

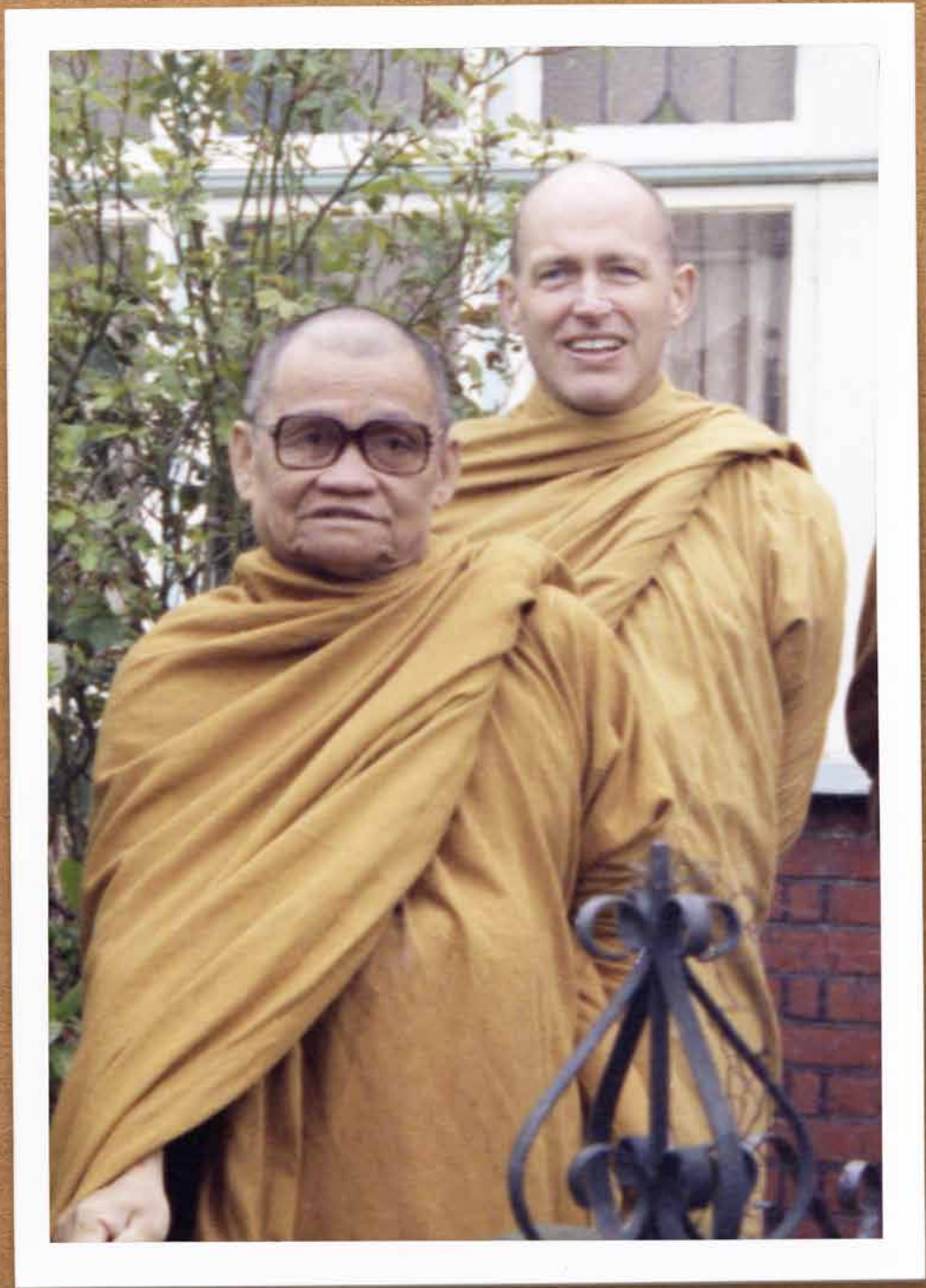
Time

↳

Timelessness

1984-
2024

Forty Years of the Deathless Realm



Luang Por Chah
← Ajahn Sumedho

Time & Timelessness

Forty Years of the Deathless Realm

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Preface

**“THE DOORS TO THE DEATHLESS ARE OPEN!”,
MAY THOSE WHO HEAR THIS, ACT UPON THEIR FAITH.’**

It might seem paradoxical for a place dedicated to the timeless reality of the Deathless to be marking a specific passage of time. However, as T.S. Eliot phrased it, and as often quoted by Luang Por Sumedho, ‘... to apprehend/ The point of intersection of the timeless/ With time, is an occupation for the saint — ...’. This spiritual challenge is also embodied in the Buddha’s teachings: — How can we realize and know the meeting of the timeless reality of Dhamma with the timebound ups and downs of life, and the concerns of society, the family, our bodies and the whole world, and, through that realization, arrive at peace and freedom?

For forty years now Amaravati has formed just such a ‘point of intersection’ for thousands of people, for Buddhists as well as those of all backgrounds and faiths. From its earliest days — with makeshift accommodations and Spartan conditions in the meditation halls — up to the present, Amaravati has endeavoured to provide a living environment that encourages mindfulness and wisdom and the inspiration to train the mind to embody insight, peace and kindness. It is a place dedicated to awakening, to enabling the realization of the transcendent, unlocated, timeless, wordless, selfless reality, for the benefit of the individual and all beings.

In the traditional Buddhist languaging of things, such an actualisation of spiritual qualities is known as ‘Entering the Doors to the Deathless’. From the inception of Amaravati, in 1984, however, Luang Por Sumedho intended the place to be welcoming to people of all faiths and would not expect everyone to be able to relate to such Buddhist expressions. He would emphasise this by regularly saying such as, ‘We are a Theravada monastery in the Thai Forest tradition, a place for monks and nuns to train, but in every class or retreat or talk we give, we should never be trying to convert anyone to Buddhism. If someone is a committed Christian or Muslim or Hindu or Jew or a Communist, but they would like to learn meditation or apply some Buddhist principles, that is entirely up to them! Everyone should feel that they are not being asked to surrender their faith, but rather that their faith can be affirmed and enriched by using some skills that we can offer guidance in.’



Forty years later — and with much more comfortable and energy-efficient facilities — that same spirit endures. The numbers of monastics has increased (to about forty-five in 2024), and all the retreats have been filled to capacity in recent years, but this ethic of unbiased openness and the wish to provide an environment for those of all faiths, or no faith, for the realization of the timeless Truth within our timebound lives remains a guiding principle. So... Some things change and some remain the same.

Similarly, the sangha first arrived on this site on August the 2nd, 1984, a few days after Luang Por Sumedho’s 50th birthday (on July the 27th). Now we have just celebrated Luang Por’s 90th and still he has been offering Dhamma reflections on a regular basis, although in 2024 it is about once a week, rather than every single day, as was the case in the era of our foundation. The patterns of worldly activity thus slowly change, with the passing of decades as shown in the progression of pictures and recollections here, yet the timeless reality that the Dhamma teachings point to remains ever-present, unlimited and unaffected by those laps of our beloved planet around the sun.

May this small book of pictures and memories serve as an encouragement, strengthening the faith of you, dear reader, that true happiness, peace and freedom are possible. May it be a reminder that the Truth is always close at hand, despite the fact that we frequently neglect it, and that Awakening is always possible. Finally, may the doors of Amaravati remain open for centuries to come so that the Deathless, (or whatever expression one uses to refer to that transcendent reality), will be remembered and directly realized by many generations, for the benefit and wellbeing of all.

Amaro Bhikkhu

29 May 2024

Pioneering

1984 - 1994

WITH GROWING INTERESTS IN MEDITATION, THE NUMBER OF MONKS, NUNS, and people who requested ordination, Chithurst was too small and too difficult to access. The initial vision of a new Centre was to be both a residence for the expanding community of nuns, and also to be a retreat and teaching centre available for and welcoming to all people...

It was a pioneering period. The original idea for Amaravati had been that most of the monks' community would reside at Chithurst, with a small number at Amaravati to help out with administration and teaching. Within a very short time that plan had changed, with more monks arriving to help out and also to be close to Luang Por Sumedho who was offering daily teachings. A group of 'lay managers' was established, who then helped look after the nascent Retreat Centre, the extensive grounds, the new Christmas Humphreys Library, also they assisted with administration and with the large maintenance responsibilities that were looming.

In addition to moving onto a new site, and launching this new visionary venture, the start of Amaravati also signalled a change of role for Luang Por Sumedho. He was now keen to step down from his position of sole leadership (the classic policy had been 'Whatever the Ajahn wants, that's what we do') and to establish instead a group of Elders who would help to make community-wide decisions amongst the branch-monasteries he had established. So in 1986, the Theras' Council was formed. That then became the Elders' Council when the senior nuns of the Community reached ten Rains in their monastic vocations.



From the very beginning Luang Por Sumedho aimed to establishing a teaching centre that was welcoming and helpful for anybody and everybody. Accordingly, a Saturday afternoon meditation workshop was established, as well as a Wednesday evening meditation class. In the summertime, on Sunday afternoons during the Rains Retreat, Luang Por Sumedho would give public talks with themes that would be appealing to the Buddhist community and to the general public interested in spiritual development. In those early years the Retreat Centre began to function with an annual programme, a family summer camp was established along with other family events, and a number of interfaith gatherings were held that were very popular and inspiring.

By around 1990 it was clear that the Sangha was overstretched on account of the many and various duties that they had undertaken. It was seen that the contemplative life of the community, that most of the monastics had gone forth to pursue, was being overtaken by a great range of service activities. This initiated a shift from being called Amaravati Buddhist Centre to Amaravati Buddhist Monastery. Local Buddhist groups that the Sangha had been visiting for many years were contacted and they were encouraged to visit the monastery for on-site events instead of the Sangha visiting them. This was a sacrifice, in some ways, but it was a refreshing change of direction and encouraging and supportive to the monastic community. At the time it was said, 'We have been trying to run a petrol-engined car on diesel' — it had not been working well.

LUANG POR HAD DECIDED ON THE MOVE, AND SO WE FOLLOWED. I don't think any of us wanted to move from Chithurst however, Luang Por had decided on the move as the community was expanding and he wanted to create a larger facility where as well as a training monastery for nuns there could be facilities for many other kinds of events + an interfaith library, residence for elderly Buddhist practitioners — and a crematorium! The crematorium never happened and, over time, it became clear that the idea of a residence for elderly lay Buddhists was not really viable either.

For us, there was never a thought of doing anything else — it was clear that that was what was happening, and we went along with it. However, as I remember, the tudong idea made it much easier to see it as a positive step for us as a community.

We had never done anything like that before so it was a big adventure.

I think there was quite a bit of concern about us going in that way, particularly as it was at a time when on the national news we had heard that there was a very unpleasant rapist/murderer at large in the area close to Amaravati. I really had no concern as I felt our practice and precepts would be a complete protection for us — I never imagined that we would come to any harm. At the end of each day, we made a shrine wherever we found to rest, and had a pūja. Also, when we met up with people who offered our meal along the way we would chant blessings; it was lovely for us, as nuns, to be able to do that. I had arranged it so we had plenty of time and all the nuns could participate. People would come to offer food. Sometimes we would stay in the homes of people we knew, otherwise, we'd find somewhere to pitch our tents.

Physically, it was quite demanding. The hardest thing was when we got lost and if we had arranged a time to meet up with people offering food — that could be quite stressful. Fortunately, it always seemed to work out that we found each other and the food was offered in time for our meal each day.

There is a story, told elsewhere, about four of us being arrested (twice in one day!) That was challenging, but I knew that if we kept our hearts peaceful we would come to no harm.

The moment of arriving (shown in the photo) was very lovely. Everyone came out to meet us, and as I recall, there were rainbows in the sky and a feeling of joy (and, maybe, relief!) as we all circumambulated the big field and went to pay respects and chant 'Jayanto' at the shrine that Ajahns Vee and Sucitto had created in one of the large dormitories. At the mealtime, John Coleman (one of Thanissara's meditation teachers, with whom we had stayed on the evening after our arrests) offered a tiny black kitten to replace 'George' — a big ginger tom cat who had lived with us in our cottage at Chithurst since our anāgārikā precept ceremony in 1979 and who had disappeared shortly before our move.

Taking one step at a time with a heavy pack on our backs was really helpful for keeping us in the moment. There simply wasn't the energy to think much — about anything!



Sister Ajahn Casbini

THE SCHOOL HAD BEEN TRYING TO CLOSE FOR THE PREVIOUS SEVEN years so, during that time, no repairs or upkeep had been made to the 20+ large wooden buildings that comprised the site. The place was a bit of a wreck, the assumption having been that any ordinary developers who purchased the site would have bulldozed the old buildings and then created a collection of new houses in the cleared area. Not having any financial resources that could accomplish this, the English Sangha Trust, and the Sangha itself, decided to simply move into the dilapidated buildings and to patch and repair, and to insulate as much as possible.

The old wooden buildings had been a gift of the Canadian government in order to provide a summer camp for urban children. They were of a very basic construction so it took a long time to work through the process of insulation and repair; the old wooden siding planks were taken off, the walls were increased in depth then filled with insulation, then the siding was put back on again. The 600 windows, that had been allowed to deteriorate, were scraped and repainted. The felt roofs, prone to being lifted by the winds, were battened down and patched. In this way the site was slowly brought up to a state of being painted, insulated and waterproofed to the extent possible.

Amaro Bhikkhu

FUNDS WERE NOT IN GOOD SUPPLY IN THOSE EARLY DAYS OF AMARAVATI, AS accumulated donations had been spent on acquiring the site. Also, in the spirit of frugality, the community tried to do all the work by themselves rather than hire external contractors.

In the monks' area, the long dormitory room was partitioned into several smaller rooms. Rooms in other buildings were also adapted. All this work kept the 'electrics monk' busy. However, the work was quite pleasant — except when one had to crawl through attic spaces and lay wires on top of dusty fibreglass insulation. It was also quite satisfying when, on flipping the switch, the light came on. A small enlightenment!

The site had its own workshop but, as it was previously used by children, this workshop didn't have any machinery. So the monastery either bought or was donated some heavy-duty machinery for the workshop, and I was given the task of installing them. However these were 'three-phase' machines — which meant they ran off 415 volts. So one couldn't just plug them into a normal household socket that used 240 volts. Considering how dangerous even 240 volts is, using these machines entailed risk — so I was quite anxious about taking on this task. However a small miracle happened! A professional electrician from the Netherlands turned up at Amaravati — and not only did he know how to do the work, but he also offered to do it. I was so happy and relieved to see those machines professionally installed! Thanks to him, the machines had proper protection for the high voltage wires, and cut-off switches on the floor whereby one could stop the machine just by stepping on the switch.

I never met the Dutch electrician again after this visit but he is gratefully remembered.

Karuniko Bhikkhu



AMARAVATI AROSE OUT OF LUANG POR SUMEDHO'S WISH TO CREATE A CENTRE WHERE LAY people could visit in order to fully practise in terms of the Noble Eightfold Path. This was because in Britain at that time, Buddhism was largely either a matter for study and lecture or for meditation retreats. When people did invite Luang Por to teach a retreat, they would have to rent a school or a field centre where the facilities didn't really suit the purpose and were expensive. Meanwhile, Dhamma as a way of life was rare: monasteries were for gone-forth people, and lay Dhamma-communities were almost non-existent.

Luang Por also wanted to have a place for Sangha gatherings, and where families could gather and participate in the traditional Buddhist festivals. Furthermore the nuns' community was growing too large to accommodate at Cittaviveka, and the other branch monasteries were small and accommodated only three or four monks. So when Peter and Barbara Jackson found St. Margaret's School was for sale, and it seemed to offer plenty of accommodation and to be near London, the English Sangha Trust purchased the site. Half the Cittaviveka monks and all the nuns took up residence there in July 1984.

The original publicity brochures that we created described the new place as 'Amaravati: Retreat Centre and Nuns' Vihara.' An initial idea had been that a few bhikkhus would come on a rota basis for a few months at a time in order to offer support by means of teaching and so on.

St. Margaret's School was basically a series of long wooden boxes in a field. So we immediately had to do a lot of work to make the buildings livable when the oil-fired heating system, being too expensive, was switched off. We had to insulate the old dining hall and convert it into a sala. We also worked on installing a wood-fired boiler for the nuns' area. However there was neither the time nor the resources to insulate the monks' and laymen's areas or establish a heating system in their accommodation.

Amaravati was formally opened in 1985 with some well-respected bhikkhus like Ven. Ananda Maitreya and Tahn Chao Khun Paññananda attending to offer their blessings. The vision at that time was summed up as 'The Doors to the Deathless are Open' and one example of that was to freely offer retreat facilities for the use of any Buddhist tradition. So one group of buildings was designated as the Retreat Centre. The first retreats began in 1986. The Retreat Centre hosted Zen retreats and also lay insight retreats led by teachers outside our sangha. Eventually however it was felt that, as Amaravati was our responsibility it was more appropriate to limit its usage to fit monastic standards and protocols.

At that time we only had the experience of a normal monastery in which the sangha did all the work and the administration except for handling money and cooking. But Amaravati was too big and complex for sangha alone and so a management scheme was set up whereby people could spend a year residing at Amaravati and looking after the grounds, the maintenance, driving and secretarial work. We also had a 'bursar' who was essentially the head manager of the entire site, and who hired professionals and contractors.

For the first few years, while Luang Por was trying to get a perspective on how the vision was going to work out, the place was called Amaravati Buddhist Centre. In the early days, we had to deal with visitors with unbalanced minds, or those who had the idea that Buddhist practice was about abandoning all conventions and rules. So Luang Por eventually decided it was better to call Amaravati a monastery so that people understood that this was a place for sense-restraint, renunciation and respect for tradition.

As was the case in most Western monasteries at that time, the daily regime was morning pūja at 5 a.m. followed by an hour of group meditation, then a chores period followed by a morning meeting for everybody in the sala with tea and porridge. Announcements would be made, Luang Por would offer a short reflection, and then there was a work meeting. We worked all day (with a break for the meal) until 5 p.m. On one day per week we'd have free time; that might be the occasion for pindapat. We'd walk into local towns and villages, generally to a lay person's house where we'd have a cup of tea and a chat and then get driven back to the monastery. This was the original style of 'English pindapat'.

At 5 p.m., everyone — monks, nuns and laypeople — gathered in the sala for tea, as the sala was next to the kitchen and was the only warm place. Once a week in the sala there was a question and answer session at tea-time with either Luang Por or a senior monk. Evening pūja was at 7:30 p.m. All-night meditation took place in the sala on the Uposatha Days.



John Suiatto



THE BUILDINGS HADN'T BEEN PROPERLY MAINTAINED FOR QUITE A NUMBER OF years so most, if not all, the windows were in need of attention.

Repairing all those windows wasn't just the nuns' job; everyone worked together on it. There was no money to replace them or to pay anyone else to do the repair. It was a lot of work, with sanding and scraping off the old paint; digging out and then filling the rotten bits, and then painting. Sometimes we needed to replace the putty around the glass as well. I'm not sure how long it took altogether: several years, maybe ...

When I had an injury — a ladder I was on while insulating the Sala ceiling slipped out from underneath me, and I fell and broke my back (no one was holding the ladder — a good health and safety lesson!) — my first thought was: 'Oh dear ... I won't be able to help out with all those windows ...' but, in fact, the convalescence was a great opportunity to help out with putting together the first siladharā training manual, "Going Forth" — which could never have happened otherwise.

It wasn't particularly pleasant work but, doing it all together, we just got on with it and learned how to do it as well as possible. We'd work in all weathers. In Britain — and at Amaravati especially — it's often cold, windy and rainy, so we needed to keep going with it. On most buildings there is a bit of a roof overhang — so there was a bit of protection for us, and the fresh paint... The tea breaks were good...!

We'd be sitting beside each other, in our work clothes, each working on a window with scrapers, hot air guns, putty or paint depending on which stage of the process we were at. I guess the monks and laymen had one stretch of a building to work on, and the nuns and laywomen another ... and there'd be somebody checking to make sure that what we were doing was properly done.

Later on, we also learned how to do drywall lining, and worked more inside. I remember teaching Luang Por how to do this in the retreat centre.

Luang Por was always around in the community, and would offer morning reflections every day. There was a good feeling, with us all being together helping out as best we could.



Sister Ajahn Candaini



OVER THE YEARS, PEOPLE HAVE ASKED ABOUT THE CHALLENGES and the inspiration in living this life. Personally, I must admit that despite the difficulties we encountered, I have been totally inspired by this lifestyle. Being quite healthy and physically strong, I loved the whole package: meditation, helping the community, going on pindapat, the natural beauty of the environment and listening to Dhamma teachings offered regularly by Ajahn Sumedho which I always found wonderfully clear, humorous and easy to put into practice... in brief, right on the spot. It was also uplifting being part of a group of people who had practiced with Ajahn Chah in Thailand and who helped us familiarize ourselves with the standards of the Forest Tradition.

It was clear that the deep learning and insights of our practice was gradually transforming our lives through the power the Dhamma. From the very beginning, Amaravati was physically quite testing. There were many challenges as the buildings were in need of much repair. We had to develop skills that some of us had never heard of such as insulating walls and drilling holes to protect them from humidity or painting large amounts of furniture. So there were many opportunities to apply the Buddha's teachings and put them into practice.

Ajahn Sundara



IN THIS PHOTO WE ARE HAVING A TEA BREAK DURING THE WORK OF REPAIRING THE windows. The nun on the left is Sister Abhassara who introduced the English version of the chanting and the notation system that we still use today.

At first, I wasn't sure about chanting in English but once I got used to it I appreciated knowing the meaning of what I was chanting.

When the monks first arrived in the UK they would chant Thai style, Pali but without the Thai. It was very beautiful but not easy to learn. Then someone thought it would be more appropriate to chant in a more monotone style, with a more correct Pali pronunciation, so Ajahn Sucitto and Ajahn Kittisaro worked out how to do that. Each day they would teach the rest of us. Then, soon after our arrival at Amaravati, Sr Abhassara, who had formerly been a musician, offered to have a go at preparing English versions of the chanting ('til then we had only chanted in Pali), and arranging a simple form of notation to give a bit more of a melody. It took her about two years to come up with the chanting form that we still use today. She recorded it so we could learn it from the recording. It made a huge difference — partly knowing the meaning of the words and also having a few more notes which gives a more powerful sense of devotion, and enjoyment. It also means that people can learn the chanting, even if they are never able to visit a monastery.

Sister Ajahn Candarin

SOON AFTER THE SANGHA TOOK UP RESIDENCE AT AMARAVATI I HEARD that the monks and nuns would welcome invitations to visit the houses of local supporters on pindapat, the custom of going for alms. So I asked how I could make an invitation and was told all I needed to do was ring the office to tell them I'd like to invite either monks or nuns and specify the number.

I lived only four miles away and there were footpaths the whole way so I drew a map to show them the way. I would invite three or four monks or nuns alternately and it became a regular event on a Saturday.

Ajahn Amaro learnt the route along the footpaths and would often come when I invited the Bhikkhus. We'd give them coffee and pastries and I'd make some food for the kids to offer and then I would take them back in my car in time for the meal. I felt like it was something important for the children to do — that the merit would come to them even though they didn't understand what merit was, which meant I felt twice as good.

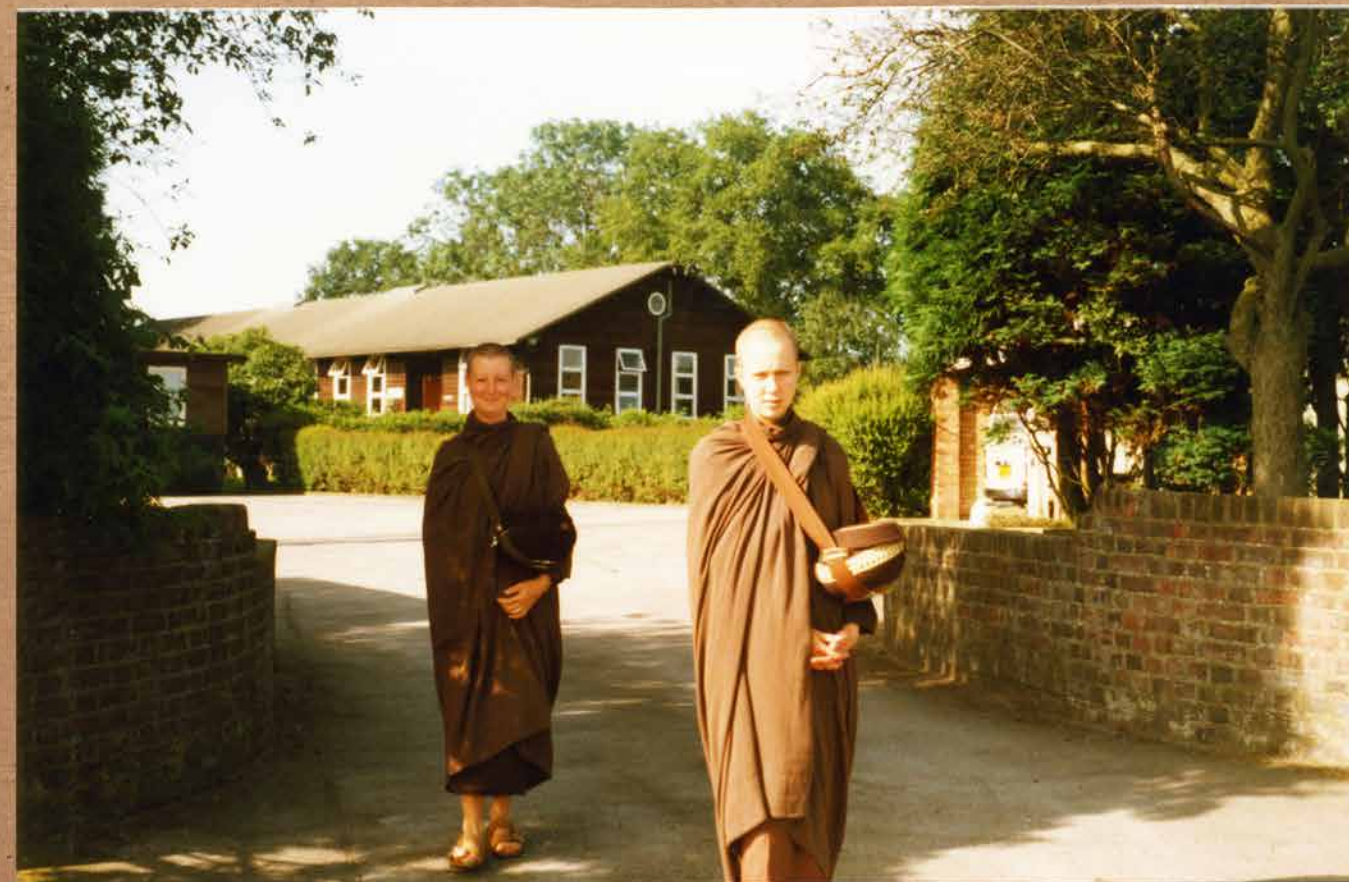
We rarely talked about Dhamma, however, there were inevitably teachings included in our discussions. I remember once telling Ajahn Candasiri about how I practiced mindfulness in lay life. At the end of my little 'discourse', she suggested I might like to come to the monastery one day to give a talk to all the monks and nuns about it. I said I would! Fortunately I didn't receive an invite. Afterwards I realised it was a wonderful example of right speech. A subtle hint given with such kindness.

I never specifically requested a particular monk or nun to visit as I didn't want to express a preference. On one occasion Luang Por Sumedho came. I had been told he was coming and made a big nut loaf, thinking there would be some left over for us to eat when they had gone. I divided it into four and helped the children serve three big pieces to the monks. Unfortunately, in my efforts to 'help' so as to keep something back, the fourth piece fell on the floor.

As I looked down at the broken pieces on the floor I reflected, 'How simple it is to give everything, how complicated it is to hold something back'. This insight arose all the more powerfully because of Luang Por's presence.

And so I learnt that giving Dana was not just about feeding monks and nuns, nor an opportunity to have a closer relationship with the Sangha, nor being blessed with the long life and happiness they would chant for us as they left, but an opportunity to let go of my attachment.

Martin Evans





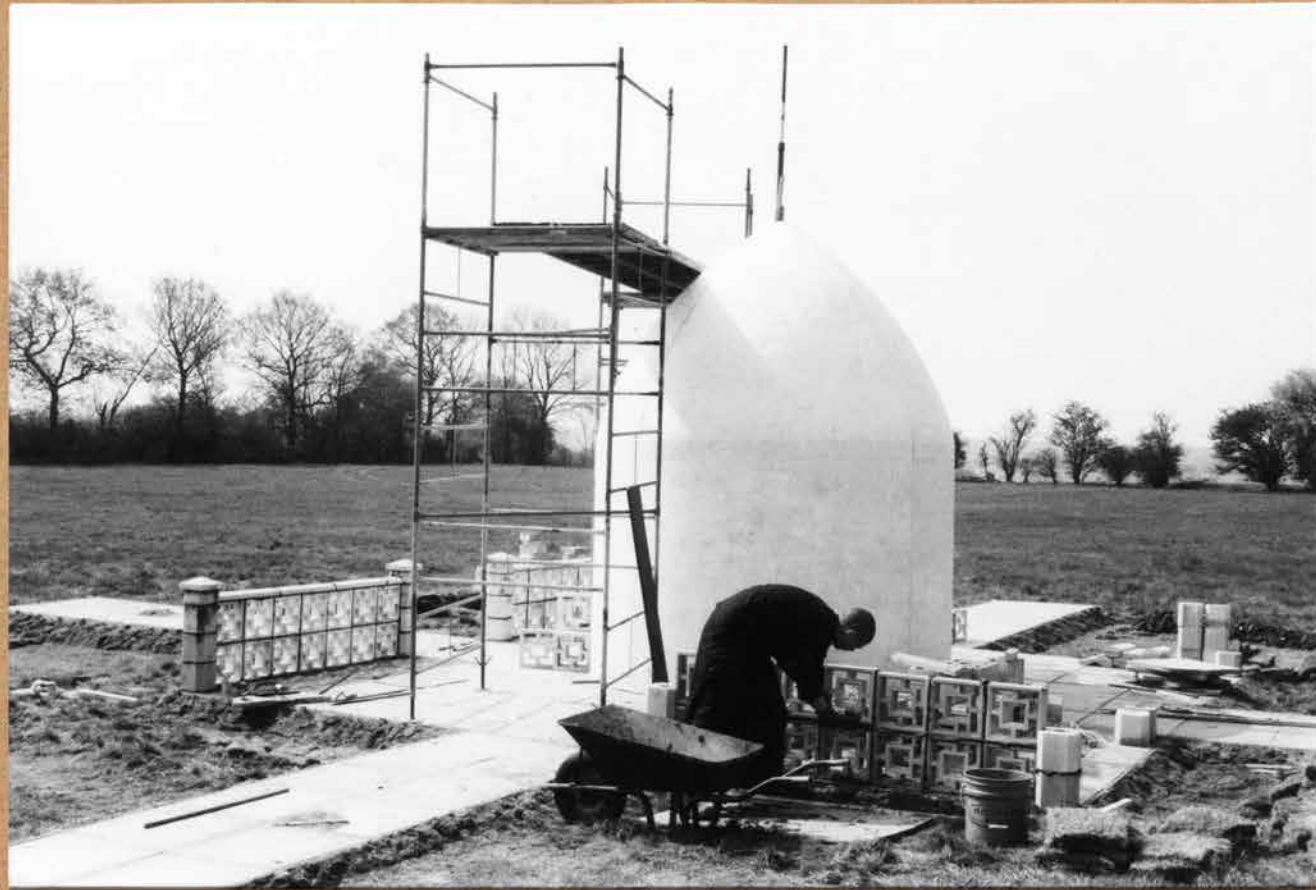
THIS STUPA WAS THE BRAINCHILD OF VEN. SUBHATO, THE MASTER carpenter from New Zealand and a highly creative monk, whose hobby was to collect junk from various sources and then employ it to make either useful, decorative or sacred objects. In 1992 he decided to erect this Stupa in the course of the winter retreat (and found many willing helpers.) A number of re-painted old tyres formed an important part of the Stupa, so it garnered the sobriquet of the “Firestone” or “Goodyear” Stupa.

Ajahn Dhammarando

A TEMPORARY STUPA — BEAUTIFULLY CONSTRUCTED of old tyres, concrete lanterns and cast iron baffles from the dismantled boilers — had been erected in the middle of the car-park but that had achieved little in affecting the general impression upon people, which was usually that the place was some kind of military barracks.

Amaro Bhikkhu





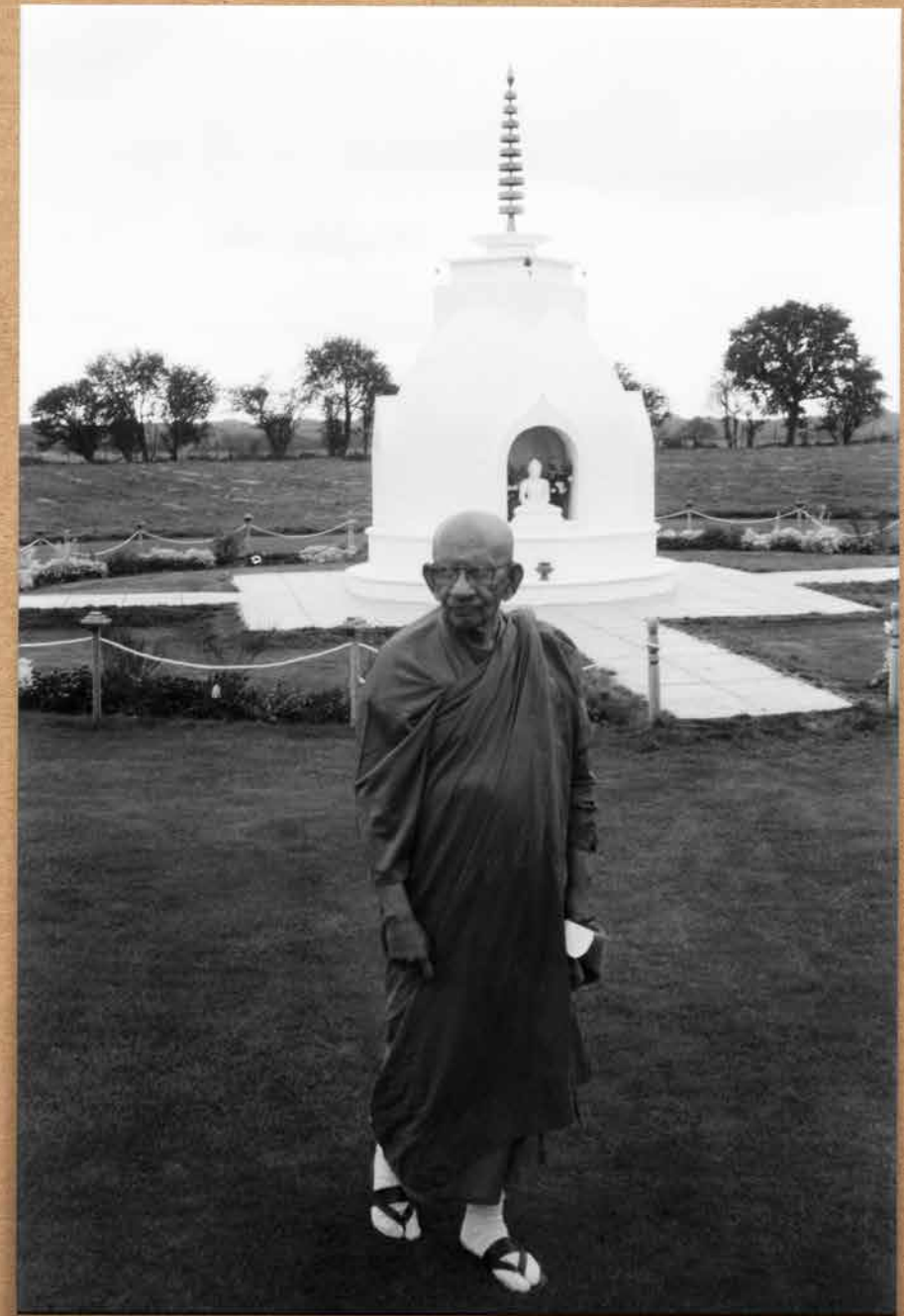
AMARAVATI WAS OFFICIALLY OPENED IN MAY 1985. BUT THREE WEEKS before the ceremony, one of the nuns, Sister Jotika, had the idea to create a ceremonial focal point for the ceremony. She thought that a simple cut-out facade in the shape of a stupa could be made and placed in the middle of the field at the back of the monastery.

However one of the bhikkhus, Tahn Adicco, had connections with a company that specialised in plaster and fibreglass fabrication, and he persuaded them to lend us a mould in the shape of a minaret used for a Middle Eastern bank. Anāgārika Alan used this cone-shaped mould to cast four pieces using glass-reinforced plaster, and Tahn Subbato helped bolt the sections together and build arches out of hardboard to create niches in the four directions for four Buddhas.

A steel dish was found in a scrapyards, out of which the ground level base was cast; and the spire was created out of steel rod, an old car tire, a cone, and some baking tins. Anāgārika Alan carved a wooden lotus to act as the pinnacle. As the stupa took shape, Mr Premadasa, the president of Sri Lanka, donated the Buddharūpas. He was so pleased with the finished stupa that he commissioned a copy for the Sambodhi Vihara in Colombo.

The Amaravati stupa, repainted every year to keep it weatherproof and clean, remained as the ceremonial focal point for the monastery for over a decade.

John Suibto



THIS FAMOUS SRI LANKAN SCHOLAR MONK, Ven. Ananda Maitreya, spent the Vassa of 1986 at Amaravati, his main purpose being to teach Pali to the sangha. This ran counter to the usual Wat Pah Pong injunction which was “practice rather than study” but a lot of people did put in some effort to learn with him. He used to walk around the field every day for exercise, with his attendant walking along behind him. We felt it was an honour to have him stay with us.

Ajahn Dhammanando

THE THIN LINE OF SMALL TREES indicates the boundary of the Stupa field. Early on the “Buddha Grove” was established in the South-Western corner of it. Later, over several years hundreds of trees were planted by Ajahn Gandhasilo along the East and South edges, creating dense woodland where meditation huts could be built. For a number of years he could be seen in the afternoons pushing a wheelbarrow with manure from the neighboring farm.

Nyanadassano





THERE WAS A GRAND OPENING OF AMARAVATI IN MAY OF 1985, WITH THE ceremonies being led by Luang Por Paññananda, and the Venerable Mahanayaka Thera Ananda Maitreya, from Sri Lanka. It was a impressive event and an occasion to invite many of the senior monastics, and other Sangha friends, from our community in Thailand and around the world.

Luang Por Chah's health had deteriorated significantly, from 1981, so by the time Amaravati opened he was not able to be involved in any practical way. In order to sustain the close connections with Thailand and our home monasteries, Luang Por Jun — one of Luang Por Chah's most senior disciples — was invited to come and spend a year at Amaravati. He resided here from 1988-89 and was a sterling example of adaptability and enthusiastic engagement with Dhamma practice.

Visits from Luang Por Paññananda were also common during this decade, as he realized that there was a need for the kind of mentorship from an Elder that he was able to provide.

Amaro Bhikkhu

THE DHAMMA HALL RESEMBLED ALL THE OTHER ORIGINAL SCHOOL buildings, except it was different in that there was a stage at one end. It had most likely been used for assemblies and large gatherings.

It was understood that this building would eventually be knocked down to make way for a future temple, so it was never renovated, nor was the heating improved.

It served as the venue for morning and evening Pūjas and, in the mornings, it was freezing cold. People would come in with blankets and hats and they would gradually 'warm up' under the blankets through the morning sit. Several important ceremonies were held in the Dhamma Hall (e.g. the Kathina ceremony) and there was also a period when communal meals were eaten here.

Luang Por Sumedho resided in a couple of rooms at the far end of the Dhamma Hall. It was a much quieter and more peaceful place than was the Bhikkhu Vihara. At the nearer end of Dhamma Hall were one or two larger rooms, which, at that time, served as the Main Office, with a telephone connection and other office equipment. Many important planning meetings were held there.

Ajahn Dhammarando

IT WAS AFTER THE VASSA OF 1984 AT CITTAVIVEKA THAT I WAS INVITED TO Amaravati. At that time the Amaravati site was heated by oil burners that heated water to be subsequently pumped around the site. They supplied all the hot water for heating and bathing. However due to the rising cost of oil, and the fact that the wooden buildings had no insulation, this method proved to be too expensive to sustain — so the burners were turned off when the oil ran out. Another problem was that the electricity supply to the site couldn't accommodate heating all the rooms with electric heaters. So we had to share one heater for three rooms so we didn't overload the supply. I remember that winter of 1984/5 being particularly cold. Some of the rooms had their own sink and the cold made the pipes freeze and burst in the rooms. The dormitory rooms had big piping running along the bottom of the walls and people heard them exploding in the night and splattering black liquid over the walls. So one had to get used to feeling a bit cold.

A wood burning cooker and water heater was installed in the kitchen. The kitchen became a popular place because it was warm! There were even newspapers available there. As there was no hot water at the bhikkhu vihara we had to fill a bucket up with hot water at the kitchen, walk briskly over to a bathroom in the bhikkhu vihara, and have a bucket bath standing up in the cold bath tub. Therefore one of the priorities was to build some showers in the building behind the kitchen so that hot water could be supplied from there.

One day it was announced that the showers were now finished and there would be hot showers after work. As you may imagine we were quite excited at the prospect of a hot shower so we were there, with towels in hand. But alas we were about to receive a Dhamma teaching! The unit on the shower that mixed the hot and cold water wasn't functioning — which meant you could only have a very cold or very hot shower. As it happened the hot water was too hot to stand under. So we didn't get a shower that evening. It was a good lesson in how expectations lead to disappointments. One could also reflect that the way of extremes doesn't bring a favourable outcome — as in this case we didn't get clean!

The Buddha teaches the Middle Way of avoiding extremes as the practice that cleanses the heart. We did manage to see the humorous side of the occasion and eventually did have the luxury of a not-too-hot shower in the following days.

Though things were physically challenging in those days there was the camaraderie of the pioneering spirit and the blessings of having Luang Por Sumedho's inspiring presence and wise guidance to help us to learn and grow in Dhamma from the challenges.

Karuniko Bhikkhu



21-25 JUNE '85 — FOUR DAY RETREAT WITH AJAHN SUCITTO

Calm comes easily in silence, but Ajahn Sucitto talks, and talks.

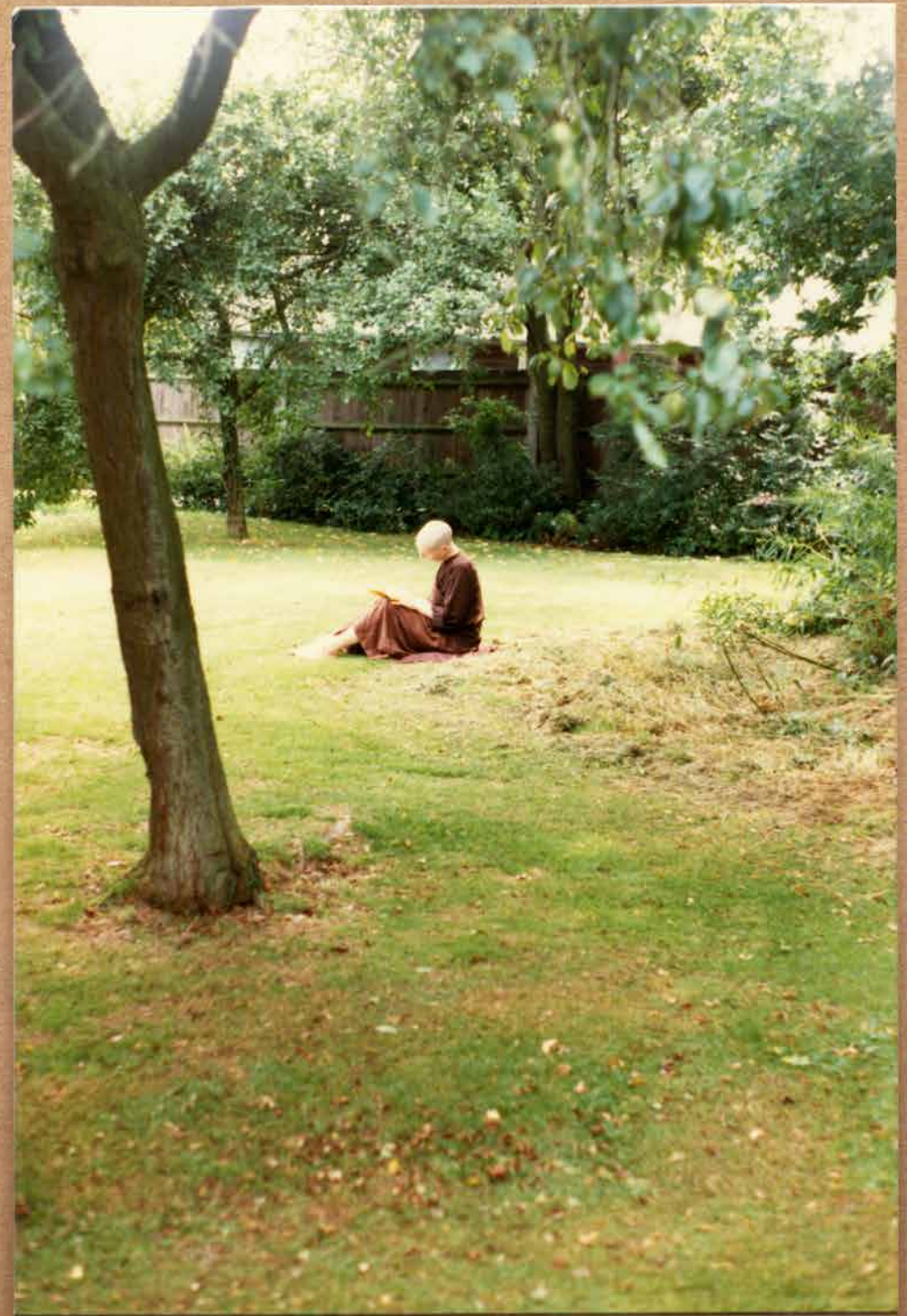
On Saturday he goes on and on about Metta. He just wouldn't shut up and let me get on with it. Then, when he did and I thought I would get somewhere, he told us to go and do some walking meditation! It was a great effort to get up and go. I went and pounded out a path feeling really angry and fed up until it dawned. When it's time to get up you want to sit! When it's time to sit you want to get up!

You have to be really fed up of the whole thing, to let go of that wanting to get somewhere. You have to reach the lowest point to really let go.

Letting go of wanting and not wanting and just giving yourself up to the practice — that's the wonderful thing about retreats, the opportunity to surrender.

Martin Evans





IN THE FIRST FEW YEARS THE BELL WAS REGULARLY RUNG in order to announce an upcoming meal and, in the evening, to remind people of an imminent Pūja. It must have disturbed nearby neighbours, so its use was eventually scaled back. Its current use is mainly to signal the end of a walking meditation session during a Saturday afternoon meditation class or, possibly, the expected and imminent arrival at Amaravati of either a senior monk or some other V.I.P.

Ajahn Dhammarando

IN THIS PHOTO THERE IS RUTH DENISON, AND AJAHN SUNDARA and myself and Venerable Vipassi during a brief visit that Ruth made to the monastery. She was very well-known as a lay teacher, and famous for her creative approach to teaching Dhamma. Ajahn Sundara and I met with her for tea. She was very relaxed, very friendly. She was an excellent teacher and had many devoted disciples. Being a little bit older than many of the other lay teachers, she was a kind of mother figure for them.

Behind us, resting on the steps of the retreat centre, is one of the monastery cats. This one was called Tiger; he was left behind after the school was closed. At first he was very timid but, like all of the cats who come to live with us, he gradually became very relaxed and friendly.

Sister Ajahn Candhiri



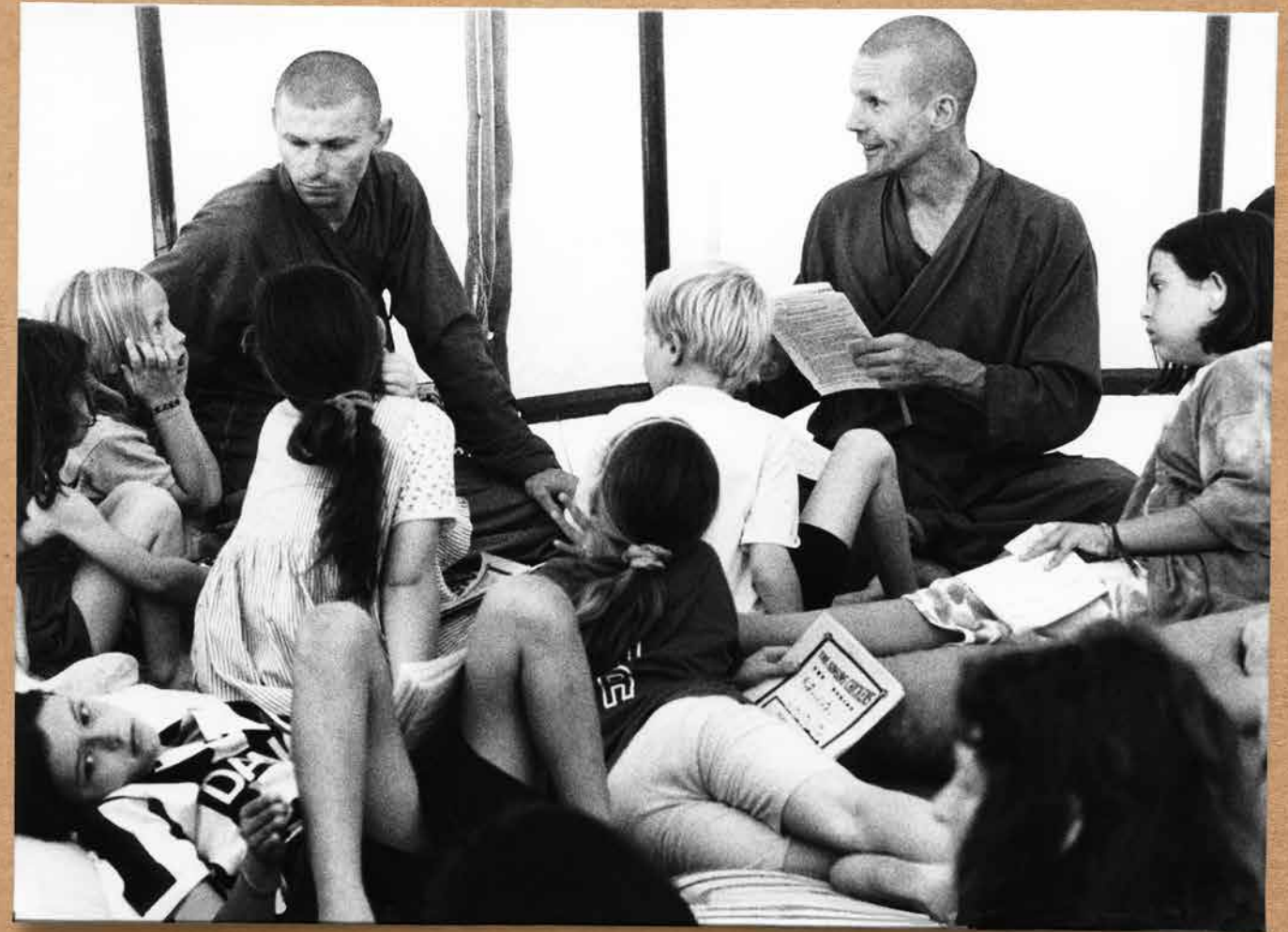


IN THOSE EARLY DAYS, ONE OF THE NUNS, SISTER THANISSARA, WAS MOTIVATED TO initiate a family summer camp. This offered people with young children a week or more to live in the Retreat Centre, and participate in a schedule of pūjas, Jataka stories and Dhamma-based activities. It was a great success. About thirty laypeople would gather, get to know each other, and create a supportive group. The children could play safely in the field, and the sangha would offer pūjas, teachings, and meditation sessions, and encourage the children to write Dhamma stories and even create and act out an entire play. The children also enjoyed offering alms-food to the sangha on pindapat, and the parents would get to meet Luang Por Sumedho and have Dhamma discussions with him.

The sangha and the parents created a magazine called 'Rainbows' which had stories by and drawings, mostly by children, but with the occasional contribution from a monk or a nun. One year, the families created a huge wire and paper dragon; I 'opened its eyes' by painting them; then it was paraded around the site.

The Camp was also full of real life — and death. One year, Declan, a boy of 2 or 3 years old, suddenly passed away at the Camp. The parents were heart-broken, but having a lot of kind fellow-parents around, as well as the sangha, helped them to deal with their grief. The other children took it all very well. Declan's body was laid out in a coffin in the old School Assembly Hall for a few days, so the children could see and learn the Law of Death for themselves and offer flowers. After Declan's body had been cremated, one of the nuns built a small stupa in a corner of the field for his remains.

John Sucitto



ONE MIGHT NOT EXPECT TO SEE DOZENS OF CHILDREN STAYING AND PLAYING IN AN English monastery for a week or more, but every summer in these first ten years of Amaravati they came with their parents to experience community living and connect with the Sangha.

Dhamma workshops included carpentry to make a meditation stool, block printing to make prayer flags, and a dramatisation of the Buddha's life. Optional extras for recreation might be circle dancing, cooperative games or 'just chillin' unsupervised in the Rainbow Room where the cushions seem to have been the most popular of the resources there. The parents and some voluntary helpers ran these activities and the Sangha led a suitable child friendly morning and evening pūja every day,

The Family Camp began as a small informal group of families who brought their tents, with Luang Por's blessing, to camp for a weekend together in the secluded campsite behind the workshop. The following summer there were 16 families, and very soon there were up to 110 people filling the Retreat Centre as well as the camp site for a week or more. Daily chores were shared equally between everyone over 5 yrs old; and parents were released from duty occasionally to have their own nourishment of meditation, yoga and Dhamma discussions. It was so popular that a waiting list formed, with participants chosen by lottery for each following year.

The role of the Sangha grew to include daily pindapat, and guided meditations, as well as the pūjas. Dhamma classes pitched separately for children and parents were held every afternoon. Young and old were enthralled by these tranquil sessions. A couple of Sangha members who had the constitution and the inclination were core liaisons, and many others offered one or two sessions in the course of the week. One of the most memorable occasions each year was the evening camp fire sharing informal story telling and marshmallows.

Medhina

ONE OF THE DAILY RECOLLECTIONS THAT THE BUDDHA encouraged is that of death and dying. This helps the mind to let go of its attachments to the body, the senses, personal status and possessions. It also encourages us to be aware of what we are carrying in our hearts in terms of gratitude and wisdom, and in terms of regret, grudges and negative states. When we consider that others, like us, will die, this stimulates compassion.

Therefore it felt important for Amaravati to have a place for proper attention to the dead. Originally Luang Por had wanted to build a crematorium, but there were objections from local people. So instead he decided to include a 'Chapel of Rest' inside the Temple where the body of a recently deceased person could be kept in an open coffin for a few days. However, before the Chapel was built, we used the old School Assembly Hall. People would visit the coffin for a while to pay their respects, or in order to contemplate the changes in the body as the process of decay took place. One of the first corpses to be laid out in this way was that of Maurice Walshe, who had been a long-term Chairman of the English Sangha Trust. It was his last gift to the sangha and to the lay community.

John Suciatto



AFTER OUR SĪLADHARĀ ORDINATION AT CHITHURST MONASTERY in 1983, the nuns started the tradition of going on alms round (pindapata) and we continued this practice when we moved to Amaravati in 1984. Our precepts followed the monks' rules of not being involved with cooking food, keeping food beyond mid-day or using or keeping money. As the work period was in the afternoon from one to five, the nuns had the opportunity to go on pindapat with our alms bowls in groups of two or three nuns. Sometimes we would meet people walking their dogs who would be curious or puzzled by what we were doing, but generally quite friendly. We also went on pindapat at the invitation of local friends living near the monastery or in the town several miles away. Amongst these was a Christian nun who became a good friend of our community and who would never let us go without putting a treat in our alms bowl. These occasions would give us the opportunity to engage in conversation after being offered a warm drink. There were often questions about our life, the practice of Dhamma, meditation and even questions about how we survived in the freezing temperature of the monastery. Witnessing the generosity and kindness of the offerings of lay friends and sometimes total strangers was always very moving and even magic.

Ajahn Sundara





THE FIRST ORDINATION (PABBAJĀ) TOOK PLACE AT AMARAVATI IN 1986 in the Dhamma Hall, which had been the sport and theatre building of the old school. Later, during the hot season, the ordination ceremonies would take place in the open air in front of the stupa in the field. In the cold season these ordinations would take place inside. The first part of the pabbajā were the formal questions that had just been introduced. At first, these were done privately. Later, the mother or one of the nuns had been so moved by those questions that it was decided to have them done publicly. Since then, anyone can witness the entire pabbajā ceremony of the nuns' ordinations.

There were many women interested in living the holy life. At the time, all that was needed to join the community was to be prepared to live a way of life that was totally new and physically quite demanding. We also had to learn and adapt to a number of rules, rituals and rhythms. In the early days, our breakfast consisted of a cup of tea before setting off for work in the morning and continuing work in the afternoon.

One of the reasons for moving to Amaravati was to have a place for nuns, as Chithurst cottage was becoming too small to accommodate the growing number of women wishing to ordain. Ajahn Sumedho used to say that the cottage was beginning to resemble a crowded Indian bus. The move from the beautiful environment of Chithurst to Amaravati was a terrific and surprising change, yet we all seemed prepared to move in and be ready to begin rebuilding our new 'monastery', which included the repair of six hundred windows.

Ajahn Sundara



I MET MASTER HSUAN HUA IN SAN FRANCISCO, I THINK IN 1980. AT THE TIME, HE had recently purchased the Northern California Mental Hospital in Ukiah, which was emptied out. It was a big institution with many kinds of permanent buildings — a vast place, really. He invited me to visit this, which he referred to as The City of Ten Thousand Buddhas. Since then we have become friends. When I would visit California, I'd visit Master Hsuan Hua in Ukiah, California.

I also invited him to visit Amravati. In 1991 he came with a group of his disciples. He had many Western bhikkhus and bhikkhunis along with Chinese ones. So we had a celebration here and a chit-chat.

We became very good friends and he really respected the Thai forest tradition because of its strict Vinaya. He said in Mahayana, a lot of the Vinaya is pretty loose. He was praising our practice here in England, which he witnessed.

When my parents passed away in 1988-89, my need to visit California diminished. I didn't feel the need to go every year like I did when my parents were living. I had a following of interested people, especially in San Francisco, so I asked Ajahn Amaro to take on the duties.

Eventually just before he passed away, Master Hsuan Hua expressed the wish to offer us this property, which is now called Abhayagiri, and is not far from The City of Ten Thousand Buddhas in Ukiah, California. Ajahn Amaro took it on and became the first abbot of Abhayagiri along with Ajahn Pasanno. They maintained a very close relationship with the bhikkhus and bhikkhunis of The City of Ten Thousand Buddhas ever since.

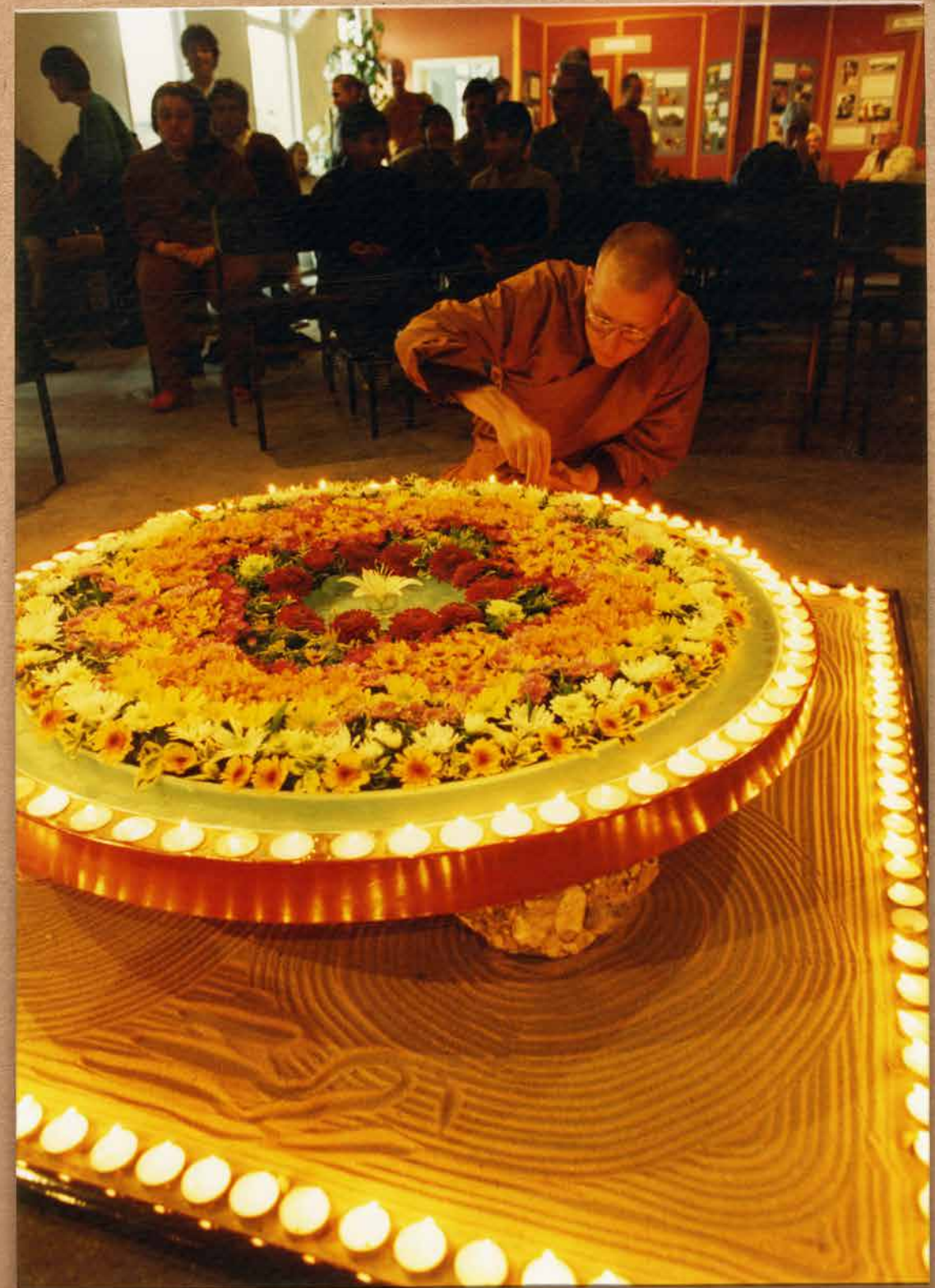
Ajahn Sumedho



I FOUND LOOKING AFTER SR. UPPALA A VERY JOYOUS EXPERIENCE, EVEN though it could be extremely challenging at times. That experience is helping me as I approach old age and the likelihood that, at some stage, people will need to look after me. I know that it needn't be burdensome; it can be very joyful if the person receiving the care is able to show appreciation (which Sr. Uppala certainly did). So now I work at cultivating a sweet heart! It was also helpful to be with an older person and to see how she faced the aging of the body and all the difficulties that accompany aging: poor sight, deafness, incontinence, reduced mobility, dependence on others etc. — she didn't make a problem about any of it.

The funeral was very special. It was wonderful that we nuns could participate so fully, carrying her coffin and lowering it into the grave — that had been dug by plumbers, who just happened to be there putting in the heating system in the Retreat Centre. Then flinging in handfuls of earth, and other small items; it brought a whole mixture of sorrow and joy. I laughed, and cried — a lot! That was a good lesson for me about the grieving process which, 'til then, had been something I dreaded. After Sr. Uppala's death I saw the process of grieving is not a solid, heavy thing but rather something that can change very rapidly from intense sorrow to joy and gratitude — and there can even be plenty of fun — a kind of tenderness that is not, in any way, disrespectful.

Sister Ajahn Candani



THIS WAS THE FAITH IN AWAKENING CONFERENCE THAT WAS HOSTED AT Amaravati in 1993. In this photo we are in the retreat centre shrine room. Tan Sobhano, who eventually disrobed, was one of the main organizers of the event. Christopher Titmus, a lay Dhamma teacher was the facilitator. It was a very special time, a gathering of about 80 spiritual people from all different faiths. There were many Christian monks and nuns, and also some Sufis and Brahma Kumaris. It took place over four or five days. I wasn't involved in the planning, so am not aware of the thinking behind the conference but it seemed to have an enormous value in promoting a sense of friendliness and respect among people of different faiths. I also found it really wonderful to meet other committed monastics and to recognise that, in a sense, our differences are far outweighed by what we share in monastic living. There was a great sense of joy in that.

In the photo there is Sister Mary. She lived as a hermit nun down in the village of Great Gaddesden. I think she was very happy to have other committed monastics living close by, and used to invite us for coffee once a week or so. Beside her in the photo is Chris Boxley, a Christian minister, who was very supportive of our community; he lived close to Chithurst. Sister Rosemary, from Fairacres Convent in Oxford, also attended the event. She was one of the main speakers, along with Ajahn Sucitto, and gave a wonderful talk.

This photo shows a flower mandala that was prepared for the closing ceremony that took place in the sala. We all gathered around, and many shared their sense of delight at the gathering and how they found it encouraging for their on-going spiritual practice.

Sister Ajahn Candaini

Building the Heart

1994 - 2004

BY THIS TIME THE DEBT TO THE BANK HAD BEEN PAID OFF; FUNDS had started to accumulate and serious ideas about building a central meditation hall, a Temple, were launched through Luang Por Sumedho's initiative. An architect, Tom Hancock, was commissioned and plans began to be discussed, reviewed and eventually put in front of the Dacorum Borough Council Planning Department. After some serious challenges and a planning refusal, which was then overturned on appeal, planning permission for the Temple was given in 1994.

The presence of the new Temple and cloister completely changed the ambience of the site of Amaravati. Prior to this, when visitors had arrived though the main gate, they often thought they were entering a prison, or some kind of military barracks, on account of the long, thin wooden buildings arranged in ranks. Now, with the Temple at the centre, on the axis of the monastery, at the end of the driveway beyond the avenue of cherry trees (as they were then), the perception was utterly transformed. Finally the monastery had a heart on the physical level to match the spiritual aspirations of the resident community, and the many hundreds of people who had gathered regularly here through the years.



With the Temple now complete, from around 2000, Luang Por Sumedho began to take more of a backseat and made efforts to pass on many of the teaching and administrative duties. The fabric of the other buildings was steadily improved, piece by piece, with double glazing being installed and amenities gradually being enhanced. Activities continued to be available for the general public, these consisting of the weekly classes, the various family events, including the ten-day summer camp, plus the round of retreats available for the public in the Retreat Centre which now filled the calendar, being about 20 retreats, short and long, from April until New Year. The interfaith Library continued to steadily expand, as books were constantly being donated. All these opportunities continued to be greatly appreciated.

Following the completion of the Temple, and the expenses that that involved, no new construction was planned or undertaken. The years 2000-2004 were thus a period of consolidation and rest with respect to that domain. Luang Por Sumedho passed on more of his leadership roles to other senior monastics at Amaravati.

THESE BUILDINGS WERE PUT TO VARIOUS USES IN THE MONASTERY'S early years, (including one of them serving as a small meditation hall and occasionally as a chapel of rest) but in the 1990's the decision to build a properly designed, dedicated Temple was made.

The process to gain planning permission took a long time and there were a number of setbacks but, once it was agreed, it became essential to take down these buildings in order to create space for the future Temple building.

A contingent of bhikkhus came up from Chithurst and a large squad of monks and novices set about tearing the buildings apart. Male energy can easily be diverted into acts of wanton destruction and the work went forward at an alarming rate. There were several accidents as this energy was unleashed but nothing seriously went wrong and the buildings were demolished in record time.

Ajahn Dhammanando



THIS IS SNAP SHOT OF A LONG PERIOD WHEN AJAHN SUMEDHO was helping with the washing up during the dismantling of the Main Hall with The Stage and the Gymnasium.

Everyone was very very busy, the work was all day every day, and there was a shortage of people to help with the cleaning up after the meal. Ajahn Sumedho was happy to commit to this practical help as long as was necessary. He enjoyed it.

The dismantling of the old Hall meant also that Ajahn Sumedho lost the place where he was living, which was the changing rooms at the back of the hall. He was using the two rooms and the toilet there at the back of the stage. It had its own entrance by a large tree. That tree was the only one which was taken down when the Temple was built.

The floor from the old hall was taken to Harnham and Devon and reused in the Dhamma Hall there.

A showman's wagon was purchased and lovingly converted and adapted by Venerable Subbato and Venerable Panyasaro and others to make a place where Ajahn Sumedho could stay and be a little quiet and private. It was in the orchard which was close by the site of the Aroga Kuti. It served well.

Then Khun Vanee Lamsam saw it and thought that it was not good enough for the abbot and she offered the Abbot's Kuti by the swimming pool in the centre of the monastery.

Rhikhu Vajro





THE AMARAVATI TEMPLE WAS TO BE BUILT ON THE SITE OF THE OLD SCHOOL Assembly Hall. So, when that Hall was demolished the site for the proposed Temple needed to be consecrated. This was because a 'temple' is literally a sacred place for contemplation. In this case, the Temple would also serve as the site for a *sīmā*. A *sīmā* is an area within which a sangha gathers for its formal legal procedures. It is, for example, the place where an ordination is performed, and it is formally cut off from the surrounding territory by clearly established boundaries.

The practical arrangements were that the Sangha gathered around the rubble of the old Assembly Hall to bless the foundations of the new Temple by offering paritta chanting. At that time, the *sīmā* was given its heart in the form of a casket of precious stones that had been given to Luang Por Sumedho. This casket was carefully placed in the foundations of the Temple in the centre of where the *sīmā* would be designated. The *sīmā* boundary then had to be determined through an exchange between a sangha member and a lay person who represented the local community. In this case this was George Sharp, the Chair of the English Sangha Trust.

The procedure was that each geographical point of the proposed boundary — North, North-West, West, etc. — was agreed upon through a simple question and response. 'This is the marker for the northern boundary.' 'Yes, Bhante.' and so on. When this was accomplished, the important basis of the Temple was created in the midst of the rubble — before the walls, roof or any other aspects of the building were built.



John Sucitto



IN THE WINTER OF 1994 WE VISITED A FACTORY IN KANCHANABURI THAILAND that many of the Luang Por Chah monasteries used for casting Buddharūpas. We had ideas of what style we wanted, and they made a small wax maquette, 8” across the knees, and from that, we made further requests to change the hand mudras, and the shape of the face. All this required multiple visits to the factory. By the next winter they built the full scale rūpa, that was 48” across the knees. It followed the ‘lost-wax’ casting process, where they make a mould that starts with a plaster interior plug; then on top of that, they put a thick layer of wax. The wax can be sculpted with the exact final features of the face, the positions of the arms and hands, the exact style that we had agreed with the smaller model. Then, they add plaster outside of the wax, and it is then ready for casting with bronze.

In Thailand casting a Buddha is a very grand event: a date is set, and many people want to come. We held the event at the factory in Kanchanaburi, and many of Amaravati’s friends and supporters came, as well as many monks from Wat Pah Nanachat and Wat Pah Pong. Lay people consider it very auspicious, and they bring jewellery, often precious rings, bracelets, or necklaces, or pieces of gold, to add them into the melting bronze, as they consider it very auspicious to give up their attachment to the gold, and have it be converted into a Buddharūpa. At the ceremony 6 or 7 fires were made to melt the amount of bronze needed to pour into the mould. The lost-wax process involves having the molten bronze replace the layer of wax in the mould. The mould is turned upside down, the molten bronze is poured into the mould in 5-6 places, and the molten bronze causes the wax to melt, and the bronze effectively replaces the wax, becoming a one-inch thick layer of metal, held in place by the the inner and outer plaster layers. When the molten bronze cools, the plaster is broken off from the outside and inside, and all that remains is the bronze, which is hollow on the inside. There is usually some final finishing to do to make it perfect, and later when we brought it to England, our friend and artist Khun Pang Chinasai covered it with a layer of gold leaf.

John Stevens
(John Stevens)



BACK IN 1989, THERE WAS A SMALL GROUP OF US (TAN VIPASSI, AJAHN Amaro, Sister Cintamani and myself) that came up with a plan to refurbish the old Dhamma Hall, with a covered walkway linking it to the Sala. But in 1990 Luang Por said, “No, no, no, let’s not waste money on that. We should build a proper Temple, and I think people in Thailand will be interested to support it.” So thus began the formal process of planning the Temple.

We courted a few different architects, and Luang Por chose Tom Hancock — Tom was a Buddhist, and Luang Por had a feeling that he could work easily with Tom. The core Temple planning team supporting him were Ajahn Amaro, Sister Jotika, Lawrence Haines (the EST Secretary), and Tom Hancock. For the first two or three years, Luang Por explained that he wanted to take on this project, and it would be his gift to the community. Little information was shared with the community, and most of the community wondered “What is going on? Can we see the plans and comment on them?” Luang Por wished the community would simply trust him, but some awkward feelings were brewing in the wings.

Finally we convinced Luang Por that we should open the plans up to the resident community and some key supporters to invite their comments and hopefully get their support. Luang Por was not altogether comfortable with that idea, but in the end he agreed it was worthwhile, and soon the mistrust that had been in the background evaporated and the whole community began to get excited about the Temple.



John Stevens

(John Stevens)



IN NOVEMBER 1992 THE APPLICATION FOR PLANNING PERMISSION WAS REFUSED BY the local Borough Council. The Council said they were concerned that the design for the building was so attractive, that many people would want to come, and it would lead to traffic problems on the narrow lanes leading to the monastery.

This was a big blow to the Temple team. But also, the team itself was changing. Lawrence Haines had been dismissed that year, Sister Jotika had become burned out as the monastery secretary, and was making plans to go to Burma, and Ajahn Amaro was spending more and more time in America. In the Spring of 1993, I was asked to take over from Sister Jotika, running the office, being the Secretary of the EST, as well as taking on the coordination of the Temple project. I'd been the work monk for five years, and had done a bit of office work, but this was a much more committing role. Sister Jotika was a great mentor, and during her last three months, her key message was: "Sit here and open the mail, Luang Por's a great man, stick to the job, and be loyal". So I put on the hat of the secretary of the English Sangha Trust, and together with Venerable Jutindharo, joined Luang Por and Ajahn Amaro on the Temple planning team.

We began discussing the planning issues with the Borough Council, and agreed we would redesign a building that was smaller and less visible from the main A-road down in the valley by the village.

In August of '93 we submitted a second application for planning permission, this time reducing the height from 60' down to 40', and reducing the square footage by 1/3rd. To our surprise the Borough Council refused permission a second time. Again they said the road to the monastery wouldn't be able to handle the added traffic.

They compared us to the Hare Krishna temple in Watford. Watford was in the same Borough Council, the Hare Krishna monks also wear saffron robes, and their temple had festivals with 65,000 people 2-3 times/year, that did create big traffic problems on the small country lanes leading to their temple. The Borough Council assumed that we were going to generate a similar problem on the roads. What they didn't appreciate was that our events were drawing only around 3,000 people, not 65,000.



Following our architect's recommendation, we took advice from legal counsel, a QC — a Queens Counsel lawyer — who was an expert in planning law. He advised us to appeal on both applications, and agreed to represent us. We prepared all the documents and witness statements. The hearing in front of a National Planning Inspector lasted two days. Curiously, at the time of the second application the Planning Officer who worked for the Council's Planning Department, had written an 11-page-report in support of giving us permission. Despite that, the Council had gone against their own planning officer's recommendation. At the appeal the Council brought 11 witnesses against us, including a member of parliament, two County councillors, the head of the County Highways Department, four Borough councillors, the head of the Parish Council, the Rural Heritage Society, a local environmentalist, as well as local neighbours; effectively representatives from the whole local establishment.

Their arguments were specious, saying things like: foreign people driving to the monastery didn't know how to drive properly — they dig up the verges of the road; or that buses were coming direct from Heathrow airport with hundreds of people — showing pictures with no dates or numbers.

We commissioned a traffic survey which showed that even on our biggest festival days, when we had around 3,000 people, the roadway to the monastery did not have a problem with handling the traffic. The Council's argument seemed to be based on hysteria.

The moment of revelation in the two-day hearing was when our QC was questioning Mr Howling, the head of the County Highways Department: "At the time of the first application for the larger building, you didn't think that traffic would be a problem; but then in the second application you wrote to say that there would be a traffic problem. What made you change your mind?" Mr Howling said: "I received some letters from the Borough Council." The QC asked to see those letters, and the head of highways said "they are all here in this envelope".

In that envelope we found one letter where Mr Howling wrote to his superior, the Chair of the Environment for the County Council, saying: "I don't appreciate the way the Borough Councillors are putting pressure on me and my staff to change our opinion, against our judgement..." Soon after receiving that letter he did change his opinion. At that point in the hearing, Borough Councillor Frank Seeley, who Mr Howling's letter referred to, was across the room, with his head in his hands, as he was due to be the next witness. The QC asked Mr Seely to read out the letter he'd written to Mr Howling. The QC was like a surgeon, polite, and simply extracting the facts. In his final summary statement to the Inspector, the QC said: "I hope the Inspector will help this Borough Council make decisions in accordance with their own planning criteria". The inspector, who had listened quietly for two days, with a reserve, asking no questions. Two months later, in January 1994, we received a letter from the Inspector saying there was no valid planning reason to refuse permission, and we were granted permission to build either of the two buildings, the smaller or the larger.

At the time, that Planning Committee of Dacorum Borough Council had other cases where they had refused planning permission, which had also gone to appeal, and they had lost, again for not following planning rules in their decision-making; and sometimes they even had to pay the other party's legal costs.

Needless to say, we were thrilled, and Luang Por and the Sangha chose to build the first building, the larger of the two designs, which was felt to be more suited to Amaravati's needs.

(John Stevens)



IN 1994-95 I'D BEEN AWAY IN THE STATES FOR TEN MONTHS. WHEN I RETURNED, the ground had been broken at Amaravati for this massive project, a Temple. I drove a couple of the monks from London to attend a ceremony to establish the *sīmā*: Venerable (Doctor) Vajirañāna and a very senior monk from Wat Buddhapadipa, whose name I never remembered. During the ceremony, I didn't have a clue as to what was taking place, yet I was fascinated by the sight of a tightly clustered group of monks moving from section to section of the building footprint, chanting over and over.

The years of the Temple construction coincided with when I was visiting Amaravati most frequently, so seeing this edifice arise and change was a regular feature for me. The first time I entered the building was during a retreat at the Retreat Centre, led by Luang Por Viradhammo. At some point, he offered us the opportunity to enter the building site. All of those oak beams, which is all that was there at the time. Amazing! The other strong image I have is that I happened to be visiting for the evening and the *Buddharūpa* had just been installed. Carpets and mats covered enough of the bare floor for a *pūja* to take place, including a long string of auspicious chanting followed by meditation, all surrounded by scaffolding and whatever else an active building site has around.

Lastly, I had the privilege to be invited to the Temple opening on 4 July 1999, in the Temple itself where I could witness this great event. I was quite oblivious as to who the visiting Elders and dignitaries were, which I think may have only added to my curiosity and sense of wonder. Every time I enter the Temple, I have a warm feeling of familiarity and comfort. One of my favourite spaces in the world to enter.

Chinsook Bhikkhu





THE SITE HERE, AMARAVATI WAS BUILT AS A SUMMER SCHOOL IN 1939. THERE were all these wooden buildings, like an army camp, like a Boy Scout camp. It had a tarmac area for school assemblies. The actual site itself did not convey anything Buddhist. I felt at the time that Amaravati didn't have a centre point or a heart to it. It just looked like a summer camp for children. I therefore thought of building a proper temple. I talked with George Sharp, the Chairman of the English Sangha Trust at the time, and he agreed with me. He suggested that I consult with his friend, Tom Hancock, a very well-known British architect who helped to build the Buddhist pagodas in Milton Keynes and Battersea Park.

Tom Hancock was a British Buddhist. I contacted him. He asked me what I wanted, and I jokingly said, "I'd like to build a temple, so that as soon as stressed out people from London enter the temple, they feel silent and peaceful." Of course I thought it was asking a lot for an architect to create something around that. I believe he took me quite seriously because to this day the temple is a place people find very peaceful, even people who know nothing about Buddhism.

Tom Hancock wanted to build it. The local council agreed we could build a temple, but it had to fit in with the local architecture. They didn't want an exotic Thai temple on top of the hill here. Tom Hancock came up with many ideas, and he wanted to use natural materials rather than manufactured ones. This green oak structure that you see in the temple is from an old structural style for barns and big buildings used before the industrial revolution in Europe. Oak is a natural wood of England. England was once absolutely covered with oak trees. They started reviving the skill of green oak structuring, not using nails



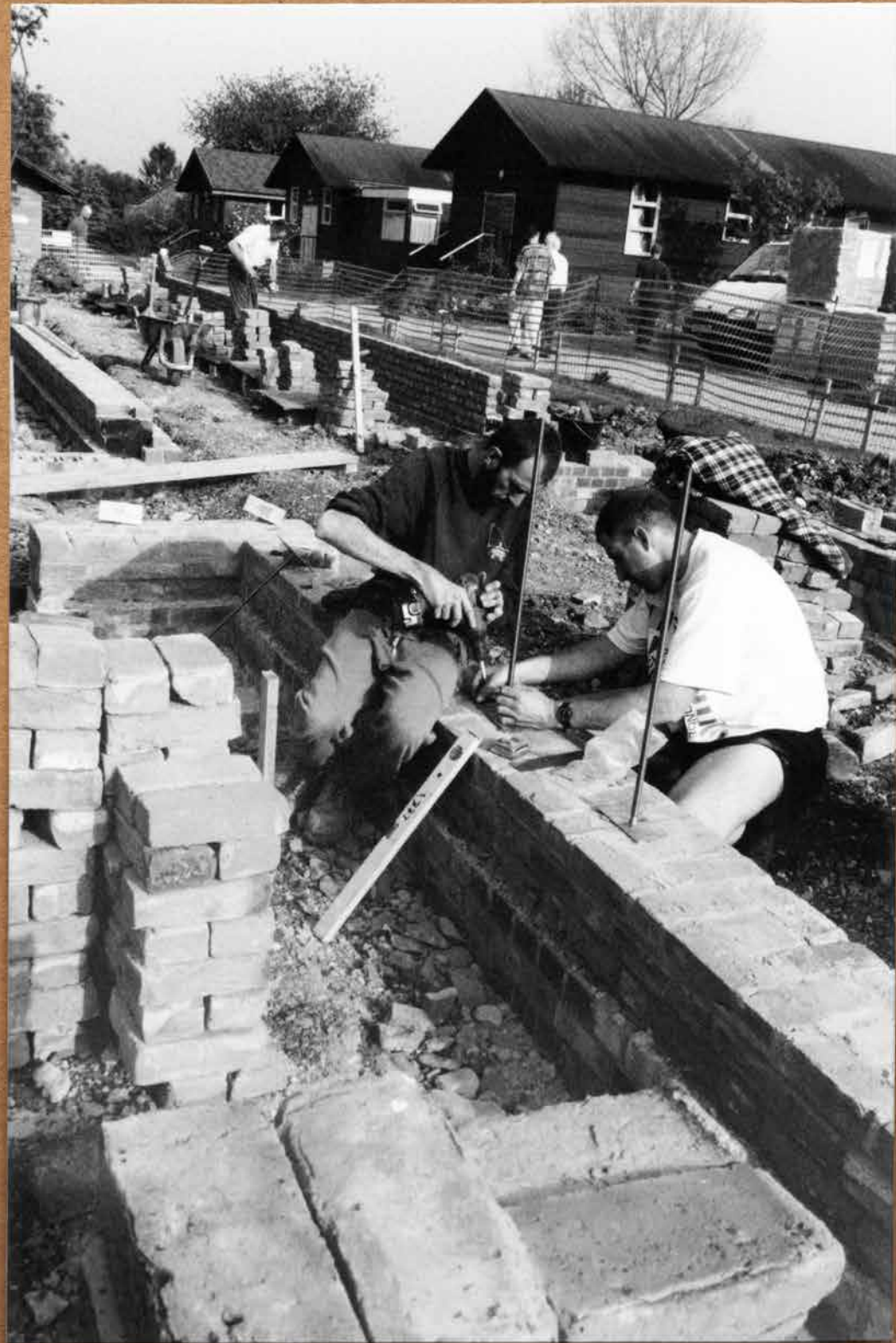
or other things like that. It's all constructed with wooden pegs. Tom came up with a design with eight oak pillars that marked the Sīmā boundary for the Bhikkhus' Sangha Kamma. Then he built a structure around that. When you go inside the Temple you can actually see the old pillars. The flooring was paved with Italian Vincenza tiles. The rest around the Sīmā is paved with terracotta tiles; that are common, especially to European buildings. The local council agreed to the structure.

We are connected with the Thai forest tradition from Ubon Rajathani in Northeast Thailand. Their favourite symbol is the Tat Phanom Chedi. So I convinced them to make a spire on top of the temple in the spirit of the Tat Phanom Stupa in Nakhon Phanom.

These were my ideas, and Tom Hancock agreed to it, and so he arranged to use the green oak structure with the handmade bricks. The bricks that he used at the temple did not come from an assembly line, so they're quite different in colours. And then the tiles on the roof are handmade terracotta tiles. They have handprints on the inside of the tiles.

So this was my idea connecting with Tom Hancock's artistic and architectural expertise.

Ajahn Sumedho



THE CLOISTER, ALONG WITH THE ABBOT'S KUTI, WAS PART OF THE TEMPLE development. However, the cloister was built not as a whole but in a series of sections and the initial build only constituted about one quarter of the final version.

The Temple and Cloister project was the first large scale building project initiated at Amaravati Monastery. The idea that a dedicated "Temple" was going to be built caused consternation in some local minds and there was strong resistance to the initial design. The first version, however, not the second, revised version was, in the end, accepted by the local authority and building commenced in 1996. The completed Temple was formally opened in 1999. The Opening Ceremony, a huge event, was attended by monks and nuns from Thailand and around the world and drew some 3,000 people.

Ajahn Dhammarando

FOR THE FIRST FEW MONTHS AS ANĀGARIKĀS WE HAD OUR HAIR CROPPED; Ajahn Sumedho wouldn't allow us to shave completely, he thought it might be too shocking for British people to see women with shaven heads. However, after a visit by Martine Batchelor in 1980, who at that time had been a nun within the Korean tradition for about five years, it was time for us to shave our heads. Personally, I found it very special as it gave more of a sense of belonging to the monastic community in a different, more complete way. However, it was very hard for my parents; they had been really upset about my decision to be a nun and shaving my head was too much. I missed seeing my family as often as I would have wished — but I was very inspired by Ajahn Sumedho and the other monks, and they were very kind to us; I think they liked our enthusiasm for the monastic life ... and our cooking!

When someone is about to take the anāgārikā precepts we gather for a head shaving ceremony. While the candidates' heads are being shaved we chant parittas, as a way of wishing them well — often trays with cards and gifts are offered to each of them. It is always a joyful occasion.

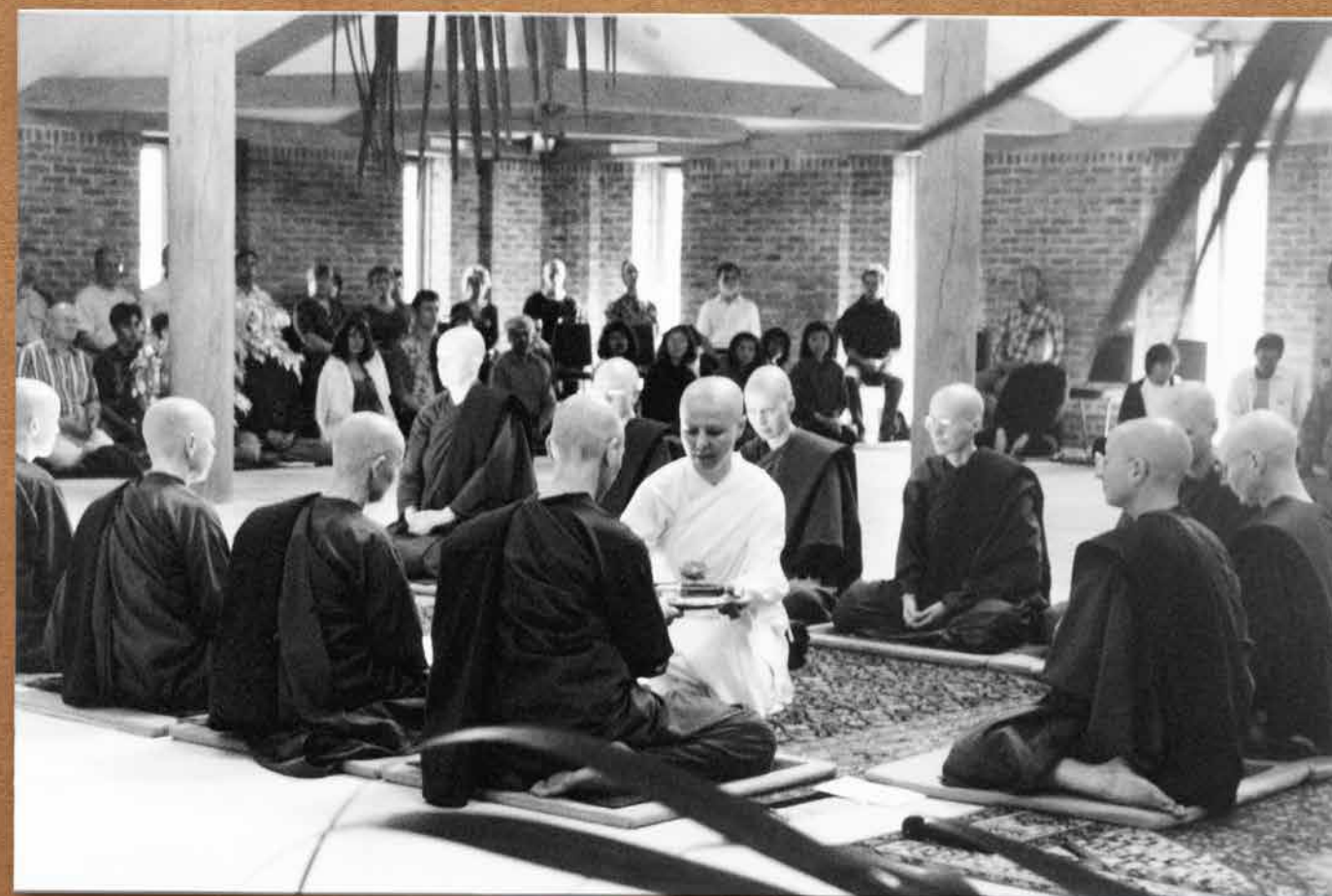
Sister Ajahn Candaviri



THE PHOTO OF THE SĪLADHARĀ ORDINATION CEREMONY IN THE TEMPLE was the second such ceremony to be held, even though the Temple had not at that stage been completed. The official opening ceremony was not until a couple of years later, in 1999. Sister Santacitta, who is in this photo, was ordained on her own. I remember that Chatsumarn Kabilsingh — a well-known Thai university professor, who later was ordained as Bhikkhuni Dhammananda — was there; she had a number of technical questions about the ordination procedure.

Our pabbajjā ceremony was devised by Ajahn Sucitto, who had been asked by Ajahn Sumedho to help us set up a formal training and procedures that we could use as nuns living in community. This was after permission had been given for the Ten Precepts to be offered to nuns of our community. Previously, we had been following the Eight Precepts, in the same style of training as the maechees in Thailand. It was a big step for us, in that it enabled us to live as alms mendicants in much the same way as the bhikkhu community. In the absence of any prospect of bhikkhuni ordination this was a highly significant development for us.

Sister Ajahn Candaviri





ON THE WEEKEND OF THE 4TH OF JULY, 1999, THERE WAS A GRAND opening ceremony and dedication for the Temple. On the Saturday the broader local community from around Hertfordshire, including the Bishop of St Albans and local MPs and mayors, were invited to an Open Day. On the Sunday, once again, Luang Por Paññananda led the ceremonies for the monastic community, and the event was honoured by the presence of Princess Kalyani, the sister of the late King of Thailand, Bhumipol Adulyadej, and she served as the senior lay person. She led the ceremony of installing the Luk Nimit 'the Seed Stone' at the very centre of the Temple, which signified the completion of the construction. Once again, Elders from the monastic community in Thailand — including Tan Chao Khun Rajapreechayanmuni, the preceptor of Luang Por Sumedho who had ordained him as a bhikkhu in 1967 — gathered for this auspicious occasion, along with many other monastic friends and members of the lay community from around the world.

Amaro Bhikkhu

THE THAI AND SRI LANKAN AMBASSADORS BOTH ATTENDED THE ground breaking ceremony, taking turns with a hoe, digging the first holes in the ground. Eight 16" diameter granite orbs had been carved by a sculptor/friend of the Sangha named Ken Grant. These Simā stones were placed into holes, and buried underground, to mark the Simā boundary. The foundations of the Temple were then dug in a way that did not disturb the Simā stones.

At that time in 1995, we had sufficient funds to build the Temple and one-quarter of the Cloister, linking the Temple to the Sala. It wasn't until 1997 that we finally had the funds to complete the remainder of the Cloister. We then paused for a year, and in mid-1998, we began to plan a grand Opening ceremony which was held in July 1999.

Luang Por had a long standing friendship with Her Royal Highness Princess Kalyani, the sister of the King of Thailand, Several years before she had accepted Luang Por's invitation to come to the Temple's Opening Ceremonies. But as preparations neared, she had one request: In Thai tradition, the key moment of such an opening ceremony is the cutting of the ties of when the ropes suspending the the 'Luk Nimit', the 9th Sima stone, over a hole in the ground, typically a machete is used, and the Princess had prior experience where wielding the machete was not so easy, and from her point of view, not very dignified. She asked if we could find a more elegant and graceful way for her to perform this important act in the ceremony.

Venerable Kusalo, from New Zealand built a wooden ramp, with a shallow pitch, sloping downward toward the hole, and with the heavy luk-nimit on the ramp, all that was needed to keep it from rolling down the ramp was a wide piece of ribbon cloth, and we could give Princess Kalyani a beautiful pair of scissors, and that ribbon would be easily cut through.

The Opening Ceremony took place on 4th July 1999. We had many senior monks come from Wat Pah Pong, as well as the 90 year-old Tan Chao Khun Paññānanda. In all 3,000 people came, many from Thailand. The Temple was packed with dignitaries; a huge marquee was erected in the field, with a giant screen, with closed circuit TV relaying the proceedings happening inside the Temple to the people in the marquee. Princess Kalyani did cut the ribbon, and a big smile came across her face when it all worked out as well as we had hoped. Tan Chao Khun Paññānanda gave a rousing Dhamma talk translated by Ajahn Jayasaro. Books and CD's of Dhamma talks, t-shirts, mugs were given out as gifts, as well as many of the 108 small-scale Buddharūpa statues, that had been made 4 years before at the casting ceremony were also presented as gifts to the guest monks and dignitaries.



John Stevens

(John Stevens)



THE “BOROBUDUR STUPA” WAS OFFERED TO AMARAVATI IN THE 1990’S.

Ajahn Kusalo, an omnipractical New Zealander had assembled it “temporarily” with his own hands and a set of tools he created himself. For many years it was sitting level with the ground and missing the pinnacle — so that the Buddha was exposed to the viewers. This had to change and so in about 2006 a group of monks and laypeople started the project of building it properly. At that time a professional mason came for a visit and happen to lose his wallet. The wallet was found and returned to the builder with all its contents. This sparked faith and trust in the man and led to him offering to do the work for free.

Foundations were poured, the mound was built around it and the stupa assembled.

It served as a focal point for circumambulations during auspicious events and a place for contemplation, also a much photographed object — in the morning mist and in the moon light, surrounded by blooming cherries or covered by snow. When the plans for new stupa were announced some of the community members were not happy. They became quite attached to the old one — for the simple look of grey stone structure blended well into the English nature.

Nyanadassano



Goodbye Forever

2004 - 2014

THE YEAR 2004 BROUGHT LUANG POR SUMEDHO'S 70TH BIRTHDAY AS well as more and more people coming to visit to make daily offerings, to stay at Amaravati as guests, to attend classes and family events, and to participate in meditation retreats. On weekends, the sala would regularly be crammed to bursting — with all the Sangha and the lay community gathered in the main hall to share the meal offering.

In 2009, Luang Por Sumedho regularly expressed his wish and intention to retire from the abbotship, and an invitation was made to Ajahn Amaro in December of that year for him to consider coming to England to take up that role. He had been co-abbot of Abhayagiri in California for the previous 13 years with Luang Por Pasanno. Ajahn Amaro duly arrived in July of 2010 and, in November, after the end of the Rains Retreat that year, Luang Por Sumedho took his leave saying, 'Goodbye forever!' as was his wont when parting company with anybody and everybody in those days.

There had been a lot of questioning about community life and traditional structures in the period leading up to Luang Por Sumedho's retirement. It was a challenging period for the monastic community and a number of Sangha members left to pursue other paths. With Ajahn Amaro's arrival there was a need to begin a reconsolidation. He spent a lot of time sitting and talking with every monastic and lay member of the Amaravati community during the Rains Retreat of 2010, in order to get to know everyone and to foster an atmosphere of 'beginning again.'



On Luang Por Sumedho's departure, Ajahn Amaro formally took up the role of abbot and began to get settled in through the second half of that decade. During the early part of this period it became clear that the now 70-year-old wooden buildings were a major source of wasteful expenditure, being very energy-inefficient and expensive to maintain. Also, even though the Sangha had adapted to the use of the long thin buildings, they were not of a form that was particularly conducive to either the lives of the resident monastic community, or the functioning of the Retreat Centre, or for communal functions with the laity, so it became clear that a long-term plan to replace the old wooden buildings needed to be developed. This was agreed upon in principle, in 2011, by the monastic community and the long-term lay residents, as well as by the English Sangha Trust. Pamutto Donohoe was contracted to serve as project manager and, over the next two years, a masterplan for the whole site was developed. Finances were still tight, so even though there was a plan, there was no capacity to start any construction at this time.

During this period the numbers of visitors, guests and retreatants steadily increased; almost every retreat at the Retreat Centre was at full capacity and, even with the Sangha no longer sitting to have the meal with the lay community in the Sala, it was found that the Temple needed to be the venue for the meal offering ceremonies on Saturday and Sunday mornings because the sala was too crowded.



AJAHN JAYASARO ARRANGED TO CELEBRATE THE 25TH VASSA OF “the Four”; Ajahn Nyanadhammo, Ajahn Jayasaro, Ajahn Vajiro, Ajahn Khemanando. This was the first kuti at Amaravati and it was built on the site of the old sewage system. The site was chosen as there was already an electricity supply to that area. The kuti is lined with bamboo for the walls, and floor. The argument used to justify the kutis was that: Amaravati is a Buddhist Monastery, kutis are integral to a Buddhist monastery so permission for the building of kutis on the site is already implied.

The electricity supply was put in by the school to upgrade the gravity system that just poured the sewage through a large septic tank into Amaravati woods.

The upgraded system was unreliable, and often there was raw sewage in the woods. In early 1990’s the mains system was put in for the whole lane.

Rhikkhu Vajiro



THIS WOULD BE ONE OF LUANG POR SUMEDHO’S birthday gatherings — perhaps his 70th. Chithurst community would come and join us at Amaravati for breakfast together. We used to have breakfasts in quite formal way.

Nyanadassano





IN MARCH 2006 MY WIFE DILSIRI AND I WERE AT AMARAVATI ON ONE OF OUR regular visits. We were fortunate to be invited to the Abbot's Kuti to pay our respects to Luang Por Sumedho.

During the ensuing conversation he mentioned that the Temple's heating was not working and that he wished that it would be repaired in time for the 2007 winter retreat. It was a particularly severe winter in 2006 and the Temple was extremely cold with temperatures near freezing. Temporary heating was provided using heavy duty fan heaters. However they were very noisy and were not effective in providing a suitable environment for the Sangha to meditate in the temple.

Being an engineer myself I offered to help to get it sorted out.

Ajahn Jutindaro was the senior monk at that time who had been helping to get the work started and had done a lot of the initial work.

I then joined the group that was formed to get the heating repaired. The group consisted of Ajahn Vajiro the most senior monk at the time and Keith Hammond the then Trust Secretary of the EST.

I contacted the Consultant Engineer who had designed the original heating system. He had already been commissioned and was progressing with a new design for the temple heating.

We also needed an architect to help with the redesign of the temple flooring. A local architect who had offered to help was invited to join the team. Once the design was completed quotations were invited from three contractors. After selecting a suitable contractor work on repairing the heating system in the Temple began.

The entire floor of the temple was removed. It had to be done very carefully without damaging the oak columns nor the foundations of the building. With due care and the blessings of Luang Por Sumedho and the entire sangha community this objective was achieved.

The Contractor was given the task to obtain the replacement marble tiles from the original supplier from Italy. The clay tiles were obtained from a reputed local supplier.

More importantly the replacement heating system was sourced from a new supplier. The consultant engineer was very careful in selecting the supplier to ensure that there would not be a repeat failure after a few more years. The deficiencies of the original heating system were addressed. In addition a cleansing system was included so that the entire underfloor heating system could be flushed out on a regular basis.

We were very fortunate that the contractor had a young engineer in his team who was able to redesign the entire floor using a computer design. The architect was very grateful for this contribution.

Ven. Panniyasaro, Luang Por Sumedho's support monk at the time, was able to obtain the beautiful lotus inlaid tiles for the corners of the inner area of the Temple from Thailand.

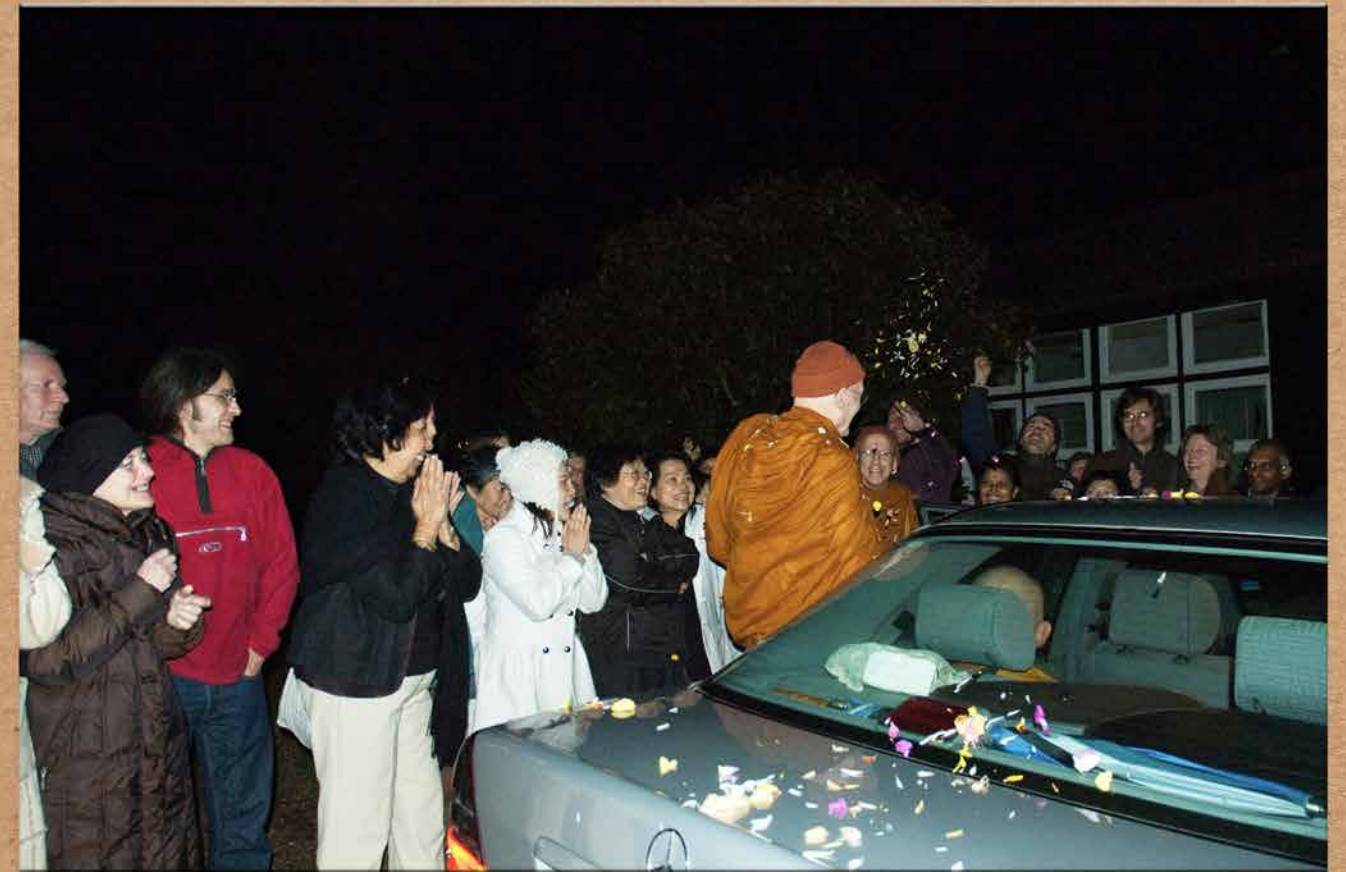
In the end Luang Por Sumedho and the Amaravati Sangha were overjoyed that they could use the Temple again without freezing in the cold or having very noisy fan heaters to heat the Temple.



M. Sumedho







IN 2010, WHEN WE HEARD LUANG POR WAS LEAVING AMARAVATI, MANY of us were so desperate! Our hearts swelled and were oozing with sorrow. I remember the day Luang Por left.

It was dark and around 6 p.m., the cars were lined up ready to take Luang Por to the airport. George Sharp was there too. Luang Por came out from his kuti and first went to the Buddha statue outside where a group of sangha and a few lay people already gathered. I was there too. Whilst sangha was chanting Luang Por deposited some relics inside the Buddha statue, then went to the Temple. The Temple was already full, the sangha chanted and evoked blessings. Finally Luang Por walked out of the Temple, through the Cloister to the car, we too followed Luang Por.

We were grief stricken; tears were pouring. Loads of people were holding rose petals, stood in a long line along the road leading to the gates, started from about the outside the Cloister entrance opposite the abbot's kuti to a fair distance towards the library. We all threw rose petals on Luang Por as he was leaving. There are no words to describe how we felt! In the middle of rivers of tears, Luang Por left Amaravati.

George and Ajahn Amaro accompanied him to the airport. A gathering of the sangha and lay people were there at the airport too to see Luang Por off.

I don't know how to describe the vacuum that was left behind. The whole place seemed to be empty. Wherever I looked it seemed empty. He was greatly missed by so many of us! Our gratitude to Luang Por for everything he did was very profound in our minds.

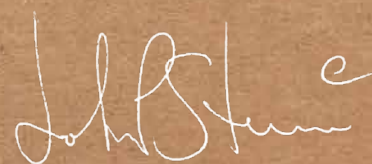
Amita.



FEBRUARY 1994, LUANG POR HAD INVITED TOM HANCOCK to Thailand see first hand, temples in Thailand and Laos, and to meet with a famous Thai architect who specialised in Buddhist Temple designs. Tom brought his drawings of the Amaravati Temple along which had pyramidal rooflines. The Thai architect scribbled on the drawings, adding dormer windows onto the 4 roof faces. Tom was shocked, and affronted, saying "How can he deface my design?" A week later Tom and I went to Laos to see some Laotian monasteries in Laos and around that also had cloistered walkways outside the temple, which gave Tom more inspiration and he made further changes to his design ideas. And once back in England the new drawings had dormer windows in the 4 roof faces, and the cloister rooflines began to look more similar to ones we'd seen in Laos. Though he had started out defensive about changing his ideas, he began to feel the building would be better with the changes.

One of the biggest challenges with Tom Hancock was he had so much passion for the project, he'd often dream up new changes, even during the construction phase, and arrive on a Monday morning with a new drawing that he insisted must be followed, even if it added additional costs to the project.

By late 1994 Tom Hancock had drawn up the final construction drawings, so we proceeded with the tendering process, and chose a building contractor. In 1995 construction began with a very inspiring Ground Breaking Ceremony, that also combined as a Sima Ceremony, the 'sima' being the consecrated boundary that the Sangha establishes, inside of which, ordination ceremonies can take place.



(John Stevens)





LUANG POR LIEM APPRECIATES THE PRACTICAL, the bricks and building materials. These are the handmade bricks used in the courtyard and in the Temple. A little rough, a little uneven, a good texture and strength.

Rhikhu Vajro







ABOUT TWENTY YEARS AGO, AFTER MANY SUMMER CAMPS, ONE MOTHER asked if we could have something like a Creative Weekend for adults. Along with several other parents, she was longing to have a weekend where they could meditate, have some Dhamma input and an opportunity to express themselves in a playful way — without needing to look after their children! Usually it was the adults who tried to ensure that the children could do something creative during Family Camp; however while doing so, they began to realize that they too would like to have an opportunity to connect with their own creative and playful intelligence.

Somehow, this request resonated with me: during my training as a junior nun, I had experienced that, at times, I could become quite tight and overly serious in the way we hold our training rules, and I had started to feel a bit stuck between “right” and “wrong”. While, when we do something creative, we need to be willing to experiment and let go of fixed ideas of the outcomes — become playful again, at least temporarily. So I felt quite inspired to offer a Weekend during which parents and older teenagers (18+) could come together and explore a Dhamma theme with more creative means: drawing, painting, creating sculptures with clay or scrap material, and even our bodies; or using our voices, having drama and writing sessions ... Since then, we’ve had many Creative Weekends at the Amaravati Retreat Centre, often exploring themes of Luang Por Sumedho’s teachings which the parents found particularly interesting or puzzling.

The photo on the left is from a Creative Weekend with the theme ‘Anicca’, impermanence.

Sister Cittapāla



VENERABLE AJAHN CHAH TOOK VERY SERIOUSLY THE BUDDHA'S INJUNCTION that one of the best ways to preserve harmony in the Sangha is to 'meet frequently and in large numbers.' Accordingly, in Thailand, there are two occasions every year for representatives of all the branch monasteries to meet — in these current times these meetings are held in mid-January (marking the date of Luang Por Chah's passing away) and in mid-June (marking the date of his birth).

Since there are now about 35 associated and formal branch monasteries distributed around the world, as well as the approximately 350 in Thailand, occasions have been created for members of those foreign branch monasteries to gather in a similar way, every few years. These are valuable and delightful opportunities to spend time with fellow monastics, to catch up on developments, to discuss any difficult issues that have arisen, and to establish protocols that might be needed as the global community spreads and grows over time.

In 2014 just such a gathering was held at Amaravati — named the International Elders Meeting, the acronym IEM being conveniently close in sound to the Thai word เยี่ยม 'yiem' meaning 'to visit'. We came together from May 26 to the 30th and it was probably the largest gathering of monastics at Amaravati since the dedication of the Temple in 1999.



Amaro Bhikkhu



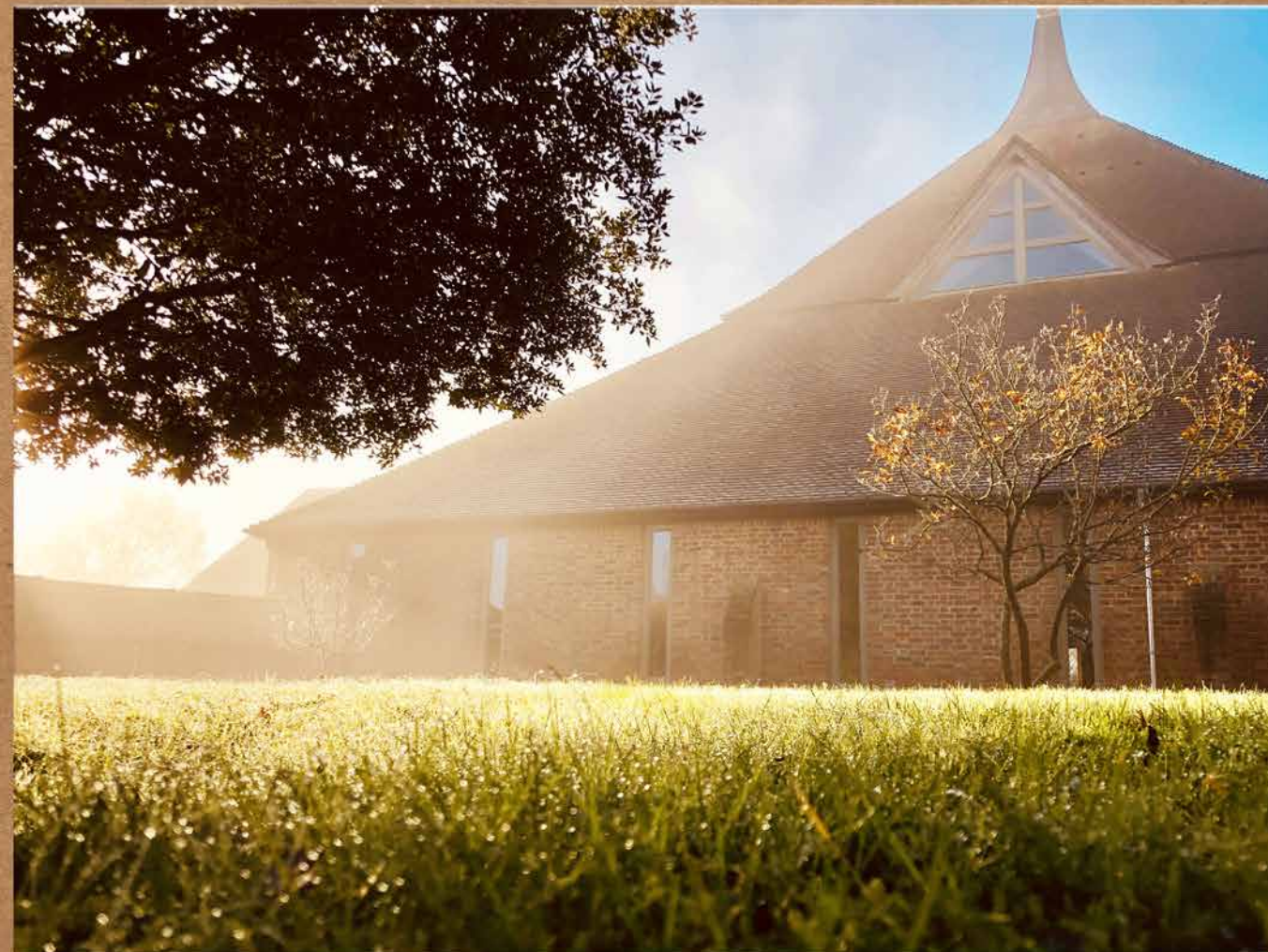
Redevelopment

2014 - 2024

IN 2014, AN INVITATION WAS MADE TO LUANG POR SUMEDHO TO RETURN and lead a week-long Open Retreat for 'anyone and everyone', this to be held in combination with an International Elders Meeting for the broader monastic community of Luang Por Chah's disciples. A pair of events was thus created for that summer. The retreat enabled 450 people to attend the weeklong session, using the Temple as the meditation hall, while the IEM, the grand gathering of the monastic community, was able to meet and discuss Sangha business for several days. This was another occasion upon which senior Elders were invited to come and could spend time at Amaravati, thus strengthening our community ties with different branches in Thailand and around the world.

Luang Por Sumedho was, at this time, happily residing in Thailand at Wat Pah Ratanawan, but it was considered that Amaravati should make moves to provide a suitable dwelling for him should he wish to return, or for the occasions when he would come to stay. The first consideration of the long-term plan was, accordingly, to provide such a dwelling. Ideas and plans for the Aroga Kutti began to be drawn up — Bridget Sheppard was contracted to be the architect. In 2017 we held another International Elders' Meeting and Open Retreat, led by Luang Por Sumedho once again, and he was able to reside in the Aroga Kutti for the first time.

Part of the appeal and necessity for a long-term plan was that the existing old wooden buildings were expensive to maintain, very wasteful of energy and not ideally suited for the purposes of the monastic community, lay residents and guests, and retreatants. Therefore the plan evolved to replace all the old buildings with eco-friendly, energy-efficient structures that were more in keeping with the needs and lifestyle of the various sectors of the Amaravati community. Seven such structures have been put in place so far, with three more under construction (including the new sala) at the time of writing.



In 2019, the Sangha was generously donated two houses along the northern side of St Margaret's Lane, a large house now called Heartwood and the smaller Bungalow next door. These provided very convenient lodgings for the nuns to reside in whilst their new buildings were under construction — as the following reconstruction phase.

In the summer and latter part of 2022 Amaravati was able to open up again as the pandemic was abating. The old sala was demolished during the summer of 2022, and ground was broken for the new complex in January of 2023. The construction process is still underway in 2024, with the planned completion to be in November of this year.

Luang Por Sumedho is now in his 90th year, and we are celebrating his foundational, fundamental and profoundly significant role in the life of Amaravati, and in the spiritual life of the world with an Acariya-Pūja event in May, 2024, in combination with Visakha Pūja. Then again, on July 27th, his 90th birthday will be celebrated, which coincides with the 40th Anniversary of Amaravati, a few days later. This book is part of the commemoration of these landmarks and it is hoped that it serves as an inspiration and a useful keepsake.

Ajahn Amaro has now been abbot of Amaravati for 13 years. The community currently consists of 45 monastics and 10 long-term lay residents. It is intended for the Retreat Centre to reopen in 2025. Plans are being prepared for the rebuilding of the Monks' Vihara complex, with its male long-term lay resident and guest accommodation. The beat goes on...

AJAHN AMARO IS VERY GOOD AT SAYING YES TO ANYTHING. FOR EXAMPLE, when a big event is going to be planned, my possible tendency is, 'Wow, this is difficult... This requires quite a lot. Can we really manage?' I would have hesitation, or even resistance. And these concerns are not mere, emotional reactions, but they can be based on certain previous experience and some relevant considerations. However, Ajahn Amaro is naturally, and would also intentionally be positive to accommodate many challenges, such as huge events and changes. This helps us let go of the initial reaction, 'Oh, this will be too much. We cannot do it.' It is true that we don't have to say yes to everything, and if the leader says, 'Well, we can't do it', of course everything simply stops. But if he says, 'Yes, it's doable. It is possible,' then it can become possible.

When we are in actual operation and we encounter challenges — a sudden, unexpected change happens, something important is noticed missing, etc. — we can possibly become panicked or even give it up. Ajahn Amaro then says, 'There is a way.' We would have internal grumbling, 'Ajahn, you can say so... , but it is very difficult to actually make it' . But we will later realise that he is right. The words, 'There is a way', convey the encouragement and trust from the leader. And they are not superficial, groundless ideas. His positive attitude comes from something deeper, real, free of worry, and truly trusting. This supports us — very important.

Nyanarato Bhikkhu



DURING 2012-13 A MASTERPLAN FOR THE REDEVELOPMENT of the whole Amaravati site was prepared, by the Sangha with the help of Pamutto Donohoe and Rolfe Judd planning consultants. When the plans had been fully worked out, we had an open day to present our ideas for the local community. This was well attended, both by long-standing friends and supporters of Amaravati, as well as by many neighbours in Great and Little Gaddesden, Berkhamsted and Hemel Hempstead.

Amaro Bhikkhu



FROM THE 1980'S ONWARDS THE AUGUST FAMILY CAMP became an annual event at Amaravati. Young people were nurtured in a Buddhist environment and made lasting friendships with one another. The Camp usually culminated in an entertainment (or show) with songs, music, dramatic skits, readings and other kinds of performance. Often put together at the very last minute, these shows were highly entertaining, very funny and sometimes quite moving.

Ajahn Dhammarando





IN THE EARLY SUMMER OF 2016, WE WERE SITTING WITH AJAHN ANANDO and talking about the limitations on the number of kutis we had. It was not possible to get planning permission for more meditation huts. He then had a bright idea: we get an old trailer and build a shed on it. Initially I didn't believe he was serious, but the next day he came with more ideas and I became committed. His mother paid for the frame with wheels and some of the materials, Anāgārika Lawrence bought insulation and provided paint, and a number of monastics lended their hands in building it. All of that happened without consultations with the Amaravati Building Committee. I was somewhat new to the system and didn't intend to dodge it. It just happened.

Building the kuti went well into the autumn, but by the end of vassa it was ready to be used. Ajahn Amaro praised me for the pretty little hut, but told me off for building it "secretly". We moved it to a quiet spot next to the Aroga Nursing kuti and Lawrence spent the winter retreat in it.

Nyanadassano





ON OCTOBER 26TH, 2017, THAILAND WAS GOING TO HOLD THE ROYAL Cremation Ceremony for our beloved King Bhumibol Adulyadej. Temples, provincial town halls, and district offices across the country and abroad were to organize ceremonies allowing local people to join the event from where they live.

We were inquired quite late about the possibility of a ceremony of sandalwood flowers burning. Ajahn Nyanadasso, suggested by Ajahn Kongrit, approached me with the idea of building a replica of the Royal Crematorium on the monastery grounds by the stupa. This would allow people nearby to offer sandalwood flowers as a final tribute to the late King Rama IX, coinciding with the ceremony in Thailand.

We rushed to find official information available on the website how the replica should be built and how to perform the ceremony. Once again, I was deeply moved and impressed by coming together of our bhikkhus — from all different nationalities — to help with wood carving, painting, and decorating, completing everything in one night to show their respect and gratitude to the late King.

Ajahn Pasanno, the abbot of Abhayagiri Monastery in California, was at Amaravati during that time. He gave an inspiring talk about the late King Bhumibol Adulyadej. After the talk, we went to where the replica was located and laid down the sandalwood flower with grief to send off our beloved King. The ceremony was completed beautifully.



MAX, AJAHN NARINDO'S NEPHEW HAD BEEN COMING WITH HIS MOTHER and sister to Amaravati. This family, including Ajahn Narindo's parents likes to come and make offerings to the monastery and monks. Max, being a boy had always been the one his mother tasked to make offerings to the monks. He took his responsibility very seriously. Trying to follow example of his monk uncle, one summer holiday little Max arrived Amaravati with shaved head. So then, Ven. Narindo asked Amaravati's Sangha for a possibility of a temporary novice ordination for Max. But Amaravati has a child protection policy plus it has never been done before. So, the temporary anāgārika role was the middle way. He could share a bedroom in the Bodhi House with his mom and sister.

We trained him to do things like other anāgārikas, including pindapat and handwashing for the monks, care for his own anāgārika's belongings like robe and bowl, offering things to monks, and other sangha's etiquettes.

Although ordained for only two weeks, little Anāgārika Max was adored by everyone in Amaravati.

Smita

Phoe Kemje S.
(Ajahn Kongrit)



WHEN I AM ENGAGED WITH A CERTAIN MONASTERY PROJECT, ALMOST ALWAYS people are willing to help. This originally comes from Wat Pah Pong tradition, I think. Ajahn Chah's style of practice is not one for the narrow sense of one's own benefit only, but also learning how to เสียสละ 'sia-sala', a Thai word that means to give up. Giving up one's own convenience, one's own ideas, personal preferences, time, etc. and then thinking of just to be helpful. This attitude has been taught and emphasised in Ajahn Chah's tradition. And Amaravati is not an exception at all.

When someone is organising an event or alike, he/she can plan and think about it, but certainly it cannot be his/her own, single person's operation. They definitely need people to help. I definitely need people to help. The idea of giving up doesn't mean we've got to do so blindly without any consideration or perspective. For instance, it is necessary to be careful about the amount of work, and we should not be negligent of one's own need for formal practice. Then, the situation arises that more efforts and contributions become required. What we'd like to keep in mind is the attitude of 'sia-sala', giving up. Willingness to give up and to offer support will come from people. When I am engaged in organising an event or ceremony, and I ask, 'Shall we do this', it's crucial whether I have such a response as, 'Yes. What can I do?' or a resistance as, 'Why do we bother to do this?' That makes a huge difference. If people say, 'Yes, Ajahn, how can I help?' just the joy follows. But if the reply is a heavy tone of 'Why?', it's very discouraging, isn't it? In my experience, for most of the cases, 'Yes, Ajahn', will come. This is the joy.

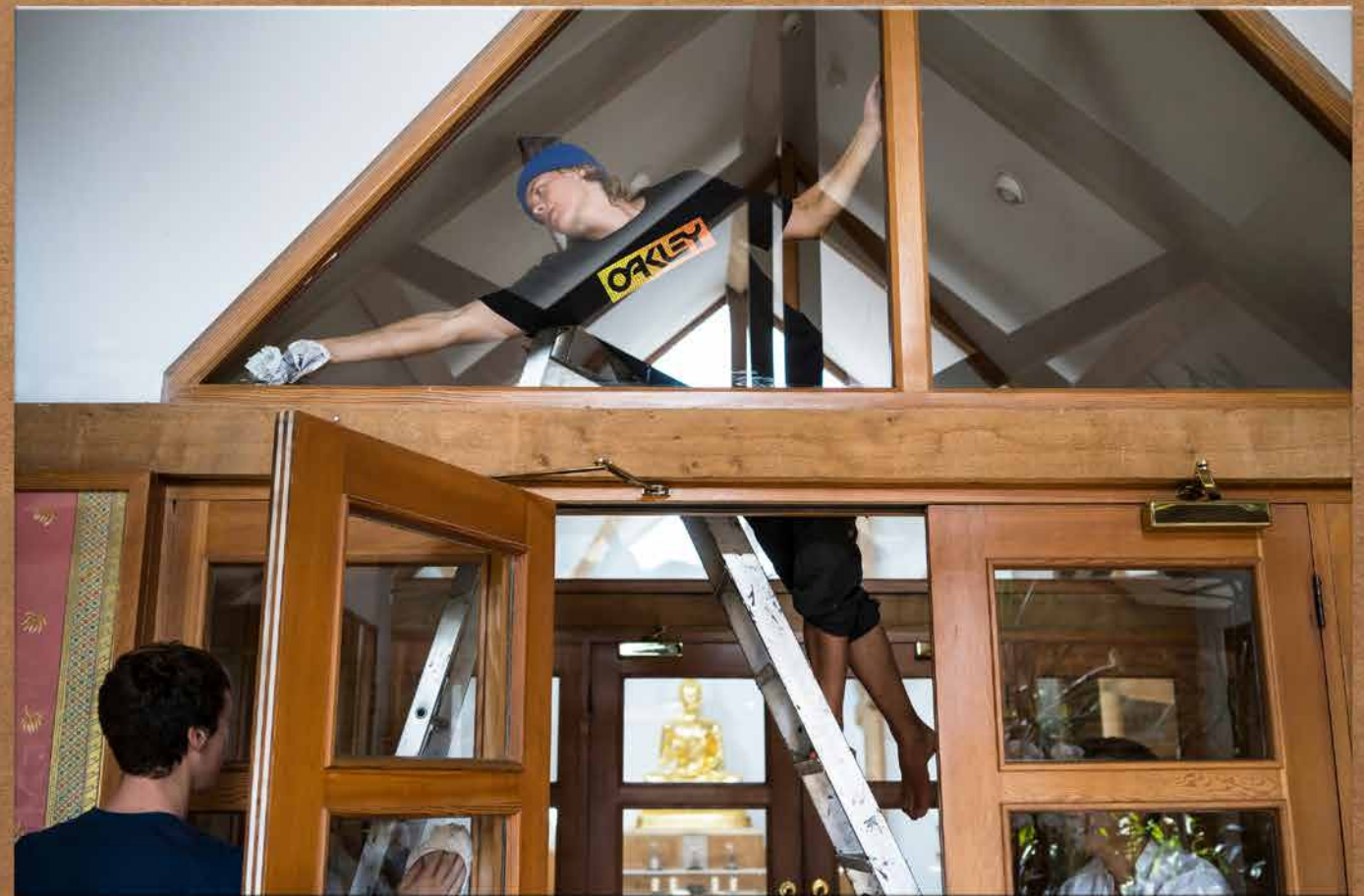
In terms of workload, the most challenging one was Luang Por's open retreat in 2017 which was held together with IEM (International Elders Meeting). It was not only the size of the function, but we also had to prepare the site for both visiting monastics and lay people in a large number. Kathina is mainly to receive a big crowd of lay visitors whereas IEM is a gathering of the sangha. But this open retreat was a mixture of both. We had to host visiting monastics, as well as an unusual size of lay people. And, the lay people were not day visitors, but stayed overnight for a few days. This way of preparation was new to us. We arranged a portal cabin for temporary accommodations. Furthermore, how to manage the seating in the temple was also a challenge. It's not just a festive occasion, when we try to accommodate as many as visitors by minimising the gaps between the seats, but it was a retreat, an occasion for meditation and listening to teachings. It was necessary to arrange the seating differently, in order to provide a more supportive atmosphere for these purposes in the hall. And yet so many people wished to attend and wanted to have seats, which could cause conflicts, even. How can we manage it? As a solution, we created a seating map, with seat numbers, like 1A, 1B, as you see in the theaters. This is a good example of how quite detailed planning became necessary. And it was not a single day event, it continued for a few days, and at the end, we also had the IEM meeting, a very different style of large gathering.

After the whole event was over, I found myself physically very exhausted. The feeling of physical tiredness was the strongest, since I came to Amaravati. But, of course, it was a very rewarding, and wonderful experience. I was so happy. There's nothing for me to complain about, not at all...

Ngamarate Bhikkhu





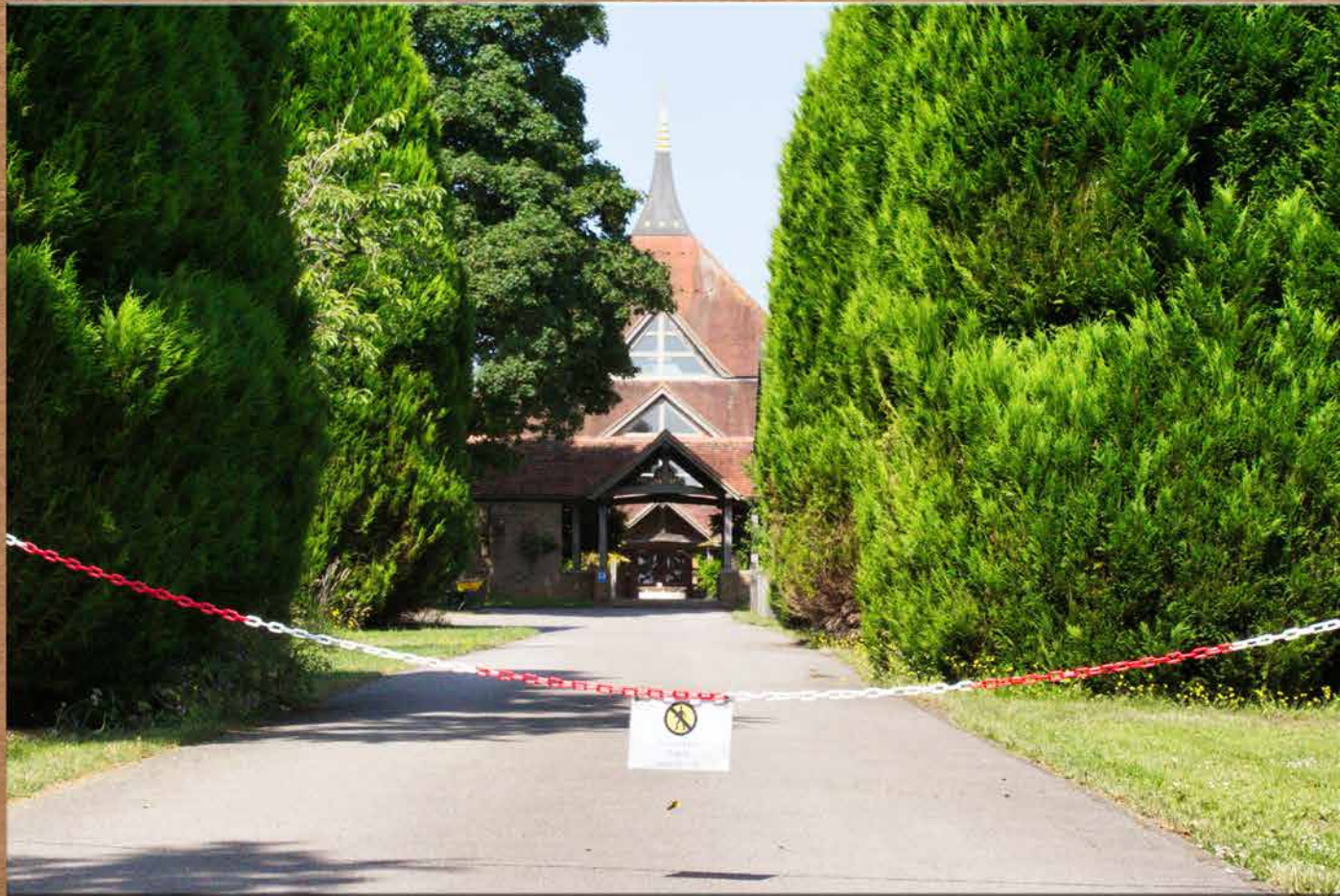




ON THE 26TH OF OCTOBER, 2019, THE WORLD TIPITAKA FOUNDATION, led by Thanpuying Varaporn Pramoj, offered to Amaravati Monastery as a Gift of Dhamma, a full set of the Pali Tipitaka in Roman Script, which had been prepared and printed with scrupulous care by their own organization. The collection is now housed in a custom-made cabinet in the Amaravati Library and is a valuable resource for Dhamma study for the community and for future generations.

Amaro Bhikkhu





THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND RESULTANT LIMITATIONS HAD A HUGE impact on Amaravati from March 2020 until the restrictions were lifted in September 2022. It was impressive to see the way the dedication and faith of the lay-supporters was undimmed, and food offerings were brought daily to be delivered at the back gate to socially distanced tables. Later on a breezy marquee was set up to hold the mealtime blessing which, again, many faithful and dedicated supporters made good use of on a daily basis.

The monastery formed a 'COVID Committee' of residents and expert advisors, who met 50 times over the many months of the pandemic, usually for three-hour meetings, to go through the development of the disease, the changing Government restrictions, and the various ways needed to adapt community life to fit the situation. It was again a great opportunity to develop the practice of Dhamma and to cultivate mindfulness and a very practical wisdom.



Amaro Bhikkhu

“RANDULA, IT’S HEADING THIS WAY. I’M QUITE WORRIED.” AJAHN BODHIPALA grabs my attention from across the Sala after the meal. “What is it Ajahn? What’s heading this way?” I ask rather bemused.

“Haven’t you heard?” she asks with her eyes wide open, grabbing my hand and pulling me towards a corner. I shake my head. “The virus Randula. It’s affecting everybody. I’ve just returned from Cambodia.”

I had heard of a virus in a news article affecting a cruise ship and stories of people dying in the far East. I sensed that Ajahn Bodhipala might have had first-hand experience of it and appeared rather concerned. So, after the meal we decided to talk to the monk receiving guests at the time: Ajahn Dhammanando. He asked me, “So, I gather you are a doctor. What do you think?” In all honesty, I didn’t know much but it seemed that something was bubbling — cases were rising rapidly in Asia, older people were dying and it appeared to be moving towards Europe.

He took our concerns to heart and dropped an email to Ajahn Amaro.

Ajahn, Respectful Greetings. I am extremely sorry to disturb your last week of solitude... .. I believe this is an issue we have to face up to and try our best to arrive at a sensible and balanced policy... .. we await your response...

With Metta, and apologies, Ajahn Dhammanando

A couple of days later, Ajahn Amaro left his solo retreat and seven or eight of us sat around the table in the Ubon room pondering: “What is this? How do we handle this?”

As the weeks unfolded it became clearer that this wasn’t just another virus ripping through a cruise ship. The elderly were sadly perishing in care homes and cases were spreading fast. On 11 March 2020, the WHO declared the COVID-19 outbreak a global pandemic and the world went into lockdown.

We were 60 - 70 people living together with quite a few elderly or vulnerable and visitors coming to the monastery every day. It was challenging. What were we? A household? How many households? A place of worship? A restaurant? A hostel? A prison? Fittingly with the Dhamma we realised we were neither any of those nor were we none of those — we were an unidentifiable entity!

Interestingly, perhaps due to years of training the monastics were very diligent in taking on these new ‘Vinaya’ rules that were introduced. For example, a limit to how many people could gather in a room, no chanting, to wearing an attire to cover their faces. There were some rules that they took on like ducks to water such as no hugging! We also had to balance being a presence for the public in a time of crisis and on-going monastic training with staying within the precautions of the pandemic to protect us and the wider community. For example, we took to live streaming events, holding zoom sessions, setting up a marquee for the meal offering, allowing limited numbers on pindapat and having the Kathina ceremony with social distancing and masks.

We were fortunate in that a great team came together to respond to the emergency. For example, there was Ajahn Kaccana with his scientific and mathematical brilliance. Later on this was re-inforced by Venerable Niddaro with his experience in doctoral research on both viruses and vaccines! Thanks to the team but more importantly the discipline, flexibility, patience, acceptance, understanding, good will, compassion and wisdom of those living at the monastery and that of many outside supporters and friends coupled with the blessings of the Dhamma, all in the community including Luang Por Sumedho and other elders remained safe.

April 2022, two years and 50 coronavirus meetings later the monastery emerged out of the pandemic — ending the longest winter retreat in recorded history!



Randula





IT WAS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC LOCKDOWN THAT WE CELEBRATED Ajahn Amaro receiving of his new ecclesiastic title of Phra Raja Buddhivaraguna. With COVID-19 restrictions and social distancing in mind, we would still like to celebrate this auspicious event. Ajahn Nānarato raised an idea of using water gutter to channel washing water onto Ajahn Amaro's hands, like water pouring ceremony during Songkran in Wat Pah Pong, would be ideal.

With many practical skills, Ajahn Dtā picked up the project, turning a simple water channel into beautiful Nāga. He downloaded a Thai classical nāga drawing, stuck it onto plywood, traced the line with a router and showed it to me. I found it interesting. We didn't really know which lines to trace, but it looked nāga enough to the untrained eye. We named the two nāgas "Red" and "Green" according to the flowers the sisters helped to decorate.

We beautifully complied with COVID-19 regulations with beautiful ceremony.

Phra Kongsā
(Ajahn Kongrit)







FOLLOWING THE COMPLETION OF THE AROGA KUTI, PLANS for further construction began, with the nuns' community dwellings being the immediate priority. Andrew Yeats had been taken on as the architect, and being a expert in Passive House construction, a method of building that is extremely energy-efficient and eco-friendly, he undertook the design, and was able to oversee the construction of a kuti for the senior nun. A communal meeting hall for the nuns, a nursing kuti for elder and ailing nuns, and lastly, a collection of three buildings for the nuns' accommodation all followed rapidly thereafter.

Amaro Bhikkhu



AFTER ENTRUSTING THE ABBOTSHIP AND CARE OF AMARAVATI Monastery to Ajahn Amaro in 2010, Luang Por spent 10 years in Thailand, residing at Wat Pah Ratanawan. Luang Por loved visiting Wat Nong Pah Pong and Wat Pah Nanachat regularly. As an elderly, senior and very highly respected monk, he was extremely well looked after and beloved in Thailand.

It was also apparent that England and Amaravati still felt like home to Luang Por. This was obvious during every visit back to this monastery, where he spent the largest part of his monastic life. In his late '80s, with the fruits of a lifetime of Dhamma practice to share, he missed teaching in English. It was therefore quite natural for him to accept Ajahn Amaro's invitation to come back and live here at Amaravati in 2021.

Bhikkhu Aoko



GEORGE SHARP PLAYED A VERY SIGNIFICANT ROLE IN THE English Sangha Trust, in that he was Chairman for many years and was the person who made the original invitation for Luang Por Chah and Luang Por Sumedho to visit the UK in 1977. He remained a devoted student of Luang Por Sumedho up until the time of his death, which occurred on the 6th of August, 2022. His funeral was held at Amaravati, with some of his ashes also being scattered at Cittaviveka Monastery, Chithurst, West Sussex.

Amaro Bhikkhu



THE ATMOSPHERE AT AMARAVATI FELT VERY OPEN, WHEN I MOVED HERE. I CAN USE the word “trusting” to describe it. It came from people, and then that set up the tone of life at the monastery. I liked it. I felt encouraged. But one thing I also noticed is that the juniors here were left alone. There’s nobody who was paying attention to them. Or nobody was able to pay attention. People were okay, and even happy, but those aspects such as training, support on an individual basis were missing. That was my feeling and perception. I think when we had the meeting — like the Elders Council Meeting — I mentioned this. I talked about the necessity for the presence of what we now refer as mentors. I used a Thai word พี่เลี้ยง ‘pi-liang’, which means something like “caring brother”. He would offer day to day, brotherly support. I felt it was missing, particularly in the Amaravati community. In this monastery, people can become very individualistic. But then the support to newcomers of the Sangha needed to have more attention. At the Elders Council Meeting, I used the word ‘pi-liang’ to describe the need for supportive presence and its nature. Then naturally I became involved in taking care of the juniors here. This is how I remember the idea of mentors was introduced.

Being a mentor or being a ‘pi-liang’ to newcomers, junior people, it’s not a one way relation — for example, I as the mentor give the juniors information, and they just follow. Is it only this? No. Actually I was learning, too. Quite a part of it is for me to listen to them. There are challenges, difficulties, such as frustration, disappointment, doubt, anger, and other emotions, so it’s not like for me to tell what to do. I am listening to them, and often it feels like a nourishing experience to me, too. It’s not necessarily easy. They are saying how difficult the monastic life is. We are Westerners, Asians, Japanese, but the struggle with doubts, frustrations etc. are very much in common. It comes down to the human experience of suffering, but it is happening in the monastic context and can have a specific flavour and contents. We might come from different backgrounds, but once we really live the monastic life, we experience the similar or the same kind of suffering. We would then know what we are talking about.

By the time I started to live at Amaravati, I already had 15 Vassa. I had had my own experience of how we would suffer, what would be a challenge, and so on, so I felt I should be able to be with the junior people and support them, if possible. Because I had a strong sense that this monastic life is very, very meaningful — however challenging and difficult it can be, it’s not an empty struggle. It is indeed a meaningful struggle. I was willing to listen to them, and if I felt necessary and ready, I was also able to offer them encouragement.

Nyanarato Bhikkhu

THE DISASSEMBLY OF THE BOROBUDUR STUPA APPEARED TO BE A DIFFICULT task, but when started, proved to be quite straightforward. Scaffolding was erected and apart from the heavy pinnacle the individual stones could be handled by one man. The statue of the Buddha was the heaviest, estimated to weigh about 800 kilograms, or 1,800 pounds. Luang Por Sumedho wished to have it in the garden outside his kuti and so, with the help of steel pipes, bits of wood and the quad bike it was transported there. It is now resting on a specially built plinth under a pergola, a beautiful shrine in that area of the monastery.

The “Borobudur Stupa” is planned to be replaced by a more traditional North-East Thai stupa — exact copy of one designed for Wat Pah Nanachat, the first monastery started by Luang Por Sumedho. The Sangha hopes for him to live for many more years, but once he is no longer with us, the ashes of his body will be placed in the new Stupa.

Nyanadassano

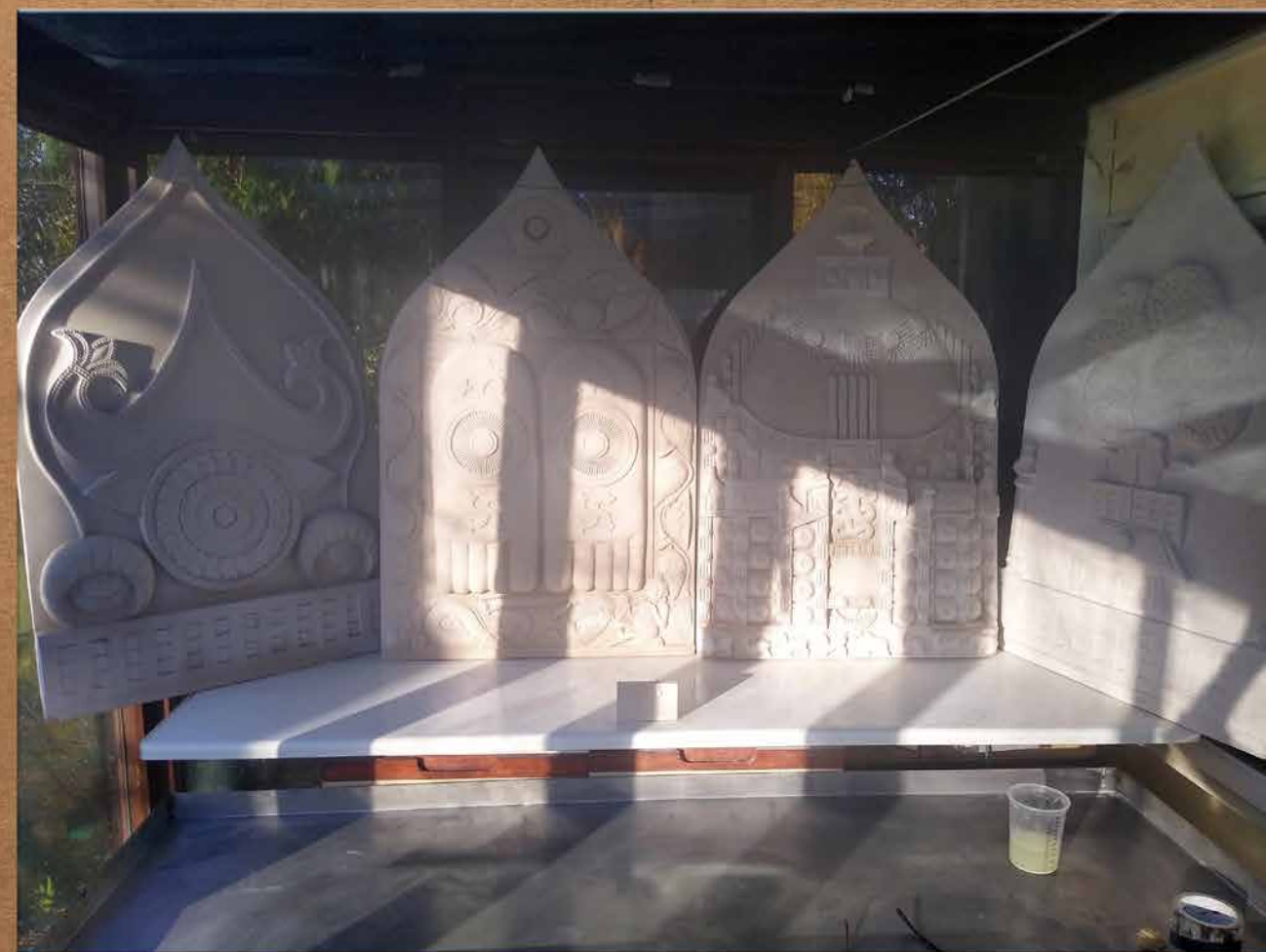


ABOUT TWO YEARS AGO AJAHN AMARO APPROACHED ME ABOUT recreating four panels to be used on the new stupa being planned for the future. His idea was for me to reproduce panels similar to those used at the ancient Amaravati vihara in India, rather than to use statues of Lord Buddha. Amaravati in India being the ancient site bearing the same name as our own vihara.

After committing myself to this idea we sat down together with a book about the ancient vihara, picking out four carvings to be copied, changing slightly some elements. I then did drawings with my own renderings which Ajahn, I was pleased to say, accepted. In the past I have also had the desire to produce a Gandaran style Standing Buddharūpa. These are my personal favourites. On hearing this my family offered to order some 50 kilos of clay. I was living at the Devon vihara at the time in a small kuti so began working on the four panels for the stupa on the one hand while producing the Buddharūpa as a personal offering working in my own time on the other. I then moved up to my old room with a large conservatory at Amaravati. This offered me a much larger space to work in. I was then invited to spend last vassa, 2023, at a new hermitage in Sri Lanka, after which I returned to the UK at the beginning of 2024 spending the next two months making moulds and casting the work in stone.

The stone panels are now finished and stored in the attic above Luang Por's room waiting the time that the stupa is built, and a plaster cast of my gift of a Gandaran Buddha has been offered to Luang Por in gratitude.

AJ Vimala







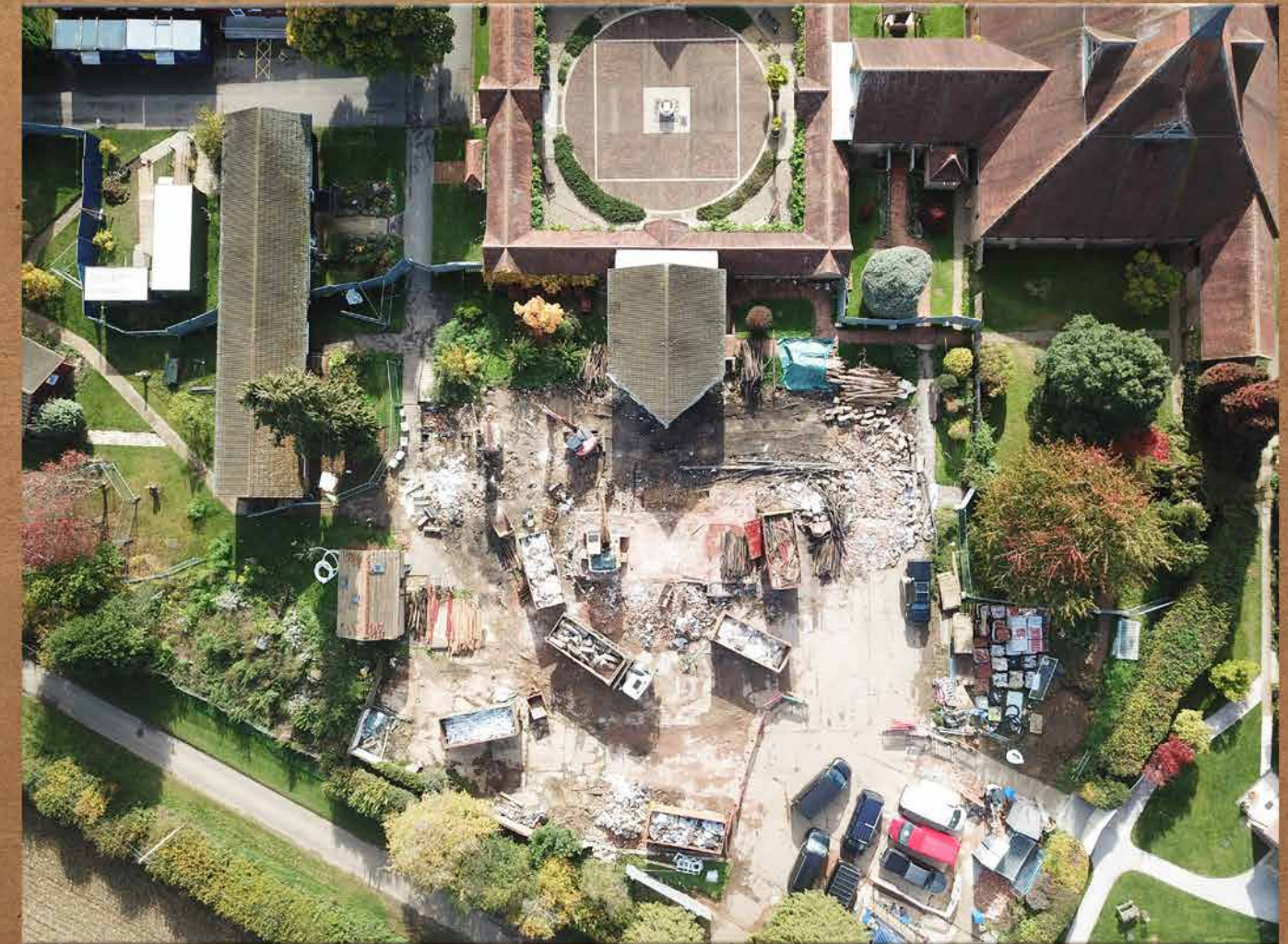
DURING THE PROCESS OF REPLACING THE OLD FACILITIES WITH the new there has been the need to cultivate a great degree of adaptability. As old buildings were vacated and demolished, there was a need to house the people and the functions in different places on the site. This has required a high degree of ingenuity, adaptability and energetic engagement but it has all been valuable in the development of Dhamma practice.

The preparations for the new sala build took a year to actualize, with 'sāmaggi-day' working bees for the whole community being held every week from April to December 2022. The old library was moved to the publications block, providing surprisingly improved amenities. The sala was calculated to have 108 different functions that all needed to be housed elsewhere. The Retreat Centre kitchen was co-opted to be the main kitchen for the monastery for two years, while the women's dormitory has been put to use as the 'temporary sala' to great good effect, as well as the men's dormitory being used for furniture and book storage.

While the Retreat Centre facilities have been used in this way it has been necessary to hold mostly online retreats, as we had done in the COVID-19 period of restrictions. That said, in 2023, Heartwood House and the Bungalow were available to be used as retreat accommodation so a few in-person retreats were held as well. There are five of these similarly planned for 2024, with the hope that the Retreat Centre proper will be restored to its usual functions, and open for a full schedule of retreats and family events, once more in 2025.



Amaro Bhikkhu



THE COMMUNITY HAD ENVISAGED A BREAK, A PAUSE IN THE development of the site, but a very large donation to support the construction of the sala arrived and so, in order to make most skilful use of the funds, plans immediately began to be formed to replace the old sala, kitchen and service yard buildings with a new workshop, garage, sala, kitchen and Sangha dining hall complex.

Amaro Bhikkhu



REBUILDING A NEW SALA IS A SIMPLE IDEA, AND AT AMARAVATI AN EXCELLENT IDEA.

The undertaking and realisation of the project is a massive venture. The levels of complexity involved are difficult to grasp. Through many rounds of community consultations, discussions, agreements and disagreements, Ajahn Amaro, with the help of many monks, nuns and lay supporters has shepherded this project along. Ajahn Amaro, Tan Manunyo, Tan Pasado, Tan Jinavaro, Ajahn Asoko, Sister Jayavira, Sister Nyanasiri, Sister Vidura, Caroline, Martin, Sudanta, and many more have contributed immensely to the project, but no one has carried this whole enterprise with more good will, dedication, time, energy and effort than the architects Andrew and Lucy Yeats and the project manager Rachaya Karasuddhi.

One of the main focuses in rebuilding the sala, as well as all the other buildings in Amaravati, is to build to what is known as the PassivHaus standard. This is an internationally recognised standard that aims at energy efficiency, allowing the building to use low levels of energy to very high efficiency through the use of air source heat pumps, super-insulation and recycling the heat of the building in heat recovery ventilation. It makes for buildings that are eco-friendly and cheaper to operate. All this has been integrated to blend in with the architectural style of the Temple and Cloisters as designed by Tom Hancock, as well as the Chiltern general landscape style and requirements.

Bhikkhu Asoko







I FIRST VISITED AMARAVATI IN 1987 AS A LAY PERSON AND WHAT struck me most was the quietude. Everybody ate their meals in silence in the sala along with the monks and nuns. Work was done in silence. I volunteered to do the washing up after the meal. Everyone was working quietly in the kitchen. It was very inspiring and helped me to go inwards and be centred.

Now I am part of the Siladharā order which also celebrated it's 40th anniversary last year. In comparison to the Ajahn Chah lineage we are a very young community. There has been a fair share of challenges for the community and much gratitude to the elders who stayed with it through thick and thin and all members who contributed in the last forty years.

Today we can celebrate the fact that all our old buildings are replaced with new Passiv Haus buildings. We have very good conditions in which to practise and we'd like to express much gratitude to Luang Por Sumedho for giving women this opportunity.

Cultivating immense gratitude for all we have as well as for the Dhamma still available 2,600 years after Buddha's Parinibbāna is the right approach for our community.

Sr. Khemaka





I ARRIVED AT THE MONASTERY IN 2001. Initially, I wondered how the English Sangha Trust could sustain such a large monastery with around 40-50 residents! How had the monastery managed to survive for over 20 years?

Over time, I came to understand the extent of the offerings made by those who have faith in the teachings of Lord Buddha and the monastic way of life. Remarkably, the English Sangha Trust does not rely on any business at all.

There are people from many different nationalities, who come to the monastery to offer various things. The Thai people always make sure that the Sangha has enough to eat daily. During my time here, the first group I knew was 'the Tuesday Group'. They came to offer food on every Tuesday, got to know each other and formed a group. Other Thai people come on other days and that we have Wednesday Group, and recently Home Team Group on Monday. Some people come regularly on Thursday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday but didn't form a group. And they some how took up the responsibility of making sure monks, nuns, and community members here have enough to eat. If they cannot make it on their usual day, they would let others know so someone can come instead. During special events with many visiting monks and nuns, Thai supporters enthusiastically ensure an ample supply of food for the Sangha, as well as for the laypeople, as much as they can. From my view, Thai people are familiar with working as a group when there is an event. Our concept for helping out at the monastery is 'more people, more fun and more merit!' So, they don't need to organise everything in details, whoever comes and wants to help, just do it. No surprise if you find that in the kitchen

often time, it's chaotic and noisy but full of laughter and joy, not to mention that plenty of food nicely done just on time!

Among the Sri Lankan supporters I've encountered, most are professionals such as medical doctors, accountants and engineers. They provide healthcare advice, assist with accounting matters for both the monastery and the Retreat Centre. Also, oversee the Temple repairing project in 2006. When Sri Lankan supporters bring food to offer, they always let us know in advance of what they are going to bring, for which occasion, how many dishes etc., which is a complete opposite to the Thais!

Volunteers from the UK, Europe, and various Asian countries, such as Malaysia and Singapore, contribute their time and skills to handle accounting, managing Sangha welfare, overseeing publications, driving, and especially organising volunteer groups for monastery events.

The monastery also accommodates long-term lay residents who volunteer their services. Living on-site allows us to be available at any time for urgent matters concerning the Sangha.

The collective support we receive would be financially burdensome if we had to pay everyone for their contributions. Years ago, one volunteer shared with me that Luang Por Sumedho and the Sangha here inspire people to discover their own generous heart, often previously unknown, which then naturally extends to benefit all.

Sumit





OVER THREE DAYS IN MAY 2024 THE OCCASION WAS CREATED TO CELEBRATE LUANG Por Sumedho's 90th year. His actual birthday being in late July — after the beginning of the Rains Retreat and thus inconvenient for long-distance travel — it was decided to combine the community's marking of this banner year with the Wesak Festival, close to the full moon day.

The intention to celebrate Luang Por Sumedho's 90th year at this time was announced and invitations were sent out to many of the senior Sangha members of both the Wat Nong Pah Pong community, as well as Elders at other Theravada monasteries in the UK. There was great appreciation for the opportunity to honour Luang Por Sumedho in this way and so Sangha members, as well as lay friends, travelled from as far afield as New Zealand, Australia, South-East Asia and North America, in order to be present for the event.

The most senior representatives from Thailand were Luang Por Liem, Luang Por Damrong from Buriram, Luang Por Khun and Luang Por Anek. While the group Elders of the Western branch monasteries, were led by Luang Por Khemadhammo, Luang Por Pasanno, Luang Por Viradhammo and Luang Por Sucitto.

The Friday evening was the time to gather and open the event, with Luang Por Sumedho beginning by warmly welcoming everyone. The Saturday morning was set aside for the monastic community to pay respects and to 'Ask for Forgiveness' as the traditional way of honouring someone on such auspicious occasions. This was also the opportunity to share gifts with the assembled monastics, and ex-monastics. Offerings of Luang Por Chah's hair were presented to everyone in small reliquaries, spoons were given that had been hand-carved by one of the monks, mugs embossed with the logo for the event were included, and previously unknown photographs of Luang Por Chah in the USA were shared with the assembly.

The Saturday afternoon and evening were times for Dhamma talks, in Thai and English, offered by various Elders, while on the Sunday morning was the traditional 'rice alms-round' which stretched, in two lines, far around the campus. On all these days the weather gods blessed the crowds with warm sunshine and clear skies.

It had been seven years since the last grand gathering at Amaravati (the Open Retreat and International Elders' Meeting of 2017) so this was another reason that people were glad to have the chance to come together. The Buddha named 'meeting frequently and in large numbers' as the first on the list of the Seven Causes of Welfare of the Sangha. This was certainly an instance of this since, for the main ceremonies on Sunday the 19th of May, there were counted over 130 male monastics, 22 female monastics and around 1,500 lay people to honour Luang Por Sumedho, to wish him well for his 90th year and to offer gifts to him.

The lines were long to make those presentations, and almost as long to receive the generously provided free t-shirts, also bearing the logo for the event and a quote from Luang Por Sumedho on the back.

The celebrations were an opportunity to pay respects and to express our gratitude to the Great Man, but they were also a way of rejoicing in the quality of community itself. There was ongoing joy in the manifold preparations — of the grounds, the Temple, making the travel arrangements, the accommodations — and abundant smiles and camaraderie amid the steam and vigorous activity of the kitchen.

Luang Por Chah was a great advocate of the lessons that can be learned by working harmoniously together; so, what better way to rejoice in the life of his most beloved and eminent Western disciple than to be putting that principle into practice and embodying it in the LPS90 event, represented by these pictures?



Amaro Bhikkhu





CONTRIBUTORS

LUANG POR SUMEDHO, the first Western disciple of Ajahn Chah, came to the UK in 1977. Along with Cittaviveka Buddhist Monastery and many other branch monasteries, he founded Amaravati in 1984 and served as an abbot till 2010. Luang Por then moved back to Thailand for ten years, until he returned to Amaravati again in February of 2021.

AJAHN SUCITTO was ordained in Thailand, in March 1976, came to Britain in 1978 and helped to open Amaravati in July 1984. Along with teaching Vinaya to monks and establishing training for the nuns, he created Amaravati Publications and the Forest Sangha Newsletter, as well as formulating books of Luang Por Sumedho's teachings. He took on the role of abbot at Cittaviveka in 1992, now serving as a Guiding Elder there.

AJAHN AMARO was ordained by Ajahn Chah at Wat Nong Pah Pong in 1979 and returned to the UK to join the Cittaviveka community. He resided at Amaravati from 1985-95, helping with administration, care for the buildings, and teaching. In 1996 he co-founded Abhayagiri Buddhist Monastery, USA with Luang Por Pasanno, and returned to the UK in 2010 to take on his current role as the abbot of Amaravati.

AJAHN VAJIRO was one of the first anāgārikas to join the Ajahn Chah sangha in the UK in 1977. He was ordained at Wat Nong Pah Pong in 1980. He returned to the UK in 1984, living mainly in Cittaviveka for 10 years. After some time in Oceania, he lived in Amaravati from 2001-12. Ajahn Vajiro is now the abbot of Sumedharama, Portugal.

AJAHN KARUNIKO was ordained in 1984 at Cittaviveka Buddhist Monastery. He came to Amaravati after the Vassa in the same year to help with repairing and adapting the electrical systems. Ajahn Karuniko served as the fourth abbot of Cittaviveka, after Luang Por Sumedho, Ajahn Anando and Ajahn Sucitto. Now he is the other Guiding Elder there.

AJAHN NYANARATO was ordained at Wat Pah Nanachat and joined the sangha in the UK at his fifteenth Vassa. With the intention to just see what it was like, he joined Amaravati in 2001 and has been a resident until now. Ajahn Nyanarato has been taking on many important responsibilities such as a mentor to junior monastics, master of ceremonies, and event coordinator. Currently he spends half a year in Amaravati and the other half teaching in Japan.

AJAHN KONGRIT was ordained at Wat Kok Phrom, Thailand, and arrived at Amaravati in 2001 when he had nine Vassas. Although his original intention had been to visit for just two years, Ajahn Kongrit, as a Thai monk, became the unofficial liaison for anything Thai on behalf of the monastic and lay communities. In 2023 he took on the duties of abbot at Skipvet Monastery in Norway.

AJAHN DHAMMANANDO took upasampadā at Cittaviveka in 1993. He lived at Amaravati 1999-2001 and from 2007 onwards. He has visited prisons and hosted student groups for a number of years. Currently he teaches retreats in Ireland and Hungary and helps to organise retreats held at Amaravati's Retreat Centre.

AJAHN AHIMSAKO, initially a lay supporter of Amaravati, took upasampadā in his native California at Abhayagiri in 2004. He returned and lived in Amaravati from 2006 - 2017, taking up several responsibilities, e.g. Monastery Secretary, School Visits Coordinator, and Newsletter Editor. Ajahn Ahimsako is currently the abbot of Cittaviveka.

AJAHN ASOKO was ordained in 2004 at Wat Pah Nanachat, Thailand. He took on the duty of attendant and secretary to Luang Por Sumedho shortly after Luang Por's arrival at Wat Ratanawan in Thailand in 2010. He arrived at Amaravati with Luang Por in February 2021, and subsequently became the liaison monk for the construction projects at Amaravati.

SISTER AJAHN SUNDARA is one of the first four founding members of sīladharā, having received ordination from Luang Por Sumedho in 1983. After spending five years at Cittaviveka Monastery she went to live at Amaravati Monastery, where she took part in establishing the nuns' community, and currently resides.

SISTER AJAHN CANDASIRI, as one of the first founders of Sīladharā Order, took on the responsibility for Vinaya training for the nuns and helped prepare the nuns' training manual. In 2012, Ajahn Candasiri moved to Scotland to start Milntuim Hermitage. She currently serves as a Sangha shareholder for the English Sangha Trust and is a member of the Elders' Council.

SISTER AJAHN CITTAPALA joined the sīladharā community at Amaravati in 1999. She co-led Creative Weekends and Young People's Weekends for over 10 years. Since 2018, Sr. Cittapala has been the senior nun at Cittaviveka nuns community.

SISTER AJAHN KHEMAKA first visited Amaravati as a layperson in 1987 and finally became a nun in 2011. After taking on various roles and responsibilities in the sīladharā community, she now serves as the Amaravati nuns community's representative.

JOHN STEVENS was ordained as Bhikkhu Attapemo in 1981 at Wat Boonsree Munigone, Thailand, and came to the UK in 1985. During his thirteen years (1987-2000) at Amaravati, he took on many responsibilities, including Secretary to the English Sangha Trust, liaison person for building of the Temple, and attendant to Luang Por Sumedho. John left monastic life in 2000 but was subsequently invited to join the Board of Trustees of the EST, which he currently serves as Chairperson.

MARTIN EVANS first came into contact with Ajahn Sumedho and the monks when they came to teach in London. He was living near Amaravati when it was bought and has been an active lay supporter since its earliest days. He regularly attends retreats at Amaravati and is a lay teacher and a founding member of Amaravati Lay Buddhist Association. Martin currently serves as chair of the EST Finance Committee and is a Director of Amaravati Developments.

AJAHN VIMALO met Luang Por Sumedho in 1976 and Ajahn Chah in 1979, and received ordination at Wat Pah Nanachat in 1991. He returned to Amaravati in 2000 and used his skills to sculpt statues of the Buddha and Prajñā Pāramitā. His latest contribution is the four panels for Amaravati's new stupa. After 33 years as a monk, he returned to a quiet lay life as Paul Hendrick.

SUVIRA WANAPHONG, despite her original intention to visit Amaravati for no longer than a year, in 2001 quit her job in Thailand in order to supervise the Office at Amaravati. Finding that service to the sangha benefits her spiritual path, Suvira has been an Office Secretary here at Amaravati for the past 20+ years.

RANDULA HATHHOTUWA, a doctor at a local GP surgery, first came to Amaravati in 2012. She's been a regular lay supporter and retreat attendee since and was in the COVID-19 support team for the monastery. She's now a lay teacher and Secretary of Amaravati Lay Buddhist Association and recently joined the Board of Trustees of the English Sangha Trust.

We wish to acknowledge the contributions of Ajahn Nyanadassano, Medhina Preston, Amita Lecamwasam, Sudanta Abeyakoon. For all the service we express anumodanā!