



AUKANA

*newsletter* 1/2026

HOUSE OF INNER  
TRANQUILLITY



*"Life is a profound mystery, open to anyone willing to meet it directly. When we place experience before intellect, admit that we do not know, and willingly follow the guidance offered, meditation becomes a doorway to the unknown and reveals what words alone never can."*

PAUL HARRIS

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## EDITORIAL

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With the exponential growth in the power of artificial intelligence, we find ourselves on the threshold of an entirely new and astonishing epoch for humankind. Is such technological innovation a blessing, or will it prove to be our undoing? Either way, we will not have to wait long to find out. The AI revolution has already begun and is unfolding with seemingly unstoppable momentum.

Change, after all, is inevitable. Given the fundamentally unsatisfactory nature of life and the creative restlessness of the human condition, civilisation was never likely to stagnate quietly and fade away. For some time now, it has felt as though in many areas of our society we have simply run out of ideas, endlessly repeating worn-out patterns. In that sense, society appears to be in need of some kind of reboot. Perhaps this brave new technological world was always destined to arrive as the means by which such a reset could occur.

Of course, artificial intelligence carries serious dangers and substantial risks. Yet it also holds the potential to usher in a genuine flourishing of culture: a new age of knowledge, creativity, and innovation across every sphere of life. Which of these futures awaits us remains an open question. Much will depend on whether we allow AI technologies to dominate us, or whether we retain the discernment to harness their power while keeping the final say over what they produce.

The difference between these two paths is already visible in the kinds of AI-driven creativity now emerging. In writing, visual art, film, and video, increasing amounts of online content are entirely AI-generated, often with little or no human mastery guiding the creative process. It is undeniably clever, but frequently lacks the warmth, depth, and authenticity that arise from a living human mind and heart. A telling phrase has emerged to describe this phenomenon: "AI slop."

By contrast, when AI is used as a tool rather than an author—when it forms part of a wider creative process under genuine human guidance—the results can be novel, beautiful, moving, and quietly humorous. AI outputs are not accepted wholesale, but selected, refined, and transformed through the one capacity no amount of code can replicate: conscious experience. It is here, in collaboration, that the real promise of artificial intelligence may yet be found.

Seen in this light, the questions raised by AI are not entirely new. They mirror, in technological form, a dynamic we are already familiar with as Buddhist practitioners. Through meditation we come to recognise two aspects of mind: direct, wordless conscious experience, and the conceptual activity that seeks to interpret it.

This relationship, too, is meant to be collaborative. The intellectual aspect of mind has the function of crystallising experience into conceptual form. It allows us to gauge, judge, discriminate, and comprehend the complex web of conditions arising in each moment. This narrating activity is a natural and necessary part of our engagement with the world.

Difficulties arise, however, when we grant this narrating voice too much authority. Instead of recognising thoughts as provisional interpreta-

tions, we believe they are telling us the truth. We bestow thinking with a status it does not deserve and grant it the final say. Rather than referring back to unfolding experience, we place thought between ourselves and reality. Experience becomes filtered through limited, judgemental concepts, and thought, elevated to mastery, reveals itself as a tyrant.

Meditation trains us to restore the proper balance. Thinking is not rejected. It plays a vital role in noting and clarifying what has first been known non-conceptually, before we return again to direct observation. In this way, each supports the other.

As with artificial intelligence, the question is not whether these capacities exist, but how we relate to them. When tools—whether technological or mental—are allowed to rule us, something essential is lost. When they are placed in service of conscious awareness, however, they become powerful allies. It is this discernment that ultimately determines whether our creations lead to alienation or to genuine human flourishing. As the Buddha said, “Mind is the forerunner of all things.” ■

## NEWS

**People:** Spring 2025 was a very busy period at the Centre, with several people coming to stay for extended periods. There was also much to prepare for the biennial Open Day in June, which brought additional visitors and helpers. By contrast, the autumn of 2025 was noticeably quieter.

**Jim Vuylsteke** came over from Toronto, Canada, for a silent retreat, adding an extra week beforehand in order to extend his stay and help out. Jim was a monk here for several years, leaving in 2003, so he is very familiar with the Centre's routines. His experience made him a real asset around the place before he settled into his retreat week.

**Lin Quantick**, who comes in regularly for extended periods, also arrived for an extra week before beginning her retreat. **Stefan Calin** discovered the Centre online. Living in London, Stefan has been interested in Buddhist meditation for some time and came to stay as a helper for nearly two weeks. During this time he got to know the full-time community, fellow meditators, how the Centre is run, and the way the teaching is presented here, with a view to undertaking retreats in the future.

Since 2021 we have been offer-

ing only four places on retreats. In autumn 2025 we began booking five people per retreat so that more practitioners could be accommodated, and this arrangement has continued into spring 2026. The occasional offer from someone on retreat to also help out has proved very useful.

Being able to offer retreats with personalised instruction and guidance from our teacher is a great blessing. The opportunity to practise the Buddha's teaching wholeheartedly in such a supportive atmosphere is rare and of extraordinary benefit. At the time of writing, there are only a couple of spaces left on the integrated retreats in the spring season. If you have not yet been allocated a place, you are welcome to contact us to book or to be added to the waiting list.

**Maintenance:** In the July 2025 newsletter we mentioned that the final two fire doors had arrived. These were the heaviest of all, each weighing over 30 kilograms. Fortunately, when they were delivered, day students **David Gilbert** and **Scott Harris** were on hand to help move them from the drive up to the Green Room, where they were stored until fitting could be arranged.

These custom-sized glazed units were destined for either end of the long corridor serving rooms in 10 and 10a. Fitters **Alex** and **Gavin** returned in the first week of August to install them.

This then left the question of what to do with all the old doors stacked against the wall in the drive. Reclamation yards were inundated with doors at the time, as many commercial properties were replacing old fittings with new, compliant fire doors. In addition, only five of the cell doors were of standard size; the rest were custom-made for unusual dimensions and unlikely to fit elsewhere.

A partial solution soon emerged. Day student **Sally Passfield** expressed an interest in adopting some of the doors. After discussion, Sally and her husband **Stephen** agreed that the five standard-sized varnished wooden doors, complete with fittings, would be a good match for their upstairs rooms. **Paul Bonczyk**, another day student with a pickup truck, kindly delivered the doors to their new home.

The fate of the remaining doors was less fortunate: they had to go to the tip. Once again, Paul Bonczyk offered his help, transporting them in his truck, accompanied by **Jason Rebello** to assist with offloading and disposal.

The new fire doors are designed to remain closed, but there are occasions when they need to be held open temporarily, particularly when people are passing through carrying trays of food. The door in the cloakroom outside the Shrine Room had already been fitted with a battery-operated magnetic device to hold it open. This consists of a magnetised disc mounted on the wall and a metal disc fixed to the door; when the two meet, the door remains open.

A second device was purchased for the door leading to the annex from the first landing at 10a. However, the automatic door closer prevented the door from opening wide enough for the discs to make contact. This problem was solved by bridging the gap with a purpose-designed heavy-duty chain, fitted with compatible connections. A dampener was also installed below to protect the door from damage when the chain-mounted disc is released.

Both devices are programmed to respond to the sound of the fire alarm, releasing the doors so they close automatically to contain a fire. As part of the weekly fire alarm tests, the doors are checked to ensure they close correctly when the alarm sounds.

Given the weight of the new fire doors, there were concerns that retreatants might struggle to open

them while carrying a tray of food. To address this, wedges have been provided so that trays can be put down, the door wedged open, and then closed again once the retreatant has entered their room.

**Garden:** Produce from the garden was variable over the autumn. The standout crop was courgettes, which seemed to keep coming despite there being only one particularly prolific plant. Several varieties of squash also did well. A rogue, unidentified plant growing in the compost bin turned out to be a magnificent Turk's Turban squash, producing several large fruits. Some of the courgettes have even made it into the freezer, ready to be turned into soup.



*Turk's Turban squash growing from the compost bin*

**Brother Nigel** has been experimenting with electric tools in the gar-



*Chard and melon on the vegetable plot*

den. After the electric cable-powered lawnmower failed just one month after its two-year warranty expired, he replaced it with a cordless model. Day students Jason Rebello and **Steven Harbour** have both used it and were pleased to find they could mow all the lawns in half the time, without the risk of cutting through a trailing cable. A single battery charge is sufficient to complete the job in one go.

Brother Nigel was also gifted a sophisticated pair of electric secateurs. Together with Jason Rebello, he put them to work pruning shrubs and branches. The secateurs are easy on the hands and make light work of even tough wood, with adjustable blade openings for different branch sizes. The built-in counter now shows that they have already made over 10,000 cuts.

Inspired by this work, Brother Nigel

cut back many shrubs hard to encourage vigorous regrowth. The resulting debris was piled high on the vegetable plot after the year's produce had been cleared. Day student **Rebecca Skillman** generously lent the Centre a heavy-duty shredder, which processed around 90% of the cuttings into mulch for composting and spreading around the garden. The remaining 10% was dried out and took only a couple of hours to burn.



*Brother Nigel burning debris*

**New Car:** The Trust's 2005 red Nissan Micra struggled to pass its MOT

in 2024. As the date of the next MOT approached, the plan to replace the vehicle was revisited.

David Gilbert found a newly advertised 2017 silver Ford Fiesta being sold privately through Autotrader. The local seller was contacted and visited, the car was taken for a test drive, and an offer was made and accepted. Payment was completed online, insurance arranged, and the following day the new Ford was collected. The old Nissan was taken to a scrap merchant in Trowbridge. The entire process was completed within two days.

The scrap merchant promptly paid the scrap value for the Nissan and, mindful that Aukana is a registered charity, later reimbursed the Trust an additional £100 from the sale of reusable parts.

**Wesak:** This year Wesak falls on Friday 4th May. Wesak is traditionally celebrated throughout the world on the full moon day in May, commemorating the Buddha's birth, enlightenment, and passing away.

We will come together at the Centre to mark the occasion with two short talks, periods of meditation, and a shared meal provided by lay students. Closer to the time, Brother Nigel will collect the names of those wishing to attend and coordinate food contributions. ■

# BRADFORD ON AVON

HOUSE OF INNER TRANQUILLITY

## RETREATS

### 6-Day Integrated Retreats

March 16-21

May 4-9

### 6-Day Silent Retreats

February 9-14

February 23-28

March 30-April 4

April 20-25

May 25-30

June 8-13

### Weekend Retreats

March 6-8

April 10-12

May 15-17

## WEDNESDAY EVENING MEETINGS

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

February 4 **Dhamma Talk**

February 11 Tape & library

February 18 **Dhamma Talk**

February 25 Tape & library

March 4 **Dhamma Talk**

March 11 Tape & library

March 18 **Dhamma Talk**

March 25 Tape & library

April 1 Tape & library

April 8 **Dhamma Talk**

April 15 Tape & library

April 22 **Dhamma Talk**

April 29 Tape & library

May 6 **Dhamma Talk**

May 13 Tape & library

May 20 **Dhamma Talk**

May 27 Tape & library

June 3 **Dhamma Talk**

June 10 Tape & library

June 17 **Dhamma Talk**

## OPEN MEDITATIONS

Saturday mornings 10.15-11.15. The door will be open from 10.05am, February 7 - June 13 inc.

## **MONDAY ONLINE MEETINGS**

**Evening starts 7.30pm**

February 9, 23,

March 9, 30,

April 13, 27,

May 11, 25,

June 8

## **WESAK**

**FRIDAY MAY 1**

Evening starts 7.30pm

Door open from 7.15pm

## **SATELLITE GROUP**

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## The Charioteer by Paul Harris

The fundamental instruction for meditation at the House of Inner Tranquillity is simple:

“Rest in the moment, content to mindfully note whatever arises.”

Yet every meditator knows from experience that this is no easy matter to accomplish. Our attempts to fulfil the instruction are hindered by conditioned habits of mind, with doubt being one of the most common. We may doubt the authenticity of the teaching, the legitimacy of the guidance, or the effectiveness of an instruction that differs from what we have encountered before. Often, however, the most persistent doubt concerns our own ability to practise as instructed.

This self-doubt frequently arises from an understandable impulse: the wish to practise well. We want to be conscientious. We want our meditation to reflect the promise we have heard so much about — that wisdom can emerge and suffering can lessen. In trying to do this, however, we can unintentionally begin to interfere with the practice itself. Rather than resting in the moment, we assume responsibility for steering the meditation,

believing that careful management will ensure the desired outcome.

What we may then notice is a subtle tension entering the practice. We find ourselves monitoring the meditation, checking our experience against expectations, and quietly evaluating whether things are going as they should. This can show up as preoccupation with technique, concern about success and failure, or irritation when experience does not conform to our ideas of how meditation ought to be.

The situation is made more delicate by the fact that many of us already recognise this pattern. We may have discussed doubt and over-effort with our teacher countless times. We may even notice ourselves trying not to try, hoping that relaxation can be produced this way. Yet this, too, is just another form of taking control. Like a Chinese finger puzzle, the more effort we apply, the more constrained we feel. The question then naturally arises: what is the alternative?

Imagine, for a moment, that you are a charioteer travelling along a straight, even road. Two fine, experienced horses are harnessed to your

chariot. You hold the reins firmly but lightly as they move forward at a steady pace. You are attentive, present, and responsible — but because everything is unfolding smoothly, there is nothing in particular you need to do. You are in control without interfering.

As the journey continues, the road naturally changes. There are bends, uneven surfaces, and moments when the horses drift slightly off course or alter their speed. Occasionally, you respond with a gentle adjustment of the reins or a word of encouragement. Most of the time, however, you allow the horses to do what they already know how to do, trusting their strength and experience while remaining quietly observant.

This image captures the attitude to bring to meditation. We can begin with the simple assumption — or faith — that we are practising correctly, and that what is unfolding is appropriate. This is what is meant by resting in the moment. We allow for the fact that a wide range of physical and mental events will arise during a session. Sounds, sensations, moods, thoughts, and even periods of runaway thinking are not obstacles; they are the very material through which

understanding develops. This is what is meant by contentment.

Our mindful attention — the simple noting of what appears — is sufficient. If we notice that mindfulness has fallen away and habitual patterns have taken over, we are free to intervene gently, just as the charioteer occasionally adjusts the reins. Indeed, the very recognition of doubt, irritation, or desire is itself evidence that mindfulness is present. It shows that we are engaged and responsible practitioners.

Beyond this, there is no need for continuous steering. We do not need to sit hunched in hyper-vigilance, anxiously overseeing each moment. We can allow the meditation room to breathe. Practised in this way, confidence deepens naturally. Ease and contentment have the space to arise, and insight unfolds without being forced.

The charioteer trusts the horses to do what they love to do — to move freely and powerfully along the road. Likewise, as meditators, we often discover that we love nothing more than to rest in the moment, content to mindfully note whatever arises. ■

## Extract from a Dhamma Talk with full-time students

**Meditators sometimes shy away from bodily discomfort. What impels somebody to actually look at and observe its nature in ultimate terms?**

**Paul:** Bodily discomfort, mental displeasure. The issue is universal, none of us are exempt from it. Yet our habitual behaviour is almost always to avoid it. The question, therefore, is really asking: what changes? What shifts in us that makes us finally willing to turn towards something we have spent most of our lives trying to get away from? What do you think?

**Student 1:** I would say it is when they have tried everything else and found that none of it works. They have tried ignoring it. They have tried moving. They keep shifting positions, but that does not fix it. Maybe they even try a different kind of meditation completely, yet find that they are still suffering.

When they give up trying to change and fix it, they finally just note what is there. As a result, they generate some experiential wisdom. They actually experience the transient nature of the discomfort. They recognise that what they have been told is true. That builds their faith and helps to impel them further along the path.

**Paul:** Yes. The Buddha talked about how the path to freedom from suffering must inevitably start with suffering, and that wisely reflecting on suffering naturally gives rise to faith. Without suffering there is no real impetus to develop wisdom.

That was certainly the case for me. There had to be an answer to the problem of suffering. There just had to be, otherwise life was entirely absurd. This is the point when somebody really knows that they do not know. Such reflection opens up new doors of possibility. The faith arises that there has to be an answer, but that answer must lie beyond their current understanding, beyond the strategies they have already tried and exhausted.

Now there are new avenues of enquiry, and one of these might well be meditation. People are taught first to sit in a chair, close their eyes, and not move. That sounds very simple. But some people really struggle to do it. They just cannot live with what they find. They stop meditations early. They walk out of the Shrine Room. They leave retreats early.

Sympathetically, we say they are “not ready.” But what do we actually mean by that? What we mean is that they have not yet reached that point of

desperation and wise reflection — of facing up to where the problem really lies, which is their own ignorance. They are yet to take proper responsibility for their suffering, and that is not a criticism, it is simply a description of where someone is on the path.

I think it is the lack of a viable alternative, at the end of the day, that triggers genuine humility and impels us along the path. When there is nowhere left to run, something has to give.

**Student 2:** The final trigger for me was asthma. I thought I would learn to meditate. I seemed to think that would solve it. I always felt, however, that I was looking for something. I don't know if I felt desperation. I mean, I had periods of depression.

**Paul:** How did you deal with bodily discomfort or mental displeasure before you first started meditating?

**Student 2:** I didn't. I would look for pleasure. I did not look at it.

**Paul:** Yes. And when you started meditating?

**Student 2:** Yes, I had to start looking at it.

**Paul:** Was that just doing what you were told because that was the technique or was that based on wise reflection? I am trying to get at what it is that causes us to finally accept the presence of bodily discomfort

and mental displeasure, rather than constantly avoiding it.

**Student 2:** I wanted the fruits of the path. I wanted the peace. I wanted the freedom.

**Paul:** Was realising the fruits of the path — the peace, the freedom — more important than reserving the right not to look at something because it was uncomfortable?

**Student 2:** Yes.

**Paul:** That is interesting, isn't it? Something more important than comfort began to take priority. I have seen how this plays out many times. If someone is not yet willing to accept responsibility for what is there, then guidance such as not changing posture, not cutting a meditation short, not walking out of the Shrine Room, not leaving a retreat, can easily be misperceived as antagonistic. It can feel like an imposition. But, actually, it is asking someone to look at something within themselves that they find threatening in some way.

In order to continue to ignore what is really happening, attention is refocused away from themselves. The cause of the discomfort is turned outward and projected onto the person giving the guidance, or onto the conditions, or onto the retreat itself.

**Student 1:** Could this be bound up with the fetter of doubt?

**Paul:** Absolutely, yes. Very much so.

**Student 1:** Another observation — slightly off topic — is that behaviours like leaving a retreat early or walking out of the Shrine Room can be quite contagious among meditation students.

**Paul:** It is contagious. If one person is allowed to behave like that, somebody else starts doing it. Then you have an unserious culture where people just come and go as they please. How long are we going to last like that? The genuine impetus for training goes out of the window very quickly, and the teacher is compelled to reaffirm the parameters of the training — not out of control, but out of care for the integrity of the path.

The whole issue is resolved once someone wisely reflects and realises that there is no viable alternative. As the Buddha said, to be free, to be at peace, suffering needs to be understood, and mindfulness is the “one way” to do that. This is a wisdom teaching, not a technique for comfort.

When someone finally accepts the instruction and practises mindful noting of bodily discomfort and mental turmoil, their practice transforms completely.

You reach the point where you are willing to allow a hindrance to be in the mind, or to fully experience a painful bodily feeling. You let the

whole process run under mindful observation, without interference, and it shows you exactly what it is. The wisdom faculty grows stronger the more you look, not because you are forcing insight, but because insight is the natural result of clear seeing.

You begin to intuitively recognise which responses are skilful and cultivate those. You also know which responses are unskilful and learn to leave those alone. Hindrances drop away because they are no longer being allowed to feed on ignorance and resistance.

The more you run away from these things, the more value and importance you give them, and the more omnipresent they seem. The more you accept the existence of discomfort and displeasure, the more you devalue them. You are essentially saying: these can be here because they are not important. You are learning not to take it personally.

Accept that this painful feeling is just passing through. Watch it. Mindfully note it. It can be here. It is only a painful feeling. As the Buddha said, “In the seeing, there is only the seeing; in the hearing, only the hearing.” So too, in a painful feeling, there is only a painful feeling. That is all it is. It arises upon a sensory contact and ceases. That is what the whole training is helping us to see, again and again.

**Student 3:** I'm thinking about another aspect of it. If there is bodily discomfort, you can start noting it, but you can also use noting as a way of thinking, "If I note it, it will go away."

**Paul:** Plenty of meditators have played with that idea.

**Student 3:** Yes, and it does not work. I was thinking more along the lines of investigating it mindfully and sinking into it.

**Paul:** Yes. That willingness to investigate is already devaluing it, isn't it? Where does that feeling actually exist? Wherever we look, the next moment it is not there, and something similar — but not exactly the same — appears somewhere else.

The outcome of investigation is that there is so little resistance. Painful feelings subside and are replaced by other feelings. We have not gotten rid of anything. We have simply seen the transient and conditional nature of sensations and feelings.

We investigate in order to become wise to the true nature of feelings. In seeing their transient, unsatisfactory, and selfless nature, craving and clinging fall away. We see there is nothing substantial to react to, nothing to grasp after. Literally, it has already gone by the time attention turns to look at it.

It is this lack of self-concern that allows us to dive more deeply into

experience and discriminate its components — bodily processes and mental processes. What is the physical sensation? What is the painful feeling conditioned by it? Mind is one thing, body another. They arise dependent on one another, exist briefly, and cease together.

Now we are comprehending experience in ultimate terms: the five aggregates, the six sensory fields, condition-dependent origination, the three universal characteristics. How did we reach this point? By abandoning the attempt to wilfully control events and allowing the suffering of life to express itself, without resistance.

This is what generates insight-wisdom. We are here to learn. Through the cultivation of simple mindful noting, ignorance and craving are abandoned, understanding dawns, and suffering ends. This truly is the one way to peace, happiness, and freedom. ■

#### 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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*This newsletter is published twice a year by the Aukana Trust*