached with a calm, open and reflective mind. Those present will usually recite the *Suttas*, which are not presented as beliefs to be passively absorbed, but as material to stimulate exploration. In this way, study becomes a mindful activity that complements mindfulness in meditative practice, chanting, and physical exercise.

Although relations with the Amaravati monastic *Saṅgha* are very good, there is no formal link. With the move of Ajahn Amaro to the US in 1996, and Ajahn Viradhammo in 1999 (who had taken over monastic patronage of the AUA), there is no current member of the Amaravati *Saṅgha* actively involved in the day-to-day direction of the AUA. This has not been seen as a problem: the monastic *Saṅgha* know senior AUA members and trust them to manage their activities.

The monastic community also welcome the fact that the AUA is not a teaching burden on them and Ajahn Sumedho was supportive at the AUA tenth anniversary meeting in 2004.

³ An experimental sixteen week ‘Essential Buddhism Course’ was run at the end of 2003 at Amaravati, and was appreciated by those who attended, but has not been repeated since, primarily for logistical reasons.