



Community

The Amaravati Lay Buddhist Newsletter



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Climatic Uncertainty

Sir Nicholas Stern has published his report on the global impact of climate change. Much of my adult life has been spent in the shadow of potential and actual environmental degradation and disaster. I remember reading such books as *Silent Spring*, by Rachel Carson and others by Schumacher and Lovelock; I remember worrying about overpopulation; I recall teaching schoolchildren some thirty years ago about the looming energy crisis. I joined Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace whilst at University. So this is nothing new. The difference with the Stern report, is that it presents some startling illustrations of the economic cost of global warming.

One of the reasons that the world has been so slow to respond to problems of pollution and degradation of our environment, is that such problems are the inevitable outcome of a pervasive economic model which has placed little value on the air that we breathe and other natural resources held in common and which regards growth of production and consumption as a basically good thing.

We tend to take for granted the qualities of the culture that we grow up in and it can sometimes be difficult to gain a perspective. But it seems clear that we are living through an era of excess, an era where it has become too easy to exploit the earth's resources. We have a superabundance of material products, at least in the developed world. Consequently, we suffer from cluttered lives with too much 'stuff' and too many choices. We may become fearful as we think of the consequences of global warming. But perhaps as it becomes more expensive and difficult to travel by car and air, we might of necessity become more involved with our local communities, a situation that was natural to our ancestors and much of humanity. During the several million years that humankind has existed most people spent their lives within their local communities and limited travel was the norm. Acquiring material possessions was difficult and expensive and avoiding waste was essential. In many ways, the actions that humanity needs to undertake in order to

avoid the worst consequences of global warming will simply return us to a more balanced lifestyle, and may also give some respite to all the other sentient beings sharing planet Earth, although the transition to this may well prove ‘bumpy’ and difficult. We will need to reform our economies to place a realistic cost on the environmental impact of our activities and —much harder— to obtain a global consensus on a whole range of difficult decisions intended to reduce energy use and consumption, all of this against a backdrop of climatic upheaval and decreasing availability of some natural resources.

Basically many of us in the developed nations have become accustomed to living with a level of comfort and wealth that in the past only a small number of the ruling class might have enjoyed, whilst many in undeveloped nations have been living in poverty, and often squalor. It is simply not going to be possible for everyone in the world to live a typical modern Western lifestyle, especially in the current use of energy and material resources.

We might pin our hopes on technology and science, but these have lost their lustre as a panacea. They will undoubtedly help to provide some new tools and approaches, but the underlying model that divorces humanity from the natural order will not be refashioned by technology.

Many of the problems that humanity faces arise from following laudable ideals, such as to improve health and material well-being and extend democracy and economic independence. However, following ideals without understanding the ‘way things are’ and without clarifying underlying motives tends to mire us in unexpected consequences and suffering.

From a Buddhist perspective, the rise and fall of civilizations, empires and cultures is simply *anicca* – impermanence and change. All that we experience is subject to change. Life as a human on planet Earth has never been easy; there is no resting place in the conditioned world. Fortunately, the Buddha did describe a secure refuge in wisdom, truth and that which is wholesome, and a path of practice pointing to the unconditioned. This is something that we can all benefit from and which is helpful in all circumstances.

Chris Ward

Tisarana Buddhist Monastery — A new monastery near Perth in eastern Canada

A letter from Ajahn Viradhammo

A bit of geography to start. It seems the Scots settled in all the corners of the British Empire, so not only do we have the city of Perth in central Scotland but also the city of Perth in Western Australia and the town of Perth in eastern Canada. Tisarana monastery is located 16 km. southwest of Perth and Perth itself is an hour by car from Ottawa, Canada's federal capital. For those of you who are unfamiliar with Canadian geography a few distances might help to locate the new monastery and give a scale to the vastness of Canada.



Vancouver lies on the shores of the Pacific at the western edge of Canada. To the east, at the edge of the Atlantic, we have the city of Halifax. Driving from Tisarana to Vancouver you would have to travel 4,752 km, which would take 44 hrs and 26 minutes. If you wanted to drive to the other coast and see the bright lights of Halifax you would only need to drive for 16 hours and 16 minutes to cover the 1,535 km. On your trip to Vancouver you could visit Ajahn Punnadhammo at the Arrow River Hermitage near Thunder Bay, a nice break in your journey from Tisarana after 20 hrs on the road west. You could also visit Ajahn Sona and Ven. Pavaro by going a bit north into central British Columbia to Birken Forest Monastery. That would be 4,702 km. from Tisarana. If you were to travel southwest you could reach Abhayagiri in California and pay respects to Ajahn Pasanno and Ajahn Amaro after driving 43 hrs and 24 minutes. For comparison, the trip from Amaravati to visit

Ajahn Chandapalo in Italy would take 18hrs 11 minutes after a journey of 1,881 km.

The property that has been purchased is 108 acres and consists of a combination of dis-used farmland, woodland and wetland.

Beavers are very active in this part of the world and the wetland

is actually a 'beaver flood', which covers two long marshes of about 30 acres in total. It's an interesting property with plenty of rock outcrops rising slightly above the old pastures and wetlands. It will be great to explore the inaccessible areas on snow shoes during the winter freeze. There is no light pollution so the night skies are fabulous. Perhaps I'll catch sight of the Northern Lights this winter.



The main building on the property was built in 1920. It's a lovely red brick structure on three floors with plenty of small rooms for the use of visitors to the monastery. There are a couple of barns built in 1880 (which need a lot of work), a good workshop, a double garage, and a small summer cabin. Included with the property we have all the necessary equipment to do building work and maintain the grounds – tractor, pick-up truck, power mowers, snow blowers, power saws etc. as well as



most of the furniture and household equipment. The real estate folk call it a turn-key. Turn the key and you're open for business.

My own connection to this part of Canada has grown in recent years and I'm very pleased to re-discover the country of my youth. I left Canada in 1969 with a vague intention to return in 3 months.

As things worked out, I only returned for a visit in 1977 and by then I had taken up the life of a bhikkhu and found my vocation far from Canadian culture. As my parents aged I made more frequent trips back to Toronto and Ottawa and over the years I have had the good fortune of developing many warm and close friendships back here in Canada. Four years ago my mother broke her pelvis and I returned to Ottawa to care for her. Ajahn Tiradhammo was good enough to take on my responsibilities in New Zealand so a couple of years ago I realized I was a 'free agent'. Friends and supporters in Toronto, Waterloo, Peterborough and Ottawa have been talking about establishing a monastery in Ontario for many years and so my life has come full circle with the establishment of Tisarana monastery.

Ajahn Kusalo will be joining me in January. We have been good friends since our days in New Zealand and having his companionship, talent and experience, as we begin this project, is immensely reassuring. For the time being I'll be juggling my own commitments to my mother's care with life at the monastery, by spending the weekdays with mum and commuting to the monastery on the weekends. We also have two lay stewards who will be living at the monastery as well a brilliant and hard working committee in Ottawa.

Each of our monasteries has a personality of its own that evolves as people participate in the life of the monastery. I'm looking forward with curiosity to the evolution of Tisarana and of course my hope is that it can be a place of refuge for many people. We have a few more hoops to jump through before we are up and running but it's all looking good. If anyone were passing through Ottawa or Toronto we would enjoy your companionship.

Best wishes.

Ajahn Viradhammo

Helping Tisarana

Those who wish to make donations to help Tisarana to develop are welcome to send them to ALBA. Cheques should be made payable to ALBA and clearly marked 'Tisarana'.

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The Ugly Duckling—Not I!

*'There once was an ugly duckling
With feathers all stubby and brown'*

So go the lyrics of the song by Danny Kaye. The story unfolds of a young bird, let's call it an avian sentient being, who is criticised by his fellow ducks and told to leave town. Wintertime was a particularly unhappy period for our ugly duckling:

*And he went with a quack and a waddle and a quack
And a very unhappy tear
All through the wintertime he hid himself away
Ashamed to show his face, afraid of what others might say
All through the winter in his lonely clump of weed*

But then spring came and with it a wonderful realization:

*Till a flock of swans spied him there and very soon agreed
You're a very fine swan indeed!
A swan? Me a swan? Ah, go on!
And he said yes, you're a swan*

So our avian sentient being through his eye consciousness confirmed that his appearance was that of a beautiful swan:

*Take a look at yourself in the lake and you'll see
And he looked, and he saw, and he said
I am a swan! Wheeeeeeee!
I'm not such an ugly duckling
No feathers all stubby and brown*

...

*Not a quack, not a quack, not a waddle or a quack
But a glide and a whistle and a snowy white back*

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*And a head so noble and high
Say who's an ugly duckling?
Not I!
Not I!*

Our young swan realised that his identity as a duckling had been mistaken and that he was actually a swan. Now we could interpret this as meaning that the duckling had been destroyed and this is the type of interpretation that is sometimes applied to the *anatta* teaching.

Such an interpretation goes along the lines of saying that the purpose of reflecting and applying the *anatta* teaching is to destroy the self. Actually what happened with the swan was that his false identity of himself as a young duck was clearly seen as an error. His self-view as an ugly duckling was an illusion, a false idea that he was able to drop when he knew through direct experience that he was actually a swan. No actual duckling was destroyed, just an idea was let go of.

The human mind is complex, we can create illusory identities based upon states of suffering or misfortune, and their reverse. We can determine that 'we are a failure' or 'we are rotten to the core' or 'I am hopeless' or 'I am pretty good at this' or 'I am a winner in life' and bring up lots of evidence to support these constellations, or mental formations, of memories, imaginings and emotion.

These identities are created through a process of conditioning and conceptualizing of our experience. Attachment to such ideas as though they are fixed, personal and real, leads to suffering. As we saw, when the young swan identified with the false idea that he was an ugly duckling, he spent a sad and lonely winter hiding in the weeds.

The Buddhist teaching of *anatta* is pointing to the way we attach to false identities and encouraging us to let go of these. What is left is not nothing, but being in touch with the way things are. All that is lost is identification with the created concepts of our minds.

Unfortunately, solving our false identity ‘problem’ is not as simple as looking at our reflection in a lake to see that we are a swan. This is because self-identities are much more abstract concepts than body-identity and we have to use the mind-sense to know the mind. To see that we create fictional selves requires that we investigate the *khandas*, those things which we conceptualise around—form, feeling, perception, mental formations, consciousness—and try to find any clear self within these. The problem is that the very idea of a ‘self’ is complex and confusing.

It is sometimes said that unless one has a healthy sense of self then the application of the teaching of not-self is dangerous. If we rephrase this proposal to state that if someone is too deluded, agitated and unhappy then meditation practice, of the wrong sort could reinforce their delusion, then this is real concern. But to state that a healthy self must be created in order to destroy it, sounds rather like suggesting that we have to become happy with our identity as a duck before we are allowed to get to the lake to see through our delusion; the compassionate and quick path to solving our swan’s unhappiness is surely to take it straight to the lake.

The idea of ‘destroying’ or ‘getting rid of’ can also lead to self-aversion, another unhelpful attitude. It would not have helped our young swan for him to hate, or want to destroy, his identity as an ugly duckling. In fact this would have been a proliferation around, and a strengthening of, the false idea that he was a duck in the first place.

What was required was a clear seeing of the situation in order to be liberated from it. Once we see clearly through or beyond the conditions of the mind then we are no longer enchanted by them.

But it is only the mind conditions we see through, so we can say that in reality no (human or duck) self is actually harmed in the application of the not-self teaching. The insight is that all conditions are not-self, or as our swan finally exclaimed; ‘Not I’!

Chris Ward

Sutta Nipata II.10
Utthana Sutta
Initiative

Translated from the Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu.
For free distribution only.

Get up!
Sit up!
What's your need for sleep?
And what sleep is there for the afflicted,
pierced by the arrow,
oppressed?
Get up!
Sit up!
Train firmly for the sake of peace,
Don't let the king of death,
-- seeing you heedless --
deceive you,
bring you under his sway.
Cross over the attachment
to which human & heavenly beings,
remain desiring
tied.
Don't let the moment pass by.
Those for whom the moment is past
grieve, consigned to hell.
Heedless is
dust, dust
comes from heedlessness
has heedlessness
on its heels.
Through heedfulness & clear knowing
you'd remove
your own sorrow.

Samyutta Nikaya XXXV.205
Vina Sutta
The Lute

(excerpt)

Translated from the Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu.
For free distribution only

"Suppose there were a king or king's minister who had never heard the sound of a lute before. He might hear the sound of a lute and say, 'What, my good men, is that sound -- so delightful, so tantalizing, so intoxicating, so ravishing, so enthralling?' They would say, 'That, sire, is called a lute, whose sound is so delightful, so tantalizing, so intoxicating, so ravishing, so enthralling.' Then he would say, 'Go & fetch me that lute.' They would fetch the lute and say, 'Here, sire, is the lute whose sound is so delightful, so tantalizing, so intoxicating, so ravishing, so enthralling.' He would say, 'Enough of your lute. Fetch me just the sound.' Then they would say, 'This lute, sire, is made of numerous components, a great many components. It's through the activity of numerous components that it sounds: that is, in dependence on the body, the skin, the neck, the frame, the strings, the bridge, and the appropriate human effort. Thus it is that this lute -- made of numerous components, a great many components -- sounds through the activity of numerous components.'

"Then the king would split the lute into ten pieces, a hundred pieces. Having split the lute into ten pieces, a hundred pieces, he would shave it to splinters. Having shaved it to splinters, he would burn it in a fire. Having burned it in a fire, he would reduce it to ashes. Having reduced it to ashes, he would winnow it before a high wind or let it be washed away by a swift-flowing stream. He would then say, 'A sorry thing, this lute -- whatever a lute may be -- by which people have been so thoroughly tricked & deceived.'

"In the same way, a monk investigates form, however far form may go. He investigates feeling... perception... fabrications... consciousness, however far consciousness may go. As he is investigating form... feeling... perception... fabrications... consciousness, however far consciousness may go, any thoughts of 'me' or 'mine' or 'I am' do not occur to him."

Birth, Buddhism and Babies!



The Buddha usually says “wake up!”, but for me when I was pregnant the message was more like “go to sleep...!” Let me explain...

In the later stage of my second pregnancy I attended the Upasika* days during the winter retreat at Amara-vati, I would try to join the meditation but find myself becoming so sleepy I had to retreat to sleep in a pile of blankets and pillows in one of the dormitories. The lovely Upasikas would leave me be, until I returned to life at 5pm, and then offer me sandwiches and hot soup. As a busy person in a busy world, this was very healing.

David and I planned to have the baby at home, in a large water tub, aided by an experienced midwife. We had great confidence in our midwife. During the weeks and days before the birth she spent many hours in discussion with us – almost talking the birth process into being – we became so relaxed we never packed a hospital bag, let alone went to see the hospital!

The night baby Amy arrived was monastery moon night (but not a full moon!). We had a little disco in the kitchen, Raphael my son, David and I, which included rolling around on a birthing ball and then listening to a dhamma tape as everyone else fell asleep. It all worked – you can tell when you are going into labour when the pain of a contraction gets so bad you cannot talk. And then the muscular spasm stops and for a few minutes you are normal, I could even make a joke, and then whoosh wham... the next contraction.

The problem is – knowing the next contraction is on its way. Knowing that if it’s really painful, that is the kind of contraction that is wanted, to yank open the cervix. Problem is, my instinct is very strongly to avoid the pain, preferably stop it straight away. With Raphael, my first child, I tried to opt out in the middle of the labour. I retreated to my bedroom

saying I was going to sleep. The pulsing power of the contractions went away, but my womb just became a tense ball. I was helped on that occasion by a birth-companion who was an acupuncturist.. She put a needle in my leg and made me get up and walk around, and the contractions started again. He was born at home, but it took me nearly an hour to push him out. I tore and I fainted. He was large, 9lbs 11 Ozs, long and lovely.

Meanwhile, there I was in labour with Amy, it's 2 in the morning and you're tired and the contractions are hurting, and you don't know how long it's going to take, and somehow this baby has to get out of you, and you don't know where the energy is going to come from. On a rational level, we choose a caesarian! Meanwhile the midwife is telling you to try and get stronger contractions....we were using a birthing pool, a lovely relaxing large tub of hot water, like a mini swimming pool set up in our kitchen. I started practicing meditation between contractions, shifting my mind away from the rational fears, and towards a place of deeper relaxation. It worked – when the next contraction came, it was good and strong. As the pain got worse, I put my head back to bellow, I put my imagination, my mind, in the Amaravati Temple. I apologized when I swore...!

I was lucky that Amy was small, she was born with just one final long involuntary spasm. I reached for the tangle of her limbs in the warm water and lifted her to the surface.

She was quite pink and opened her eyes to glimpse at us. No crying, just a little whimper....

The night of the birth we didn't sleep. Then there is a day of excitement, family visits to greet the new baby, and then the next night, well there's a tiny baby wanting to feed every 2 hours. That is the end of uninterrupted sleep for a couple of years! My intention was to feed her on demand, but sometime I go into a fury at being woken again in the middle of the night. My mind would go into an angry rant, so I tried blanking it out by reciting a mantra "buddho" in my mind. It isn't a particularly subtle technique, nor maybe very skilful, but it did work for a

while. Now she is older I am less angry at being woken, and I use a determined gentleness to get her to settle back to sleep without feeding, by laying her down in her cot.

So I offer much gratitude to the Upasikas and all at Amaravati, and if there is anyone out there planning to give birth or just be a parent, learning meditation can be very useful.

Recommended reading:

Water Birth by Janet Balaskas

Everyday Blessings Maya and John Kabat-Zinn

Emily Tomalin

* *Upasika* refers to members of the Amaravati Lay Buddhist association. Ed.

Joe

Living with Fragile x Syndrome

My son, Joe, is 12 years old and has a condition called Fragile X Syndrome. It's a learning disability, some of its symptoms are similar to autism. His speech is at a 3 year old level. He becomes highly distressed if there is a change in routine. His behaviour is unpredictable, at times aggressive. He is also loving, fun, generous, and has a wonderful sense of humour. I wanted to offer some reflections on practicing the Dhamma and being the parent of a child with special needs.

My wife and I were aware that something was 'wrong' with Joe when he was about 18 months old. He didn't do things that other kids did naturally. He didn't speak. He couldn't walk. In the night he screamed and banged his head on the wall. We finally got a diagnosis for Joe when he was five years old. By this time, I had insomnia, panic attacks, and a prolapsed disc in my back. I was in an agitated state all the time. It seemed that nothing, and no-one, could help, because the biggest

problem was in my own head. It was nothing to do with Joe, or the lack of support we were getting, or anything external. The real source of my problems was my mental reaction - an overwhelming sense of 'this should not be!' But luckily, because I was acquainted with the Dhamma, I had an inkling of how to work with it.

Breathing meditation was very useful. In the midst of a panic attack, there's nothing you can *think* of that will give you comfort, because thought itself is causing your distress. So constantly bringing the attention back to the inhalation and exhalation was the only thing that helped. When it was three in the morning, and my brain was spinning with every dreadful thought in the world, bringing the attention back to the breath was the only thing I could do - over and over again. Assuming a seated posture was good too. And slowly, my brain would settle down like a wild animal that had tired itself out. So this was useful on a practical level, and it also gave me the insight that Dhamma is beyond words and beyond thought.

Joe is very unpredictable. So even if I wake up at 5 am to do an hour of sitting meditation, it's still possible that in the middle of my sitting Joe might burst into the room and loudly announce that he wants to watch Pingu. This can be very startling. At the moment one becomes startled, it's very easy to become angry and to give rise to various unwholesome mind states. I'd find myself thinking, 'I'll never be able to have a really good meditation session because of my circumstances with this child! Oh woe is me!' But I'd then console myself by comparing Joe to a Zen master, who hits his students on the back while they're practicing zazen. It does bring up an interesting point about concentration - single pointed concentration only works if the single point contains everything, and the mind stays flexible enough to shift at a moment's notice. So if the mind has settled on the breath - great! If a moment later, the door bursts open and a little boy wants Weetabix, that's just another facet of mind, breath, and concentration. It's not something to make into a problem. So, in the end, I've been forced to allow my circumstances to become a part of my regular sitting meditation.

Finally, I'd like to reflect on really SEEING things. This is something my wife says all the time. There's a difference between looking in the direction of your loved ones, and really SEEING your loved ones. This is a particular challenge for parents of a child with a learning disability, because it is so easy to just think of your child as a problem to be solved, rather than a person. Or to become so involved in analysing your own mind states you forget about the reality of the people around you. But to really be present with Joe, to really SEE him as he is, is the most beneficial thing I can do for him.

And the same is true with my wife and my daughter and everybody else I come into contact with. In the teaching on the four foundations of mindfulness, the Buddha talks about being mindful of body, feeling, mind, and objects of mind both internally and externally. Really SEEING people is probably what is meant by being mindful externally.

If external mindfulness is neglected it has a subtle and pervasive negative impact on your environment that accumulates over time - in the same way a garden goes to seed and withers if it's neglected. As soon as you start paying attention to those around you (even if it's painful or difficult) your garden starts to improve. This is particularly apparent with Joe. He's not sophisticated like we are, he doesn't filter his experience in the same way we do, so he reflects circumstances in a very direct way. If Joe begins to feel neglected, he gets distressed and agitate. As soon as he feels SEEN, he begins to relax, he becomes more flexible.

There are a million other ways that the Dhamma comes into play in living with Joe. Teachings on loving kindness, compassion, non-attachment, sympathetic joy, non-self are all particularly resonant. But I just wanted to highlight a few areas where practicing the Dhamma and parenting Joe have converged.

Adam Long

*Information on the UK based Fragile X Society can be found at:
<http://www.fragilex.org.uk/index.asp>. Ed*

ALBA Connections

Do you live a long way from a monastery or a local group? Or are you housebound or otherwise limited in how much you can get out and about? Would you like to meet like-minded people in your part of the country?

We are in contact with supporters of Amaravati and its associated monasteries all over the UK, so if you would like to be put in touch with new Dhamma friends, or if you would be happy to be contacted by others, do call Alison Moore at ALBA on 01442 865519 or email me at metta@petalmoore.net

It's entirely up to you how you would like to keep in touch with people – you may want to meet, chat on the phone, or simply make email contact. And we won't pass on any of your details to anybody else unless we have your permission – initial contact will be through ALBA. So your personal information will be safe with us.

We can't promise for sure that there will be people near you, but if this idea takes off we hope that numbers will grow, and that a new network will gradually come into being.

Just to get the ball rolling – I already have one request to put to you. Long term Amaravati supporter Jenni Jepson has recently moved to Suffolk and would love to hear from anyone in East Anglia who'd like to make contact. If you're interested, give me a call or email me and I'll pass your details on to Jenni.

And now – over to you!

Alison Moore

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A JOURNEY TO ASSISI



In May 2005, I was very fortunate to have been able to visit the town of Assisi. In one guide book, it was claimed that the Basilica of St. Francis housed more art treasures than any other building [besides a museum] in Italy. I could only gaze in blissful ignorance and feel sorry for the janitors whose exhortations for ‘silenzio’ went largely unheeded.

The Basilica is an extraordinary building or rather two buildings. The lower building, The Crypt, contains the tomb of St. Francis. Here, drawn back to my Christian upbringing, I joined the pilgrims purchasing candles, and bringing them unlit to a basket at the Saint’s tomb [no matter that they were probably recycled at the end of the day].

Making my way up from the basilica I sat outside a café with a companion I had met on the Assisi bus drinking a Fanta con limone. Walking back down the road past us was a man intently saying his beads. Yes, the basilica was thronged with tourists and groups of Italian school children [who like young teenagers anywhere seemed basically only interested in themselves], yet also the devotion of many was plain to see.

It got me thinking [and later reading] about this man Francis, who living a relatively short life influenced people so profoundly then as now. Although it is difficult to separate historical fact from legend, we are told that Pietro Di Bernadone, Francis’ father and a rich cloth merchant, received something of a shock in 1206. As if begging for stones for rebuilding a church and consorting with outcastes was not bad enough, Francis stripped off in the town square returning clothes to his father. I imagine that centuries before, King Suddhodana, Siddhatha’s father, was similarly surprised by the turn of events.

Here was a monk who was never a priest and whose message, untainted by strict adherence to dogma, was so simple and so attractive. In fact he

paid the highest respect to priests, though I would suppose that a good number of them at that time scarcely deserved such deference.

He also wished his followers to just have enough theology to get by [I'm thinking here about The Lord Buddha's handful of leaves]. He asked his disciples not to grasp the power of book learning [so relished by other monks of his day]. In fact I understand that he saw the accumulation of books as a sin against the cherished virtue of poverty. On his return from one missionary journey, he was alarmed at that the over-zealousness of two caretakers he had left in charge of his Friars who were trying to impose a stricter regime of fasting than the rule required. Of the many points of similarity which could be drawn between the two men, one in particular stands out for me. It is said of St. Francis that all manner of men felt themselves drawn towards him with a sense of personal attachment. Francis himself said, ".....whether a friend or a foe, a thief or a robber, let him be kindly received." This is a time when respect and justice for the poor or suspects of crime was absolutely minimal. Similarly with The Buddha, he spent many years traveling and teaching with no regard to the wealth or status of his listeners. We are told sometimes that his face was calm and clear and there seemed to be a golden light about him.

Coincidental too, is the fact that the Franciscan Community is three-fold - The Friars Minor; The Second Order of Poor Ladies [The Poor Clares] and the Third Order of Penitents [lay women and men].

I am led to believe that more cynical commentators on his exemplary life have suggested that on his death in October 1226 there was a collective sigh of relief from some as they visualized the 'business as usual' signs going back up. Whatever the case, his tomb and church were erected in record time and were dedicated on 25th May 1230.

Saint Francis, made patron of Ecology by John Paul 2nd in 1980, becomes for me an ever more interesting and inspirational character.

Tony Spinks



BEING AT AMARAVATI

*Just being at Amaravati
helps me stop, look, listen, hear*

*Just being at Amaravati
helps me quieten, empty, see*

*Just being at Amaravati
makes my knees and lower back
ache and ache and ache*

*Until just being at Amaravati
helps my body gently soften and dissolve*

*Just being at Amaravati
helps me appreciate with love the long, long, long
journey travelled*

*Just being at Amaravati
helps make worth of all the dukkha, suffering, pain,
anger, terror, despair*

*Just being at Amaravati
allows the tearful, flowing, transformation to the
joy, beauty, bliss*

*Just being at Amaravati
allows my heart's hard shell to gradually open, once
again, once again,
risking unfolding, yet another time,*

Just being at Amaravati feels safe

*Just being at Amaravati
allows emotional openness*

Just being at Amaravati

Community

*transforms the company of strangers into a network
of fellow travellers*

Just being at Amaravati

*on our solitary journey - together - we may not
speak and our eyes may only occasionally touch*

However Just being at Amaravati

*A kindly energy filled with metta vibrates within,
and in between us,*

*An energy that can remain in the heart , as we travel on-
wards,*

*Homeward bound within the deathless realm
to the Buddha , the Dharma, the Sangha ,
becoming , less and less and less my self.*

(an offering inspired by Ajahn Sundara's retreat July 2006)

gregor



Community

A Visit to Nilambe

Paula Ruddick reflects on her recent retreat in Sri Lanka



In February this year I spent ten days at the Nilambe Meditation Centre, near Kandy in Sri Lanka. The setting is stunning: it occupies several terraces cut out of a steep mountainside, just below the top of the ridge. The various low buildings are surrounded - swamped almost - by lush vegetation; some are so tucked away that

I didn't notice them for several days. It struck me as the ideal layout for community living; the predominance of nature over buildings added to the beauty of the setting, and enhanced the sense of harmony and peace which prevailed.

The warm climate enabled us to spend breaks and mealtimes outdoors, and often I couldn't decide between wandering around the gardens and walking along the path above the centre, from where there were extensive views. It was wonderful to watch the sun set from this path: it would slowly sink behind the distant hills, and sometimes leave the sky ablaze with colour. Every time of day had its own magic. Nilambe has no electricity, and at night the flickering candles and oil lamps contributed to the peaceful atmosphere. The sky would be full of stars, moonlight cast silhouettes of the trees on the ground, and glow worms flew about, so that there were little twinkling lights all around. But my favourite time was early morning. We would emerge from the first hour of meditation at 6 a.m.; freshly brewed tea – bliss!! – would be waiting to be poured, and I would perch to drink it on the edge of the terrace, gazing out at the hills in first light, and thinking I could stay forever! Such feelings of deep contentment did not last, of course.

There are five hours of scheduled meditation each day, with the option of doing more if you wished. This is much less than in many Retreat

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Centres, and I wondered if it was part of the 'gentle way' philosophy of Nilambe. The founder, Mr Acharya Godwin Samararatne who died in 2000, was very aware how stressed and achievement-oriented Westerners are, and thus wanted to encourage a relaxed approach. The present teacher, Mr Upul Gamage, is unfortunately not there very much, but he was there during the first three days of my stay, and was available for one-to-one instruction. I have been established for some years in the Vipassana meditation technique as taught by S. N. Goenka, so I did not request an interview, but I was moved and inspired by the quality of gentleness and deep stillness that emanated from him; and grateful for his presence in the evening sittings.

The daily schedule includes two one-hour yoga sessions, an hour of working meditation, and either a talk, tape or discussion in the evening. There is a well stocked library, and I would often skip the evening meeting (mostly geared to newcomers to the Buddha's teachings) in order to read. As reading is not allowed in Mr Goenka's courses, I felt a certain sense of forbidden pleasure! The two should not be compared, however. Nilambe seemed to me to be offering people an opportunity to experience a monastic lifestyle rather than an intense personal retreat. Noble Silence was encouraged (and generally adhered to) but not enforced, and there was even a half hour's scheduled practice of Noble Speech – which meant a nice chat over afternoon tea! But there was also the option of doing a totally silent retreat, with separate accommodation areas and slightly earlier mealtimes.

As there is no minimum length of stay, there is at times a high turn-over, which can create a slight disturbance. I arrived on a public holiday and the centre was full and felt a bit crowded. I had to share a room for the first three nights with a Sri Lankan woman who did not comprehend the rule of Noble Silence and kept talking to me, but after she left I had the room to myself for the rest of my stay. I'll mention, by way of illustration of the Truth of Unsatisfactoriness, one other source of disturbance: the often relentless squawking of the native squirrel! It made a high-pitched noise rather like that of a piano tuner repeatedly striking a high note, and on a couple of occasions it went on through the entire meditation period. Wherever we go, whatever we do, there is always something that irritates.

And of course the inner hindrances pursue us everywhere: desire, restlessness etc. I think I can best describe my battles with these, as well as

my joys, by selecting a few quotes from the diary I kept. The see-saw swing between contradictory mind states will, I'm sure, resonate with some readers:

Feb 12th: Nilambe is a haven of peace and beauty, a sanctuary. I don't have to talk to anyone! I immediately feel safe, comfortable, at home.

Feb 13th: Sitting was hard today; muscle aches are back. (*Note: I've suffered from chronic fatigue for several years, and get muscle aches when I over exert myself.*) Two cups of tea and a chat with R (whom I'd met at Vipassana Meditation Centre near Hereford), made me feel better. Yes, sometimes I need to talk!

Feb 14th: This a.m. we meditated with Upul in the pine forest above the centre. He said, "Be grateful that we are sitting here." And I was! I feel like I'm in the Garden of Eden ... that I have everything I want. Lovely.

But anicca (*change*) in the p.m. Tired after lunch. p.m. sit was hard. Too tired and hot. Also, negative, painful thoughts arising. Regrets about the past, fears about the future.

Feb 15th: First time I've managed the 5 a.m. sit. It's so good to sit before dawn. My body feels lighter, stronger. After lunch, read a helpful passage in my library book (*by a disciple of Sai Baba*): the writer said he feared weakness and struggled to be strong. I want to stop struggling! How hard it is to surrender to what is.

Feb 16th: Excellent yoga session. Did head stand for the first time in a couple of years. What a pleasure, and confidence boost. Did some strong back-bends too. Felt light and energised.

I notice more exotic shrubs and flowers every day. There's such an abundance here. What else could I want? – Well, actually, I would like a room with a view, and several new coats of paint, and a comfy chair, and proper flushing

loos, and hot showers

Feb 17th: Sweeping leaves off the paths in the work period, I realise they move more easily with a light touch. It occurs to me that this lesson can be applied to many aspects of life, including sitting practice.

I could just about live here. (*Two ex-Pat Brits do!*) There's just a little human contact – I don't need more – at the moment!! – but a sense of belonging, and to something wholesome, beautiful, good. The constant birdsong adds to the sense of harmony and peace.

Later: starting to get itchy feet, feeling the lure of the coast (*where I was heading after my stay in Nilambe*) and even the desire to sit in a cramped internet café in noisy, hectic Kandy sending emails to my friends!

Feb 18th: Took photos of the hills at first light. What a blessing to be up amongst them in the early morning. How could I think of leaving??!

Later on saw the lily pond, which I'd forgotten was there. Purple lilies sitting like jewels on the water. There is so much beauty here it's hard to take in – even after a week! It's almost overwhelming.

Evening snack under the stars (*bread rolls and grain 'coffee' are served at 7:30 p.m.*) shared silence of companions on the path. No need to talk. Could I live forever like this? Afternoons are difficult, though. This is when I want to put my feet up – despite the two and a half hour lunch and rest period.

Feb 19th: Meditation is hard work. Counting the days now. Looking forward to a change of scene and a lazy pace; and to some indulgence! And to being in the world again.

Feb 20th: Sitting with my 6 a.m. cup of tea, looking at the empty hills and growing light in the sky, I think I don't want to leave. Feel very content.

At 7:30, enjoying a Sri Lankan breakfast of chick-peas, sambol (*like salsa dip*), coconut and sweet potato; and watching a patch of low cloud in the distant valleys, I reflect on what a privilege it is to be here, and to be so well looked after.

By lunch-time I'm feeling like leaving again! I notice the correlation between my moods and my energy levels. When I'm tired I get dispirited.

Feb 21st: Difficult sits. Feel disheartened. Notice my joy in nature has gone.

Later: a big uplift – the unexpected arrival of a friend I'd made on my travels and teamed up with for a while. Couldn't wait till 4 p.m. to share news, so we sneaked off for an excited illicit gossip.

I was asked to lead the evening chanting, as they had just acquired copies of the Metta Sutta etc. as used in the Thai Forest Monasteries in the West, and no one else was familiar with the intonation and rhythm in the English versions. The intention is to chant partly in English from now on. So it felt like an honour to lead it on the very first occasion in this Sri Lankan meditation centre.

Last walk up the hill – awe, sense of wonder still fresh – distant hills so quiet and still and mysterious. Already yearning to come back!

Relaxed evening sit. So simple. No striving. Just letting go. Resting. (*If only it was always so easy!!*) Feels like a new beginning.

Feb 22nd: In the 5 a.m. sit – my last on this visit – I can feel myself smiling. Something of the gentle, soft quality of Nilambe, personified in the teacher, Mr Upul Gamage, has helped bring out that quality in me.

I have written this account on a warm June day in England. In recent weeks I have been enjoying the flowers and birds and quiet in my own

city garden. Recalling the paradisiacal beauty and climate of a Sri Lankan hill centre, and noticing how I feel similarly contented when the English climate permits spending long hours close to nature, I reflect on how dependent on conditions most of us are, and how fragile those conditions are. The great challenge is to find all our happiness inside!

I spent several hours working on this article using a new-to-me computer programme; and I lost it all! After recovering from the shock, I started again – in long-hand – a kind friend having offered to type it up for me. I recall the voice – on tape – of my meditation teacher, Mr Goenka, at the start of some of his sittings urging his students in ringing tones to “Start again!”

*For more information you can visit the Nilambe web-site,
www.nilambe.org/index.html*

The Bodhinyana Meditation Group Spring 2007 Programme

We meet in the Bodhinyana Hall, or possibly the Ubon Room, 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 the website for more details:

www.buddhacommunity.org

- Jan 10 Where is the world heading?
- Jan 17 Brahma Viharas
- Jan 24 Sutta Study
- Jan 31 Community and consensus
- Feb 7 Right Livelihood
- Feb 14 Personal relationships, romance and practice
- Feb 21 Hindrances to meditation
- Feb 28 The poisoned arrow
- Mar 7 Sutta Study
- Mar 14 Judgement
- Mar 21 A sense of being
- Mar 28 Using the precepts
- Apr 4 Metta Sutta—a new translation

Community

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Mailing list and Donations

If you do not wish to remain on the ALBA mailing list or change your address, 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 would be greatly appreciated. Email your changes to :

metta@petalmoore.net,
or post to ALBA at:

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

ALBA News

As you can see, this edition of the community newsletter is in a new smaller format. This is so that we can save postage with the new post rates based on size of letter. Please let us know what you think of this format.

The ALBA committee has now decided upon the programme for 2007. This will be based upon the ten perfections, those qualities which the Buddha developed during his time as a *bodhisatta*. We are also devoting a day of practice on June 2nd to explore some of the 'engaged' Buddhist roles which have developed over recent years. There are roles for Buddhist lay-chaplains in prisons, hospitals, hospices, and we also now have a Buddhist chaplain for the armed forces. There are also a growing number of therapists who are strongly influenced by the Buddha Dhamma in their work. We intend to have speakers who are experienced in these roles to talk about what is involved and to provide information for those who are interested.

As Buddhism becomes more established in the UK, we can expect the varieties of formal engagement to increase. Most Buddhist practitioners will see this as a wholesome thing, although it does raise questions around the training and experience of those who represent 'Buddhism' and perhaps on the ethics of engagement. We hope that you will come along and contribute to our day.



The Amaravati Lay Buddhist Association (ALBA) 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.

Community

Amaravati Lay Events - 2007

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. Our theme for 2007 is the 'perfections' (*Parami*), to be perfected by one intent on enlightenment.

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

Sat 13th Jan Winter Day of Practice - Giving (*Martin Evans*)

Sat 10th Feb Winter DOP - Virtue (*Chris Ward*)

Sat 10th Mar Winter DOP - Renunciation (*Nick Carroll*)

18th -20th May Weekend retreat - Wisdom & Effort (*Martin Evans*)

Sat 2nd Jun Lay Ministry day (*Chris Ward*)

6th-10th July Five day retreat - (*Nick Carroll*)

Mindfulness & the Psychology of Skilful Living

Sat 11th Aug Day of Practice - Patience (*Alison Moore*)

21-23th Sep Weekend retreat - Honesty (**Chris Ward**)

Sat 27th Oct Day of Practice - Determination (*Chris Ward*)

Sat 10th Nov DOP - Kindness (*Alison Moore*)

Sat 1st Dec DOP – Equanimity (*Nick Carroll*)

****PLEASE CHECK FOR LATE CHANGES TO THE PROGRAMME ON OUR WEB SITE** :www.buddhacommunity.org
Retreat booking forms may be downloaded from the web site**

Organised by the Amaravati Lay Buddhist Association

Community

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For Guest Information: please write to the
Guest monk / nun or visit the website at
www.amaravati.org



CONTRIBUTIONS DEADLINE: end Mar 2007

*It helps if you can send
your contributions in
electronic form, as a basic
text file or in MS Word file
format, attached to an
email and sent to: **info at
buddhacommunity.org***

**The Editor, Community
Newsletter
c/o Amaravati Monastery,
Great Gaddesden, Hemel
Hempstead, Herts, HP1
3BZ**

New Retreat Centre Accommodation



“So, let’s get this straight, caves 9 and 10 are past
the rocky outcrop, left at the dry river bed, and next
to the hyena skull”

Editorial & Production Team :

Chris Ward, Nick Carroll,
Tony Spinks, Martin Ev-
ans, Alison and Peter
Moore

Plus much help in copying,
enveloping, and posting.

The Community Newsletter
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