



**Birken Forest Buddhist Monastery ('Sitavana')
Annual General Meeting – October 25, 2020**

MINUTES – AGM 2020

1. ATTENDANCE

Thomas West (Ajahn Sona), Naruemon Teneralli (Sister Mon), Teresa Wixted, Hazel Plumbley, Brent Styra, Kush Tilakaratne, Rachel Telesmanick, Nadine Fletcher, Sarah Haverstock, John Baser, Charles Jasper, Eleonore Constant, Mary Dumka, So Mir, Colin Baur, Stan Hoffman, Gael Hoffman, Arthur L. Robinson, Theresa Aspol, Grant Smith.

2. MINUTES OF LAST YEAR'S AGM (OCTOBER 27, 2019)

The AGM 2019 Minutes were accepted unread.

Moved by Teresa Wixted, seconded by Thomas West (Ajahn Sona). Motion carried: 15 approval votes, 1 abstention.

3. MATTERS ARISING

None.

4. SPECIAL RESOLUTIONS APPROVED PRIOR TO AGM

Two special resolutions came up for board consideration in September 2019 and June 2020. Special resolutions require an approval vote by at least four board members; the record of voting is shown below. Copies of the approved Special Resolutions are attached at the end of this report:

a. Special Resolution Approving Abbot's Kuti Landscaping (Completed in fall 2019)

Approved: Thomas West (Ajahn Sona), Naruemon Teneralli (Sister Mon), Teresa Wixted, Hazel Plumbley, Brent Styra, Leslie Hanrahan – UNANIMOUS

b. Special Resolution Approving Vihara Propane Heaters (Installed in fall 2020)

Approved: Thomas West (Ajahn Sona), Naruemon Teneralli (Sister Mon), Teresa Wixted, Hazel Plumbley, Brent Styra, Leslie Hanrahan – UNANIMOUS

5. PRESIDENT'S REPORT

a. Resident Monastics:

Ajahn Sona continues in his essential role as Abbot of Birken Forest Buddhist Monastery. 2020 marked his 66th birthday and his 32nd vassa (rains retreat). The past year cannot be accurately

accessed without mention of the COVID-19 pandemic that has changed all of our lives. Since its appearance in early 2020, Ajahn Sona made a determination to close Birken monastery to all visitors indefinitely, and at least through the remainder of 2020.

This decision has rippled out into the world in a number of ways, and has heightened Ajahn Sona's commitment to bring the Buddha's teachings to more and more people around the world. Due to this resolve, as of the end of July 2020, Ajahn Sona's online library of nearly 130 YouTube video Dhamma talks and podcasts provided teachings to a subscriber list of approximately 8,600 viewers and practitioners, an increase of more than 4,000 subscribers in the past fiscal year. At the time of this AGM, the number of YouTube subscribers is now over 11,000.

In May 2020, working with Ajahn Sudanto from Pacific Hermitage, Ajahn Sona offered Birken's first all virtual 10-day retreat on [The Four Foundations of Mindfulness](#). Nearly 500 people registered online in advance of the retreat and thousands more participated virtually by viewing the nightly Dhamma talks on Ajahn Sona's YouTube Channel. A second virtual retreat series began in July 2020 with weekly YouTube Dhamma talks from the [Jhana retreat](#) that was recorded in March 2020 at Birken, the final onsite retreat of the year.

In addition to his online teachings, Ajahn Sona's newest book, [Bloom: Buddhist Reflections on Serenity and Love](#), was published by [Sumeru Books](#) in May 2020. He was also interviewed about the book by Ted Meissner for [The Secular Buddhist podcast](#) which aired in early July 2020.

Finally, Ajahn Sona was invited by The Council of Thai Bhikkhus in the USA to offer a Dhamma talk in late June 2020 on the subject of "[Equanimity in the Time of Pandemic](#)", and has been invited back to share additional Dhamma talks as well.

Tan Sid Udaggo, who has been with us since February 2019, left the monastery for a visit to his family in January 2020. Due to the pandemic, his return to Birken was delayed until June 2020. He plans to be part of the Birken Sangha for the foreseeable future.

Sister Mon continues in her active role as Senior Nun at Birken, and this year culminated in a wonderful conclusion to her seven-year-long journey towards Canadian permanent residency. In September 2020 we received word from our immigration attorney that IRCC had approved Sister Mon's final PR application. She is now a permanent resident of Canada! Thank you to everyone for your support and best wishes for Sister Mon and the monastery over these past many years.

b. Monastic and dignitary visitors:

In September 2019, Ajahn Jotipalo travelled to the US to visit his family and friends, and he returned to Birken at the end of November 2019. We applied to renew his work permit in the spring of 2020, and the renewal was granted, extending his work permit until June 2022. In addition to developing his practice of using icon writing as a means of meditation, Ajahn Jotipalo has been cultivating his videography skills this past year and has started a YouTube

Channel called [“Sauntering into Silence”](#) as a medium for his visual Dhamma practice. He expects to remain at Birken until June 2021, at which time he will return to the US.

c. Retreats and events held at the monastery and online:

We give sincere thanks to all the many Birken supporters who helped us to organize a number of retreats and events this past year (August 1, 2019 – July 31, 2020):

September 5 – 8, 2019	North American Abbots Gathering at Arrow River Hermitage
September 27 - October 6, 2019	Fall 10-Day Silent Retreat at Birken, led by Ajahn Sona
December 22, 2019 – January 1, 2020	10-Day Metta Retreat at Birken, led by Ajahn Sona
January 8 – March 4, 2020	Annual Winter Retreat at Birken
March 4 – 18, 2020	Two-Week Jhana Retreat at Birken, led by Ajahn Sona
May 1-10, 2020	10-Day Virtual YouTube Retreat on The Four Foundations of Mindfulness, led by Ajahn Sona and Ajahn Sudanto of Pacific Hermitage, White Salmon, WA, USA
June 20, 2020	Virtual Dhamma talk on “Equanimity in the Time of Pandemic” by Ajahn Sona for The Council of Thai Bhikkhus in the USA
June 29 –August 2, 2020	Six-week Virtual YouTube series on the Jhanas, led by Ajahn Sona; following day coffee time Q&A with Ajahn Sudanto at Pacific Hermitage YouTube Channel

d. Dana meals and guest totals:

Despite the monastery’s closure for the final third of this fiscal year, we were blessed to share in the generosity and commitment to practice of so many people who visited Birken prior to the pandemic’s impact on us all. Between August 1, 2019 and March 31, 2020, Birken welcomed 323 visitors to the monastery, down from 907 visitors the previous fiscal year, a decrease of 64%. Some offered dana meals, others dropped in for a day visit, and over 200 meditators took time away from their busy lives to come to Birken for a Personal or Scheduled Retreat.

As you will hear later from the Treasurer’s Financial Report, this reduction in monastery visitors did not translate to what was expected to be a sharp reduction in donations. In fact, it was quite the contrary.

Below are the total numbers for each group:

- 211 overnight guests, down from 395 in the last fiscal year (Personal Retreat and Scheduled Retreat participants)
- 56 day visitors, down from 154 last year

- 20 full and partial dana meals, down from 60 last year
- 56 dana meal participants, down from 358 last year

e. Renovations and construction projects:

During the summer of 2019, work continued on the new decks and roof extensions at the back of the Vihara (main building), as well as Nimmita House (our recording studio and multi-purpose outbuilding). A two-car covered carport was built, which included installation of an electric vehicle (EV) charger for our new Mitsubishi Outlander PHEV (Plug-in Hybrid Electric Vehicle). Construction was completed at the end of October 2019. Many of the solar panels previously located in the field behind Nimmita House were moved to the roof of Nimmita House and attached to the side walls of the carport in November 2019. The remaining solar panels will be relocated in the coming months.

In late August 2019, the Abbot's kuti landscaping officially began. At that time, we hired a third generation Japanese landscaping company to bring the vision of Ajahn Sona's design to life with a xeriscape Zen gravel garden, one-of-a-kind cedar deck and walkway, stepping stones and mulch around the perimeter of the kuti, plus a winter friendly walkway leading from the kuti to the Vihara.

October 2019 was also the culmination of Ajahn Sona's long anticipated advance in our solar battery system. Thanks to several generous donors, eight new lithium ion SimpliPhi batteries and two new Outback Inverters were installed, replacing our lead acid battery array. This improvement has increased the maintenance efficiency and general operation of our electrical system, significantly increasing battery, and thereby, electricity storage, and greatly reducing our generator run time during the long winter months.

With the closure of the monastery to guests this past summer, we were able to build an elevated cedar walkway to the front Vihara entrance in July 2020, replacing the aging wheelchair ramp that was falling into disrepair. This new addition provides an aesthetically pleasing and practical entry point to the Vihara from the circular driveway and parking area of the monastery.

f. Other news and concluding observations:

Our purchase of a PHEV in 2019 has enabled us to save tremendously on our automotive fuel expenses. In fiscal 2018-2019, our gasoline expenses were \$2,754.57; in 2019-2020 that total came to only \$1,855.52. This represents a 32.6% reduction in fuel costs. In addition to the hard cash savings, by utilizing both in-town and the monastery's charging stations, we were able to fill up our PHEV with 391.647 kWh of free energy, which translates to approximately 25 round trips to Kamloops in the past fiscal year. We see these numbers as significant validation of the importance to move towards an all-electric vehicle fleet at Birken in the coming years.

As we mentioned at last year's AGM, Ajahn Sona had decided that the third iteration of the formal Upāsikā Training Program would be the final one held at Birken. With this year's pandemic, and seeing how far-reaching our virtual connectivity can be, Ajahn Sona has decided

to move this inspiring program in a new direction. This coming January will usher in the first [Birken Online Upāsikā Program](#) for Dedicated Lay Buddhist Practitioners around the world. As of a few days before this AGM, we have received 100 applications from 13 countries, with applicants ranging in age from 25-81. Although not every applicant will be accepted into this first online training, we look forward to the program growing in the coming years, reaching more and more practitioners in all walks of life who may not have the opportunity to visit Birken in person anytime soon.

This re-imagining of the Upāsikā program is another example of how challenges, such as the coronavirus, can be seen in not only a positive way, but a more expansive and inclusive conduit to all aspects of life. How Birken and other monasteries will move forward and adapt in the midst of this continuing worldwide pandemic is yet to be determined. For the immediate future, Ajahn Sona plans to offer virtual teatimes and retreats, including a 10-Day Virtual Metta (Loving-Kindness) Retreat at the end of this year. Please be sure to [subscribe to our newsletter](#) and check [our website](#) for future updates.

6. FINANCIAL REPORT

The COVID-19 pandemic forced closure of the monastery to guests in the latter half of the fiscal year, and a corresponding decline in donation revenue seemed likely. However, Birken's supporters, both old and new, continued to contribute and the 2019-20 fiscal year was remarkably healthy. The quick pivot from on-site to virtual sharing of Dhamma via an on-line retreat in May and continuing release of YouTube videos allowed Ajahn Sona to reach supporters at a time when Dhamma was so valuable to practitioners, and the gratitude expressed from attendees and viewers across the globe was warming.

Overall, donations (not including those from other charities) fell only slightly (by \$2,857.00) from the year prior. Given the documented effect of the pandemic on employment income generally, this decrease is hardly surprising. Donations from other charities increased by \$11,301.00 in this fiscal, while Extraordinary Donations (>\$5000) decreased by \$10,917.00. Overall, continued support from the friends of Birken and reduced expenses related to limited guest occupancy resulted in a net income of \$62,643.00 for this fiscal year.

No new debt was incurred in this fiscal, and donors' generous contributions to the Green Vehicle Fund allowed the monastery to halve the long-term debt incurred for the loan to purchase a plug-in hybrid electric vehicle in the prior fiscal. Major infrastructure projects were completed, including landscaping around the Senior Ajahn's kuti, construction of a covered carport and an elevated walkway to the Vihara to replace the aging wheelchair ramp, extension of outdoor living space off the Samma Vaca Sala of the Vihara and Nimmita House, and ongoing improvement to outbuildings. While liquid assets declined from \$208,140.00 in 2018-19 to \$183,817.00 in the 2019-20 fiscal year due to the maintenance costs noted above, the results of these improvements increased the value of tangible capital assets held by Birken to \$916,404.00.

Externally driven costs related to the operation of the monastery such as insurance, accounting and legal fees, automotive maintenance, freight, property tax and fuels generally remained flat or declined slightly from the prior fiscal, due in part to the closure of the monastery to guests as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Internally monitored costs such as grocery and household expenses and utilities also decreased accordingly. Please see the attached financial statements for more information.

While Extraordinary Donations in this fiscal exceeded the 15-year trailing average, they declined in dollar value from the prior fiscal. Birken is supported and sustained by generous lay benefactors for the benefit of this same lay community to whom it is dedicated. Anticipating a future re-opening of the monastery's doors to practitioners, funds will continue to be used to maintain and improve the existing buildings and off-grid systems. However, extraordinary donations will need to increase, as opposed to decline, in future years to ensure preservation of the monastery for its lay community.

The Financial Statements as circulated and presented were accepted.

Moved by Hazel Plumley, seconded by Thomas West (Ajahn Sona). Motion carried: 12 approval votes, 3 abstentions.

7. MOTIONS

- That Tombe Herrington Chartered Professional Accountants LLP be reappointed our accounting firm for the next fiscal year.

Moved by Teresa Wixted, seconded by Naruemon Teneralli (Sister Mon). Motion carried: 15 approval votes, 1 abstention.

- That the 2021 AGM be held at Birken Forest Buddhist Monastery and/or virtually on Sunday, October 31, 2021.

Moved by Teresa Wixted, seconded by Thomas West (Ajahn Sona). Motion carried: 15 approval votes, 1 abstention.

Meeting Adjourned.

Moved by Teresa Wixted, seconded by Thomas West (Ajahn Sona). Motion carried: 15 approval votes.