

LIBERATION PARK:

who we are and what we offer

Liberation Park is a small Buddha-Dhamma refuge in southwest Wisconsin working to create facilities for experienced practitioners to engage in independent self-retreat in a rustic, natural setting. We situate our understanding in Buddhist tradition, particularly the Thai forest style of practice and the earliest recorded teachings traceable to the historical Buddha. These are our reference points as we seek to serve the needs of spiritual seekers, inquirers, and others looking for meaning and truth within the hectic and stressful fast-moving post-modern era.

As a Dhamma refuge we seek to provide a beautiful largely natural valley with small hermitages and canvas cabins for retreat, contemplation, quiet, study, and spiritual rest. In keeping with the pragmatism and down-to-earth-ness of Early Buddhism and the Thai forest approach, we try to keep accommodations, rules, and routines simple.

Santikaro, long time student, assistant and translator of Ajahn Buddhadasa resides at Liberation Park and is present to provide teaching and guidance when he is not traveling to teach. Retreatants are expected to be fairly self-sufficient with regard to creating and maintaining their daily schedule, and are expected to prepare their own meals in the shared Guest House kitchen.

Shower, laundry and library facilities are also available in the Guest House. There is one guest room in the Guest House, and a small cottage nearby for those with limited mobility or a need to be close to the amenities. The rest of the hermitages are more rustic, and require walking up and down hills, to and from the Guest House.

Kinds of Retreat

While our primary focus is to provide accommodations and support to individual self-retreatants, small groups of friends or sangha members do at times make use of the valley for more organized retreats, often with Santikaro's support and guidance.

Whether individual or small group retreat, not every retreat must be primarily focused on meditation. Many students choose to focus on meditation, but others choose to focus primarily on study of Buddhist texts, particularly when Santikaro is available to consult and guide. Others may choose to engage primarily in kamma-dana, or work retreat, engaging in the work of building and caring for the Dhamma refuge and its surroundings.

This link provides more detailed information: <http://www.liberationpark.org/retreat/persrets.htm>

Longer term residents

Long term guests and short term residents are welcome. During longer stays, Dhamma reflection and conversation are a regular thread of life when integrated with meditating and working together, sharing some meals, and walking the land. The spontaneity and connection with life as it is happening is a more direct and focused approach than happens in classes.

Forest practice: gardens of liberation

At Suan Mokkh (the Garden of Liberation), the first modern forest monastery in Southern Thailand, Ajahn Buddhādāsa cultivated a lifestyle that was “intimate with Nature” and which he found conducive to deeper Dhamma inquiry and skillful contemplative practice. His well-rounded approach integrated study and service with solitude and meditation. ‘Buddhādāsa’ means ‘servant of the Buddha,’ a name to which Tan Ajahn dedicated his life. He was, and remains, Santikaro’s root teacher. Among his more important influences at Liberation Park:

OPENNESS: Our aim is to serve Dhamma, humanity, and beings that suffer. Whether one is Buddhist or not, religious or not, is not of central importance. While we are grounded in Buddhism, we welcome friends with other spiritual frameworks and commitments, so long as they are interested in dialogue with Early Buddhism. Our own lives have other important threads running through them: healing practices, feminism, progressive social change movements, Jungian psychology, “Equine Dhamma,” and Enneagram.

DHAMMA IS NATURE, NATURE IS DHAMMA: Gardens of liberation are places to explore this simple fact and teaching. Ultimately, Nature as Dhamma is our main teacher. Life is the teacher. The patterns and laws of nature — physical, biological, ecological, social, psychological, spiritual — must be our teacher. To live and practice with nature is a great aid to Dhamma inquiry, experience, and understanding. The trees, wind, weather, bugs, birdsong, sweat, hunger, garden cultivation, foraging for wild food — all of these are avenues for exploring Dhamma as they reflect our inner nature. The early Buddhist texts can support and provoke this exploration without taking the place of living Nature and natural law.

PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY: As the Buddha himself said, “The Tathāgata only points the way. It is up to everyone to walk the path personally.” Teachers can give advice, instruction, support, and inspiration, yet each of us must necessarily take full responsibility for our lives and practices. This can be difficult in large group retreats that require a lot of structure. We have set up Liberation Park to be flexible in such matters so that each of us can find the middle way.

MUTUALITY: At the same time, we are social beings and Sangha is the third Refuge. Interacting cooperatively, even when there is conflict with others – human, animal, plant – is a necessary part of life. At Liberation Park, everyone pitches in and contributes to the collective, whether the land and facilities, the atmosphere of life together, or the teaching and study.

WILDNESS: Living with plentiful reminders of the many aspects of life beyond our control helps keep us in touch with important Dhamma truths. Often, we live in the artificial, highly managed environments created by human desire. Wildness in weather, plants, and insects mirrors the aspects of ourselves that aren’t under our conscious control. We have better perspectives on our choices, limits, and potential for freedom when exploring the tension between controlling everything and letting ourselves “run wild.”

JOURNEY FROM SELFISHNESS: Ajahn Buddhādāsa summarized our spiritual journey as transformation from selfishness to unselfishness and letting go even of ‘good self.’ “Both simple and profound, this has infused and framed my (Santikaro’s) spiritual journey ever since. After my Peace Corps experience, his critiques of selfishness spoke to my recognitions of how egoism got in the way of serving others and of peace. He set an example of non-egoistic service of Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha.”