

FEARLESS MOUNTAIN

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The Benefits of Retreat

by Taraniya

From time to time we may find that practice in daily life is not very inspiring. It's not that the teachings and practices aren't innately inspiring. They are. It's just that so much of our time in daily life is focused on other things—chores, work, relationships—that spiritual practice can become just one more thing we have to do. It may take many years (or many lifetimes!) before we become so imbued with our love of Dhamma that we see it everywhere and that practice both on and off the cushion becomes qualitatively indistinct. Ajahn Chah said that it gets to the point where we see Dhamma everywhere, and everything we see is Dhamma.

In the meantime, we often need periodic jolts and reminders of what we're doing and why, of how much we love Dhamma and how deeply we want to be free. We can get that kind of inspiration from time on retreat.

How does that happen? What are the components of retreat that facilitate such inspiration?

Soaking in Our Good Intention

Retreats provide a wonderful opportunity to notice, contemplate, and actually soak in our right understanding and intention. We may not think about it that way, but con-



Photo courtesy of Taraniya

sider what's going on when we make the decision to go on retreat. For most people vacation time is in short supply. We may want to use the time to go to the beach or the mountains, and that's understandable. The fact that we choose retreat over such options is a strong indication of quite mature wisdom. Our decision says that, fundamentally, we recognize that our spiritual practice is a worthwhile undertaking and that we wish to pursue it. This is right understanding and right intention—the first two steps on the eightfold path.

I like to remind people to reflect upon the wisdom of such a choice, to make it fully conscious, to let it into one's heart. There can be an amazing reluctance to do this. Our minds seem to have a propensity for seeing what's wrong with ourselves and ignoring what's right. Our tendency is to

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FROM THE MONASTERY

COMMUNITY

The full moon of July to the full moon of October is observed as the traditional “rains” retreat, which, in a Southeast Asian country, would normally be time for more intensive meditation practice. Even though July through October is the dry season in California, here at Abhayagiri we observed these months by studying the rules of training (*Vinaya*), and each community member took a two-week solitary retreat, giving up all duties and heading to the forest. The *Vinaya* classes were held a few times a week and headed by Tan Jotipalo. Because there isn’t enough time to go over all 227 training rules, he took those most important to our practice and initiated fruitful group discussions. These discussions were very useful for finding ways to practice the Buddhist discipline in America in a way that fits in with social norms, but also in a way that doesn’t compromise the training rules.

In September the community was happy to welcome the Spirit Rock teens for their annual visit. Fifteen teens and seven adult helpers camped out in the forest for two days and nights. The weekend kicked off with everybody gathering and setting up tents on Friday night, then attending morning puja on Saturday. The morning meditation was divided into two parts: sitting for half an hour then walking for half an hour. At 6:30am the group had a guided meditation. After breakfast, they took part in the work period, including painting, trail work, staining the new ordination platform, and job-site cleanup at the new kuti. After the meal, the teens were led into the forest to spend two hours in solitary contemplation. For such young and active minds, this can be an interesting and insightful endeavor. Later in the afternoon the teens got back together and shared their experiences. Their sincerity and enthusiasm each year are notable, including a full turnout during our early morning puja on both days!

In September, Ajahn Amaro attended the eleventh Mind and Life conference, held this year at M.I.T. in Cambridge, Massachusetts. These conferences were initiated by Adam Engle seventeen years ago as a result of His Holiness the Dalai Lama’s interest in science and psychology. A panel of scientists and a few Buddhist practitioners and scholars gathered together with His Holiness to discuss the relationships between Buddhist practice and behavioral science. Top behavioral scientists discussed their findings on topics such as attention and cognitive control, mental imagery, emotion, and neurophenomenology. These discussions also included the Buddhist perspective on each subject. For example, scientists reported on the use of MRI scanners to monitor the brains of Tibetan lamas as they practiced different types of meditation. The findings were astounding; during a compassion meditation the section of the brain corresponding to happiness was far more active than the scientists had ever seen.

Among other surprises were Matthieu Ricard’s reflections on mental imagery. According to scientific study a mental image can be sustained in the mind for only a few seconds at most. According to the experience of some Tibetan lamas, however, a mental image can be sustained for hours or even days. On a certain level the conference demonstrated an important shift in American academia: the top scientists were starting to look to Buddhist meditators for answers to their deepest questions relating to the nature of reality, suffering, and happiness.

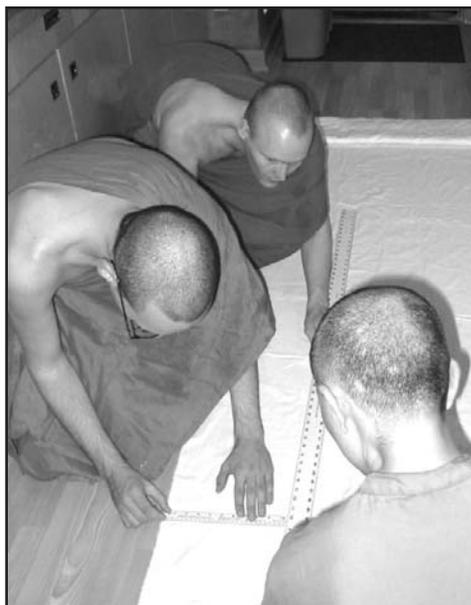
During two very hot days in early September, the second Buddhist Bicycle Pilgrimage took place. Nearly 80 bike pilgrims rode the 150 miles from Spirit Rock Meditation Center to Abhayagiri Monastery, with temperatures on the road reaching 106 degrees. The bike pilgrims pushed on despite the heat, using courage and spiritual resources to complete the journey. Upon accomplishing their mission, the cyclists enjoyed refreshments and sprays of cold water, then partook in a closing ceremony at the monastery. (For photos and more information, visit www.dharmawheels.org.)

On October 19 the Kathina Ceremony, an annual celebration of giving, took place. Many people gathered throughout the day to make offerings of requisites for the monastery. Traditionally, the kathina cloth is a length of material which will be sewn into a full robe for a chosen Sangha member that very day. At Abhayagiri, the cloth-offering ceremony takes place according to ancient tradition and was offered by Regan Urbanick, along with a group from Denver and another from Thailand. After the offering ceremony the cloth was whisked away and the Sangha began the robe-making process. The bhikkhus took turns drawing the robe pattern, sewing parts of the robe, and finally dying the robe. This year the completed

robe was presented to Venerable Sudanto.

Elder bhikkhu Ajahn Bankau, a Laotian monk of 36 years and a disciple of Ajahn Chah, arrived from France to partake in the Kathina Ceremony and spend the subsequent week at Abhayagiri. He stayed in the newly finished kuti as its first resident.

Monastery photo



Marking the Kathina cloth for a robe

Ajahn Bankau's presence and teachings had a very penetrating and direct energy and were much appreciated by the community. Ajahn Pasanno and Ajahn Bankau have known each other since their early days of training with Ajahn Chah. We hope to accommodate Ajahn Bankau again sometime in the future.

In December, Ajahn Pasanno headed to Birken Monastery in British Columbia to act as preceptor for Samanera Pavaro and Samanera Nanda, who wished to go forth as bhikkhus. Ajahn Pasanno was accompanied on this road trip by Tan Sudanto, Tan Jotipalo, Tan Phasuko, Debbie Stamp, and Larry Restel. Tan Sudanto will stay on at Birken for the winter retreat and plans to return to Abhayagiri in the spring. This was the first ordination to take place in Canada, with a Canadian preceptor and Canadian quorum. It featured the coming together of Ajahn Viradhammo, Ajahn Punna-dhammo, Abbot Ajahn Sona, and Ajahn Pasanno, all of Canadian heritage. Though there was heavy snow a week before the ordinations, the weather cleared up during the ordination day. Ajahn Pasanno's mother offered the bhikkhu's almsbowl to one of the ordinees. Also worthy of note is the amount of work Ajahn Sona and the residents of Birken Monastery have put into the new property. It is turning out to be a very beautiful and spacious monastery.

After the Birken ordinations, Ajahn Pasanno headed to Thailand. He carried an eight-pound bag of gold and silver taken from necklaces, bracelets, rings, and even teeth that were offered by laypeople to be melted down as part of the new Abhayagiri Buddharupa. On December 6, the pouring ceremony for the statue took place. Over a thousand people attended the ceremony. Protection verses (*paritta*) were chanted here at Abhayagiri simultaneous with the pouring ceremony in Thailand. The new Buddharupa is due to arrive here in late spring or early summer 2004. (See also page 14.)

On December 7, about 25 upasikas partook in a work day at Abhayagiri. In one hour the upasikas moved ten tons of rock onto the hillside behind the Dhamma Hall to keep the hill from sliding during the heavy rains. Thank you to all of the upasikas for your continued support and good nature!

We are sad to be parting with Venerable Obhaso, who made the decision to leave the robes and become "Scott" again. Scott intends to stay in close contact with the monastery and to continue the wholesome connections and friendships that have been formed in the last three years.

Anagarika Craig requested to make a one-year commitment as a samanera. His novice ordination was held on January 4, and he was given the new name Ahimsako, which Ajahn Amaro translated as "one who is gentle toward all beings."

DEVELOPMENT

On October 12 the new kuti was completed. It turned out to be a wonderful exhibition of "monastic craftsmanship." Tan Sudanto, Tan Phasuko, and Tan Nyaniko assisted Mark Newell in building this beautifully finished and well-insulated structure. All other members of the community gave a hand at various times. We were very grateful to Mark for his assistance and generosity, and to Tan Sudanto for his thorough planning and skillful finishing work. The entire cost of the structure ended up at under \$10,000.



Photo by Ajahn Amaro

Interior of the newest kuti

In November, Tan Jotipalo headed up the construction of the pavilion addition to the new ordination platform, which will house the new Buddharupa due to arrive later in the year. Around the same time, Tan Nyaniko began work on a new storage shed, which will free up some of the clutter in the small storage rooms currently available. The shed is located half-way up the entrance drive.

Plans for the cloister building continue, but the reality of its development is still uncertain. It looks as though the retaining walls and foundation work might begin in the spring of 2004, but again, it's all uncertain.

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Photo by Tan Ahimsako

Upasika Work Day crew finishes moving 10 tons of rock

From the Monastery

(continued from page 4)

TEACHING

On October 24 Ajahn Amaro headed to Spirit Rock to lead the annual ten-day monastic retreat. Taraniya, a lay Dhamma teacher and long-time friend of the sangha, co-led the retreat and Tan Jotipalo, Tan Obhaso, Anagarika Craig, and Anagarika Adam lent their support. Spirit Rock graciously offered the use of its facilities on a purely “by donation” basis. A standard monastic day was practiced, starting with morning chanting at 5:30am, spending the day in silent meditation, alms-round before noon, and ending the day with evening chanting and a Dhamma talk. Things went smoothly, and there were many learning experiences.

Soon after, Ajahn Amaro headed solo to the Pacific Northwest to offer teachings at various locations. First he gave a talk on the Brahma Viharas at the Episcopal Cathedral in Portland. He then led a daylong retreat at Friends of the Dhamma and give a talk to Robert Beatty’s vipassana meditation group. Next, he led a weeklong retreat at Great Vow Zen Monastery, newly founded by Chozen and Hogen Bays. There was no charge to attend the retreat, and the retreat participants provided all the food for the full week. The retreat was a “Theravada-Zen hybrid.” The morning sitting started at 4:30am. From 8:00am to 10:00am was a silent “work meditation” period. After the meal, the day was spent in silent meditation until 9:30pm. On the last day of his journeys in Oregon, Ajahn Amaro spent an afternoon at a prison outside of Portland. Mary Reinard (Sakula) has been helping the inmates there to form a meditation group and study Buddhism. (See also page xx.)

Evening teachings continue to take place at the monastery on Saturdays and lunar quarters, as do teachings at the Berkeley Buddhist Monastery on the first Tuesday of every month. In Ukiah, Ajahn Amaro led a series of workshops titled “Compassion in Action” at Yoga Mendocino.

—Venerable Ñāniko, for the Sangha

Boundaries Fade in a Sea of Blue Jeans

by Mary (Sakula) Reinard

The sun tangles and dances across looping barbed wire as we near the steel-bolted gate. An officer smiles and tips his hat. Cheerfully responding, both Greg and I walk toward the secured entrance. Inmates outside rake leaves under guard. One gentleman looks up with a recognized smile, and I wave the fellow meditator closer. “Hi, Devon,” I say, extending my hand. Devon smiles broadly, puts his hands in *anjali* and whispers with bowed head, “I don’t think we’re suppose to talk to anyone while on the outside.” The quickly approaching officer confirms as I apologize.

Inside the prison, Chaplin Blix greets us with warm demeanor and offers us a seat in his office. We chat pleasantries while the clock steals ten minutes from class. I excuse myself and check to see if the men are gathering for meditation group. Brad hollers and waves from a second-floor hallway and heads down the steps. “You’re late. I was afraid you weren’t going to show,” he grins.

When resident Thomas Ha first arrived at Columbia River Correctional Institute, there had been no meditation group, so Ha made a formal request to Chaplin Blix, who offered immediate support. Soon thereafter, fellow Portland meditation teacher Greg Satir and I accepted an invitation to form what the men have come to refer to as the Release into Freedom Sangha. On January 6, 2002, Greg and I shared our first Buddhist meditation with a diverse group of eight. Several of the men have been released or reassigned since we began. New residents join regularly, and the numbers fluctuate from six to fourteen.

Brian joined our group just around our fourth month. He appeared strong and high-strung. By the time he visited our group, he had been in prison for many years. I welcomed him and invited him to partake of or skip our opening “check-in,” whatever was comfortable. He shared unabashedly.

Before finding himself in prison, he was trained by and worked with the U.S. military special forces. Some of his assignments involved grave acts of violence. He loved his work and boasted satisfaction. “I protect folks and want to return when I’m out.” Nevertheless, he was in anguish from flashbacks that left him confused. It seemed the very work to which he attributed pride and satisfaction was now motivating him to seek refuge. He searched in an accustomed style: “Can you teach me to control these flashbacks so they don’t return?”

Brian enjoyed his ability to meet a challenge and was attentive as we discussed how he might search for the source of both his satisfaction and affliction. First we reviewed the effect these attributes might have on a well-concentrated mind and then on a mind engaged with violence. Might the effects differ from one another and, if so, could we learn to witness the impact each had on the psyche? “Sounds challenging. Can I test it out?” Brian asked, and I replied, “Yes, though it might not be easy and will require a great deal of concentration and a firm commitment to follow through. Do you think you’re up for it?” Without hesitation he grinned and confirmed, “Yeah, what do I do?”



Mary Sakula Reinard (center) with the Release into Freedom Sangha

A few weeks passed. Brian continued with our meditation group. One day he bounded in happily alit. “You won’t believe what happened this past week! I’m absolutely astounded. I actually felt joy from applying the same restraint on my mind that I thought I was applying out there in the world with my work.”

Patiently unsettled, Brian waited for his turn to check-in to share his good news. “You get assigned a seat in the cafeteria and if you sit anywhere else they slap you with points. You don’t want points ’cause enough of them will put you in ‘the hole’ (solitary confinement). I had a lot of points already so I needed to be careful. Bummer, too, cause one of the men sitting near me at lunch wouldn’t stop razzing me. I tried to ignore him, but he wouldn’t stop it. I was getting really pissed.

“Then I remembered the challenge and decided I had nothing to lose for trying. First, I noticed what the anger was doing to my body. It was tight all over. It was really uncomfortable, and I thought that if I punched this guy out there’d be some release. At least it would shut him up. But then I thought, Hey, the challenge was to not act aggressively .

“I started thinking about how much I wanted to punch this guy out, ’cause my anxiety was cranking up. But then I thought about the challenge to not act with aggression. Man, I knew if I didn’t move from the table I was going to punch him and lose the challenge, but if I did move, I’d get points and could end up in the hole. Dang!” Brian slapped both knees and sitting straight and tall in his chair announced, “I decided to just suck it up and moved to another table. And get this, as soon as I sat down at another table all the tension in my body just disappeared, like magic! Lunch tasted great!”

He continued with great animation. “But that’s not the best part of this story. The best part is that this guy came up to me after the meal and apologized. He apologized!?! He said he was so stunned by what I had done that he was left sitting there feeling ridiculous.” Raising both hands in the air and leaning back in his chair he exclaimed, “No one ever apologizes in prison, not to me any way, not for trying to start a fight. And here was this guy saying he was sorry! You know, I think we both left feeling satisfied . . . imagine that.” ♥

Mary (Sakula) Reinard lives in Portland, Oregon, where she leads the Friends of the Dhamma meditation center. She is a participant in Abhayagiri’s lay ministry training program as well as an artist.

*Meditative moments by members of the
Release into Freedom Sangha*

The Beds We Make

Abed, embed, childbed, seedbed,
daybed, roadbed, riverbed, streambed,
hotbed, flatbed, featherbed, deathbed,
trundle bed, seabed, sickbed, test bed,
. . . Breakfast in bed . . .
Bed and breakfast . . .
Bedbug, bedpan, bed-wetter, bed-hop,
bedchamber, bed check, bedfellow, bedrock,
bedroll, bedclothes, bedroom, bed board,
bedtime, bedmate, bedridden, bedsore,
bed rest, bedpost, bed warmer, bedspread,
bed-sitter, bedside, bed table, bedstead,
bed of roses, sleep tight, go to bed
and good night!

—Todd Garland

Haikus

Community Meeting
The train outside pulling
Our attention

* * *

On the steep dike
A row of young trees put
Their best root forward

* * *

Tall wire fence
Is now a collage of
Autumn colors

—R. Blakely



Cassidy Trager, Susan Seitz, and Karen Phillips

Offering the Meal: Dana in Action

Learning to support a Theravada forest monastery in Northern California means learning new cultural practices, such as how to offer the main meal of the day. Some lay visitors feel shy at first, while others jump right in and find it fun. Just about everyone comes to love it.

The act of giving, or *dana* in the Pali language, is a form of generosity, an important part of Buddhist practice. The Buddha often taught about the joys of generosity, virtue, and kindness to others as part of the path to true happiness and ways to prepare the mind for meditation.

During the past 2500 years, support for the monastic life has been provided entirely through dana in the form of donations from lay supporters. This includes food, medicines, cloth for robes, and all other monastery supplies.

Fearless Mountain contributor Catherine Direen talked with Karen Phillips and Cassidy Trager, who along with friend Susan Seitz, have been offering the meal once a month for three years, to find out what this act of dana means to them. Karen lives near Guerneville, Cassidy near Sebastopol, and Susan near Cazadero. It takes the group at least two hours to travel to Abhayagiri.

FM: How did you start offering the meal?

“I think it was Susan’s idea,” said Karen. “It felt and still feels like the people who live at the monastery are upholding the Dharma in a wonderful way, and we wanted to support that. It has turned out to be a great way to build a relationship with the

community, and it’s a beautiful example of interdependence.”

Karen, who has long practiced in the vipassana community, and Susan started first, while Cassidy was practicing meditation with monks in Burma. When Cassidy returned in February 2001, “I knew I wanted to offer dana to monks because I was overwhelmed by the generosity given us in Burma.” She turned 60 in May 2001 and made the intention to offer meals at Abhayagiri for a year.

Though the women initially made a one-year commitment among themselves, they now have been offering meals monthly for three years.

FM: What keeps you coming back, month after month?

“I feel really lucky that the monastic community is there and we have this opportunity to be a part of this beautiful tradition,” said Karen. “We often just can’t wait to go up to visit—it’s delightful to be there with the ajahns and the sangha. A lot of my life (as a psychiatric nurse) is spent dealing with people who are not upholding the precepts, so being at Abhayagiri is nourishing and refreshing.”

“It comes from the heart and the desire to be generous—just wanting to do it,” explained Cassidy. “It’s not a feeling that I ‘have to do it’—I just really want to. The monks are so generous. They offer the annual retreat (each fall, at the Angela Center or Spirit Rock) completely on a dana basis. I’ve also stayed at Abhayagiri for days on end, and I value the work they do. I want to give them as much as I can.”

Offering the meal on a regular basis “brings me more and more appreciation of being connected to the monastery,” said Karen. “I have a feeling of connection to everyone there.” Karen also invited the ajahns to lunch at her house once, and invited people she worked with to attend. After the meal, Ajahn Pasanno, Ajahn Jitindriya, and others went to the hospital where she works, offered chanting, and

talked individually with patients.

Susan invited the monastics to offer a blessing ceremony at her house for her fiftieth birthday.

“I’m feeling more and more like they’re my teachers,” Karen said. “I haven’t stayed at the monastery, but I’ve done several retreats with them. It’s just comforting to know they’re there (at Abhayagiri), doing what they do.”

FM: How do you prepare the meal?

Karen, Cassidy, and Susan divide up the work of shopping in advance and preparing the meal at the monastery. “We each buy things, and one person bakes, the others shop, and we do the main cooking at the monastery,” Cassidy explained. “We set up our joint schedules three months in advance. It’s just part of my life. We also sometimes invite friends to join us. We also call the kitchen manager in advance to ask what they need so we can bring things,” she said.

*Offering a Meal
Pizzas, pastas, sweets
Simple joy; another day
Another dana
—Susan Seitz*

“The monks are just grateful to receive,” Karen said. “And there’s always someone in the kitchen from the community to help you if you’re new. One way to start would be to bring a dish and see how the meal preparation process and offering go. Sometimes we just take very simple things, like ‘take & bake’ pizza. Basically, we just use a recipe and multiply it to make enough food.”

“It’s a feeling of appreciation and giving back to all those who have dedicated their lives to peace and enlightenment—doing whatever I can do to help support them,” Cassidy added.

FM: What advice would you offer to someone thinking about offering a meal for the first time?

“Definitely go do it! It’s a wonderful feeling,” said Cassidy.

“Doing the actual offering of the meal is fun—it feels quite special,” Karen said. “Listening to the blessing chant the monks do is very moving. It feels great to sit in the meditation hall when they’re all there at the beginning of the meal.”

“You’re offering something, and there’s the extraordinary appreciation and humility in how the monastics receive,” Cassidy said.

“If you feel the inclination to offer a meal, just do it and enjoy it,” Karen said. “It’s a chance to cultivate generosity. It’s an immediate example of how the act of giving feels the same as receiving. We receive so much through giving. The line between giving and receiving is not really there.” ♡



Photo by Dennis Crean

Tan Dhammaso receives a food offering

How to Offer a Meal to the Monastics

The monastic community at Abhayagiri eats one main meal a day, in late morning, and the monastic regulations (*Vinaya*) require that they finish by midday. The monastic practice for receiving almsfood is to accept gratefully what is offered for the meal that day, without holding anything for tomorrow, and without expressing preferences. Laypeople can be assured the monastics are receiving almsfood in this spirit, so whatever is given can be offered freely with an open heart. This opportunity for generosity is a precious example of the interdependence between laypeople and monastics.

Offering a Meal at the Monastery

Offering food gives us an opportunity to visit and participate in the daily lifestyle of the monastery. Some people may at first feel awkward preparing foods in someone else’s kitchen, so it’s sometimes easier to prepare the main dish ahead of time. When lay visitors offer a meal at the monastery, the kitchen manager will help explain the protocol.

It’s a good idea to make the menu simple, but do remember that it’s the only meal for the day. Rice, vegetables, a salad, and a protein dish are perfectly suitable, and portions should be generous.

When a layperson offers the food just before the meal, each dish needs to be individually offered (even condiments, like salt or soy sauce) to the monk receiving the food. He will then pass it on to the others. Monastics eat with a spoon they

carry with them, so if you’re serving something that would be difficult to cut with a spoon, it’s helpful to pre-cut the food into manageable sizes.

After the food has been offered and the monastics have served themselves, they will offer the remaining food back to the laypeople.

An important part of offering a meal is remembering to relax! Accepting things as they are—easy or awkward, hurried or relaxed—is the practice for all of us. What’s most important is the offering being made and the happiness an act of giving can bring.

Offering a Meal to Monastics in Our Homes

When you invite them to your home, you can ask one of the monastics beforehand how to set things up. Many people spread a tablecloth on the floor and offer the dishes to the senior monastic, who will then pass them down the line to the other monastics who are present.

If you’re placing servings into an almsbowl, try to not touch the serving utensil against the bowl or tap a spoon on it. If you’re placing servings into the almsbowl, continuing until the monastic makes some indication that you have offered enough is a skillful way to proceed.

For more information on offering a meal or making a donation, visit www.abhayagiri.org or call the monastery.

The Benefits of Retreat *(continued from page 1)*

be self-denigrating. When we start talking about our own goodness, we can feel a little constricted: “Isn’t that being conceited? I don’t want to be conceited.” Or we might say, “Yes, but I have lots of other reasons for going on retreat, and some of them are selfish: I want to get enlightened. I want to be a star.” Or we might think, “Yes, I have good reasons, but I’m not practicing from that level all the time. Most of the time I’m a lazy good-for-nothing.”

Sure, there are mixed motives for going on retreat. That’s how it is with everything. We aren’t always in touch with our deepest aspirations and intentions. We get away from them, and things become rote. But it is important to realize that right understanding and right intention are driving our practice. These good qualities are coming from this heart.

When we act upon right understanding and right intention we are experiencing the fruits of extremely good kamma and generating more of the same. The more we acknowledge this, the more consciously these good qualities will drive our daily practice. Daily practice will become more attractive and the tendency to turn towards the good more and more automatic.

Strengthening Discipline

Few people probably think about going on retreat in order to develop their discipline to make it more accessible in daily life. If they caught themselves thinking in these terms, perhaps they

wouldn’t even go on retreat. Discipline can feel like a dirty word. It conjures up images of smacking ourselves around in order to get our act together: “I’m not sitting regularly, I’m not putting Dhamma first in my life, and I want to go on retreat to force myself to do that.”

When seen clearly, there are two sides to discipline: restraint and cultivation. We need restraint in practice. At times we might even need to be iron-fisted. Restraint is made a little easier on retreat because we aren’t excessively distracted by stimulating objects. The simple environment is a huge support. We build up the momentum of restraint, and this stays with us when we leave retreat. This kind of discipline has to be soft and loving. It’s not a yanking away or smacking ourselves around, but a gentle movement to withdraw from harm. It’s a gentle alignment with our true heart’s desire, and it makes it possible to see for ourselves how happy we are when we are released from blindly following whim and fancy.

Discipline is a powerful tool to help us see the force of kammic patterns that take us in the direction of the five hindrances. If we can restrain the impulse to follow these mind-states—even if only for a short while—we can position ourselves to see more clearly our unskillful tendencies, to understand them instead of always getting caught in their web.

If we only think about discipline as making ourselves do something that’s hard to do, all we get is resistance. The mind doesn’t respond well to that kind of driving force because it’s

Wow! An Entire Month

by Edward Lewis

“Dear Mom,

Guess what? I just completed a monthlong meditation retreat. I awoke every morning at 4:45, sat and chanted in Pali (it’s the ancient language of the Buddha’s time) with a bunch of other yogis (we call ourselves yogis), meditated on my breath for an hour, then did walking meditation for 45 minutes. That’s walking back and forth for a distance about the length of our backyard. Then I sat for another hour, walked again, and so on. That was pretty much my day. We ate, of course, but finished our meal before noon, not eating again until the next morning. You know I always like a good dinner, but after the first couple of days without it, I was fine. I actually lost a few pounds. It was the best 30 days of my life, Mom. It’s really difficult to explain. Somehow I feel more present and peaceful. Next year I am going to sit for two months.”

How do you explain to someone the inner experience of sitting a long retreat? How do you explain why you might choose to spend limited discretionary time and money sitting in silence watching how your mind deals with the pain in your back? If you have meditated at all, you already have a clue.

During my first 10-day retreat, the first three days were just as uncomfortable as my earlier three-day retreat experi-

ence had been, except that I did not have the comfort of knowing I was going home. The question “What am I doing here?” arose more than once. Then there was a shift. The periods of presence, clarity and insight that can be glimpsed by any meditator at any level of experience began to occur more frequently and for greater periods of time.

Following a simple routine in silence in the company of others dedicated to practice day after day was bringing me a deeper sense of inner harmony. The agitation diminished, and when it did arise I was often able to embrace it rather than feel antagonized or victimized. After the ninth day there was a sense that in the previous few days I had entered a groove and a pace I had not experienced before. There was an urge to remain longer. The seeds had been planted. I could see how ample time and dedicated cultivation could help my practice to ripen.

The difference in extending to a monthlong retreat was greater than I could anticipate. Each day the memory of identification as a “doer” became more distant. Just being was enough, and enough was just perfect. The desire for “more, less, different” became a knock on the door that I was increasingly less prone to answer.

“A month, wow, I sat for an entire month. Has a month gone by already? How sweet it was. I would love to sit longer.” Thirty days is not forever and once again a retreat has ended. Something has shifted inside. I know that. How will it manifest in my work and home life? That is yet to be seen.

Edward Lewis lives in Tiburon, California.

filled with judgment and criticism: “There’s something wrong with me and I have to make it right.” Can you feel the aversion in that? The mind-heart’s response to aversion is to contract, to take cover, and, in effect, to not do what it’s being told to do. The methods of the heart are much softer.

There’s also the cultivation side of discipline. Discipline is not only turning away from harm but also moving towards goodness. Through discipline, we learn to say “no” instead of “yes” to the unskillful. But we also practice saying “yes” instead of “no” to the skillful. The structure of a retreat facilitates this. Consider what happens when we give ourselves over to the form of retreat. We get up at a certain hour, sit on cue, walk on cue, and even eat on cue. We are like Pavlov’s dogs. When we are asleep and hear a bell, we get up. When we are walking and hear a bell, we go to sit. When we are sitting and hear a bell, we get up to walk—unless, of course, it’s time to head towards the dining hall! We don’t have to think about anything, and the wholesome environment leaves little room for following unskillful patterns.

Form is like this. That’s why people become monks and nuns. In a paradoxical way, form is an instrument of freedom. While it appears rigid and stiff, it makes it possible for us to completely relax and let go. I’m reminded of a monk in *The Mindful Way*, a film about Ajahn Chah’s monastery in Thailand. In commenting on the 227 rules of the monastic code, he stated that while at first they might appear to complicate things, in actuality the rules help simplify life. The monk found he didn’t have to make decisions about things. It was very clear what he had to do, and this afforded him a tremendous freedom.

It’s like that for us. Because of the form and structure of retreat, we are free to save our energy. We don’t have to spend all that energy getting caught up in where to go, whom to be, what to do. We can just watch the mind. I don’t know about you, but I’m often frustrated and discouraged by how easily I can give in to self-gratifying impulses in my daily life. Many times a day I’m faced with the opportunity to follow my deepest yearning, and yet over and over again lesser motives prevail.

One time while on retreat I took on the job of wake-up bell ringer. I’d like to say I signed up out of an inspired wish to serve others, but my real motivation was much more self-serving. I knew how easily I could get caught in early morning slothful impulses, and I was frustrated with my daily battles with the alarm clock. I needed the bell-ringing job to propel me to my feet! One morning a few weeks into the retreat my alarm went off and I bolted out of bed without a flicker. I had gotten out of bed so fast that my thinking mind neglected to get up with me. I went about my morning wash and got dressed without all the annoying internal chatter that normally accompanies everything I do—commenting on what’s going on, mimicking it, or chattering away about topics from the day before, the day ahead, or something else altogether, rarely connecting with what’s actually happening.

But this morning, it was different. I got up without the chatter, and it was several minutes before it kicked in. During that time I had a brief glimpse into a world that lies just below the superficial world that I “normally” occupy—that is, the self-absorbed world I call “me, myself and mine.” I stumbled into what felt like a subterranean existence—but which was really simply the direct experience of life. I could see that my body and mind had an intelligence capable of directing my life without the involvement or constant comment of “self.” I knew the temperature

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Solitary Refinement

by Ven. Ahimsako

Fifteen days of solitary! Can’t wait. That was the attitude I had as I approached my solitary retreat this past summer at the monastery. Each year, members of the monastery community get 15 days of retreat time during the *vassa* (Rains Retreat). Last year I had arrived at the monastery just as the community began their solitary retreats, and I definitely thought then that I would like to do such a retreat one day. Now my chance arrived.

I like solitude, so there wasn’t any anxiety around that. I did, however, decide to try fasting for 10 days, partly for the health benefits but also for the added isolation it would afford me as I wouldn’t need to come down the hill for food or “waste time” eating. The thought of not eating brought up mild anxiety—just enough to make it interesting but not enough to make me run down the hill with my almsbowl!

With absolutely no responsibilities around the monastery, apart from attending classes on the monks’ discipline two to three times per week, my days and nights were wide open. How would I spend my time? Would I be lazy or diligent? I was ready for settling down to hours and hours of formal meditation practice, which I usually enjoy a great deal. But you never know what the mind is going to throw at you.

I found it interesting that even with no schedule to follow, within a few days, I fell into a distinct rhythm and pattern of sitting and walking meditation, chanting practice and Dhamma reading. “Breakfast, lunch, and tea” happened every two hours or so in the form of a liquid concoction designed for energy and cleansing. I had heaps of energy to practice, and that was all that really counted.

I already had respect for walking meditation practice, but during this retreat I really got into it and spent hours every day and night on my path. When drowsy, I found it easier to stay alert on my feet. My only concern was that I didn’t want to fall down in a heap or walk off the path. Is this an allegory for something?

How did the retreat benefit me? I wouldn’t want to venture into putting that into words, but I do know that it was a valuable time. I investigated and refined various practices that I have kept up since then. What a gift to have the opportunity and support to spend time practicing Dhamma in this way.

Samanera Ahimsako (formerly Anagarika Craig) was ordained as a novice on January 4.

Suffering More Effectively

by Anushka Fernandopulle

People have often asked me why I go on long, silent meditation retreats. It's a rather arcane way to spend one's leisure time in the modern-day U.S.A.! I spent about three years after college doing long retreats in monasteries and retreat centers in the U.S., India, and Sri Lanka. Since returning to the faster-moving flow of mainstream lay life in America, I have taken time out to do one- to three-month retreats several times, and have managed to do one or two 10-day retreats every year.

Experientially, I love being on longer retreats. It gives me a chance to be a "human being" instead of a "human doing." I can become aware of the natural rhythms of my body-mind process in a closer way. On retreat, I lead a simpler life—minus a big set of keys, complicated appointment calendar, and multiple passwords to remember.

Longer retreats have allowed my Dharma practice to deepen. Mindfulness practice often feels like an ongoing development of greater intimacy with self and others that carries over to nonretreat life. I find retreat to be one of the most interesting things I could be doing. In its "laboratory" conditions, I get to experientially explore my deepest questions without much other distraction.

Retreat time creates the conditions for a deepening of concentration. Allowing my usually much more scattered energy to gather together is powerful, supports developing insight, and is even very pleasurable. While to some going on retreat may seem like deprivation from fun stuff, for me it is among the happiest and most pleasant times of my life.

I don't want to downplay the challenges. When there are no distractions and one "unbusies" oneself enough to allow for some unraveling, tough stuff can come up. But tough stuff comes up anyway, so it is good to see it and learn to love it in the context of retreat, where one can focus on what is generally avoided.

I remember a quote from Thomas Merton, an American Catholic monk: "If I am called to the solitary life, it does not necessarily mean I will suffer more acutely in solitude than anywhere else, but that I will suffer more effectively." Longer retreats have helped me to suffer more effectively—meaning that they have helped lead to greater freedom from suffering for me in my life, something I can attest to without a doubt over the course of my practice.

Setting up time to go on retreat has been something I have had to prioritize very consciously in order for it to happen. Circumstances, relationships, and responsibilities can make it challenging to take time away on long retreat. And the flow of modern life does not lead towards long-term contemplative practice. But I have found that if I carve out the time and then stay committed to holding to it unwaveringly, others also will respect this and are willing to help make it happen.

May all beings be free from suffering.

Anushka Fernandopulle lives in San Francisco.

The Benefits of Retreat *(continued from page 11)*

in the room. I knew what to wear and dressed accordingly. I knew how to brush my teeth and wash my face. I didn't need the CEO who usually directs and comments about these activities. For a few brief moments there was a clear and distinct experience of living life unencumbered by a sense of self and all the chatter that goes with it. The experience was not particularly blissful or extraordinary. In fact, it was quite common and ordinary. And yet it was liberating. I thought, "There but for the preoccupation with self go I."

The form and structure of retreat has the effect of snapping us out of deeply rooted patterns that do not serve us. Sure, one could probably break through the so-called crack in the cosmic egg without going on retreat, but the structure and form of retreat, coupled with the power of our intention to follow them, have the effect of collapsing our focus such that we become more and more present. This experience of presence of mind is often what meditators mourn losing at the end of retreat. On retreat, we know we are more present. We know we feel fabulous. We know we are tasting freedom. And we want to be that way all the time.

Experiencing Concentration and Mindfulness

Our daily lives tend to be filled with alternate episodes of agitation and anxiety, dullness and withdrawal, and distraction. These are common states of mind. In the Buddhist teachings we learn instead about states such as relaxation and tranquility, awareness and alertness. On retreat, we have precious uninterrupted time to devote ourselves to discovering and experiencing these states.

Notice that I said "discovering and experiencing" instead of "developing." All too often I have seen how people tend to have merely a concept of these states. We get ideas about what they are. We make them into abstractions. When we do this, we move them to the head, and they become something to think about and to acquire. With such a view, we will never truly experience ease. Our very effort will stand in the way. When we talk about having to "pay attention" or "become mindful," we can get a militaristic energy going: "ATTENTION!" Everything stiffens up. We can spend so much time "becoming" that we never actually experience what the Buddha is talking about.

Practice is about direct experience. What does it feel like to be easeful? What does it feel like to pay attention? What is the direct experience of these states? We learn about ease by being attuned to when we are at ease and when we are not. We learn about paying attention by being attuned to when we are attending and when we are not. We come to know these directly, not conceptually—"Wow, this is what it is!" Gradually, we see for ourselves that it's better to be relaxed and awake than anxious or dull; and the heart inclines towards these. We experience them more and more. This kind of direct experience is something that stays with us when we leave retreat.

Associating with the Wise

On retreat we also have the opportunity to experience first-hand the value of spiritual friendship. It's quite common on retreat to feel a real closeness to the other meditators—even when we aren't talking to them or don't know anything about them. Our connection is at a much deeper level. In the *Ittivutaka* (Iti 17) the Buddha says that no single external factor is more helpful than good friendship. A practitioner who has a good friend, he says, abandons the unwholesome and cultivates the wholesome. With the help of good friends, we progressively attain the destruction of all defilements.

On retreat we also spend time with the elders of our flock, the senior monastics, our teachers and friends. Their good qualities rub off on us. The Buddha said that one should associate with the good, learn the true Dhamma from them, and, thereby, "one becomes better, never worse." He frequently spoke about the importance of associating with the wise. In the "Shorter Discourse on the Full-Moon Night" (MN 110) the Buddha explains the difference between the companionship of the bad person and the companionship of the good person. The good person, he says, chooses as friends and companions those who have faith, who exhibit a wholesome sense of shame and a moral conscience, who are learned in the Dhamma, energetic in cultivation of the mind, mindful, and possessed of wisdom. With this kind of experience we walk away from retreat with a stronger sense of being on the right path and living among good friends.

(continued on page 14)

Thanksgiving '96

When they invited me for Thanksgiving,
I told them I was already busy.
"Busy....retreating?" they asked,
implying that I should be advancing
rather than retreating at this point in my life.

I remember Thanksgivings of
butterball turkeys and
television football games.
There were many trips to the airport.
I always made the gravy.
Yes, there was love too, in the pumpkin pies,
and slightly tipsy faces.

Today, I'm trying to remember something else.
Trees. How many different kinds of trees there are!
The sound of the silver-winged nada bird fluttering in my ears.
The cream puff full moon sky surrounded by vanilla icing
clouds.
How quickly the weather changes both inside and out.

I am busy completing
a labor of love
with my life.
It is a big project.
It's the kind of busy
that makes me feel
very unbusy.

—Kathryn Guta

Seeing the Benefits

by Terri Julianelli

Before I departed for my most recent 10-day monastic retreat, my 11-year-old goddaughter asked, as she's inquired incredulously in the past, "So, you're not gonna talk for 10 days?! Are you scared?" I enjoyed the conversation that naturally followed, sharing my past joys and struggles, but internally I thought "What's not to like?" I had only seriously hesitated once, before my first weeklong retreat; since then I have usually just seen the benefits.

Typically for me, being on retreat is about transitions. Threshold experiences, with their corresponding challenges, are the main place I can learn and grow. Life is made up of so many different aspects: work, play, decision-making, family commitments, and on and on. Practice exists as a part of it all. Being on formal retreat allows me the time to reflect on my changing life without being bombarded by the usual daily responsibilities.

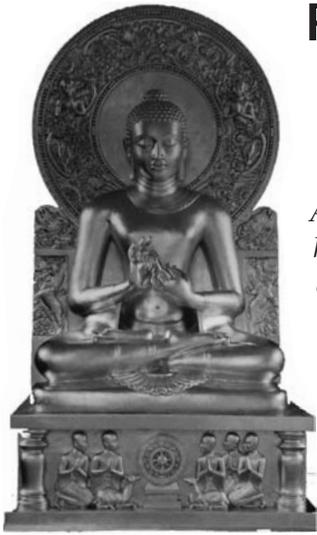
At times, friends and family members have been seriously ill while I was on retreat. One of my dear friends died while I

was on retreat in 2001. I knew he was close to death, and I had spoken with his wife and offered emotional support just before leaving. It was very special to have the time to sit with the emotions that arose. Outside the retreat environment, I often have difficulty just being with sadness without feeling that it has grabbed a hold of me and taken me hostage. Having time to sit with whatever emotions arise, I can allow them to intensify while finding I can get through it. As a result, my ability to notice and be with all that arises is strengthened in my entire life.

This ability to be more in the moment also benefits my relationships. I find that I can hold a question or concern rather than feeling I have to talk about it when it first comes up. The right time eventually arises, and then it is very natural to discuss the issue rather than having forced the situation. Retreats support my capacity to wait and allow things to unfold naturally.

Retreats reinforce my sense of practice as a way of life, strengthening in me the knowing that the joy, the suffering, the confusion, the ease—"it's all retreat."

Terri Julianelli lives in Emeryville, California.



Pouring the Buddharupa

by Jill Boone

Author Jill Boone travelled from her home in California to Thailand to attend the ceremony and pouring of the new Buddharupa soon to arrive at Abhayagiri. Photos of the event are included on the back page.

I arrived at the location for the Buddharupa pouring early in the day, when preparations were still being made for both the casting of the Buddha image and the crowd expected in the afternoon. Many men were getting the molds ready by unbricking them, pasting something white on the edges, and building the scaffolding and ramps for the workers to carry the molten bronze up to the top of the mold where it could be poured in. In addition to the pieces of the large Buddharupa that were going to be poured, nine 9-inch Buddhas and nine 5-inch Buddhas were lined up to be poured. The area was already “strung up” with a blessing cord that connected the different tent areas for the laypeople, the bhikkhu hall, the Buddharupa, and the pouring area and molds.

In honor of the ceremony, a whole new hall had been built for the ajahns to sit in—finished just the night before. It was a

lovely, open Thai-style structure with a marble floor that remained quite cool in spite of the heat. As the bhikkhus gathered, people streamed in to offer respect and greet them. There were hundreds of people and 50 or more bhikkhus in attendance. At some point, the foundry workers disappeared then reappeared in their traditional white outfits. Everything was suddenly set to go. The air sparkled with anticipation.

As one of the few non-Thai speaking attendees, it was a bit overwhelming at times trying to follow the ceremony, but it was wonderful anyway, and I just enjoyed the moment. Balls of the blessing cord were unrolled through the crowds so that we were all connected to the main cord. The chanting was excellent. Ajahn Pasanno and Ajahn Liam, who were presiding over the ceremony, came and stood by the mold, holding the blessing cords while the pouring began. It was quite amazing to see buckets of golden yellow molten bronze be taken up the scaffolding and poured into the image. I took pictures as rapidly as I could. After the main Buddha was poured, the little Buddharupas were poured. It all went rather quickly once it began.

After the ceremony, many of us went up to the molds to get pieces of the thick blessing cord that had connected them. The ajahns sat in a long row accepting offerings and talking to the laypeople. Ajahn Pasanno was sixth in the row with his 30 years as a bhikkhu. My final image of the day was Ajahn Liam blessing everyone by sprinkling water over the crowd. The Thai people are truly generous and kind and the joy was wonderful. In spite of knowing only one word of Thai and thus never being quite sure what was happening at any given time, I loved being there and being part of the ceremony. ❖

The Benefits of Retreat *(continued from page 13)*

Garnering Insight

On retreat we have the rare opportunity to sit uninterruptedly for hours simply listening to the self-absorbed rantings of our unawakened mind. It takes this kind of sustained attention to see the nature of these rantings. If we are even just a little reflective, we have to admit that they have nothing to do with running our lives. It may feel as though there is a “self” who is in charge, but we gradually come to see that what we call “self” is just a collection of thoughts and feelings, reactions and comments, judgments and criticisms that have nothing to do with anything. When all is said and done, the self-absorbed rantings of the mind are just that much.

It can be a rude awakening to observe firsthand the uselessness of the many hours one spends in fantasy, planning, managing, controlling, rehashing the past, and creating the future. It can be startling to see that the strategies of the unawakened mind, that is, the things it turns to in order to deal with difficult or unpleasant things—the longing for other conditions, the hatred, the depression and numbing, the anxiety and worry, the confusion—don’t work. In fact, they only add to our difficulties and postpone our awakening. In the

end, we come to see the foolishness of the unawakened mind, and we stop following it.

Our own foolishness can make us chuckle. We’ve been trying so hard to find peace, but we’ve been going about it in all the wrong ways. It’s like watching a child fumble trying to tie his or her shoelace and never getting it right. On retreat we get to sit through all our own unsuccessful efforts to tie our shoes. Over and over again we try to overcome suffering through our unskillful views and deeds, and over and over again we fail to experience release through these strategies.

Eventually we give it up. There is no getting away from difficulty. But then we see that this is really no big deal. Our lives are like the rotation of the planet, effecting now darkness, now light, now difficulty, now ease. Neither one is better than the other. They are just two halves of the whole. It’s just the rhythm of life. Sometimes it takes the rigors of retreat to see that. ❖

Gloria Taraniya Ambrosia has been offering instruction in Theravada Buddhist teachings and practices since 1990. She has been greatly inspired by the example and teachings of the Western Forest Sangha and makes visits to several of their monasteries each year. She is a participant in the CALM (Community of Abhayagiri Lay Ministers) training program.

Abhayagiri.org Is a Big Hit

Have You Visited the Monastery Site Lately?

The monastery's website began a few years ago as a simple page on the DharmaNet.org site, but since then has grown to a top-ranked domain with an average of over 6,500 "hits" per day and 670 unique individuals browsing the site.

With the help of numerous supporters, we have been able to add new content such as books published by the monastery, new translations of talks by Ajahn Chah, recent photos from the monastery, and an up-to-date calendar of events. We have recently begun adding audio versions of Dhamma talks from the monastery, often available just a day or two after being given. In an average week, it's not unusual for over 100 people to listen to our most recent talk. Since publishing Ajahn Amaro's newest book, *Small Boat, Great Mountain*, on the site in May 2003, it has been viewed over 35,500 times. Within the first four hours of posting, it had been viewed over 600 times.

All of this is significant to the monastery for a few of reasons. Providing access to the teachings in a convenient and timely manner is always something we try to keep in mind. Secondly, as we're able to provide teachings on-line,

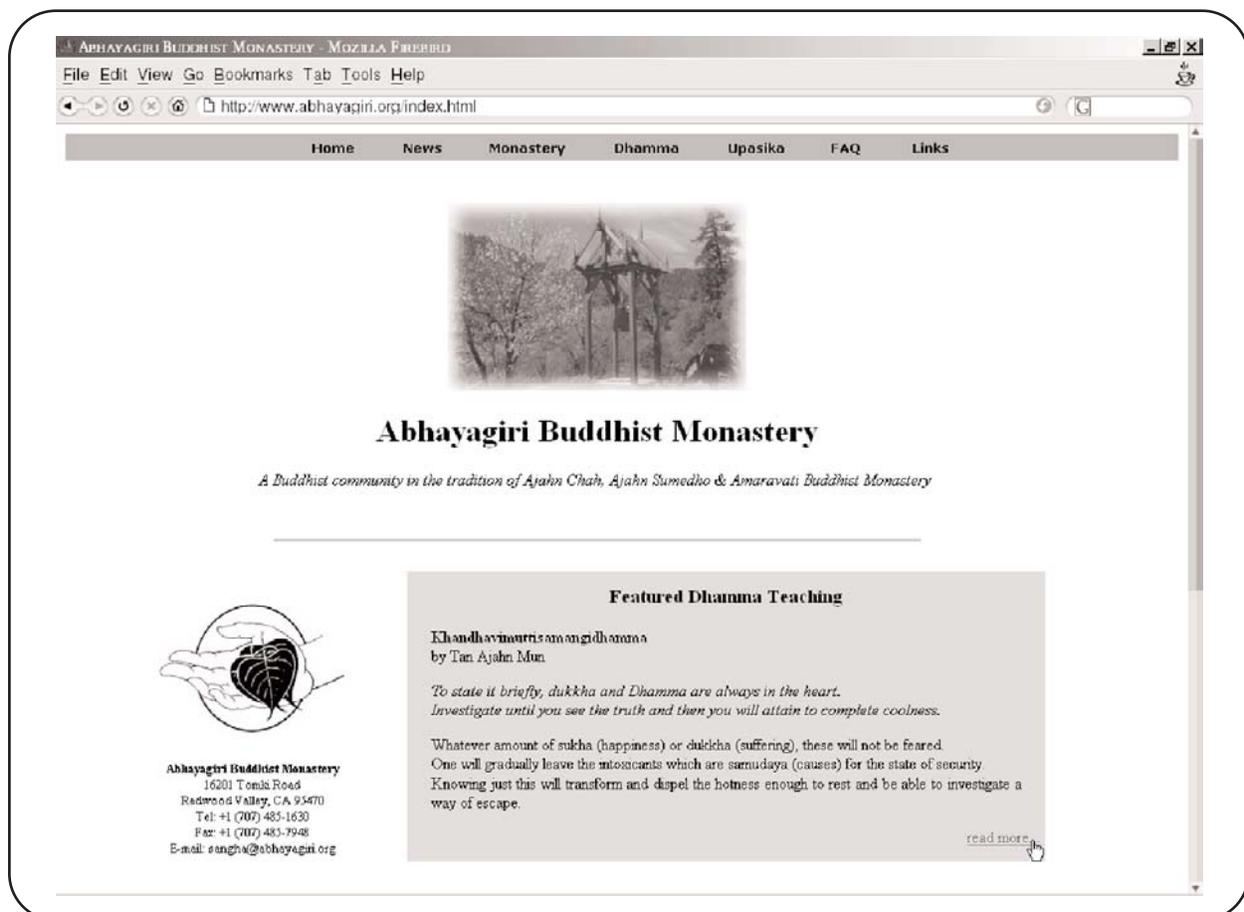
it reduces the physical cost of printing and mailing materials. For instance, of the thousands of viewers of *Small Boat, Great Mountain*, if only 100 choose to read it online instead of requesting a printed copy, that is a significant savings of resources. Likewise, over 100 people read this newsletter online, which also saves a money in printing and mailing costs.

Finally, the website allows people to remain more informed about what they're interested in. By checking the "Publications" section, visitors can know when we've received or published new books or check to see if the book they are looking for is currently available. The "Calendar" page has dates and contact information for all the retreats led by Abhayagiri, as well as special events at the monastery. One can also read past issues of *Fearless Mountain*, as well as the most recent edition of the *Forest Sangha Newsletter*.

We would like to thank everyone who has helped with the site, either by transcribing talks, helping with the design, or providing feedback about the site. Special thanks to Kondañña (Barry Kapke) for creating the site, Sakula (Mary Reinard) for her design expertise, and Laura Dunkerley for her advice and support.

If you have any questions or suggestions, please send an e-mail to webmaster@abhayagiri.org.

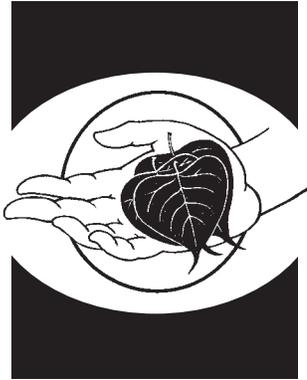
—Scott Boultinghouse, Webmaster



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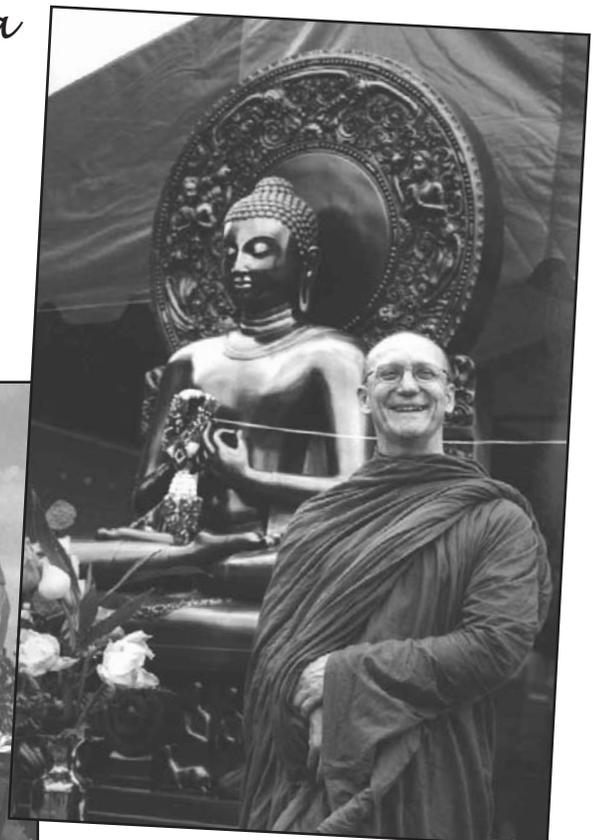
Buddharupa Pouring Ceremony

Bangkok,
Thailand
Dec. 6, 2003

(see story on page 14)

(above)
Melting down
jewelry donated
by Abhayagiri
lay supporters
(right)
Foundry
workers in
traditional
costumes
pouring
the new
Buddharupa

Photos by Ginger
Vathanasombat



Ajahn Pasanno with a "twin"
of the new Abhayagiri Buddharupa