

SANTACITTARAMA

the first thirty years

PREFACE

This book is offered in appreciation to all those who have contributed in some way to the existence and development of Santacittarama, the first monastery of the ancient Theravada tradition in Italy. Santacittarama, which can be translated as "The Garden of the Peaceful Heart", was founded in 1990 in order to meet the existing interest among Italian Buddhists as well as the Asian immigrant community.

In terms of a human life span, thirty years may seem like a very long time and yet, compared with the 2,600 years since the time of the Buddha, it is very short indeed. Since those first tentative and humble beginnings in a small villa on the edge of Sezze Romano, one *bhikkhu* and an *anagarika* invited to live and practice there, a forest monastery has come into being and the developments have been impressive. This book attempts to give some idea of how it all came about.

To try and condense thirty years into a few pages is not easy, and inevitably many important or interesting details have been left out. Hopefully, however, it will convey some sense of how this monastery developed, not from compulsion or proselytism, but as a flowering of faith, generosity and dedication in the hearts and actions of many friends and supporters. During these years there were times when it all seemed impossible, but with perseverance, patience and goodwill all obstacles were gradually overcome.

In a way, the fruition of this unfolding is symbolized by a magnificent temple, which this book is also intended to celebrate. May this building – a result of the dedicated efforts of too many people to name in these pages – be of great benefit for innumerable beings, aspirants to awakening, here and now and for generations to come, and may all obstacles in their path be similarly overcome.

PROLOGUE

From the time of the Buddha right up to the present, monks in the Therāvada tradition of Buddhism have dedicated their lives to following the example of the Awakened One. They tend to live close to nature, away from the noise and confusion of towns and villages. The simple and solitary life as a monk is conducive to meditation and the cultivation of the heart and mind, following a path of training which leads towards the supreme goal of Buddhist practice – liberation from suffering and realisation of the true peace of Nibbana.

On 6 May 1977, having accepted an invitation from a foreign disciple to visit the West for the first time, Venerable Ajahn Chah travelled from Thailand to London. During the flight one of the wheels exploded, requiring the plane to land at Leonardo Da Vinci Airport in Rome. It was as if conditions had conspired to invite Ajahn Chah to step on Italian soil and to spread lovingkindness and Dhamma teachings. Perhaps it could be taken as a sign that in the future Ajahn Chah's disciples would come to establish a monastery in this country.

Italy is one of a few European countries where Buddhism has been officially recognised as a world religion, and there has been a steady increase in interest among Italians. This is a result of the dedicated efforts of many people over several decades, including the first pioneering monks to take residence in this country, who have continued to practice and make available the Dhamma, following the example and standards established by Ajahn Chah of Wat Nong Pah Pong in the northeast of Thailand.

Phra Thep Nyanavithet (Ajahn Sumedho), an American-born monk and the first western disciple of Ajahn Chah, founder of the International Monastery (Wat Pah Nanachat) in Thailand, was invited to take residence in London in 1977. Two years later the first forest monastery in the UK, Cittaviveka, was established in the West Sussex countryside. Ajahn Sumedho was able to convey the Buddha's teachings in a way that was more easily accessible to Westerners, and there was a growing interest among both lay practitioners and those who aspired to the simple and committed life as a monk or nun. Eventually Ajahn Sumedho was invited to give some teachings in Rome by a local meditation group and, not long after, Santacittarama, the first Theravada monastery in Italy, was founded.

THE FIRST THIRTY YEARS OF SANTACITTARAMA

At the time of writing, thirty years have passed since Santacittarama was officially inaugurated on 21 March 1990. It was then located in a small villa, generously offered by the late Vincenzo Piga, on the outskirts of Sezze Romano (Latina), and the original residents were Ajahn Thanavaro and Anagarika John Angelori.

What follows is something of a potted history of these first three decades. In an attempt at accuracy – memory being so notoriously unreliable and subjective – I have used, where possible, articles already published in such places as the Forest Sangha Newsletter, the Santacittarama Newsletter and the monastery website. Although there may be some inaccuracies, the fact that these sections have already been published and not contested suggests that they are not of critical importance.

To start at the beginning, here are some extracts from an article announcing the opening of the first Theravadin monastery in Italy, written by Ajahn Sucitto for the Forest Sangha Newsletter (FSN) in April 1990:

Ajahn Sucitto provides some background and perspective on another Theravadin monastic residence (vihara), which is taking shape in Italy. Ajahn Thanavaro will return to his native country to take up residence there.

When Ajahn Sumedho returned from a visit to Switzerland and Italy last December, he brought back some news that created a blend of interest and enthusiasm mingled with apprehension – the possible establishment of a *vihara* in Italy, about 100 Km. south of Rome. Ajahn Thanavaro, then in Italy visiting his parents, would be residing there, at least for a while, as the senior incumbent. Not much else was certain, except the beauty of the situation on the Mediterranean coast, and the commitment of the lay supporters. Such impressions, and the sign they leave in the mind, herald the opening of all viharas and are characteristic of much of sangha life. ...it is time for another leap of faith. The chronology of this venture gives it a sense of inevitability. The supporters can be classified broadly as two groups: a large Sri Lankan community, and a group of experienced Italian

Buddhists. The latter include Corrado Pensa and Vincenzo Piga, who have been foremost, respectively, in teaching vipassana meditation and Buddhist Studies in Italy over the past decade. Yet, although Zen, Tibetan and Nichiren monasticism are well established, there is no Theravadin monastic presence in Italy. The late Ven. Dr. Saddhatissa visited Italy quite often and, on learning of this situation, passed on the name of Ven. Thanavaro Bhikkhu, born in Italy, ordained by Dr. Saddhatissa, and living in New Zealand with Ajahn Viradhammo at that time.

Naturally, the situation developed. Ajahn Sumedho, visiting New Zealand in 1989, felt that it was time for Ven. Thanavaro to return to Europe after nearly five years in the Antipodes. It would be a chance for a long overdue visit to his parents, and to reconnect to a larger sangha. But by the time that Ven. Thanavaro actually arrived in Italy, Ajahn Sumedho was also there – having been invited to Rome by the Theravadin community – and a small monastic residence had been prepared in the *hope* that a sangha might be able to stay. The two bhikkhus were introduced to the community, the residence and the spiritual need, and it was decided that in principle the necessary factors were there for an Italian *vihara*.

SETTLING IN

Here are extracts of a letter from Ajahn Thanavaro to Ajahn Sumedho, describing developments so far at the newly-established *vihara* (FSN July 1990):

We have been here in Sezze a month, and we are settling down with no real difficulties. Our neighbours have been very supportive – you know that Italians have a long tradition of expressing their hospitality with food. Most recently I was invited in next door, after returning from *pindapata* (a long uphill walk to Sezze), and my empty almsbowl was filled to overflowing with eggs, bread and Easter cakes...

Most mornings when I go out for alms up into Sezze on what amounts to about a four-mile walk round trip, I experience directly the dynamic energy of the people at the start of their day. Surely, the symbol of the *bhikkhu* is seen by many and recognized as one who lives in the world but does not

follow it. And I have found that the practice of walking mindfully on *pindapata* is supported by my practice of my most effective mantra "Buon giorno". It is such a powerful sound that it never fails to break through the startling or cynical response many seem to experience when seeing a bhikkhu for the first time. Or, as an old Italian widow, frocked in the traditional black dress of mourning, remarked to her friend as I passed one day, "before we die, we shall see all colours".

Regarding the actual committee who have been so helpful with our transition, much of the activities are still in an embryonic state. We are, however, going ahead fairly soon with the renovations on the ground floor so that we will have a proper meditation hall and guest quarters.

The goodwill demonstrated by everybody is most impressive, especially Mr. Piga – who recently stayed with us for three days as our first guest – and the Maitreya Foundation, Corrado Pensa and his group, the A.Me.Co ('Associazione di Meditazione di Consapevolezza'). And the Sri Lankan ambassador, Mr. De Zoysa, whose unceasing enthusiasm has been invaluable in launching this *vihara*. He has often said: "The *vihara*, once it is open, will be supported . . . it can't close". However, his confidence does not dispel the doubts of Mr. Piga and Corrado Pensa regarding the "experimental nature of the project"....

CONSOLIDATING THE FOUNDATIONS

Over the next couple of years, a succession of monks and anagarikas from the British monasteries come to help out, usually staying no longer than about six months. John Angelori leaves and eventually settles in Latina, where he lives to this day, and where for many years he has been leading a meditation group.

The *vihara* is discovered to have major structural problems, having been built with inadequate foundations on land that is largely clay, resulting in large cracks appearing in many of the walls. Extensive work is done to try and shore up the foundations. Ironically, the name Thanavaro means something like 'firm foundation'!

In the meantime, Ajahn Thanavaro is teaching regularly in Rome (at the A.Me.Co) and occasionally in other parts of Italy. He is elected President of the Italian Buddhist Union in 1992. A governing body for representing the sangha for bureaucratic purposes – the Santacittarama Association – is established and applies for official governmental recognition as a legal entity. When this is eventually granted in 1995, the property legally belongs to the Association.

Ajahn Chandapalo arrives from the UK in April 1993, and Ajahn Preechar Jutindharo a few months later. Work proceeds in creating a 50-square-metre meditation hall on the ground floor, to host a large brass Buddha image recently arrived from Thailand, and two rooms for guests. The number of people visiting and wishing to stay for a few days or longer gradually increases, and the first of a regular newsletter is issued. Just as Ajahn Thanavaro leaves on extensive travels, the Bertolucci film 'Little Buddha' is released, generating much interest in Buddhism. This is related in an extract from the FSN of October 1994:

Although the recent film Little Buddha was a flop in England, in director Bernardo Bertolucci's native land of Italy it was received with great interest and anticipation and played to full houses. In their search for material on Buddhism at the time of the film's release the media soon discovered Santacittarama and, shortly after Ajahn Thanavaro had left for a three-month trip to Australia, New Zealand and Thailand, we found ourselves giving interviews for major newspapers and radio, and appearing briefly on prime-time television...

Even though many of the articles were rather shallow and superficial, with whimsical titles such as 'The Buddha has arrived among the artichokes of Latina' and 'Tibet in Sezze', the interest generated was very genuine and sincere. The current dissatisfaction with the 'Establishment' in Italy does not seem to have affected their respect for the spiritual life and religious teachings. The locals were very impressed with the amount of attention given to their Buddhist monks and the only Theravadin monastery in Italy, and rumours were soon rife that the world famous football player, Roberto Baggio, widely known to be a Buddhist, was doing a retreat there!

In October of 1994, Ajahn Chandapalo and Ven. Jutindharo depart from Sezze on foot with the intention of walking all the way to Naples, depending only on almsfood. Within about ten days, they had made it as far as Castel Volturno, not far north of Naples, from where they were persuaded to finish their journey in a car, out of compassion for their blistered and painful feet. Here is part of their account that was published in the newsletter of December 1994:

Ajahn Chandapalo and Ven. Jutindharo returned foot-sore but cheerful from Naples, after their first attempt to re-introduce the wandering mendicant tradition to Italy. Their first night away from Sezze was spent at Fossanova Abbey (where St. Thomas Aquinas spent his last years). The resident Franciscan friars – all Polish – were very hospitable and quite curious. Most subsequent nights were spent outdoors, using sleeping bags with ‘waterproof’ covers, once on a mountain slope and then between Terracina and Castel Volturno on the beaches. Sometimes kind friends brought food out to them, occasionally they received offerings on almsround and other times they just soaked up the sun rays and took some deep breaths!

Fortunately the weather was mostly kind, apart from a very heavy thunderstorm which disproved the waterproof-cover theory. Contact was made with many sympathetic, curious and kindly people throughout the journey; an impressive number recognizing Buddhist monks! After completing the last short stretch by car several days were spent in Naples, meeting a large number of Thais in the area as well as Italians and others interested in Buddhism. Khun Porntip very graciously made her apartment in Agnano available as a ‘*vihara*’ for the weekend...

Around this time work on the ground floor is completed, and a kuti constructed at the end of the garden, thus increasing the accommodation for sangha members and offering opportunities for solitary retreat. In November 1994 we are delighted to host our teacher Ajahn Sumedho, and two other abbots: Ajahn Anek from Thailand and Ajahn Tiradhammo of Dhammapala monastery in Switzerland. One noteworthy event that takes place during their stay is the taking of the eight *anagarika* precepts by Roberto, originally from Palermo, the first Italian to train at Santacittarama as a white-robed postulant.

NEW PLANS

New plans are announced in the newsletter of October 1995:

A major cause for concern since the *vihara's* inception has been the inadequate nature of the building's foundations and the continual appearance of cracks in the walls due to seasonal movement. It is a little premature to say with any certainty but there is optimism that, after a lot of expensive building work, this problem has been resolved. This means that the house would now be saleable if it was ever decided to transfer to another property, which brings us to the main point of this letter.

Anyone who has been to Santacittarama will be aware of its limitations as a meditation monastery of the forest tradition. Until the present time, however, it has served us well enough and, despite their doubts, people have continued to support it. This deserves a note of commendation. With the ground floor converted into a meditation hall and accommodation facilities, the limit of possible expansion has been reached, and yet with the recent explosion of interest it is already somewhat inadequate. An increasing number of people are requesting acceptance as long-term members of the community, some as *anagarikas* with the possibility of training for future ordination. Women guests have endured, with little complaint, rented accommodation on a rather busy and noisy road and a very steep climb to the *vihara*. The *vihara* and its garden is looked down upon by houses at close proximity on two sides, giving little privacy or seclusion. Without the immediate prospect of any alternative we have learned to live quite happily with this situation, and being relatively free of work projects we have been able to put more time and energy into formal meditation practice. A welcome opportunity! However, it has been apparent for some time that the present Santacittarama has reached its full potential, and that eventually we would have to start thinking in terms of looking for a somewhat larger and more secluded property.

A group of dedicated Thai supporters have, after consultation with the sangha, initiated a project which aims to raise sufficient funds to establish a 'Santacittarama Forest Monastery'. By November of this year they hope to be in a position to purchase a suitable plot of land on which a monastery can be

built when further funds become available. These they hope to raise by organizing a special Kathina ceremony, with invited guests from Thailand, in October or November of next year, 1996. In the meantime the Royal Thai Embassy in Rome has very generously been offered as a venue for an alms-giving ceremony on 19th November of this year, which will provide an opportunity to meet the sangha and to find out more about this project. For this plan to succeed, it will need the support of many, many people and all are invited to contribute, in whatever way they are able. Participation is not limited to Thais but is open to all nationalities; once completed Santacittarama Forest Monastery will serve the general Buddhist community, regardless of country of origin...

We are beginning to look for land in the area immediately around Sezze as we are well established here and have a very good relationship with the local people; we also wish to honour the original intention of being accessible from both Rome and Naples. Already there is one possibility being looked into – a nine hectare plot of land, a bit less than half forested, with a modern bungalow, and a dilapidated building reputed to be a former friary! Before a decision is made, however, many aspects need to be carefully considered, and this is likely to be a slow process.

CHANGES

A major change in the community of Santacittarama is announced by Ajahn Chandapalo in their newsletter of May 1996:

Six months have passed since our last newsletter and quite a few things have happened during this time. I was very fortunate to spend much of this last winter in Thailand, partly at the International Forest Monastery near Ubon where our teacher, Ajahn Sumedho, led a retreat for the monastic community. Before returning to Italy I met up with Tan Jutindharo and we had a very pleasant two weeks together in a forest wilderness retreat, very close to the Burmese border, in the Kanchanaburi province famous for the 'Bridge over the River Kwai'...

On returning at the end of February Anagarika Roberto had just left after exceeding his one year's commitment and deciding to return to laylife in Palermo. Our best wishes go with him – we will remember him for his gentle and cheerful presence, his willingness to serve and the good example he set for other guests.

A few days later Ajahn Thanavaro left for England, where he took leave from the sangha and formally gave up the bhikkhu training. This was not a sudden decision, but part of a difficult process that he has been going through during the last couple of years. His commitment to spreading the Dhamma to an ever-growing audience was gradually drawing him away from the monastic life. Finally the pressure of trying to maintain both became too great and he decided to disrobe. This was certainly not an easy decision on his part, and one that he is still coming to terms with, given the effect on the many people who have come to know and love him over the years.

For those familiar with the early days of the community in England, Ajahn Thanavaro will be remembered as one of the first bhikkhus to be given *upasampada* (acceptance into the bhikkhu life) in England on a boat in the middle of the river Thames. I remember first seeing him at a Vesakha Puja gathering in Manchester in 1978, and three years later being together with him and Ajahn Sucitto at Harnham, near Newcastle, the first branch monastery of Chithurst. In 1985 he went to New Zealand with Ajahn Viradhammo to establish the Bodhinyanarama Monastery, and for the last six years he has been responsible for Santacittarama in Italy.

Being the first resident Theravada bhikkhu in Italy presented quite a challenge, but one that he gave himself to with a pioneering spirit and without regard for his own well-being. As a result of this he became well-known and loved throughout the country as a teacher of retreats, counsellor, author of two books and as President of the Italian Buddhist Union, a position that he has been invited to continue at least until the end of the three year term. The sangha hopes that the virtuous deeds that he has cultivated during his bhikkhu life will serve to protect Mario (as he wishes to be known) during this time of transition.

In April I was invited to join an 'Elder's Council Meeting' of senior monks at Chithurst in England, and was asked about the present situation at Santacittarama. Assuring them that I was happy to remain here, and that there are promising signs of continued support for the monastery and interest in the Dhamma, the sangha approved of my taking responsibility as the senior incumbent. It was also agreed that the project of establishing a new location for Santacittarama should go ahead. I have been encouraged to keep in close contact with the sangha in England and to maintain as my priority the living of the monastic life, thereby offering a suitable environment for those who wish to share it, whether for short or long periods. Therefore I intend to limit any teaching activities to the Rome/Naples area and to invite those who have the opportunity and inclination to spend some time practising with us at Santacittarama.

Tan Jutindharo returned towards the end of March, very considerably cutting short his stay in Thailand in order to support the continued development of Santacittarama. This is something that two bhikkhus cannot do alone, but which needs the goodwill and assistance of many people. All contributions, however humble, are much appreciated – such as offerings of food (we generally eat only what people happen to bring) and requisites, help in the garden, cleaning, cooking, shopping, office work, translating, transporting and so on. Or just being a peaceful presence, someone who is skilfully using their time for developing the path, and being a good example for others.

Having completed three years at Santacittarama my Italian, if not fluent, is now at least usable – I have given talks, guided meditations, led a weekend retreat and talked to many, many visitors. I enjoy living in Italy and am grateful for this wonderful opportunity to practise the Dhamma with like-minded people in a country that is ripe for the teachings of the Lord Buddha. We hope that the presence of the Triple Gem will continue to be of benefit for this generation and many to come.

In the meantime the search for a new property continues, as recounted in the same newsletter:

Our search for larger and more secluded premises for Santacittarama, as announced in the last newsletter, continues. We have investigated several possibilities in the Sezze area but, as nothing suitable was found, we are also beginning to look further afield. The areas immediately north and east of Rome look most promising, both for availability of suitably isolated properties in attractive countryside and for good road and rail connections.

Ideally we hope to find several hectares of land, perhaps partially wooded, either with some building that could be adapted for monastic use or with the possibility to construct something suitable. The Alms-Giving Ceremony held in the Thai Embassy last November was very well attended, and we were honoured with special guests Luang Por ('*Reverend Father*') Tong, one of the most important monks in northern Thailand, and Ajahn Viradhammo from England.

PATIENT PERSEVERANCE

The search for a suitable 'forest monastery' property continues. We find ourselves visiting literally hundreds of properties within a reasonable distance from Rome. Several times we seem to have found the right place – near Velletri, Tivoli, Palombara Sabina, Rocca Sinibalda – and the excitement level soars, word goes out and many interested and enthusiastic people visit, only for some major obstacle to eventually come to light. One building was basically illegal, while another was restricted to agricultural use. One property could not actually be sold for another several years and the final one just cost far too much.

The Thai ambassador's wife of the time, Khun Natcharee, is deeply involved and committed to concluding the project before her husband's retirement. Meetings are held in the embassy and fund-raising events organised. However, time is running out; there have been so many disappointments and despair is beginning to take hold. Perhaps we should just give up and stay in Sezze or else return to England or Thailand?

Khun Natcharee is introduced to our notary, Marina Fanfani, who helped create the Santacittarama Association's statute and constitution and get it legalised. Her father, Amintore Fanfani (former Prime Minister of Italy), was a teacher in

Switzerland before the second world war. One of his students was a young Thai citizen, Bhumibol Adulyadej, who soon afterwards, on the death of his brother, became the king of Thailand and reigned for 70 years. When Marina is asked if she is able to help, she contacts a friend who is an estate agent, a property in the Sabina hills near Poggio Nativo is brought to our attention, and sounds interesting. It is at the end of a road, but not far from the Via Salaria and thus well connected for public transport to and from Rome. There are four buildings and five hectares of land, partly wooded. We go and visit in May 1997 and are soon convinced that this is what we are looking for! It really has all the potential of a forest monastery and not only is the price substantially lower than all the other properties that we might have bought, it is also, from our point of view, by far the most desirable.

Once again, though, doubts begin to surface. The entrance road seems to cut across the neighbour's property. But the toughest and seemingly insurmountable problem is that, according to the law, a legally-recognized association – such as Santacittarama – needs governmental approval before acquiring a property. Nobody has any idea how long this could take. One year, two years, or even more? In the meantime, the owner is deep in debt and needs to sell as soon as possible. There is no way he is going to wait for us indefinitely. Despair begins to take hold again, but then some unexpected news arrives. The law has just been changed and the purchase can go right ahead!

Here is part of a stop press item added as an insert to a newsletter of June 1997:

Finally our 'new monastery project' is approaching a satisfactory conclusion. A suitable property has been found in the *comune* of Poggio Nativo, among the Sabina hills, near the 53rd kilometre of the Via Salaria. Frequent buses shuttle between Rome and Rieti, stopping just over a kilometre away, providing easy access by public transport to a very quiet location of gently rolling hills and wooded valleys.

The main house, sturdily built in the distant past and then extended for use for his family by the previous owner, an architect, is in excellent condition and consists of a large kitchen/dining room, five bedrooms and three

bathrooms. A smaller house, standing about thirty metres away has three rooms, kitchen and bathroom, while two large outbuildings suggest various possibilities for future development. Around five hectares of meadow and woodland offer a contemplative community a suitably inspiring and peaceful environment.

Around this time we receive a visit from an eminent Thai monk, Tan Ajahn Tui from Nong Khai, an associate of the better known Tan Ajahn Maha Boowa. He stays for a week and walks with us on the morning almsround in the local area. Naturally, we also take him to see some of the famous historical sites in Rome, and he is invited by Khun Natcharee to the Thai Embassy for the meal. On hearing a description of the property that we are investigating, he encourages us to proceed, and expresses his intention to visit the new monastery at some point in the future (which he does twelve years later!).

Finally, negotiations are concluded and the property is acquired on 26 September 1997 by the Santacittarama Association, minutes after a major earthquake that has the windows rattling and plants shaking in the notary's studio in Rome. We are fervently hoping that what we have just purchased does not turn out to be a pile of rubble!

The following day Khun Anurak, the Thai ambassador, retires, and he and his wife, Khun Natcharee, return to Thailand, her dream having been realized just in time, several years of patient perseverance having finally come to fruition!

THE HEART IN THE RIGHT PLACE

The newsletter for October 1997 announces our imminent transfer to the newly acquired property in Poggio Nativo:

Dear friends, after more than 7½ years in Sezze Romano, Santacittarama is relocating to its lovely new setting among the Sabina hills, in the province of Rieti. By the time you read this we may have moved already – we expect to be settling in by November. Naturally, any major change arouses a mixture of feelings in the heart. Sadness, on the one hand, to be leaving Sezze, where we have developed many friendships and received much warmth and

kindness. On the other hand, there is the excitement and uncertainty of entering the unknown of a new beginning.

The property transfer was signed on the day before the departure of the Thai ambassador and his wife, to whom we are most indebted for the success of this project. We send them our very best wishes for a peaceful retirement. To the staff of the Royal Thai Embassy, who have worked so hard, and to all those who have offered their support, from as far afield as Switzerland, Thailand and Australia, we express our grateful appreciation.

Ajahn Chandapalo moves to the new monastery on 31 October 1997 and for a few weeks the sangha inhabits both properties until most of the contents have been transferred. Everyone tends to accumulate an amazing amount of stuff over the years, and this is especially true in monasteries where, apart from the usual household furnishings, there are objects such as Buddha images, some weighing hundreds of kilograms. It would have been much more difficult if not for the help of a young Thai woman from Florence, who would borrow her husband's truck for the weekend. She would drive all the way to Sezze – a distance of nearly 400 Km – where we would load up the truck, which she would then drive to Poggio Nativo to unload and then drive back home. This was repeated five times! We even managed to dismantle the two kutis that were in the garden in Sezze, transport them by truck and reassemble them in woodland of the new monastery.

The Forest Sangha Newsletter of April 1998 reports:

The monastery land is delightful and we are still exploring it. At one end of the property there is a group of three caves, two of which are high enough to stand up in and perhaps ten metres deep. A discreet path then runs along the stream through the predominantly oak woodland about half a kilometre to the ruin near the other end of the property. There is a hidden ruin among the trees which is thought to have been a staging post for changing horses when the old 'salt road' (via Salaria) passed nearby. They probably kept the horses below and the people stayed upstairs. It is a very attractive and secluded spot with trees growing in, through, and out of the stone walls. We think it would make a very nice 'meditation garden', with the sun filtering

through in the winter, and the trees providing a pleasant shade in the summer.

It is possible to continue walking beyond our property until reaching the road that leads to the small town of Poggio Nativo, or to a derelict cemetery, where one can look into abandoned tombs and see human skeletons. What more could a forest monastery ask for – trees, caves, and a nearby abandoned cemetery! ...

Our newsletter of April 1998 relates the process of settling in:

Santacittarama – the 'Garden of the Serene Heart' – has finally found its rightful home near the geographical centre of Italy – Rieti's claim to fame. Since arriving here last November the 'forest sangha' has been feeling nearer to its traditional roots in this quiet countryside setting. In fact, as spring puts in a rather tentative appearance, the sangha is already blossoming, having more than doubled its size in the last few months to a community of seven – four monks, two anagarikas and a nun.

After all the hard work of moving and settling-in, it was a great relief to slow down over the Christmas period, and to spend most of January in the silent composure of a monastic retreat. Living very simply, sitting, walking, mindfully appreciating the natural surroundings, one gradually began to relax and become accustomed to what still felt not quite real. From the joyful space of being silently present, there arose a profound sense of gratitude for all those who have helped to make what for several years seemed like a remote dream finally come true.

Our lay visitors have also invariably expressed delight and enthusiasm for the new monastery. During our brief stay here there have already been visitors from as far afield as Sicily and Switzerland – distance need be no obstacle for those who have determination! One morning in early March around 70 Thai people arrived, having travelled all night from Switzerland on a double decker bus, to perform a traditional offering ceremony in their usual devoted and joyous manner, before setting off on the thousand kilometre return journey just after dawn of the following day. We were also

greatly honoured by the presence of Ajahn Sumedho who, despite being in the middle of leading a retreat at Amaravati, came especially for this event. With Ajahn Vajiro, abbot of Bodhinyanarama Monastery in New Zealand, and Ajahn Samvaro, assistant abbot of the International Monastery in Thailand, arriving around the same time, it became a kind of unofficial inauguration. The new Thai Ambassador, his family and diplomatic staff, and many of our friends of various nationalities also participated, filling out the new tent that was completed just in time. Later on, while our Thai guests were visiting Rome, Ajahn Sumedho offered some useful Dhamma reflections for the remaining Italians, and was very ably translated by Corrado Pensa.

Relations with our neighbours have got off to an auspicious start. Seeing our need for assistance as we desperately tried to extricate a friend's truck from the mud, on the first transport run from Sezze, the local farmer kindly volunteered his tractor to tow it to safe ground, and since then regularly drops by with offerings of his own organic farm products and his wife's homemade biscuits. That the first local person we meet should come forth in such a generous manner was an uplifting experience for all of us. The local officials have been very helpful and friendly. A confusing situation of having the monastery within the territory of Poggio Nativo, yet with the access road in Frasso Sabino, meant having to present ourselves at both *comune*.

The lack of a suitable meeting hall has been temporarily resolved by erecting a large tent, which should be strong and resistant enough to last a number of years. Until such a day as there is the permission and funds available to consider constructing a custom-built Dhamma hall, this tent should suffice for large gatherings, especially in the warmer months...

MOTHER AND FATHER OF SANTACITTARAMA

During the first year at the new location we wrote several times to Khun Natcharee, to inform her of all the positive developments and to let her know how much the new monastery was being appreciated by all concerned. We were

very pleased when we found out that the replacement ambassador, Khun Somboon, and his family, were already well-known to us; they had been dedicated and generous supporters in the early days of Dhammapala monastery in Switzerland. After only a few visits, Khun Somboon had already familiarised himself with the route from Rome and would sometimes drive a minibus full of embassy staff and their families to help with work in the grounds. One doesn't usually expect to see an ambassador with sleeves rolled up, pushing a wheelbarrow full of rocks!

Khun Natcharee, in the meantime, was intending to come and spend some time in the monastery, but her health had suffered from the stress of moving back to Bangkok and at some point she fell and fractured her hip. On 7 August 1998, shortly after our fortnightly *patimokkha* recitation, we received the sad news that she had died. This was reported in the October edition of the FSN:

It is with great regret that we announce the untimely passing-away of Mrs. Natcharee Thananan, on 7 August 1998. During her several years in Rome as wife of the Thai Ambassador, Mr. Anurak Thananan, she dedicated herself wholeheartedly to the realisation of a suitable forest monastery for disciples of Tan Ajahn Chah and Tan Ajahn Sumedho in Italy. Despite many obstacles, not least of which was the leukaemia she bore as if it were a minor inconvenience, her dream came true just as she was to return to Bangkok at the time of her husband's retirement.

With sincere gratitude we recognise that, without her relentless energy and enthusiasm, the new Santacittarama could not have come about. In a recent letter she expressed her happiness and gratification that her dream had been fulfilled, and appreciation for the many kind messages she had received wishing her well. We hope that the sadness of her passing may, at least in part, be offset by the joyous memory of her good deeds. In the final act of a truly generous heart she had requested that, instead of offering flowers at her funeral, donations be made to a children's charity.

Ajahn Chandapalo and Ajahn Jutindharo travelled to Thailand in November to attend her funeral. While there, news came that Vincenzo Piga had died, as reported in the newsletter of March 1999:

In April of this year, while going to visit his wife's grave, Vincenzo Piga was hit by a car, sustaining severe injuries from which he never fully recovered. He died on 14 November, in the local hospital of his birth-place near Vicenza.

It is mainly due to Vincenzo, who donated the original property in Sezze Romano, that Santacittarama exists. He first became interested in Buddhism about thirty years ago, while working at the headquarters of the European Common Market in Brussels, where he met a Tibetan lama. On return to Rome he established the Italian Buddhist Union and the Maitreya Foundation and began publishing a regular journal, *Paramita*, which became perhaps the most widely-read Buddhist publication in Italy over a period of sixteen years.

Our heartfelt thanks go to Vincenzo, for his unbounded generosity and for his untiring efforts on behalf of all Buddhists, of all traditions and nationalities, in this country.

It was as if we had lost, in the space of a very short time, both the father and mother of the monastery. Although this was saddening, it was also taken as a sign that the monastery had reached a sufficient degree of maturity and stability, and that it would now have to proceed independently of the two laypeople most important to its existence.

DEVELOPMENT PLANS

The first FSN of the new millennium reports:

'They didn't make Rome in a day' is a helpful reflection to bear in mind here at Santacittarama, fifty kilometres from Italy's bustling capital city. In the two years since we moved to the present address much has already been achieved towards developing a modest-sized forest monastery. Its full potential, however, has yet to be realised. Fortunately, the relocating from the old monastery went quite smoothly - the buildings were already in fair condition - and since those hectic early days we have been attempting to maintain a healthy balance between formal practice, work and teaching.

Work that has been done include a large amount of land-clearing, road-repairing, opening up woodland paths and gardening. The first Christmas here was spent relaying seventy metres of sewage pipe. New monasteries often have problems with their sewage systems... We now have three simple wooden kutis, two of them in delightful locations in the woodland overlooking the stream. A heating system has been installed in the guest house, and upgraded in the main building. Visitors and guests can now take advantage of a quiet meditation room that used to be the workshop.

Plans for the future include acquiring more land. There is now the possibility of buying an adjoining parcel of five hectares, with woodland and meadow, that would double the size of the property, extending it right to the edge of the abandoned cemetery of the medieval town called Poggio Nativo. We need to research how best to conserve and develop this land, in a way that will also benefit the various forms of wildlife that have been seen on it, such as fox, badger, hare, porcupine, squirrel, dormouse, weasel, beech marten, tortoise and several species of lizard, snake and birds...

A monastery, of course, is not just about buildings and building projects but, more importantly, about people. The resident community, as in other monasteries, is not fixed but in a state of flux, of comings and goings of monks, novices, anagarikas and laity, at any one time numbering around five to eight people. Although the daily routine is usually quite structured, with morning and evening chanting and meditation and a morning work period, the afternoon is free for private study and practice. Opportunities are also offered for individual retreats in the kutis. This summer our Thai monk, Ajahn Jutindharo, who has been here for more than six years, was able to spend the whole of the three-month *Vassa* period on solitary retreat.

Having a mixed sangha of Thai and European nationalities is enriching and at times challenging - often we lack even a common language - and allows us to better serve the needs of both the Thai and Italian lay communities. As is usually the case with other monasteries in the West, the Thais tend to come mostly to make offerings and participate in ceremonies, while the Italians come to meditate and to learn about the Buddha's teachings. Gratifyingly, however, we have recently been witnessing more and more Thai people

coming to ask questions about Dhamma and to spend a few days participating in the daily meditative life of the monastery. Some Italians, on the other hand, are also coming to request the refuges and precepts, to make offerings and help out. A young man recently drove 850 kilometres from Sicily to offer his jeep!

With the monastery now well established we have felt more free to respond to teaching invitations, after having kept a low profile for a couple of years. The Mindfulness Meditation Association of Rome, just a few minutes walk from the Vatican, hosts us regularly for meditation classes and retreats. They are very skilfully guided by Professor Corrado Pensa and the level of interest shown is always very encouraging. A Theravada retreat centre near Piacenza that used to be a hotel, until it was inherited by an Italian meditator, is another venue to which we are regularly invited. Other invitations have come from such places as Bari and Naples in the south, Arezzo and Lucca in the north. Mostly, however, we stay in the monastery, which is also very much appreciated for its lovely tranquil setting, where we hold occasional beginners' meditation classes and day-long study and practice retreats.

In the meantime, plans for developing the monastery are announced in the same newsletter:

Whilst living here for the last year a vision has been gradually unfolding of how the property might be developed, in a way that could best serve the needs of both the resident and lay communities. An overall plan is being worked on, with the help of the monastery committee. This would see some modifications to the guest house (recently furnished with central heating) and the stable converted into further accommodation. The small garage could become a library and reception office. In order to house the growing number of monastics, several more simple wooden huts (*kutis*) may be erected among the trees.

As many have commented, what the new monastery most lacks is a proper shrine room, a quiet space for meditation that can also accommodate the regular group meetings as well as the occasional larger public gatherings.

We are considering the various possibilities of building something especially for this purpose. Although we are not sure yet what to call it – meditation hall, Dhamma hall, temple? - we are agreed that it should be of a reasonable size (at least 100 square metres) and that it should not be simply utilitarian, but have some inspirational or uplifting quality, such as a religious building might be expected to have.

In the meantime, the original property in Sezze Romano was put up for sale and very soon found a potential buyer. But there is a problem. A legally-recognized association needs governmental approval before selling (even though it is no longer necessary for buying) a property. While we are trying to find a way to resolve this seemingly insurmountable obstacle, the law changes and it's no longer necessary! This means that the association can pay the debt that remains and, soon afterwards, acquire the extra five hectares of land.

We begin to consider possibilities for a large meeting hall or temple building, to replace the tent. The local authorities are very supportive and help us to obtain change of use for part of the land, from agricultural to place of religious worship. However, there is an environmental law in place which makes it almost impossible to build anything new within a band of 150 metres from a recognised water course, such as the stream – called Fosso Riana - that defines the southern boundary of the property. The only piece of land outside the 150 metre band is in the northernmost corner, where there is a tufa-block storage building, beyond which it slopes down very steeply. It does not seem an area at all suitable for a large building. Many years go by as we explore alternative solutions, such as trying to acquire an adjoining piece of land from the neighbour and by presenting an application to the authorities to extend the designated area into the restricted band, explaining that the environmental impact would thus be minimised. None of these come to fruition.

In the meantime, however, hands are not idle. Luang Por Anek, who spends the *vassa* (rainy-season retreat) of year 2,000 here, leads us in cementing the worst part of the entrance drive. One of the outbuildings is converted into an apartment for female guests, and the original guesthouse is later renovated and used for male guests. The resident community continues to grow, slowly but surely. Ajahn Sawaeng from Thailand comes to stay, and there is a series of men

of Italian, British, German and Spanish origin who begin their training as white-robed postulants (*anagarikas*). Many end up leaving after a few months or a year, and are usually grateful for the experience they've had. The first Italian who managed to stay with the training, joining us after six months spent practising in Thailand, and eventually receive *upasampada* – acceptance into the *bhikkhu* training – at Amaravati in the UK with Ajahn Sumedho as preceptor, was a young man from Arezzo who is now known as Ajahn Mahapanyo.

NEW BUDDHA IMAGE

In January 2003 Ajahn Chandapalo visits Thailand for the first time in five years. His main reason for going is to participate in the casting ceremony of a specially-made Buddha image to be offered to Santacittarama, with the intention that it be used for the future temple building. Many important monks are present at the ceremony, including Tan Somdet Buddhajahn, Abbot of Wat Saket - the Golden Mount Monastery - in Bangkok; Ajahn Liam, Abbot of Wat Nong Pah Pong - Ajahn Chah's main monastery; and Ajahn Sumedho.

The newsletter of March 2005 heralds the arrival of the beautiful new Buddha statue:

Some may remember that last winter I was in Thailand, together with our two Thai monks, for a Buddha casting ceremony. Finally it arrived at Santacittarama on the first of this month, a bitterly cold day with snow still on the ground. Fortunately, on that very day, we had an unexpected visit from some Thai students, who enthusiastically joined us in unloading it from the truck and hauling it into place, not without some difficulty. For the time being it has been placed in the large tent. It is a magnificent image and was well worth waiting for. The Buddha sits on a throne, which is two metres high, and all is made of bronze, so it is very heavy.

This image is styled on the well-known and much-admired 'Teaching Buddha' of Sarnath in India, where the recently enlightened Buddha delivered his First Sermon at the 'Deer Park of Isipatana'. The Three Jewels of Buddhism are all represented in the one image, with the Buddha, his hands held in the teaching mudra, expounding the Dhamma, the way to

liberation, also symbolized by the wheel at the base of the throne (eight-spoked for the Noble Eightfold Path), to the first five disciples, who formed the beginning of the Sangha or spiritual community. The deer can also be considered a simile for the gentleness, grace and agility of the enlightened mind. Especially beautiful in this statue is the Buddha's face, with the classic gentle smile conveying such serenity and quiet joy. Please do come and see it when you can!

It really is a marvellous gift from the Thai people. Surely it will be a source of inspiration and faith for many generations to come here in Italy. Now it needs a suitable dwelling place and we are beginning to give serious thought to a 'Dhamma hall' and hope to have a design ready this year.

STANDING BUDDHA

On the 9th day of the 9th month of 2009 (the very day that Ajahn Chandapalo and Thai layman Boonchan reach the highest alpine refuge, the Margherita Hut, at an elevation of over 4,500 metres on Monte Rosa!) the standing Buddha arrives at monastery, as recalled in the newsletter:

After being held up for several weeks at the port of Genoa, we imagine due to the perplexity of the customs officials, our new Buddha image finally arrived and looks majestic among the trees in front of the main house. It is made from bronze, with an oxidised surface to withstand the weather, is in the walking posture and, including the plinth, is almost four metres high (it had to be taller than Ajahn Chandapalo!). The left hand is raised with the forefinger touching the thumb in the 'blessing mudra', thus welcoming and blessing visitors as they arrive at the monastery. It was sculpted especially and uniquely for this monastery by a well known Thai architect, Somprasong Chawmarai.

PRECEPTOR APPOINTMENTS

After living in England for 33 years, Ajahn Sumedho returns to Thailand in the autumn of 2010, having handed over the position of abbot of Amaravati monastery to the English monk Ajahn Amaro.

The August 2011 newsletter has the following announcement:

In January of this year Ajahn Amaro and Ajahn Chandapalo were in Thailand together, seeking approval from the Thai sangha as officially-sanctioned Preceptors (*upajjhaya*), which would authorize them to receive suitable candidates into the bhikkhu training. With Luang Por Sumedho having relinquished this role last year and returned to Thailand, our European monasteries were in need of an officially recognized Preceptor. The European elders agreed to propose both Ajahn Amaro and Ajahn Chandapalo to fulfil this office, thus providing a geographic spread, with Ajahn Amaro based in England and Ajahn Chandapalo in Italy. This was accepted by the elders of the Ajahn Chah group of monasteries in Thailand, and by Somdet Buddhajahn of Wat Saket, the acting Supreme Patriarch and the *Mahathera Samakorn*, the ecclesiastical body which governs the Thai sangha, of which we are a part. On 10 July at Chithurst Monastery in the UK, these appointments were acknowledged by the sangha and Ajahn Chandapalo received his certificate in the *sima* (ordination boundary) where he had been accepted into the bhikkhu sangha twenty nine years previously. Having Ajahn Chandapalo as an authorized preceptor is a significant step and great honour, and means that in the future we will be able to perform bhikkhu-acceptance ceremonies here in Italy.

SANTALOKA MOUNTAIN HERMITAGE

Ajahn Sumedho spends most of the winter in Thailand, then a few months in Portugal, and late spring and early summer in Italy. Now that he has relinquished all official duties, he is more free to accept invitations to spend longer periods in other European countries, where previously only brief visits have been possible. Part of his time in Italy is spent in a lovely quiet property belonging to generous lay supporters near Faenza, between Bologna and Ravenna. His last week before returning to Thailand is spent at Santacittarama, but the previous month finds him in a small alpine cottage in Valle d'Aosta, near the border with Switzerland, as recounted in the August 2011 newsletter:

Luang Por Sumedho has been spending the last month in a mountain hermitage at 2,000 metres above sea level at the end of the Lys Valley, near Monte Rosa. He was joined there by Ajahn Chandapalo and Ajahn Khemasiri (abbot of Dhammapala in Switzerland) on his 77th birthday, when the property was formally offered to the sangha by Boonchan and Maria Vittoria, a local Thai-Italian family. This is a very generous and useful offering and will be a wonderful resource for the sangha as a place of retreat and solitude in beautiful and quiet natural surroundings. We have called it Santaloka, which means 'Realm of Peace'.

The hermitage is quite isolated and was once a cow-herders cottage, made from stone with a slate roof, and is about thirty minutes walk from the small village of Staffal. It is available for sangha members, especially senior monks of this group of monasteries, to have periods of solitude of several days or even a few months. Some very generous and committed lay supporters living in the general area arrange a rota for offering food at the edge of the village in the early morning. Santaloka offers a unique and extraordinary opportunity for monks in Europe to have an experience of solitude in such beautiful surroundings. For the time being, no-one is staying there continuously.

TEMPLE PROJECT

In 2013 we select a group of architects from Rome (called SPSK) to work with us and a lay committee (Aldo, Lorenzo, Federico and Gene) to formulate a design for the temple for submitting to the authorities for approval. By December we have some good news, uploaded on the website:

Santacittarama's temple project was presented to the council administration of Poggio Nativo and has been approved. The structure will fit into an area already designated as a place of religious practice. Now begins a development phase that involves a detailed elaboration of the project in all its various aspects. The main hurdle has been overcome and now the plans need to be assessed by the fire service, the health authority and the public works office, to ensure that various safety standards are met. First of all there will be a geological analysis of the land to be built on, and this will

largely determine important choices regarding the structure. As this is a seismically active area we need to ensure that the structure will be resistant to earth tremors.

The top floor will be a large meditation hall, about 225 square-metres floor space – twice as big as the tent that we have been using the last fifteen years – at the same level as the tent and connected by a ten metre-long bridge. The floor below this will have a smaller multi-purpose meeting room, a library, an entrance hall and an apartment with rooms for several monks. The lowest floor will contain public toilets, storage and utility rooms.

As consultations proceed and the bureaucratic machine slowly moves forward, another opportunity to increase the monastery's facilities presents itself (August 2014 newsletter):

ADJOINING PROPERTY FOR SALE

In the meantime our neighbour has informed us that he wishes to sell his property, a two-story building with 12,000 square metres of land, that borders with the monastery at the gate and along the entrance drive. We are in consultation with our lay committee with a view to the association acquiring it, if an agreement can eventually be reached on the price. We feel that this presents a unique opportunity that is unlikely to happen again. It would certainly be a very useful addition to the monastery. The problem of insufficient parking space would be resolved and the building could provide further accommodation, a need that is becoming increasingly necessary with the growth of the resident community and the number of people wishing to stay as guests.

In the long term it could be used, for example, as a residence for monks that are elderly and needing some degree of care. We are all getting older and there will come a point for some of us when staying in a little hut in the woods is no longer an option. How to look after our elderly monks is an issue that the European monasteries have been discussing for some time, and the feeling is that each monastery should work towards developing such a

facility. It was something that we were in any case intending to think about once the temple was completed.

We hope not to have to delay the temple project, having already waited many years for it, with the authorisation to proceed being expected quite soon, and the need for a large meeting hall ever more keenly felt. ..

The upper floor of the house is 120 square metres and has a living room, three bedrooms, two bathrooms and a kitchen. The lower floor is larger but unfinished, basically it's a garage and storage space.

After consulting the senior monks of the other European monasteries as well as our lay committee, who are all supportive of the idea, and having come to an agreement with the owner, we decide to go ahead with the purchase, which is completed in July 2015.

It is decided to call the house Nirodha, a pali term meaning cessation – or non-arising – of *dukkha*, suffering. The idea is that in the long term it will provide a suitable facility for elderly and ailing monks. Some improvements are made to the top floor: applying a fresh coat of paint, dividing a large bedroom into two and installing another bathroom.

In October of the same year we are happy to announce that all the hurdles have been overcome to the temple project:

After seemingly endless requests to provide various documents and certificates, we are now finally in possession of the building concession for the temple. We are especially grateful to the *comune* of Poggio Nativo, which has been very helpful and supportive right from the beginning, and to Reino and Pino, who have very ably taken the matter in hand in this recent crucial phase.

Work has begun as scheduled with the removal of the asbestos roof of the *cantina* (storage building). Our thanks go to all those who came out to help with the laborious process of removing the contents to the ground floor of Nirodha house.

The next stage will see the demolition of the cantina, once the area has been measured and fenced off. At the time of writing there is not a date yet fixed, but it is likely to begin within the next few weeks.

Work actually begins the following month, November 2015, on the first phase:

After many years of patiently accepting the seemingly glacial speed of the legal and bureaucratic process, it is very gratifying to witness the rapid progress that is now being made on the ground. In a little over a week the tufa-block outbuilding, the 'cantina', has been demolished and the rather extensive excavations – around 1,500 cubic metres of earth removed – have been completed. The next stage is the drilling of 22 holes to a depth of 12 metres, to be used for the reinforced concrete foundation posts.

Last Sunday, shortly after the Kathina offering of cloth and other requisites, a large metal box containing various objects of symbolic value, such as a set of robes and bowl, damaged Buddha images and a selection of Dhamma books, was gradually lowered into a hole at the centre of the building site. At the same time, the monks, while holding a white thread connected to the box, recited traditional blessing chants, thus inaugurating the start of the building project.

It was an exceptionally warm sunny day and we were also blessed with the presence of five senior Thai monks, including Luang Por Jundee of Wat Ampawan, who were our guests for several days. They were accompanied by lay supporters from Thailand, Switzerland and the UK, having brought many generous donations towards the temple construction. A very substantial sum was offered at the Kathina ceremony, thanks also to contributions by many people who attended on the day.

With the funds already available, together with those pledged, about 90 per cent of the costs of the first phase has now been reached. The second and final phase should only cost about half the amount of the first phase, which means that about 60 per cent of the total cost has already been raised. Once the first phase has been completed it will be possible to take a pause before continuing, depending on the financial circumstances, and the second phase

may be divided up into several stages that may be done as and when funds become available. In this way we can avoid getting into debt.

By early January 2016 good progress is being made:

In the last few weeks the final elevations of the various levels have been determined with precision, and the actual construction of the building has begun. The lowest part of the foundation has been completed, and on the last day of the year the laying of concrete continued. The surface on which the building stands is almost completely filled with concrete and is ready for the next phase, which can proceed even in bad weather. The next steps will focus on completion of the foundations, the construction of another retaining wall and then going on to pillars and floors.

By early summer the foundations and retaining walls are completed and the main frame of reinforced concrete has been fabricated, including all three levels as well as the connecting tower, which will house the elevator and stairway. The external walls are going up, made principally from 38 cm-wide blocks that are a mix of clay, wood-fibre and volcanic ash, with closed air cavities, thus of organic nature and offering excellent heat-retaining properties. After a thorough research of the market, a roof with a laminated wood frame and a copper covering is commissioned. It has a high level of insulation and natural pine cladding on the interior. A large crane arrives on site, ready to lift the pre-prepared sections of the roof into position.

Work begins on the temple floor, which is to be of a local travertine (a kind of marble used for temple floors in Roman times) from Poggio Moiano; the quarry being only a few kilometres away. Apparently some of the same stone was used on J.F. Kennedy's tomb! Underfloor heating is installed and the screed laid in preparation.

In September the newsletter reports:

Friends from various parts of the world were contacting us a couple of weeks ago, concerned that we had been adversely affected by the earthquakes in central Italy. Despite being only about sixty kilometres from the epicentre,

and being strongly felt at Santacittarama, no damage was done to people or property here. As most people will already know, not everybody was so fortunate, with several towns being practically destroyed and about 300 people losing their lives. On the last new moon observance day, at the initiative of several of our close supporters, a special ceremony was dedicated to all those affected in some way or who have been involved in providing aid and assistance. It was yet another reminder of the fragility and uncertainty of human life and of how important it is to use the time that we have for what is truly beneficial, both for ourselves and others.

Our project manager happened to be staying at the time of the earthquakes and immediately, at four o'clock in the morning, went to inspect the temple building. Fortunately there was no visible damage and now, at the time of writing, the roof is being assembled. The stupa-shaped pinnacle is on its way from Thailand. It is made of gold-finished bronze, weighs 400 kg and is about three metres high. We are expecting it to arrive in time for the Kathina ceremony, by when the roof should have been completed. Several high-ranking monks have been invited from Thailand for the Kathina day, when the pinnacle will be installed on the top of the roof as part of a special ceremony.

The Kathina ceremony in October was very well attended and was a unique occasion, as reported in the last newsletter of the year:

The final public event of the day was a special moment when the stupa, positioned on the temple rooftop a few days previously and covered with a drape, was unveiled while the sangha recited auspicious verses. A very brief video of the unveiling can be viewed on the internet. An audible sigh of joy from the gathering can be heard at the moment the beautiful stupa is revealed. It fits perfectly on the roof, both physically and aesthetically, and we are very pleased with the result.

After a pause of several weeks, work is once again proceeding on the temple. The roof is presently being covered with copper and should be completed within a few weeks. Assembling of the wooden bridge connecting to the top floor should begin soon.

By June 2017 the roof is completed and the floor laid, and a relics-installing ceremony takes place, where an elaborate container with a collection of supposed relics of the Buddha and many wise disciples is lifted from below into the stupa. There are 18 monks present for the ceremony, many of them senior disciples of Ajahn Chah including Luang Por Liam, LP Anek, LP Jundee, Ajahn Nyanadhammo and a minimum estimate of 700 people take part. It is a beautiful day and a most memorable and moving occasion.

In April of 2018 we are given permission to use the temple for the South-East Asian new year celebration (*Songkran*). The warm weather and the the presence of Ajahn Amaro contribute to a very special and joyful event.

The June newsletter reports:

We are very much appreciating the temple, having started to use it on a regular basis for morning and evening puja. With it's elegant simplicity and spaciousness it seems particularly conducive to meditation, which is its main purpose. Our intention is to keep it very simple, to avoid filling the empty spaces with various pictures and objects of all kinds. There are many places one can go in order to stimulate the senses, whereas places conducive to calm and tranquillity are hard to find. Having the room practically empty except for the Buddha image reflects the emphasis on this way of wakefulness – of being 'the one that knows' – and letting go of what is superfluous, inclining towards direct understanding, peace and liberation.

In January of 2019 there is more good news to share:

The heating system in the temple has been turned on, so we are now using the large hall on the top floor for chanting and meditation, appreciating the warmth that rises from under the floor. However, there is not yet enough electrical power for it to function fully, so it's useful to come wearing plenty of warm clothes.

The other good news is that the Italian Buddhist Union has approved a substantial contribution towards the building project, from funds made

available through tax contributions, the so-called 'otto per mille'. This should be sufficient to finish the temple building – there is still a lot to do on the lower floor – as well as landscaping the surrounding area. It seems reasonable to imagine it all being brought to completion during this year. However, we are not planning to have a formal inauguration ceremony until the year 2020, which coincides with the 30th anniversary of Santacittarama and should give enough time to organize such an event.

A newsletter of June 2019 announces yet another building project:

This is a time of major changes at Santacittarama, with the old main building – for so long the central hub of the monastery activities – undergoing structural modifications and refurbishing, mainly to improve the kitchen facilities. The main focus for the monastery is now the new temple building, where we have morning and evening puja on the top floor, while on the level below the sangha has their main meal and where the teatime meeting takes place. Ajahn Chandapalo and Ajahn Preechar have joined Ajahn Mahapanyo in the sangha residence on the second floor.

Work is proceeding well on the lower level. Ceilings have been fitted as well as most of the doors and windows. We are just waiting for technicians to resolve some problem of stability in the electricity supply before being able to activate the elevator. Bathrooms are fitted and plumbed in. The solar panels are now connected to the grid, although the sun has been somewhat absent of late! The temporary kitchen in the old tent, now at the side of the male guest house, is fully operational.

By October the new, professional standard, kitchen is fully functional, as are all three floors of the temple building. By the end of the year the refurbishing of the top floor of the central building is completed, and work begins on improvements to Nirodha, with the aim of rendering the ground floor ready to accommodate some of the many monks expected for the inauguration ceremony due to take place in June 2020. The winter retreat proceeds, accompanied by the sounds of a bulldozer as it moves the earth around the temple, in the hope of having it landscaped and developing into a garden in time for the celebrations marking thirty years of Santacittarama.

GRATITUDE

A list of names of all those who deserve our gratitude would take up far too much space in this book, and would inevitably be incomplete. All those who have contributed in some way to the development of Santacittarama, over more than thirty years, may be confident that their support has been very much appreciated and that, through the law of kamma, they can expect to enjoy the good results of their generosity and kindness.

Two names that should be mentioned, even though they never lived in Italy, are Luang Por Chah and his first western disciple Luang Por Sumedho. Without their generous and wise teachings and example, Santacittarama monastery would not exist today.

Two other people of particular significance are Vincenzo Piga and Natcharee Thananan, one Italian and one Thai. Although they are no longer alive, we consider them to be the Father and Mother of the monastery, and from the first we intended to dedicate the temple to them both.

I would like to express profound gratitude to all those who have given their support to this monastery, all the lay people and sangha members of all nationalities who have come and gone over the years, in particular to those who have contributed to the realisation of this beautiful temple, and to the compiling and bringing to print of this book.

The tent in which we gathered for meetings lasted a surprising 21 years; the temple has been built to last a great deal longer. May it be of benefit and inspiration for many future generations.

Finally, another most deserving of our gratitude, who lived a very long time ago, but without whom none of this would exist, is the Lord Buddha himself.

Ajahn Chandapalo, February 2020