



Community

The Amaravati Lay Buddhist Newsletter



Spring
2009 /
2551 Issue
No. 28

Puzzled by Buddhism?

In this Issue

Faith in the economy
It's not just about sitting
Questions
Don't Sleep there are Snakes

The Crucible of Practice
The Dalai Lama's Visit
A day for RE teachers
ALBA News

editorial



Faith in the Economy

As he was sitting to one side, King Pasenadi Kosala said to the Blessed One:

"Where, lord, should a gift be given?"

"Wherever the mind feels confidence, great king." — SN 3.24

By the time this is published the ‘global financial meltdown’, the ‘credit crunch’, and the recession, will be old news. We are experiencing a particularly severe example of the periodic episodes of recession which have characterised recent history.

Such cycles of abundance and want are perennial features of human experience. History records the rise and fall of civilisations over centuries and millennia. Our own more narrow experience may have included the birth of children, the start of new careers, the growth of prosperity, the beginnings of new relationships; and also the loss of loved ones, the loss of livelihood, periods of relative impoverishment, and the ending of relationships.

There is nothing startling or revolutionary about these observations—this is just the way the world is—there is simply no way to create a world where everything flourishes forever. This applies to pets and plants as well as to the economy and governments.

Such reflections might seem somewhat negative if we are attached to the idea of a constant flourishing and if we are young and healthy. We may not want to consider the down-side of life. As we grow older, so do our chances of experiencing the messengers of sickness, old age and death; and of experiencing setbacks and problems—the everyday worries of making a living as well as the more tragic losses— all of which we can include within the broad Buddhist concept of *dukkha*.

Although reflecting on historic cycles of growth and decline gives us a less personal and more objective perspective, this does not avoid the need to take action. Although Buddhism points to the unconditioned and our practice is designed to help us to experience this, conditions cannot be ignored. Buddhism is not a nihilistic doctrine and whilst we are practising to relinquish our hold on the world at the same time we also have to act appropriately according to our conventional roles as householder: mother, father, son, daughter; husband, wife; student, breadwinner, retired.

Buddhism distinguishes between fundamental (or dhammic) and relative (or conventional) truth. Conventional truth consists of agreements about everyday matters to help societies to interact harmoniously and fairly.

Many things we take for granted are conventions - for example, time and money. Conventional truth may be in accord with the *Dhamma* or it may not. For example owning property is a useful convention, even though in reality nobody owns anything. Many of the conventions and laws which have been established around property—and other aspects of modern life—are intended to prevent conflict and unfairness; it seems right that someone who has worked hard and bought a home should be regarded by the wider community as the rightful owner of his property.

Dhammic truth is true in a basic way, but conventional truth is much more uncertain: laws change, and what is acceptable at one time becomes abhorrent at another. In fact the uncertainty of conventions is summed up in the *tilakkhana*—the three characteristics of existence— *anicca* (impermanence), *dukkha* (unsatisfactoriness), and not-self (*anatta*).

The current recession appears to be closely linked with failures in banking and financial systems caused by the lack of regulation of global transactions. Financial systems, (like all conventions) depend upon confidence. We need to believe that a metal or paper token has a value much greater than its intrinsic worth and that this token will be honoured by

others. Each depositor believes that the amount shown on his bank statement can be withdrawn at any time. If depositors start to doubt that their money is safe, then we can get a 'run on the bank' where a lot of people try to withdraw their money at the same time and the bank has insufficient liquid assets to meet all these demands.

Over recent years much more complex financial 'instruments' have been marketed. Many people and organisations invested in these complex products either directly or inadvertently because they were convinced by plausible people that their investments would grow. And just like historic financial scandals such as the south sea bubble, it has eventually become clear that recent financial innovations have been founded on hot air—basically greed and delusion: the promise to make money based on a belief that wealth will continually increase. At root many modern forms of investment are just hidden forms of gambling.

It has been obvious for many years that all was not well; the pushing of large loans to those with little income, the very high bonuses obtained by some financial managers; the huge rise in property values, and the massive levels of debt, all offered strong clues. The end result of the bursting of the debt bubble has been a profound loss of confidence in financial institutions and systems. The financial conventions have been exposed as flawed and will take much effort to rebuild.

Maintaining a livelihood is something that householders need to take very seriously. And although the monastic Sangha does not handle money, maintaining somewhere like Amaravati is costly. As someone wryly remarked to me, 'it is surprising how much effort and money it takes to maintain a community of monastics in poverty'!

We are embodied beings, we have animal needs. We all need to eat, clothe ourselves, live somewhere, and protect and support our families and communities. And this applies to all of us whether we are monks or

nuns, lay men or lay women. This truth is recorded in the four requisites in the Pali suttas—the four basic requirements to sustain life are food, shelter, clothing and medicine.

The importance of the requisites is fundamental. So what are we to do during this difficult time? Buddhism teaches that material wealth is uncertain and to be used before it gets lost. Generosity is encouraged, and stinginess is criticised.

What isn't given is lost
So when the world is on fire
with aging and death,
one should use one's wealth by giving:
what's given is well used.

What's given bears fruit as pleasure.
What isn't given does not:
thieves take it away, or kings;
it gets burnt by fire or lost. (SN 1.41)

Trading our skills and bartering surpluses, growing vegetables and recycling goods, and being more frugal and careful with possessions, may all become more widespread as recession continues and unemployment rises. Many of these activities and virtues are good for the planet as well.

And while we wait for global financial systems to be rebuilt, we can reflect that our good actions cannot be taken by ‘thieves or kings’. We can all act generously using whatever wealth we have and make deposits in the ‘Bank of *Puñña**’. This is a bank that is always open and has endless credit.

Chris Ward

* *Puñña*—the fruit of good *kamma*, also known as ‘merit’

The Crucible of Practice

When the Buddha made his discovery that there is a way out of suffering, he said “Opened are the doors of the deathless, Let those who have ears to hear put forth faith”.

What is the trajectory for those of us who taken up this invitation and embarked on the path in order to explore what he had realised and pointed to in his teachings?

Many of us have heard the teachings and felt them to be true. With an intuitive sense of trust we begin to reflect on the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Noble Path, and increasingly see the logic and rationale of the teachings.

We apply ourselves to practice, to being more mindful and responsible. We engage in sitting practice and suffer the ups and downs that inevitably follow as we gradually get better at integrating ethical behaviour, mindfulness and meditation practice into our lives. Hopefully we learn to better accept our own shortcomings and those of others as we gain an improved perspective on the frequently unrealisable ideals we might aspire to. In many cases we experience enjoyable and blissful states of mind, which make it all feel worthwhile.

Many of us find that with time we function better in daily life, that we manage to keep our head better when those around are losing theirs. We discover that living a principled and moral life gives us greater stability in daily interactions with others.

As we become increasingly familiar with terminology and concepts, we become more confident in communicating our own understanding and experience of practice to others, especially if they are interested. We might even ‘come out’ and declare our interest in Buddhist teachings and practice more openly.

But what then? Living a moral life with all its benefits and having a ‘good’ practice with the greater equanimity that it brings, still leaves the inevitable fact that we all have to face, that all this also comes to end. That at some point we won’t be capable of living a relatively autonomous life, be able to engage competently or coherently with others, that we might not be able to experience peaceful meditations, let alone be able to sit. At some point we will grow old, our bodies and operational minds will fall apart and we will die. What then?

It leaves us having to confront and penetrate the ultimate question we all face personally as individuals. Who or what is it that lives and dies? Or, looking at it from another perspective, who or what is it that doesn’t die? What is this ‘deathless’ the Buddha spoke of? For this is what the Buddha’s teaching is all about when he spoke about the end of suffering.

Here is the crunch point, the one that at the deepest level of instinctive being and the one that almost at any price, even the price of being truly free, we all try to avoid, whatever we may say and think. That moment of ultimate relinquishment, relinquishment not just of all that is pleasing, but truly of everything without exception, even our innermost desire for and attachment to life itself (1).

It is at this point, often recurring, that we need to engage with the teaching on *Anattā* (2) even whilst still operating and functioning as a self in the conditioned world. It is here that we experience the apparent paradox of existence and non-existence, of form and emptiness, of the personal and impersonal, of the conditioned and unconditioned. Fully understanding and embodying that understanding involves relinquishment, but this relinquishment is not a willed act, it happens naturally, though naturally does not necessarily mean painlessly.

This ultimate relinquishment comes only with Insight, the realisation of Wisdom, that transformative process where deep understanding and emotional acceptance come together in a moment of freedom, one which reverberates and continues to reverberate through our embodied being, profoundly shifting our perspective on life. Recognised as always being present when one is awake to it, it is known to be always there,

even when we are not awake to it, which is why it is called the deathless.

Insight then just does its 'stuff'. It is just 'there', without effort or struggle, it is the background of all that we experience. It informs and expresses itself in the interactions and experiences of daily life, in intelligent and skilful living, in the understanding of others, in kindness and empathy, in love.

Insight or wisdom requires no effort, no struggle. There is struggle though, but this struggle or effort is concomitant with the attachments, desires and aversions that arise from long held habits and patterns of unenlightened living, most inherited and many learnt. As they naturally arise and try to function, they blind us to acceptance of the way things are.

In the light of wisdom they are challenged, questioned and undermined by the intuited and known bigger picture. Some drop away easily whilst others cling more persistently, all depending on the depth of attachment (3). It is in this crucible of practice where the suffering of purification takes place, as well as the joy of deepening liberation. We may suffer the pain of letting go but it is with the release of letting go that we also experience the joy of freedom and acceptance of sentient life and form in all its emptiness, as it is. It becomes an increasingly choiceless process as the true becomes increasingly self evidently seen to be just so.

This deathless is the ultimate refuge, the end of the journey, the real home we have always been looking for. In knowing our real home we are at home everywhere, as we go about our daily business whoever or wherever we are in the world, be we monks or nuns, married or single, employed or unemployed, educated or uneducated.

No more worries? In the bigger picture, no. In the smaller, yes, lots. But in the context of the bigger picture they are not overwhelming or ever unmanageable. Does suffering ever end? No, for conditioned and sentient existence always involves suffering and Yes, it does end, when suffering is seen from the unconditioned perspective and known as conditioned and transient.

It is the acceptance of our immediate suffering that ends our suffering as it is normally experienced, which is with the reactivity of aversion as well as our natural inclination towards pleasant experiences.

Our journey through the crucible of practice is like a deep devotional bow when our forehead touches the ground, where the highest functions of the mind come down to earth, for it is in and through our fathom long body that we know the world and where we find the path that leads to its cessation.

So what is meant by the term ‘the end of suffering’. It is the direct and immediate knowing of suffering in existence, the direct and immediate knowing of the cause for its arising, it is in the experience of the deathless and it is in the knowing and practice of the means by which suffering is brought to an end.

The Four Noble Truths are thus both the beginning and end of our journey to the end of suffering and real peace.

Nick Carroll

1. *Āsavas* - the desire for sense experiences, the desire for life, ignorance (*avijja*)
2. *Anattā* – the teaching on non-self. That *all* phenomenon, physical and mental, is essentially conditioned and interdependent and therefore impermanent with no unchanging essence.
3. *Upādāna* – the clinging to sense impressions, both physical and mental.

It's not just about sitting

***Confusion ceases
by maintaining
a meditation practice
focused in the body,
by avoiding that
which should not be done
and by mindfully doing
that which should be done.
Dhammapada 293***

I find it so much more helpful to rate thoughts, words and deeds as skilful or unskilful than as good or evil, but I am realising how much I am conditioned to do the latter despite my wholehearted acceptance of the principle. I keep noticing that as soon as I identify something as unskilful I tag on to that recognition another thought: 'I shouldn't have done that' or 'I should know better' etc ... and

then comes the pain of guilt. Sometimes I have been aware of identifying an unskilful action and of 'catching' myself before I've slipped into the groove of finding fault, though often if I look carefully I notice that it's a conscious exercise in controlling my thoughts ('I'm going to carry on as though I don't feel as much like a naughty girl as I actually do). But at the stage at which I realise I still feel naughty because I haven't eradicated that judgmental attitude properly I usually start to smile at myself!

Anyway, I'm finding it fruitful to think of 'misconduct' in terms of actions that might tend to increase dukkha in the world, rather than only as something that is judged to be wrong according to a rule or a law (though I can see that rules and laws may well be made in an effort to limit dukkha – indeed as a parent I have often proposed family rules in the hope of encouraging peace and harmony!). A little 'Aha' moment that came to me as I was reflecting on this topic is that misconduct needn't just involve how we treat others. It can also include unskilful behaviour towards ourselves – for example the very self-criticism that I've just mentioned. So even when I'm trying really hard to do everything right, I can still act unskilfully.

Conversely, I can minimise the potential damage that might arise from an unskilful action by acknowledging it, learning from it and forgiving myself. Here's an example from a couple of years back,

when I was still working. I'd left the office at lunchtime to buy a sandwich and do a few errands. I knew I had a meeting that afternoon to discuss ways of raising my assistant's salary, but was sure it was at three o'clock, and that it needn't impinge on my lunch break. So I didn't bother to notice what time I went out. In fact, though, the meeting was at two o'clock, and I arrived back half an hour after it had started. Feeling embarrassed about missing the meeting, when I made my excuses I found myself saying that I had misread the time on my rather stylised watch face instead of telling the truth, which was that I'd misread my diary entry. I was able to make a funny story out of the former (How could this happen – I must be losing my marbles!), whereas I'd got it into my head that the latter would merely sound careless, and give the impression that I hadn't been treating the subject of the meeting, and by implication my assistant, with the respect they deserved.

It was true that the error was caused by a misreading, but I deliberately falsified the story to put myself in a better light and, I told myself, as a kindness to my assistant, who might have been hurt when she discovered that I had not taken care to be present at a meeting that concerned her. And of course, there were repercussions, but only for me! The funny story was accepted at face value, the meeting was rescheduled, but I continued to feel thoroughly ashamed, even though only I knew I had lied, and even though there were good intentions bundled in along with the main driver of fear of censure. More important to me was the realisation that I had in a way created a little mist and confusion despite my commitment to uncovering the truth – like deliberately putting a smudge on clear glass. Clearly my Pali name, Amala, needs some living up to!

At the same time I could see that the episode had a valuable lesson to teach me – that carelessness can contribute to the conditions for further foolishness and that, conversely, taking care of small things, such as checking a diary before going out, make skilful action more probable – fear of hurting others, fear of others' bad opinion and so on are less likely to arise and to become the spur for misconduct.

What was particularly interesting to me about this episode, though, is that having come through it without actually hurting anyone else I found myself almost grateful for it. That's because it gave me the opportunity

to acknowledge my misconduct and to notice, allow and reflect on the pain it caused me, all in the context of investigation without judgment. That's made it feel more comfortable for me to draw that positive teaching from it and not to fall prey to guilt – a real benefit for me of practice.

The other thing that the episode highlighted was the observation that I've not infrequently made to myself before – that the more I practise the more I notice potential unskilfulness in this way, and sometimes it can feel as though I am 'finding myself out' more and more often, rather in the way that I start to notice dust in the corners of a room once I know I am responsible for cleaning it, which I wouldn't notice if I were just visiting. So the perception of pain tends to increase to the extent that I can no longer ignore it or suppress it but must bring it into full awareness and investigate it properly.

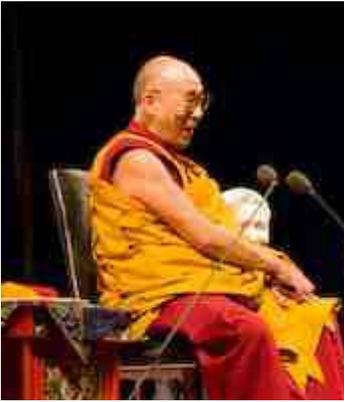
I have found it helpful to use the body to investigate the wisdom of our actions. For example, when I feel the uneasiness that follows foolishness, it's in the body that I feel it – a mask-like tightening of the face and a heavy stone in the chest. So much so, that if I feel that way, I can be fairly certain that I am indeed uneasy about something, and can search until I find out what it is. Again, the more I practise, the sooner I seem to become aware of these sensations and the more likely I am to find another way of dealing with the issue. And when I find that way, bodily relaxation follows like a knot unravelling. And the very complexity if that knot can provide a clue in its own right – there's a difference between the complex proliferations of thought around an unskilful course of action and the simpler, cooler, smoother 'feel' of a wise choice.

But of course that opens the way for even more investigation – how do I know that what my body tells me is 'right for me' is not simply delusion? My experience up to now has been that the body is a reliable guide – the results of decisions I've made in this way have demonstrated it. So maybe now it's time to develop some faith...

Alison Moore

THE DALAI LAMA'S VISIT—LONDON MAY 2008 some personal reflections.

In contrast to previous visits, The Dalai Lama's return to the UK this May was made controversial by a combination of World events. Civil unrest in Lhasa during February and March had been brutally suppressed. Tibet had been subject to a 'Lockdown' by the occupying Chinese forces. This coincided with the run up to the Olympics in Beijing when the Chinese regime would be on display to the world.



In addition to this the supporters, of the deity Dorje Shugden, had recently resumed demonstrations against the Dalai Lama. So in late May when I walked along the edge of Hyde Park to the Royal Albert hall to hear HH 's London public address I was met with noisy demonstrations. Firstly there was an unrelated demonstration outside the Iranian embassy. Then there were the Shugden supporters waving banners and shouting 'Dalai Lama stop lying'. Further along the road and neatly contained by the Met. were

Chinese demonstrators chanting 'No return to feudalism'. And on the opposite side of the road were some Tibetans much less noisily asking for the end to the Chinese occupation.

It interested me that this gentle compassionate monk should attract so much 'heat'. I wondered whether the Chinese demonstrators were aware of HH's long held plans for reform and modernisation of Tibet but by the Tibetans. I wondered whether they were aware of the brutal treatment of Tibetans by the occupying Chinese administration, of the human rights abuses and the murder of demonstrators in Lhasa.

I wondered why so many of the Shugden supporters were Westerners in Tibetan monks attire. I wondered why none of the Shugden supporters literature addressed directly the reasoning given by HH for proscribing the Shugden sect.

Inside the Albert Hall the atmosphere was different and my non Buddhist companions were instantly won over by this simple Buddhist Monk with his message of peace and compassion.

The Middle Way in Birmingham.

Whilst the London address was for the general public, the teachings over three days in Nottingham were intended for a Buddhist audience. Each morning the day commenced with Tibetan monks chanting followed by an offering from another Buddhist tradition. The nuns from Chithurst and Amaravati gave a wonderful rendering of one of HH's favourite Sutta's after which I wanted to applaud but they were greeted with respectful silence and a warm smile from HH which was probably more appropriate.

Tsongkhapa.

HH had chosen to teach from a Text by the great Tibetan scholar Tsongkhapa. Now it is important to remember that the Dalai Lama is head of the Geluk school of Tibetan Buddhism. In the Geluk tradition meditative practise is informed by and informs reasoning, analysis and debate. The two go hand in hand. Indeed Tsongkhapa in 1398 CE at the age of 41 attempted to provide a systematized integration of contemplative practice and textual reasoning. His work is important because it marks the beginning of the Gelukpa tradition which by the sixteenth century CE had become the largest of the Tibetan schools.

What intrigued me was the information that after many years of grounding in the classic Indian Mahayana sutras and immersing himself in the works of past generations of Tibetan scholars, Tsongkhapa became dissatisfied with his understanding and realization of emptiness. He then went on a year's retreat in an isolated hermitage in central Tibet. It was here whilst undertaking intense meditation and study that he had a dream in which he was present at a debate between the luminaries of the Middle way tradition. Present in the dream were Nargarjuna, Aryadeva, Nagabodhi and Candrakirti. When Tsongkhapa awoke he was in a state of great bliss having had a direct experience of emptiness. Following this awakening he went

on to write five main works on the middle way philosophy. So it was via a dream in a meditation retreat rather than simply years of study and debate that lead Tsongkhapa to his realization.

What seemed central for me in listening to HH read and talk about both Tsongkhapa's and Nargajuna's work is that discourse, debate, reasoning and analysis are accepted as important tools in the quest for enlightenment. Meditation in the Geluk school, both *shamatha** and *vipashyana** stand alongside the intellect and a serious attempt is made at the integration of all these tools.

Nargarjuna.

HH made frequent references to Nargarjuna, a second century CE Indian Buddhist scholar and monk because it was his text — 'the fundamental wisdom of the middle way' that informed Tsongkhapa. Indeed Nargarjuna is regarded as the 'father' of the middle way tradition. Tsongkhapa attempted to distil Nargarjuna's development of Buddhist thought into the Tibetan tradition.

Dependent Arising And Emptiness.

Tsongkhapa in 'The Harmony of Emptiness and Dependent-arising' states:

'Thus it is taught that because nothing exists
Other than the dependently –arisen
There is no existing thing
Which is not empty of inherent existence.'

What is being stated here is that each and every phenomenon (including oneself) is comprised of other interrelated and dependent phenomenon. A dependent phenomenon cannot be said to have an inherent existence, or an essence. It does not exist from its own side. It is empty of essence. Dependent arising and emptiness mean the same thing.

Now if this all sounds a bit abstract stay with me as I try to give some examples to help explain this philosophy. (In doing so I perhaps break with the Geluk style which I have to say seemed to stay in the realm of the abstract.)

The table on which I write is comprised of a top, some legs, and a drawer with handles etc. It is made of wood. The wood came from a tree. The tree was felled and a carpenter fashioned the wood into this table. If we break this table down into legs, a top drawer, handles and so on, is simply pieces of wood assembled in a certain way. The wood being grown in the first place was dependent upon the right climatic conditions the right soil, the assembly depended upon the skill of the carpenter, his intention, his tools etc. And these in turn depended upon other dependent phenomena. There is nothing about these bits of wood apart from a convention of language to call it a table, that makes it a table. It does not exist from its own side. It is a dependently arisen phenomena. As a dependently arisen thing, it exists but the way it exists is through its dependence. That is to say it does not exist through its essence. If I take it apart and chop it up it is simply firewood. 'The table' is a convention of language. Thus the middle way philosophers would say this table exists but is empty of inherent existence.

Now of course we might object that what holds for tables does not hold for people. And of course this leads us into the teaching of anatta which in the Tibetan schools is presented as emptiness.

Tsongkhapa here applies the same rigorous analysis to the self. If we break the self down into the aggregates (the body/mind complex categories of; form, feeling, discernment, formative elements and consciousness). Nowhere can we find an essence of self. At this point HH made a moving step by step explanation of how in our Meditation we might investigate the nature of 'self'. By rigorously applying analytical meditation to each of the aggregates in turn, he suggested our notions of an independently existing self are unsustainable.

His view and his experience was that nowhere could this 'self' be found. The middle way philosophers are not claiming that we do not really exist or are illusions. What they are teaching is that we are not different from the aggregates. 'The self is not the same as the aggregates, nor is it anything other than the aggregates'. The aggregates are then shown to be dependent phenomena much like the different parts of the table.

For Tsongkhapa the self as a separate independent essence of an indi-

vidual cannot be found. Yes we exist but the way an individual exists is in dependence upon other dependent phenomena. The individual is empty of inherent existence. HH is not teaching that this analysis is enough on its own, it needs to be integrated with a lifetime of insight meditation.

The middle way is not simply a scholarly Buddhist philosophy. It informs HH 's dealings with the troubled world of international politics. For what is in operation here is a principle that applies to every human situation. We are always finding ourselves on the horns of a dilemma. Either this or that. Either the self exists or it does not. Either we fight the Chinese invasion or we do nothing. Either we give vent to our anger or we suppress it.

The middle way teaches that in the centre of every polarity, every dilemma, every juxtaposition of opposites, is a place of balance that opens up a different way of relating to the given dichotomy. Thus HH has consistently preached non violence towards the Chinese invaders and at the same time has kept the Tibetan cause alive by travelling the world and winning support for his proposals for a cooperative solution to the issue of Tibetan independence. It is the middle way in politics.

The Compassion Of His Holiness.

Hearing HH teach this text from Tsongkhapa filled me with hope and awe. For here is a man who seems to embody the compassionate ideals of a Bodhisattva together with the skill and diplomacy of visionary inspirational worldly leader. His non violent middle way approach to the Chinese invasion and oppression of his homeland has set a high standard for political behaviour.

Of the many people I talked to during the days of the teachings, the common response was one of having been touched by being in the presence of this remarkable man. I travelled back from Nottingham with a real sense of having been uplifted through this contact with a truly wonderful person.

Richard Bober

** These terms are Sanskrit for the Pali Samatha and Vipassana*

Questions on practice

Q. When I try to focus on the breath my mind is all over the place, what shall I do?

Have you ever thought of trying to be aware of the distracted mind? Try it. As much as you try, the mind can't be distracted. All you get is awareness. The mind stops doesn't it. It's like a Zen koan. It can't be done. It doesn't make sense. That's why the mind stops. Then, just rest your attention right there and see what happens. The breath comes to you doesn't it, and this is fundamentally different than trying to grasp the breath, which is what we tend to do if we try to be mindful of it. So now you have awareness of the breath, but look for the arising of the distracted mind, and when you notice it, be aware of that – not the content or the story, but the fact a story has come into the mind. Now be aware of the distracted mind, and you will find you can't be – and in the silence that follows, the breath will present itself again. It's a cycle isn't it – but one you can't escape from. You can't escape from mindfulness when you practise this way. And there is no success or failure when you practise this way, because everything is included in your meditation. Both the breath and the distracted mind are your objects of meditation. And if you notice the self-critical mind, the mind that sits in judgement and tells us we can't meditate, that too is within your field of awareness.

Where did the problem of the distracted mind come from? By thinking you should focus on the breath you have set up the conditions for the distracted mind to arise. And you have created the op-

portunity to despise yourself when it does. But your mind is just following its nature, receiving thoughts is its nature. Mindfulness is about being mindful of every moment, whatever arises. So from the perspective of being mindful, it doesn't matter what it is, whatever we experience, we should be mindful of it.

Q. I don't know how to be mindful. I hear so much about how important it is to be mindful, but as hard as I try, I don't know whether I'm ever really mindful. I don't think I know what mindfulness is.

Have you ever tried trying not to be mindful? Try it. Try not being mindful of your breathing (1). What do you get? You get mindfulness of breathing. Not only that, you are mindful of breathing in quite a different way. Because you are trying not to be mindful, there is a quality of relinquishment that isn't there when you are trying to be mindful.

And try not to be mindful of walking. It works for me. I find I'm mindful of walking like I've never been before. It's so much easier. It stays with you like a bad tune.

Try not being mindful of feeling. For the first time, you notice neutral feeling, let alone pleasant or painful feeling. When we try not to be mindful of feeling we really have to explore feeling. It's the same with mental states and ideas. You really pay attention when you are trying not to pay attention to something, and in quite a different way. You are not grasping 'being mindful', which means you move on. You don't squeeze the life out of the moment trying to be mindful of it, you notice and relinquish each moment. You let it go, and are in the next moment, which you can never be if you are 'trying' to be mindful.

It's like listening to someone speak. Trying to listen, you find you grasp one thing they say and squeeze it to death, you analyse it and work it over in the mind, and then you discover you haven't been listening at all. You've missed everything else they have said. It sounds ridiculous to suggest you should try not to listen – but this is exactly the way to listen. For example, to listen to a Dhamma talk, just open the

mind to the sound, and don't grasp one or other idea to the exclusion of the rest. The ears can't help but hear, and if you try not to listen (rather than let your mind wander off, grasping this or that idea), you will hear everything – and on a much deeper level. Don't believe me, you need to try it out and see what happens.

After I had lead a meditation on trying not to be mindful at the last ALBA Day of Practice a good friend came up to me and told me she had recently given up being a Buddhist. After practising Buddhism for 30 years she had made the decision to stop taking the refuges and precepts. But she continued to meet her Buddhist friends, visit the monastery and cook on retreats as she had done before. And she realised she had laid down a burden. Trying to be a Buddhist had been a load she had been carrying around for 30 years and she had finally put it down. What she had been carrying around was, 'I'm not good enough', which had expressed itself as, 'I'm not good enough to be a Buddhist'.

Laying down the burden of the critical mind that says, 'I'm not good enough', is what Buddhism is all about. We practise Buddhism in order to break through the conditioned mind. But we approach Buddhism with the same critical mind as we've always had, going right back into childhood. How could it be otherwise? And all these years we've never questioned it. It's time to challenge it. That's why it's trying to do the opposite of what we think makes logical sense sometimes, just to challenge our habitual assumptions, our conditioned way of thinking.

There is lots of paradox in Buddhism, and it's often overlooked. I reminded my friend of when we'd studied King Milinda's questions, long ago. In a dialogue between King Milinda and a monk called Nagasena the Venerable Nagasena tells the King that to do good deeds in the past is useful, but to do good deeds in the present is useless (2). Well, of course, it is not possible to do good deeds in the past is it? It doesn't make sense.

At the King's request, Venerable Nagasena gives a simile. If we want water, would it be better to dig a well in the present, or to have dug it in the past? The answer is, to dig it in the past, because we would die of

thirst before we had finished digging the well in the present. It is the same with doing good. We forget that what is of real benefit is to have done good deeds in the past. When we remember this, we realise that we had better start digging that well now, before it is too late. This is a really good reflection, I think. This is why we use paradox - to shake up the conditioned mind. It is why we meditate, to break through our conditioned way of thinking, so we can see things as they really are. We talk about blindly following our habits – it's a good description, and it's when we stop, that we see.

When the Buddha had finished giving a sermon, the listener often said, 'it is as though you have set upright something that was turned upside down'. That's how things are for us. We think we see things the right way up, but they are actually turned upside down. It's only when we break through our conditioned mind that we can turn them the right way up.

Martin Evans

Notes

- (1) In trying not being mindful of your breathing, you should try not to be mindful of the beginning, middle and end of the in breath, and not to be mindful of the beginning, middle and end of the out breath, and not to be mindful of the changing nature of the breath and so on. I don't just mean think of something else.
- (2) From the section called 'Questions for cutting off of perplexity'. Milinda's questions are thought to date from around the beginning of the Christian era. It has been translated by I.B. Horner and published by Luzac and Co. I don't know if it is still in print. King Milinda himself was one of the Greek rulers of Bactria from 155 to 130BC, a kingdom in what is now northern Afghanistan, who came to rule much of northern India, and became one of the most revered figures in Buddhism.

A Buddhist review of:

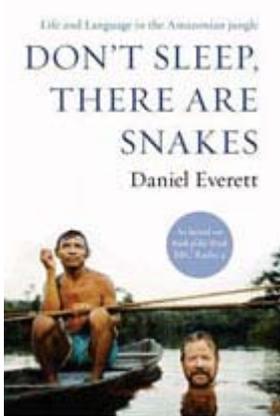
Don't Sleep, There Are Snakes: Life and language in the Amazonian Jungle

by Daniel Everett, 2008, Profile, 300pp, Profile, £15

Dan Everett has spent around thirty years visiting the Pirahã people deep within the Amazon jungle. He and his family were initially visiting and living amongst the Pirahã as evangelical Christian missionaries.

Everett spent a lot of effort in trying to understand the Pirahã language. There were no textbooks and no previous translations into Portuguese, a widespread Amazonian language. He became the first Westerner to achieve a reasonable competence in and understanding of Pirahã, and subsequently produced a translated gospel of Mark.

It was with this that he hoped to convince the Pirahã to accept Jesus and Christianity. However, although tribe members listened to a tape recording of the gospel read by a Pirahã native, they were unimpressed apart from the story in Mark about John the Baptist being decapitated.



He was eventually told by one of the tribe that although they liked him and he was welcome to continue to live with them they did not want to hear any more about Jesus and did not want to live like Americans.

Everett subsequently read that for the two hundred years that missionaries have had contact with the Pirahã, not a single conversion had been recorded. They were regarded as 'recalcitrant'. Since they did not feel lost, they did not feel any need to be 'saved' either.

Although the Pirahã were unconvinced by the Christian message, Everett became very interested in the Pirahã life and worldview and subsequently lost his own faith.

One of the main reasons for his difficulty in getting the Pirahã to consider Jesus, was the value they placed upon immediate experience. Valuing immediate experience lies at the heart of the Pirahã culture and language. They have no words for the past and the future and for abstract concepts. They have no numbers and a simple grammatical structure, although the language does use complex pitch and tones. Their lives revolve around hunting and gathering along the Maici River, a very large tributary of the Amazon. Everett describes their commitment to their current experience as the ‘immediacy of experience principle’.

Arañña Sutta The Wilderness

Standing to one side, a devata addressed the Blessed One with a verse:

Living in the wilderness,
staying peaceful, remaining chaste,
eating just one meal a day:
why are their faces
so bright & serene?

[The Buddha:]

They don't sorrow over the past,
don't long for the future.
They survive on the present.
That's why their faces
are bright & serene.

From longing for the future,
from sorrowing over the past,
fools wither away
like a green reed cut down.

Samyutta Nikaya I.9

Now this interested me from a Buddhist perspective. As the ‘Wilderness Sutta’ on the left explains, Buddhism extols the virtues of a simple life in wilderness and the focus of much of the training is to cease to be attached to the conditions of mind. Buddhism encourages living in the present moment and the gaining of a true perspective on concepts and thoughts.

Concepts and thoughts are regarded within Buddhism as ‘constructed’ and untrustworthy, especially when they are about abstract matters.

One could say that the further our awareness is away from immediate experience, and the more attached to thoughts, the more deluded we are. And some thoughts are more troublesome than others. Attachment to thoughts of self-hood, of ‘me’ and ‘mine’, of the past and the future, and of grand ideals and subtle abstractions can be particularly deluding. Buddhism offers a range of teachings and practices to help us to clearly see through these objects of mind and to understand that these are human constructs and not necessarily useful or true.

It would seem that the Pirahã language and worldview follows this same insight. The priority given to direct experience and of trusting only what friends have to say about their own direct experience is why the Pirahã were unconvinced by the Christian message. They asked Everett if he had met Jesus. When he replied that he had not their response was “Well, Dan, how do you have his words if you have never heard him or seen him?”

Everett observes that the Pirahã are the happiest and most relaxed people he has met. They understand their environment and live in a simple and natural way in the jungle. Their lives are not perfect, however. They suffer from malaria, high infant mortality and animal attacks, and yet are happy. To Everett’s discomfort, they laughed when he told them about the suicide of his stepmother since suicide is not known amongst the Pirahã and was seen as ‘very stupid’.

What Everett’s work supports is the insight that a large amount of mental anguish results from a misuse of the mind — from a basic ignorance. And that modern Western culture, for all its benefits, creates a toxic climate for mental health.

This is not to suggest that the Pirahã are natural paragons living in a constant state of *Nibbāna*: this would be to indulge in a Buddhist version of the romantic ideal of the noble savage, yet it seems that their way of life, their language and their culture, by supporting living in the present, does avoid much unnecessary anguish and lead to happier lives.

As Everett says:

‘The Pirahãs have built their culture around what is useful to their survival. They don’t worry about what they don’t know, nor do they think they can or do know it all. Likewise, they do not crave the products of others’ knowledge or solutions. Their views, not so much as [dryly summarised here], but as they are lived out in the Pirahãs’ daily lives, have been extremely helpful to me, and persuasive as I have looked at my own life and the beliefs that I held, many of them without warrant. Much of what I am today, including my nontheistic view of the world I owe at least in part to the Pirahã’

Chris Ward

Food preparation problems



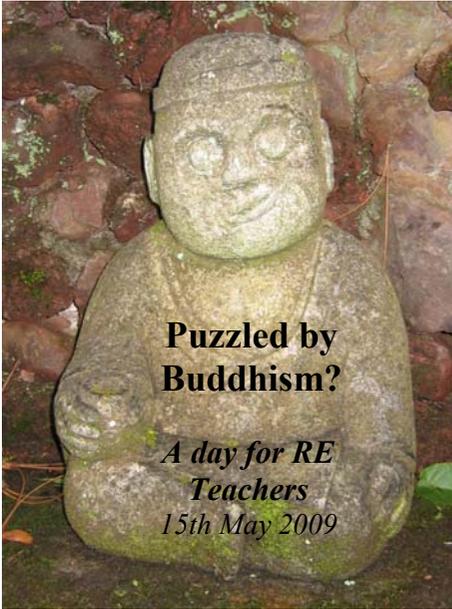
It would be a close run thing whether the porridge could be recovered in time for breakfast

ALBA CONNECTIONS YAHOO! GROUP

We've set up the ALBA Connections Yahoo! group to enable you to contact each other directly, for example to discuss Dhamma topics, to support each other's practice, to make practical arrangements, for example for lifts to events at Amaravati, or simply to make conversation with Dhamma friends.

If you're not already a member, there are two ways you can join, and both are very simple. You can join via the website - as it's an invitation-only site you will need to be approved, but that's just a formality, and approval is guaranteed. You'll then be able to start receiving and posting messages. Alternatively, email Alison Moore at metta@petalmoore.net and I'll send you an invitation. When you receive it, all you'll need to do to join is to click on the "Join this group" button at the bottom of the invitation email.

ALBA News



Puzzled by Buddhism?

*A day for RE Teachers
15th May 2009*

Where does most teaching about Buddhism take place? At Buddhist monasteries and centres or elsewhere?

Surprisingly, the answer may be that most teaching takes place in state schools.

Ever since Buddhism was identified as one of the six major world religions to be taught in UK schools some years ago, there has been a requirement to include Buddhism in the RE curriculum.

As with the other faiths in the list of six, Buddhism is now often introduced and taught to primary and secondary school students by RE teachers who are relatively unfamiliar with it.

Understanding one faith or religion is difficult enough; to understand and teach about six sounds like an impossible task. And the fact is that Buddhism is still relatively unknown in the UK.

For many years Amaravati has hosted school visits. This is an excellent way for teachers and students to experience the reality of Buddhism. And it is clear that such visits are popular with both students and teachers.

To help school teachers further, ALBA and the Amaravati

Sangha have agreed to run a one day event aimed to help primary teachers to understand more about Buddhism.

Gill Williamson, the Hertfordshire Buddhist representative on the SACRE committee, has observed how Primary school teachers sometimes struggle to teach Buddhism and the limited materials that are available to them. Often, schools use the 'laughing or fat Buddha' as an example of a 'sacred' image respected by Buddhists, rather than the appropriate sitting or standing Buddha statues.

Ajahn Vajiro is hoping to obtain a number of more suitable Buddha images to give to teachers attending the RE day.

The plan is to run the day on the 15th May 2009 from 10.00 till 3.30pm at Amaravati. The will be to give a basic appreciation of Buddhism and some ideas / worksheets / resources / plans for activities and lessons. Up to 20 teachers would be accepted and no charge would be made.

If anyone is interested in attending the day or contributing in some way then please contact Gill or Chris via email at: ***info (at) buddhacommunity.org***

Kathina 2010

ALBA has offered to play a leading role in Kathina 2010. This is likely to require fund-raising and setting up of a Kathina committee. If you would like to offer support then please contact ALBA : ***info (at) buddhacommunity.org***



The Amaravati Lay Buddhist Association (ALBA) was formed to foster and encourage good Buddhist lay practice. It does this by providing a lay forum for all those interested in the Buddhist path in the form of one day and longer events, as well as other gatherings. At the heart of good Dhamma practice lies a commitment to enquiry. Whether you are interested and just beginning, or whether you have been practising for a while, we offer the opportunity to develop all aspects of the Buddhist path in a supportive lay context.

Amaravati Lay Events - 2009

These events provide an opportunity to practice together and explore themes relevant to practice and lay life. They are suitable for both newcomers and more experienced practitioners. Days of practice usually include silent and guided meditation, Dhamma talks, and discussion. Retreats may also include chi kung, yoga, and other activities.

Events are usually introduced or led by experienced lay-teachers and sometimes by members of the Amaravati Sangha.

All are welcome to attend.

*Days of Practice (DoP) – no need to book, open to all
9.45am for 10am-5pm*

(please bring an offering of food to share and requiring no preparation or cooking)

***Retreats** – advance booking essential via our website*
5.30pm Fri. – 4.00pm on last day*

January	17	Winter DoP	<i>Nick Carroll</i>
February	14	Winter DoP	<i>Alison Moore</i>
March	14	Winter DoP	<i>Martin Evans</i>

April 24-26 **Weekend retreat***
‘Point of Practice’—Nick Carroll

May	9	DoP	<i>‘A Perfect Relationship’—Chris Ward</i>
June	6	DoP	<i>—Ajahn Candasiri</i>

July 10-14 **5 day retreat***
‘Embracing Life’—Chris Ward

August 15 DoP
September 19 DoP

October 2-4 Weekend retreat*
‘Overcoming difficulties in our practice’
— *Martin Evans*

October 31 DoP
December 12 DoP

*Retreat booking forms and late changes to the programme can be found on our web site:

www.buddhacommunity.org
Organised by the Amaravati Lay Buddhist
Association



TripleGem is a new cooperative venture based in the UK, which provides Buddhist based comment on social issues and contemporary events. TripleGem is an independent, collaborative not-for-profit venture.

Visit us at <http://triplegem.terapad.com> and join in the activity or leave a comment.

Teaching & Practice Groups

Ashford, Kent	Bernie Oxland	01233 643848
	email Bernardoxland@yahoo.co.uk	
Bath	Bill & Carol Huxley	(01225) 314 500
Bedford	David Stubbs	(01234) 720 892
Berkshire	Anthea West	(0118) 979 8101
Brighton	Sam Halter	07888 821 525
Cambridge	Dan Jones	(01223) 246 257
Canterbury	Charles Watters	(01227) 463 342
Carlisle	Jean Nelson	(01228) 543491
Harlow	Pamutto	(01279) 724330
Hemel Hempstead	Bodhinyana Group	
	Chris Ward	(01442) 890034
Kendal	Fellside Centre, Low Fellside	
	Sumedha	(01539) 729 793
Leeds Area	Daniela Loeb	(0113) 279 1375
	Anne Grimshaw	(01274) 691447
Liverpool	Ursula Haekel	(0151) 4276668
London Buddhist Society		
	58 Eccleston Square London SW1(Victoria) (020) 7834 5858	
London Hampstead		
	1 Hillside (Room 6) London NW5	
	Entrance in Highgate Road	
	Caroline Randall	(020) 8348 0537
	Ann Booth	(020) 7485 0505
London-West	Nick Carroll	(020) 8740 9748
Leigh-on-sea	Rob Howell	(01702) 482 134
Maidstone {Kent}	Ālokabodhi Group	
	Bee Price	(01622) 726414
Midhurst	Barry Durrant	(01730) 821 479
	Viv Bell	(01730) 812362

Newcastle-on-Tyne	Ian Plagaró-Neill	(0191) 469 2778
Newent-Gloucs	John Teire	(01531) 821 902 <u>Email: john.teire@virgin.net</u>
Norwich	Robert Coggan	(01953) 451741
Penzance	Lee	(01736) 762 135
Portsmouth	Medhavi	(02392)732 280
Redruth	Vanessa	(01209) 214 031
Sheffield	Greg Bradshaw	(0114)262 1559 <u>Email: greg.bradshaw@NOJUNKbtclick.com</u>
South Dorset	Barbara Cohen	(01305) 786 821
Southampton	Robert Elliott,	023 8061 2838
Steyning-Sussex	Jayanti	(01903) 812 130
Stroud	John Groves	(07967) 777 742
Surrey-Woking	Rocana	(01483) 761 398
Taunton	Annie Fisher	(01728) 457 245
Totnes	Jerry	(01803) 840 199
Teesside	David Williams	(01642) 603 481
	John Doyle	(01642)587 274

The Bodhinyana Meditation Group at Amaravati

We meet in the Bodhinyana Hall at Amaravati Buddhist Monastery – from 7.30 till 9.30pm on most Wednesday evenings. Meetings are open to all and include chanting, meditation and discussion around a theme. We do not have meetings during the summer and other holiday periods. And we join the monastic Sangha on observance days. Please check the website for more details:

www.buddhacommunity.org

Amaravati Monastery Contacts

*Amaravati Monastery,
Great Gaddesden, Hemel Hempstead,
Hertfordshire, HP1 3BZ*

Office Phone : 01442 842455

Retreat Information: 01442 843239

Fax: 01442 843721

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

CONTRIBUTIONS DEADLINE: end Mar 2009

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

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

Editorial & Production Team :

Chris Ward, Nick Carroll, Martin
Evans, Alison and Peter Moore,
plus much help in copying,
enveloping, and posting.
The Community Newsletter is put
together and published as an
offering to others. All views and
comments are personal.

Mailing list and Donations

If you do not wish to remain on
the ALBA mailing list or
change your address, please let
us know. This enables us to
reduce the size of mailings and
to save money. If you wish to
continue on the mailing list
then you need do nothing.
However, any contributions
you can make (to the address
below) to cover the production
of the newsletter would be
greatly appreciated.

Email your changes to :
**Metta (at) petal-
moore.net,**

or post to:
ALBA , Amaravati Buddhist
Monastery, Great Gaddesden,
Hemel Hempstead, Herts, HP1
3BZ, England

If undelivered please

return to:

**AUA Community
Newsletter**

**C/O Amaravati
Monastery**

**Great Gaddesden,
Hemel Hempstead,
Herts, HP1 3BZ,
England**