

The Winchester Group Visit Chithurst

A Report by Thea van Dam

On Tuesday, October 12th 1999, ten of our members paid a day visit to the Buddhist Monastery at Chithurst, near Petersfield in Hampshire. We chose a perfect autumn day, still and warm and comforting. In the lovely gardens and woods which surround the Monastic house, we prayed with the squirrels and rabbits and dragonflies and watched the sunlight playing on the trees and shrubs and stone figures, our spirits warmed by the beauty of God's Creation.

We had been invited to share the one daily meal with the Sangha. The reverence with which the monks approached their food made us acutely aware of our own thoughtlessness in this respect.

In the afternoon, the Abbot led us in meditation and answered our many questions. He spoke of the Buddhist Monk as a symbol of renunciation to the wider community, upon which he depended for support. A monk's training was extensive and hard but, in the end, liberating. The Abbot considered that rituals (rites of passage not necessarily pertaining to any particular religion) are helpful in daily life, but to be meaningful, they must be participatory. We must not be mere observers. He stressed that, in order to move forward in prayer, we should look carefully at our own 'virtue' in the broadest sense - our compassion and non-judgemental attitudes towards our fellows on the way. We must prepare our hearts and minds for prayer.

We are most grateful for the hospitality of the community and would recommend a similar visit to other local groups..