



AUKANA

newsletter 1/2025

HOUSE OF INNER
TRANQUILLITY



“Everything that the Buddha talked about, his entire teaching, the ‘handful of leaves,’ is found here, now. It is nowhere else. All that knowledge is available to us, but we need to learn to rest content with not knowing, to allow new information to present itself to us. That is the secret of meditation.”

PAUL HARRIS

EDITORIAL

Safetyism, a term coined by the philosopher Jonathan Haidt, describes the modern societal trend that prioritises emotional well-being and the avoidance of discomfort above all. Its core tenets include the belief that words can cause trauma, that disagreement is inherently harmful, and that institutions have a responsibility to shield individuals from any form of emotional discomfort. Even if that means limiting exposure to challenging ideas, viewpoints, or experiences, and at the expense of other important values like free speech.

We find this same trend influencing other areas of life too, such as workplace health and safety. It goes without saying that businesses and organisations of all kinds have a moral duty to maintain safe environments. Indulging safetyism, however, creates unintended negative consequences. For instance, overly cautious measures can lead to regulations becoming excessively stringent, focusing on remote possibilities rather than using

common sense. Lacking the ability to adjust to the unique conditions of a particular organisation, this can end up stifling innovation and discouraging activities that, while not risk-free, offer valuable experiences and benefits. Further, constant emphasis on safety, far from reassuring people, can actually reinforce a culture of fear, leading to heightened anxiety and a diminished sense of agency.

Do people have ideas or do ideas have people? In this litigious age, fear of being blamed means that most people are willing to comply with such excessive regulation, even when they know better. However remote the risk actually is, no-one wants to endure the consequences if something does go wrong.

How does the safetyism trend fit with the Buddha’s teaching on suffering and its cessation? It does not. Safetyism insists that our discomfort is wholly the fault of others, the environment or the ‘system.’ It always, therefore, seeks outward control. The

Buddha taught personal responsibility. We are learning to self-regulate, rather than endlessly trying to regulate the world around us.

Our actions of body, speech and mind have results. We are the heirs to our past deeds whether wholesome or unwholesome, which we experience as the sensory contacts, feelings and perceptions we encounter as we live out our lives. Given the endless series of rebirths we have already been through, it is inevitable that, when suitable conditions come together, the results of our past deeds will be felt, whether pleasant or unpleasant, wanted or unwanted. Is it possible, therefore, to eradicate suffering through the manipulation of externals alone? According to the Buddha's teaching, no, we cannot escape suffering in that way. Indeed, we are merely adding to the heap of actions necessitating a future result, a future rebirth, and inevitably, therefore, future suffering.

In the Buddha's teaching, the concept of suffering is fundamental. It is the inability to adequately resolve the problem of suffering that causes us to consciously undertake a spiritual training. Suffering is the resistance block from which we launch into a thorough investigation of empirical reality, in order to truly understand how life works. Following the Bud-

dha's teaching is not risk-free. We have to be willing to accept personal responsibility for the pain, discomfort and displeasure that we go through, and not fall into the banal tyranny of safetyism. We have to be willing to look at suffering and work with it, in order to transcend it through understanding it. You will never control it out of existence. This is the quintessential message of the Buddha.

Through necessity we are compelled to abide by the excessive dictates of safetyism. We can, however, find genuine protection from much of the harshness of life by developing all aspects of the Buddha's mundane teaching. After all, that our actions have results works both ways. For example, one of the traditional benefits of practising loving-kindness is that, "fire, swords and poison" are far less likely to come near one. Keeping precepts, therefore, developing the *parami*, imbuing the mind with attitudes of loving-kindness and compassion, and establishing calm and focus, will all help tremendously in reducing the potential for harm to come our way. Further, creating supporting conditions that mitigate the amount of suffering we experience gives us the time and space needed to generate the insight-wisdom necessary to realise *nibbana* and release us from suffering for good. ■

NEWS



Ellen Foster

People: Ellen Foster is a long standing member of our Canadian group in Toronto and a familiar face on the fortnightly Monday online meetings. Due to a change in life circumstances, Ellen is once again able to come on retreat in Bradford on Avon after a break of five years. She came a week early to help out at the Centre in November before entering her six-day silent retreat.

This is what Ellen had to say about the experience, "Being a live-in helper when there was no retreat provided a special opportunity to connect with

many members of the group and to participate in a Wednesday evening for the first time. I realised afterwards how important a support like this is to my practice, given I live far away." Ellen plans to make a regular commitment to coming over for a two week period and has already planned a return in spring 2025.

There are also other members of the group, both local and those living abroad, who are planning longer term retreats. If anyone is interested in coming for an extended stay of two or three weeks they are welcome to get in touch. Full-time training is also possible, as a fully-ordained monk or nun, or as a full-time lay student. The supporting conditions at the Centre are extremely beneficial for those serious about practising *vipassana*. Anyone who is ready for that level of focussed commitment and service is very welcome to contact Paul.

Maintenance & Projects: During the summer **Tom Hammond** and **Simon Prudames** completed the window repairs and replacements in no. 9. It turned out to be a long process. Every window in these old Bradford on Avon houses, it seems, is one of a kind, with

unique measurements. For instance, one of the dormer windows on the top floor has complex triangular glazed side-panels. On closer inspection it was clear that both dormer windows were in a such a sorry state that they would need to be completely rebuilt. Simon Prudames' father is a carpenter and he did a wonderful job building the replacement units. Although an expensive undertaking, making these repairs was absolutely necessary and, thanks to Tom and Simon's excellent workmanship, these quality replacements will likely last a very long time.



Simon Prudames at the attic window

The Trust is in the process of upgrading the Centre's safety measures in accordance with the latest legislation. This includes installing

new fire alarm and emergency lighting systems. This is an expensive but necessary improvement that will stand the Centre in good stead for many years to come. We have enlisted the use of a local company with extensive experience and expertise to carry out the work, which will be completed before the beginning of the retreat season in February.

Our plumber **Richard Carr** has just visited to service our boilers. Upon our request, he also prepared gas safety records for all our gas appliances. No. 8 has always tended to be the last building to be considered. Now, the time has come time for the "vintage" gas oven and gas fire to be decommissioned and replaced with new electric versions. These have been ordered and will be installed following a visit from our electrician **Steven Ingram** who will check the electrical system and prepare for installation.

Finally, the Trust's little red Nissan Micra is now nineteen years old and struggled to pass its MOT in December. Plans are afoot to replace the vehicle later this year. While it isn't used a huge amount, it is an essential asset when it comes to the weekly shopping and trips out for gardening and maintenance products. We will

be replacing it with a similar, functional used vehicle which, no doubt, will be more up-to-date.

Gardens: This autumn has seen major pruning projects in the gardens. The Wisteria growing up the main house wall was not cut back in the previous year and the extra year of unfettered growth enabled it to twine round the drainpipes and get onto, and possibly into, the roof. **David Gilbert** managed to cut it back to above the ground floor windows, but some of the longer strands of growth lodged in the guttering have been left dangling. We will wait until better weather in the spring to use the three-tier extending ladder to access and remove the rest.

Many of the garden's trees and shrubs have outgrown their situation and **Brother Nigel** has been busy reining them in. The Centre was given an extending saw that reaches thirty feet. It has proved to be a little heavy and cumbersome being extended that far. Nonetheless, it has been very useful in cutting branches at lower height that would otherwise be inaccessible. It made light work of much of the heavier pruning. Brother Nigel has already burned much of the pruning waste that was left on the vegetable

plot. A second lot is being piled high, waiting for an opportunity for burning when it has dried out.

A narrow, dense patch of *Echium pininana* plants self-seeded in the vegetable plot after the harvest of vegetables last year. If they survive the frost and cold over the winter they could make a splendid floral display for this year's Open Day. As a precautionary measure Brother Nigel covered some of the plants with bags and other items in an effort to protect them. Since then we have experienced snow, frosts and heavy winds. Exposed parts of the plants are looking bedraggled. It remains to be seen whether the plants will pull through.

Open Day: This year, on Sunday 22nd June, the Centre will be holding its biennial Open Day. This is a wonderful opportunity for meditators to invite family and friends to visit the Centre and have a look around the houses and gardens. They can also meet Paul and the full-time community, as well as fellow students and supporters. It is always a happy and friendly occasion, and visitors are always impressed with the Centre.

Traditionally there is a tea stall selling drinks and cakes donated by meditators. A shop is set up in the

Ruby room selling books, Buddha figures and incense. Brother Nigel also organises a stall with plants propagated from the Centre's gardens. It takes a great deal of work to prepare for the day, particularly in the week or two just prior. It is, therefore, another opportunity for meditators to offer their services to the Centre. We will be asking for volunteers nearer the time. Please let us know if you can come in to help of an afternoon.

Online Meetings: Our fortnightly Monday evening online meetings were well attended, with an average of thirty-two people during the autumn. This season we focussed on the *parami* or perfections. These are ten mental qualities the Buddha taught that inform our compassionate activities and act as an essential foundation for the successful development of insight-wisdom. The meetings included an examination of each of the ten, as well as discussions about how students have found ways to develop them. Recordings of all the meetings can be found on the House of Inner Tranquillity Facebook page and YouTube channel. Playlists for videos of particular Dhamma-related subjects, such as *vipassana*, condition-dependent origination or

the *parami*, can also be found on the YouTube channel.

Donations: The Trust remains extremely grateful for all the financial support that it has received over many years from students and supporters. Such generosity allows us to carry on the work begun by **Alan** and **Jacqui James** over forty years ago. In all that time, we have not charged for any events. All of the teaching, be it lectures, retreats, audio and video, as well as the online meetings, are given entirely freely. We encourage people to see donations as a way of helping others to have access to the teachings, but without giving so excessively that they leave themselves short.

The Trust's finances are very well managed; however, we do need to keep pace with rising costs. The suggested contribution for a residential course currently stands at only £30 per day and we welcome donations above and beyond that, where possible. To make donating easier, we will be updating our website donations page with a link to PayPal to allow direct donations. If you would like to make one-off or regular contributions via your bank, please contact the Centre for our details. ■

BRADFORD ON AVON

HOUSE OF INNER TRANQUILLITY

RETREATS

6-Day Integrated Retreats

March 17-22

May 5-10

6-Day Silent Retreats

February 10-15

February 24-March 1

March 31-April 5

April 21-26

May 26-31

June 9-14

Weekend Retreats

March 7-9

April 11-13

May 16-18

WEDNESDAY EVENING MEETINGS

Note: The evenings start at 7.30pm, the door will be open from 7.15pm.

February 5 **Dhamma Talk**

February 12 Tape & library

February 19 **Dhamma Talk**

February 26 Tape & library

March 5 **Dhamma Talk**

March 12 Tape & library

March 19 **Dhamma Talk**

March 26 Tape & library

April 2 Tape & library

April 9 **Dhamma Talk**

April 16 Tape & library

April 23 **Dhamma Talk**

April 30 Tape & library

May 7 **Dhamma Talk**

May 14 Tape & library

May 21 **Dhamma Talk**

May 28 Tape & library

June 4 **Dhamma Talk**

June 11 Tape & library

June 18 **Dhamma Talk**

OPEN MEDITATIONS

Saturday mornings 10.15-11.15. The door will be open from 10.05am, February 8 - June 14 inc.

MONDAY ONLINE MEETINGS

Evening starts 7.30pm

February 10, 24,

March 10, 31,

April 14, 28,

May 26,

June 9

WESAK

MONDAY MAY 12

Evening starts 7.30pm

Door open from 7.15pm

OPEN DAY

On **Sunday 22 June**, the Centre, Monasteries and gardens will be open between 2 and 6pm.

All readers of this newsletter, their families and friends are welcome to attend.

SATELLITE GROUP

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Cultivating loving-attention by Paul Harris

In the Pali Canon, we find a story that the Buddha told his monks. On one occasion, while Sakka, King of the Devas, was away on royal business, an ugly, pot-bellied goblin, with foul smelling breath and an equally foul attitude, had the temerity to go and sit on the royal throne. The King's attendants became more than a little flustered with such an egregious breach of etiquette. All in a flap, they implored the goblin to leave. The more they opined, however, and the more agitated they became, the more refined and handsome-looking the goblin became. Nothing the attendants did could shift the goblin off the throne. The matter was only finally resolved once the King returned. Understanding the situation, Sakka simply knelt on one knee before the goblin and, with a mind filled with loving-kindness, stated three times, "I, friend, am Sakka, King of the Devas!" Where upon the goblin disappeared there and then.

From time to time, we all experience the unwanted in some shape or form. This could be discomfort, for instance, or a sense of loneliness, shame, fear and anxiety, feeling trapped or finding other people's

behaviour intolerable. It is entirely understandable that, when we are confronted with the negative side of life, we tend to react with passionate resistance. We know from the Buddha's teaching, however, that craving for things to be different will only ever exacerbate and perpetuate the suffering we experience. Whether we try to control the situation or avoid it, we seem only to make the problem loom even larger. "Whatever we resist, persists," as the saying goes.

Is another option available to us? What if, instead of trying to get rid of negative experiences, we choose to greet their appearance as we would the unexpected arrival of an esteemed and distinguished guest? What happens if we lavish mental states, such as irritation, frustration, displeasure and the like, with a loving welcome, similar to the way that Sakka, King of the Devas, treated the pot-bellied goblin?

The twentieth century Indian teacher Jiddu Krishnamurti suggested we look at suffering like we are looking at a jewel. When we hold a jewel in our hand, we are likely to find it fascinating. We will turn it over and

over, taking an interest in its cut, colour, and lustre. In the same way, to release ourselves from whatever it is that is bothering us, we need to learn to stop trying to get rid of it. Instead, we can take a keen interest in the whole experience. To put it another way, we can cultivate an attitude of loving-attention towards it.

Of course, no-one would expect a student to cease lifetimes of resistance to suffering at the proverbial, 'drop of a hat.' Hence the necessity of applying oneself to the development of the whole of the Buddha's Noble Eightfold Path. This includes the willingness to genuinely accept guidance from those who have already trodden the same path. Solving the riddle of suffering is not easy, but it most certainly can be done.

When Alan and Jacqui James first began teaching at the House of Inner Tranquillity, they trained students to treat all objects and tasks with love. Whether it was doing the washing-up, vacuuming or looking after house plants, students were encouraged to take great care of things to ensure that nothing in the external environment came to any harm.

In essence, Alan and Jacqui were

teaching students the right spiritual attitude, that is to say, being humble, caring, open and interested in everything and anything that arises in our experience. This is exactly the same attitude we need for meditation.

Just as we may find the cut, colour and lustre of a jewel in our hand fascinating, so we can find the workings of mind and body equally absorbing, if we choose to take an interest. Whether pleasant or unpleasant, wanted or unwanted, treating each new experience with the attentiveness we might show an esteemed guest, we begin to discover previously unrecognised facts about it. For instance, we learn that each new experience is a visitor and not a permanent resident at all. All the components involved, we find, are transient, ungraspable and empty of any abiding core. This develops a keen appreciation of just how deeply mysterious life really is.

With time and application, acceptance replaces the need for control and fascination replaces avoidance, even towards uncomfortable and unwanted experiences. We find we can allow suffering in all its forms to be there, knowing that, just like the pot-bellied goblin, show it a little love and, by and by, it will disappear. ■

Extract from a Dhamma Talk with full-time students

Are there efficient and inefficient ways to look for the mystery in life?

Paul: What lies behind the question?

Student 1: A while ago, some meditators were talking about looking for the beauty in things. It seemed to be more a case of wanting to look at the nicer side of life, rather than actually looking at the unsatisfactoriness of things. It was thinking the idea of the teaching is to look at beautiful things.

Paul: Is it attachment to the idea of beauty, then?

Student 1: Yes. Or thinking that is the teaching.

Paul: I have to say that was true for me. During my training, there was an ongoing preoccupation with the idea that what would be revealed to me was more and more beauty, and that what I was looking for was a perpetual state of beauty in which I could abide. I was mistaken. That notion, however, took me far enough down the spiritual path that there wasn't any turning back. Gradually,

an appreciation grew that one just could not hold on to beautiful states at all, that those experiences would always come and go. The 'beautiful,' therefore, was finally added to the list of unsatisfactory things.

Actually, you do not have to look for beauty at all, and you do not have to look for the mystery. It is an error. It seemed to me, in reading the question, that the assumption is that we ought to be looking for the mystery in life. No.

Rather, the spiritual path is undertaken to come to see that the infinite mystery contains, exists in and shines through everything. And by everything I mean everything that you so take for granted that you just see as being ordinary. The mystery exudes from every component part of the ordinary. And this makes the ordinary extraordinarily beautiful.

To put it another way, you can say that everyone is looking for *nibbana*. The problem, however, is that while they are busy looking for *nibbana*, they are not looking at what is actually unfolding in their experience. Instead

of trying to look for mystery or to look for beauty, or *nibbana*, what is it that we do?

We look at the constituents of what is unfolding in conscious experience right now. It is through this simple observation and mindful noting of 'what is,' again and again, that all the assumptions and misperceptions about the nature of reality are corrected.

It is through doing this that you drop all attachments. Through this, you stop resisting and fighting with life. Through this, you reach the point where you see that it is the assumption of selfhood that lies at the base of the misapprehension. And when that is seen through, what is left is infinite mystery.

And the infinite exudes through all its finite, transient, empty displays, which is conscious experience. And, thus, there is the realisation of the inherent beauty and inherent mystery of life. It is the realisation of the great perfection.

That is what this is. This is the great perfection. But people insist on assuming selfhood in what is not self and, as a result, cannot see it. That is

what lies at the base of the problem. When you assume selfhood, you lose awareness of the infinite expressing through its finite displays. You can look for beauty, you can look for mystery all you like, but you have missed the point. Look at what is actually occurring.

Note whatever object is occurring, mindfully attend to it, and you will see that it is transient, and you will see that it is ungraspable and unsatisfactory. You will see that it is a product of a whole concatenation of other conditions, such that, if you remove even one of those conditions, the object would not exist. It is all utterly ephemeral and there isn't a whiff of 'self' in any of it. All objects are empty of the very thing that perception attributes to them.

How marvellous. This is what you do, you focus on this. This is *vipassana*, the path of insight-wisdom. Forget about trying to find mystery, forget about trying to find beauty. Just focus on this. This is the path. Any other thoughts about that?

Student 2: I was considering this question and thinking about devotion to this path, that it is about pay-

ing attention in every moment as if it were the only one. I was pondering on devotion towards something in a mundane sense that leads to a love of a thing or a person. I do not mean getting to the end of suffering, but devotion that leads to love, and love having fewer boundaries.

Paul: People can fixate on love as being the culmination of the path. Love, it seems to me, is a very welcome side-effect of having discovered the true nature of reality. Yesterday, I was coming to take one of the meditations, I was watching mindfully as I opened the door to the cloakroom, and I heard the universe creaking. It was just the sound of the door. Yet, that, for me, was as delightful and mysterious and fascinating as anything else.

Recently, a student was talking about intellectually being able to reason the teaching out, but not feeling it in the heart. I made the observation that, ultimately, it comes from direct experience. It is, therefore, having enough faith and perseverance, devotion if you wish, to persist long enough that it moves down from the intellectual to the felt, to the experienced, and then it makes sense on an

altogether different level.

We do need an intellectual appreciation of things, but it only takes us so far, and it is okay not to know. In fact, knowing that you do not know is the key to experiencing the mystery. It is when we assert that we 'know' that the mystery is lost completely. It is okay to devalue the significance we place on thinking about the path. Instead, use the power of the mind to actually practise mindful noting.

That is why they use the koan as a teaching tool in Zen Buddhism. The master wants to get students cross-eyed trying to work it out, so, in the end, they give up and let go. That, it seems, can be a very beneficial way of making the point. I have spoken before about how, literally, the nano-second before someone realises enlightenment, they still do not know what it is. Then, the moment after, they realise that, in a sense, they have always known what it is.

How wonderful. That is why students have to see the limits of thinking and the intellect. Learn to include thinking as an object to be noted and do not expect thinking to be able to bring true clarity. Up to a certain

point, intellectual work, pondering, does help develop clarity. Beyond that, however, it becomes a nuisance. It just muddies everything. Keep it simple. To return to my earlier point, with mindful investigation, you are not specifically looking for anything. You are just looking at whatever arises.

If you are looking for something, you will not get the sense of inherent reward in what you are doing, because the rewarding feeling can only happen when you find the thing that you are looking for. Even if that thing is mystery or beauty or love. Whereas, you can surrender all of that and, instead, content yourself just to be interested in, devoted to, whatever comes up next. Allow whatever arises to impinge, note it, be with it, do not be in a rush to get on to the next object, just be with that experience. Then you see that it passes away and the next object arises, and you just carry on in that way. The energy is balanced, therefore pleasurable interest arises, the sense of fascination, the sense that this simple noting is deeply rewarding in and of itself. An attitude of not needing anything to come from the practice arises. That is wonderful. When you get that, you know you have got the balance abso-

lutely right. And you are just resting, and you find the whole experience of mindful noting to be a really rewarding experience. Even when painful feelings arise. Even when unwanted memories occur. Whatever it is, it is included and found to be fascinating. That is the doorway to realising the mystery. It is not the doorway to having all your questions answered.

I use the term mystery specifically. It is mystery. You do not know. (*Laughter*).

That is the beauty of it. The finite display of consciousness, the knowing part, the intellectual mind, cannot encompass the infinite mystery. It just cannot possibly do that. ■

DATA PROTECTION ACT

The mailing list used for the House of Inner Tranquillity Newsletter is maintained on computer. If you object to your record being kept on our computer file, please write to us and we will remove it.



AUKANA



HOUSE OF
INNER TRANQUILLITY

*The Aukana Trust is a registered charity
(no 326938) which provides instruction in
the Buddha's path to enlightenment,
from introductory evening classes
to full-time monastic training.*

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