



AUKANA

newsletter 7/2024

HOUSE OF INNER
TRANQUILLITY



“We are constantly reinforcing the idea that this world is solid, inherently real and unbreakable. The more you look with insight-wisdom, however, the more you realise that it is all just the most wonderful, elaborate and ephemeral display. Seeing how impossible it is to gain lasting fulfilment through endlessly trying to manipulate such transient phenomena, eventually we give up our obsession.

The mind just totally relaxes. It ceases attempting to gain anything in any way at all and finally rests in its essential and innate nature. It is at this point that there is the possibility of recognising that which lies beyond the world.”

PAUL HARRIS

EDITORIAL

It has been said, “Never mind what they say, if you want to know where someone is really coming from, look at how they behave.” In the Buddha’s teaching behaviour is of three kinds, namely; actions of body, of speech and of mind. In terms of speech, what someone says they stand for may not at all correlate to the kinds of behaviours they display.

Take for example the rhetoric we commonly hear these days from politicians, journalists and commentators on social media. Often, we find it is the very people who preach compassion, tolerance and fairness who engage in the most venomous

behaviour towards those with whom they disagree. Those who rail against bigotry are often also the ones trying to de-platform others, refusing to enter into respectful dialogue and, at times, communicating with outright hostility and discrimination.

Recently, there was an attempt to assassinate a politician. This led to calls for those involved in public discourse to tone down their inflammatory attacks on one another. Who, though, were leading these calls for mutual respect and moderation? The self-same politicians, journalists and commentators who were previously engaging in that very vitriol and in-

vective. There was, however, no individual acknowledgment of mistakes having been made, no “*mea-culpa*.” Rather, it was always people on the other side who were deemed responsible and whose attitudes needed to change. These calls for restraint were not heartfelt in any way, they were merely politically expedient.

It is understandable that people try to make sense of the complex and nuanced world by categorising everything and everyone in the most simplistic terms. Hence we find reductive, polarising and absolute notions of good and evil, right and wrong, or success and failure. This kind of oversimplification, however, does not reflect the subtleties of the real world. Rather, it is the breeding ground for rigidity of outlook, negative emotions and extremism. This is the way of conflict.

As students of the Buddha’s teaching, we need to be very aware of this kind of reductive thinking, both as it presents itself externally through the media and as it arises within us. We cannot afford to be lulled into these inflexible, conflict-ridden outlooks. Gotama said of his teachings that they flowed against the stream of worldly attitudes and beliefs. His teaching is a way of peace and understanding, it is a path of non-hatred,

of non-harming. If we are to live our lives and follow this path truthfully, our behaviour needs to reflect this.

For instance, it is hypocritical and not in keeping with the ethos of this teaching to police other people’s ethical behaviour. The five precepts are undertaken personally as rules of training to help develop a healthy self-regard and to reduce levels of self-concern. They were never intended to be used as verbal sticks to bash other people over the head with.

The way of mindfulness is a marvellous exploration of the true nature of conscious existence. As we deepen our practice we discover quite how complex and nuanced life really is. We recognise that truth within ourselves and appreciate that it must also be true for everyone else. There are, therefore, no absolutely good or evil people. We see that, like us, everyone employs both skilful and unskilful means. Like us, everyone is confronted with the realities of gain and loss, pleasure and pain, happiness and despair. And, like us, everyone is ultimately looking for freedom from suffering and the blessed peace of *nibbana*. This flexible, nuanced and compassionate outlook towards all beings without exception lies at the heart of the Buddha’s teaching. ■

NEWS

People: The House of Inner Tranquillity's increased online presence has led to requests from overseas meditators asking to come here for retreats. In early February this year **Alex Voloch** was welcomed to the Centre for a two week stay. Alex hails from São Paulo in Brazil. He discovered our online content and has been receiving regular meditation guidance from Paul over the internet. During their conversations, Alex discussed with Paul the possibility of coming to spend time on retreat at the Centre. When he first arrived in the UK he was hosted by meditator **Sally Passfield** and her husband **Stephen**.

This is the second time Stephen and Sally have hosted an overseas student. They also looked after **Joe Rediger** from the USA. They made contact online first and had a few chats together, so they got to know a little about each other. Then, when Joe arrived, he stayed with them for a few days before going in for his retreat. This allowed time to recover from jet lag and also the opportunity to visit a few places nearby.

Sally said, "It was a wonderful chance to discuss and share the teachings of the House of Inner Tran-

quillity. It emphasised how lucky those of us who live near the Centre are to have regular contact, both with Paul and the full-timers, but also with a good, supportive Sangha."

Joe and Alex also kindly sent their thoughts on the importance of having a contact to stay with before the retreat.

Joe: "Sally and Stephen hosting me before and after my stay at the Centre was very helpful, and much appreciated. It set me up to go into my stay with a great attitude and mindset, ready to experience the teaching in full. Being able to discuss what to expect before going into the retreat and discuss my experience after my stay with a fellow meditator was also very helpful."

Alex: "Staying with Sally and her family was so helpful to get me into a calm and happy state of mind for the retreat. It really opened my eyes to the power of a strong and receptive community, because it made me feel so at home, even before getting to the Centre. When I did get on to the retreat this feeling of community only grew stronger, and this is something really special and unique about the House of Inner Tranquillity and its lay supporters."



Sally Passfield, Alex Voloch and Stephen Passfield

Here are Sally's final thoughts, "It is probable that other meditators from overseas will want to come here for retreats in the future. This will give more members of our Sangha the opportunity to host them. I cannot recommend it highly enough. It is an act of generosity and service to the Centre and an opportunity to make new friends."

Garden: A heavy overnight storm at the end of January caused some

unexpected damage in the garden. **Anda Lutkevics** was on retreat at the time and, when she went out for walking meditation after breakfast, she was surprised to find a curtain of ivy hanging down over the top of the arch on the corner under cells three and four. At the top of the Japanese garden, she found that the fence and the shrubs next to it had blown over and were leaning over the path, blocking the way.

The damage was temporarily rectified by propping up the fence to allow access to the Japanese garden. Subsequently, the climbing shrubs either side of the fence were removed along with the fence and posts. It was decided to replace them and fill the gap with 1.5 meter high yew trees which were ordered online. In the meantime, the concrete post bases were removed and a trench was dug by day students **Peter Andrews** and **Steven Harbour**.



Peter Andrews and Steven Harbour

How an established mass of ivy measuring 3 meters high by 1.7 meters wide was ripped off the wall by the wind in a sheltered part of the garden remains a mystery. The portion overhanging the arch was trimmed back soon after the damage was done but several weeks passed before the weather settled enough for the rest of it to be removed.

Over the last several years, **Brother Nigel** has been working on replacing the *Leylandii* hedge around the property with yew trees. As the yews have grown so well, this spring has been the time to finish off the project. The fence that was constructed as a place holder around the Japanese garden has now all been removed, creating an airy vista around the garden. The yews along the bottom edge are growing strongly and complement the newly planted ones at the top. A stretch along the top edge of the Japanese garden adjacent to the path going down to the shed will be planted up with some more yews this autumn.

The *Leylandii* hedging along the outer boundary by the road was previously cut back on the garden side to encourage the growth of the replacement yews planted next to them. This spring the *Leylandii* were cut back on

the road side too and the final trunks were sawn through. **David Gilbert** kindly used his electric chainsaw to cut the last forty trunks. The job was done in stages with a team of three people. Brother Nigel held the foliage of the adjacent yews out of the way to avoid damage by pulling on a strategically positioned plank. **Scott Harris** held onto the upper trunk of each *Leylandii*, angling it as needed and supporting the trunk, while David sawed away near ground level.

Brother Nigel has been gifted a very beautiful statue of a Zen master with staff in hand setting off on a walkabout. After a lot of trial and error, pondering and repositioning, it was agreed that the perfect placement for the statue was at the top of the Japanese garden on a gravelled area in front of the newly planted yew trees. The statue needed to be on a plinth and experiments were made with wood and stone blocks. Stone was selected and two blocks were shaped and stacked. A hole was drilled through them and into the base of the statue so that a metal rod could be inserted and driven into the ground to secure the statue in position. The layers of the structure were then glued together for extra stability. It is nice to know that from now on the

Zen master will be on hand to encourage meditators as they set off on their mindful perambulation around the Japanese garden and to welcome them on their return.



Brother Nigel and David Gilbert with the Zen Master statue

Maintenance: There are several projects planned for repairs and maintenance of the buildings. We are very happy to have retained the services of **Tom Hammond** and **Simon Prudames** once again, who did such a marvellous job of renovating the garden room of no.8. The first project is replacing some rotten windows, and repairing and repainting others on the garden side of no. 9. A carpenter came to measure the sash window that needs replacing in Paul's office. He will also make half of the sash window on the first floor landing outside Paul's office. The other half of

this was replaced previously when it rotted away.

Tom and Simon started work in early July with repairs to the windows in the sewing room and removal of the other sash window on the first floor which they will repair, paint and reinstall. Two windows will also be renovated on the top floor but how much work they involve will depend on the condition they are in.

Other projects to be tackled in future are redecoration of the other downstairs room in no. 8 and repainting the windows on the top floor of no. 10. ■

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.

BRADFORD ON AVON

HOUSE OF INNER TRANQUILLITY

RETREATS

6-Day Integrated Retreats

September 2-7

October 21-26

6-Day Silent Retreats

August 19-24

September 23-28

October 7-12

November 11-16

November 25-30

December 9-14

Weekend Retreats

August 9-11

September 13-15

November 1-3

TAPE & LECTURE EVENINGS

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

August 7	Lecture
August 14	Tape
August 21	Q&A
August 28	Tape
September 4	Lecture
September 11	Tape
September 18	Q&A
September 25	Tape
October 2	Lecture
October 9	Tape
October 16	Tape
October 23	Q&A
October 30	Tape
November 6	Lecture
November 13	Tape
November 20	Q&A
November 27	Tape
December 4	Lecture
December 11	Tape
December 18	Q&A

OPEN MEDITATIONS

Saturday mornings 10.15-11.15. The door will be open from 10.05am, August 10 - December 14 inc.

MONDAY ONLINE MEETINGS

Evening starts 7.30pm

August 12, 26,
September 9, 23,
October 7, 28,
November 11, 25,
December 9

SATELLITE GROUP

Toronto Canada

Please contact: Jim Vuylsteke
Tel: +1-416-571-4932
Web site: www.sunyata.ca

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An introductory talk given by Rebecca Skillman

On an Integrated retreat, a meditator listened to her teacher answering a question about whether anger was ever justified. He shared a memory of being on the receiving end of some aggressive behaviour from someone else. Recognising that this same pattern had emerged on plenty of previous occasions, this time the teacher had chosen to verbally pushback against it and, thereby, re-establish appropriate social boundaries.

The meditator pondered on this and wondered how her teacher's response fitted with the Buddha's teaching on non-self and the description of enlightenment as being "without boundaries." With a question like this on her mind, there was plenty of opportunity for obsessive, doubtful thinking to get established.

Fortunately, being on an Integrated retreat, there was also an opportunity for the meditator to air her internal conflict with a more experienced student. It was pointed out that even when someone has completed the training, they still live life in the world with all its varying conditions and may very well choose to respond in such ways. The difference is that there is no craving for life to be different and no clinging attachment to

any of it as being 'me', or 'mine' or 'myself.'

Listening to the senior student's explanation had a very powerful effect on the meditator. She intuitively felt she could place trust in that description. The meditator decided to rest in the knowledge that, although there were clearly aspects to the issue that she still did not fully understand, she was happy for this to be so. She was able to acknowledge the doubt that had been a massive distraction and chose to "park" it for the time being. Immediately she felt lighter and freer. As the senior student said, it is our views about enlightenment that are the problem and need to be let go of.

In hindsight, the meditator could see that she had been bringing a strong view to her analysis, and also a quotient of resistance. What she had seen as her desire to see "truth" was in fact a desire to be right.

The meditator reflected on what her teacher had said about the perniciousness of doubt and saw how true this was. At the same time she also felt deep gratitude to the Sangha of which she was part, and the opportunities for attending Integrated retreats, which had been so very beneficial for her that week. ■

An introductory talk given by Julia Cole

The meditator had noticed over the years that she had a preference for studying the Buddha's teaching over the seated practice. She was at home in the world of thinking and doing. The world of being and observing was much newer to her. She noted that she had to be strict in getting herself to meditate, but that time spent reading or listening to a podcast needed very little enforcing. She knew she needed to develop the ability to see clearly, as well as expanding her theoretical knowledge. She, therefore, resolved to meditate daily regardless of her preferences.

She endeavoured to follow her teacher Paul's advice to 'rest content in the moment, mindfully noting things as they arise and pass away.' To her surprise, she found that she was able to follow the guidance more frequently than getting caught up with the hindrances. This led to the possibility of directly observing the five aggregates.

A new problem, however, began to emerge. There was a general sense of unease around noting. She went to her teacher for more guidance. Her teacher thought that, rather than allowing herself to experience the aggregates with beginner's mind, she was trying to get her experience to match the words and descriptions she had absorbed from her studying. Her

studying, he suggested, was her way of trying to mitigate doubt by wanting to know the answers in advance. This really hit home for the meditator.

Her instructions were simple. She was to stop looking for the answers outside of herself and investigate internally. She was to concentrate her efforts on seated meditation and stop listening to or reading any new content for a while. After all, she was told, if we were able to realise enlightenment through reading books the Buddha would have written one.

Fairly immediate results followed. As she sat and mindfully noted, she began to see mind and body processes more clearly. She recognised how mind is one thing and the body was another. They are different and, yet, she saw too how inextricably linked and dependent upon one another they are. She realised she had been partitioning experiences and this was both constraining and uncomfortable. Now she had a new viewpoint from which to investigate. She felt excitement and commitment naturally arose within her as she felt her faith in the Buddha's teachings increase. She also noted that no further intellectual study had been required, that this comprehension had come from direct mindful exploration of her conscious experience. ■

Extract from a Dhamma Talk with full time students

Why is there no 'trying' in mindfulness?

Paul: An excellent question.

Student 3: During a recent conversation you pointed out that I had said I would 'try' to be mindful. I reflected on it. Yes, I can see that you are either mindful or you are not. I get that there is no trying involved.

Paul: It simply requires an intention that comes from an overarching sense of purpose. I don't have to 'try' to brush my teeth. It happens. Why do we practise mindfulness?

Student 3: To see and understand the true nature of reality.

Paul: Just so. It appears to me this is all about intrinsic versus extrinsic reward. For instance, right at this moment are you aware that the birds are singing?

Student 3: Yes.

Paul: To my mind, that this is happening at all is inherently mysterious. The infinite mystery is being revealed through these finite, transient, empty displays, such as, in this case, the

experience of birdsong. There is nothing else that needs to come out of the experience. It is enough in itself. There is no necessity of any extrinsic reward. The reward is inherent in the actual experience. The problem is that we have become so goal-orientated, driven by the idea that a reward is always derived from doing something. In terms of the teaching, unfortunately, we can also get too caught up with the idea of a spiritual 'path', and getting somewhere. And to get somewhere, what do you have to do?

Student 3: Try.

Paul: Try. And, yet, it is all here. All the information we need in order to overcome suffering and to truly understand reality is present in this moment and every moment. The information is present in the experience of the birds singing. You don't have to 'try' to hear the birds singing, do you? The experience of hearing birdsong is happening spontaneously.

When we sit down to meditate, often we think, "I've got to try." Yes, we practise the Four Right Efforts as part of following the Noble Eightfold Path. To practise right effort in meditation, though, what is needed is receptivity. Instead of 'trying', just rest and be

receptive to whatever arises. That may very well be the sound of birds singing. You haven't had to become supremely concentrated. You haven't had to do anything other than set the intention to rest in the moment and allow experience to unfold so that you can mindfully note whatever arises. That is Right Effort. What does it say if someone is 'trying' to practise mindfulness? What does that mean they are actually doing?

Student 3: When I was reflecting on that, I came up with a few things, such as the doubt that one could do it. So, you would need to try. There was a lack of self-belief, the assumption was that there was going to be failure.

Paul: Failure can only exist in contrast to success. Where is the success in listening to the birds singing? Is that a success? It is neither success nor failure, is it?

Student 3: No.

Paul: Success and failure suggests that the practice is being done to get something else, an extrinsic reward. If success is predicated on some future reward it means that any potential happiness, joy or interest in the experience now is being withheld. If,

however, you practise with the idea of the birds singing as being a transient display of the infinite mystery, you are no longer caught in chasing extrinsic rewards. If you just listen in that way, you quickly realise that you can listen to anything mindfully. Even the sound of a fan whirring in the bathroom can be fascinating. There is no future goal. Happiness, joy and interest in the moment are not, therefore, being suppressed.

And you just listen. As you do, all these interesting facts about the nature of sound start to become obvious. You are not 'trying' to get somewhere else. If you are trying to get somewhere and it is based on an idea of 'me' and 'success' and 'failure,' then, there is no room for this simple 'being with.' It is being with the experience rather than trying to use the experience to get somewhere else. Do you see what I mean?

Student 3: Yes.

Paul: It is so much simpler than chasing goals. Self-view, in the form of doubt, however, will insist that it cannot be that simple. Doubt creates complexity. The practice of mindful noting is, in itself, utterly simple. This is why in interviews I regularly ask students what they are aware of right

now. "A sense of warmth," they might say, or, "The perception of my foot." They are doing mindful noting. It is immediate. You don't have to aim for success. These things are just happening and you are just noting them in real-time.

Student 2: Is there an element of thinking that mindfulness is something permanent, that you should be able to keep it and use it all the time?

Paul: Isn't that where the meditator takes being mindful as the signifier of success? For instance, reflecting on a period of mindfulness, a student might ask themselves how mindful they were being. That, however, misses the point. The point of the reflection is not to determine how mindful I have been, because that is about 'have I succeeded or not'. No, the point of the reflection is simply, 'what was I mindful of?' What was the order of events? Do any of those events now persist? That is the correct way to reflect mindfully on experience.

But people have this tendency of using the reflection as a barometer of their success. On a recent Monday evening Zoom meeting, one of the students was talking about using the arising of the signs of concentration as confirmation that they were suc-

ceeding with the practice. It is not at all. It is simply a sign that you are getting concentrated. Temporarily.

There are stages on the Insight-wisdom path where the signs of 'success' are the arising of states such as fear, misery and disgust. And the stage known as 'Knowledge of Re-observation' isn't too much fun either! (*laughter*). The indicator of 'success' there is intense restlessness. This is why, when meditators who I know are doing really well are reporting how hard the practice has suddenly become, I am genuinely happy for them. I am sitting there with this huge Cheshire cat grin on my face.

Another example: I will be aware that they have come through the stage known as 'Knowledge of Arising and Passing Away,' during which they have had all these supposed signs of 'success.' They have seen the bright lights, the spontaneous visions of Buddhas and temples, and they have enjoyed the deeply concentrated, blissful states that can and do arise. And, to their credit, they have realised that, no matter how impressive these states are, they are not, in fact, signs of success. In reality, they are defilements, corruptions of insight-wisdom and not to be indulged. The task of Insight meditation, they realise, is to carry on watching and noting things

as they arise and pass away. That is when the practice enters much more challenging territory. The meditations can, at times, become really tricky and difficult. Given that I know approximately where they are in the process, to hear them say, "I never want to meditate again," to me, is a genuine sign that their practice is going really well. (*Laughter*)

As a meditator, therefore, how can you know what success represents on a path you have not trodden? Or, to the extent that you have trodden it, you cannot possibly know what comes later. How much of your time, therefore, is actually spent in unnecessary despair, because of an entirely misplaced perception of failure? For instance, how often are you properly concentrated in a meditation? Let's be honest, very seldom. And when you are, you get too excited because you regard it as a 'success' and so you instantly lose it again. And we are going to use that as the barometer of success?

It is not. It is simply another state to be included in the practice of mindful noting. This is true with the mental formation of mindfulness itself. It is as much of a transient phenomenon as any other mental formation. It comes, it goes. Understanding that brings in its wake the realisation that the ba-

rometer of success is not the degree to which you are mindful, nor for how long mindfulness can be maintained. What is a good barometer of success in walking the path?

Student 2: The sense that there is less suffering around than there used to be.

Paul: I think that is the most reliable gauge. Reflecting upon the path trodden so far because you can't possibly know what success represents going forward. You haven't done it yet. Looking back in that way will allow you to determine whether the practice is working or not. If it is genuinely the case that somebody looking back can say, "There's been absolutely no improvement, no change. I suffer just as much as I ever did. What is the point of doing this?" Well, don't do it. Go and find something that does work for you. This clearly isn't it. I think, however, in the vast majority of cases, if people look back, hand on heart, they will say, "Given everything I've learned on the mundane level and in terms of the higher teaching, as far as I have developed them, looking back, I can see I definitely suffer less than I used to." I think that alone is the most meaningful and helpful gauge of success. ■



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*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.*

9 Masons Lane
Bradford on Avon
Wiltshire BA15 1QN
England

Tel: +44-(0)1225 866821

e-mail: info@aukana.org.uk

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

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

This newsletter is published twice a year by the Aukana Trust