



Community

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The Upāsaka & Upāsikā Newsletter

Issue No. 23



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editorial

In people we trust?

Multiculturalism and community relations have been much in the news over recent months. The tragedy of the London bombings and the spotlight this has thrown on to what is called 'the Moslem community' has led me to reflect upon our own Buddhist 'community'. Interestingly, the name of this newsletter is 'Community', and this was chosen in discussion between a number of us, because it reflected our wish to create a supportive and inclusive network of Forest Sangha Buddhist practitioners.

The AUA is predominantly supported by western converts to Buddhism. Some of those who frequent and enjoy AUA events would consider the label of 'Buddhist' a step too far. They are more comfortable to be known as 'spiritual seekers', or as having an 'interest' in Buddhism. This hesitancy may come from many causes. One of these is perhaps a reluctance to openly identify with a faith group when the reputation and history of other organised religious movements is so poor. There are many examples of fanaticism in religion and an enmity towards the non-believer can be an integral part of some faith (and politically motivated) groups.

A passion for righteous causes – especially in the young – can easily be corrupted by persuasive people to convince some to undertake malicious and even murderous actions. Unfortunately, this is nothing new. A twisted idealism underlies many atrocities. When the end is seen to justify the means, there is a great risk of slipping towards fundamentalist attitudes and unethical action.

When this happens, our common humanity and aspiration – of seeking happiness and avoiding suffering – is lost sight of. We are simply classified against some stereotypical group criteria.

One is then categorised as a Catholic or Protestant, a Sunni or Shi'ite, a socialist or capitalist, young or old, black or white, British or foreign, man or woman.

Suddenly one is given a stereotypical makeover and all of one's actions are judged from a limited and distorted perspective – as the actions of someone representing her or his group.

This is a thoroughly uncomfortable position to be in, as anyone who has suffered from arbitrary discrimination can attest. There is a feeling of helplessness that whatever one says or does will be misinterpreted. There is a resentment that one is being treated unfairly. Actions that would previously have been taken at face value are now suspected of having a hidden agenda in support of one's group. In this situation, rumour and gossip tend to flourish, and attempts to adopt a more inclusive position may be regarded with suspicion, or misinterpreted to fit the stereotype.

Once a community has polarised, it can take a great deal of work to re-establish trust. Our minds become obsessed with the differences between us rather than with what unites us. The conditions are then right for greed, hatred and delusion to flourish.

Buddhism offers many antidotes to these mental defilements. Identifying strongly with groups and beliefs is to link oneself to that which is impermanent, not-self and unsatisfactory. Group or gender identities are part of the conditioned world and conventional reality. This enables us to see them as useful, but fundamentally uncertain, social conventions to be used with skill and kindness.

Anger and resentment that have arisen in one's own heart may be mindfully identified, accepted, and let go of through meditation and metta practice. Loving-kindness to oneself and others is a direct antidote for aversion.

Regular meetings are encouraged in Buddhism, in order to maintain harmonious relationships. Deliberately making an effort to meet with, to socialise with, and to talk with others in a community, in an open, kind and straightforward way is very skilful. Buddhist teachings are very clear about the wisdom of avoiding actions which lead to the division (schism) of a community. Inevitably such a division leads to arbitrary exclusion, suspicion and fear, a sense of resentment, and taking sides.

As Ajahn Chah says:

'Conventions have a use, but in reality there really isn't anything there. Even people are non-existent. They are merely groups of elements, born of causal conditions, dependent on conditions...conventions are established to make things convenient that's all.'

Chris Ward

The Temple at Kosgoda



The Shrine Room 'buddu ge' at Kosgoda

The 26th of December 2004, was to be the day of prize giving for the children attending the Sunday Dhamma school at the temple in Kosgoda, situated on the western sea board of Sri Lanka.

Preparations were being made that morning for the evening's event, when the Indian Ocean, just 200 metres away, began to behave as it has never done before. Many went to the beach to watch this unusual phenomenon, they didn't

have a chance to survive the tsunami which sped toward the village, growing as tall as the palm trees and crackling like fire crackers. It took everything in its path and sped a further two kilometres inland, cracking open houses, scattering furniture, and tumbling people around who hadn't been able to hold on to anything. In a moment, the ordered, somewhat predictable world at Kosgoda, had been turned into a chaotic melee of death and destruction.

For over 300 years, the temple at Kosgoda has been the focal point for the 400 or so families that live in Kosgoda. And, at this time of trauma, it is to the temple they turned. Ven. Kosgoda Vajirabuddhi, the chief incumbent of the temple, was one of the first to return to the village and face the destruction. When the villages returned, they found to their dismay that looters had been there first. The monk's presence in the village was an encouragement for the other villagers to return and begin the task of clearing and rebuilding.

The temple complex which had several structures such as a 10-roomed Sangha vasa (monks' residence), and many other buildings were completely destroyed. Only part of the sangha vasa and the budu ge (shrine room) which houses a large buddha statue survived. The surround of the buddu ge, with its beautiful paintings was partly destroyed exposing the paintings to the weather, the relief statues on the walls blasted out by the force of the water.

Kosgoda was one of the many places of worship in Sri Lanka that was affected by the tsunami. It is at the top of the list as the Buddhist temple which received the most severe damage. The reason I write to you about Kosgoda, is that when I visited Sri Lanka in January, wishing to offer relief and consolation to the survivors of this ordeal, it is to Kosgoda that events and chance meetings took me. Being a community

development worker in Hemel Hempstead, suddenly felt inappropriate, I felt that my skills will be of better use in my motherland. So when friends and colleagues learnt of my wish to visit Sri Lanka, they made financial contributions. That money was placed in a fund which I called “The Sahana Relief Fund for Sri Lanka” – it is not a registered charity, but I give you my word that all the funds are being used to assist the truly wonderful people of Kosgoda and their temple. So far, the funds supports 24 children who have lost their parents/carers with a monthly allowance and has helped 20 adults with re-establishing their livelihood or meeting medical expenses.

When I visited again in August/September, I found that whilst there is a lot more to be done, people are beginning to raise their heads and get on with life. The temple is being gradually rebuilt according to a new design drawn up by an architect. The work is carried out in phases as and when funds are made available by private groups and individuals. Local organisations have sponsored a new toilet block and protection for the paintings in the buddha house. The first structure to be put up was the Sunday school hall. A multi- storey building is going to house the dhamma sala, dana sala (ground floor), sangha vihara (first floor) and relic house (second floor). Work has halted on this building at the first floor as more funds are required to put the concrete floor between the first and second floors.



'Buddu ge' and bell tower under repair

Ven Vajirabuddhi's community of sangha consists of eight young samanera's who are receiving training from him. Until the new vihara is built, their accommodation for the night is the open sided Sunday school hall.

On Sunday the 4th of August, I was honoured to witness the prize giving ceremony of the Dhamma school in this new hall. For me the event was a symbol of the resilience and strength of the Buddhist community, for whom their faith has supported and guided them through a most harrowing communal ordeal.

Santoshni Perera

An Appeal

I would like to offer you an opportunity to assist in the rebuilding of the temple at Kosgoda. Your contribution may be sent as a cheque made out to “L.Santoshni Perera Re: Kosgoda” and sent to: *Amaravati Buddhist Monastery, Great Gaddesden, Hemel Hempstead, Hertfordshire, HP1 3BZ*, and I will ensure that it goes towards the rebuilding of the temple at Kosgoda.

The total cost of the new building is estimated to be Rs 9.4 million to be completed in three phases:

Phase 1: Foundation & Ground floor, 3750 square feet - estimated at Rs. 562 5000

Phase 2: First floor housing the monks vihara, 2272 square feet – estimated at Rs 340 8000

Phase 3: Second floor balcony, 626 square feet, and relic enclosure, 276 square feet, estimated at Rs 414,000 £1 = Rs 170 approximately

Editors note: The Amaravati Upasaka / Upasika Association has donated £500 towards this cause. Our hope is that this will reach £1000 with your additional donations.

Amaravati Monastic Led Retreats 2006 Programme

The 2006 programme of retreats led by monks and nuns at Amaravati can be found at the Website:

<http://www.amaravati.org/abm/english/announce/2006.html>

Long Walks Programme

Nick Scott is reviving the long walks for laymen and monastic Sangha that he used to organise. Next year there will be two in the mountains of Europe, one for a week, the other for two weeks. On each walk six laymen will share the costs of organising the walk and taking along two monks. To come you have to have some experience of meditation (at least one ten day retreat) and be reasonably fit. To find out more send an e-mail (titled 'sangha walks') to: nickscott@amaravati.org.

Rude Awakenings

The account by Ajahn Sucitto and Nick Scott of their walking pilgrimage around India is finally being published. The first half will be published in America in December by Wisdom Publications under the title 'Rude Awakenings'. It can be ordered from Wisdom Publication's web page.

The Bodhinyana Group Programme - Spring 2006

We meet in the Bodhinyana Hall at Amaravati Buddhist Monastery – from 7.30 till 9.30pm on Wednesday evenings. Meetings are open to all and include meditation and discussion around a theme.

Please check our website for more details:

www.buddhacommunity.org

- Jan 11th Is it right to doubt?
- Jan 18th Consumerism and Frugality
- Jan 25th The Heart and the Head
- Feb 1st Meditation and Reflection
- Feb 8th Helping others
- Feb 15th Sutta Study
- Feb 22nd Meditation Practices
- Mar 1st Meditation and Reflection
- Mar 8th Engaged Buddhism
- Mar 15th What is Mindfulness?
- Mar 22nd Euthanasia
- Mar 29th The Metta Sutta
- Apr 5th Meditation and Reflection
- Apr 12th The natural world

SUNYATA RETREAT SCHEDULE

Dec 9th – 11th Insight Meditation *Marjó Oosterhoff* Cost €160

Marjó Oosterhoff has been practicing and teaching insight and loving-kindness meditation for many years. She trained and continues to do so in monasteries in Burma, where she ordains for the duration of her stays. She works and teaches at a small meditation centre - *Passaddhi* - in the southwest of Ireland.

Dec 28th '05 – Jan 2nd '06 'Beginning Anew' Retreat *Ajahn Sundara* Cost €280

Ajahn Sundara has been an ordained nun in the Forest Tradition of Ajahn Chah and Ajahn Sumedho since 1979 and has taught and led retreats worldwide since the late eighties. Currently she lives at Amaravati Monastery in Hertfordshire, England.

NB: All Retreat prices cover the cost of meals, accommodation, teachers' expenses and retreat overheads only – no part of that fee goes to the teacher. All teachers at Sunyata offer their services on the traditional Buddhist principal of Dana, (meaning generosity, or free-will offering). There will be an opportunity to offer donations for the teachers at the end of each course.

For information on retreats and bookings (unless otherwise specified) please contact the retreat managers at Sunyata.

Tel: +353+(0)6136 7073; email: info@sunyatacentre.com, or visit our web-site: www.sunyatacentre.com

A Buddhist Response to Physician Assisted Suicide

Since 2003, there have been a series of attempts to pass a bill through Parliament which would allow a terminally ill patient to request to die and to be assisted in this choice. Lord Joffe's *Assisted Dying for the Terminally Ill* bill was discussed in the House of Lords on the 10th October and a revised bill along the lines of the 'Oregon Model of Physician Assisted Suicide (PAS)' will be submitted by the end of the year. Buddhist groups have been approached through the Network of Buddhist Organisations (NBO) for the Buddhist response to this bill. No agreed Buddhist consensus has been forthcoming, although there are individual Buddhist traditions that have made known their opposition to the bill (and euthanasia generally). Other faiths have strongly opposed the bill. Buddhist teachings and practice would appear to oppose all forms of euthanasia, including Physician Assisted Suicide. However, not all agree. The following pieces present one from Dr Robert Ilson in favour of assisted 'dying' and an opposing response.

A Buddhist Case for Assisted Dying

11 October 2005

A bill has been put before Parliament to make it legal to help terminally ill people to die. Apparently, several religious leaders, including a Buddhist representative, have expressed their opposition to this bill.

The Buddhist objection to assisted dying seems straightforward. The first of the Five Precepts is "I undertake the rule of training to refrain from killing any living things." However, I believe that the Pali Canon is more nuanced. It mentions at least one type of suicidal intention and three types of actual suicide. Of these four types, only one seems to be condemned, one seems morally neutral, and two seem to be approved.

Some monks proclaim their intention to persist in striving for enlightenment even if they die in the attempt. Their suicidal intention seems to be regarded as praiseworthy.

In early Buddhism there were waves of suicides by monks who had practised meditating on the foulness of the body and were appalled by the horror of life. Their suicides seem to have been regarded as wrong.

Several terminally ill Aryans kill themselves. Their suicides are not condemned. It has been believed traditionally that all these Aryans were Arahats. However, it has also been suggested that at least some were not Arahats at the time they killed themselves but became Arahats only at the very moment of death.

The Jataka tales include examples of the Bodhisatta killing himself to provide food for other beings. As a rabbit, he throws himself into a fire to be eaten by a starving human. As a human, he throws himself off a cliff to be eaten by a starving tigress and her cubs below. These suicides are regarded as exemplary.

Such Jataka tales seem the most relevant to the debate about assisted dying. Here the Bodhisatta sacrifices himself for the welfare of other beings. It is likewise understandable that a person suffering great pain and indignity might want to sacrifice himself to relieve his carers of the enormous burden of attending to him, which burden can make the carers themselves become ill. Moreover, the ill person is himself a being who according to Buddhism should respect his own needs as much as those of anyone else. If his body after death is then used for medical research, the analogy with the Bodhisatta's self-sacrifice is well-nigh complete.

Of course unscrupulous carers – not to mention unscrupulous agents of government -- could use the legalisation of assisted dying to put pressure on an ill person to die. (There is apparently in the Vinaya an example of monks who were rebuked for suggesting to a dying monk, probably with benevolent intent, that he would be better off dead.) Of course any legislation to legalise assisted dying must include appropriate safeguards.

But these problems, important though they are, are not directly relevant to the question whether Buddhists as Buddhists can support assisted dying in principle. I think they can.

Robert Ilson

A Buddhist Case against Assisted Suicide

A Buddhist case against assisted suicide (avoiding the euphemism of 'dying')) can be clearly based on teachings to be found in the Pali Canon (the scriptures associated with the Theravada Buddhist tradition). Buddhism views a human birth as a very rare and precious opportunity. It is only in the human realm that one is able to practice the Buddha's teachings and achieve enlightenment. This reverence towards human life (and all sentient life) supports the first precept which encourages harmlessness. One who follows the first precept:

...does not harm a living being, does not cause a living being to be harmed, does not approve of such harming (Digha Nikaya iii.48)

Since the person requesting assisted suicide is intending to cause harm to a living being (him or herself), and anyone providing such assistance is also harming a living being, both parties are effectively breaking the first precept. This is surely a key issue; we are not simply discussing suicide which is morally dubious on its own, but the involvement of another in harming (killing) a living being.

The most relevant and detailed teachings on this subject are to be found in the Vinaya section of the Pali Canon. In the Vinaya, the Buddha strongly condemned monks or nuns who praised or aided suicide and established a rule that:

Whatever monk should intentionally deprive a human being of life, or should look about so as to be his knife-bringer, or should praise the beauty of death, or should incite anyone to death, saying, 'Hallo there, my man, of what use to you is this evil, difficult life? Death is better for you than life, or who should deliberately and purposefully in various ways praise the beauty of death or should incite anyone to death: he is also one who is defeated, he is not in communion. (Vinaya III.73).

So, such behaviour falls into the category of the most serious offences leading to immediate expulsion from the order of monks. Even though there are cases of monks acting out of compassion in helping someone who is gravely ill or suffering to die quickly, these actions are still condemned. In one of these incidents a monk asked the family of a person who had had his hands and feet amputated, whether they wished him to die. The family agreed, so the monk prescribes certain food which led the man to die (Vinaya iii.79, 86).

It is said that no act of mercy-killing can be without some element of aversion, even if this is an aversion to the pain that the patient is suffering. Consequently such an act would have some unwholesome consequences. Buddhism would also point out that death is not the end, and that illness in this life may be worked with as an opportunity for spiritual realisation.

Assisted suicide must be distinguished from death as the unintended side-effect of the administering of medicines, for example to alleviate pain. In these cases the intent is to provide appropriate treatment to alleviate suffering, not to bring about death. From a Buddhist perspective it could also be morally acceptable for a patient to forego further burdensome treatment in the knowledge that such treatment is futile. This is simply to let nature take its course without deliberate hastening of the process.

It is difficult to see how any legislative safeguards could ever prevent some unscrupulous relations or carers of a very sick person from making comments that would be interpreted by the patient as indicating that his or her duty was to request assisted suicide.

Chris Ward

Editor's note: Good sources of information about this topic can be found in 'An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics' by Peter Harvey, and 'Buddhism and Bioethics' by Damian Keown. A useful discussion on the Oregon model of Physician assisted suicide (PAS) by Andrew Fergusson, can be found in 'Going West' in the Summer 2005 edition of Triple Helix at <http://www.cmf.org.uk/literature/>.



Sickness — A teacher



Did I neglect my practice during a time of sickness?

I have been questioning myself as to whether, during my recent time spent in hospital, did I neglect my Buddhist practice? My first reflections seemed to show this to be so. But should I be so critical of myself during a period of ill health? As time goes on and in conversation with others this first impression of neglect has receded.

My admission to Stoke Mandeville Hospital on January 1st 2005 was intended to be a short stay. Just long enough to rehydrate and get me back on my feet. But a bowel condition only worsened and the medical team put me on a vast array of drugs. My first ward, due to bed shortage, was a temporary stay in Spinal Injuries. A move took place after two weeks to a medical ward, but after one month my condition was no better and I elected for surgery to resolve the problem. I moved to another ward to await my surgery. This took place successfully on February 5th and after another two weeks I was moved back to the medical ward to recuperate. By March 16th I was proclaimed medically fit enough to go ahead with rehabilitation. At this time I was around three stone underweight, could not sit up without falling over; lacked the strength to feed and saw myself as 'stick woman'. I spent a further 6 weeks at the Royal Bucks Hospital putting on weight and gaining strength.

Becoming aware of a cluttered lifestyle

On arriving home on April 26th, I immediately became aware of being surrounded by clutter – of both mind and possessions. Whilst 'moving house' from ward to ward, hospital staff had to list my possessions that steadily increased. Admitted to hospital with a half full suitcase, I returned home with a bulging case and three boxes of possessions. I retained the same bed but when being pushed to another ward I was surrounded

amongst other gifts by bags of bottles of drink, packets of biscuits, magazines and books. I remember the anxiety I felt when the nurses were required to make lists each time my possessions were packed ready to move on. Then travelling along the corridors I wondered about the spectacle I must have made, accompanied by porters and nurses, who had to balance my packages. Soon new visitors arrived bearing additional gifts. I hope my looks of despair did not show.

I became resolved to remove the clutter that surrounds me at home. Interestingly some objects have already become unnecessary. But now the problem is what to do with them. A great deal of effort is required to find new homes. One area of clearance has been the 'delete' and 'sent' boxes of my e-mail, which contained over 1500 messages, some with attachments. Like other areas of clearance this has produced a feeling of equilibrium and peace. During my time in hospital very few decisions had to be made, I had little to clutter my mind. The hospital staff tended to my needs and on the home front friends and family was looking after things.

Support given by others and awareness of renunciation

Whilst in hospital cards and letters arrived regularly, with wonderful words of encouragement and messages of wise words that by coincidence often fitted my set of circumstances at that time. Being remembered by friends traveling in India and Portugal, I was temporarily spirited away to join them on their travels. I felt that I could not lose hope and strength

when others were counting on me to pull through. You can do it; you are a strong person etc.

One occasion on my return to the ward from a distressing diagnosis, there was chaos. Beds and patients were being moved around to allow the ward to be cleaned. Amongst this chaos two familiar faces greeted me. After noting my black mood they reminded me of non-attachment and of the transience of life. Remembering that non-attachment being pertinent to both positive and negative thoughts. I gained much strength and hope from



A self-portrait during Ann's time in hospital

these wise words and consequently spent time during the rest of my stay in hospital reflecting on renunciation. I regularly asked myself, 'what am I attached to at this precise moment'. There were countless of these moments when waiting for nursing staff to respond to my bell. Usually I required them to turn me in bed as a result of discomfort from time spent lying in a fixed position. I was not able to move myself—but learning to stay with the discomfort—noticing the relief and gratitude when pain was relieved.

Getting to know the other patients

I observed the impatience of other patients and in some cases the rudeness and lack of gratitude towards the staff. At least this is what I assumed. I soon realised that their illness greatly contributed to their behaviour. This was my first experience of sharing a mixed open ward and with people mainly older than myself. Not just ages but conditions varied. I learned about the most intimate details of other patients, then horror and realisation that they too knew all about me, and knowing that one's ego had taken quite a hammering.

There were times observing other patients that I compared their actions to live comedy theatre and I had to hide my giggles under the sheets. One chap seemed intent on soaking his neighbour with the contents of his water jar because he couldn't get attention. But at other times this comedy was not so entertaining, especially when I was kept awake at night. I tried to decide whether the 'culprit' was creating unnecessary drama or just very ill.

I got to know some very interesting people and was entertained by tales of their life experiences. There was an actor and writer who had worked with some top names in the entertainments industry. Also a very sick lady who had travelled the world and spent time trekking in the Himalayas. It did take me some time but I learned to feel great compassion for these people who had lived very colourful lives. Did they once ever imagine that they would be spending time in hospital, becoming aged and sick?

I felt I was living in a community. One had to get to know and understand its other members and this included both staff and patients. Just like in any outside community there were those one liked better than others. Strategies had to be learned of how best to approach different people. At the time I thought this rather unfair. After all I had been at times very ill. But learning who not to upset — right speech became very necessary and how not to apologise for being sick. Noticing how the males were nearly always more demanding than females. Learning to understand this lack of patience in oneself and others.

One elderly man in the next bed had taken a dislike to me and at the first opportunity let rip his feelings, telling me what he thought were my shortcomings. I was both angry and hurt, trying to contend with pain on the

physical and now emotional levels. I needed to concentrate on compassion to myself. Sometime later when I felt stronger I steered that compassion towards him.

Learning trust in others

There was the need for trust in others. I quickly gained that trust in the staff that worked so terribly hard. Constantly understaffed, they were regularly transferred to other wards and those remaining needed to rush even faster from one patient to another. There was one sister who developed a very fast walk and her feet hardly touched the ground as she dashed from one patient to another. During these times of stress I cannot remember any member of staff ever confronting a patient. They were able to deal with some very difficult situations. Gradually I noticed patients learned trust in each other. A sense of comradeship prevailed; if one were unable to reach for their bell another would ring to summon help. I often heard the words 'are you alright there?' Many times a familiar tune could be heard on the hospital radio station and those of us who knew the words would join in.

Becoming more aware of my own shortcomings

I know that one of my biggest faults can be interrupting the conversation of others. I became aware; lying in bed, that I was too weak to do this and my voice had become very faint. I allowed others full flow and found I was actually listening. I realised the benefits and linked this to right speech and action. I had been aware of this problem in the past and had tried to overcome it, but old habits do tend to return. Since my return home I have noticed occasions when I want to interrupt and have been able to restrain myself.

In Hospital I found myself in situations of despair and lack of patience. I found faults in others and this followed with bad language. This resulted in remorse and the big question 'have I really progressed with my practice after all these years?' I thought that spiritual progress was indeed extremely slow and eons of lifetimes were required to remedy this. Maybe this is so but now think that my experiences in hospital did add to that progress.

I am regaining my health now but vanity has been a problem to contend with. I became more aware of my appearance, how much weight I had lost, my hair was falling out. I just swallowed hard when some visitors arrived and hoped they still recognised me. Although I'm still aware of this problem I'm learning to deal with it.

A sharper sense of the everyday

My spell in hospital has most certainly been a rich experience and as I have recently realised, a test of my Buddhist practice. I believe I am more aware of everyday experiences and, I hope, increased wisdom.

Ann Engel



The wisdom of the heart



There are two kinds of wisdom; the wisdom we can put into words, and the wisdom that is without words. The first is the wisdom of the intellect; the second is the wisdom of the heart.

The wisdom with words we can formulate. We can read it in a book. We can reason it out. We can believe in it. We can argue over it.

The wisdom without words - it is seeing. It is not a set of views we try to fit the world and our experience into, but a mind that is open.

There isn't much we can say about it, which is a relief, because whatever we say is bound by concepts and division. When we talk about the body, it is something out there, not the body we are experiencing right here and now. When we talk about our minds, it is something separate and outside, not the thinking process that is our experience right here and now. This subject object separation is the fundamental way we express ourselves with language. It is the wisdom that is limited by words. It is the wisdom of the intellect.

It is true that words are an important means of communication. I am using words. I like using words. Words can be creative, inspiring, informative. We talk, we write, we think with words. Can you think without words?

When you look up at the sky do you think with words? Do you think 'the sky is blue', or 'the sky is grey'? Do you have an inner conversation as though you were talking to someone else? Of course there is nothing wrong with thinking this way. Now try thinking without words. When you look at the sky and don't engage in that inner dialogue, you notice there is much more to the sky than blue or grey. A sense of wonder can arise when we don't limit our experience to what we can describe with words. A sense of seeing something as though for the first time.

You might say that the mind is just vacant when there are no words, that we need words to bring ourselves into the real world. But the world of words is limited. The real world is beyond words.

When you practice insight meditation (vipassana) you go beyond words. It is very simple. There are only three questions the Buddha asked us to investigate in order to practice insight meditation. Is the world permanent or impermanent (anicca)? Is it satisfactory or unsatisfactory (dukkha)? Is there an unchanging essence (self or ego entity) or is there no unchanging essence (anatta)?

Insight is 'seeing'. Vipassana is derived from the word passati - to see; Vi is a strengthening prefix, so vipassana means seeing clearly. It is seeing through our delusion, our conditioning. And we can't have the same insight twice. Once we see, we can't be fooled again.

We can think about these questions with words, but this intellectual reasoning can be a trap, because it traps us in our condi-

tioned world. We can only reason with the ideas we have already got, with the insights we already have. At some point we have to abandon words. We can't reason it out. We have to allow these questions to abide in the silent mind and open our minds to whatever arises. This is the key to insight practice.

It is no good trying to catch insights, like butterflies in the sky. It is the grasping mind that is our obstacle to seeing. It is only through letting go that insights can arise. Never grasp an insight. Let them come, let them go. A true insight will never leave you.

I recently went to an optician. I noticed that when they test your eyesight, first they fit one lens, let's say to get the vertical lines right, then one to correct the horizontal etc. You don't stop and buy the glasses after they have fitted the first lens, you wait until you can see perfectly. It's like this when you cultivate insight, if you grasp an insight you will stop right there. Don't grasp anything, just keep on letting go.

When I did my first ten day retreat at Amaravati, after seven days of meditation on loving kindness, and experiencing a strong feeling of lightness or bliss, I was asked by the teacher to consider who was experiencing this feeling. But I was asked not to reason it out, but to do so with a silent mind.

This is when insight can arise; when we hold one of these three questions in the silent mind without seeking an answer. Our conditioned thinking doesn't obscure the truth from us when the mind is silent, when we are not thinking with words. When insight arises there is just seeing, seeing through the conditioned to the unconditioned.

The unconditioned? That is an idea you can't reason out isn't it. It isn't logical. It is very irritating to the mind that wants to think with words, because it is, by definition, not anything the mind can form concepts about. It is an experience of the silent mind.

And being unconditioned, it is uncreated. So insight isn't something we create. Yes, we can learn how to calm down and concentrate the mind, but we can't make insight arise.

So where does insight arise from? It is quite simple, it doesn't arise from anywhere. We can say it is already there, that we already have it, it is just that we haven't seen it yet. In other words, the experience of insight is seeing through the delusion that hides the truth from us. But the truth is already there, it doesn't come from outside. We don't make ourselves wise, we let go of the delusion that obscures the truth from us.

Isn't this wonderful? I find it is so exciting that the whole world of seeing the way things are is available to us all, without exception. All we have to do is let go of our delusion.

And another amazing thing is that this world of truth is also a world of love and compassion. When we see, what do we see?

Not how to steal and destroy. Greed and hate are bound up with delusion. Non-greed and non-hate naturally follow from seeing through delusion. So it is not surprising that the experience of insight brings with it an opening of the heart and that love and compassion are an expression of wisdom. Buddhist wisdom is not a cold intellectual experience, it is the wisdom of the heart.

But the loving kindness that follows from letting go is not the same as that which is developed through metta meditation. Metta is a very useful tool, once developed we can use it to help us overcome anger and hatred, but it is temporary, it is there when we develop it, but it doesn't last. The loving kindness that follows insight, that is an expression of our true nature, it is a fundamental shift in the way we see things.

When people use the word 'heart', they may mean many different things. The word 'heart' gets used a lot these days. Books like 'The Heart of Buddhist Meditation', 'A Path with Heart', 'Food for the Heart', to name a few. We can use the word heart to mean the heart-wood or core of the teaching. We can use it in the sense of cultivating love and compassion. We can use it to describe that aspect of the mind that deals with our feelings or emotions as opposed to our intellect.

But we have to be careful we don't get caught up in a wisdom that is trapped in words. We can hold an opinion about what is the heart of the Buddha's teachings, we can hold an opinion about whether there is enough compassion in Theravada Buddhism. We can hold an opinion about whether a teacher is too intellectual and doesn't communicate 'from the heart'.

But we can't argue about a wisdom that is without words. Where will we find it? The Buddha's wisdom, the wisdom of the heart, is within us all. If there is a purpose to life, it is this; to realise our potential to see things as they really are, through the power of our own insight, and by doing so, to find true peace.

You may by now have concluded that I am opposed to the study of the Dhamma and the use of the intellect. Nothing I have said should be understood to mean we should despise the intellect. The intellect is a wonderful tool and for many of us it is highly refined. We should make good use of it.

For hundreds of years the teachings were passed down through the generations by an oral tradition and even today a young bhikkhu in a Buddhist country will be expected to memorise suttas word for word and will be tested by his teacher each day. We should at least try to memorise the core teachings, the four noble truths for example. The first noble truth: *Jati pi dukkha, jara pi dukkha, maranam pi dukkham...* (birth is suffering, old age is suffering, death is suffering ...)

The Dhamma should be so familiar that it is accessible to us all the time. We should consider and reflect on it at every opportunity. But study and learning is of no benefit if it is just intellectually satisfying or if it is just something to be chanted to bring good fortune. For it to be of real value we

have to go beyond the intellect, we have to let it change our lives.

Perhaps you have read into what I have written that I am opposed to the cultivation of loving kindness through metta meditation. On the contrary, many people benefit a great deal from practicing metta. In fact most people find vipassana (insight meditation) difficult because they are not ready to practice it. Vipassana requires us to investigate and break down our attachment to self (the attachment to the idea 'I am this, this is mine'), and it isn't possible to see through the self until we are able to hold the self up and look at it. If we practise this with self-hatred we simply try to destroy the self rather than look at it dispassionately. Depending of where we are starting from, it can take years of 'self healing' though the cultivation of metta before we are ready to do this. Interesting isn't it, that we first have to become 'whole' or fully attached to our self-identity, before we can let it go. We have to feel really good about ourselves, even learn to 'love' ourselves (a very un-British idea), before we have the self-confidence to walk up to, and off the edge of the conditioned world, to see through the grasping mind.

This way of the heart and the way of the intellect (rational, intelligent thinking), can seem to be in opposition to each other. But look at the first precept. Not harming life is a really good idea when we think about it rationally, and loving kindness is a good antidote to hatred when we apply it. If we have the knowledge that hatred is bad and have developed the tool of loving kindness, and the awareness to know that hatred has arisen, then we can eliminate it. We should make the intellect and the heart work together, not in opposition to each other.

But whilst this sounds wonderful in theory, in practice, the loving kindness we have created doesn't last forever, and if this is something we cling to, we will suffer when we haven't got it.

That is why the Buddha taught us to develop wisdom. When you look with wisdom you can see that what I have described above is simply a veneer on rotten wood. I don't know of a world religion that doesn't teach that hatred should be overcome by love. As the Buddha said, 'This is a universal truth'. It is the most fundamental moral teaching.

What happens when you apply a veneer to rotten wood? The veneer bubbles up and breaks up, it can only 'contain' the rotten wood for so long. It is not hard to see why the Buddha taught us that we have to eradicate our rotten wood in order to be truly free. And there is only one way to do this. We have to peel back the veneer and see what is really there. And when we see it, what we see is the grasping mind that tricks us, fools us, into grasping what I want and don't want, which is nothing more than greed and hate.

When we peel back the veneer, when we can see the mould and the maggots; this is insight, this is seeing as it really is. This is what tears greed, hatred and delusion out. Out of our hearts and our minds.

Martin Evans



Making Connections Beyond Words



There's an acronym that's been bandied about in my extended family for years (and no doubt in a lot of others) – PLU, for People Like Us. It's been a handy shorthand way of indicating how well we thought somebody fitted in with 'our way' of seeing the world, 'our' taste in music or literature, 'our' holiday preferences, 'our' political outlook and attitudes or 'our' choice of newspaper. 'Yeah, well, the party was OK but there weren't many PLUs', we'd say when we found that somehow we just hadn't 'clicked' with many of the people there. It wouldn't necessarily indicate differences in social class or educational attainment – simply a difference in outlook the perception of which got in the way of comfortable communication. A few years ago, though, I had begun to wonder if maybe I wasn't a PLU myself – I often found myself somehow out of step with how people I'd known for years were interpreting world events or with choices they were making in their personal lives, and was aware of a certain disenchantment, which I interpreted as cynical, with the 'packages' of opinions I detected people espousing. Somehow I started feeling as though everyone was making 'lifestyle choices' rather than living from the heart. The number of phrases in quotes that I've just used gives you an indication of how unreal I was feeling my life to have become and how much I had started to feel at odds with a persona that I had previously accepted as me, and, unwillingly, at odds with people around me.

This was the context in which my interest in the Buddhist path was aroused and developed, and one of the key areas which indicated to me that it was the right path for me was how I related to my fellow travellers and the ease with which I began to make new connections.

I began my connection with Buddhism by taking an online meditation course with Wildmind, an FWBO meditation site which offers the same introductory courses on Mindfulness of Breathing and Metta Bhavana that are offered by all FWBO centres. I had felt rather nervous of meeting 'real Buddhists' in case I didn't feel comfortable with the teachings after all – it was all new to me and I worried that I might feel trapped. So this seemed an ideal way of dipping a toe in the water without really committing myself to anything. I was delighted to find that I connected straightaway with the course teacher, to whom I submitted a regular journal entry, and it was only a few weeks into the course that I realised that this was something I did want to commit myself to. And a very early indication of that commitment was the wish to meet some 3D Buddhists as well as my virtual mentor. It was this

which prompted me to research local groups and to come up with Amaravati.

I joined a local sitting group in Watford, which I continued to attend after moving to Berkhamsted (this move was a serendipitous coincidence, since when I started on this exploration we'd already put in an offer on the house we now live in). That's when I also started going to the Bodhinyana group and to AUA events. And for the first time I found a community in which I felt thoroughly at home, where I was conscious of a feeling of welcome and of mutual trust even with people I hadn't yet spoken to.

My chief impression of the first AUA day of practice I attended was of the powerful effect of sitting in silence with a large group – by the end of the day I had a strong feeling of being amongst friends and of feeling closer to these people than I had ever felt to friends at school, university or in the workplace. And as time has passed I have found that that feeling of trust has enabled me to practise with relationships in what's felt like a completely safe environment.

The confidence that I have that the community of people I am now part of are committed to the same path as I am, and are probably far more experienced than I am in the language of Dhamma and in their practice means that when I perceive some rough places and dysfunctions in my interactions with people I can dare to face them far more squarely, and can dare to acknowledge how large a part my own projections play in creating them. Equally, as friendships have gradually grown, I've taken pleasure in experiencing impulses towards generosity and joy in others' happiness that feel genuinely heartfelt and uncomplicated by any of the sense of duty, or of the obligation to be 'nice' or 'helpful' that I used to assume almost as a survival mechanism ('unless I'm helpful nobody will like me'). This has been a source of great joy to me.

I wonder if it's because of this sense that my survival depended on niceness, and that I was basically unworthy of being loved for myself, only for what I could do to help (I'm sure I shall expand on this on another occasion!) that I have found metta practice quite difficult to do on a formal basis. I have found it very difficult to cultivate metta for myself and have found myself resisting almost any phrase that I tried to use, feeling that it sounded false.

What has recently transformed this for me is the realisation that I could do the practice without using words, for example by imagining a protective hand between my shoulder blades, or that I'm a small child being cradled on an enormous lap. And once I'd discovered the warmth that that could generate I found myself more able to use the words, but only if I addressed them to myself, calling myself 'you' rather than 'I'. I found myself using the voices of all the people I loved and respected – in fact the very people for whom I'd planned to cultivate metta later in the meditation. That seemed to set up a sort of two-way energy which has strengthened the connection I feel between myself and others.

I have even managed to do the practice this way whilst calling to mind people whom I find it hard to feel natural empathy with, or with commuters on the train whom I would up to now simply have found annoying – not that I don't find them annoying now, but with practice I find myself more able to imagine them as people who are looking for happiness, who would wish me well if they knew me better, and who have their own troubles and concerns. And that in turn allows me to feel genuine warmth towards them and connection with them – not, as before, an attempt based on the feeling that I 'ought' to feel that way. Again, that's a real gift – a gift beyond words.

Alison Moore

May-Day Bluebell Walk

We had eaten our lunch on route, having started out from Amaravati in silence. Sitting in a circle in the beech woods, we chanted the metta sutta before eating (passing walkers didn't seem to mind – and the birds joined in!) and finished with a Mary Oliver poem Jenni had brought before moving on.... It very much spoke of the experience to come:

*At Blackwater Pond the tossed waters
have settled after a night of rain.
I dip my cupped hands. I drink a long time.
It tastes like stone, leaves, fire.
It falls cold into my body, waking the bones.
I hear them deep inside me, whispering:
Oh what is that beautiful thing that has just happened?*



Dockeys Wood was indeed a beautiful thing that just happened: - a magical, fairy kingdom which stunned us into silence once more. Like a vast cathedral, columns of elegant beech trees rise out of a changing carpet of lavender and indigo, patterned by a delicate canopy of spring-green leaves. We sat again on logs in the heart of the wood, noticing many of the other day trippers were wandering the tiny paths with equal reverence.

It was as if we had made a pilgrimage from one sacred place to another, both places inspiring and bringing out the best in people. We were so grateful to Cath for having suggested the destination and for leading us to such a place of silence.

There was nothing to do but sit and *be* there; to drink it in and absorb the beauty into our bones. The Navaho poem Alison had included in the poster talked of walking in Beauty. This day was certainly that, not just because of the woods, but also the beauty of being with each other, sharing a journey with spiritual friends we normally do not have this quality time with. We learned something of our own pace in the company of others, and to gradually let the mind quieten so we could simply be with nature. An encounter with horses, a small group of deer bounding across our path, the magnificent Redwood alone among the beech trees, the sight of the path to Amaravati winding over the Downs – so many special moments during the day. As we flopped into chairs outside the sala, clutching tea and glowing with sun, (and for one, checking out blisters!), we resolved to make this May-Day walk an annual event. As Shirley said, "even though it wasn't Kent, it was perfect!"

Contributions from the walkers: Cath (guide and map reader), Sharon, Shirley, Christina, Sarah, Jenni, Vivien, Chris.

AUA News

A great deal of activity has recently been devoted to working out the programme for 2006. The Retreat Centre and space at Amaravati is an increasingly scarce resource with demands from many worthy sources. Taking this into account, we have been fortunate to have been offered, and agreed, around one AUA event each month. In order to make the fullest use of these, all AUA events in 2006 will be open to all. We will also be focusing on a series of themes which link together to cover all factors of the four Noble Truths and the Ennobling Eightfold Path.

In response to feedback from participants and as part of the gradual evolution of AUA events, we will be including some *sangha-bhāvanā* activities alongside the mix of formal meditation, physical exercise, teaching, and study. In the sense we are using it, *sangha-bhāvanā* means to cultivate or encourage community and fellowship. Hopefully such activities will provide an opportunity for developing both mindfulness and friendship.

All AUA events provide many levels of teaching. The most fundamental is that which arises from our mindful observation of our moods, thoughts, and actions during the different parts of an AUA day of practice or weekend. We can observe our reluctance or eagerness to take part in a particular session, or

our boredom, restlessness, or joy.

However perfect or imperfect we find the conditions of the event, we are always able to observe our response from the perspective of 'the one who knows'.

This is the great value of such events. We are not worrying about increasing our performance or our group efficiency, or intent on becoming an academic expert in some aspect of Buddhism — or aiming to achieve an emotional catharsis. Our primary intention is simply to relax, to open, to be present, and to notice our thoughts, feelings and responses.

Chris Ward

The New Model Kuti



'A revolutionary semi-detached design, but shouldn't there be a door and windows?'



The Amaravati Upasika - Upasaka Association (AUA) was formed to foster and encourage good Buddhist lay practice. It does this by providing a lay forum for all those interested in the Buddhist path in the form of one day and longer events, as well as other gatherings. At the heart of good Dhamma practice lies a commitment to enquiry. Whether you are interested and just beginning, or whether you have been practising for a while, we offer the opportunity to develop all aspects of the Buddhist path in a supportive lay context.

NOTICES

Mailing list and Donations

If you do not wish to remain on the AUA mailing list please let us know. This enables us to reduce the size of mailings and to save money. If you wish to continue on the mailing list then you need do nothing. However, any contributions you can make (to the address below) to cover the production of the newsletter and the two or three mailings each year would be greatly appreciated.

If you change your address, please let us know either by emailing your changes to :

metta@petalmoore.net,
or posting to the AUA at:

AUA , Amaravati Buddhist Monastery, Great Gaddesden, Hemel Hempstead, Herts, HP1 3BZ, England

CONTRIBUTIONS DEADLINE: 28th Feb 2006

SEND to: The Editor, Community Newsletter
c/o Amaravati Monastery, Great Gaddesden, Hemel Hempstead, Herts, HP1 3BZ (It reduces production time if you can send your contributions in electronic form, either on a 3.5 inch floppy disc in PC format as a basic text file or Word file format, or included within an email – but typed or hand written is fine).

E MAIL: info @ buddhacommunity.org

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Amaravati Lay Events - 2005 - 2006

These events provide an opportunity to practice together and explore themes relevant to practice and lay life. They include silent and guided meditation, yoga, discussion and study groups, and other activities. Events are led by experienced lay-teachers. All are welcome.

Days of Practice – no need to book 9.45am for 10am-5pm (please bring food to share)

Retreats – advance booking essential 5.30pm Fri. – 4.00pm on last day

2005

Dec 3 Day of Practice 'Not One, Not Two' (incl. Annual Community Meeting) (*Nick Carroll*)

2006

Jan 14	Day of Practice	Dukkha
Feb 11	Day of Practice	The Cause of Dukkha
Mar 11	Day of Practice	Cessation of Dukkha
Apr 1	Day of Practice	A Path of Practice
May 13	Day of Practice	Guidance on the Path
July 14-16	W/end Retreat	Right View
Aug 12	Day of Practice	Right Intention / Aspiration
Sep 15-19	5 Day Retreat	Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood
Oct 28	Day of Practice	Community and Sangha (includes Annual Community Meeting)
Nov 10-12	W/end Retreat	Right Effort, Mindfulness and Concentration
Dec 2	Day of Practice	Meditation

****PLEASE CHECK FOR LATE CHANGES TO THE PROGRAMME
ON OUR WEB SITE** :www.buddhacommunity.org**

Retreat booking forms may be downloaded from this web site

Organised by the Amaravati Upasaka/Upasika Association (AUA)

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and comments are personal.

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www.amaravati.org