

NORTHERN LOTUS

Volume 21

The Birken Forest Monastery Newsletter

WINTER
2006

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Ajahn Brahm visits Birken

In mid-November, Ajahn Brahmavamsa (“Brahm”) paid Birken a short visit during his stopover in the Northwest.

Ajahn Brahm is the abbot of Bodhinyana Monastery near Perth, Western Australia, a thriving centre with over 20 monastics in residence. In addition to his teaching responsibilities in the monastery, he maintains a daunting schedule as a public speaker, spiritual advisor and meditation teacher in Australia, Singapore and beyond.

Bodhinyana Monastery contains very few places for visiting lay retreatants. Instead, regular retreats are organized in Perth and elsewhere by the active Society affiliated with Bodhinyana. During his visit to Birken Ajahn Brahm shared with us the current plans to build an ambitious retreat centre near to Bodhinyana. It will be



large enough to house 60 retreatants and Ajahn Brahm is confident that construction will begin during the next year.

It took a book-signing tour initiated by Wisdom Publications to bring this busy senior monk to N. America. Wisdom has recently published a lovely book of his Dhamma stories, entitled

Who Ordered This Truckload of Dung: Inspiring Stories for Encountering Life’s Difficulties.

Several dozen people (including carloads from distant Calgary as well as Vancouver) made the wintry journey to Birken to hear Ajahn Brahm give several Dhamma talks, answer questions, and sign copies of... his short booklet on meditation, Birken brochures and anything that was at hand. (The shipment of his new books – ordered with time to spare – arrived two days late!)

Ajahn Brahm’s talks offered an inspiring mixture of wise meditation instruction, Pali scholarship, warmhearted stories and humour. Although the Birken audio library contains many of his recorded talks, we discovered that they don’t quite compare to meeting him in person.

Excerpt from one of his talks at Birken ...

There are two ways to meditate. THIS [*holding up a cup of water*] is your mind. You can meditate by trying to make your mind still: “I’ve been trying really hard for months, putting forth maximum effort to make my mind still. It’s not working, so I’m going to try even harder....” Even if I kept doing this for a couple of hours I wouldn’t be able to hold it still. It’s always moving. And so, many years ago something clicked inside me. [*He sets the cup on the table.*] Put it down, let it go, stop controlling, stop interfering. See! Meditation is the easiest thing in the world. Just sit down, close your eyes, and stop doing things.

If you can do that, the mind stops all by itself. It takes a lot of courage. It goes completely against the grain of everything you’ve ever been taught – to be the one in charge. For your whole life, if you’ve wanted something you’ve had to do something for it. And here, you’re going in the opposite direction: if you want

something, just leave it alone.

In the Noble Eightfold Path there is Right Effort. It’s whatever it takes to create wholesome states and abandon unwholesome states, to maintain the wholesome states and avoid the unwholesome states. So, Right Effort is defined by the results.

You can either define something by what it’s made of, or by its function. The function of a self is to do things. When you stop “doing” things, it’s dead. That is the way to Jhana [*meditative absorption*]. That’s why when I was first in Thailand Ajahn Chah would often ask people who came to study with him, “Have you come here to die?” He didn’t mean the body dying, but the ego – the self – dying. And that should scare the heck out of you, because in the whole world there is nothing more fearful.

But there is also nothing more wonderful.

Scheduled Retreats at Birken – 2006

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.

WEEKEND RETREAT	April 21—23	Regular instruction Shorter sitting periods
5 DAY RETREAT	May 3 –7	Regular instruction Longer sitting periods
“ABSOLUTE BEGINNERS”	May 19—21	Relaxed <i>schedule</i> Evening meal available
“ABSOLUTE BEGINNERS”	June 16—18	Relaxed <i>schedule</i> Evening meal available
10 DAY RETREAT	June 23—July 2	Extended practice periods Previous retreat experience required
10 DAY RETREAT	September 22—October 1	Extended practice periods Previous retreat experience required
WEEKEND RETREAT	October 20—22	Regular instruction Shorter sitting periods

Ajahn Sona to visit Thailand & Sri Lanka

In January, Ajahn Sona will return to Thailand for the first time in twelve years to attend the World Abbots' Meeting (WAM) being held at Wat Pah Nanachat. The visit will enable him to re-connect with many senior monks he first met during the three-and-a-half years he spent in training there.

The WAM is held for the Western branch monasteries of Wat Nong Pah Pong, which was founded by the great forest monk, Ajahn Chah, in the mid-1950s. It is now led by Ajahn Liam (who visited Birken in 2004). There are now over 250 monasteries in Thailand in this lineage.

Held irregularly, the WAM enables the 15-plus abbots of branch monasteries to discuss relevant issues and simply re-establish important friendships, many dating back several decades. The

meeting will enable Ajahn Sona to return to his early “training grounds” and take part in these discussions. Birken Forest Monastery is an affiliate of these branch monasteries. The WAM will conclude on January 16th, Ajahn Chah's memorial day.

Following his time at Nanachat, Ajahn Sona will spend several days touring religious sites in the Chiang Mai area in NE Thailand. Next, his trip will extend to Sri Lanka for a nine day tour of its ancient Buddhist monuments. Ajahn will give a talk in Singapore during his return to Canada.

He will be accompanied by his mother, Irma, and steward-cousin George. The group should arrive back in Canada – tanned and with many stories – in the first week of February.

Luang Por Sumedho returns to Seattle

In early July, Ajahn Sona, Ven. Pavaro and Anagarika Ryan drove to Seattle to pay respects to, and visit with, Ajahn Sumedho. Many readers of this newsletter will know that Ajahn Sumedho, who ordained in Thailand in 1967, was the first Western student of Luang Por Chah (Luang Por, or “Venerable Father,” is often used as a term of reverence for very senior monks). Following ten years of training in Thailand, Luang Por Chah asked him to go to England, where he led the early, vital establishment of Western monasteries in the Thai forest tradition.

Ajahn Sumedho along with his attendant monk, Ajahn Paññasaro, and the Birken monastics, were graciously welcomed to the home of Ladawan and Hirin Kongkarat. Maechee Mon arrived from the Gulf Islands to take part in this visit. During our stay, we were privileged to receive several hours of teachings by Luang Por. Being a native-son of Seattle, this return visit also enabled him to tour old neighbourhoods and schools. (Other highlights: his first visit up the Space Needle and a cup of coffee at the original Starbucks location.) Looking back from his present age of 71, these travels elicited many lively recollections from Luang Por’s youth. Ajahn Paññasaro recorded the sessions, which will offer invaluable impressions for a writer in the UK who is beginning to work on Luang Por’s biography.

Our trip also included a visit to Wat Atammayatarama, just outside of Seattle, in Woodinville. Its abbot, Ajahn Ritthi, had invited Luang Por Sumedho to visit and give a Dhamma talk. Stimulating several references to the times of the Buddha, over 100 people gathered on a lovely day beneath the generous limbs of an old maple tree to hear Luang Por Sumedho

Solar Panels: *Birken Goes Green* 🌱

From Birken’s earliest stages we’ve devoted considerable energy to making our “infrastructure” economical, quiet and (where we could afford to do so) eco-friendly. Birken is off the electrical grid, so needs to produce its own power to run lights, pump water from our 300 ft. well, and circulate hot water for our wood-fired heating system. To do this, we draw electricity from a bank of deep-cell batteries, which are charged by a diesel generator.

The system works quite well, but we have always hoped to be able to supplement it with solar panels.

The power they develop will charge our battery bank, significantly reducing the hours of run-time for the diesel generator. Current estimates are that the system should reduce our fuel costs by between 20 and 80 percent, depending on



Luang Por Sumedho, centre, with Ajahn Sona & Anagarika Ryan to his left; Ajahn Paññasaro & Ven. Pavaro stand to the right.

speaking following the Dana offering. He reflected on a range of subjects at the gathering, from the inestimable value of the Buddha’s teachings to a human life, to the patience his early training years in Thailand instilled in him, to the successful “experiment” of the nuns’ community in England.

One lasting recollection we had of our time with Luang Por was the wise stress he placed (both in word and manner) on the profound virtue of two qualities: *contentment* and *gratitude*. Not only do they enable us to orient ourselves with greater skill and ease in daily life, he noted that these qualities also offer a sound basis from which to develop deep states of meditation.

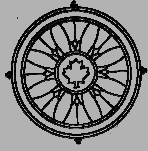
It was a memorable visit, indeed.

the time of year (i.e., hours of sunlight). This will not only reduce generator maintenance costs: the system should also be good for the battery bank, since the lifespan of these expensive batteries increases when they discharge more slowly.

During the summer Birken received an estimate of approximately **\$22,000** to initiate this project with 16 solar panels. (Note: this estimate was given before a recent hike in panel prices.)

In the past few months, the project has received considerable support. A donor has offered up to **\$10,000 in matching funds**. Recently an electrician has offered to donate his expert time to wire these panels into our electrical system.

We are now hoping to be able to purchase and install the solar panels in the Spring of 2006.



Birken Forest Monastery

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(the best way to reach us)

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www.birken.ca

PHONE:

(250) 483.4326

DONATIONS

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

Donations can be made to:

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

♦ Canadian tax receipts are available for all donations.

SPECIAL ANNOUNCEMENT:

InterSpiritual Centre of Vancouver

Dear Friends of Birken: I seldom write such letters. However, I believe the merit of this project deserves special consideration. We at Birken are doing what we can to ensure its success.

In the spring of 2004, I had the good fortune to participate in a large, wise-hearted gathering of people from various spiritual traditions. This conference coincided with the visit to Vancouver by **H.H. the Dalai**, as well as **Archbishop Desmond Tutu**, and **Shirin Abadi** (each, a Nobel Peace Prize winner).

Since then, I have been pleased to offer teachings at other retreats and events, both in support of inter-spiritual engagement and to raise public awareness for the development of an inspiring sacred space in Western Canada.

Plans are quickly gaining momentum to erect a remarkable building – the **InterSpiritual Centre of Vancouver (ISCV)**. The initiative is being led by a diverse group of religious, spiritual, business, and community leaders. Birken Forest Monastery is honoured to be a founding member.

When first presented with the concept, Vancouver City Council quickly agreed to donate several acres of valuable land on False Creek, next to the Olympic Village. Other support for this \$18.5 million project followed. WHAT REMAINS TO BE GENERATED IS \$3.5 MILLION FOR THE CENTRE'S OPERATING EXPENSES.

The projected completion of the ISCV is 2009, in time for the 2010 Winter Olympics. Following his visit to Vancouver, the Dalai Lama has remained a keen observer, pledging to return

Maechee Mon on Salt Spring Island

Since the past summer, Maechee Mon has been settled in retreat on Salt Spring Island, a guest on the property of Buhnmanee Armstrong.

Her occasional trips “abroad” have included two visits to Birken, as well as stays with some of her many friends in Vancouver and Seattle.

Much energy has been given to readying her cabin for the winter months. In this, she and Buhnmanee have received plenty of assistance from a long list of generous friends and supporters: Cathy, Denny, Ed and Nudang, Janice, Lisa,

for the sod-turning ceremony in October 2006.

The ISCV has been conceived on a generous scale. The main building will be over 30,000 sq. ft. – its design will be sizeable enough for public gatherings and include smaller spaces for devotional and contemplative practice.

We understand that when completed the ISCV will be one of only two or three such facilities IN THE WORLD. A growing number of religious communities are offering support, including Anglican, Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Quaker, Sikh, Unitarian.... The Centre will offer benefit to members of organized religions, spiritual practitioners unaffiliated with a specific group, and to everyone committed to the cause of peace and religious understanding. It's clearly a case of the “right place at the right time.”

I believe that people's dedication to virtue, kindness, and wisdom deserves to be given honoured standing in our society, and sincerely encourage you to consider supporting this noble endeavour.

With metta, Ajahn Sona

Website: www.interspiritualcentre.org/

Phone: 604-875-0240

E-mail: outreach@interspiritual.ca

Donations can be mailed to:

ISCV c/o Diocese of New Westminster
Anglican Church of Canada
580 – 401 West Georgia Street
Vancouver, BC V6B 5A1

Monique, Merna and Lorne, Stephen....

Conditions are decidedly simple, and Maechee Mon has expressed much contentment with the solitude and quiet this property has been offering her practice.

At present, Maechee Mon's plans are to return to Thailand in late March for a visit. Although the future is uncertain, interest has recently been gathering to support her to reside somewhere near Vancouver. Interested in details? Please let us know.