

News

and

Musings

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It's eerily quiet! This week we should have been celebrating the South East Asian and Sri Lankan New Year, when even small forest temples like this would normally be seeing an increase in those coming to bring food, to make offerings and to pay respects; not to speak of the crowds that would normally flock to temples in Buddhist countries like Thailand, Burma, Laos, Cambodia and Sri Lanka with the streets there full of people in celebratory mood showering each other with water.

Songkran, the sun moving into Aries and thus signalling a New Year, falls from April 13th to the 15th. However, in England we usually choose a Sunday, either just before or just after April 13th, for our main celebration. Of course, during the actual days of Songkran a few people do still manage to come to the temple but it's a practical expedient to have the main event on a Sunday.

At the Forest Hermitage, which is a Thai style forest temple with Burmese connections, on the chosen day, from about ten to ten-thirty in the morning, a crowd gradually gathers of people from all over the country. Most are Thai with a smattering from other Buddhist countries and there are friends and husbands who are English with children of course who have been born and brought up here. Most of the Thais will be in traditional costume. Since good Buddhists wouldn't dream of coming to a temple without things to offer, they bring with them food and all sorts of supplies they think we might need or find useful. The cooked food that everyone will enjoy shortly before twelve is set out on warmers in the marquee and the rest of the offerings are assembled in our main Shrine Room where everyone gathers. The day proper begins by chanting and bowing to the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha. The congregation next chants the request to receive the Three Refuges and the Five Precepts. These are given by my reciting them one by one and the people repeating them after me. Just to remind you, the Three Refuges mean going for refuge to the Buddha, to the Dhamma and to the Sangha; and the Five Precepts are the undertakings to abstain from killing, to abstain from taking that which is not given, to abstain from sexual misconduct, to abstain from false speech and to abstain from alcohol and drugs. For more than two thousand five hundred years people have been declaring their commitment to the Triple Gem by the Going for Refuge and undertaking to observe these precepts. This is how one formally becomes a Buddhist and nowadays at practically all special occasions it's usual for people to retake and reaffirm their commitment. This is how our festivals usually begin. Next comes the alms-round, an attempt to replicate what happens every morning in these Buddhist countries. The people line up to put rice in our bowls as we monks walk slowly along the line. At the end of it various vegetarian curries and dishes are offered to add to the rice and then we eat, and everyone eats. After the meal and when the

clearing up has been done, we all assemble again in the Shrine Room and the things that have been brought and the money that's been collected are all formally offered. Then as part of the blessing for the food and all that's been given, I give a short talk. The Buddha made the point that while we monks are dependent on the lay community for all material needs and support, the laity should expect from us spiritual inspiration, encouragement and instruction.

My talk will be on the meaning of Songkran. How it's a time when, traditionally, families come together and respect is given to the elders of the family, to parents, grandparents and to the elderly in general. This is the meaning of Songkran, respect. It's a time to remember our debt to those who have gone before, to those who have brought us up and cared for us, who have taught us and whose efforts in the past have laid the foundations for the privileges and prosperity and freedoms that we have inherited and should never take for granted. Showing respect too makes for humility and challenges our pride and arrogance. We're encouraged to bow often, when we enter the Shrine Room, when we leave, and as well as bowing to our senior monks, to place our hands palm to palm when speaking to them. I remind them that the Buddha said that to respect those worthy of respect is a great blessing. And I tell them that Songkran is also a time to spread good wishes for the coming year and the chance too to pick oneself up and to make a fresh start.

By the time my talk's over and I've chanted the blessing, things will have been set up outside for the bathing ceremony. This is when as a token of respect first the Buddha Image will be bathed and then the hands of the monks, then the elderly will be sprinkled and after that everyone's fair game, that's when the fun begins. So, at the large Buddha in the garden I begin by splashing it with water. Then when I've taken my seat, the next monk does the same but before he sits, he pours water over my hands. Then the next will do the same and bathe the second monk's hands as well before sitting. And so it goes on, then the lay people begin, bathing first the Buddha and then each of us, coming down the line, one by one, pouring water over our hands. This is all done with great care, reverently and mindfully. Finally, they turn to each other, sprinkling the elderly and seniors amongst them first and then whoever happens to be nearest, taking pleasure in being together and wishing each other a Happy New Year. But then it's not long before the fun begins and by the end of the afternoon quite a few are queuing up to change into dry clothes. It's all very good natured.

That's how it has been but this year as we know has been different and it remains here still eerily quiet. However, after a dull, cold winter, now with the sun shining, the blossom coming out, the bluebells in flower we can feel refreshed and go forward with a spring in our step and with hope.

May you all be well and happy, may you all be at peace.