Cittaviveka Newsletter August 2010

Summer's here, fine and blooming; and in Sangha parlance, it's the Vassa season - of which the three-months' Rains Retreat forms the core. This Vassa we currently have in residence eleven bhikkhus, three siladhara, two samaneras and six male and female anagarikas. After Vassa, there will be the **Kathina Alms-Giving Ceremony, held this year on November 7th**. This is an acknowledgement of the fellowship of the Sangha for this period, and of the bond between the monastic and lay communities. Details of how you can participate in this will follow.

Forest, and other, work

However, before (and after) the Vassa, there is work in the Hammer Wood. This year Paul, our forest manager, organized a week long session of forest maintenance work which included clearing the paths, and control of invasive plants such as bracken and Himalayan balsam. Some 18 male and female volunteers camped out in the woods, and, assisted by monks and nuns, also renewed the hand rails by the paths and mended footpath signs. With such fine weather it was a splendid mix of work, recreation and meditation. Generally the mornings officially began with breakfast in the woods and concluded with an evening meditation under the spreading boughs of an old yew-tree. To add to the mix there were also guided wildlife walks on plant ecology, dragonflies, and even a night-time walk to observe bats (of which if I remember rightly there are no fewer than 18 species in UK). Much good work was done on all levels, and we hope to repeat the occasion next year.

In the nearer future, there will be the opportunity for up to six men to participate in the Autumn Forest work session, which begins in early November. This work will consist mostly of thinning out trees and gathering the firewood that heats the main buildings of the monastery. **If you're interested, please apply to 'Forest Work'** at the monastery.

Other work which is moving along in its own way is the Cloister (Covered Walkway) which received a big boost this year with the construction of a roofed entrance over the stairs. Above this entrance a bell, donated in memory of Alain Savako, is being hung. This bell, cast in Thailand and subsequently blessed by the auspicious chanting of 108 monks, will be the main bell that sounds out the monastery's (daytime) routines. Perhaps later in the summer or in the autumn, we will nail the battening on the main structure and tile the roof. If you're interested in helping with this, **please contact 'Cloister Work'** at the monastery.

The construction of the nuns' new shrine room has got in gear again, thanks to massive efforts and negotiations between Ajahn Kovida, Julia and the English Sangha Trust on one hand, and the Romanian company and their English suppliers on the other. As I reported a few months' ago, although the Sangha Management bodies had taken reasonable precautions to check their credibility, the previous suppliers, 'Custom Timber Build,' went bust in the recession. This resulted in the EST losing its deposit. However, in the late spring the Romanian company manufacturing the pre-fab building contacted the EST, and with a re-negotiated contract which has significantly reduced the overall financial loss, we are able to proceed in erecting the shell. The final cost is still the cheapest quote we received.

Finally I am pleased to inform you that due to a substantial donation from an Asian supporter, the debt acquired in purchasing Rocana Vihara is now paid off!

Nuns' situation

The unfortunate news regarding the nuns is that our two senior nuns have left or will be leaving the community. Ajahn Thitamedha revised her plan to live as a nun outside this community to one of disrobing altogether. Ajahn Kovida has decided to leave Cittaviveka in November, spend some time in Burma and then take up life as a solitary nun in Britain. Many of you will have read their farewell letters and are understandably shocked or saddened by this news, especially as they point to perceived problems in the community dynamic. It's a sensitive area, and because rumours and interpretations abound, I offer a few thoughts for consideration. To speak in general terms, each of us requests permission for the Going Forth and entrance to this lineage after careful consideration, and many choose to leave it after a similar process. The sense of how needs, aims and directions change is part of the changing nature of spiritual life. This is nothing new; nor is the sense of loss and disappointment that occurs, especially when a monk or nun of long-standing leaves the group. To my

knowledge, even amongst senior monks, more have left our group than now remain. To address the nuns' situation more specifically, I will speak from my own limited understanding of the situation. It seems to me that at this time our lineage sits at the edge where a conservative Asian tradition meets a liberal Western one, and that brings with it the crunch point of gender equality - which is the aspired aim of the West, but which is in direct contradiction to the fact that in all Buddhist monastic lineages, the male line is held to be 'senior' to the female. Seniority is a way of forming line-ups and protocols within a group, to avoid competition or jealousy - so that who goes first is not a matter of who's wisest, but who's senior. This too is nothing new here, and it is so much the standard that to change that would require broad Sangha consent.

Another crucial point is that men and women experience and relate to the world in distinctly different ways. Over time, these differences can bring with them a frustration that we're not on the same wave-length, and interpretations that so-and-so is not following the agreed-upon norms, or that so-and-so isn't listening or is out of touch. In situations when a man and a woman live together, I'd imagine that these issues can get sorted out (though not always), because of the intimacy that is part of the commitment to live with a chosen partner. When such issues occur amongst 25 people, who haven't chosen to live in a close relationship, and who are in many ways barred from forming one, and who incline towards silence and solitude, resolving these differences is a major challenge. Some feel that more dialogue is needed; greater separation is also a considered option - either through creating another vihara, or, regrettably, through a more complete leave-taking. At Cittaviveka we have attempted to give the Rocana Vihara a good degree of autonomy, with the nuns being in charge of their routines and internal governance. Recently this has extended to having meal offerings for the sisters down at Rocana on the last Friday of each month (you are all very welcome to make offerings there to the sisters). We are also establishing an inter-monastic committee to look into how sharing these wonderful places can become smoother. Naturally after all the time and effort that's gone into establishing a training for women in the west, I'm keen to find a satisfactory resolution.

Farewell to Luang Por Sumedho

Another major leave-taking, which could take pages but will be covered by other presentations, is that of Luang Por Sumedho, founder of Cittaviveka and Amaravati. In July we celebrated his 76th birthday, and so his retirement should really come as no surprise. Out of gratitude to his teacher, Luang Por Chah, he determined to establish places, teachings and training in the West, and has done so for 34 years, and now feels that his work is complete in that respect. As the abbot of a monastery, I can speak from my own experience of the gratitude and the resolution that is the foundation for this kind of work; and also of the kind of multi-tasking between management, community business, teaching and receiving visitors that go along with leadership functions. It gives me joy to consider that Luang Por will have the freedom to focus on his practice in a more secluded way in his final years. It's also a sign that it's up to the rest of us to work together to carry things forward. So I am delighted that Ajahn Amaro has come back to UK to take on some of Luang Por's duties, and I'm sure that his contribution to the Sangha in UK will be considerable.

Meanwhile as one of a round of farewells, Luang Por Sumedho will be at the Cittaviveka Kathina. This may well be the last time that some of you will have a chance to see him, so please don't miss the occasion. We are planning a simple leave-taking ceremony in which you can take part. This year the Kathina organizers will be Prasit (tel: 01903 263273, mobile: 0773 3358225) and David: (tel: 01273 723378; mobile: 07545 816367). You will be hearing from them with details in due course, but for now pencil in the date in your diary.

And the rest…

Otherwise, life at Cittaviveka goes on much as usual: Saturday night talks, Sunday tea-time discussions and guided meditations. However during the Vassa we will be having silent meditation vigils on the evenings of the new moon (sit until midnight) and the full moon (sit until 4:00 am). For those who favour a more active approach, there are the work days in the Hammer Wood and also in the Gardens for those who' enjoy being with nature and lending a helping hand. If you like to exchange ideas with others, there are the Lay Forums. And to finish the Vassa, we'll have a samanera (male novice) ordination on the evening of October 23rd. It's true that there aren't that many events here, we like to keep it quiet; but while the summer's still with us, there's still the opportunity to watch the dragonflies and martins skimming across the pond, like thoughts in the mind. Life rolls on, up and down, birth and death; it's worth taking the time to pause and contemplate it.

Ajahn Sucitto