

HARTRIDGE BUDDHIST MONASTERY

By Community Researcher, Sasha Vertalova
Telling Our Stories, finding our Roots

The core of my research and the center of my interest is Theravada Buddhist Monastery – **Hartridge Buddhist Monastery** in Devon not far away from Exeter, quite reachable for anyone who is interested.

I tried to summarize some historical facts about the Monastery, but unfortunately there is not a lot of official information in the written form. That's why the only way to collect the most important facts about the Monastery was to ask for help from the people who are involved in it. Luck brought me such nice people who were pleased to give me as many briefings as they were able.

The Monastery

Hartridge Monastery is a sanctuary in rural Devon, comprising 22 acres of land with a pond and new woodland, and accommodation based around an old farmhouse. The monastery is the residence for a small community of monks and novices practising in the Theravada tradition. The monks live as alms-mendicants, following a discipline based on guidelines established by the Buddha.

Although the Monastery is primarily a place of monastic training for monks, visitors and guests are also welcome, to share the lifestyle of the community.



The main building of Hartridge Buddhist Monastery main, where people meet with Sangha. There is a little winter garden, kitchen, living room and meditation room for public. Please, take off your shoes when you enter in building.

Mrs. Margaret Jones, one of the founders spoke to me about what influenced the decision to set up the monastery and about very beginning of the Monastery:

"We were extremely fortunate to be able to meet **Ajahn¹ Chah** in Oxford, I think in about 1978. He was incredibly impressive, and this stimulated our interest. You can still see videos of him teaching at that time on Youtube. There was also a TV programme called, I think, 'The Mindful Way'. I think that our interest began then.

Monks came and stayed with us for the rains retreat several years running and discussions with them led to the possibility of a local monastery".

"The monastic presence in this area began in 1980, when Ajahn Viradhammo (Thai – Teacher, used as a title of senior monks) came to spend the **Vassa** (3 month rains retreat) with my family at our home at Golden Square, a few miles from here".

"This pattern was repeated in 1981 and 1982, when Ajahn Sucitto, now abbot of Cittavivekha Buddhist Monastery (Hampshire, UK), and Ajahn Amaro, now abbot of Amaravati Buddhist Monastery (Hertfordshire, UK), came to spend the Vassa with us. Kittisaro (who founded Dharmagiri, a Buddhist hermitage located in South Africa together with a nun Thanissara) , now a lay teacher, also spent time with us. While with us they visited Buddhist groups in the South West, and held meditation workshops and regular pujas (offerings) that were open to anyone. At this time Cittavivekha was the only Forest Sangha² Monastery in the UK. We discussed the possibility of starting a branch monastery locally".

THE DEVON VIHARA TRUST

Mrs. Jones recalls:

"One of the most committed laymen, who has since died, was a solicitor, and he spent a considerable amount of time preparing a trust document that was acceptable to both the Charity Commissioners and the Sangha, so that we could become a Charity. The charity was called 'The Devon Vihara Trust'³. There were five trustees to begin with, we were responsible legally for the monastery".

Unfortunately there is not a written record kept so it is hard to say exactly how many other supporters there were. As Mrs. Jones remembers, the newsletter address list was 50 – 100. There were people who offered support, such as financial help or various skills such as building, cooking, architectural or legal work. This number varied from year to year, people moved away, died etc.

The Devon Vihara Trust is registered as the charity from the 26th of May 1984 and its main aim is support Hartridge Monastery and its resident monks, nuns and novices (sangha) practicing in the forest tradition in the lineage of the Thai master Ajahn Chah and his senior western disciple, Ajahn Sumedho. To offer the Sangha the opportunity to live a contemplative monastic life founded upon the principles laid down by the Buddha.

¹ Ajahn, in Thai means 'Teacher', used as a title for senior monks

² Sangha (monastic community) – visit <http://forestsangha.org/> for information about Buddhist communities associated with Ajahn Chah

³ The Devon Vihara Trust Newsletter 1989 <http://www.fsnewsletter.amaravati.org/html/09/devon.htm#top>

After the charity The Devon Vihara Trust was established, it was necessary to find a place, where the monastery could be founded. Mrs. Jones remembers:

"We spent some time looking for more permanent accommodation. To begin with it was funded privately. Douglas (my husband) bought an old and rather decrepit bungalow at auction. It was on the outskirts of Axminster. We looked on this as a temporary solution, until more financial support was offered. Ajahn Munindo, now abbot at Harnham, was the first senior monk there.

There were no nuns to begin with, just monks. . The female anagarika currently staying at the monastery is the first nun to stay there at the same time as the monks. Nuns were resident for a period of several years, but there were no monks during that time.

The number of monks varies considerably. The number has varied between 2 and 5. The number goes up and down".

" Local support grew over the first years, until we had enough money and offers of interest free loans to look for a more permanent solution. People who found the teaching valuable and the monks way of life and manner inspiring were happy to provide support.

Hartridge was actually found for us by a local estate agent, who knew that we were looking for a secluded property with some land. It was bought jointly with another Theravadan Buddhist charity. This charity has since been wound up and the assets of the charity were donated to the English Sangha Trust. There was no financial help at the time from the English Sangha Trust or from the state.

What was the opinion of Margaret and Douglas Jones' family? Margaret replied:

"My family were, and still are, horrified at our connection with Buddhism and meditation. We have tried hard to explain, and encouraged them to meet some of the monks. My family are life long non-conformist Christians, Methodists, and are very sad that we have 'strayed from the path. They know very little about our connection with the monastery, as the subject is never mentioned any more, it is 'off limits'. It's very sad!

Douglas' family are more tolerant, they just believe that he is eccentric!

There have been effects on my teaching career here in the south west. Many of the Primary Schools are controlled by the Church of England, and demand that their teachers will say that they are practicing Christians. One school phoned me up to say that that I was just the person that they were looking for to be their new headteacher. When I told them that I was happy to teach Christian values to the children, but that I did on occasion visit the local Buddhist monastery, they quickly changed their minds as to my suitability!"

The Monastery has developed good links with the Devon education department, particularly since schools have been required to study major world religions. They have been welcomed into many schools and colleges, and also welcome groups of children and students to the monastery.

HARTRIDGE MONASTERY TODAY

In 2013 I went to experience Hartridge Monastery first hand by staying there; these are my notes and impressions of that experience.

Beautiful place, peaceful, friendly, filled with a positive energy. This is the Monastery today. Lay people are visiting this place, bringing offerings with huge respect to the residents. Many of them are looking for refuge, peace of mind, a quiet space where they can contemplate. This special place, created by people for others brings harmony to everyone who steps on this land. Place, where no one judges others, where no one criticizes or is being criticized. Peace of land, where many people come to find calmness, sheltered from the outside busy world. Some of

the visitors stay overnight, others a week. Depends on the circumstances. The Monastery offers accommodation for 4 people at a time in the little cute refurbished caravans with the little altar, bed, lamp, table and chair in each. There is a heater too. People, who would like to stay overnight, should bring their own linen. Duvets, pillowcases and warm blankets are provided in the monastery. Because the Monastery does not have many financial resources, it's always better to use more blankets than use too much heater energy. Every guest should clean the room after use.

The Monastery is friendly with animals too. In the monastery, there is a cat Winky, and Poppy, Sumitta's little dog. If residents want to bring their four legged friends, this is not an issue.

The Monastery is the place where people are coming and going as they chose. Guests can stay for a few days or longer, taking the opportunity to deepen their understanding of Buddhism and themselves in an environment that encourages peaceful reflection.

It is a willing place where everyone is looking for a quiet time without external influences such as the common problems of everyday life. But it doesn't mean that people come and do whatever they want to do.

All guests are asked to observe the ⁴**Eight Precepts**:

1. **Harmlessness**: not intentionally taking the life of any living creature
2. **Trustworthiness**: not taking anything that is not given.
3. **Celibacy**: refraining from any sexual activity.
4. **Right Speech**: avoiding false, abusive, malicious or unnecessary speech.
5. **Sobriety**: not taking any intoxicating drink or drugs.
6. **Renunciation**: not eating after midday.
7. **Restraint**: refraining from attending games and shows, and from self-adornment. (Guests are asked to dress appropriately, and not to play radios, musical tapes or instruments.)
8. **Alertness**: refraining from over-indulgence in sleep.

Religion, belief in higher existence, or just believe in goodness, yourself, these true feelings should be honest, clear and willing if they are to be TRUTHFUL and RIGHT. No one is forced to come to this place, and when people come to stay, they should know these rules should be kept. To think about these rules, what about finding some of them and keeping them even after the monastery? Imagine keeping them all, wouldn't we be happier in our lives? No bad conscience, no empty thoughts, no false happiness and hangovers later... to think about all Eight Percepts... Humans are humans, we make mistakes in life, but the worst mistake is invisible, the non admitted mistake, or the one with a false excuse.

⁴ Eight Precepts taken from the Hartridge Monastery Website
<http://www.hartridgemonastery.org/index.php?pageID=3>

WHAT DOES A DAY IN THE MONASTERY LOOK LIKE?

Who thinks staying at the Monastery is a holiday? No, it is a change of environment, but daily routines in the place should be kept.



The meal Offering (Dana) before lunch, many lay people bring the food already prepared. The meal is vegetarian; residents are not allowed to eat meat. Organic food is preferable.

The Daily Routine

The daily routine that guests are expected to follow is outlined below, there may be seasonal variations and unexpected changes.

5:30 am Morning group meditation

6.30 am Cleaning

7.00 am Breakfast

8.15 am Meal preparation or Work period

11.30 am Meal offering (Dana)*

After-meal clean-up

2.00 pm Personal meditation and quiet time

5.00 pm Tea

7.00 pm Evening group chanting (Puja) and meditation

8.00 pm Personal time or on Sunday a Dhamma talk

**The meal is served at 11.00 in Winter*

05:30 Morning group meditation is placed in the meditation room in the main building. This place is totally quiet, words are inappropriate. The morning meditation lasts one hour, so it is

up to us, but it is not bad idea to wake up little earlier to have a little exercise outside before meditation in the chilly English morning.

06:30 After the morning meditation, it is time for little cleaning, sweeping floors, dusting, preparing breakfast. During this time, everyone should avoid speaking and concentrate on work which is divided between visitors and residents. For me, as a student, it was quite difficult to be quiet, because of the excitement of my morning meditation experiences...

07:00 Breakfast: Everyone who stays in the monastery has to admit, it is a nice time, when people are allowed to eat again. Remember, for everyone, who decided to stay in the monastery for more than one afternoon, the last meal is served at about 11.00 AM and should be eaten until noon. After 12.00, when the sun is right above our heads, the meal is not allowed. So, to have breakfast, after 19 hours of not eating is for people who are not used to be on this kind of regime quite a happy time. Residents have their breakfast and visitors have theirs. Novice – nun Sumitta, is responsible for a kitchen and cooking in the monastery recently. She prepares breakfast for both, residents and visitors. Residents have their breakfast served in the dining room while visitors take their breakfast to their rooms or they can eat outside in the beautiful garden in front of the monastery.

08:15 After breakfast, talking is allowed, but shouting, screaming and other loud voices are not welcome in the monastery at any time.

Time for a bit of work around the monastery which begins by dividing work among visitors. During my stay I was doing a bit of gardening. That's why it is good to take some older clothes and maybe not brand new white shoes...Before we start, we were reminded to be mindful, concentrate on what we are doing and try to stay in a present situation.

I was cleaning my mind of bad thoughts as if I was getting rid of the weeds from the garden.

11:30 Time for lunch – prepared by Sumitta or brought as an offering to the Monastery from lay people. Before the meal, everyone gather in the meditation room for a pray, gospel and a little chat. People can give offerings to monks at this time too. First, monks and nuns are eating. Visitors are waiting in the meditation room. They are going to eat after them.

In Burma, I was allowed to eat with monks and nuns. As I heard later, it was a special occasion for them to treat me, as they said "as a special quest" because I was the foreigner who came to share my experiences about outside world and gave my holiday time to Burmese children. They didn't need to treat me this way. Now, I know how glad they were to let me eat with them.

After an always delicious and very healthy meal, something sweet to bite. Visitors can help themselves to a cup of coffee, tea or cocoa.

It is very nice to be a part of a group, where people during the dishwashing talk and smile. Everyone feels full of optimism, because the whole morning was utilized.

14:00 After all these pleasant duties, the time of rest follows. Usually people stay to drink their drinks in the living room chatting for a while and after, everyone has time until 7 pm for themselves. Monks and nuns disappear to their bungalows close to Monastery (visitors are not allowed to go there without the permission of the residents) or they just stay in the main building to do some paperwork. Residents usually go to their bungalows too. This time is very precious and perfect for meditation, the kingdom of silence dominates the place again. **You hear only the wind dancing with the twigs and the birds tweeting fades step by step with your gradual deepening meditation.**

The monastery surroundings are suitable for a walk too. Beyond the Monastery where the path leads you can recognise, why the monastery has been called "Hartridge". The shape of the heart is created by nature when you look in the distance.

If visitors intend to have a talk with some of the residents they can ask for meeting after 5 pm.

19:00 Evening, 7pm is the time for last meeting and group meditation in the meditation room. It is sensible to come on time so as not to disturb other meditators. At the end of the meditation, there are prayers and beautiful chant singing in the original Pali⁵ language or English. There are books for those, who don't know the words by heart.

20:00 8pm is the time when people slowly diverge to their rooms. We are not used to going to sleep so early, and, personally, to fall asleep at this time with empty stomach can be hard job...Electricity is brought into the bungalow during night too, so reading or writing is possible.

This one ordinary day in the monastery was described from my point of view. Of course, whoever decides to spend time in this place, can realize other and new experiences.

I would like to share some points, which are important to know not to cause "faux pas" in the monastery as well as in the Buddhist Temple. These rules are good to know even when we are in touch with Buddhist people, visiting their house, or if we decided to visit a country, where Buddhism is practiced.

1. **Smile.** For western people this is something very difficult to understand, but Buddhist people don't argue or use a loud voice. These sounds can worsen the situation. If westerners argue in public, Buddhist people often don't understand. When Westerners shout at them, they don't know how to defend themselves, so they stay quiet. Sometimes, they smile, this can make a Westerner even more angry. A Westerner, who lets their feelings of anger out in public hasn't educated or prepared themselves for a Buddhist country or culture. Even in unfair situations, Buddhists try to resolve these without loud expressions. (Expect laughter – or better, chuckles).
2. Remember the sacred and taboo parts of your body: head and feet. For Buddhists, the head is the most sacred part of the body, while the feet are the lowest and the filthiest. Don't ever touch a person's head; at the same time, you must never show the soles of your feet to anyone, or use your feet to point to something.

Before entering the Temple (or the complex of temples), Monastery or house:

3. It is polite to take off our shoes. No worries, in a Buddhist country no one will steal them!
4. No shaking hands. Instead of this greeting, Buddhist people give a short bow with hands held fingertips-together enter close to your chest or face. Never bow to someone in a lower position. We would understand this as the polite and egalitarian thing to do, but we only embarrass the person to whom we are bowing.

⁵ Pali (also Pālī) is a Middle Indo-Aryan language that is in the Prakrit language group and was indigenous to the Indian subcontinent. It is a dead language that is widely studied because it is the language of many of the earliest extant Buddhist scriptures as collected in the Pali Canon, or *Tipitaka*, and it is the liturgical language of Theravada Buddhism. Source Wikipedia 2013

5. Clothes-modest, no sleeveless shirts, naked shoulders, flip-flops, too short skirt or shorts.
6. Never put the food on the floor
7. Never step over someone. It is something very impolite to step over someone's body during praying. Even on the street, train...etc.
8. Never direct your feet towards Buddha. Be careful, after meditation, when you stretch not to direct your feet to Buddha's image or other people around you.
9. Never touch a Monk or a Nun. Never kiss them. If they offer a hug or hand to you, it is beautiful sign that we should value and appreciate.
10. Monk and Nun are special. That's why it's good to show them respect and even when newcomers don't know how to bow properly, there are always ways to show respect to them without touching.



A smile from Hartridge Monastery 2013

To close...a few words by Mrs. Margaret Jones about the Monastery and their feelings about the Monastery today:

* We are particularly pleased that anyone at all is welcome to come to the monastery and stay, so long as they are willing to keep the rules, whether they are male or female, old or young, rich or poor.

* We are delighted that people can come and stay, or receive teaching without charge. So many courses and retreats are on offer these days that cost hundreds of pounds, and are thus beyond the means of many people.

* We are also glad that the monastery serves as a centre for the ex-pat Thais who have come to live and work in the South West. They have great respect for the monks, are very generous, and love to come to offer food or hold fund raising events.

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank Mrs. Margaret Jones and her husband Douglas Jones, who were central to the Monastery from the beginning together with residents: Ahajn Suvaco, who has been part of the Monastery for 15 years, Ahajn Jutindharo, the senior monk in the Monastery and nun Sumitta, the youngest resident of the Monastery. Thank you very much for your complaisance, your time, your warm welcome, your kindness...

Sasha Vertalova 2013