



News from Amaravati – Spring 2015

Looking Back, Looking Ahead, Looking Here

*Just as a mighty mountain range,
scraping the sky with rocky crags,
might advance from the four directions crushing everything before it –
so too do old age and death
trample all living beings.
Nobles, priests, merchants,
workers, outcastes, scavengers ...
none of them can escape,
everyone gets laid low.
S 3.25*

Ajahn Amaro writes: We are all getting older. Even during the short time it has taken to read these words, the wheels of birth and death have not paused; they spin on ceaselessly. However, the remembered past with its resonances, and all possible futures, meet here in the ever-present present.

The earth has already made thirty laps around the sun since the preparations began for the Grand Opening of Amaravati, in the spring of 1985. To acknowledge this milestone in the development of the monastery we have invited a number of the members of the four-fold community who were involved in those earliest days to gather at our Visākha Pūjā celebration, on May 31 this year. The ceremonies of the Opening took place over three days (24-26 May, 1985); many revered Elders led the events and many distinguished visitors were amongst the hundreds of people who gathered over the period. The event planned for 2015 will be a more humble affair but hopefully more intimate, focusing on the reminiscences of both lay-people and monastics who were part of the nitty-gritty of 'opening the doors to the Deathless' and getting the place up and running. We also plan to have another showing of the small exhibition that was made for the Kathina of the last thirty years of Amaravati, together with a display about plans for the next thirty years and beyond.

The Buddha encouraged us not only to reflect upon the causes of things but also their results. Our birth has led to our inevitable ageing and, as he points out in the quotation, 'old age and death trample all living beings.' As we look back to the past we must also look to the future, recognizing that physical impermanence is an essential part of what lies ahead.

The Amaravati community has taken this fact to heart: on the large scale in terms of the fabric of the monastery with the long term plan to renovate the whole site with energy-efficient and purpose-built structures; and on the human scale by attending to the physical needs of ageing monastics through the first building that we propose to construct being a Monks' Nursing Facility/Kuti for Luang Por Sumedho.

Over the last couple of years plans have been developed for this 'Nursing Kuti' and, after three versions of drawings were submitted to the local Planning Authority, we were delighted that permission for us to build was granted in March of this year.

Although Luang Por Sumedho is happily retired and currently settled in Thailand, along with providing a nursing facility for the resident monks as they sicken and age, we also aim for this building to be a place where Luang Por Sumedho can comfortably stay at any time he chooses to be in England.

Now that he has reached the grand age of eighty there are certain amenities that will make things more convenient for him, and a number of design choices have been made with that in mind. The facility will be usable by other sick or aged monks when Luang Por is not in residence but we wanted to do the best we could in providing for his needs while he is still with us in the world.

The new building is to be situated close to the 'showman's wagon' kuti, beside the monks' vihāra – a place where Luang Por Sumedho lived for about five years while the Temple was being constructed. The current expectation is that we will break ground in October and that the build period will be about six months long. If all goes as we would like, it would be completed and ready to use by the end of April 2016. Of course, as Luang Por often points out, 'The future is a mystery' but this is the prospect as it looks today.

In terms of the long-term master plan for the Amaravati site, the next part of the process would be to pause for a while and draw up plans for the second phase of reconstruction. The area we have in mind to develop next is the nuns' area and the service yard behind the Sālā. This is a big, logistically complex, expensive undertaking, so there will probably be a gap of a few years while plans and resources come together. We will wait and see how things unfold with the Nursing Kutī before we start to fix any dates or cost estimates as these will only become clear with experience.

The long-term plan is concerned with the possible future development of the physical structures of Amaravati, but it is important to remember that the most significant element of what makes a monastery is the people NOT the buildings. It might be all very well to have ideally formed, eco-friendly amenities but if there are not women and men who are inspired by the Dhamma, and who wish to enter into training and to practice here, what will it all be worth? Thus the issue of 'planning for the future' needs bear in mind that the Eight Precept anagārikas and anagārikās of today, provided that there is the appropriate commitment and training, are going to be the Mahā-Theras and -Therīs of tomorrow.

As the current abbot of Amaravati I feel it is therefore my duty to keep this principle in mind and to ensure that the spiritual development of the four-fold community, of monastics and lay-people, remains the priority over material development. We need to realize the Deathless Realm internally so that the physical 'Deathless Realm' of Amaravati truly fulfills its vision and serves its purpose, for the benefit of every being.

And where is that Deathless Realm that should be the centre of attention of all these aspirants? To quote Luang Por Sumedho again: 'Yesterday is a memory, tomorrow is the unknown, now is the knowing' – it is in the awakened awareness, the knowing of this present reality that the Deathless Realm is realized. May all our considerations of past and future meet here, in that timeless present.