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The Lay Review and Newsletter of the
Birmingham Buddhist Vihara

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Freedom from Fear

by **Pamela Hirsch**

One day when I was closing my back door the glass fell out and broke. It took a week before anyone would come out to fix it. All I could do was flatten a large cardboard box, cover the hole and hope that no-one noticed. Before this happened, every evening, after my husband had gone to bed, I used to sit and relax, drinking hot chocolate and reading. But now, every noise at the back of the house made me nervous. I was thinking "This council estate where I live is very rough. Someone may break in and steal my washing machine. I may get hurt as well." I was very frightened.

So I turned to my book of Protective Chants where I came across the 'Crest of the Banner' (Dhajagga Paritta). In this sutta Lord Buddha tells the monks that once there was a battle between the Devas and the Asuras. Then Sakka, the Lord of the Devas, told his subjects 'Devas, when you go to the battle, if you experience fear and terror, look up at the crest of my banner, and your fear and terror will go away.' Lord Buddha told the monks that the Devas' fear and terror may or may not go away when they look at the crest of Sakka's banner. It's not certain. Why is that? Lord Buddha explained that it is because Sakka, Lord of the Devas, is not free from greed, not free from hate and not free from delusion. Therefore, he himself is liable to fear and terror.

I stopped reading the Sutta for a bit and thought 'Now I know why I am so frightened. Like Sakka I am not free from greed, hatred and delusion. I'm so greedy. I want to hold on to my washing machine. I have ill-will towards the people on this estate,

suspecting them of dishonesty, and I've got ego delusion, not wanting to get hurt.' Then I returned to the text.

Lord Buddha continued. 'Monks. If any fear or terror should arise in you when you have gone to the forest, to the foot of a tree, or to a lonely place, then think only of Me in the following way: Such indeed is the Blessed One, Arahant, the Consummate One, supremely enlightened, endowed with knowledge and virtue, welcome being, knower of the worlds, the peerless trainer of persons, teacher of Gods and Men, the Buddha, the Blessed One.' Lord Buddha promised the monks if they thought about Him in this way, then all their fear and terror would go away.

When I looked further down the text I saw why Lord Buddha could make this promise. As He, Himself said: 'The Tathagata, O Monks, who is an Arahant, supremely enlightened, is free from lust, free from hatred and free from delusion, and is therefore not liable to fear, terror, fright or flight.'

So then I realised that, although I have not overcome greed, hatred and delusion, Lord Buddha has overcome everything, and if I just think only of Him and recite the virtues as He has recommended, then I would be safe. I wouldn't have any cause to be afraid.

So that is what I did every night when I was on my own and, although the neighbours could see that I had no proper back door, no-one took anything or harmed me. By chanting this sutta I was protected from all fear and danger. ♦

Quotations from: **The Great Book of Protective Blessings**, compiled by Ven. W. Sarada Maha Thera. Pub: Singapore Buddhist Meditation Centre

**Those who are forever watchful, who study themselves day and night,
and who wholly strive for nibbana, all their passions pass away.**

lotus
lay review

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Whilst every effort is made to publish only appropriate material, there may be times when the opinions expressed may be at variance with your own. Comment and criticism is always welcome and should be addressed to the Editor at the address given on p. 8.

Nothing To Gain but Peace



The Buddhist scriptures teach us that the world we experience, including the understanding of self and others, has no true existence in ultimate reality. Through our practice and study we should be able to leave behind our sentimental attachments and be perfectly at peace on some wild remote mountain top practising all pervasive unattached love for everything and everybody.

I know this is exaggerated and that it is perfectly possible, if one is sufficiently advanced in understanding the Dhamma, to live in the world without attachment and still have love and compassion. I have a confession to make. I have not reached that stage yet, even though I have been practising Buddhism for many years. There is still attachment to people, places and things. There is still sadness at other people's misfortunes. Sympathetic joy (*mudita*) I have no problem with, but my actions and thoughts are not free from what may be called 'sentimental attachment'. The Arahats thoughts and actions are free from attachment and therefore of greater benefit to all, but my entanglement in samsara makes me feel that the refined air on the mountain top of perfection is a long way off and perhaps a bit lonely for the likes of me yet.

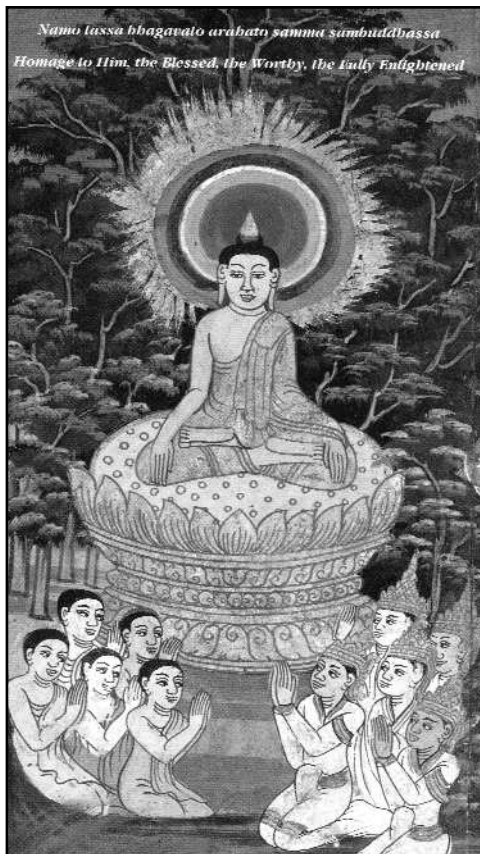
One thing I have learned, which may be of benefit to anyone who feels as I do, is not to be too critical of yourself. Remember, there is nothing to gain as ultimately there is no-one to gain anything. Treat yourself gently. Sit at the feet of the Buddha whenever you can; see what is here and now with a spirit of gentle acceptance and, when the Buddha smiles, you know that nothing else is needed and the top of the mountain may not be such a daunting prospect after all.

And so, with my best (if somewhat attached wishes), I wish you all a very happy new year. ❖

Bill

THE
BUDDHA'S
FIRST
SERMON

an
illustration
from the
British
Library's
collection
of
Burmese
Life of
the Buddha
manuscripts



Myanmar Festivals: Tabotwe & Tabaung

Following on from the festivals of Thadingyut and Tazaungmon, the next Buddhist events to be celebrated in Myanmar occur in Tabotwe (February) and Tabaung (March).

Tabotwe can be the coldest month in Myanmar and so it is probably only appropriate that the festival associated with this month is the Bonfire Festival. The festival involves the burning of sandalwood, or other fragrant woods, in braziers that are then taken to the temples, as offerings to the Buddha images.

The origins of the festival relate to one particular incident during the life of the Buddha when he was residing at the Pubayon Monastery at Savatthi. One evening, during Tabotwe, he was stood on a hillside but, because of the cold, he kept his back turned towards the last rays of the sun to keep warm. As the sun finally set, the temperature continued to drop, and he found one robe to be insufficient for keeping him warm, so he put on a second robe. By midnight he had to wear a third robe and towards the end of the night he had to resort to yet a fourth robe. However, as the Vinaya rules do not permit more than three robes, this last robe was stitched together with the third robe becoming the robe known as the "*Dukut*" robe. Throughout the exceptionally cold night the Lord Buddha kept his hands and feet warm by keeping them on a furnace.

In memory of this night devotees have been offering bonfires to the Buddha images in Tabotwe, and especially on the full moon night since the time of the Myanmar kings as described in a treatise on court festivals and ceremonies known as "*Law Ka Byu Har Kyan*".

The number of areas where this festival is still celebrated has reduced over the years and it is now restricted to upper Myanmar in the major temples and pagodas of towns such as Monywa, Mandalay, Sagaing, Shwebo, Magwe, Meiktila and Pakokku. The largest of these events occurs at the Maha Muni

Temple in Mandalay but, as elsewhere, the preparations begin on the eve of the full moon day. On the eve of the event fragrant woods, especially Sandalwood and Thanatkha, are collected in the temple's forecourt and heaped into the shape of a pagoda or spire. Another offering associated with this event is rice porridge and particularly a savoury mix known as htamane. In addition to being a traditional offering, the making of the htamane provides a social occasion for everyone involved and is typically made in the courtyard alongside the bonfire area.

The celebrations start at sunrise on the full moon day with a band playing religious music (*Nayi*), accompanied by singing, and the head monk carries out a face washing ceremony of the Buddha image. Altogether the band plays three times during the day, i.e. at dawn, midday and at dusk. Once the htamane is made, a portion is kept for offering to the Buddha and monks at dawn the next day, and the remainder is shared out amongst all those present along with cups of hot tea.

In the evening the wood is lit to provide warmth for the Buddha in memory of this day. The bonfire may also be offered to senior monks, and older laypeople as a meritorious deed and mark of respect.

Tabaung is the last month of the Myanmar calendar, marking the transition from winter to summer, and sees the celebration known as the Sand Pagoda Festival. References to the festival being celebrated in Myanmar can be found in the earliest writings of the Inwa period (1364-1752). However, it is also possible that such Myanmar celebrations can be traced even further back in time to the Bagan Period. In support of this it is recorded that King Anawrahta (1044-1077) built Shwezigon Pagoda (Bagan) on the sand banks of the Ayeyarwady River and, furthermore, the original name of this pagoda was Shwe The Khon, meaning "golden pagoda on the sand bank".

Buddhist literature mentions the origins of the Sand Pagoda in connection with two different incidents. The first relates to a hermit by the name of Devala who lived a hundred thousand kabas (cosmic aeons) ago. Devala occupied a hermitage in the Himalayas along with several of his disciples. It is said that one day he built a pagoda with sand which he decorated with flowers before proceeding to worship at it. When his disciples asked him why he worshipped the Sand Pagoda he told them that he had read in the ancient writings of the Vedas that the Lord Buddha had many disciples and was the Exalted One to be revered. Consequently, he had built the Sand Pagoda and dedicated it to the Lord Buddha before proceeded to worship at it, which had brought him both peace of mind and spiritual joy. His disciples were so moved by what he told them that they too built sand pagodas to worship at.

In the biography of Pulinahtupiya Mahathera it is said, that in a previous life as the hermit Narda, he had built a sand pagoda to represent all previous Buddhas who had entered *parinibbana* and, having decorated it with three thousand small bells, had then proceeded to worship at it day and night.

In memory of these two events it is said that the Myanmar kings declared that the building of sand pagodas should be an annual event with the month of Tabaung being chosen for two reasons. Firstly, rivers are at their lowest levels which, in turn, exposes sand banks along their shorelines. Secondly,

by this time all the crops that had been grown alongside the rivers have been picked giving the farmers the free time needed to fully celebrate such a festival.

These days the Sand Pagoda Festival is not celebrated nationally but is restricted to those towns and villages found alongside the larger rivers. The pagodas are comprised of five tiers which taper towards the top and represent the five layers of Mt. Meru. Each tier is made from a circle of bamboo posts or matting that is then filled in with white river sand. Finally, the structure is decorated with flowers, flags and coloured paper streamers. Participants then circle the finished pagoda three times before paying homage to it with fruit, flowers and other devotional items. After receiving the five precepts from the presiding monks a libation ceremony is carried out to share the religious merit with all other beings.

Sand pagodas last until the next rainy season and the subsequent rising river levels. However, some can be found that have been encased in cement to enable them to last longer but, even so, are referred to as Sand Pagodas. ❖

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A Story Never Told is...



The Lion was accepted by all as the king of the forest, but the other animals felt he could not be fully trusted and so insisted he must rule with the help of some of the other animals. At first the Lion agreed to their demands and appointed the Bear, the Monkey and the Rabbit to be his ministers. After a short while the Lion became irritated by having to listen to his ministers and felt they would serve him better if he just ate them. However, he realised that he couldn't simply kill and eat them but needed a valid reason to make the whole thing acceptable to the other animals of the forest.

Therefore, the next day the Lion called a meeting of all the forest animals, including his ministers. When all the animals were assembled he said, "You have been my ministers for some time now but I am concerned that so much power may have corrupted you." He then opened his mouth wide and asked the Bear to describe the smell from his royal mouth. Being a meat eater the smell was quite foul and being truthful the Bear told the Lion it was foul.

The Lion screamed at the Bear that to insult his king like this was nothing less than treason and that the penalty for treason was death. Lion immediately killed the Bear with one swipe of his paw.

Next, the Lion turned to the Monkey and asked exactly the same question. However, the monkey having seen the fate of the Bear, was wise enough not to fall into the same trap. Consequently, after smelling the Lion's breath, the Monkey said the smell was quite delightful, in fact possibly the nicest smell he had ever come across.

At this point the Lion turned on the Monkey and said this was not just flattery but more importantly it was lies and how could a king's minister be a liar. Yet again the Lion killed one of his ministers without a second thought.

Finally, the Lion turned towards the Rabbit, smiled and asked the same question.

The Rabbit had a good long sniff and then looked quite sad. "I'm so sorry Your Majesty," said the Rabbit,

"I have a really bad cold you see and have not been able to smell anything for a few days now. However, if you would let me go home to my bed I could come back once it is cleared up."

Unfortunately, for the Lion, there was little he could do but agree to the Rabbit's request. Of course the Rabbit never did remember to visit the Lion again to check on his breath!

•••••

***So what is 'a story never told'?
It is simply a story not shared.***

•••••

Some people may have read this story and found it amusing. Reading this story may have caused some to look at things in a different way. Of course some people will not have found the story of any interest whatsoever. For me, however, it caused me to look at a certain event in my life from a different perspective and more importantly to make sense of it.

If it could help me come to terms with an event then it may also be of benefit to someone else, but not if I don't share it!

•••••

***And for all of you concerned about
the fate of our Rabbit! Well, read on...***

•••••

After killing his ministers the Lion went back to hunting every day for his dinner. However, after a while he decided there had to be an easier way to get food and so called a meeting of all the animals. He pointed out that by going out and hunting everyday all the animals of the forest spent their whole day in fear of being killed and eaten. Therefore, he proposed that the animals should draw lots each day and the one

with the short straw could then present itself at his den to be eaten. This, he explained, would make everyone happy as he would be fed every day and the rest of the animals could go about their business safe in the knowledge he would not jump out and try to eat them, at least not that day!

The animals agreed that this would be best for everyone and so each day an animal would go to the Lion's den to be eaten whilst everyone else felt safe.

Things ran smoothly until the day the rabbit got the short straw. Having escaped death once he was determined not to be eaten this time and so he spent the whole night trying to think of a plan.

Next morning the Lion woke and looked out of his den to see who was for breakfast; but there was nobody there. He went back in and had a wash and waited a little longer. While he waited he became more and more angry, but just as he was about to leave his den to confront the animals of the forest, the Rabbit rushed in breathless. The Lion looked down at the Rabbit and asked why, if he was breakfast, was he so late. The Rabbit explained that he had been stopped en route by another Lion who wanted to eat him. The

Rabbit said he had explained that this was not possible as he was the King's breakfast. Although the lion had let him go he had sworn to kill this fraud who dared to call himself King. The Lion was almost blind with rage and asked the Rabbit if he knew where this liar lived. The Rabbit said he did and so the Lion asked to be taken there so that he could kill the impostor before enjoying breakfast.

The Rabbit took the Lion to a deep well and explained that if he looked over the edge he should be able to see the impostor in his den. King Lion looked over the edge and sure enough there was the impostor, just as the Rabbit had told him. With a mighty roar the Lion jumped in to the well and was drowned.

From that day on nobody in the forest questioned Rabbit's new title of "Wise Rabbit". ❖



Of course, this is not the only story of its kind in the world. So, if you've heard a story that has inspired you, helped you through a difficult situation, or just caused you to think, then share it. It does not matter whether your article is fiction or non-fiction, all that matters is that it meant something to you. Send it to the editor at Birmingham Buddhist Vihara or e-mail it to kutika@googlemail.com. It will be most welcome.

In Memory of



Ven.Dr. Medagama Vajiragnana
13.9.28 - 15.12.06

It was with sorrow that we at the Birmingham Buddhist Vihara learned of the recent death of the Most Ven. Dr. Medagama Vajiragnana. We wish to express our condolences on behalf of our Sangha, of our Trustees and of the many devotees here who knew and appreciated him over the years.

We are aware of the long friendship between our own former incumbent, the late Aggamahapandita Rewata Dhamma, and Dr Vajiragnana, which went back to their being fellow students for two years at the Sanskrit University of Varansi from 1961. It was our good fortune that the two met again when Dr. Rewata Dhamma came to Birmingham to set up his own centre in 1975 and

thereafter continued their acquaintance. This was further cemented by the fact that the then incumbent at London Buddhist Vihara, Dr. H. Saddhatissa, had briefly tutored the two while teaching in Varansi. We in Birmingham have therefore benefited over the years from the wise advice and incisive teaching of both these learned monks.

At a personal level, I remember that I decided to become a Buddhist in 1966, the year that Dr Vajiragnana first arrived in England, and have therefore benefited from his dedication to the role of missionary monk. As a disciple of Dr Rewata Dhamma, I and many of my fellow devotees in Birmingham, share his dedication to the cause of interfaith dialogue.

We therefore honour Dr Vajiragnana for all he has done to further such dialogue in Britain. We also appreciate what he has done to help those in need through the Rahula Trust, sharing his conviction that Buddhists should not simply teach the virtues of loving-kindness and compassion but be seen to teach by example as well.

To be able to say of a monk that he has lived according to the Dhamma is, the Buddha has taught, the highest praise that can be given. We therefore rejoice that we have had the chance to witness this example over so many years of dedication.

May it continue to inspire those who follow in his footsteps!

VIHARA NEWS

Birmingham Buddhist Vihara

Spiritual Director: Venerable Dr. Ottara Nyana

Dhamma Hall Construction

Since the autumn edition of the Vihara News, work has continued steadily on the construction of our Dhamma Hall. With the scaffolding down, attention was switched to the inside of the building and work has progressed steadily. With the walls plastered, the electrics and lights installed, and plumbing and heating almost complete, the decorating has begun. The amount of work still to be done is now relatively small and completion of the building is expected to be around the end of January after which furnishing of



DR OTTARA NYANA IN THE ONE OF THE UPSTAIRS ROOMS

the rooms can begin.

Since our last publication many individuals have made specific donations towards this appeal and we would like to thank them at this point. As said before, these are of course in addition

to the ongoing support we are constantly receiving that ensures the continued running of the whole site.

Ye Htut Kyaw & Htay Htay Thuang
 Mrs S.R. Sampla & family
 Mrs Irene Wynn
 Birmingham Samatha Group
 U Lwin Myint & Daw Khin Myint, Htwe Thant, Yi Lwin Myint
 R.H. Johnstone & T.T. Lwin
 Dr. Mya Thuang & DR Khin May Sein
 Lin Yen Chen & Mandy Pham
 Capt Ko Ko Maung & Dr Moe Wint Aung
 U Myint Oo & Daw San Myai
 Dr Lay Maung & Daw Than Than Aye Maung
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 Dr & Mrs Tint
 Drs Z. Min & K. M. Tho
 Dr Sein Way Lwin
 Zeyar Win & Hla Myat Lwin
 M. Zeyya
 H Naing
 Richard Pe Win

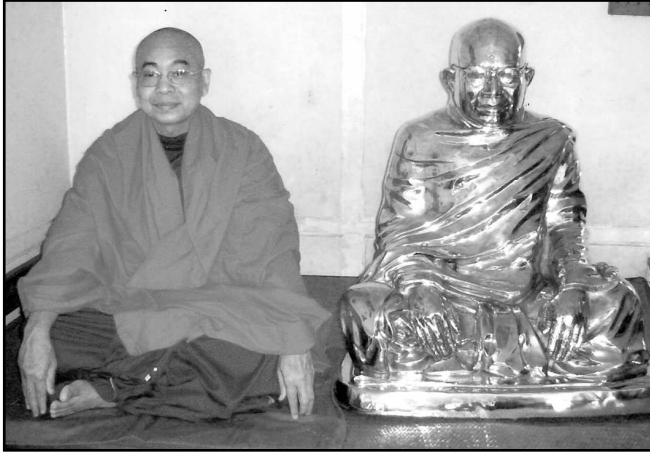
A. Pradhan
 Mrs Khin Myau & daughters
 Jina Das Barua
 Jitu Barua
 Dr. Rupayan Talukder
 Ms Ommar Chitpan
 Khin Mg Htwe, Than Than Htwe, Nicholas
 Wat Moe Aung & Aye Shwe Siro
 Akar Htut & Thanda Aung
 Mr Liam Perdue
 U Ba Maw+ Daw Kyin Wan's family
 Drs Win Myint Aung+ Khin Thin Han,
 Win Thandar Aung & Lin Kathi Win
 Nanin Tun & Nway Nway
 U Phone Kyu Pe & Daw San San New (daughter) Ei Kyu Pe
 Mr Maung Maung Lay & family
 Graham Singh
 Thant Syn
 Dr. Myo Thu & Lynn Lynn Sein
 Dr. Ngwe Soe, wife Khin Mya Kyin, (son)
 Dr Zeyya Aung + Nila
 Aung Zaw Win & U Hla Win
 Mr Hlaing Kyaw Win & Daw Htay Htay
 Daw Yin May & son Dr Kyaw Nyein
 Mr Khin Mg Thuang T.Ohn Myint
 Miss Thinzan Nwe Thuang
 Dr Soe Aung
 Daw Nan Nwe
 Mr Htay Naing & Thant

In connection with this, Dr. Ottara Nyana visited Myanmar during December to check upon various issues relating to the Dhamma Hall. His first priority, at the beginning of his visit, was travel to Mandalay to see the progress made on producing Dr. Rewata Dhamma's statue, which he was happy with. So much so that a veneration ceremony was performed with the finished statue at the Janitarama Meditation Centre in Yangon on the 23rd December.

The second reason for his visit was again to check on how work was progressing, but this time on the various wooden items of decorative art for the building. As with the statue, work has progressed well and everything is due to be shipped soon, with an expected arrival time in Birmingham of the end of February.

Further to this, Dr Ottara Nyana also received donations of 1000 reference books, 10 teak tables 3'x4', 2000 copies of Dr Rewata Dhamma's biography and monetary donations totalling 12,700.00 Kyats along with various other religious objects.

In addition, he also received a single donation of \$1600 from U Zaw Zaw of Mass Myanmar Co. towards the cost of shipping everything back to England.



General Vihara News

Abhidhamma Day was celebrated on Friday 6th October at 7pm. Once again the pagoda was lit by hundreds of candles in memory of Lord Buddha's return from the Tavatimsa realm where he had spent the vassa (3 months retreat) teaching the Abhidhamma to his mother, now reborn as the deity Santusita..

Kathina Day, celebrated on Sunday 8th October, was again well attended and began with Puja in the pagoda before lunch. After lunch the celebrations continued with Dhamma talks, presentation of robes and other offerings and finally the transfer of merit. During the event total donations of £8,000 were made.

Ancestors Day (also known as Samaanāphala Day (see *Digha Nikaya*)), which also coincides with the Christian festival known as All Saints Day, was this year celebrated on Wednesday 1st November. The evening started at 7pm with a welcome and introduction. This was then followed by requesting the refuges and precepts, chanting by various Buddhists groups and traditions, chanting of the Homage to the 28 Buddhas, remembrance and lighting of candles and a talk on the significance of Ancestor's Day. The event was then brought to a close at 8.30 pm with the final chanting of a blessing.

Earlier this year Bhikkhu Nagasena was awarded his MA and subsequently accepted to do a PhD in Buddhism. The topic of his PhD will be *The monastic boundary (Sima) and its associated rituals and cultural practices in Theravada Buddhism*. The main focus of the thesis will be on the activities in Burma and Bangladesh and in particular in relation to the establishment of the monastic Sangha.

During December Bhikkhu Nagasena attended the funeral of the Most Ven Dr Medagama Vajiragnana, the Head of the London Buddhist Vihara and the Chief Sangha Nayaka of Great Britain, who passed away on the 15th December 2006 at the age of 78 at the Hammersmith Hospital, London. Our letter of condolence is reproduced here on page 4. As it reflects, the loss of Most Ven Dr Medagama Vajiragnana is keenly felt by our Vihara.

During September we were represented at two interfaith conferences which were organised by and held at Worcester Cathedral. From these two events good links have been established between the Vihara and Worcestershire LEA, which have already resulted in educational visits to the pagoda.

On a more general basis we have enjoyed many visits by a variety of groups ranging from Key Stage 2 children through to a group of ecumenical students from a range of Christian Churches.

Ven. Dr. Ottara Nyana's Activities in the UK

On Sunday 12th November Dr Ottara Nyana was invited as a VIP guest, by the Hindu community, to the Birmingham Diwali Celebrations that were held at Millenium Point.

Then, on the 17th November, he was invited to attend the inauguration of the Ninth Bishop of Birmingham, the Rt Revd David Urquhart, which was held in Birmingham Cathedral.

He has also been invited by the Kagyu Samye Ling Monastery and Tibetan Centre to run a Vipassana Meditation Retreat, which will run from 19th to 27th May 2007 at their centre in Eskdalemuir.

Ven. Dr. Ottara Nyana's Activities outside the UK

Whilst in Myanmar Dr Ottara Nyana visited Dr Rewata Dhamma's old village and the new secondary school to check that everything was progressing well. During his visit sponsorship money totalling 1,000,000 kyats was presented on behalf of Dr Mar Mar Lwin, to two 2nd Year Medical students.

In addition to this he visited his own native village and was able to see some of his relatives and supporters, as well as being able to pay his respects to his teachers. Also during the visit he was able to arrange for a transfer of merit to his late parents plus some of his relatives and supporters.

At the end of March 2007 he will be visiting Belgium in order to again run a 15-day meditation retreat at the Centre de Meditation Dhammaramsi, Brussels.

SANGHARAMA ACTIVITIES

Meditation: *Advanced*, Mondays 7.30pm *Beginners*, Thursday 7.00pm.

Retreats and Teachings See enclosed programme or send sae for further copies.

Zen Group: First and third Friday in the month.

Devotees Day: First Sunday of month (*Sanghadana, communal meal, teaching or discussion of Vihara support*).

Full Moon Days: Jan. 2, Feb. 1, Mar. 2 (*Chanting in the Pagoda*)

Festivals and Special Days: *Buddha Day (Wesak)* Sunday, 29 Apr. 10.30am;

Dhammacakka Day & Pagoda Anniversary Sunday, 29 July 10.30am; *Abhidhamma Day (Pavarana)* : Fri. 26 Oct. 7pm;

Kathina Celebration: Sunday, 28 Oct. 10.30am; *Ancestors & Parents Commemoration* : Thurs. 1 Nov., 7.30pm

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