



# RIVER DHAMMA

✿ Arrow River Forest Hermitage News ✿ Vol. 3 No. 2

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## Good News and Bad News

One of the greatest aspects of Arrow River is its remoteness, and a simplicity of lifestyle that can come as a shock to those of us used to the hustle and bustle or urban centres. However it is also one of our greatest challenges. Because of our location most of our lay community is far removed. But we seem to be even more isolated from the monastic community, leaving Ajahn Punnadhammo set apart from his Sangha. It also forces him to carry the double-role of abbot (with its attendant administrative responsibilities) and sole resident Bhikku able to provide dhamma teachings.

So it was with considerable enthusiasm that I greeted the news that Arrow River will be hosting Samana Paramito, currently at Amaravati, for at least a year starting this November. This is the good news. An opportunity for Arrow River's lay community to benefit from another monastic, for Ajahn Punnadhammo to have the support and company of another person in robes, and for Tan Paramito to explore a temperate climate variation on Ajahn Chah's forest tradition in an actual forest.

However, this also creates added financial pressures for Arrow River. There is the small, but appreciable, increase in operating costs associated with another full-time resident at the hermitage. As it is traditional for a monastery to pay the costs of a visiting monastic, we also have to find funds to cover the cost of a flight from England.

My infrequent contributions to the newsletter in the past have always focused on service work - what Kema used to call karma-yoga. But now I find myself in the unenviable position of having to ask our lay community - whose support has always been generous and kept Arrow River open despite its isolation - for financial help. Amaravati has offered to put up the money for Tan Paramito's flight, but we should ideally be able to pay them back as quickly as possible.

High attendance in the last two summers has also added the financial burden of an extra load of firewood this year. Winter is traditionally a time of year with few visitors, and so fewer donations. Finally, the cancellation of the Toronto Star's religion section means we will no longer have any income from Ajahn Punnadhammo's regular articles.

Arrow River requires approximately \$1200 per month to operate. Along with seasonal expenses like firewood, building upkeep, and the large propane tanks, our annual expenses can climb upwards of \$20,000 per year. Right now we are in the midst of pricing out re-roofing jobs for Ridgehouse and the caretaker cabin, which are overdue, and required to prevent weather damage to our buildings.

I'm not very good at imposing on people, but please, if you have the means, Arrow River could use your financial help.

Let me close by offering many thanks to everyone that has helped support Arrow River. Thanks to all stewards, past and future, who help keep the centre running on a daily basis. Thanks

to all who have offered dana, either funds, or goods given. And thanks to all the people who provide service, from chopping wood to preparing the newsletter. I hope this note finds you well and healthy, and you will get a chance to visit Arrow River soon to experience its peace for yourself.

Metta,  
Ian Moores

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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.

# Begin

by Ajahn Punnadhammo

The Buddha often advised his monks to seek out a lonely forest abode. Throughout the history of Buddhism, there have always been those who followed this advice. Living close to nature has many benefits for the spiritual seeker. There is, of course, the advantage of avoiding the negative influences of city dwelling; the noise, the distractions, the sensory bombardment. These things were bad enough in Rajagaha in the Buddha's time, and so much more troublesome in Toronto or Bangkok or Berlin in these later days.

But there are other, directly positive benefits as well. Quiet is not just the absence of noise, it has a definite quality of tranquillity all its own. Natural darkness too, can be a quality not easily found in the city. The lights of our big cities may offer convenience and security (or the illusion of security) but there is a price to pay; we lose the universe. Only on a moonless night in the country can a person really see the stars.

Being close to nature also reminds one constantly of the reality of this conditioned existence. The changes of the seasons, especially stark in the more northerly latitudes, is a powerful reminder of impermanence. The year itself goes through a dependently arisen cycle of birth, maturity, aging and death, followed by rebirth.

The animal life reminds us of the presence of other ways of being. Everything from the quick little mice to the ponderous bears represents a living consciousness different from our own. Even the most troublesome, the humble and busy mosquitoes, have their Dhamma lessons to teach. It is a very good exercise in First Precept not to swat the mosquitoes during a Canadian summer.

As an example of a lesson given by animal life, I recall watching termites swarm in Thailand. Once a year, these little beings produce a winged form. Like most social insects, it is only the winged ones which have the power of sexual reproduction. The new "princes and princesses" (to use the terms favoured by biologists) appeared one by one at the mouth of the nest and you could see them

spread their new wings, getting ready for the "courtship flight."

As each one took to the air, no doubt it's tiny mind filled with delight, it was immediately swallowed by an enormous and very ugly toad. Chomp. Chomp. So much for prom night in the great samsara.

I also think there is something important to be had by living, as we do at Arrow River Forest Hermitage, "off the grid." In the city, the source of our power, water and heat is at most a monetary expense. Electricity is always there in the outlet, produced somewhere far away by processes we may not even be aware of. Likewise water from the tap and natural gas piped directly to the furnace.

Living remote from these utilities, we have to make our own. When you pump your water into buckets with a hand pump, and carry them back to the cabin, you are not likely to be wasteful of it. You also become keenly aware of using every watt of power when there is only a limited supply. You know where these things come from, and if anything goes wrong, you learn how to fix it or you go without.

At the moment of writing this, we are in the last stages of preparing for winter; getting the sheds filled with firewood, the chimneys cleaned and battened down. All the wild creatures who share this space with us are busy too, with their own preparations. Those who remain for the winter are storing food and preparing nests, and those like many birds, who migrate, are moving on. I've watched many different species pass through the bird-feeder and we are now just about down to the few hardy species who winter over; the blue jays, the whiskey-jacks and the chickadees.

The trees have shed their brief and brilliant fall colours and are in their barren dormant state. Puddles are freezing over, nights are getting cold. Soon enough everything will be covered in a brilliant white blanket of snow. Naturally.



# The Law of Karma ❁

by Giovanni De Crescenzo

**K**arma is the universal spiritual law of cause and effect. Every living thing is subject to it. In simple terms it states that past actions affect the future. This belief, in some form or other, is common to many religions. "What you sow is what you reap" is an expression of the law of karma. In the Buddhist and other eastern religions however, the law of karma has much more profound implications being inextricably intertwined with the concept of reincarnation. The effects of karma are not limited to one life but span many lives. This law explains apparent iniquities, which would be otherwise incomprehensible, such as: why is one born healthy and another sick; how is it that some people easily succeed in whatever they try, while others seem to have no success at all, no matter how hard they try. The answer comes naturally once you realize that your karma follows you from one life to the next. The happenings of your present life are influenced not only by your actions in this life but also by the twists and turns of your past lives, and the karma they have accumulated.

**Good and bad karma.** For practical purposes we make a distinction between 'good' and 'bad' karma. It must be understood that this distinction is artificial. It's like asking whether the law of gravity is good or bad. You may say that gravity is good as otherwise you could become lost in space as you jump up to skip a rope. Yet if you fall and break a bone you might end up cursing gravity for causing your body to be so heavy. Similarly, if karma causes suffering we call it bad and if it causes happiness we call it good. But karma is really neither. It is really more like, what engineers or physicists would call, a feedback mechanism. We could think of a feedback mechanism as a way to keep some device (say an airplane on autopilot) on a given path. If the device strays too much to the left the feedback will counteract by steering to the right and vice versa if it strays too much to the right. Karma is that universal feedback mechanism that is constantly trying to steer us to our ultimate goal: Nirvana and freedom from rebirth. Eventually after many lives we learn to distinguish between actions which, through the law of karma, cause sorrow and those which produce happiness and we finally start our journey towards spiritual elevation.

**Is our karma better or worse than others'.** We should not think that, because somebody is suffering more than we are or has worse luck than us, our karma and/or spiritual advancement is necessarily greater than theirs. We cannot predict when the effects of bad karma will strike. The fruition of a present action could come immediately or in the next life or several lives from now, depending on our balance of good and bad karma. One important thing to remember is that it is impossible to

live without producing karma. Every action, every thought, has karma associated with it.

**Are we helpless against bad karma?** Some people have the mistaken belief that anything that happens to us is due to our karma and nothing can be done to stop it. But think about it! That would mean that life is pre-ordained. What would be the sense of living then. If life is pre-ordained then we have no free will. If we have no free will then nothing we do is under our control. Then why should we get karma from actions not in our control? Obviously that can't be right. If we have free will then karma cannot pre-ordain our existence. The seeds of karma only determine tendencies. But it's always up to us to reverse those tendencies before they are realized. Buddhism and other oriental doctrines assure us that karma can be countered. Some people become monks so that they can work towards the destruction of their karma and attain liberation. Also they help others in their struggle. The only antidote to bad karma is good karma. Yet, depending on your level of advancement you may or may not be able to completely avoid the fruition of bad karma. Nevertheless every effort, however small, to accumulate good karma will certainly help diminish the effects of bad karma.

**An inspirational story.** Sometime we may find ourselves in a situation in which it is impossible not to produce some bad karma. Here is a story which I read many years ago. An ascetic was meditating under a tree when a man came running towards him and said: "I'm being pursued by some people who want to kill me. I'm going to hide up this tree. Please don't reveal my hiding place". The ascetic made no reply and continued his meditation. When the pursuers arrived they asked him which way the man had gone, under penalty of his own life. The ascetic was in a dilemma since he never told lies. He thought for a while and finally decided that lying would be a sin and therefore he was compelled to reveal the whereabouts of the man. So he raised his index finger and pointed to the man's hideout. The man was eventually killed. The point of the story is this. It is true that by telling a lie the ascetic would have committed a minor sin. But wasn't it a greater sin to contribute to the man's death? By simply pointing in the wrong direction he could have easily saved the man's life. In a way he was motivated by selfishness in his response. Not wanting to commit a sin, even a minor one, no matter the cost. Yet he did not realize the greater sin he was committing.

This is only a simple illustration. Life is in general much more complex and it's not always easy, in any given situation to discern the appropriate course of action. When there is no clearcut choice the best we can do is base our behaviour on common sense.

# The Mascots of Arrow River

## *Toby*



Toby in a contemplative mood.



Toby paying a visit to the bird feeder. Toby appreciates bird food occasionally (or maybe just birds?)

## *Calvin*



Dancing for treats.



Calvin looking innocent. Somebody knows something?

### **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.**