



# BIRKEN FOREST MONASTERY

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Abbot's News  
by Venerable Sona

## Dhamma in the Wild

I've just returned from my 6<sup>th</sup> annual cross-Canada Dhamma tour. It's an interesting and heart-touching experience to be a Buddhist pioneer at the very beginning of the establishment of the Buddha's teachings in Canada. When I read the ancient discourses of the monks and nuns at the time of the Buddha over 25 centuries ago I find myself a part of the still glowing light emanating through time across continents, the Dhamma untarnished and as fresh as the morning sunrise, preserved amidst the rise and fall of empires.

It is a joy to find and polish the appropriate surface of the many faceted gem of the Teachings, to set it to illuminate and dissolve contemporary dilemmas and existential darkness. By many a simile, story, description and prescription does the Buddha's legacy clarify problems, provide inspiration, sustain our correct efforts, redirect our mistaken energies, and give us much needed rest or at least a glimpse of peace and hope. The wisdom truths

are so utterly applicable to the confused teenager, the widow in old age, the overstressed executive, the recently separated husband, that I am amazed and inspired again and again by the uncanny simplicity and accuracy of the Buddha's genius for the truth.

The Buddha once said that though indeed he was endowed with tremendous psychic capacity, the area of his genius which was most important was the ability to teach others. In our own motivation to practice meditation and to cultivate our minds how often we become interested in the glittery capacities – some glimpse of the future or distant past, perhaps a mysterious mood and a flash of light. But in the end, if we keep on practising we will glimpse the towering reality above all knowledge and vision, beyond all complex understandings and marvellous techniques. We will see just what the Buddha taught in his first sermon and his last. Just this: there is suffering and there is an end to it.

## RENOVATIONS & NEWS

**Who's who.** Currently, eight people reside at Birken. Our senior monk, Ajahn Sona continues to lead the community, which includes another fully ordained Theravada monk, Venerable Thitapuñño as well as Anagarikas Stephen and Philo (soon to begin their samanera training) and Anagarini Mon. From April until the end of October, we also benefited from the presence of Anagarika Michael, who recently departed in order to further his training in Thailand. Lending vital practical support to the residents and guests are the kitchen steward, Heather Hutchinson, the office steward, Amin Kabani, and George Robinson, whose duties extend from cooking to carpentry—and much of what lies between!

**Work done, work continuing.** It's been a busy few months. If you haven't been to the monastery lately, you'll be pleasantly surprised. First, about 7 km away, you will begin to notice spiffy new signs pointing the way, compliments of our resident monastic-sign makers, Ven. Thitapuñño & Anagarika Philo.

Driving in, you'll see roadwork is proceeding nicely, with a new cattle guard and an elegantly smooth driveway. We were given 80 dump trucks of free gravel and hired a professional dozer operator to prepare a proper surface for it. Result? Potholes virtually eliminated.

As you near the building, you will see a circle drive with several new gardens. A blue spruce is now nestled near the big rock, and a weeping birch has also found a new home here. You'll likely notice some new rock gardens along the way, thanks to Linh Pham. And, speaking of gardens, if you haven't yet seen it, note the huge mandala outside the sala windows. Constructed during the Gardening Retreat, and worked over several times since, it overlooks the lake and is surrounded by wild grasses. You can see it best by standing inside the sala. And while you're in there, do notice the Buddha batik now framed professionally by Trudi Locheed.

If you fancy a canoe ride on the marsh, just follow the winding gravel trail from the mandala until you see the canoe donated by Iain Ritchie – you can't miss it. You'll notice a Buddha

statue sitting on the island, keeping watch over the monastery.

By now, you'll have realized that the familiar sight of the Tyvek siding wrap has become obsolete, with our exterior cladding and soffits up. A five-man team of resident monks and anagarikas took the lead in this project. Thanks to our architect, Kim Pham, we are working with vertical lines in the finished product which gives an even more impressive vertical dimension to our already grand building. The pattern was designed to resemble the stitching pattern on monks' robes. We rented scaffolding to get to the upper reaches of this Surprisingly Tall building.

As has been reported elsewhere in this newsletter, a busy few days helping men with large trucks and backhoes have left us with much more reliable well and septic systems.

The construction of two kutis is presently occupying most of our attention. Including one nearly finished, we'll have three new kutis suitable for habitation this winter (making a total of six). Luckily, Steve Marshall (he and his wife were our neighbours with the wolves at Princeton) is lending us an expert hand with these as well as a host of other projects we hope to complete by December. We hope that one of these projects will be the finishing of the basement walls and ceiling.

Finally, although any attempt to list the contributions made by visitors over the last few months would be inadequate (or very long), it deserves noting that tremendous resources of skill and good-humour have made light work of many landscaping, painting, gardening, building, cleanup and firewood projects. A recent example is evident in the lovely labyrinth that now stands (sits?) not far from the entrance to the property (see photo on next page).

In addition to the wonderful help we've enjoyed with work projects, Birken residents and guests, alike, have been the recipients of many "danas" – meals planned long in advance, prepared with exceeding care, and offered with hearts of devotion. Nourishing in so many ways!

Our sincere appreciation to you all!

**Other changes of note.** (The 1<sup>st</sup> one isn't a "change," but is often on our minds!)

With about 40 cords in, the collection of firewood is nearing completion (we hope). When compared to last year, when the wood was cut and loaded in-between the hectic business of making the monastery winter-worthy, this year has offered the relative luxury of actually setting aside time to find good wood – especially long-burning fir. With only one winter in this location, we will likely need to monitor wood use for another year or so to get a more respectable sense of how much is needed.

Carpeting now graces the upstairs hall and one of the large bedrooms, as well as the two stair cases. This has appreciably reduced the noise in the building.

Since the spring we have had numerous discussions and ruminations over what the Birken property should "look" like in the coming years. It is our great good fortune to be aided in

this by the expert advice (now drafted for us in a detailed reforestation report) of Paul Sears, whom we wish to thank most warmly. Tree planting may begin as early as May 2003.



Faisal Moosa standing in the recently completed labyrinth

## THE SIDING SYMPHONY



Opus 1: Work on the South Wall

By 8 am the orchestra is tuning up. Conductor Ajahn Sona is on the ground while Venerable Thitapuñño and Anagarikas Stephen, Philo and Michael are on the scaffolding, poised at their stations, ready to begin. And now, a hush falls over the monastery. The clearing of a throat...

The brass section cuts the air robustly – Ajahn on horns wielding the table saw and Anagarika Philo on tenor sax with the jig saw. The symphony has begun gaily!

Soon Venerable Thitapuñño joins in on strings, with the smooth lines of his violin – adding one long neat bead from the caulking gun. And now the subtleties become increasingly apparent with gentle brushes from the percussive section, with Anagarika Michael stroking paint onto the eaves. Then the chorus: Anagarika Stephen cuts in startlingly with a percussive staccato, a refrain from the air gun. The piece coming together in perfect harmony.

But wait! Now we have a special guest appearance by Sister Mon on flute, skipping lightly to find more caulking and another paint brush. And yet more guest appearances, as various painters add further depth and richness to the piece.

At the end of the day, the siding stands as a majestic work of art. And the orchestra retires with sore muscles, knees and shoulders, getting tuned up to begin again tomorrow. All working in perfect rhythm and in complete harmony ... on this lovely Symphony in Brown.



## BIRKEN'S ROAD

Recently we received confirmation that Argo, the principal road-grading company in the Kamloops area, will keep our road in clear condition through the winter months. The cost is reasonable, considering the 7 km length of road to be ploughed. This saves us the expense of fitting and maintaining a suitable blade on our

pickup truck, not to mention the on-going labour of doing it ourselves.

In all, it's excellent news for us when town trips are required in the depth of the Winter Retreat. And of course, it will be very welcome to visitors arriving at Birken during what can prove to be the "iffy" driving months of December and April.

## ROUGHING IT IN THE BUSH: 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY STYLE

by Donna Woods

September 1, 2002 Ha! Well, we have been without water at the monastery for about three days. Well problems.

Most of us long term residents are already smelling kinda fruity and ripe in the warm weather. And my hair is crawling at the scalp. As the only resident who's not bald, I'm probably in the worst shape. A little too natural looking.

Goes quite nicely, really, with the fur trimmed winter boots I am wearing on the building site (the only sturdy shoes I own), along with my shorts. Quite an ensemble. Bag lady chic. Ajahn remarked, "Where's your shopping cart, dearie?"

Anyway, I did find I can brush my teeth AND wash my face with just ¼ cup of water – rinsing my toothbrush while rinsing my mouth, and using a mere dab of water on a washcloth for my face. Just like that!

We were told to flush only when "necessary" with lake water, a terrible dark tea colour. The accumulating urine ... just accumulates. It was

getting so smelly that even with the windows open, bathroom doors shut AND toilet lids down, you could STILL smell it down the hall. Someone said, "Bleach!" and yes, that's indeed the answer! Just for future reference.

You can see who does a Big Job – they go down the hall humbly, pail of lake water in hand, in order to flush the toilet. Gosh it's funny!! Jolly rollicking!

Because of Labour Day weekend, we have a full house using our five waterless bathrooms. So ... very interesting. We are all just quite cheerful and campy about it all. While giving each other wide berth! Ajahn Sona says it's a great opportunity for body contemplation. So dhamma is indeed everywhere you look.

Just had to share this with you, it brings so much glee! So, a very smelly goodbye! And I will kindly spare the hug.

Abbot's after note: the well is fixed, there's plenty of water and everyone smells good again.

## VISITING AJAHNS

During the months of July and September Birken was privileged to receive visits from Ajahn Thiradhammo, abbot of the Dhammapala Monastery in Switzerland, and Ajahn Viradhammo, abbot of Bodhinyanarama in New Zealand. Both trained for many years under Ajahn Chah in Thailand before returning to the West. As befits this “forest” training, both Ajahns took several lengthy walks in the woodlands surrounding Birken. Meanwhile, we

residents benefited tremendously from their wise Dhamma talks and personal counsel.

Large numbers of guests were present during these visits; certainly one of the benefits of being in this larger monastery is that such events can be shared more generously with others.

## NOVICE ORDINATION

On **Saturday, December the 7<sup>th</sup>**, Birken Monastery will host the novice ordination of Anagarika Stephen and Anagarika Philo. In formal terms, they will be going forth from the “homeless” status of an anagarika to that of a *samanera*. This is the next stage of commitment in monastic life and precedes that of the fully ordained monk, or bhikkhu. The ordination marks an important step for Stephen and Philo, who will begin to adopt many of the practices and forms required of bhikkhus. It means, for instance, that as of December 7<sup>th</sup> Birken will have four monastics wearing the brown robes.

This is our second novice ordination and the first at the “new” Birken. Visitors are welcome to join us for this rare and auspicious event. It will begin with the offering of the main meal (dana) at 11 am, with the ordination ceremony taking place at about 1 pm. If you would like to come, please coordinate your attendance with the Office Steward, Amin (250-318-2980), as soon as possible.

## PLANS FOR ABBOT’S KUTI

A generous donation was received in October towards the eventual construction of a more suitable kuti for Ajahn Sona. A lovely spot on the property has been set aside. It is on a raised, secluded portion of land, with deep forest behind it and a fine view of the marsh in front. Planning for this building is in its early

stages, but we have in mind a structure large enough to accommodate modest living quarters for our abbot as well as a reception area suitable for interviews and group meetings.

We would welcome your ideas and contributions on this project.

## ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

Birken’s AGM was held on October 6<sup>th</sup>. Much of the information presented there is contained in one form or another in this newsletter.

Next year’s AGM will be held on October 4<sup>th</sup>, 2003, at Birken Forest Monastery. Among the business that will occur at this meeting is the election of a new Board of Directors.

The current list of Directors of the Birken Forest Monastery Society is as follows:

Executive:

Ven. Sona – president  
Ven. Thitapuñño – vice-president  
Heather Hutchinson – treasurer  
Amin Kabani – secretary

Directors-at-Large:

Anagarika Stephen Roehrig  
Bodhi David Adam  
Judith Williamson

AGM cont'

The meeting afforded a good opportunity to reflect upon the many changes that have taken place over the last year, and acknowledge the people who have done so much to make this possible.

This is a fitting place to offer sincere thanks to Kanthi Randeni for her longstanding dedication to Monastery matters. Kanthi has recently stepped down as a Board member after many years of valuable service.

### **TREASURER'S UPDATE**

by Anagarika Stephen Roehrig

The 2002 fiscal year for the Monastery proved to be a positive one in many respects. Once again the donation stream was encouraging and allowed the Monastery to be quite "constructive." Total donations for the past year were \$120,176. We rejoice in the merit of those whose contributions make the Monastery viable.

It was deemed necessary to apply for a \$150,000 bank loan this summer. The considerations for arriving at the \$150,000 loan figure were full repayment of the \$100,000 personal loan (generously extended to the Monastery by Donna Woods) and \$50,000 for siding, landscaping and basement renovations. After significant effort the loan was finally approved in August by the Thompson Interior Savings Credit Union (TISCU). Initially we opted for a floating rate (prime + 1.75%) and most recently decided on a 4 year fixed rate (15 year term) at 7.50%. This translates into a monthly mortgage payment of \$1381. We appreciate TISCU's flexible payment options, including the ability to pay down 20% of the original loan amount annually. Our intention is to pay this loan off as soon as possible, while maintaining a responsible level of operating funds. We would like to acknowledge the TISCU for their consideration in processing our loan as well as extending preferred treatment with our regular banking activities.

One of the loan conditions requires the Monastery to submit to annual financial statements. The local firm of Becker Daley

Spice Chartered Accountants were hired to prepare these for the current fiscal year as well as the previous 2 years. With the recent change in the Monastery's financial profile, professionally prepared statements serve the additional purpose of alleviating any concerns Government auditors may have about our activities.

With my upcoming samanera ordination, I have officially stepped down as treasurer and been replaced by Heather Hutchinson. Naturally I will continue to support her with these rather exacting duties.

To facilitate our ongoing refinement of Monastery accounting, we will be incorporating the use of "Simply" accounting software in the near future. Both the TISCU and Becker Daley Spice support this software and the Monastery stands to benefit from being able to converse in a familiar accounting language.

A new membership/database/reservation/tax receipt program was recently designed for the Monastery. In addition to automating all donation information it simplifies the issuing of tax receipts. On this note, we will continue to send out tax receipts annually, or sooner if requested. We also urge all members/donors to confirm their current address/phone information and advise us of any changes.

## SUBMISSIONS(!) FOR BIRKEN RETROSPECTIVE

We would like to hear about some of your Birken experiences.

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** before **December 15, 2002**. A selected number of submissions will be published in our "Commemorating Birken" Winter Issue; some may be edited for space considerations.

We are also looking for old photos of "Birken I," near Pemberton, for this special edition. We will return the photos to you unharmed. Thank you

## UPCOMING EVENTS AT BIRKEN FOR 2002

Dec. 7                      Novice Ordination  
Dec. 15 - Jan. 1      Renewal Retreat – Christmas and New Year's at the Monastery

## AJAHN SONA'S UPCOMING TRAVELS

Ven. Sona has been busy this fall with talks and retreats scheduled both locally and outside the province. Dates for his remaining visits are as follows:

Nov 15-17              Kelowna  
Nov 29 - Dec 1      Naramata

Meanwhile, **Ven. Thitapuño** will soon be off to Seattle and Vancouver to give talks. Then, in mid-December he begins a 4-month period to the south of us: first to Dallas, then to Mexico City, for a series of talks and introductions to meditation. Tahn Puño will be spending the first 3 months of 2003 in solitary retreat in southern Mexico.

We are pleased to report that **Sister Elizabeth**, who is now established in Nelson, B.C., will be joining us for the Winter Retreat.

The **2003 RETREAT SCHEDULE** is  
now available on [Birken website](#).

## ADDRESS LIST: YOUR HELP IS NEEDED!

Since the spring we've been at work on a new database. Among other things, it simplifies the process of issuing tax receipts and enables us to send out this newsletter. However, as the changeover has taken place we've found many errors or old information in our existing address lists. For instance, we have started a file of donors with tax receipts for whom we do not

have a current address. We would very much like to bring all of this information up to date.

Unless you have heard from us recently (and therefore are certain we have your new or correct address), we invite all of our readers to send details for mailing/e-mailing/phoning as soon as it's convenient. Many thanks.



Monastic cat, Sukhi, being herself

## **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. Direct deposits are also possible. These can be made to: Account No. 7024342 Branch O7, Thompson Interior Valley Savings Credit Union, #600 – 1210 Summit Drive, Kamloops. BC V2C 6M1.

Non-monetary donations are welcome, please consult the monastics or Stewards to ensure that the article(s) to be donated is (are) allowable according to the monastic code.

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

## **TO RECEIVE THIS NEWSLETTER**

Our newsletter is widely distributed 2 – 3 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 (e)mailing list for this newsletter we welcome you to contact us with the pertinent details.



Ajahn Sona's walking meditation platform



Morning sun dawns over Birken