

# NORTHERN LOTUS

The Birken Forest Monastery Newsletter

SPRING  
2007

- ◆ 2007 Retreats
- ◆ Dhamma Talks on Web
- ◆ New Tractor
- ◆ New Phone #

## 'Together in Silence'

I recently attended an "inter-contemplative" session in Olympia, Washington. My fellow practitioners are shown in the photo. The event was a full day called "Together in Silence." 350 people attended in a spacious and beautiful modern Catholic church situated in the rural forests of Olympia's outskirts. The day was interesting for me as a realization that the practice of silent contemplation is not only for Buddhists but has been discovered by other traditions as well.

The three other teachers are rather famous (in modern contemplative circles, at least): Father Thomas Keating, Rabbi Ted Falcon, and Shaik Kabir Helminshi. A couple of years ago I participated in a 5- day interspiritual retreat with Kabir at Hollyhock. He is a master in the Sufi tradition and a man of "many parts" as they say. He has lectured at Harvard, is a fine musician in the Sufi tradition and delivers uplifting but extremely calming talks in the nature of contemplation.

Rabbi Ted Falcon directs a "contemplative synagogue" in Seattle which he proudly claims has as many non-jewish participants as Jewish. He also hosts an interfaith radio program from Seattle - something that is sorely needed in these times.

Father Thomas Keating is a landmark figure in the restoration of the contemplative Catholic movement. He is a very open personality who has interacted frequently with Buddhist traditions and has devised a method of meditation called "centering prayer." It is wonderful to see the benefits of what seems to be a lost tradition in the Catholic Church. Sometime in the 16th century, social activism became the star of the show, having to compete with science and technology. There was a loss of understanding of the benefits of silent contemplation.

The audience impressed me with the capacity to maintain silent appreciation through the day - even through lunch! Each of the four presenters deliv-



Presenters at recent day of silence retreat: Shaik Kabir Helminski, Ajahn Sona, Fr. Thomas Keating, and Rabbi Ted Falcon.

ered a 25 minute talk from our own tradition. I was delighted to listen to these fine men practise their art of communication and deeply appreciative of their practice and experience. Father Thomas Keating, at 84, I must say, was a tower of dynamic energy when he took the stage. I was the only one who noticed that his microphone was off, such was the power of his voice! I myself was lucky to be heard with a mike on.

In this short article I cannot do full justice to the event but the most important points are that it is good in this troubled time to realize that there is no distinction between Jewish, Christian, Islamic and Buddhist silence. Silence is a great place to come together in peace. True peace of mind partakes more of silence than of speech. *Evam.*

Ajahn Sona

**Birken AGM**  
**October 13, 2007 - 1:30 pm**  
**Birken Forest Monastery**

This is a voting year for the BFBM Society: applications for board members gladly accepted.

## Birken Retreat Schedule - 2007

TO REQUEST A BOOKING IN ONE OF THESE RETREATS, OR TO COME FOR AN INDIVIDUAL RETREAT PERIOD,  
PLEASE E-MAIL BIRKEN'S OFFICE STEWARD. SEE CONTACT INFO ON PAGE 4.

Ten-Day	<b>July 20—29</b>	Extended practice periods Previous retreat experience required
"Absolute Beginners"	<b>August 10—12</b>	Relaxed schedule Evening meal available
Ten-Day	<b>August 24—September 2</b>	Extended practice periods Previous retreat experience required
Introductory Weekend	<b>September 14—16</b>	Regular instruction Shorter sitting periods
Ten-Day	<b>Sept 28—October 7</b>	Extended practice periods Previous retreat experience required
"Absolute Beginners"	<b>October 19—21</b>	Relaxed schedule Evening meal available
Introductory Weekend	<b>November 23—25</b>	Regular instruction Shorter sitting periods

## Edmonton Retreats

AJAHN SONA AND VEN. PAVARO WILL BE LEADING RETREATS IN EDMONTON FOR THE LIGHT OF THE DHAMMA SOCIETY.  
THEY WILL TAKE PLACE AT THE PROVIDENCE RENEWAL CENTER, 3005 - 119 St., Edmonton.

For registration details, contact: Sheila Lennox 11002 University Ave. Edmonton AB T6G 1Y3  
Phone: 780.433.1386

/ or / Stephen Roehrig Phone: 780.444.2622

E-Mail: [LightoftheDhamma@gmail.com](mailto:LightoftheDhamma@gmail.com)

Nine-Day	<b>June 30—July 8, 2007</b>	<i>Ajahn Sona</i>
Five-Day	<b>October 31—November 4</b>	<i>Bhikkhu Pavaro</i>

## Birken's New Tractor

Winter visitors to Birken will be familiar with the frequently troublesome condition of “our” road—that is, the final 7 kilometres of what is formally named Smith Lake Forest Service Road. Since arriving at this site, winters have been very challenging, with snowfall sometimes making the road impassable. Hiring snow plows (on those welcome occasions we could obtain their services) has been a costly expense.

Deciding that convenience and safety requires us to be able to keep the road clear all winter, early last summer we began to consult tractor brochures and wander around farm equipment lots. Ajahn Sona reckoned that in addition to winter plowing, a tractor would be valuable for summer landscaping and each year's firewood harvest.

Learning of our earnest search, Ken Netzel, a long-time Birken friend, generously offered to donate a new John Deere. Ken brought expert knowledge to this purchase, ordering a 4WD unit with 80 hp and equipped with a heavy-duty blade (it weighs about 1500 lbs.) for plowing, as well as a self-levelling loader with grapple.



## Funds + Projects

Ajahn Sona has dedicated this year to paying off as much as possible of the monastery's debt, which stands at roughly \$68,000. For another 2 years, the loan will remain interest-free. With this in mind, although refinements continue to be made, the projects on the go at present are modest.

Over the past few months a pair of related tasks have been completed by hired carpenters and the Birken “building team.” A passage-way at the left of the foyer now permits us to access the sleeping rooms beyond, without walking through the sala. On the opposite side, at the top of the stairs leading down to the basement, a monks' room / interview area has been added. These improvements leave the sala reserved for meditation. With the basement ceiling completed last summer, this work completes (for now) necessary improvements to Birken's main building.



*Tractor Blessing: Ken Neztel, Ven. Pavaro and Ajahn Sona stand in front of Birken's new John Deere—“Viriya.”*

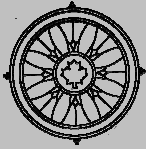
The tractor arrived in late November, just before our first large snowfall in what became an above-average year for snow. In all, we logged about 100 hours to keep the road clear through the winter, with the principal drivers, Ven. Pavaro and Anagarika Jamie, becoming quite proficient with the large machine. It has been given the name Viriya, “Energy.”

In early January Ken and Alexandra Netzel arrived specially for the what may be the first-ever Buddhist “tractor snow blessing” ceremony. (Needless to say, the road was nicely groomed for their arrival.) The light-hearted nature of the event was underscored by the tremendous appreciation everyone has acknowledged for this marvellous, multi-purposed gift.

Aided by the know-how of Ven. Abhayaratana, we are presently considering methods to deal with the 200-300 trees that we had felled at the edge of our property last autumn. It represents 3-4 years of firewood - in addition to a monumental challenge to those facing the cutting, lifting and stacking. One thing is certain: the tractor will play a role!

‘Energy’ always seems to be on our minds. In recent months we have been monitoring the feasibility of adding to our electrical production with a windmill. Very encouraged after a year's solar panel use, more panels may be purchased when funds permit. Meanwhile we have recently replaced a large battery in the bank that stores all this electricity.

A final pending expense: in 2008 we hope to purchase a new(er) vehicle to replace or supplement the aging monastery van.



## Birken Forest Monastery

E-MAIL:

[meditate@birken.ca](mailto:meditate@birken.ca)

*(the best way to reach us)*

WEBSITE:

[www.birken.ca](http://www.birken.ca)

NEW PHONE:

**778.785.6059**

*(answering machine only)*

### DONATIONS

Birken Monastery is supported solely through the ancient practice of DANA, generosity.

*Donations can be made to:*

Birken Forest Monastery Society  
PO Box 5  
Knutsford, BC  
CANADA V0E 2A0

◆ Canadian tax receipts are available for all donations.

## Dhamma Talks on Birken Website

Page 4

Early this Winter Anagarika Dustin finished the work of organizing and mounting our Dhamma collection on the Birken website. This means that nearly all of our recorded Dhamma talks are now available for downloading in MP3 format to your home computer .

This massive offering contains Dhamma talks by monks and nuns in our tradition from all over the world. Many of these talks are not easily available elsewhere. It is a very long list. Among the speakers are Venerable Gunaratana, Ajahn Sumedho, Bhikkhu Bodhi, Ajahn Brahm, Ajahn Jayasaro and Ajahn Sundara. A generous number of talks by Ajahn Sona are featured, including several dozen "Birken Tea Times."

Visitors to Birken also have the option of copying CDs or DVDs during their stay. Dustin has done a skilful job of setting up the "Dharma-tron" (the library computer which contains this collection) to enable quick sorting and copying.

In this digital age it becomes increasingly easy to regard such an accomplishment as just another expression of "information distribution." But it is useful to reflect on what it means to have

such teachings so freely accessible in the world - compared with, say, 10 or even 5 years ago. Already, we have begun to receive grateful e-mails from people in various countries, remarking on the tremendous value of this Dhamma resource.

*For the statistically minded:* In all, there are over 3000 talks available to download, with more being added periodically. (At the moment, they would provide more than 71 DAYS of continuous listening!) Since early January 2007, a total of 33,000 individuals have downloaded talks, at the rate of about 300 hours (or 8.5 GB) per day.

Many thanks to Anagarika Dustin and various Birken stewards who have dedicated so much time to this valuable project.

For several years, Birken's website was generously managed by Rasika Rajapakshe. We're very grateful for all the time he spent to keep the information up-to-date. Using the ground work Rasika put in place, the work of maintaining our site has now been taken over by Dustin. Over the coming months the website will begin to acquire a new look - stay tuned.

## Community News

The comings and goings, and general transformations, of the Birken community continue.

Some readers will remember Paul Sears, an early visitor to Birken who went on to become an anagarika and samanera at Bhavana Center under Ven. Gunaratana. This winter he traveled to Myanmar where he ordained as a Bhikkhu. "Ven. Abhayaratana" flew back to Canada this spring to await a visa for him to return to Myanmar. Formerly a professional forester, it was very useful to receive his advice regarding Birken's annual wood gathering. After several weeks, Tan Abhayaratana left Birken in late May to resume training under Ven. U Tejaniya.

The past few months have seen several changes to the ranks of Birken monastics. In late December, Samanera Kondaño decided to return to laylife as Ryan Shick. Ryan assisted Birken in many ways during his two years at Birken and we wish him all the best back in Vancouver. Mike Nowak completed his planned year as an anagarika and, with characteristic energy, is now back in Washington about to embark on studies in Nursing.

Early in the winter, Dustin Harriman and Jamie Jamieson were accepted by Ajahn Sona as anagarikas. Both have been bringing considerable enthusiasm to their new lives as monastics-in-training. Recently, Drew Sawyer, who hails from Mississippi and recently spent several months at Bhavana Center, arrived to become Birken's third anagarika.

Sister Mon returned to Birken from November to April this year. She has now left for another period of traveling and is spending time Abhayagiri and Tisarana monasteries prior to the Rains retreat.

Remy Snow, who came to act as office steward last fall, has now departed in order to serve at IMS in Massachusetts. She was a friendly and very able steward whom we shall miss.

Last, but by no means least, long-time Birken steward George Robinson has now left the monastery to live in Kamloops. In all, George spent about seven years serving in the kitchen and as steady driver of the Birken van. Our town trips have been offering chances to visit him and we're happy to report that he enjoys returning for the occasional tea-time.