



News from Amaravati – Winter 2015

Breathing out

Marking the end of one year and the beginning of the next is often seen as an opportunity to look back on what has been; but also to make plans or resolutions, for looking ahead. It is a useful exercise, to take stock, rejoice in whatever we did that was well done, resolving to do more of that; facing up to what was less skillful and resolving to avoid that in the future. This yearly self-examination can be developed further, into an aspect of what is termed right effort (Samma Vayama) or the skillful use of energy to restrain oneself when moving towards what is harmful, to avoid unhelpful habits or reactions, to seek out what is useful and to stay with that. In the texts and commentaries it is often summarized more formally as:

1. To prevent the arising of unarisen unwholesome states
2. To abandon unwholesome states that have already arisen
3. To arouse wholesome states that have not yet arisen
4. To maintain and perfect wholesome states already arisen.

These four efforts can act as a helpful framework for the mind; a way of approaching one's day, reflecting on one's attitudes. Thinking in that way becomes a reminder of what mindfulness is to be used for, how it develops the heart and refines the mind when it is channeled as right effort. As ever, this effort starts with the mundane and immediate – perhaps keeping a gratitude book to see more clearly what is already great and full in one's heart; resolving to speak more calmly to a difficult colleague; to be more generous with one's time, or to stop feeding a negative impulse; leading all the way through to perfecting the spiritual qualities, to understanding reality, to peace.

As most of our readers will be aware, 2014 was an eventful time for Amaravati Monastery on many fronts, with the visits of Luang Por Sumedho and the gathering of sangha for the Elders' Meeting in May being particular highlights. All these events are covered extensively in the recently published Forest Sangha Newsletter which you can pick up at the monastery or online at <http://forestsangha.org/newsletters/>

It is always worth noting just how much goodwill and energy goes into the many day-to-day projects and routine work taking place in the monastery over the year. In 2014 there were all the big events on top of this routine work, which could be quite a challenge, so our deepest appreciation to the lay residents who supported running the place and to the volunteers and friends who gave of their time and energy: Sharron and all the Lotus Volunteers; the Tuesday and Saturday groups, the unflappable José and the indomitable Khun Ladda in the kitchen; Suvira in the office; Khun Ploen and friends from Thailand; Calle who helped set up the new ABM website; Julian who has been working on the retreat centre booking system and the many, many others who have contributed in small or bigger ways. You will also notice on p.2, the message from the EST about the extraordinary generosity shown to Amaravati Monastery by supporters from around the world.

In other news, the community will settle into their annual winter retreat on January 3rd for three months, starting with two weeks of all day group practice. The monastery goes into quiet mode and the sangha have the precious opportunity to focus on meditation and to practice physical seclusion. Details of the structure during the winter are on p.2. The usual programme of retreats and teachings, guests bookings and other regular activities will resume in April.

Lee Woods who looked after site maintenance in various guises for over two decades is no longer working for us, with Martin Gelgyn taking on responsibilities as site manager. His first project will be overseeing some upgrading work in the Retreat Centre over the course of the winter. Other than that, the main anticipated event for 2015, depending on the outcome of the planning process, is for work on the first of the new buildings to start in July, and last for 6 months (see p.2).

There are quite a few new recruits or new residents in the monastic and lay communities, bringing new perspectives and energy with them, but after a particularly busy year, it is time to breathe out and look forward to less activity over the next while.

Breathing out could be said to symbolise the action of letting go of what has served its purpose. Just as marking the end of the year symbolises an end of darkness, the hope of the return of light and life; the time between the shortest day of one year and the beginning of the next resembles the hiatus between breathing out and the next breath in. Breathing out, stepping back and using the break, the pause, to put down any accumulated grievances or stress; give oneself the chance to examine what has been done and adjust one's path if necessary, then determine where to focus one's energies even as the cycle of the year inevitably resumes its course.

Announcements

Sangha Winter Retreat

The winter retreat runs from January 3rd to the 31st March. Many guests ask what difference there is between the winter retreat and the Rains retreat, the Vassa. The traditional Vassa 'retreat' that runs from July to October, is a custom from the time of Buddha that corresponds to the monsoon time in India. While it does include time on solitary retreat, it is primarily a time spent in community deepening understanding of the vinaya, the rule by which we live. It is the busiest time of year at the monastery in terms of guests, visitors, engagements, study and work. The winter retreat has a very different flavour, with the monastics putting down their duties and outside engagements to practice in noble silence as a group or in solitude. A group of lay people (the winter retreat support team), come for longer periods to look after the place and to practice. For the monastery, this is generally a very settled time with minimal outside activity.

Staying Overnight & Visiting

There is no overnight accommodation available and the guest monk/guest nun will not be answering queries from January until the end of March. Guest bookings will resume in April 2015. The Retreat Centre is closed, with the first retreat of 2015 taking place in early April.

Visitors are still very welcome to come to participate in the meal offering at 11 am, attend the weekly Saturday afternoon meditation workshops, spend some quiet time, use the library, attend the moon day talks or the daily readings in the sāla and join in the group meditation in the temple.

General Monastery Enquiries and Office Hours

From Jan 3 to March 31, the office is open from 8.30-11.00 am, Mon-Fri only. At other times, there is an answer phone for leaving messages. The monastery secretary will check messages regularly but only reply to those deemed absolutely urgent. General enquiries will be filed away to be answered once the winter retreat is over

A message from the EST

Kathina this year saw particular appreciation and care being shown towards current and future generations of the community's Elders. Luang Por Sumedho, himself having reached 80 years, had been informing donors about the proposed Nursing Kuti which is planned for 2015-6. It is the first major project of the Amaravati Long Term Plan. Donations arrived, inspired by Luang Por, from Thailand, Singapore and Malaysia, and of course, the UK. The total offerings for the Kuti came to £598,358.04, with additional gifts for the running costs of the monastery itself.

Planning Permission for the Kuti has been applied for, and a decision is anticipated in early spring. Information updates will be available on the website under "Rebuilding Amaravati": <http://www.amaravati.org>

Anumodanā, blessings,
The English Sangha Trust

An Update from the Library

The library has been in the process of updating or correcting its records and re-organising content for over two years. 2014 saw the completion of the first full inventory of the library holdings of over 15,000 books and periodicals, the introduction of an online catalogue (KOHA), an overhaul of the borrowing system as well as the re-classification of some of subject sections. The next step is to update the card index system to match the information in KOHA and continue to update the information we have on what is in the library.

As Juan, our librarian, says: "The task is vast. Each card (and there are more than 30,000) will have to be checked against KOHA and amended as necessary. Another mammoth task we propose to embark upon is the production of labels with the book reference number and a barcode, and to attach these to each book. These labels will greatly speed up the loan/return process and will enable us to perform inventories much more quickly in the future. There are also the usual library tasks like cataloging new books, dealing with loans and returns, and much more."

Help with all these tasks is very much appreciated, there is always something for everyone to do. The library is a wonderful place to spend a few quiet hours, so if you can help out over the winter or during

