



Community

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The Upāsaka & Upāsikā Newsletter

Issue No. 22



School children in Colombo, Sri Lanka at an eye clinic, waiting to have a sight test. Jan. 2005 . C.Ward

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EDITORIAL

The impermanence of 'Buddhism'

A number of regular contributors to this newsletter visited Asia during the last several months. Consequently, this issue has a distinct 'flavour of the orient' with material on experiences in India and Sri Lanka.

The front cover shows a group of schoolchildren at a school in Colombo, Sri Lanka waiting to have their eyes tested at an 'eye clinic' — a charitable venture for which funds are provided from the UK. I was struck by the good natured patience shown by the children as they waited to have their eyes checked or to have a prescription prepared. Later, some children were presented with their spectacles and this was exploited as a photo opportunity by the local politician who was there with his supporters—one of whom had lost his only son and grandson in the tsunami.

I had travelled to Sri Lanka just over a week after the tsunami had struck. Initially, after hearing the tragic news, I had thought to cancel my visit; I did not want to get in the way of relief operations, and somehow my trip seemed inappropriate as a time of such sadness.

However, I decided to go as a gesture of support and this turned out to be a good decision. Many Sri Lankan livelihoods depend upon a flow of 'rich' western visitors and there was unanimous delight from Sri Lankan souvenir vendors, taxi drivers and guest house owners that we, (Martin Evans and I), had travelled to Sri Lanka, *after* the tsunami; hence there was hope.

Martin and I found the famous sites that we visited almost deserted, with souvenir sellers seeming to outnumber visitors. This did become a little wearing at times, and we both returned with one or two items that we felt pressured to buy. However, I looked on this as a way of donating to some obviously needy people.

I was struck by the friendliness and gentleness of the Sri Lankan people I met. Many have shown great resilience in the face of decades of civil unrest and war. I hoped that the tsunami tragedy might help to unite the country and accelerate the current peace negotiations between the Sinhalese majority and the northern (and eastern) Tamil areas. In many ways, Sri Lanka is well-placed: there is universal education and a basic health service; the island is fertile and abundant in natural resources.

Religion is everywhere. The local papers carry a lively

debate about different aspects of Buddhism and the other main faiths. There are numerous temples and festivals and an abundance of ancient remains of temples, monasteries and cities.

Whilst staying in Nuwara Eliya in the Hill Club, a relic of the British Empire with a picture of Winston Churchill on the walls (and a separate entrance for women), I was awoken at 5 am most mornings by the Moslem call to prayers broadcast from the local mosque. One hour later, Buddhist morning chanting was similarly broadcast from the local temple. When this had completed, church bells were rung by the Christian contingent. Presumably an agreement had been reached as to who had which 'slot'.

Whilst looking at the wonderful Buddhist site at Polonnaruwa, a wizened and dishevelled, (but surprisingly lively), woman appeared from the entrance to a small temple. She was a devotee of Shiva and promptly reached up and pressed her hand on the top of my head, pushing my 'Indiana Jones' style hat down over my eyes, before breaking into a chant. Each time I thought that she had finished, it proved to be just a pause for breath before she continued with the next verse of what turned into a lengthy performance. I was reluctant to break into the ritual by making any attempt to move my hat above my eyes, since I had no idea what bad karma this might generate.

Eventually, and after I had almost become accustomed to the blurred image of the underside of my hat, the chanting ceased and the woman grabbed my arm and led me into the temple doorway, gesticulating into the gloomy interior. There, rising from the floor was a sacred stone lingam, adorned with silver and gold foil and other offerings. Giving my hearty thanks and some rupees, I made a dignified retreat to find Martin wondering what had become of me.

Sri Lanka has been undergoing a long period of innovation in Buddhist practice—with much greater involvement of the laity and an emphasis on meditation—especially *vipassanā*. However, the traditional focus on making merit, as the major lay practice, continues alongside these innovations, as well as great tolerance towards Buddhist worship of Hindu deities (a practice which has a long history in Buddhism).

Buddhism is adapting, with complex interactions between Western ideologies and perspectives, and traditional practices in the Buddhist 'heartlands' of Asia.

Truly all is impermanent.

Chris Ward

Images from Sri Lanka



Martin Evans helping to fit some new spectacles, with our host Mr Jayasekera looking on.



Composed young members of the Sangha in Mahintale



Restoring a dagoba at Polonnaruwa

Nuns' Pilgrimage

This year I hope to sponsor two nuns to go on their pilgrimage to Holy Places in India in December 2005. If you would like to support them in any way, however small, please contact:

Gobi Bechtle: 22 Ramillies Rd
Chiswick, London W4 1JN
Tel: 020 8994 6046
Mobile: 0780 1931486
Email: bechtle@tiscali.co.uk

Cheques should be made payable to:
'The English Sangha Trust'.
State clearly on the back of cheque that it is for
the Nuns' Pilgrimage & send to:

*Amaravati Monastery
St Margaret's
Great Gaddesden
Hemel Hempstead
Hertfordshire HP1 3BZ*

Thank you

Gobi



Martin Evans and Chris Ward at the Hill Club in Nuwara Eliya with Winston Churchill .



On pilgrimage to Bodh Gaya

In search of what is skilful, seeking that state of perfect peace, while walking on a tour through Magadha I arrived at Urvela. There I found some beautiful countryside, a lovely forest grove, a clear flowing river with a delightful ford and a village nearby for support. So I sat down there thinking, 'this is the right place for exertion.' Majhima Nikhaya, 26.

In December I spent a week visiting some of the pilgrimage sites in Northern India with my daughter. Travelling by train from Delhi to Bodh Gaya, I was pleased to find my seat was next to a Burmese Buddhist monk who was on his way back from the World Buddhist Conference which had just been held in Myanmar. He gave me the conference papers to read which kept me happy for hours.

He was returning to Bodh Gaya where he was building a meditation centre. He told me that because the Buddha gained enlightenment in Bodh Gaya, there is a special energy there. In fact, he said, the Buddha chose this place to strive for enlightenment because it already possessed this energy. It is the centre of the world, as far as Buddhists are concerned, he said.

After such a build up, all the conditions for disappointment had been created. First, we called at the Mahabodhi Resthouse, where there was no room at the Inn, although I had booked ahead. Then we tried the Burmese Temple, only to be turned away again. Having installed ourselves in an expensive hotel, we went to explore the town and I didn't feel particularly inspired by what I saw. Rows of market stalls with sellers insisting we buy trinkets we didn't want, and dozens of beggars, many with missing limbs, dragging themselves after us in the hope of a few coins. I saw one woman who had to drop her bag of bananas and run for her life into a shop, after stopping to hand one or two out to some beggars, such was the fight over them. It was like watching monkeys fight over a bag of nuts.

On one walk through the village, we were persuaded to ride in a horse and cart to visit a stupa supposed to be on the site of Sujata's house (Sujata offered milk rice to the Buddha before his enlightenment). Whilst there, we were asked to donate to three schools, 'that

one over there' (wherever that was), and absolutely everyone we passed begged for money. Some children asked us to save the lives of the fish they had caught, by giving them money so that they could return them to the pond. Even the one person who was at least carrying out a livelihood, he was ploughing a field with a hand-held plough drawn by two bullocks, demanded money because I'd taken a photograph of him. By then I had run out of coins and all I had was a 20 rupee note which he rejected because it was torn. He was not at all pleased when I waved away his demand for another and walked on.

A lot of people go to Bodh Gaya on retreats. I met two women who had just finished meditation retreats in Tibetan meditation centres. They had spent the whole time in the retreat centre. They had no idea about the poverty of the state of Bihar. And when I visited the monk who was building the new meditation centre I noticed that he had built a six-foot wall around the whole site. Now bearing in mind that he will be running Goenka style retreats where the rule is you aren't allowed to leave the centre during the retreat, you will get to see a lot of wall, but not much of the people on the other side.

If I was running a retreat at Bodh Gaya I would hold the meditation sessions on the other side of the wall. I would ask that retreatants practice walking meditation at least once a day through the slums of the town, to experience the sounds, the sights and the smells of birth, old age, sickness, and dying, and see for themselves the suffering of people in real poverty. Then they would realise by direct experience the inescapable truth that the Buddha taught, 'there is suffering'. Isn't this the power of Bodh Gaya, simply in the understanding and practice of the Buddha's teaching, in this present moment? And the place of this power is surely wherever we are right now. Meditate under a Bodhi tree, behind a brick wall, in a slum; all of these places have the power of now. When little hands are clinging to you, and you know if you give to one, dozens more hungry children will surround you. All of these places have the power of now.

If there is a special power in Bodh Gaya it certainly isn't in a reliable electricity supply. One evening, walking around the Mahabodhi Temple, there was a power cut. The illuminated temple disappeared into total darkness and the speakers which had been belting out 'Buddham saranam gaccami' to the devoted, fell silent. In the confusion of market traders finding lamps to light their stalls, and people making sure that the person next to them was really the person they thought they were with, we stood

still and silent and watched the new moon sink behind the ancient temple and its spreading bodhi tree. N.B. it is worth remembering to carry a small torch at all times when travelling in India.

The present Mahabodhi Temple dates from around the fourth century AD and what we can see today owes a great deal to British restoration of the late nineteenth century. It is a rectangular building with a large spire rising from its centre and a smaller spire at each corner. The four corner spires were added at the time of the restoration, based on a model of the temple found in the precincts. You wouldn't get away with such a bold restoration today, but they add a grandeur which seems appropriate to the foremost place of Buddhist pilgrimage.

King Ashoka, the great Buddhist Indian king, visited in 260 BC, building a temple of which nothing survives, and a pillar, now broken. Later pilgrims built small votive stone-carved stupas, and other shrines which surround the temple, according to their wealth and devotion.

Pilgrims in the past suffered terrible hardships on the long journeys they undertook to reach here. Some wrote accounts of their travels, at first talking about a thriving Buddhist community, later referring to the neglect in which they found the place as Buddhism began to die out in India, giving harrowing accounts of when the region was at the mercy of the Muslim invaders who damaged and pillaged the site. Still the pilgrims came, driven on by the desire to visit this, the most sacred place in the Buddhist world, at least once in their lives.

A hundred years ago the temple was in the hands of a local Hindu who was not at all sympathetic to the needs of Buddhists to worship there, and the Anigarika Dharmapala, a Sri Lankan lay Buddhist, sought to bring the temple under Buddhist control. He fought and lost a legal battle in 1906, but he continued his campaign for the remaining 27 years of his life, gaining international support. It was not until 1949 that an act was passed giving Buddhists partial control of the site, and unimpeded access.

Today, hundreds of pilgrims come daily to walk round the temple and to sit under the Bodhi tree. Perhaps it has been an aspiration of a lifetime, fulfilled in a moment, as they turn the corner of the temple building and reach the place of their dreams, the place where the Buddha gained enlightenment, marked by a simple slab of stone. Some sit quietly in the shade alone, some in small groups, chanting softly together. Some are led in their chanting by the monks who travelled with them,

chanting the triple gem and perhaps the metta sutta. Others just come to watch and wonder at what it is that causes people to express such devotion. Which was I? I sat quietly, and watched in wonder.

When visiting the Buddhist pilgrimage sites I was aware of the tension between being in the moment and wanting to add something to the moment. After all, I have never been to India before and I've been a Buddhist for 25 years, why shouldn't it be special to visit these places? But it is being in the moment that is special. When we watch the grasping mind, that is, the desire to add 'something special' to the moment, then we can see that it is actually taking something away. We are taking away the way it is. Grasping our experience is just a process of adding the delusion of self to it. These two, grasping and delusion, are so tightly bound when we are trapped in the process, trapped on the wheel, that we can't see a way to get off. But the way to get off this wheel is by watching and letting go of grasping, moment by moment. And when we let go, we leave a space in which what is really there will reveal itself, this is what we call insight, where delusion falls away.

Wherever you sit, wherever you stand, walk or lie down, you have to watch the grasping mind and let it go. Then you are practising like the Buddha. You must follow this path of practice everywhere, all the time. There is no special place to practice, no special time to practice. When you are established in the practice you see that the essence of the practice is that it is beyond place and time. The present moment is here and now, and here cannot be given a geographical location, nor can now be pinpointed in the concept of time. The experience of here and now is both boundless and timeless.

We need to watch the grasping mind twist and turn like a worm trapped in a fork. However horrible it is to watch, don't turn away from it. Don't let the mind escape. We have to stay with it until we see right through it. When we see the grasping mind for what it is, it loses its power over us. We're no longer fooled into grasping or rejecting the world, as it arises and ceases, moment by moment.

This is our challenge, to know by direct understanding and experience, suffering, the origin of suffering, the end of suffering and the path which leads to the end of suffering. This is where we will find the Buddha, in realising these same four truths that the Buddha realised under a Bodhi tree in Bodhi Gaya 2,500 years ago.

Martin Evans

A good book for those planning a pilgrimage is: 'Middle land, middle way'. A pilgrims guide to the Buddha's India. Ven.S. Dhammika. BPS Kandy. ISBN 955-24-0197-6. I'm happy to lend it to anyone who is planning to visit.

Amaravati Monastic Led Retreats 2005 Programme

The 2005 programme of retreats led by monks and nuns at Amaravati can be found at the Website:

<http://www.amaravati.org/abm/english/announce/2005.html>

Retreats run on a donation basis: no booking fee is required.

Please follow the booking instructions contained at this site.

Amaravati Monastery Contact Details

*Amaravati Monastery,
Great Gaddesden,
Hemel Hempstead,
Hertfordshire, HP1 3BZ*

Office Phone : 01442 842455
Retreat Information: 01442 843239
Fax: 01442 843721

For Guest Information: please write to the Guest monk / nun or visit the website at www.amaravati.org

Amaravati Upasika Association Lay-people's Network

Many people have now joined this network which is available for people to make informal contacts with other lay people interested in Buddhism at Amaravati. Contacts can be made by telephone, e-mail and letter. On submitting your own information details, you will be sent the details of the other people in the group and can then use the network as you wish.

Some of us find that we have little contact with other Buddhists outside Amaravati especially if we do not attend a local group. It may be useful to discuss the dhamma and how to live a meaningful life with other like-minded people. Perhaps you would like to arrange to meditate at the same time as others once a week, to know how to prepare wholesome recipes or to study Dhamma texts or the history of Buddhism?

Ideas and suggestions welcome.

If you would like further information contact:

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Day of Practice at Amaravati

On June 11th 2005
from 10 am until 5pm
on the theme of

'Direct Seeing'

Led by Nick Carroll
All Welcome

*A day to meet friends, practice meditation
and discuss Dhamma.*

Please bring a little food to share.

**Organised by the Amaravati Upasaka/Upasika
Association (AUA)**

Community Newsletter by Email

We can send Community as an Acrobat file attached to an email. You can also simply read and download the newsletter from our web site: www.buddhacommunity.org.

Women's Social Events

If you are interested in forthcoming women's social events please contact Shirley McDonald on:

Tel: 01622 203751

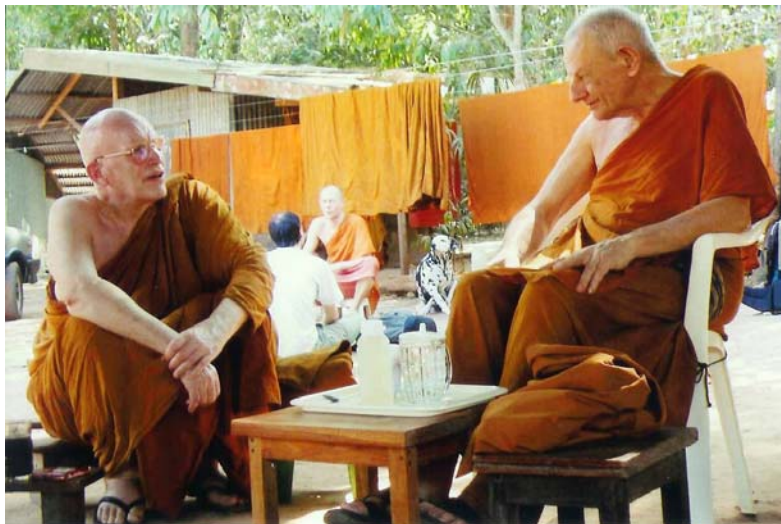
email: shirleymcd@blueyonder.co.uk

A Layperson's appreciation of Luang Phor Pannavaddho

Some of you may have read about the recent death of Luang Phor Pannavaddho in the October 2004 edition of the Forest Sangha Newsletter and would be interested to hear a little more about him. I was fortunate enough to know him since 1958. My first introduction to a Buddhist monk was to hear him give a Dhamma talk on Dependent Origination at The Buddhist Society Summer School. The following two years I joined the week-long retreats he took in a large house rented for the occasion in Oxford. They were conducted on strict Vipassana lines.

He spent five years in England at the little Vihara in Alexandra Road. Before he left, a large donation was given to the English Sangha Trust enabling them to buy suitable premises in Haverstock Hill, but by now Tan Panna, as we called him then, knew it was time for him to find a teacher. He returned to Thailand and after some months he met Tan Acharn Maha Boowa in Bangkok and asked if he might join his small monastery in the North near Udorn-Thani. There he remained, except for a short visit to London with Tan Acharn Maha Boowa in June 1974.

Luang Phor Panna was a cautious and circumspect person. Trained in lay life, like Acharn Karuniko, as an electrical engineer, when he taught he was careful to only give advice that was appropriate to the capacity of the individual. He constantly stressed the importance of developing a calm relaxed attitude to investigating the body and mind. This meant practicing Samatha, something most of us Westerners find incredibly difficult. Mindfulness, and noting the three signs*, were for daily life, Anapanasati for sitting and walking practice.



L P Sumedho talking with L P Panna just a few months before he died

He was always kind and gentle, but emotional problems were dismissed as kilesas, or defilements of the mind, just manifestations of craving or Tanha. He advised the development of Metta for overcoming fear of people who appeared threatening in any way.

As a teacher he had an uncanny way of knowing how one's practice was going to go and would give one advice that at the time one sometimes found perplexing, even, dare I say it, irritating, but which would prove to be invaluable when one needed it. I am deeply grateful for his patience as I stumbled on.

Luang Phor Panna was dedicated to spreading the Dhamma through the many translations he did of Tan Acharn Maha Boowa's desanas and also the

huge 'Mode of Practice' of Acharn Mun, which took him many years. He was always there for the Westerners who visited Wat Pa barn tard, answering questions and giving talks. Some of these are now available on tape and need transcribing.

The Thais held Luang Phor Panna in enormous respect. Admiring his steadiness and his impeccable behaviour towards Tan Acharn Maha Boowa, never speaking in his presence, if he needed to ask something, always waiting patiently until Tan Acharn was ready to listen. His complete lack of self-interest and growing contentment were evidence of his own progress on the path.

His fortitude and dignity when dying of bowel cancer was legendary. Luang Phor Panna died while the Olympic games were going on in Athens; no one awarded him a gold medal, but many thousand guests came to his cremation from 390 monasteries. The golden sun was surrounded by a rainbow on three different occasions and at dusk the cameras picked up the crystal balls which appear in the sky when the heavens are rejoicing. Luang Phor Panna had followed the path discovered by the Buddha for 49 years of his life and it would seem from all the evidence that he had reached his goal. A truly remarkable achievement for a Westerner, and proof that the Buddha Dhamma is alive and well.

* *The three signs are impermanence, not-self and dukkha (ed)*

Jane Browne

India – impressions and reflections

“Once a year, go some place you’ve never been before”. I read this advice, attributed to the Dalai Lama, on a print-out hanging on an office wall in Benares, or Varanasi as it is now known

It was towards the end of over two months travelling around the Indian sub-continent, my first visit. Perhaps the print-out should have also added “..and to India at least once a lifetime”. The impressions were so many, so varied and at times so intense it was difficult to think of them all at once, but what was clear was that the experience had been a rich one.

Some years previously I had seen a youngish couple who had come to therapy in order to address a crisis in their lives. Their reason for coming was a two week holiday they had just returned from. They had gone to see some of the main tourist sites in northern India, including the Taj Mahal, a building that they felt symbolised their love for each other. The impact that India had on them was rather different to what they had expected. No one had prepared them for the other aspects of life India had to offer, aspects that travel agents do not generally advertise, such as the poverty and the impact of begging, as well as the dirt or different standards of hygiene. They hadn’t had any peace. They had been unable to sleep at night and had returned traumatised, their assumptions about life seriously challenged, and in fact, still unable to sleep peacefully at night back in their London home.

As I travelled around India I could understand better why the young couple had reacted the way they had. My impressions were similar. The degree of poverty and hardship experienced by so many

fellow humans was painful to witness. The impingements of discomforts on the senses were difficult to ignore. Friends had encouraged me to keep a record of my impressions but I quickly realised that it would take me a while to be in the right frame of mind to do so, and decided to let the experience just happen. But over the time I was there I wrote a few e-mails home.

Written in small internet café’s – hot stuffy little rooms with a fan (not always working), drenched in perspiration on slow dial up connections with occasional crashes, they give a more direct flavour of the impact India had at the time. Here are some edited extracts:



Gopuram Mysore

18 Jan 05 ...am finding it difficult to keep a record of my experiences here in writing or by photographs and have stopped trying to. Am simply surrendering to experiences which are so rich and varied. We have been in Tivuranamalai near Mount Arunachala now for a few days. A spiritual powerhouse.

We sit on hard marble or stone floors with no cushions in shrine rooms and temples as well as for our morning and mid day meals here in the Ashram. The meals are served on a green palm leaf which one rinses with water. A dollop of rice and dhal or veg sauces plonked on to the palm leaf, pretty hot both in taste and temperature, eaten with the fingers of the right hand, followed by some watered buttermilk at the end. My tummy is fine. The ‘Delhi belly’ episode I spoke about on the phone was borderline, nothing serious so far, and my palate is adapting.

The small bananas here are delicious. Great variety of plants and wildlife. Peacocks, squirrels, chipmunks, monkeys, butterflies and strange birds.

Mongrel dogs in poor shape, some with bad mange, cows with pointed horns brightly painted red and/or blue with bells and ribbons. Holy men in a variety of cloths and robes, or almost none, with ash markings on their heads and sometimes bodies. Beggars, school children in smart uniforms - crisp white shirts or blouses and same coloured shorts or dresses, sometimes on bicycles, with their bundles of exercise books, sometimes tied up with string, or in the case of the better-off, with large satchels on their backs.

Women in beautifully bright coloured saris. Some parts of the streets are clean. There is a great deal of sweeping of porches and in front of shops with brush stick hand held brooms, but it seems to have little impact - there is so much dirt and rubbish.

Many individuals are spotlessly clean - equally many are dusty and dirty, especially the very poor. Buses packed with people, sometimes hanging on the sides like bunches of grapes, sometimes on the roof, horns blowing, weaving their way through myriads of bicycles, scooters, motorbikes and auto-rickshaws. Multi coloured trucks rule the road, followed by buses, followed by vans and cars down to motorbikes, carts, cycles and at the bottom of the pile, long suffering pedestrians! Extraordinarily, haven't seen one accident yet despite the number of close shaves with everyone driving on any side of the road that suits them to get them to where they want to go the fastest way possible.

Life here is extraordinarily 'in one's face'; this makes it potentially such a powerful place to practice in. One cannot avoid the suffering and dramas of existence here. A deep teaching.

5 Feb 05...Finally got to an internet shop in Kodaikanal, in the hills of Kerala about 4 hours drive from Madurai. An ear splitting (engine full throttle, horn blaring, sound system at full volume) bone shaking bus journey. Big change in temperature, from 32 degrees down to 12 (and apparently even 9 degrees at night). I've just had some chai -with more sugar than I care to think about, and a piece of plain chocolate so for the moment I feel warm! Amazingly the place we are staying in has hot water 24 hours a day (it's usually 5am - 10 am if you're lucky, and in the ashrams often only cold water). I will have to double check though, for the first shower had been cold. For an extra charge we were given a small heater each - but haven't had a chance to try mine

for the hotel fuses have blown and the heaters have been taken away! We are 2000 metres above sea level in beautifully forested mountainous country in probably the cleanest part of India seen so far. In the main, India is a pretty dirty country - the more inhabited the area, the more dirty. Plastic rules.

Our stay in Madurai, a large Temple city down in the hot plains of Tamil Nadu, was a powerful experience. The hot sun beating down in the humid heat of the city, teeming crowds, jumble of traffic with bicycles, cycle rickshaws, scooter auto rickshaws, buses and cars hooting and honking as they weave and fight their way forward into any opening that appears. Beggars calling out, tailors and dealers trying to sell you their services, be it a new shirt or trousers made-to-measure in an hour, or some hashish, or offering a taxi or auto rickshaw ride.

The large Temple complex, almost a little town in itself with its 4 towering 'gopurams' (entrance towers) covered with thousands of gods and mythical beings), is full of Hindu devotees entering and making their way through the maze of monumental stone pillared halls and passage ways, poorly lit and dark in contrast with the bright sunshine outside, making their offerings, bowing and prostrating themselves as they worship the innumerable gods and deities in numerous individual shrines. The Temple complex also houses shops and stalls, The Brahmin priests wear white 'dhoti's' (loin cloths) and have markings on their foreheads as they make formal offerings in the dark innermost sanctums which Hindu devotees are allowed to approach (and into which in the stricter temples, non Hindus are not allowed). Mantras are chanted during the rituals which involve burning ghee, oil lamps and incense.

In the larger temples amongst the pillars one often finds a large live elephant in the shadows (representing the god Ganesh), chained to one leg, with white markings on its forehead and body standing with his mahout. One can make a small coin offering (anything from 2 to 5 rupees) which is received by the elephant in its trunk which it gives to its mahout. The elephant then very gently touches the devotee on the top of one's head with the tip of its trunk as a blessing. A very nice experience. In the outer perimeter around the temples, cows and calves wander around, as they do in the busy streets outside.

And everywhere one sees beggars; old women, old men, cripples, the occasional 'saddhu', poor women with little babies in their arms and small children

trying to catch your attention and indicating with their hands to their mouths that they want money for food, the more articulate ones calling out what little they know in English 'hello, hello' or 'what's your name?' or, "where are you from?", or 'one rupee, one rupee'. Some of the children are even more specific 'pen, pen' in the hope that you might have a ballpoint pen to give them. Most of them are really happy and grateful for 5 rupees (7p), and if you give them 10 Rs you've made their day. One can buy a full 'thali' or Indian meal for 25 rupees in an inexpensive eatery.

As well as the painful sights and the demands of cripples and beggars, we are also approached by very friendly people including children, who are genuinely interested in saying hello, want to talk, and are curious about us and Aj. Jutindharo in his monks robes. They ask about our country, what we do, what life in the West is like. Very friendly, often beautiful smiles which highlight their amazingly white teeth, unless they chew betel nuts in which case their teeth are red, and in the aged look worn away with all the wear and tear of chewing.

4 March 05. I am writing this in Bodghaya....We survived our 42 hr train journey from Madras to Varanasi eating the food prepared in the 'pantry car' of the train and, probably as a direct result, suffered 3+ days of 'Delhi belly'. Fortunately it wasn't too bad, for I had some say about when to go!

Varanasi, or Benares as it used to be called - and still is by the locals, is an extraordinary city. It is regarded as the holiest city for all Hindus who comprise 82% of India's population (1.2 billion +) Quite impossible to describe and do it justice. Even after two months here in India it was a lot to take in. Coming here straight from the West would be a major cultural/emotional shock. We were staying right in the heart of the old city by the river Ganges. Narrow, dirty (often filthy and where you have to side step the cow dung) alleyways with strong often unpleasant smells, lined with small shops, hovels, eating

places, people cooking food, tailor shops, children playing in indescribable dirt, often filthy clothes, beggars, cows standing or just lying down, sometimes blocking the alleyways completely. People going about their business, some smartly dressed, 'coolies' (as they are still called here), and women, balancing enormous weights on their heads, be it firewood or baskets with goods. Some people friendly, most indifferent, just going about their lives. Shop keepers call out to attract the attention of passers-by. A cacophony of noise, shouting, loudspeakers, often within a short distance of each other, playing (or rather blaring) religious music and mantra's from outside temples and small shrines. Numerous gods dressed up in flowers and with offerings, devotees passing by paying their respects (the equivalent of the sign of the cross that I have

seen Polish peasants make as they pass a Christian shrine), the more serious ones prostrating and praying, all quite unselfconsciously.

On the steps (Ghats) of the river front, hundreds of people wash themselves and bathe in the Holy Mother Ganges, a wide slow flowing river, purifying themselves externally by performing ablutions, submerging themselves several times in between prayers and salutations, and internally by drinking the water. (N.B. Apparently the water has 1.5million faecal coliform

bacteria per 100ml of water - water safe for bathing should have less than 500 and for drinking it should be less than 50!) Only yards upstream are the 'burning Ghats' where the dead are cremated. Bodies are brought to the riverside by relatives, sheeted in golden drapes on wooden hand made stretchers, and having been dipped in the river are placed on wooden pyres stacked by loin clothed woodcutters, the pyres are lit and the bodies burnt.

One watches the body burn and gradually fall apart, relatives (male only) poke about and adjust the bits that stick out, usually the legs, folding them over to make sure that all gets burnt as thoroughly as possible. The poorer people can only afford small pyres - the cremation is priced by the weight of wood purchased, so the job is



Varanasi

rarely completely thorough, for wood is expensive. The remains are put into the river.

Whilst we were observing and contemplating this scene, a dog was scavenging in the water along the edge of the steps amongst the rubbish and detritus, looking for food and finding it - gnawing at bits of bone, whilst a little further out the bloated remains of a dead animal, or was it human (?), slowly and languorously drifted by. Nearby on the bank, a little boy followed by his friend skipped by, engrossed in playing a game, quite oblivious to the scenes around them.

All the while, rowing boats pass by, people ply their trade, holy men sit, the odd tourists walk by, the sun beats down, a light breeze blows carrying the smoke from the pyres into the still blue sky whilst the river slowly flows towards the ocean. Life goes on; it's all part of the never ending cycle of life and death in which everyone has their part to play in the flow of events. A meditation and blessing to be able to experience all of this.

We arrived in Bodhgaya this afternoon, a three and a half hour train journey away. This is where the Buddha realised his enlightenment. I am glad we made it here. I am still processing recent impressions, so not much to say except that we are staying in a Burmese

monastery full of pilgrims from Burma. Across the dusty road from the monastery are some low mud buildings with straw roofs, more like shacks or hovels, which apparently house some good breakfast eating places (i.e. Western breakfasts? Porridge for our long suffering tummies perhaps? - I hope so). Indian breakfasts consist of hot spicy runny mixes with rice cakes or potato puree (also spiced!) – definitely not good for tender tummies. We will find out tomorrow. We plan to stay here 3x nights, and then return to Varanasi. We hope to visit Sarnath where the Buddha gave his first sermon, after which on to New Delhi. Two nights there and then the flight back to England. Strange thought. It will be interesting!



Chola Temple

The couple I had seen in London, with the help of time and some conversations gradually settled back into their lives. Thinking about it, I can see that I had a few things in my favour. I was traveling with a monk, a friend of many years standing. We made good traveling companions, enjoying each others quiet company, exchanging views and checking each others needs out when necessary. We had not imposed a rigid itinerary on ourselves so we were able to change our travel plans when needed. We were traveling quite light, with only a small travel bag cum rucksack and shoulder bag each. We were on the eight precepts which imposed itself on each days planning in a way I found interesting, for it seemed to increase the sense off space in which everything was experienced. It also felt like a connecting link to the stability and composure associated with our ‘home’ monastery, Amaravati.

Most importantly, I feel we had gone with few expectations; open to what India had to offer. This open minded disposition, which can be cultivated in well established practice, gave us the space to reflect and process all the phenomena we were experiencing and which undoubtedly challenged many assumptions. Paradoxically, the very ups and downs of each day’s experiences that could

have been so overwhelming or distressing were nourishing to insight. For whether the phenomena experienced are life in India or life in England makes little difference. It is all phenomena which comes and goes, is impermanent, just as our bodies, feelings and thoughts are impermanent. In that understanding there can be a greater sense of peace and well being. Seeing such a variety of life in so different a context, informs one’s experience when returning to familiar surroundings and routines, where, I am glad to say, sleep is very peaceful – well, at least so far.

Nick Carroll



NEW YEAR AT AMARAVATI

Being aware
From here to there
Fragments of grace and beauty
everywhere
The sway of grasses
The turn of a branch
The spiral of the yew
and new growth.
Oak leaves
Copper hued with purple tinge
Nestle into the pathway,
From here to there

Anna Badar



***A five day retreat at
Amaravati***

From July 22nd - 26th

on the theme of

'The Middle Way?'

*Martin Evans
and Chris Ward*

All are welcome to attend this five day retreat. The retreat will explore the various meanings of 'the middle way' and will include meditation, discussion, teachings and optional physical exercise.

Booking is necessary. Please download a booking form from our website:

www.buddhacommunity.org

**Organised by the Amaravati Upasaka/Upasika
Association (AUA)**

Letters, News & Reviews

A Review of 'The Buddha and The Terrorist', Author: Satish Kumar Published by Green Books, Dartington, Totnes

In this short book (of 75 pages) the author Satish Kumar recounts the story of Angulimala and interweaves this with the key teachings of the Buddha.

Satish Kumar is the editor of Resurgence magazine and Director of Programmes at Schumacher College. In his youth he was a Jain monk for 9 years. In the introduction he explains that the version of the Angulimala story in this book is the one which he learned from his mother. It differs from the more widely known version, in which Angulimala is a Brahmin, who is effectively tricked into his life of crime. The story here is based on a very different (and probably more plausible) background.

Angulimala is an untouchable. The duties of his caste include clearing away dead animals, notably after they have been sacrificed in religious ceremonies. As a young man he rebels against this and against his father who he resents for not fighting against his family's state of affairs.

As Angulimala tells the Buddha, he abandoned his father, his family, his village, his caste and ultimately the world. In doing so he sought retribution against society by killing others. The Buddha in his first meeting with the murderer points out that Angulimala abandoned the world in anger, while he, the Buddha, has abandoned his family and wealth through compassion for the world.

As the Buddha says to Angulimala, 'I have stopped. I stopped ages ago, but have you? And will you?'

Of course, Angulimala does stop and becomes a monk, known as Ahimsaka. The second chapter describes the King's change of heart towards the former criminal. The story then recounts how, on alms round, the monk is nearly killed by a mob, including the relatives of his many victims. He is saved by Lady Nandini, one of the Buddha's followers.

There is then an interesting chapter, entitled Spiritual Simplicity. In one sense this is an interlude in the main story. The Buddha discusses the key principles of his teachings with Nandini. In only a few pages the author sets out a succinct and compelling outline of Buddhist ideas. Notably The Buddha points out that he is not a prophet, not a master, or a guide, but simply a friend. These 9 pages are well worth rereading.

The book then moves back to the main story. The local population is not happy to find that the Buddha and Nandini are harbouring a terrorist. 'They are either with us or against us'. A phrase that is all too familiar.

The King decides to convene a court so that the due process of justice can be followed. At this many people speak, victims, the prosecutor, and The Buddha. In addition Mahavira (the founder of the Jain religion) speaks. He asks the gathering to recognise violence is not just physical violence, but includes psychological, social and institutional violence. This passage encapsulates the importance of non-violence and the need to examine ourselves closely.

Ultimately Angulimala is pardoned. Sujata, the wife of one of his victims, expresses her deep sorrow at her loss, but recognises that Angulimala's example shows that no-one is beyond redemption.

For such a short book, a number of key messages and teachings are touched upon, with an economy of language. This makes it very easy to read and reread. I would recommend this book to anyone who has an interest in the story of Angulimala and also to anyone who is seeking a concise outline of the main Buddhist ideas.

Keith Hammond

AUA NEWS

Getting this issue together has been delayed by a combination of travelling and other pressing commitments. Hopefully the next issue can be produced in a more timely way. There is a continuing need for contributions. Both short and longer pieces will be considered for inclusion. Poems, letters, book reviews, news, articles, and reflections are all welcome. We have also gradually been experimenting with photos and images. These can be quite a problem: they enlarge the file size of the electronic version making it very slow to download from our website; they may also not print very well in black and white. If this issue causes any download problems for those using the internet, then please let me know.







Recent agenda items for the AUA Committee have included discussion of the detailed organisation of AUA events; limiting 'exclusive' events which reduce opportunities for all AUA members to attend; the content and advertising of events; and the lay-ministry initiative—CALM. This is still in the gestation stage, and there is no certainty that it will happen, although people are welcome to express an interest. The programme, if it happens, is likely to extend over 3 or 4 years and will comprise a mixture of academic, meditational, ceremonial and social elements.

The AUA also has two representatives on the Network of Buddhist Organisations (NBO). This is a worthy attempt to establish communication and constructive interaction between the many different UK Buddhist organisations. The NBO website is interesting (<http://www.nbo.org.uk/>), and we are now using this to advertise AUA events.

Initiatives such as our retreats and days of practice, our online networks (see details earlier in this issue), our NBO activity, and our discussion around CALM, demonstrate the great value of the AUA. As well as directly supporting practice, it has created an open and inclusive forum for dialogue and consultation about ways that lay-people can skilfully practise for the well-being of the whole Amaravati community. Such communities require careful maintenance and good will from all.

Chris Ward

Observance Days for 2005

MOON PHASE	 HALF	 NEW	 HALF	 FULL	 HALF	 NEW
MAY 05	1st	7th	15th	22nd	30th	-
JUNE 05	-	6th	14th	21st	29th	-
JULY 05	-	5th	13th	20th	28th	-
AUGUST 05	-	4th	12th	19th	27th	-
SEPTEMBER 05	-	2nd	10th	17th	25th	-
OCTOBER 05	-	2nd	10th	17th	25th	31st
NOVEMBER 05	-	-	8th	15th	23rd	30th
DECEMBER 05	-	-	8th	15th	23rd	29th



The Amaravati Upasika - Upasaka Association (AUA) was formed to foster and encourage good Buddhist lay practice. It does this by providing a lay forum for all those interested in the Buddhist path in the form of one day and longer events, as well as other gatherings. At the heart of good Dhamma practice lies a commitment to enquiry. Whether you are interested and just beginning, or whether you have been practising for a while, we offer the opportunity to develop all aspects of the Buddhist path in a supportive lay context.

NOTICES

Scandal in the Retreat Centre Kitchen



To his horror, Bruce spotted Hob Nob crumbs on the kitchen floor. Hob Nobs were neither organic nor vegan!

CONTRIBUTIONS DEADLINE:
30th Oct 2005

SEND to: *The Editor, Community Newsletter*
c/o Amaravati Monastery, Great Gaddesden, Hemel
Hempstead, Herts, HP1 3BZ (It reduces production
time if you can send your contributions in
electronic form, either on a 3.5 inch floppy disc in
PC format as a basic text file or Word file format,
or included within an email – but typed or hand
written is fine).

E MAIL: info@buddhacommunity.org

The AUA Committee

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 Martin Evans, Jenni Jepson, Roger Little, Vivian Miles,
 Alison Moore, Colin Rae, Caroline Randall, Tony
 Spinks, Chris Ward, Gill Williamson

Associate Members

Josyane Bijoux, Stuart Brown, Radmila Herrmann,
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The Bodhinyana Group Programme - Spring 2005

We meet in the Bodhinyana Hall at Amaravati Buddhist Monastery – from 7.30 till 9.30pm on Wednesday evenings.

Please check our website for more details:
www.buddhacommunity.org

6th April	How should we meditate?
13th April	What makes the path right?
20th April	Regeneration
27th April	Meditation and Reflection
4th May	Spiritual friendship?
11th May	Sutta Study – Metta Sutta
18th May	Ashoka & other world rulers
25th May	Meditation and Reflection
1st June	Wings to awakening
8th June	Right communication
15th June	Sutta Study
22nd June	Family and Community
29th June	Engaged Buddhism?
6th July	Meditation and Reflection
13th July	What is the middle way?

Donations and Mailing list

If you do not wish to remain on the AUA mailing list please let us know. This enables us to reduce the size of mailings and to save money. If you wish to continue on the mailing list then you need do nothing. However, any contributions you can make to cover the production of the newsletter and the two or three mailings each year would be greatly appreciated.

Please send donations to
AUA, Amaravati Buddhist Monastery, Great Gaddesden, Hemel Hempstead, Herts, HP1 3BZ,

If undelivered please return to:

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Herts, HP1 3BZ, England

**Mailing List
Address Changes**
If you change your address, please let us know either by emailing your changes to :
metta@petalmoore.net,
or posting to the AUA as left.

AMARAVATI LAY EVENTS - 2005

These events provide an opportunity to practice together and explore themes relevant to practice and lay life. They include silent and guided meditation, sutta study groups, yoga, discussion groups and other workshops. All are welcome.

Days of Practice – no need to book
9.45am for 10am-5pm (please bring food to share)

Retreats – advance booking essential
5.30pm Fri. – 4.00pm on last day

June 11th Day of Practice - 'Direct Seeing'
(Nick Carroll)

July 22nd – 26th 5 day retreat 'The Middle Way?'
(Martin Evans & Chris Ward)

Oct 21-23rd Weekend Retreat 'Meditation and
Bhāvanā'
(Chris Ward & Martin Evans)

Dec 3rd Day of Practice 'Not One, Not Two' (including
ACM - Annual Community Meeting)
(Nick Carroll)

Women's Events

Sept 9 – 10th Women's Weekend Retreat (Booking
required—via the web site below)

Nov 5th Women's Day of Practice

Both led by Jenni Jepson and Chris Blain

**PLEASE CHECK FOR LATE CHANGES TO THE PROGRAMME ON THE WEB SITE :

www.buddhacommunity.org

Please download booking forms from our web site
Organised by the Amaravati Upasaka/Upasika Association (AUA)

Editorial & Production Team :

Chris Ward, Nick Carroll, Tony Spinks, Martin Evans
Plus much help in copying, enveloping, and posting.
The Community Newsletter is put together and published as an offering to others. All views and comments are personal.