

News and Musings

January – Feb 2020

From Ven. Ajahn Khemadhammo OBE



I'm not usually exactly what you would call a great traveller, that is unless you take into account the mileage I clock up every year visiting prisons and away on Buddhist related prison business. But last year was different. As usual I was away in January for the Ajahn Chah memorial event, and that was followed by a week in Burma and then another week back in Thailand. In May I was invited as a speaker to the UN Day of Vesak in Vietnam, and that was followed by a short conference on Mindfulness and another Vesak celebration at the UN building in Bangkok. In June every year at Wat Pah Pong there is what is known as the June Meeting, a huge Sangha gathering of monks from the various Wat Pah Pong branches mostly in Thailand but also from all over the world, and I went to that too. Then later in the year I was invited to an event at a new forest temple in Norway and in December I went to Slovenia to conduct the first ever novice ordination of a Slovenian in Slovenia.

Now this year, I've once again been on my annual trip to Thailand and Burma. The main reason for this is the Ajahn Chah Memorial Day on the anniversary of his death, January 16th, twenty-eight years ago.

I've written about the Ajahn Chah memorial event before and every year it follows much the same format but

with the crowds never diminishing, but if anything, increasing, although as time passes and we all age it's inevitable that practically every year there are one or two familiar faces missing from the front line of elder monks. It remains an extraordinary tribute to a monk who rose from very humble origins to become a teacher and inspiration to millions across the globe simply by being true to his monastic discipline, practising what the Buddha taught and talking about it in ways that spoke directly to the hearts and minds and experience of those who heard or have read what he said. As every year, in the afternoon there was a procession of many hundreds of monks followed by thousands of lay followers that from the main meeting hall then wound its way all the way out to and around the Ajahn Chah Chedi where his relics are kept, until with the entrances and steps packed with monks and the whole area gridlocked and covered in devotees the Acariya Puja was read out and we each made our offering of flowers, candles and incense.

Then two days later, I was off to Bangkok and from there to Mandalay. This too is becoming a habit. Our little party numbered five in all: me, Ajahn Manapo and three lay followers. From the same hotel as every year we went out each day to various beautiful and inspiring places.



The ShweDagon

We went twice to U Bein's Bridge, an extraordinary affair, almost three quarters of a mile long, made of teak and spanning a huge lake that at this time of the year is partly dried up and cultivated, some of it already planted and some still being tilled by elegant high stepping white oxen. On our second day we were treated to a fabulous day out by a young lady who used to be at Warwick Uni and apart from when a certain football team was playing was a regular every week at Warwick Uni Buddhist Society and was its President for one year. She took us into the hills north of Mandalay to a magnificent cave that following a stream wound its way deep into the hillside. A cave made even more magnificent by the dozens, if not hundreds, of Buddha images placed here and there throughout its length. In some places these



were grouped with other images to form tableaux illustrating events in the Buddha's life. So, for example, there is the Buddha subduing Angulimala with, in the background, Angulimala's mother who he was about to kill

when he spotted the Buddha. Then the same evening we paid a visit to the Jade Pagoda, a favourite now since we were introduced to it last year, a pagoda covered entirely with jade of various colours and types, the gift of one man. In the evening when all lit up and when most of the people there are Burmese it's at its best. The almost casual but deeply rooted devotion of people in Burma at these sacred places is indescribable. There's no forced or false piety, instead a moving, deep and abiding trust and affection that is almost tangible. The next morning, once again, we made our boat trip to Bagan down the mighty Irrawaddy. This colossal river absolutely

captivates me. I'd love to spend more time exploring it. This year we were on the same boat as last year and again looked after by a young and very helpful Burmese woman keen to improve her English. A feature of the trip was a stop at a village where the local industry was the production of rather



crude but practical earthenware pots. Last year when I was there, I wandered away from the main party and stood for a few minutes in a dusty pathway. Just then two women turned the corner bearing impressive loads on their heads. They had to pass me but one of them was wearing sandals. To her and the culture she comes from it would have been the height of disrespect to have walked past me with her sandals on, so she performed the impressive feat of bending and removing them without dislodging the load from her head before, still politely lowering herself, she passed by. That was the most unforgettable gesture of respect I've ever seen and would be a real lesson for modern Britain where the principle of respect seems to have had its day.

Yangon followed Bagan and here, as it is every year, it was the great Shwedagon that was the highlight of our visit. We deliberately stay in a certain hotel because of the perfect view we have of it, especially at night. This is the mighty Pagoda that dominates Yangon and has to be one of the most remarkable and holy places on earth. I well remember in 1987 a Burmese lady passionately insisting I must go there and how sceptical I was. But when I went, I was enchanted, and all these years and many visits later I remain enchanted. The effect, the atmosphere is indescribable.

By the time I flew back to Thailand, and a few days rest by the sea before my return flight to Heathrow, the



coronavirus was beginning to hit the headlines. At Suwanabhumi Airport masks and concern were already visible. Nothing at Heathrow. But now the lockdown and a new and different world.

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