



BIRKEN FOREST MONASTERY

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REFLECTIONS ON THE NATURE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF A 'MONASTERY'

by Vens. Thitapuñño and Pavaro

Social Contributions of Buddhist Monasteries

The West is still largely unaware of the great number of benefits that come with the establishment and support of monasteries. Nevertheless, many people in Western societies are beginning to view Buddhist monasteries as social resources akin to such public institutions as libraries, museums, and universities.

The efforts of small numbers of people dedicated to spiritual practice can have a tremendously beneficial influence in their social milieu. Intellectuals often feel this influence first, being attracted by the profound and systematic nature of the Dhamma. However, as the

teachings spread throughout society other individuals also make them part of their lives. It is a given within the Buddhist teachings that the final goal of liberation from suffering is not exclusively reserved for members of a particular sector of society, but is available to all individuals who have the disposition and capacity to reach or make strides towards that goal. One must stress that Theravada Buddhist monasteries are not cloistered centres where the opportunity for spiritual development is reserved exclusively to monastics – in actuality they are communal resources available to the general public.

While monasteries' benefits to society cannot be separated from their central function to support the practice of Buddhist monks and nuns, these social benefits certainly deserve *honourable* mention.

For example, in light of the ongoing ecological deterioration in the world, Buddhist forest monasteries in countries like Thailand and Sri Lanka have been vigorous advocates for the protection of endangered forests vital to so many forms of life. In this way, monasteries are often ecological preserves where human beings, animals and plants are given sanctuary. What one finds in such monastic environments is an atmosphere imbued with peace, kindness, beauty, and cleanliness. These conditions are not only of "environmental" significance: they are also essential for the harmony required to nurture the higher development of the heart and mind.

Buddhist monasteries are also the institutions in charge of preserving a millennial tradition. The cultural and historical acumen that is protected and transmitted from generation to generation is of great value for humankind. Of primary value for their spiritual wisdom, the teachings found in the vast Pali canon also treat many aspects of life in India at the time of the Buddha. From a social perspective, the texts contain injunctions regarding norms of conduct that are conducive to harmony in interpersonal relationships, family relationships and amongst nations.

Monasteries offer good examples of a viable lifestyle determined by simplicity, ethical conduct and noble aspirations. At the most basic level, they encourage individuals to follow a lifestyle bound by the five Buddhist moral precepts, namely, abstinence from killing living beings, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying and

taking intoxicants that lead to negligence. When followed, these helpful principles lead to personal contentment and help ensure respect and harmony between people. At a more intimate scale, monastic Buddhism also promotes values that strengthen harmony in the family, thus providing a foundation for the social and spiritual development of individuals.

At the individual level, monasteries traditionally have side-functions as psychological and emotional support centres for those burdened by the stress, addictions, and neuroses so common in contemporary societies. The ancient psychological techniques that are used in monastic training may be applied, within limits, by lay people who are willing to undertake Buddhism's meditative techniques. Again and again the effectiveness of this training makes itself evident as dysfunctional individuals weighed down by despair and depression transform themselves into healthy, well balanced members of society.

Another influence is apparent when considering the West's growing interest in the techniques of contemplative practice, and its emerging appreciation for the disciplines and fruits of monastic life. One example of this is the degree to which modern psychological theories and therapies are being influenced by ancient Buddhist understandings of human perception and thought. During the last few years Buddhist meditation methods have been implemented with great success in the treatment of patients with a wide spectrum of ailments ranging from heart disease, cancer, and AIDS, to chronic pain and hypertension. Modern studies of expert monastic meditators are also giving scientists unprecedented clues about the optimal and super-normal states of which the mind is capable.

Spiritual Contributions of Buddhist Monasteries

A monastery's primary function is to serve as a *Vihara*, the Pali term designating a place of residence for members of the monastic order. Monks and nuns, considered "homeless renunciants," have in monasteries the means for fulfilling their basic requisites for life, that is, shelter, clothing, food, and medicine. The monastic structure of the Forest tradition follows a scheme designed to provide conditions for the development of what is known as the "triple training," consisting in the development of morality, meditation, and wisdom. Members of the *Sangha* come from all walks of life; some of them stay as monastics for life while others do so only temporarily. Traditionally the *Sangha* has been comprised of those who view Theravada monasticism to be the most suitable means to lead a life conducive to the ultimate goal of the teachings: the liberation of the mind from suffering.

The fact that Buddhism is growing in the West may be seen as an advantage and a blessing by members of other spiritual traditions. Like most religions, Buddhism promotes harmlessness, honesty, harmony, and understanding among all individuals and societies. In addition, its monastic dimension

offers a living demonstration of these values, as well as an enormous range of skilful practices directed at their cultivation. For instance, many Christian groups in the West have in recent years come to recognise and profit from the useful spiritual heritage of Buddhist teachings and meditation techniques. This interest has promoted avenues for ecumenical conferences and retreats (mainly in Europe and North America), where people come together in a cordial spirit. In a way, Buddhist meditation practice has helped prompt a renewed interest in and rediscovery of many of the practices which at one time constituted the heart of Christian spirituality.

In the process of serving as environments dedicated to monastic training, monasteries also become spaces of spiritual instruction, practice and refuge for interested lay people. Monasteries remain environments where individuals can develop according to their efforts and capacity. As individuals progress along their spiritual path in association with monasteries, both lay and monastic practitioners are able to mount strong opposition to the pervasive influence of unexamined secular attitudes.

Spiritual Economics

The foregoing seeks to show that Buddhist monasteries serve varied, profound, and often unique functions in the lives of individuals and societies. These beneficial roles are even today being adopted to and fulfilled in Western cultures. What is more, it is noteworthy that even here the age-old Buddhist tradition continues of offering such benefits – so eminently worthy of support – "free of charge." True to their origins, that is, without invitation Theravada monastics may not make direct material requests from laypeople. Instead,

monastics have traditionally survived in cultures steeped in an understanding of the far-reaching value of *generosity*.

However, this situation can be easily misunderstood in a culture whose generous impulses have often been expressed in somewhat different terms. For instance, visitors to a monastery will sometimes have heard that there is no fee charged for the Dhamma and will observe monks' and nuns' conditions of simplicity and dependence. As a result, they can view donations they leave behind in a

similar light to money or goods they might give to any “charity.”

But this idea needs to be reviewed. In fact, the reason that the Dhamma may not be a commodity for economic transaction is not that it is free, but *priceless*. A Buddhist monastery is not a “charity case” but an institution of tremendous merit, one which reflects the very highest aspirations of which people are capable. Particularly here in the West, such places are extraordinarily rare, precious.

Generosity is like a ladder to heaven; it is the best provision for a journey, the righteous means to the path, and it directs the way towards supreme happiness.

– the Buddha

The Buddha frequently declared *Dana*, or “generosity,” to be the first quality a person needs to develop in the religious life.

Generosity is the first of the “perfections,” or *paramis*. It also appears first in his “graduated” list of subjects for discourse and reflection, meaning that even before one may be capable of dedicating oneself to virtue or meditative development, generosity can be practised with great benefit. It is to a vital degree the “entrance” by which Buddhist religious life can be engaged.

The Pali texts indicate very clearly and abundantly that, right from the Buddha’s time, monastic culture owed its material welfare to the full spectrum of ancient Indian society. Kings, queens, farmers, merchants, Brahmin priests, tradesmen, courtesans and householders populate the *suttas* as sincere and grateful recipients of Dhamma, devoted practitioners, as well as generous supporters of the Sangha.

Through the centuries, Buddhist monks and nuns have lived in close association with laypeople. The nature of *Dana* is intrinsic to their relationship. Accordingly, it has been integral to the economic structure of traditional

Buddhist cultures for centuries, to the extent that it is, as we say, “a given.” Among the vital challenges now faced by monastic Buddhism is how this ancient, *natural* form of giving is to be understood in Western cultures which have for so long prized economic independence, and often viewed with shades of condescension those “in need of charity.” Even so, it is useful to deconstruct the too-common distinction between East and West along spiritual versus material lines. As a corrective, the traditional forms of generosity and many noble expressions of philanthropy commonly practised in the West deserve clear acknowledgement. In short, people in the West are no strangers to the *necessity* and *rewards* of giving. Nevertheless, a Buddhist perspective on the importance of generosity – both as an invaluable practice in a broad, social sense and one which lies at the heart of relations between the laity and Sangha – can deepen its value immeasurably.

A misapprehension sometimes evident here in the West is that the recipient of a gift is the only one who benefits from generosity. After all, a straightforward understanding of the transaction is that something (medicine, money, a shirt, etc.) is given to one who lacks it. And, unlike normal economic “transactions,” no payment is given in return. However, the notion of “kammic results” sheds important light on this. What we have, instead, can be described as a subtle *spiritual economy*, in which several factors come into play. These include the nature and suitability of a gift and whether the giver is acting with an appreciation for the various conditions involved.

Even the most modest gifts need to be understood in view of the magnifying mirror by which cause-and-effect operates. Offering water to a thirsty dog is a splendid act that generates, as it were, “compounding interest.” How much more, then, to fund a young person’s music lessons, or support the construction of a monastery for the long term benefit of many?

Indeed, even the opportunity to give is itself a kammic resultant; properly understood, it is a fortunate condition that should not be taken for granted. For instance, couples unable to have children of their own can experience tremendous frustration at having no one upon whom to bestow their parental love. On the other hand, it is common to read of exemplary people active as volunteers for organizations supporting “those in need.” Such people regularly express in the warmest terms their

gratitude for the blessings of this work, and declare that they *receive much more than they give*.

These, then, are a few of the factors which bear upon the spiritual economy of generosity and make it a valuable subject for reflection and practice. In view of Western attitudes, when the kammic magnitude of giving appropriately to morally suitable recipients is understood, it can be seen that the act of giving renders the giver into a *recipient*.

The Western Monastic “Experiment”

It is valuable to consider how Birken Forest Monastery can be contributing to the spiritual life of this culture in the next ten or twenty years. In its construction, considerable thought has gone into planning systems that ensure its physical operations run economically. Birken’s resident community devotes much energy to the monastery’s development and is dedicated to simplicity. The result is that Birken is presently able to function on the resources of a middle-class family’s income. But for it to begin to perform the role befitting a Buddhist monastery in the contemporary Western world it is important that more than subsistence be the target. A monastery’s very purpose is to offer benefit to “the many,” to all those with the interest in the Buddha’s teachings and commitment to their own spiritual development.

The present state of Birken Forest Monastery is therefore more like a hinge point than a terminus. Buddhism is in its infancy in Canada, and the West, and we need to reflect on how many people’s lives can be touched by coming to know the Buddha’s teachings. To offer a guiding role in such matters Birken will require the resources for further monastic training, communication, travel, and publishing. Significant contributions of resources, energy, and funds will be required to realise these evolving expressions of the Dhamma.

Accordingly, we would like to invite our friends to be active participants in realising Birken’s potential. Rather than view Birken as approaching its “final” state, we have, instead, been witnessing its remarkable *beginnings* over these last years.





Ajahn Sona enjoying a quiet moment

BHIKKHU ORDINATION

The Bhikkhu ordination of Samaneras Nanda and Pavaro will take place at Birken on **Saturday, November 29th**. Ajahn Pasanno will be acting as their *upajjhaya*, or preceptor, and Ajahn Sona, their *achariya*, or teacher. Ajahn Pasanno will travel from Abhayagiri Monastery in California with Ajahn Sudanto and three other monks. Several more monks are expected. They include Ajahn Viradhammo, Ajahn Punnadhammo – both coming from Ontario – and Ajahn Santi from Surrey. In addition, Ajahn Sobin, an elderly Thai monk, will be flying from Bangkok especially for the occasion.

Birken Monastery has for weeks been fully booked with over-night guests, but all signs suggest that we will have many dozens of people here for the ordination itself. It should begin after the main meal, at about 1 pm.

All are welcome. Any of you wishing to attend and needing accommodation are invited to contact Day's Inn Hotel in Kamloops, which is offering attendees a reduced rate. Their toll free number is 1-800-561-5002

VISITING AJAHN

Ajahn Thiradhammo, abbot of Dhammapala Monastery in Switzerland, was a welcome visitor to Birken in early November.

With a weekend retreat in progress during most of his visit, he took the opportunity speak individually with many of the residents and to

take several lengthy walks in the area. We are fortunate that Ajahn Thiradhammo, originally from Surrey, makes regular trips to Western Canada to visit family.

NEW KUTI DEDICATED

This Spring witnessed the building of a monastic *kuti* at Birken through the generosity of Bruce and Buhnmanee Armstrong. Bruce, a home builder by trade, oversaw the construction process – and led by example. On



Bruce showing his skills

a fine day in July, as the Rains Retreat began, the Armstrong family and many friends gathered for a dedication ceremony. *Anumodana!*



Dedication gathering

BIRKEN RETROSPECTIVE: ON ITS WAY

Progress is being made on the Retrospective that will celebrate Birken's first 10 years. The project has gained significant momentum over the summer, with the result that we have decided to dedicate a special issue to it this Spring.

Several feature articles have now been written. Donna Woods, the editor, would still be happy to receive short submissions from readers who might like to share some story relating to one of the three incarnations of Birken Monastery. Perhaps a particular visit stands out; perhaps one of your interviews with Ajahn Sona really

resonated, or maybe it's just that Birken has had an overall impact on your life and the life of your family. Whatever it is, we would like to hear about it! Please jot down what Birken has meant to you over the years, in 100 words or less, and e-mail your submission to donnajeanwoods@yahoo.ca. A selected number of submissions will be published in our "Commemorating Birken" Issue. Some may be edited for space considerations.

Thank you.

VEN. THITAPUÑÑO'S TRAVELS

Ven. Thitapuñño will be traveling to Mexico in December together with Ven. Sona. They will be heading south to look over a property that has been offered to the Birken monastics as a seasonal retreat facility. Michael Mahony, our current Office Steward, will be joining to assist them. While in Mexico, Ven. Sona will be leading retreats and giving talks in Mexico City and Queretaro, with Ven. T acting as translator.

Both Ven. T and Mike will remain in Mexico to do the yearly "winter retreat" in seclusion at the new facility until the end of March, 2004. They will be joined by Ven. Pavaro for the month of February. During the last week of March Ven. T will join several senior monks (among them, Vens. Gunaratana, U Silananda, Rewata Dhamma, and U Nyanissara Sitagu Sayadaw) who will be participating in the fifth anniversary celebrations/activities of the Dhamma Vihara. The Dhamma Vihara is the only Theravada monastery in Latin America. Ven. U Nandisena, its abbot, will host this event. (Readers

interested in learning more about this monastery or the celebration itself are directed to: <http://www.dhammavihara.org/english/>)

THE BIG WALK

During early April both Ven. T and Mike will embark on a long walk/pilgrimage. Beginning at the Mexico-US border, the walk will head northbound back to Birken Monastery on the challenging Pacific Crest Trail. Ven. T is treating this as part of the traditional "tudong" walk that Thai forest tradition monks often engage in following the completion of the fifth rains retreat. They are aiming to be able to join the Birken monastics, at the latest, for the "late" rains retreat in August, 2004. Those friends who would like to find out more about their endeavours are invited to contact Mike Mahony at narvinmt@yahoo.ca or Neil Duncan at meditate@birken.ca.



Ven. Thitapuñño prepares for his walk

2004 SCHEDULED RETREATS & EVENTS

This brief list will be added to significantly in the coming year.
The Birken website will be kept up to date with new postings.

✿ **Vancouver Events**

Saturday, April 9	<i>Public talk</i> Vancouver Public Library 350 West Georgia	<i>Alice MacKay Rm</i> 7 – 9 pm
Sunday, April 10	<i>Meditation Retreat</i> UBC Asian Centre (Auditorium) 1871 West Mall	8 am – 4:30 pm
Saturday, June 11	<i>Public talk</i> Vancouver Public Library	<i>Alice MacKay Rm</i> 7 – 9 pm
Sunday, June 12	<i>Meditation Retreat</i> UBC Asian Centre (Auditorium)	8 am – 4:30 pm

All of these events are open to the public. *Donations are welcome.*
No registration is required for the UBC retreats: just bring your meditation cushions and some lunch.

✿ **BIRKEN RETREAT SCHEDULE**
(current)

May 22 – 23	Introduction to meditation
Sept 24 – Oct 3	10-day advanced retreat
Dec 15 – Jan 1	Christmas and New Years at the monastery

Spaces are limited. Please book early by emailing: meditate@birken.ca (our preferred method) or (a last resort) by phoning (250) 318-2980 on weekdays. Please note that the preferred arrival time is 4 pm on first day of retreat; departure time is 1 pm on last day of retreat.

Please check our website, www.birken.ca, to become acquainted with the rules of the monastery, or ask the Steward in advance.

Important items to bring: towels, sleeping bag or bedding, flashlight, personal items, alarm clock, and outdoor wear for walking in the country.

PRIVATE RETREATS

In addition to the *scheduled retreats*, below, Birken Monastery continues to offer the opportunity for people to book personal retreat time. From April 1st to December 31st Birken is open for guests to schedule periods most suitable for them. First-time visitors may stay for up to 10 days.

Please book by emailing: meditate@birken.ca or by phoning (250) 318-2980 between 8:30 – 10:30 am or 4:30 – 6 pm daily. (Note that our cell phone is expensive and unreliable. We strongly encourage you to communicate with us through e-mail or regular mail. Thanks.)



DONATIONS

Birken Forest Buddhist Monastery is supported solely through the ancient tradition of Dana, or generous giving. If you would like to support the Monastery and resident community you can mail cheques or money orders payable to: The Treasurer, Birken Forest Buddhist Monastery Society, PO Box 5, Knutsford, British Columbia, CANADA V0E 2A0. Auto debits and direct deposits are also welcome. These can be made to: Account No. 7024342 Branch O7, Interior Savings Credit Union, #600 – 1210 Summit Drive, Kamloops BC V2C 6M1.

Non-monetary donations are welcome, please feel free to consult the monastics or Stewards for suggestions on needed items.

Offerings of food are also acceptable. If you would like to offer a prepared meal please extend the invitation in advance. We have an adequate kitchen if you'd like to prepare the meal at the monastery.

TO RECEIVE THIS NEWSLETTER

Our newsletter is widely distributed 2 times a year. The quickest (and least costly way) to receive it is via e-mail — we send out a notice when a recent newsletter has been posted on our website. If you don't have e-mail or would prefer a paper copy, we also mail the newsletters through the post. If you would like to be included on our newsletter (e)mailing list we invite you to contact us with the pertinent details.