



# RIVER DHAMMA

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## Ten Years

by Ajahn Punnadhammo

It's now been ten years since I first came back from Thailand to Arrow River. Looking back, the passage of time seems very swift. As the Buddha said, human life is like a dew-drop, fading swiftly in the sun. I remember the shock of coming back from five years in the tropics to one of the worst winters in memory. In the spring of '96 we had snow on the ground until the last week of May. I remember being nervous about walking in deep grass until I remembered there are no cobras here.

It was quite a challenge Kema left me when he passed on, to take over the running of the Arrow River Centre. I honestly didn't know if I could make it work. But with the help of many good people, both locally and elsewhere in Canada and abroad, we have managed not only to hang on but to put down roots for the Dhamma and to grow in a modest way.

Over the last ten years, we have had five monks, and one nun, beside myself, staying here for extended periods of time. Many others have come for short visits. We have also made space for dozens of lay meditators and helpers. My hope is that their time here was fruitful and helped develop seeds of wisdom and peace.

We have also been visited from time to time by non-human friends; beasts and birds of all kinds. Our feathered friends range from humming-birds to bald eagles. Regular visitors include flocks of blue-jays, whiskey-jacks and chickadees who come to the feeder every day. It's also a way-station for migrating birds of many kinds, spring and fall. We've seen many wild animals too, from the northern red squirrel and the chipmunk all the way up to deer, moose, and bear. The bears have sometimes made a nuisance of themselves, but they taught us to be careful with our food and garbage.

We've made many improvements in our facilities over the last decade. We now have seven kutis on the land, and the sala is finished at last. (Well, finished enough for now - that building will not be finished until it falls down) We've adapted successfully to living off the grid and I doubt we'd be interested in hooking up to land-lines now even if they ran poles down the Devon Road. We have solar power in three buildings, including the kitchen and a good satellite connection for phone and internet.

Living here, I've had to become somewhat proficient in a range of skills, from carpentry to wiring to mechanics. One of the challenges is keeping all the equipment working, fifty miles from town and on a limited budget. As always, we seem to have managed to stumble along from minor crisis to minor crisis with a little help from our friends. I've gradually taken on more teaching work, both here at the hermitage and when travelling. This has been very educational for me. My greatest reward is when someone tells me that something I've said has helped them with their spiritual growth.

What of the next ten years? I'm not much of a planner. It seems that whenever I try to make plans, nothing ever turns out the way I intended or expected. I've learned to mostly take it day by day and let the universe surprise me as it unfolds. Having said that, I do have some vision of what I'd like to accomplish. I want to keep Arrow River small and simple, close to nature. One or two more kutis over the next decade would be just enough growth. We could use a building for the library and office. There may be one or two other smaller building projects (such as a bell-tower). All of this will unfold, if it does, in its own time - both resources and man-power need to be available and in the right season.

s for myself, I find this a suitable place and have no intention of moving on. I'll probably stay here until I'm too feeble to haul wood and water. ■

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Arrow River Forest Hermitage welcomes visitors. Prior notification is necessary if you would like overnight accommodations. Retreats must be scheduled in advance with Ajahn Punnadhammo. Retreatants are required to abide by the 8 precepts. Guests are required to abide by the 5 precepts.

# Let's Count to Three

by Scot Kyle

I wish to express a few words from the perspective of a lay person on the Buddha's teaching of the Triple Gem: The Buddha, The Dhamma and The Sangha. After all, it seems to me such a simple and beautiful teaching may evoke a variety of different perspectives. I like this teaching since I believe it to be central to the inner strength and longevity of Buddhism generally. The Buddha was very pragmatic in providing tools of awareness which, if used with skillful motivation, provide a space for spiritual cohesion amongst practitioners and Monastics alike.

The Buddha was one man born into luxury who caught a glimpse of the world and its suffering, left his beloved family to pursue the life of an ascetic, then suffered greatly himself until he achieved enlightenment. Therefore, the path toward one's enlightenment isn't something esoteric; that is, gained from books or secret sects. Nor is it limited to the resources of the rich or denied those in great suffering. So the first gem is the Buddha, the lone man with His pain and His Path toward Nibbana. It points out the reality of human struggle as well as the means to its cessation.

The Dhamma, or second gem, can be expressed as the Truth, the original wisdom teachings or simply "the way it is". Although we can try to interpret the Dhamma, words expressed from the human mind are always a reduction of the power of what is felt or experienced at our deeper levels. The term "levels" is even misleading. Perhaps the analogy of fog being burned off the lake by the rising sun is more apt. Even the Blessed One's first

words following his enlightenment were a rendering down, or unavoidable reduction of His experience of direct Dhamma. Truth is woven into the very fabric of the uni-

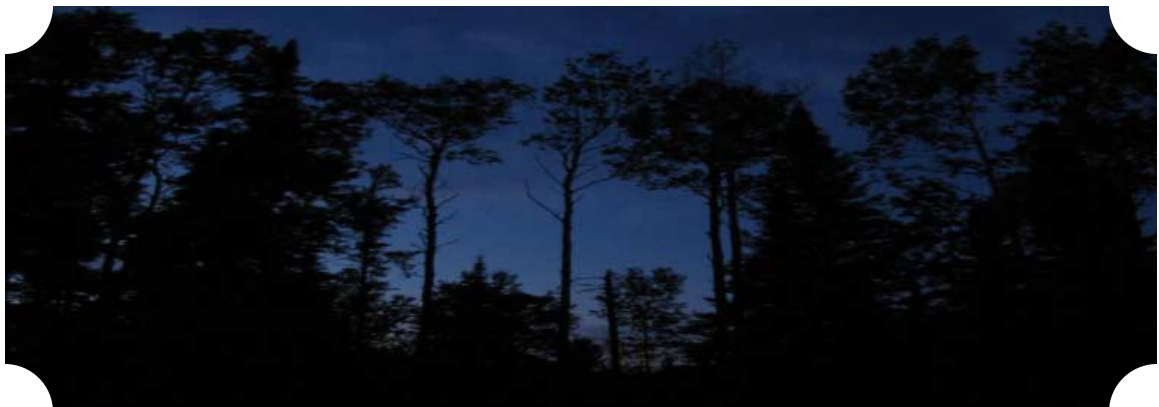
verse herself and its accessibility is at our fingertips. If we need a navigator, we need only visit our Monk. One teaching suggests that the Monk is a manifestation of The Buddha. The closer one is to the way things are, the more clearly the Dhamma is perceived. This perception is right view.

The Sangha, or third gem, was the Buddha's guidance to his disciples to remain as a communal unit. With numbers of Monastics living together, the oral tradition of the Dhamma could be chanted and hence passed down through the ages with accuracy. The Sangha preserves the Dhamma. A subtler concentric ring outward from the Sangha is the lay community, which feeds and cares for the Monastics in exchange for the Truth teachings. The Sangha and the lay community are inextricably linked. The Buddha formed the Sangha for the preserva-

tion of the Dhamma in order that those with "little dust on their eyes" may come to know directly the Way of the Scared Path.

Neophytes to Buddhism are at times frustrated by trying to remember the "five of this" and the "seven of that", but in moments of too much mind, I take refuge in the purity of this Triple Gem teaching and ask myself where I can fit into it all with real action. For wisdom may be equated with action.

Thanks for your dana, however it may manifest. ■



# Voidness Meditation ❁

by Ajahn Punnadhammo

The concept of sunnata, voidness or emptiness, is one that is central to an understanding of Buddhist thought. It is also very elusive and difficult for beginners to grasp. In fact, it cannot really be understood by the intellect alone, but must be approached by way of direct experience. As one matures in insight practise, the essential emptiness of all dhammas become more and more evident.

There is also a series of contemplations in the Cula-Sunnata Sutta (Shorter Discourse on Emptiness, Majjhima 121) that deserve to be better known. In this Sutta, the Buddha lays out a graded series of meditations which allow the mind to approach a direct experience of voidness.

Below, I've given instructions for a way to do this meditation. Two general points should be borne in mind -

1 - Each stage is arrived at by a process of selective non-attention to some aspect of the total field of awareness. This may seem strange to those raised in the insight tradition, but this is how it works. Remember, with each successive stage, you are adding nothing new. You are simply removing attention from some aspect of the previous contemplation. There is nothing to attain, and nowhere to go.

2 - Don't try and "figure it out." The analytical mind is not of much use here, and attempts to engage it will only obstruct the process. This is especially so in the later stages; the best way to understand each stage is that it is what is left when you remove the previous object of attention.

The meditation proceeds through the following seven stages. As a rough guide, you should spend five to ten minutes in each one, but don't be dependent on a clock, just let it unfold naturally.

**I** - Begin with contemplation of village - this is a simple mindfulness exercise. Be aware of your surroundings, as they actually are, the room, the furnishings, any other people. Don't analyze or judge or compare. Just hold the surroundings in mindful awareness. When this is established, extend your imagination beyond the visible surroundings to take in the immediate area, the street etc., extending only as wide as is comfortable for you. ("village" is used in the Pali as a word for the quotidian human environment)

**II** - Next, move on to contemplation of forest. Simply remove all human constructions from the previous mind-field and focus only on the natural world, the plants and

trees especially. Remember, selective non-attention. You don't add anything, you subtract. The "forest" was a part of the first contemplation, now you make it the foreground by non-attention to "village." Allow the field of your imaginative awareness to extend to take in the locality where you live, beyond your range of vision. If you live in a city, there are still lawns and parks to focus on ("forest" is used in the Pali as a word for the natural environment).

**III** - Next, by selective non-attention to the living world you move on to contemplation of earth. By non-attention to the living growth, become aware of the wide earth-element underlying things. Be aware in the imagination of the hills and valleys, bowls for any nearby lakes, etc. Allow your field of imaginative awareness to gradually expand until you are holding the whole globe of this planet in awareness. Focus on the solidity of the earth-element.

**IV** - Next, by non-attention to earth one should become aware of boundless space. At first, this will be the space occupied by the earth. Removing the earth from awareness, space becomes the foreground. (Again note it was present all along - we subtract and do not add.) Space by its nature has no boundaries, so the idea of an earth-sized area should quickly dissolve into boundlessness. Hold the awareness of boundless space.

**V** - Your consciousness is now filling boundless space. Okay, stop noticing space and only pay attention to the boundless consciousness. Mind without limit.

**VI** - In the next contemplation, we stop paying attention to boundless mind and let your awareness rest on the nothingness that remains.

**VII** - If you're able to take it this far, eventually even nothingness starts to seem "busy". In the next step we remove the concept of nothingness from our field of awareness and rest in the field called "neither-perception-nor-nonperception."

It is not perception, because there is no perceiver and no perceived, but it is also not non-perception because it is not a blank annihilation. But don't try to figure it out. The name is not important, it's essentially meaningless, it's best to simply think of it as what's left when you remove nothingness.

After holding this for a while, return to the body with some mindful breathing before getting up. Good luck with this if you are inspired to try it. ■

## ❁ ARFH Updates ❁

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### FUNDRAISER



#### **Dhamma Connection**

*Designed and made by Lori Smetaniuk*

**Dhamma Connection quilt is for sale: \$1,350.00**  
(or best offer).

The goal is to raise a \$1,000.00 (after cost of fabric)  
for Arrow River Forest Hermitage.

Width: 86.75 inches    Length: 109 inches  
Made from 100% quilting grade cotton fabric  
with 100% polyester batting.

Machine washable, tumble-dry on low to medium heat

Check out the link below for an explanation  
about this quilt and to view more pictures:

<http://www.arrowriver.ca/quilt/quilt.html>

To Contact Lori: [quilted@tbaytel.net](mailto:quilted@tbaytel.net) or call (807) 344-3534

### Donations

Donations can be sent to the treasurer at the following address:

**Ian Moores**  
**Box 79**  
**4700 Keele St.**  
**Toronto, ON, M3J 1P3**

**IMPORTANT** ► All cheques should be payable to: **Arrow River Forest Hermitage.**

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[riverdhamma@sympatico.ca](mailto:riverdhamma@sympatico.ca)

## Call for Volunteers

As spring returns to Arrow River, so too does the short and busy season of work on the upkeep of the buildings and grounds of the centre. As visitors to the centre are aware, this is a constant effort, to counter the even more constant effects of the environment - another of the myriad lessons in impermanence.

As treasurer my work is mostly concerned with money. And certainly I would appeal to anyone that has a surplus of funds to consider this form of dana. Fuel costs are obviously steep, we require an extra load of firewood this year to restock our reserves, and the construction projects of last year have given us a lengthy list of (neglected) maintenance jobs.

However, there is a different form of dana that I would like to mention here. Along with funds to provide supplies, equally important are the hands that do the work. An extra load of firewood means twice as much wood to chop. And more maintenance work means more nails to hammer, more walls to paint, more roofs to patch, more trails to clear. So I would like to encourage both regular visitors and those who have never been, Thunder Bay locals and more distant supporters, able carpenters and those who (like myself) are barely confident they know one end of a hammer from another, to consider a visit to the centre for what Kema introduced me to as karma-yoga. Not only will it be a great help to the centre (and if my own experiences are any indication) you will also find it rewarding in itself, and a fruitful source of mindfulness practise.

If you wish to donate some of your time to Arrow River, please contact either Scot, the president, or Ajahn Punnadhammo, the abbot.

Metta,

**Ian Moores**

Click here to hear a 5 second audio clip of the sound of the Arrow River.



# Notes from an Autumn Retreat

by Leah Thomas



One chair. A woodstove. An altar. Candles, incense and a futon. 5 days. One meal a day. A small cabin overlooking the Arrow River in Devon, Ontario. I am on retreat at the Arrow River Forest Hermitage, a 95 acre Theravadan Buddhist Monastery. I walk down the frosted path at 5:30 a.m. in the dark.

Morning puja is at 6:00 a.m. in the sala, a six-sided glass-walled building overlooking the waterfall. Early as I am, Jotipalo Bikkhu -a visiting monk - is already there, lighting a fire in the barrel stove. Soon the Abbot (Ajahn Punnadhammo) arrives along with Ajahn Kusalo, a monk from New Zealand. They adjust their long saffron robes, kneel and bow three times, then sit before the altar. Three shaved heads in a row.

By candlelight, in the emerging dawn, we complete the morning chant, "Itipi so bagava araham sama sambuddho...", then arrange ourselves for an hour of silent meditation. When I again open my eyes it is daylight. Because I am on retreat, the monks and steward scrupulously avoid talking of worldly things in my presence.

As I leave the sala I hear them begin to discuss activities for the day: split wood, fix the snowplow, work on one of the cabins, fire up the sauna in the afternoon. I go to the well, pump water and return to my cabin. Just before 10:00 a.m. I again walk the path, this time carrying a large stainless steel bowl fitted with a tightly woven saffron-colored cover and

strap.

The steward has prepared curried chicken, salad, vegetables and soup for the daily meal. The Vinaya, the rules of discipline of monastic life, allows monks and retreatants to eat only before noon. After the steward has offered the meal and the monks have served themselves I fill my bowl and return to my cabin to eat in silence.

Then I spend the day alone in practice....sitting and walking meditation interspersed with yoga and a few tea breaks. This retreat goes well. I feel nourished and content. After a summer of intense emotion, chaos and revelry in Colorado, retreating to Arrow River is like curling up on a soft sofa with a down comforter and lots of pillows. Accumulated tensions and peripheral desires are allowed to gently fall away. I rediscover my warm and compassionate center - always there if often forgotten - steady, friendly and welcoming.■

