



RIVER DHAMMA

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President's Message

by Scot Kyle

As I reflect on this past summer's accomplishments, I can't help thinking about the Buddha's teaching on the nature of desire. We desired a new kitchen, we did the work, and we got one. Suppose someone came in while the work was being done and inquired as to when the ceiling would be finished, more desire enters the room. Two points: we need to pat ourselves on the back once in a while, for our collective efforts are our spirituality announced to the universe. Secondly, our well of desire has no bottom. The cause was desire, the effect was a new kitchen. Desire seen from the eternal dimension could be expressed as will or intention. Intention arises from the being, while desire arises out of the doing. Doing is of the body: being is of the spirit. The subtle key is to recall that we are human beings, not human 'doings'. Globally, it is our 'doings', our endless constructions, which abrogate our ability to transcend samsara. It's not so much that desire itself is bad, rather it is desire's attachment to rigid goals or outcomes. When outcomes are left fluid, disappointment has no entry point: and we have the opportunity to see perfection in the process. Upon achieving this perception we may have mindfulness in the moment. If such mindfulness is present we've called forth our own being, for the time being. This fortifies the circle and the strengthening of relationships in the circle will be its own reward. Herein, lies the miracle of a fluid expectation. The making of or the fortifying of the circle in our present physical form is our reason for being. It is will or intention made manifest. Will is the karmic spark between cause and effect: the sacred reason for the time being is, simply put, this being in time. May all beings in our circle and outward to the global circle adhere, to the best of their understanding, to the original teachings. Thank you for being the way you are. ■

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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.

Reading and Understanding

by Ajahn Punnadhammo

Dhamma Note: Pali words used in this article are printed without diacriticals. Our apologies to the purists.

After giving a Dhamma talk, I make it a custom to open the floor for questions. Often, I find that people are confused about important points of Dhamma because of reliance on the English words used in translated scripture and other Dhamma books. There are some excellent translations available these days (I would recommend Bhikkhu Bodhi's) but no translation can ever be perfect.

Pali has a highly developed technical vocabulary for describing various qualities, states and attributes related to the mind and to meditation. As often as not, there is no single exact English equivalent. Translation is always an inexact science, as no two languages are completely isomorphic. English, and most likely all European languages, are particularly blunt instruments for parsing the niceties of the mental terrain, which are dealt with by such precision in Pali, Sanskrit and other classical Buddhist languages.

Over the years, certain Pali words have come to acquire standard English equivalents; for instance consciousness for the Pali *vinnana*. *Vinnana* has a very clear meaning in Pali; it is the attribute of mind which is capable of experience. In Thai they say "Poo-Roo" which is "the one who knows." It is the elementary act of knowing, in the sense of being aware. Unfortunately, the English word consciousness has a much looser meaning and often implies knowing about something rather than simple knowing. Furthermore, consciousness in ordinary English usage is often made the equivalent of thought, or given a special psychological meaning as opposed to sub- or unconsciousness. None of this fits with the Pali *vinnana*.

I once read some abstracts from a conference of various scientific disciplines discussing the question "What is Consciousness?" and was struck by the wide disparity of views. To give two extreme examples; one psychologist used a "black box" model based on stimulus-response. If an entity is able to intelligently respond to varied stimuli, then consciousness must be present as the intermediary

(hence the black box.) She was forced to admit that by her definition a welding robot on the Ford Motor line would be a conscious entity! On the other extreme, one psychologist gave a complicated definition that mixed up consciousness with cognitive thought, and concluded that only humans and possibly the great apes are at all conscious.

That both of these conclusions are absurd just points up the vagueness of the word in English. So when a beginning student of Buddhism encounters the word "consciousness" in a book or hears it in a discourse, there is no telling what connotations she will "hear" along with it. The solution is to make oneself familiar with the definitions of the original Pali words that one encounters in translation. (A good source for this is Nyanatiloka's Buddhist Dictionary, a small but invaluable reference book which belongs on every Buddhist's bookshelf). Then the reader is able to identify the precise technical meanings of such words, even in translation.

Other standard translations that cause misunderstanding are craving for *tanha* (too broad), suffering for *dukkha* (too narrow), feeling for *vedana* (way too broad) and rites-and-ritual clinging for *silabataparamattha* (very misleading.) But I would like to focus on just one more; concentration as the English name of *samatha* meditation. It is common to see meditators who struggle with *samatha* practise because of trying too hard. In part, I think this comes from the connotations of "concentration."

We are told to concentrate on the breath, so we bear down and force the mind onto the object and soon weary of the endeavour. And no wonder; think of the mundane uses of the word concentrate; we concentrate when we are balancing the cheque-book or studying a difficult textbook. These are hardly experiences that tend to tranquillity or joy, or to an ease or lightness of mind, all factors of right meditation.

Samatha should be a relaxed being-present with the sensation of the breath. The breath is allowed to fill the mind, rather than the mind attempting to fill itself (concentrate on) the breath. I haven't come up with a better translation, and will probably continue to use "concentration" if only to save confusion. But one should be aware of the problem. ■

At Kema's Grave

by Phil Keinholz

rest peacefully
faithful yogin

Georgia
Georgia
Georgia the whole day
through

just an old sweet song
keeps Georgia
on my mind

still / in peaceful
dreams I see
the road
keeps running back

The Zen of Firewood, or How to Still your Mind

by Ajahn Punnadhammo

The winters here are long and cold and the fall firewood preparations are an important part of the annual cycle. This is good, hard work. Ten cords to cut, split, deliver and stack. It's an elemental kind of activity; earth, wind and fire. It's a chore determined more by the rhythms of nature than any man-made clock. Rain days close us down, the hours of daylight limit the pace, the uncertain onset of snow establishes the mystery deadline.

The first and primary tool is the chain-saw; a Stihl 034. The modern chain-saw is a small miracle of precision engineering. The pattern of the teeth (two curving cutting edges flanging outward, and a smaller dull knob in the middle to push out the dust) was modelled on the mouth-parts of the wood-boring beetle. The chain-saw is a harsh teacher of mindfulness, any lapse can result in a huge gash across your thigh or your face (the two most common chain-saw injuries). I was told by an emergency room medic once that doctors hate chain-saw wounds because they are so messy and hard to stitch. But on the upside, you're unlikely to cut a limb off because the teeth will bind on the bone. I bet that's hard on the friction clutch too.



When it's working properly, the chain-saw is a joy to work with. It slices through big hard ash logs like a hot knife through butter. When something goes wrong with it, the saw can be a bitch; hard to start, stalling, overheating, pulling to one side. Good maintenance is the key. Sharpening the teeth is an art in itself.

Many chain-saw chains have exactly 108 teeth, and when sharpening you must apply the same number of strokes to each tooth. I have sometimes used the chain like a Tibetan mala and said a syllable of a mantra with each stroke of the file.

The axe is the next tool. It combines two of the primitive machines; a wedge and a lever. The long swing of the axe provides torque for the application of focussed force at the sharpened edge. The wedge-shape provides a horizontal force pushing apart the grain of the wood.

The theory is simple, but skill is needed for efficient chopping. To begin with, one must work in harmony with the essential nature of the wood. The chopper appraises the piece, judging the grain, taking into account any knots, and decides where to make his blow. The main thing to avoid is getting the axe sunk into the pithy centre of a large piece. Sometimes it is very hard to extract, stopping work while one looks for hammers, wedges, hatchets, anything to free the recalcitrant axe.

The chopped wood is loaded onto a truck for delivery to the various woodsheds. The primary wood-truck here is a venerable 1976 Dodge three-ton. The driver-side door is missing, the body of the rest of the cab is a rusted, tangled mess of iron. The brakes barely work. The muffler is a distant memory. The battery sits on the passenger seat, the gas tank is a plastic jerry can wedged behind the cab. But every year we put a little gasoline into the carb, turn the key, and with a roar and cough she clears her ancient pipes and comes once more to glorious life. Of course, she uses enough gas to keep three or four Gulf Sheikdoms busy. They don't build them that way anymore.

At the woodsheds, the wood is unloaded and stacked. The stacking too, is a refined art. The materials you are working with come in all kinds of random shapes and sizes and somehow you have to construct even, stable pillars and neat rows. Anything sloppy and the whole thing is liable to tumble over, forcing you to start again. And you must do this at a good pace, or you'll never get done before the snow blows. Here again, the key is to work with, and not against the essential nature (svabhava) of the wood.

There is a tremendous feeling of satisfaction when the last piece is stacked and the chain-saw put away. All that is left is to disassemble those carefully constructed piles, piece by piece to keep the stove warm through the long white winter months. Believe me, anyone who has worked on the piles in the fall, really appreciates the comfort they bring in the winter. ■

❁ ARFH Updates ❁

ARFH now has a satellite link and VoIP. The new email address is:
arfh@xplornet.com

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.**

🐾 Receive River Dhamma By Email 🐾

If you wish to receive *River Dhamma* in full colour PDF format by email forward your request to: riverdhamma@sympatico.ca

New Computer

Thanks to all those who made donations towards Ajahn Punnadhammo's new computer. The computer is an Apple Powerbook g4. It runs Tiger OS 10.4.2.

The New Kitchen is Finished!

After much work and help from volunteers the kitchen is finished. The new look includes new cupboards and counter-tops (acquired used from ReStore), a linoleum tile floor, improved insulation and new windows. The layout is far easier for cooks and includes a walk in pantry with a closing door. The results are a more efficient, modern work area.



Mississippi Pilgrimage - continued...

by Jotipalo Bhikkhu

"I've sometimes been overcome with a passion to return into that 'heart of darkness' across the Mason Dixon line, but then I remind myself that the true darkness lies within my own mind, and the idea looses itself in the gloom. Still the passion persists. Sometimes I feel the need to reaffirm all of it, the whole unhappy territory and all the things loved and unlovable in it, for all of it is part of me."

Invisible Man - Ralph Ellison

Six months after leaving Arrow River on a cold snowy day, I find myself back at the hermitage. I left with the expectation that Austin Stewart and myself would have walked from New Orleans, Louisiana approximately 3,000 km back to Arrow River, taking five to six months to complete the walk.

We walked for a month, basically making it through the state of Mississippi, before getting sick. After two weeks of trying to recover we were still very ill, so we jumped on a train for Chicago. A few days later we visited a doctor friend of mine who diagnosed us as having mononucleosis.

Even with this grim diagnosis Austin and I kept thinking that we would quickly recover and get back on the road. Once we bought tickets for Saint Louis, Missouri only to watch that date come and go. Later we were making plans to travel to Dubuque, Iowa. Eventually we both realized that there would be no more walking this year and we made plans to return to Arrow River.

My mind immediately started thinking about next year. Maybe Austin could take a month off from work and we could walk from Memphis to Saint Louis. Or maybe in a couple years Austin could have his student loans repaid and then we could complete the walk. At times when I had energy my thoughts drifted into various themes of this nature. On days when I was feeling ill, the thought of walking across a room filled me with nausea. So what is this desire to walk all about?

One answer is obvious, we were having a great time! When we started the walk we had no idea if it would work and we almost quit after four days. But slowly the walk started to build its own momentum, and we were being showered with hospitality and generosity. The night before I came down with mono I wrote in my journal, *"Austin and I have noticed that the goodwill coming our way, even just smiles and waves, seem to be coming more frequently and at closer time intervals. I don't think I will ever cease to be humbled by people's generosity. It makes us feel so good, and those that give tell us they feel such joy in making the offerings. What will tomorrow bring?"*

Wanting to understand this desire to walk and not knowing how to get a handle on this question I called my teacher Ajahn Pasanno, at Abhayagiri. He advised me to look at my tendency to always have a project. This pilgrimage had been in the planning stage for two years before we took the first step and I read several dozen books and made most of my gear. Taking my teachers advice, I decided to live for awhile without having a project. Austin and I had been talking about putting our journal into a book so I decided not to follow through with this idea. For a few weeks I felt very uncomfortable and it was mostly manifest by a hollow feeling in my gut. I've noticed this feeling many times in the past, but never had it been this intense.

This sensation was prevalent most of the time and I kept thinking this feeling shouldn't be here. But slowly I began to question, "is my desire to always be planning and doing something an attempt to cover over or expel that feeling?" At a deeper level maybe that gut feeling is the beginning of nibbida or dispassion, which is the wholesome desire to get out of samsara. So here the motivation that is needed to attain liberation is present, but I've not recognized it as such and have been pushing it away by excessive planning and other means of escape.

I'm sure you have heard the stories of the person who goes on some long adventure just to return home to find what they had been seeking. It appears that maybe that is how this journey will end too. ■



Trip to Abhayagiri

by Winston Loh



This summer I had the privilege of spending a week at Abhayagiri Monastery in northern California. It was a wonderful opportunity for me to take part in the daily life of the monastic community. The day starts at 5am with morning chanting and meditation, done outdoors. A light breakfast is served at 7am, followed by a period of work until the main meal at 11. Afternoons were a time for our own practice, and I often walked the grounds of the monastery.

Abhayagiri is located in a valley, with the monks' kutis scattered in the hillside above. To walk mindfully to the top of the mountain took me 2 hours, and I was rewarded with scenic views of the valley and beyond. I also found respite from the summer heat under the shade of a huge evergreen.

Drinks were taken at 5:30pm, and this was also a time for the lay community to meet with the abbots Ajahn Passano and Ajahn Amaro for questions and discussion. At 6:30, the community would gather in the meditation hall and listen to Ajahn Passano read from a Dhamma book. The last gathering of the day was evening chanting and meditation at 7:30.

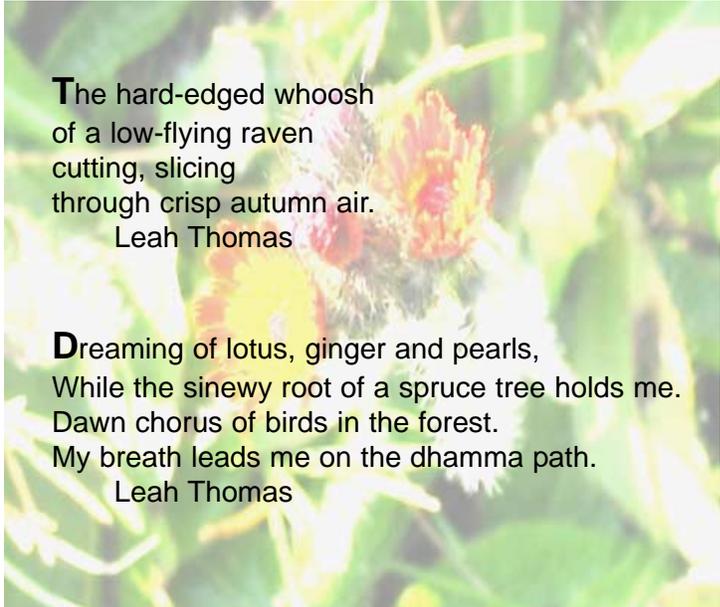
To witness the interaction of the monastic and lay community was something very special. The lay community very much had a sense of reverence and respect for the Sangha, for example, placing their hands in anjali when addressing the monks. At the same time, there was also a great sense of friendli-

ness, ease, and laughter.

I was also impressed and inspired by the devotion of the lay community. Some had moved to the area from other parts of the US to be close to the monastery. It was a privilege to get to know them and hear some of their stories. To be near people who have inclined their lives towards Dhamma is an inspiration.

Abhayagiri and Arrow River are both of the Thai forest tradition in the lineage of Ajahn Chah. When the monks or lay people would ask me where I was from, I would reply Thunder Bay, Canada. Almost invariably they would relate that to Ajahn Punnadhammo, Arrow River, or Venerable Jotipalo. Many of them have had personal experiences with Ajahn Punna and Arrow River. And through that I felt a greater sense of closeness to their community.

During my stay, I also came to see that our community at Arrow River is part of a larger Buddhist community. The teachings of Ajahn Chah are wise, practical, and piercingly direct. To have Thai forest monks living nearby is a rare blessing. Much gratitude to the monastic and lay community of Arrow River, past and present, especially Ajahn Punnadhammo and Kema Ananda. ■



The hard-edged whoosh
of a low-flying raven
cutting, slicing
through crisp autumn air.

Leah Thomas

Dreaming of lotus, ginger and pearls,
While the sinewy root of a spruce tree holds me.
Dawn chorus of birds in the forest.
My breath leads me on the dhamma path.

Leah Thomas