



AUKANA

*newsletter* 7/2020

HOUSE OF INNER  
TRANQUILLITY



*“The Buddha said that each of us does what we do in the belief that it is in our very own best interest. This is the human realm. It is a realm into which we come in order to test out all these possibilities, to find out truly what it is that is in our own best interest. Everyone, including you and I, have the capacity to change our minds about what we consider that to be.”*

PAUL HARRIS

## EDITORIAL

Undoubtedly, the year 2020 will be remembered as one of the strangest of our lifetime. The coronavirus pandemic and subsequent lockdown has brought worry and concern for everyone. No-one can remain untouched by these extraordinary circumstances and we are all having to learn how to adapt to the new reality. The Centre will remain largely off limits for the time being and, with no meetings or retreats scheduled, the majority of the teaching will continue to be conducted online via livestreams and videos.

The crisis has brought a heavy toll upon people’s psychological and emotional well-being. It is not easy to see the world you are so heavily invested in apparently crumbling away all around you. It is not unreasonable that people will be thrown into states of anxiety, panic and depression as a result. It is a pity that more people do not know the benefits that meditation can bring. Taking the trouble to train

the mind means that we can learn how to remain largely untroubled by negative emotions. Meditators are not immune to the impact of the pandemic, certainly. The Buddha’s teaching, however, gives us the tools we need to deal effectively with the uncertain times we live in.

Many people will regard the current situation and its implications for the future as exclusively negative. Others, however, are finding that there is an unexpected pay-off from having to spend more time at home during lockdown. The timeout has given them a breathing space, the chance to spend more time in nature, perhaps, or being able to take more care of the garden. This, in conjunction with the crisis itself, is prompting some wise reflection. Many are beginning to question their priorities and are considering alternative lifestyles. Would working less and being content with less bring hidden benefits? Life may not be quite so materially

comfortable, perhaps, but might having to work less actually bring more happiness? And what does that tell us about our life goals and aspirations? Are they relevant anymore?

It may be a somewhat indulgent and idealistic suggestion, but could the pandemic unexpectedly herald some kind of spiritual renaissance? At the societal level, perhaps that is too much to expect. At the individual level, however, why not? The lockdown has provided us with a wonderful opportunity to reconsider our priorities and to embrace the idea that there is a higher purpose to life, a purpose beyond the constant pursuit of pleasure, status and comfort.

The Buddha's teaching on the Four Noble Truths gives us a radically different perspective on life. It states explicitly that the world as ordinarily understood is fundamentally unsatisfactory and uncontrollable. To unwittingly rely on it for your security and happiness is productive only of perpetual frustration and disappointment. There is, however, a deeper truth to life, a transcendent wisdom that is always available but is rarely noticed. Buried underneath all the wrong ideas and false perceptions that ordinarily dog the human mind, we discover life's inherent perfection. We are finally able to see everything that is unfolding in its true context. With this recognition, the ignorance,

resistance, fear, anxiety and depression that make life such a burden are eliminated and all that remains is the indefinable peace and bliss of *that which is*. The deeper purpose to life is to realise this transcendent wisdom.

The Noble Eightfold Path teaches us how to go about it. We learn how to move lightly through the world. We learn how to act in skilful ways that create as little turbulence and disharmony as possible, whilst maximizing our experience of life as benevolent, peaceful and happy. It also teaches us how to train the mind, so that it is calm, lucid, focused and pliable. It is this training that allows us to see through all the wrong ideas and perceptions that create resistance and suffering. It is through the development of such a powerful mind that all of life's deeper truths come to be discovered.

To walk the Path successfully requires time and space, fewness of wishes and freedom from excessive busyness. And, amazingly, that is exactly the set of circumstances that the Covid-19 crisis has afforded us. This, then, is where we find ourselves. On the one hand the lockdown has proven to be an exceptional example of exactly what the Buddha has been telling us, that is, life is suffering. On the other hand, the lockdown is giving us the very circumstances we need to put his teaching into practice. ■

## NEWS

**People:** On Saturday 15th February **Theo Sheraton** ordained as a monk at the Monastery of Absolute Harmony with **Brother Nigel** acting as preceptor. To witness Theo's entry into the Order, Paul and the full-time community were joined by fifteen members of the group and four meditators who were on integrated retreat. Happily, many of Theo's family, friends and former work colleagues were also able to attend, travelling from Brighton and London amid storms and flash-floods to show their support and wish Theo well.

An ordination is always a very moving event, especially for those who appreciate the Buddha's teaching and the level of commitment required for full-time training. For Theo the ordination ceremony, "...felt like a life-changing event. It was great to have both old and new friends there showing their support. My time here has already given me a strong sense of purpose in being able to support the community, and has offered the time and space to take my appreciation of the Dhamma to the next step."

Thank you to everyone who contributed to Theo's entry into the Order and for helping to make the day so memorable. Special mention must go to **Sally Passfield** and **Cathy Hilser** for the many hours of devotion that



*Sally Passfield with Brother Theo*

went into making Theo's monastic uniforms.

In the last Newsletter we reported that **Sister Sara** had broken her leg. After a series of operations, Sara was able to return to the Centre to convalesce. Initially, she stayed in a ground floor room in No9 until she was able to negotiate stairs and relocate back to the top floor of no. 10. To aid her rehabilitation, Sister Sara attended fortnightly physiotherapy sessions at Melksham hospital. We are very grateful to group members **Aurore Andrews**, **Geoff Farrer** and **Maxine Haraway** for their help in driving Sara to and from appointments.

Over time, it became apparent that a full recovery from the broken leg would be a lengthy affair. Paul discussed the situation with Sister Sara and it was clear to both of them that

Sara's health needs could not properly be addressed whilst remaining in the monastic setting. After eight years in the Order, Sister Sara disrobed on Saturday, 8th February. It was agreed by the Trust that Sara could stay on at the Centre for a further three months in order to continue to receive treatment and ease her return to lay life in the outside world. These were understandably trying times for Sara which she dealt with admirably. We all wish Sara the very best for the future and for a full recovery.

Two lay meditators stayed at the Centre as full-time students this spring. **Keith Richardson** arrived on 2nd March for a month. **José Guerrero** had come on retreat in mid-February and could not return to his native Spain due to the lockdown. He found temporary accommodation locally before then entering the Centre as a full-time student for a month on 6th April.

**Coronavirus:** In response to the pandemic an extraordinary meeting of the Trustees was called on 17th March to manage the situation. When reviewing the Government's guidelines, it was very quickly apparent that the scheduled retreats would all have to be cancelled. It was not feasible to have retreatants and full-time residents isolate for a minimum two-week period should anyone

develop Covid-19 symptoms. The scheduled mindfulness workshops and annual Wesak celebration were also cancelled.

Efforts with social distancing and an extreme cleanliness protocol were adopted in an attempt to keep the Centre open for day students and the Wednesday evening meetings. With further measures from the Government being announced, however, it became abundantly clear that the Centre would be required to close its doors completely.

The reworking of the Government's guidelines meant that more recently day students have been able to return. Numbers have been restricted to a maximum of four per day and protective measures are in place. Eighteen students signed up immediately.

Due to the unprecedented situation, no meetings or retreats have been planned for the autumn. Consequently the diary page has not been included in this Newsletter. We will, of course, keep everyone informed as circumstances change and once we are safely on the other side of this pandemic normal meetings and retreats will resume.

**Online:** One very positive outcome of the lockdown has been the instigation of regular livestreams on the House of Inner Tranquillity Facebook

page. The streams are public, meaning that anyone can watch them. To contribute comments and questions, however, does require that you have a Facebook account. Livestreaming has enabled our community to remain in close contact and keep the teaching to the fore. To help counter the understandable anxiety surrounding the initial lockdown, Paul went live most days. The livestreams quickly became a popular forum for discussing the teaching in relation to world events and for getting clarification on all aspects of the Buddha's teaching. Many more people have been watching than would otherwise attend the regular Wednesday evening meetings at the Centre. We have even seen former members of the group being inspired to take up the practice of meditation again. Currently Paul does two livestreams a week at 7.30pm on Wednesdays and 5pm on Sundays (BST). Thanks to regular contributions from Sally Passfield, **Natalie St Julian Bown** and **Glenda Brewer**, the Facebook pages have helped bring the teaching and the Centre to the attention of far more people.

The House of Inner Tranquillity YouTube channel also continues to grow, with now over four hundred and sixty subscribers and over eighty videos. The latest in audio-to-text transcribing software now makes it

possible to add subtitles much more easily. This has also included some Spanish translations. **Amy Rabe, Eduardo Sabaté, Jamie Carlisle, Sara Rolfe, Chris Pedler, Lin Quantick** and **Nagsen Gedam** have all helped with the transcriptions.

We have continued to release audio of lectures online. Previously, downloads of the talks had been at between seventy or eighty per week. More recently, to our complete surprise, the analytics were showing us that the average had shot up to over two thousand per week. This seemed somewhat strange and further investigation showed that most downloads appeared to be happening in India. This, we thought, was the spiritual equivalent of, "taking coals to Newcastle." Since then, however, the company who host the servers has changed the way they measure the data and the figures have come down to a more reasonable but still impressive three hundred a week.

**Interviews:** As mentioned in the editorial, the lockdown has provided an opportunity for people to reconnect with and develop their meditation practice. Keeping the channels of communication open between teacher and student is vital for success. Interviews with Paul are possible, either in person, by phone or via online video calls. Please contact

the Centre via email to arrange an interview.

**Maintenance:** The night of 14th February was a windy and stormy one and something was heard rattling down the roof of no. 10. The following morning a broken tile was found lodged in the guttering below one of the dormer windows on the garden side of the building. **Mr Tripp**, our roofer, came to inspect the damage. He was confident that the job would only take a few minutes to repair but, because of the location, a scaffolding tower would have to be erected to enable access. This job is currently on hold as there is no threat of further damage to the building and the lockdown intervened to delay the repair.

This summer the Trust decided to redecorate cell 3 which had been stained by water from a leaky roof. At the same time, we realised we could have the Shrine Room freshly painted as well as the adjacent cloakroom and both the upstairs and downstairs bathrooms. **Simon Prudames**, a decorator who has helped us with projects here in the past began work on 8th June. As of writing, Simon has almost finished and we are very happy with the results.

**Garden:** For much of the spring, Brother Nigel had been maintaining the gardens without his usual cohort of day students. Brother Theo has

helped with watering the newly planted yews that are interspersed amongst the *Leylandii* hedge and have been struggling to get established in the hot, dry spring weather. Some of the plants that were dug up and relocated to different positions did not seem to recover from the ordeal. Brown and shrivelled, they have now been removed.

The return of day students meant more willing hands to help in the garden so Brother Nigel has undertaken a new project. Between the larger seated area and the wall bordering the Japanese garden is a space with a small pond, lawn and a bank of shrubs, roses and Periwinkle. Old ivy was covering the wall and wearing away the structure on the outer side above the tea house in the Japanese garden. **Dave Gilbert** removed the ivy and laboured hard sawing through and prising out the thick runners that had worked their way through the mortar. Brother Nigel repointed the wall above the tea house and rebuilt it higher on the garden side. It is being capped off with a concrete coping-stone ridge that Brother Nigel is making *in situ* with the help of **Scott Harris**. Some of the area will be planted up with shrubs after reconditioning the shallow soil and the rest will be put down to grass. ■

## Extract from a Dhamma Talk with full time students

### **Please could we discuss what is meant by taking refuge in the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha?**

**Paul:** What do we mean by refuge in context?

**Student 1:** It is a place of safety and sanctuary. Given everything that is going on at the moment, it does bring home that the Buddha's teaching is a safe space and allows us to perceive life in the right way.

**Paul:** Yes. I think for some people taking refuge is regarded as being something akin to a magical incantation. It is magical thinking to believe that just by repeating the words, "I take refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha," three times, that somehow you are going to be protected from all the vagaries of life. Oh, would it that it were so simple. But, of course, that is not what taking refuge means at all. What does it really mean, then, to take refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha? What do we mean by those three words in context?

**Student 2:** You can see it as the Buddha being the Awakened One,

the one who woke up to the truth of reality. The Dhamma is his teaching of that truth, which shows us what we need to practise in order to come to that same understanding. The Sangha is the community of those who, through their experience of following the teaching, do know the Way and to whom we can turn for help.

**Paul:** Yes, very good. Exactly that. In addition, we can enjoy the mutual support of fellow spiritual travellers along the way, giving one another support, consideration and service.

Taking refuge is, therefore, not magical at all. It is very practical and very pragmatic. Refuge is something that you do. You take refuge when you practise mindfulness. In a very real sense what we are taking refuge from is our own ignorance, our own craving for life to be different. It is not the external world that is causing us to suffer. The external world provides supporting conditions, for sure. It is, however, the passionate desire for life to be different than it is that is the fundamental cause of suffering. Dhamma, the teaching of the Buddha, shows us how to overcome that.

The very act of practising meditation is taking refuge in the Buddha,



the Dhamma and the Sangha. Same with keeping precepts, developing the *paramis*, practising loving-kindness, regular interviews with the teacher, listening to and studying the teaching... There are so many aspects to the training, but they all fall within the compass of the three refuges.

We need the example of Gotama, both before and after his enlightenment. He is, as it were, the archetypal spiritual being. He became the fully self-realised one, the one who rediscovered how to awaken from delusion. He is, therefore, our guiding light, the example around whom we orientate our lives.

As an aside, when I was growing up, I idolised a particular rock guitarist. I wanted to play the guitar just like him. I would practise endlessly, not just learning to play the guitar like him, but literally learning to move like him. He was, in that sense, my guiding light, my star, he was everything that I looked up to and wished to emulate. When it comes to following the spiritual path we can take Gotama, the Buddha, as our guiding light. His search, his enlightenment, his wisdom and compassion become what we want to emulate. I mean, we cannot emulate the mundane wisdom of a historical Buddha because we have not gone through all the thousands of lifetimes of preparation as

the *bodhisatta*. Enlightenment itself, however, is the same for all because it is simply the realisation of one's true nature. The Buddha and his enlightenment become our refuge, giving a clear sense of meaning, purpose and direction to our life.

In such an apparently confusing world with a million different options, the Buddha's teaching gives us a really clear path through life. It gives us a sense of who we are and what we are about. Following this training, we will, ultimately, transcend the need for identity. In the meantime, however, it does give us a sense of personal identity and healthy self-esteem. By this I do not mean, "Oh what an amazing Buddhist I am." It is, rather, that we find living an ethical life, practising meditation and generating insight-wisdom inspiring and fulfilling. You would not be all sitting here if deep down what you really wanted was to be a rock star or a quantum physicist. This would not be the way to go about either of those ambitions. You would have taken a serious wrong turn and need to correct it immediately. If, however, your aspiration is to realise freedom from suffering, to realise the true nature of reality, then this Sangha is exactly the right place.

Another thought I have about this is, "Yes, but who looks after the refuge?" Who looks after the sanctuary?

Who makes sure that the Dhamma remains the Dhamma, that it does not become *adhamma*, that is to say, a corrupted teaching because of people ignorantly misrepresenting it? There is, therefore, this reciprocal arrangement whereby those that seek refuge from the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha are also prepared to be of service in return. Otherwise the teaching could be lost so easily.

We see it in the world. There are people who are, consciously or not, guilty of misrepresenting the Buddha's teaching, saying that the Buddha did not teach things which he clearly did teach. The Sangha has the responsibility of upholding the Buddha and the Dhamma as well as helping one another through. There will be subsequent generations of truth-seekers who will need the genuine teaching. If the Dhamma gets corrupted they will not have that opportunity. My goodness, it is a narrow enough portal to freedom as it is. We do not want to make it even more difficult for people to realise it by not protecting it. We all of us share a responsibility in this.

**Student 1:** I remember times when there has been strong mindfulness and hindrances have dropped away. There has been this feeling of relief, an awareness that this really is the right way to go, that it is "The Way."

Everything fits together.

**Paul:** That is the arising of faith. You know that the journey is not complete but there is a sense of feeling refreshed and energised. There is a sense of aliveness to it. The mind is rejuvenated and has confidence in the way forward. That is what I mean by having a clear sense of direction and identity in terms of that direction. It is a sense that whatever life lessons we came in with, we are fulfilling those through following this teaching. That is a refuge and, whilst the Path is not yet completed, we can have the faith that we know that this is the way forward for us from here.

**Student 3:** I was just thinking that if someone takes refuge there is no guarantee that when they die and are reborn that they will go back into that tradition or have that particular refuge. Or would they?

**Paul:** Taking refuge in the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha is very powerful *kamma* if it is being done in the right way. Nothing can be said to be certain until somebody gets beyond stream-winning. If you do, then a new faculty of mind arises which is the certainty that, "I shall come to know the unknown." That is a real thing. There is, consequently, this underlying

ing assurance that the stream-winner carries with them quite naturally and propels them from that point on until they realise the complete cessation of suffering.

Before that point, however, if you really do sincerely take refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha, if you really mean it and live life accordingly, then you will be very heavily drawn towards the teaching or an equivalent teaching in a future life.

In that sense, it is really not the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha that you are drawn to *per se*. It is, in essence, the deepest desire to come to understand the true nature of existence. If you have that aspiration deeply held within you, nothing is going to stop you. Only reneging on that as a possibility is going to stop you. And you only really take the burden of following a spiritual path upon yourself in the certain knowledge that there are no viable alternatives. You have tried enough of them in *samsara* and every single one of them failed to provide you with what you really want. If, therefore, that volition has gone in deeply enough, then that is very powerful *kamma*.

Existence is entirely benevolent. It is just us acting out of our ignorance, greed and hatred that makes it seem malevolent. The more we practise mindful investigation, the more we

see how much perception of what is unfolding is based on the kinds of views we hold and the way we think and act. You start to see how malleable it all is. Change the views, thought and actions and perceptions are changed accordingly. Existence has laws and patterns that govern the ways in which experience comes together. It is our task to discover and master them. Whether the universe appears as benevolent or malevolent is down to us. It is, therefore, dependent on one's own skill, understanding and wisdom that determines what kind of existence unfolds.

If somebody is genuinely taking refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha, they will come across the equivalent in the future. If you understand the nature of action and result, if you understand the nature of conditionality, then that brings with it incredible power. ■

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the Buddha's path to enlightenment,  
from introductory evening classes  
to full-time monastic training.*

9 Masons Lane  
Bradford on Avon  
Wiltshire BA15 1QN  
England

Tel: +44-(0)1225 866821

e-mail: [info@aukana.org.uk](mailto:info@aukana.org.uk)

<http://www.aukana.org.uk>

[Facebook@aukanaboa](https://www.facebook.com/aukanaboa)

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