

Insight Journal Summer 2007

Making the Best of It
Editor's Essay

Sharpening Mañjuśrī's Sword
An Interview with Leigh Brasington

Only the Mountain Remains
Mark Coleman

Poems from the Community

Meditation on the Elements
Sutta Studies

Pilgrimage in India
A Photo Essay

Food for Awakening
Ajān Thanissaro

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Claire Stanley

Program Information

No Harmful Thought
Pali Poetry



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Barre Center for Buddhist Studies





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Insight Journal
is a free publication of the



Barre Center for Buddhist Studies

149 Lockwood Road
Barre, MA 01005
(978) 355-2347
(978) 355-2798 fax
bcbs@dharma.org
www.dharma.org

Editor: Andrew Olendzki

Managing Editor: Sumi Loundon

Photo credits: front & back cover
by Chris Germer; BCBS campus
by Sumi Loundon.

Insight involves an intuition of mind and heart that takes us beyond knowledge toward wisdom. It has to do with deeply understanding the nature of things, rather than with knowing a lot about them.

In the Buddhist tradition wisdom is nurtured by the deep investigation of experience. This involves the careful integration of both study and practice—the study of dharma (the Buddha's teachings), coupled with the practice of meditation.

This journal is dedicated to exploring some of the insights that such a balanced inquiry uncovers about ourselves, our world, and our fellow beings. Welcome to the discussion.

Making the Best of It

Sensory information hurtles upon our eyeballs at the speed of light, crashes into our eardrums at the speed of sound, and courses through our body and mind as fast as an electro-chemical signal can flash from one neuron to the next. How do we deal with all this data without getting overwhelmed? By blocking out most of it, and stepping down the voltage on what little is left.

The brain freezes the world into discrete mind moments, each capturing a barely adequate morsel of information, then processes these one by one in a linear sequence. The result is a compiled virtual world of experience, more or less patterned on what's "out there," but mostly organized around the needs and limitations of the apparatus constructing it. It is like the brain and its senses are hastily taking a series of snapshots, then stringing them together into a movie called the stream of consciousness.

The Buddhists have a pretty good word to describe this system: delusion. It doesn't mean we are stupid, only that the mind and body are designed (so to speak) to distort reality in some very fundamental ways. For starters, each moment of consciousness creates an artificial node of stability out of a background that is thoroughly in flux. As the flip-chart of mind moments rapidly unfolds, we weave all sorts of narratives about the way things are, filling in the blanks with various assumptions, projections and aspirations. Taking these as real, we go on to seek gratification and security to a degree the constructed system cannot support. The ensuing dissatisfaction is organized around the notion of "myself," who is both the one who wishes things were different than they are and the one who suffers when they are not. We are hardwired, in other words, to misconstrue the nature of reality by obscuring the impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and selflessness of it all.

There is another way the amount of data we need to process at any given moment is even further reduced. Most of what comes in to the system does not even reach the threshold of consciousness but is relegated to the unconscious. The precious resource of conscious awareness is generally apportioned only on a "need to know" basis. When first learning a task, such as playing the piano, we have to "think about it" and "try" consciously to make our fingers go where they are supposed to go. But as the right connections are made in the brain and among the muscles of the fingers and hand, the patterns subside into lower levels of consciousness and, after a while, it feels as if we are playing "automatically."

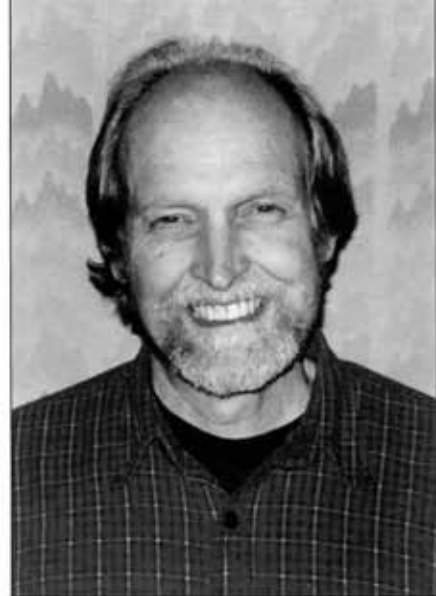
Because this process works so efficiently, it is not long before most of what we do in our lives can be accomplished without having to be very conscious of it. You would think this frees up our mental energy for some really creative things, but alas this is too seldom the case. More often than not consciousness is used merely to seek out the things that please us and strategize about how to get more of them, or it is used to disparage the things that displease us and to conspire to avoid, ignore, or destroy them. We wind up using our conscious mind to pursue new ways of desiring things to be different than they are, while the unconscious mind is relegated the task of maintaining whatever habits we happened to have stumbled into in previous endeavors to change what was happening. The Buddhists have a good word for this, *to dukkha*.

Much of meditation has to do with learning to use consciousness as a tool for transforming our unconscious where all the underlying dispositions abide. Paradoxically, we can only change what we are not aware of by becoming more aware of something else. That is to say, our unconscious has been conditioned by all sorts of unwholesome patterns of response, and these are used to guide conscious behavior. By definition we are not aware of most of these, but become aware of the suffering they cause in the course of lived experience. By training conscious awareness on an innocuous object such as the breath, we strengthen its ability to open to more and more of the information available to the senses in present time.

As the mind fills with direct sensory experience, which it does when practicing mindfulness of the body, for example, it empties of desire for things to be otherwise than they are. Mindfulness means being present to whatever is happening here and now: when mindfulness is strong, there is no room left in the mind for wanting. With less liking and disliking of what arises, there is less pushing and pulling on the world, less defining of the threshold between self and other, resulting in a reduced construction of self. As the influence of self diminishes, suffering diminishes in proportion.

It is natural and inevitable that we are always working with an imperfect model of reality. It makes a difference, however, to understand the limitations of our constructed system, to see more clearly the consequences of it being both unskillfully and skillfully employed, and to use this knowledge to maximize the well-being available for ourselves and all those around us. The Buddhist word for this is wisdom.

—Andrew Olendzke



Sharpening Mañjuśrī's Sword

An Interview with Leigh Brasington

Leigh Brasington has been practicing meditation since 1985 and is the senior American student of the late Ven. Ayya Khema. Leigh began assisting Ven. Ayya Khemma in 1994, and was authorized to teach in 1997. He teaches in Europe and North America.

I want to know the truth, I want to know the deepest truth there is.

Leigh, you are a teacher perhaps best known for guiding people through an exploration of the *jhānas*, stages of concentration meditation known as “absorptions.” But this is not all you do, am I right?

For my day job I'm a software engineer. I live in Alameda, CA and work for a small software company where I'm responsible for the Windows and Web interfaces to their database. But yes, I also teach dharma in two major aspects, both concentration meditation and insight practices.

How did you come to learn and eventually teach these practices?

Well, I had injured my knees and was seeing a massage therapist who was a student of Ruth Denison's and she suggested that meditation would be good for me. Not long afterwards, she pointed me to a retreat with Ayya Khema, and I signed up. I went off into the desert for ten days to meditate, and it changed my life. I felt there must be something

to this, so I kept practicing. I was on my second retreat at Wat Suan Mokkh with Ajahn Buddhadasa and stumbled into a state of rapture and happiness that was given the name *pīti* [joy, rapture]. For the next couple of years I would go on retreat and I would get to *pīti* and ask the teachers about it. They told me I should not pursue that, but being rather stubborn I tended to ignore them and went back to looking for *pīti*. When I experienced *pīti* it was a good sitting, and if I didn't—well, better luck next time.

After about two years of this I had another chance to do a retreat with Ayya Khema, and off I went. In the first interview with Ayya, she said to me, “Tell me about your meditation practice.” And I said, “Well, I can get to *pīti*.” And she said, “Good. That's the first *jhāna* [absorption], here's how you do the second.” Finally, somebody knew what I was doing, and knew what I was supposed to be doing with it. So during the course of that ten-day retreat, I learned the second, third, fourth and fifth *jhānas*, and a year later I came back and

learned the sixth, seventh and eighth. As I learned what I was supposed to be doing, I was also hanging out having fun going through these altered states of consciousness.

“A pleasant abiding here and now,” is how the texts refer to it, yes?

Exactly. But Ayya Khema also insisted I do insight practice in the same sittings that I was going through the *jhānas*. In other words, use the *jhānas* as the preliminary practice and then do insight practice. Ayya Khema was not someone you would disagree with. It was just “Yes ma'am, I'll go try that right away.”

So I did as she said and was totally astonished at the amount of insight that came flooding in. Luckily this was a five-week retreat, and I had lots of time to take the concentration skills I had learned and apply them to generate a mind that could do insight practice much more effectively. And the insights changed my life in a very dramatic way. When I came back my friends could tell that I was different.

And over time, Ayya Khema felt I had learned these states fairly well and had some understanding of what the Buddha was teaching and began encouraging me to teach. Eventually in 1996, at her last retreat in North America as it turned out, I said, "OK, if somebody will organize a retreat, I'll teach it." And one of her students organized a retreat for me to teach in 1997 at Cloud Mountain in southern Washington. The retreat went well, and I seem to be invited to places to teach ever since.

Tell us something about Ayya Khema. What was she like?

She was a very amazing person. Her autobiography *I Give You My Life* [Shambhala] is a really fantastic read, and if you want quite a good adventure story I highly recommend it. Without getting into the whole story here, I'll just say that in addition to being a Theravada nun she was your favorite Jewish grandmother and she was as German as they come. That is, she was warm and she was stern. If you were a person who had trouble with authority figures, she probably would not be a good teacher for you. But if you were willing to do what she told you, you would find her to be a brilliant teacher and a very loving person as well.

She had a magnificent way of doing metta meditation, with fantastic guided imagery. She knew the suttas [texts] amazingly well, and had a deep respect for the Buddha and his teachings, which really came across in her own teaching. But it was her clarity that was her most memorable skill. Her teaching was basically *sīla* [virtue], *samādhi* [concentration], and *pañña*

[wisdom], taken straight from the Buddha. Morality as a foundation, *jhāna* practice as right concentration, which takes you directly to insight practice and the gaining of wisdom.

Let's try to unpack this terminology a little. What exactly is a *jhāna*, and what is concentration practice?

Concentration is the broader term, and there are many levels of concentration. The commentaries speak of momentary concentration, access concentration, and full concentration, which are the *jhānas*. The suttas actually talk about four *jhānas* and four immaterial states, but these are now commonly lumped together into the eight *jhānas*. These are eight altered states of consciousness that are brought on by concentration, each yielding more concentration than the previous, allowing you to stair-step your way into deeper levels of concentration. They are ordered according to increasing subtlety of object.

Concentration is one of the factors of the eight-fold path. Again and again throughout the texts, the Buddha defines right concentration as the practice and development of the *jhānas*. It's not some sort of adjunct to his teaching—it's central. Neglecting the *jhānas* is like practicing a seven-fold path.

So how does one go about gaining access to the *jhānas*?

You sit down and settle the mind upon a single object of attention. The nature of the object is not too important, but keeping it steadily in mind is. Of course the mind will wander off the object. As it does this, you gently bring it back—again and

again and again. You can't force the mind to stay on the object, but if you bring it back often enough, it will eventually settle on the object. Whenever it does so successfully for a short while, this is called momentary concentration. Such basic concentration is important for any meditation practice, and one is often told at this point to open up one's mind to various other objects in different kinds of insight practices.

But you can continue working with bringing the mind back, until the mind stays back. At that point, you're at what the commentaries refer to as access concentration, in the sense that this is sufficient concentration to give you access to the *jhānas*. You can then step into these *jhānic* states, and continue the process of refining and focusing your concentration.

You initially experience the *jhānas* with an object that is not particularly subtle. An intense burst of mental and physical joy—called *pīti*—which naturally emerges when the mind arrives at steady concentration. The joy/rapture gradually calms down to happiness, then to contentment, and then to quiet stillness, as the objects of awareness become more and more subtle and as your concentration becomes stronger and stronger.

Is it a matter of greater intensity of concentration in one moment, or of increasing the continuity of concentration over multiple mind moments?

It's both of these. The intensity of the concentration in the moment increases, and the non-distractibility over time also increases. The result is that the mind can be one-pointed with more and more subtle objects.

However compelling the *jhāna* practice is, gaining real insight into the nature of experience is much more so.

Objects you could hardly stay with at all in normal awareness can now be held clearly in mind, and as concentration deepens the likelihood of losing your focus decreases considerably.

All this generates a mind, as the Buddha says, that is focused, clear, sharp, bright, malleable, wieldy, and attained to imperturbability, which is just the kind of mind you want to have when you're doing insight practice.

What kind of insight practice does one then do?

It's basically the same insight practice that you've been doing all along, but it's now done much more profoundly. The number of insights that arise is much greater, and the depth of the insight is much more profound. It's like you've turbo-charged your practice. So if you're doing the Mahasi method of simply noting everything that's going on, you are able to notice much more subtle things. If you're doing choiceless awareness practice, again, you're able to notice much more subtle things. You're able to take something like dependent origination and investigate it in a way that is more than just reciting the twelve links. Your mind has the capacity to really stay with a mental object and not go wandering off.

Is it true that you can't, strictly speaking, do both at the same time? If the mind gets settled on a

single object, it's not really able to discern characteristics about that object (such as its impermanence or selflessness), and if one is discerning characteristics of the objects of experience (a process we would call wisdom or insight) it's not, almost by definition, going to be one-pointed.

That's my understanding. There are some teachers who encourage such a modest level of concentration that you would be able to discern the characteristics of the object you're one-pointed on. They tend to cite the example (Majjhima Nikaya 111) of Sariputta having insight into states one by one as they arise and pass away in experience. But this is just one sutta, and there are many others in which the Buddha gives instructions to step systematically through the *jhānas*: first abandon the hindrances, move steadily through the *jhānas*, and then turn the mind to insight practice afterwards.

Formal concentration practice sharpens the mind to a remarkable extent, and this is actually a very helpful metaphor. In the Mahayana tradition you have Mañjuśrī, the Bodhisattva of wisdom, who has the sword of wisdom he uses to cut through the bonds of ignorance. *Jhāna* practice is simply sharpening Mañjuśrī's sword. It's sitting down, taking the time out to get the sword nice and sharp, and then you go to work cutting the bonds. If the sword is dull, it's a lot more difficult to do any cutting. If you sharpen it up, you actually make up all the time you

"wasted" doing the sharpening. *Jhāna* practice is about generating a sharp mind that is much more effective at insight practice.

What do you make of the view that the *jhānas* are dangerous because they are so alluring and seductive that you can get stuck in them and become a "samadhi junkie," as it were?

This is a slight problem, but only very slight if you are working with a knowledgeable teacher. Somebody might learn these altered states of consciousness, full of rapture, happiness, contentment, quiet stillness, and there may be a tendency to get hooked on them. But as most of us have learned at one stage of life or another, getting high is wonderful, but with our famously short attention span we eventually say, "Okay, been there, done that, what's next?" I know this very well because that's exactly where I was.

What's next is insight. When I can get students to stop just playing with the bliss of *jhāna* and start using their concentrated minds to do insight practice, they invariably find there is all sorts of insight dangling like low-hanging fruit. However compelling the *jhāna* practice is, gaining real insight into the nature of experience is much more so. Seeing the impermanent nature of things, the unsatisfactory or selfless nature of things, is truly remarkable. These insight practices work, as we all well know! They just work so much more powerfully with a concentrated mind.



At the site of the Buddha's first teaching, Sarnath, India.

It sounds as if you are a rather gentle teacher, trying to steer people toward what they have the most enthusiasm for rather than try to break them of their addictions and drive them into a rigorous practice.

Hey, I'm an old hippie! I grew up questioning authority. And, I also have a leaning toward tantra, in the original sense of the word: discover what the student likes to do and put that in service of the spiritual path. That's so much easier than trying to tell them they've got to do this or that. If I were enlightened, maybe I would have the ability to say something like that. But I'm just another seeker on the path. I don't know what's best for people. I think what's best is to use what people are willing to do. What I am offering them that is really useful is a sharper knife to cut through the jungle.

I can't help asking about one of the classical fruits of *jhāna* practice: magical powers?

My favorite answer is a story from the Tibetan tradition. There was a man whose teacher sent him off to

meditate in a cave on his own. Over the next twenty years, he learned the ability to walk on water, which he used as a shortcut when he went to town for alms. His teacher finally comes to visit him and asks, "So, what have you learned in these twenty years?" He stands up all proud and he walks down to the river, walks across, turns around, and comes back. His teacher says, "You fool, you just wasted twenty years of your life! There's a bridge a quarter mile upstream." So, I think they're a waste of time. The Buddha forbade his monks to exhibit them to the laypeople. And he forbade them to even use them unless they were fully enlightened.

Isn't it tempting, though, to walk on water, pass through walls, or read people's minds?

I've walked on water—it was in Sweden one winter. I walk through walls all the time, using a thing called a door. And knowing the sort of junk in my own mind, why would I want to pick up other people's junk? Yeah, it might be cool, but how much time and energy am I going to spend

trying to get that to happen? I know I can get insights with a concentrated mind because I've done that. I know that these insights have changed my life for the better. I'm much more interested in going for the stuff that promises to be the highest and I know is working, than to take a side trip for something that might be interesting but might also be just a dead end.

I came to this practice out of curiosity. Many people come to it through *dukkha* [suffering], but my motivation is curiosity. I want to know the truth, I want to know the deepest truth there is. And so I'm much more interested in discovering the true nature of reality than reading somebody's mind or taking a shortcut across the river.

And in the process, you share your knowledge with others?

Exactly. If there was a famine and you knew where some bread was, you'd tell people, especially if there was enough of it that everybody could have some. It's as simple as that. I've found something that is very beneficial. There is a great thirst out

We are reaching a phase where we've got to just integrate *jhāna* into a mature, well-balanced practice.

there for spiritual growth, awakening, understanding, and knowledge. This is something thirst-quenching, and there's an inexhaustible supply. It's not like if I give it away, I won't have any [laughing]. It's not even a big deal to give it away, right? It has been so helpful for me, and I have seen it be so helpful for a large number of students. People do get insights that change their lives in very significant ways, and that's great. The planet definitely needs people who know what's going on.

Research has shown that everyone has a particular emotional set point in their brain. Hanging out in these positive states of mind long enough will have a tendency to move your mind, your emotional set point, more towards the positive. But I see that as a wonderful, free side-effect. The real reason for doing it is not so much that it makes you a little happier, but that in the long term you'll gain a lot of insight into the nature of reality. Being able to operate in harmony with the way things really are is what's going to make the biggest difference.

Leigh, where do you think all this is going?

It's been very interesting to see the changing role of concentration over the more than twenty years I've been doing this practice. In that first retreat with Ayya Khema, she used the word *jhāna* once, and only in passing. There were no public discourses on the *jhānas* and what they were. By the time I saw her five years later, she was giving dharma

talks on the *jhānas* as part of her course. But nobody else was.

Now, seventeen years later, I'm teaching a course here at BCBS, Bhante Gunaratana is teaching a concentration course at the retreat center at IMS, and Pau Auk Sayadaw was at the Forest Refuge last year for two months and will return next year for four. So the role of concentration seems to be much more recognized, and not only in the Western Theravadan tradition. Alan Wallace has a big project on concentration going now, and the scientists love to wire up meditating monks and see what's going on in their brains.

It's been intriguing to see how interest in concentration has unfolded, and I hope it will continue to be recognized as the important preliminary practice it is. We are reaching a phase where we've got to stop being superficially confused about it and just integrate it into a mature, well-balanced practice.

One last bonus question: What is nirvana?

Nirvana is a breakthrough in consciousness such that you never conceive of a separate self ever again. There you have it, from someone who doesn't know [laughs]. That's how I would put it. If you don't conceive of a self, you've uprooted all selfish behavior, including grasping and craving, and hence no more *dukkha*. No more greed, hatred, or delusion.

It is a breakthrough such that you're no longer fooled by an illusion.

If you go down to the beach, you can see the edge of the world six miles offshore; sometimes you can even see a ship fall over the edge if it sails too close. But when you break through the illusion and realize the world is a sphere, with gravity and all that, you see the same thing with your eyes but no longer regard it as the edge of the world. Nirvana is the non-conceiving of any edge of the world—nor of any separate self.

It sounds like you are in the camp of looking at it as a psychological transformation rather than a breakthrough to an unconditioned transcendent reality?

I'm firmly in agreement with Nāgārjuna in that I don't think nirvana has ontological existence. There is not a breakthrough to something separate, but there is a transcendent breakthrough that happens in shattering this illusion of self. That's the key point: uprooting of the conceit "I am." When that happens, what you've done is realized the transcendent by having understood that there are no objects. You've gotten beyond subject-object duality and have experienced the entire universe unfolding as an organic whole—yourself included—but not as a separate entity and without any identification of yourself with the whole, either. But the emphasis is upon how to open the door, not about what's on the other side. Do that and you'll know for sure, instead of listening to me speculate.

Only the Mountain Remains

Practicing in Nature

Mark Coleman

As long as there are monastics who delight living in the forest at the foot of trees, the way of the Awakened Ones will not decline.

—DN II 77; AN IV 20.

I lead wilderness-based meditation retreats in many parts of the Western states, from Alaska to Baja, Mexico. Sometimes I am teased about my “work,” since it takes me to such pristine, idyllic nature preserves—some wonder whether the retreats are more like vacations than places for serious practice. For me, nothing could be further from the truth. I regard the wilderness as an ideal venue to touch the truth of the dharma, since it can emerge there with crystal clarity and vibrancy. It is also a place where we get to practice with many adversities and challenges, forcing us to our edge, where so much growth comes in our practice. Nature perennially teaches us about uncertainty, unpredictability, and our attachment to comfort and control. When we are out in the wilderness, the conditions so often force us to expand our capacity to stay mindful and centered amidst adversity, such as when snowed upon in the desert, meditating in a deluge of rain lasting several days, or when attacked by clouds of mosquitoes.

So what is it we can learn in the classroom of the outdoors? First and foremost, there is a beautiful, reciprocal relationship between meditative awareness and being in nature. Go anywhere in the natural world and you discover that you are invited to pay attention. Walk contemplatively in a verdant forest or alongside

the ocean and what Buddhadasa calls a “natural samadhi” gracefully grows. We don’t need much effort or concentration to pay attention: it comes forth effortlessly. Watch a sparrow hawk hover in stillness on a windy day, or listen to a thrush’s song in spring, and you can’t help but touch this natural attentiveness. It wakes us up and brings us alive in ways that the sterility, uniformity, and predictability of our houses, malls, and offices could never do.

Since being outdoors is such a visceral experience, we are invited to inhabit our senses. The body and the senses are always in the present moment. The simple act of being awake and attentive to our sensual field as we take a stroll in a meadow or alongside a stream brings us out of our thinking mind and into the present. Take some time to watch the waves persistently pound the shoreline and we are pulled in, mesmerized, by the feast of the senses. And, we begin to awaken attention’s delicious by-products: curiosity, wonder, joy, appreciation, calm, and even love. As Joanna Macy once said, “If we really pay attention to something, we can’t help but fall in love with it.”

With meditative training, we can utilize this mindful attention to perceive and receive the gifts of the natural world. The earth continually offers teachings to those alert enough to see. Everything in the natural world

Sages from the earliest times have sought solace deep in the forest.

is constantly changing, in various stages of birth, regeneration, maturity, decay, or death. Apple blossoms, aspen leaves, cumulus clouds, and melting glaciers all whisper that every experience is fleeting, to be appreciated and enjoyed, but also to be let go of as it passes from the peak of its fullness.

Not only does being outdoors bring forth a mindful awareness, but it also cultivates many of the other qualities we seek to develop on the cushion. One example is spaciousness. Step out the front door of your office or house and what is the first thing you notice? Space. The mind opens up the moment we go out from the confines of our cubicles, cars and cabins. Look up at the cloudless sky, or take in a moonless night, and we immediately expand into something vast. Take in the extent of the ocean or a broad landscape, and we begin to sense how the experience of exterior space reveals and develops similar qualities in our own minds. Since it is space that allows for all phenomenal experience to be and to unfold, connecting with an inner experience of spaciousness is a soothing balm to a mind often cramped with the busyness of thought and scarcity. This can be so helpful when dealing with difficulties because it is precisely when we lose that spacious perspective that the reactive mind can arise in full force.

Another factor in ourselves we can better understand in nature is restlessness, one of the principal hindrances the Buddha considered as an obstacle in the meditative journey. Restlessness seems to be one of the defining characteristics of an over-caffeinated culture driven to running away from anything that requires simply being present. What a perfect antidote is the stillness and silence that envelops one sitting quietly in the shade of a willow by a river bank, watching the floating world go by. In nature we can sense the stillness that is present in movement, in the flight of a gull, or as wind invisibly sways the leafy treetops. The quietness

of an old grove of trees supports our mind and body to come into a calmer, grounded, more centered state. Since we are intimately entwined with our environment, spending time in such tranquil groves provides an ideal venue to cultivate samadhi, the calm, gathered attention so essential for meditative depth.

Silence is another quality so vital to the spiritual journey. Yet how is it that the natural world is rarely silent? Alone on a still, summer night we are accompanied by the staccato chorus of singing crickets; perhaps the Buddha was similarly serenaded on that auspicious night in Bodhgaya. Even in a remote desert canyon we hear the beating sound of frogs echoing off ancient, painted walls of stone. Yet amidst that din lies a stillness and silence that quiets the mind and touches the heart. Silence is not dependent upon an absence of sound. In nature we can discern a silence that pervades even the loudest thunderstorm. We sense it as a doorway to the mysterious, something beyond the rational mind and its interpretation of the senses. It is for the sake of this silence that sages from the earliest times have sought solace deep in the forest or in mountain hermitages.

For many, the natural world instills reverence. It is a place where people often sense the sacred, touch a mystery, or connect with a reality more vast than the limits of the ordinary mind. For myself, walking in an old-growth redwood forest, where elegant tree trunks stretch skyward for several hundred feet, feels more sacred than any church, temple or mosque, no matter how grand, ancient or ornate. I have heard many people say that their time in hills, woods, prairie or desert was at the heart of their spiritual practice. Some would not have said they were "meditating," and may not have even considered themselves on a spiritual path. Yet looking into the brightness and clarity of their eyes as they spoke, it was clear that being outdoors was a profound, necessary and transformative

experience that connected them with qualities of love and clarity, understanding and ease.

Many people have also spoken of how being outdoors awakens the simple joy of being alive. The experience of nature, whether for a farmer in the Midwest planting corn, an Inuit fishing in frozen waters, or children chasing seagulls on a beach in Peru, provides a unifying commonality of joy. Who hasn't heralded the blaze of crimson coating the skies at sunset, been moved by the surfacing of a whale, enjoyed the playfulness of dolphins, or been left breathless by the flight of an eagle floating on invisible thermals?

There is so much suffering in the world, so much pain, anguish, loss, betrayal, injustice, fear, and violence. And it's all so easy to focus on the negative. So much of dharma practice cultivates balance of mind. Nature in that respect provides a perfect antidote to a mind that overly dwells on what is wrong. Even in our times when the environment is so besieged and species are under huge threats for their very survival, the rose is still seducing us with its perfume, sunflowers still rotate in honor of the life-giving sun, and pelicans thread their way along the shoreline, skimming cresting waves of aquamarine. There are still no shortages of thrushes making our hearts sing, and leafy groves that bring a sweet contentment to the heart. It is essential in these times of global awareness, when it is so easy to be overwhelmed by the magnitude of problems, to go out and smell the roses, watch flowers bloom before our very eyes, and come back joyfully to the miracle of this moment.

What happens when we do this is that another important quality emerges: gratitude. These gifts of the heart keep our minds open and allow us to see the abundance we live in, providing a direct antidote to the scarcity consciousness of the ego-mind. When we are truly present there is an infinite array of things to be grateful for, from the moment the

morning sun warms our bones, to the wind bringing clouds of rain, to the food we eat that required the participation of so many life forms, from the micro-organisms in the soil, through the gopher and the farmer, to the macro movements of the sun and moon.

Perhaps most usefully, being in nature invites us to let go of our preoccupation with our own mind-created personal drama. This happens in part because nothing in the natural world is self-referencing. The redwoods are not proud of their lofty heights, the spotted turtle is not ashamed of his speed. When we are away from the world of people, so dominated by the needs of the ego, our own habits of self-reference can, with the support of meditative training, evaporate in the morning mist. In such moments, when we lose track of ourselves, we inhabit a simpler realm where there is just the coming and going of experience in the field of awareness. No self, no other, just what is.

As the Buddha said to Bahiya:

In the seen there will be merely the seen; in the heard there will be merely the heard; in the sensed there will be merely the sensed; in the cognized there will be merely the cognized.... Then you will be neither here nor beyond nor inbetween the two. This itself is the end of suffering. —Ud 8

Or as the Chinese poet Li Po has put it:

*The birds have vanished into the sky
And the last remaining clouds have passed away
We sit together the mountain and me
Until only the mountain remains.*

Mark Coleman teaches at Spirit Rock, leads Wilderness Meditation courses, and is the author of Awake in the Wild, published in 2006.

Ants

It must have been about july
the ants came
they camped out in my bathroom

they've done this in years before
and I always went out and bought
ant traps

not this year
the ants came and I just let them

I asked them to be nice
I told them to be careful when I took
a shower because they would be washed away

they didn't come in great hordes
just a few here and there
sometimes a bunch here and there
but no army

some of them were washed away when I showered some of them were washed away
when I scrubbed the floor

I tried to alert them

I made no big deal about them
they pretty much seemed to ignore me

when fall came the ants left

a few less each day

then one day I didn't see any

no more ants

it's colder now

I can't wait for the ants to come back

they seem to bring warm weather

—John Pollard

On Knowing the Temple Bell

I have struck the temple bell

With a wooden mallet:

This is what sadness feels like.

The vibration fades to silence.

I bow in reverence to the three gems,

And all the temple bells round the earth

Ringin

Now,

Linked in an unbroken chain of temple bells ringin

Back in time,

Through austere Zen temples,

Up and over the mountains of Tibet,

Down into the heat of Southeast Asia, India, and Sri Lanka,

All the way back to the Awakened One,

While Sangha streams back into the meditation hall,

For the last time this retreat.

—J. Jason Graff

HURRICANE B.

how broad the reach,
how sweet the dew
of compassion, how fierce,
& how it teaches: all
things whirl
away.

—Jeanne Larsen

This page contains material sent in by our readers. If you have a poem, drawing or photograph you would like to share with others, relating to your meditative insights or retreat experience, please send it to the editors at BCBS.

Crossing

Sit on the bench
Breathe
Gnawing in tree begins.
Ringing in the backyard house
Breeze through the window
Stiffness in the neck

"What is this?"
Awareness

What will "thinking" add?
Who gnaws?
What rings?
Why pain?
When did stiffness start?

"Knowing," "thinking" add nothing
except fodder for the discursive mind
mirage of control for the believed thought

What bug crosses this drying ink?
Why "know?"

Let be
See

—Joan Neth



Fiddleheads unfurling into ferns.

—Sumi Loundon

BODY-SATTVA

this pallid
elephant: lumbering
freak, requiring so much
care. and yet what
fun to bobble up here
in the howdah. and
yes, it gets you
there.

—Jeanne Larsen

Meditation time
at first I'm a jungle gym
Then the kitten's bed.

—Kali Kaliche

Meditation on the Elements *(Majjhima Nikaya 62)*

The Buddha gives meditation instructions to his son Rahula.

The commentary tells us Rahula was eighteen years old when this teaching took place. The Buddha encourages his son to dissolve the sense of self into the impersonal elements making up the world. The goal is not to infuse the world with self, but to drain the self of self. It is finding things agreeable and disagreeable, that leads to suffering. With an attitude of "not mine" toward all phenomena, the mind is liberated from its clinging. —A. Olendzki

Rahula, any kind of material form whatever, whether past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near, all material form should be seen as it actually is with proper wisdom thus: 'This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self'.

Rahula, whatever internally, belonging to oneself, is	solid, solidified,	and clung-to... this is called the internal	earth	element.
	water, watery,		water	
	fire, fiery,		fire	
	air, airy,		air	
	space, spacial,		space	
Now both the internal and external	earth	element are simply	earth	element.
	water		water	
	fire		fire	
	air		air	
	space		space	

And that should be seen as it actually is with proper wisdom thus:
'This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self'.

When one sees it thus as it actually is with proper wisdom, one becomes disenchanted with the	earth	element and makes the mind dispassionate towards the	earth	element.
	water		water	
	fire		fire	
	air		air	
	space		space	
Rahula, develop meditation that is like	earth;	for when you develop meditation that is like	earth,	arisen agreeable and disagreeable contacts will not invade your mind and remain.
	water;		water,	
	fire;		fire,	
	air;		air,	
	space;		space,	
Just as people throw	clean things and dirty things...	on the earth, and the earth	is not horrified, humiliated, and disgusted because of that...	so too, Rahula, when you develop meditation that is like [the elements], arisen agreeable and disagreeable contacts will not invade your mind and remain.
Just as people wash		in water, and the water		
Just as people burn		in fire, and the fire		
Just as the air blows on		and the air		
Just as space is not established anywhere...				

Images from a recent pilgrimage to Buddhist sites in India.

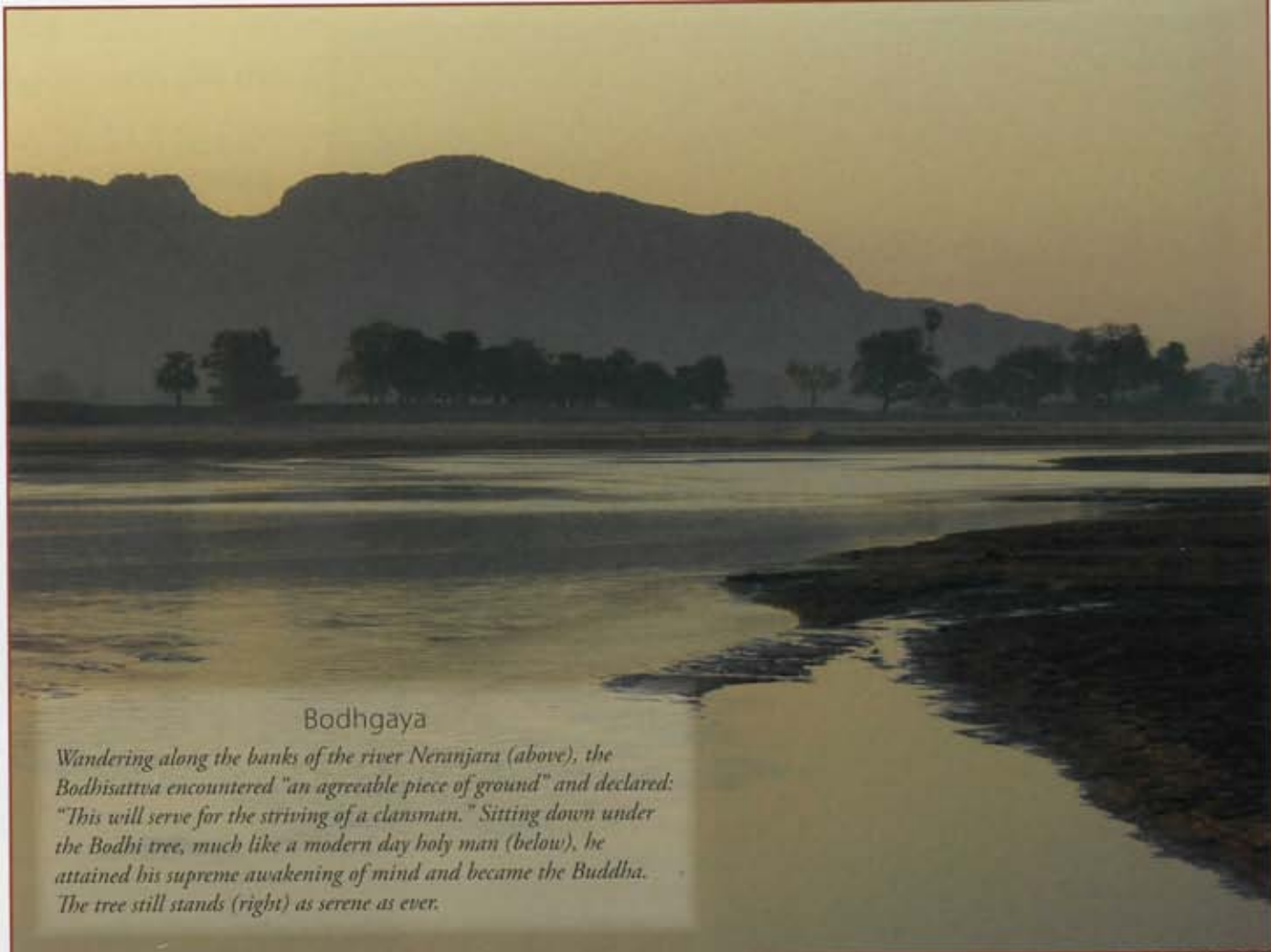


Rajagaha

The ancient capital of Magadha is a natural ring of hills rising abruptly from the plains. It is also the site of Vulture Peak (ever wonder how it got its name?) and the Bamboo Grove, both favorite haunts of the Buddha.



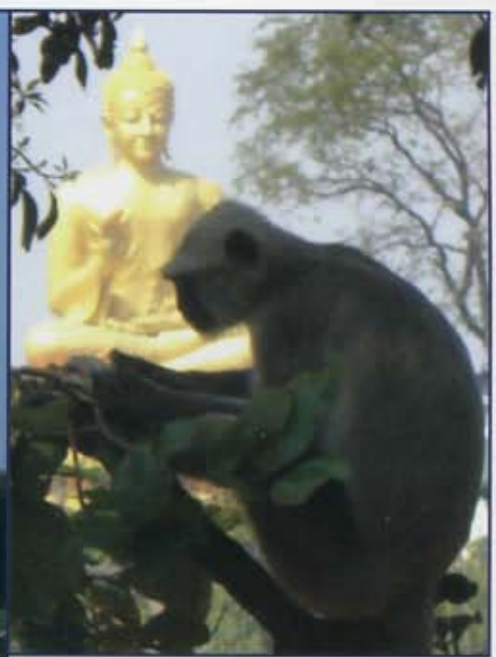
Photos by A. Olendzki.



Bodhgaya

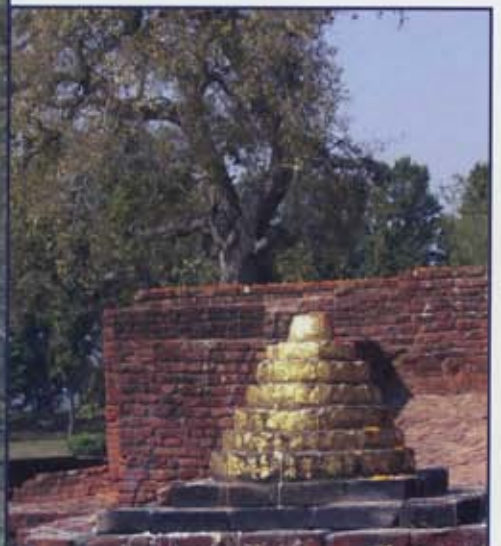
Wandering along the banks of the river Neranjana (above), the Bodhisattva encountered "an agreeable piece of ground" and declared: "This will serve for the striving of a clansman." Sitting down under the Bodhi tree, much like a modern day holy man (below), he attained his supreme awakening of mind and became the Buddha. The tree still stands (right) as serene as ever.





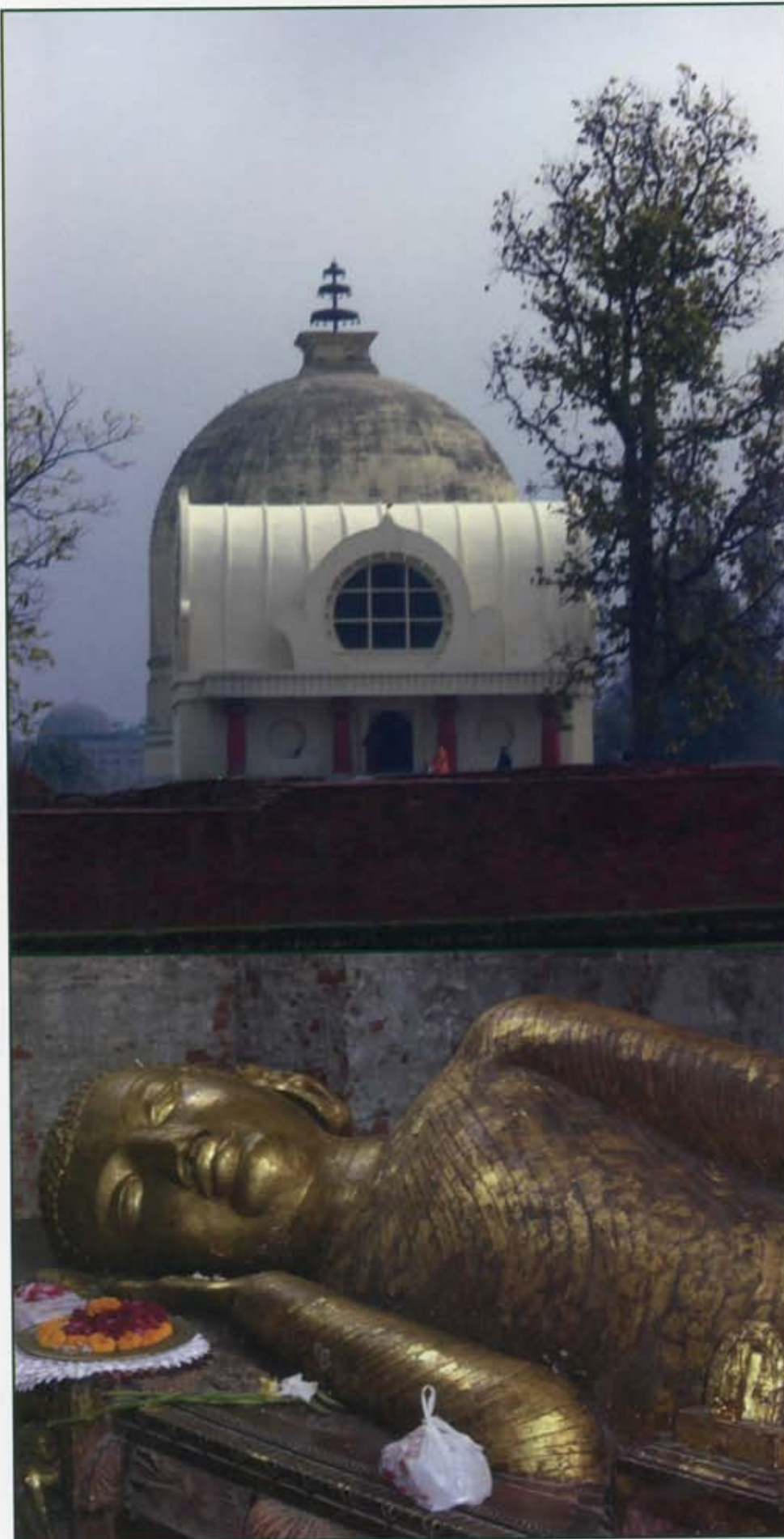
Sravasti

The park purchased by Anathapindika from Prince Jeta and given to the Sangha still remains, strewn with stupas and monuments from all different ages. The Buddha spent most of his time here over the last twenty-five years of his life, and even today it is a place of great tranquility. Nearby are the unexcavated ruins of the old city, as well as a new attraction: an extensive Thai lay Buddhist complex complete with a massive gilded statue.



Kusinara

The Buddha passed away at the age of eighty in a sleepy little "wattle & daub" town, as tranquil today as it was in ancient times. A stupa and shrine (left) identifies the spot, within which is found a magnificent reclining statue (below left). A solemn and powerful place, the womb-like room was lined with middle aged Asian women sobbing quietly, as if the event had just taken place. A puja is offered at dawn (below) at another nearby stupa, dating from the time of Ashoka, where the master's body is said to have been cremated.



Food for Awakening

The Role of Appropriate Attention

Ajaan Thanissaro

The Myth of Bare Attention

The Buddha never used the word for “bare attention” in his meditation instructions. That’s because he realized that attention never occurs in a bare, pure, or unconditioned form. It’s always colored by views and perceptions—the labels you tend to give to events—and by intentions: your choice of what to attend to and your purpose in being attentive. If you don’t understand the conditioned nature of even simple acts of attention, you might assume that a moment of nonreactive attention is a moment of Awakening. And in that way you miss one of the most crucial insights in Buddhist meditation, into how even the simplest events in the mind can form a condition for clinging and suffering. If you assume a conditioned event to be unconditioned, you close the door to the unconditioned. So it’s important to understand the conditioned nature of attention and how the Buddha recommended that it be trained—as *appropriate* attention—to be a factor in the path leading beyond attention to total Awakening.

The Pali term for attention is *manasikāra*. You may have heard that the term for mindfulness—*sati*—means attention, but that’s not how the Buddha used the term. Mindfulness, in his usage, means keeping something in mind. It’s a function of memory. When you practice the establishings of mindfulness (*satipaṭṭhāna*), you remain focused on observing the object you’ve chosen as your frame of reference: the body, feelings, mind, or mental qualities in and of themselves. This

process of staying steadily focused on observing an object is called *anupassanā*, and it requires the help of three mental qualities. 1) You need to be mindful (*satimā*) to keep your frame of reference in mind, to keep remembering it. 2) At the same time, you have to be alert (*sampajañña*), clearly aware of what you’re doing, to make sure that you’re actually doing what you’re trying to remember to do. And 3) you need to be ardent (*ātāpi*) to do it skillfully. The act of observing an object in this way—by being mindful, alert, and ardent—is what constitutes the establishing of mindfulness, which then forms the topic or theme (*nimitta*) of right concentration.

For instance, if you focus on the breath in and of itself as your frame of reference, *anupassanā* means keeping continual watch over the breath. Mindfulness means simply remembering to stick with it, keeping it in mind at all times, while alertness means knowing what the breath is doing and how well you’re staying with it. Ardency is the effort to do all of this skillfully. When all these activities stay fully coordinated, they form the theme of your concentration.

To understand how appropriate attention functions in the context of this training, though, you first have to understand how attention ordinarily functions in an untrained mind.

The Conditioning of Attention

In the teaching on dependent co-arising—the Buddha’s explanation of how events interact

The simple act of attention is anything but bare.

to create the conditions for suffering—attention appears early in the sequence, in the factor for mental events called “name.” It follows on ignorance, fabrication, and consciousness; and precedes the six sense media, sensory contact, and feeling.

“Ignorance” here doesn’t mean a general lack of knowledge. It means not viewing experience in terms of the four noble truths: stress, its cause, its cessation, and the path to its cessation. Any other framework for viewing experience, no matter how sophisticated, would qualify as ignorance. Typical examples given in the Canon include seeing things through the framework of self and other, or of existence and non-existence: What am I? What am I not? Do I exist? Do I not exist? Do things outside me exist? Do they not?

This ignorance conditions the intentional fabrication or manipulation of bodily, verbal, and mental states. The breath is the primary means for fabricating bodily states, and practical experience shows that—in giving rise to feelings of comfort or discomfort—it has an impact on mental states as well. When colored by ignorance, even your breathing can act as a cause of suffering. As for verbal states, directed thought and evaluation are the means for fabricating words and sentences, while mental states are fabricated by feelings—pleasure, pain, neither-pleasure-nor-pain—and perceptions—the labels we apply to things.

Sensory consciousness is colored by these fabrications. And then—based on the conditions of ignorance, fabrication, and sensory consciousness—the act of attention arises as one of a cluster of mental and physical events called name and form.

As if the preconditions for attention weren’t already complex enough, the co-conditions in name and form add another level of complexity. “Form” means of the form of the body, as

experienced from within and shaped by the activity of breathing. “Name” includes not only attention, but also intention, again; feeling and perception, again; and contact, which here apparently means contact among all the factors already listed.

All of these conditions, acting together, are what ordinarily color every act of attention to any of the six senses: sight, hearing, smell, taste, the tactile sense, and the sense of the mind that knows mental qualities and ideas.

From this—and a great deal more could be said about these conditions—it should be obvious that the simple act of attention is anything but bare. It’s ordinarily shaped by ignorant views and the intentional actions influenced by those views. As a result, it’s usually inappropriate: applied to the wrong things and for the wrong reasons, thus aggravating the problem of stress and suffering, rather than alleviating it.

Training Appropriate Attention

So how can attention be trained in the other direction? Obviously, it should be freed from the conditions of ignorance, but that doesn’t mean that it should—or even can—be freed from conditions entirely. After all, that would require an act of will, and that act of will would have to be formed by a correct and pragmatic understanding of suffering and its causes. Also, that act of will and that understanding would have to be borne in mind continually so that attention could be effectively retrained.

So instead of being stripped from all conditions, attention requires this new set of conditions to make it appropriate. This is why the Buddha said that the corresponding factors of the path—right view, right effort, and right mindfulness—hover around every step of the

path. Right view provides the ability to see things in terms of the four noble truths, right effort activates the desire and intent to act skillfully on those views, while right mindfulness provides a solid basis for keeping that view and that effort in mind.

Of these three factors of the path, right view comes first, for it's the direct antidote for the primary condition of ignorance. Right view is not simply knowledge *about* the four noble truths; it sees things *in terms of* those truths. In other words, for a person aiming at the end of suffering and stress, it points out the four salient factors to look for in any given moment. At the same time, it sees the tasks or duties appropriate to each factor: stress is to be comprehended, its cause abandoned, its cessation realized, and the path to its cessation developed. As the Buddha noted in his first sermon, this knowledge of the appropriate tasks for each truth comes in two stages. The first stage identifies the task. The second realizes that it has been completed. This second stage is the knowledge of Awakening. Between the first and the second lies the practice.

What this means is that the practice will be marked by alternating periods of ignorance and knowledge, with the knowledge gradually growing stronger and more refined. During these periods of knowledge, the act of attention is informed by an understanding of suffering and its causes. It is also motivated by intentions—expressed through the way you relate to your breath, your mental activity of directed thought and evaluation, and your perceptions and feelings—that aim at bringing suffering to an end. This combination of wise understanding and compassionate intention is what turns the act of attention from a cause of suffering into a strategy for health: a healing attention. This healing attention is called appropriate because it looks at things in ways appropriate for advancing the tasks of the noble

truths, focusing on whichever task needs to be advanced at any particular moment.

For instance, when attention needs to be focused on comprehending suffering, the role of appropriate attention is to view the aggregates—the components of our sense of self—in such a way as to induce dispassion for them.

A virtuous monk should attend in an appropriate way to the five clinging-aggregates as inconstant, stressful, a disease, a cancer, an arrow, painful, an affliction, alien, a dissolution, an emptiness, not-self. Which five? Form as a clinging-aggregate, feeling... perception... fabrications... consciousness as a clinging-aggregate.... For it is possible that a virtuous monk, attending in an appropriate way to these five clinging-aggregates as inconstant... not-self, would realize the fruit of stream-entry [the first stage of Awakening]. (SN 22.122)

To attend to the aggregates in this way helps to advance the task of abandoning any craving for the aggregates that causes suffering.

When attention needs to be focused on developing the path, the role of appropriate attention is to feed the factors for Awakening and to starve the five hindrances that stand in their way. Here is where appropriate attention applies to the practice of establishing mindfulness, in that mindfulness solidly established is the first factor for Awakening. Thus, one of the first roles of appropriate attention is to feed the development of mindfulness.

The image of feeding and starving here is directly related to the insight into conditionality that formed the essential message of the Buddha's Awakening. In fact, when he introduced the topic of conditionality to young novices, he illustrated it with the act of feeding: All beings, he said, subsist on food. If their existence depends on eating, then it

ends when they are deprived of food. Applying this analogy to the problem of suffering leads to the conclusion that if suffering depends on conditions, it can be brought to an end by starving it of its conditions.

In its most sophisticated expression, though, the Buddha's insight into causality implies that each moment is composed of three types of factors: results of past intentions, present intentions, and the results of present intentions. Because many past intentions can have an impact on any given moment, this means that there can be many potential influences from the past—helpful or harmful—appearing in the body or mind at any given time. The role of appropriate attention is to focus on whichever influence is potentially most helpful and to look at it in such a way as to promote skillful intentions in the present.

Feeding and Starving

The Food Discourse (*Ābāra Sutta*, SN 46.51) indicates how appropriate attention can be applied to the potentials of the present to starve the hindrances and feed the factors for Awakening. With regard to the hindrances, it notes that:

1) **Sensual desire** is fed by inappropriate attention to the theme of beauty and starved by appropriate attention to the theme of unattractiveness. In other words, to starve sensual desire you turn your attention from the beautiful aspects of the desired object and focus instead on its unattractive side.

2) **Ill will** is fed by inappropriate attention to the theme of irritation and starved by appropriate attention to the mental release through good will, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity. In other words, you turn your attention from the irritating

features that spark ill will and focus instead on how much more freedom the mind experiences when it can cultivate these sublime attitudes as its inner home.

3) **Sloth and torpor** are fed by inappropriate attention to feelings of boredom, drowsiness, and sluggishness. It's starved by appropriate attention to any present potential for energy or effort.

4) **Restlessness and anxiety** are fed by inappropriate attention to any lack of stillness in the mind, and starved by appropriate attention to any mental stillness that is present. In other words, both potentials can be present at any time. It's simply a matter of how to ferret out, appreciate, and encourage the moments or areas of stillness.

5) **Uncertainty** is fed by inappropriate attention to topics that are abstract and conjectural, and starved by appropriate attention to skillful and unskillful qualities in the mind. In other words, instead of focusing on issues that can't be resolved by observing the present, you focus on an issue that can: which mental qualities result in harm for the mind, and which ones don't.

In short, each hindrance is starved by shifting both the focus and the quality of your attention.

With the factors for Awakening, though, the process of feeding consists primarily of changing the quality of your attention. The discourse lists each factor—mindfulness, analysis of qualities, persistence, rapture, serenity, concentration (the four *jhānas*), and equanimity—along with its potential basis, saying that the factor is starved by inappropriate attention to that basis and fed by appropriate attention to the basis. With one exception, the discourse doesn't say what each basis is. Apparently, the purpose

of this is to challenge the meditator. Once you've received instructions in mindfulness and concentration, you should try to identify in your own experience what the potential basis for each factor of Awakening is.

The one exception, however, is illuminating. The basis for the second factor—analysis of mental qualities—is the presence of skillful and unskillful qualities in the mind. To pay appropriate attention to these qualities not only feeds the factor of analysis of mental qualities but also starves the hindrance of uncertainty. At the same time it provides the framework for identifying for yourself the bases for each of the remaining factors for Awakening.

Of these factors, equanimity is the closest to what is sometimes described as bare attention or non-reactive awareness. But even equanimity is conditioned by views and intentions. For instance, the Buddha points out in MN 101 that when encountering unskillful qualities in the mind, you'll observe that some of these qualities will go away only through concerted effort; in other cases, nothing more is required than on-looking equanimity. But even this equanimity is conditioned by an understanding of skillful and unskillful, and is motivated to make the unskillful go away.

Non-Fashioning

In fact, equanimity has many levels, and a crucial insight on the higher level of practice is to see that even the equanimity of refined jhanic states—in which awareness and its object seem totally “one”—is a fabrication: conditioned and willed. On gaining this insight, the mind inclines toward what is called “non-fashioning” (*attammayatā*—literally, “not-made-of-that-ness”), in which you add nothing at all to the data of sensory experience.

The move from equanimity to non-fashioning is briefly described in a famous passage:

Then, Bahiya, you should train yourself thus: In reference to the seen, there will be only the seen. In reference to the heard, only the heard. In reference to the sensed, only the sensed. In reference to the cognized, only the cognized. That is how you should train yourself. When for you there will be only the seen in reference to the seen, only the heard in reference to the heard, only the sensed in reference to the sensed, only the cognized in reference to the cognized, then, Bahiya, there's no you in that. When there's no you in that, there's no you there. When there's no you there, you are neither here nor yonder nor between the two. This, just this, is the end of stress. (Ud 1.10)

On the surface, these instructions might seem to be describing bare attention, but a closer look shows that something more is going on. To begin with, the instructions come in two parts: advice on how to train attention, and a promise of the results that will come from training attention in that way. In other words, the training is still operating on the conditioned level of cause and effect. It's something to be done. This means it's shaped by an intention, which in turn is shaped by a view. The intention and view are informed by the “result” part of the passage: The meditator wants to attain the end of stress and suffering, and so is willing to follow the path to that end. Thus, as with every other level of appropriate attention, the attention developed here is conditioned by right view—the knowledge that your present intentions are ultimately the source of stress—and motivated by the desire to put an end to that stress. This is why you make the effort not to add anything at all to the potentials coming from the past.

The need for right view would seem to be belied by the circumstances surrounding

The meditator has to be careful not to add any assumptions to the data of experience that would foster passion.

these instructions. After all, these are the first instructions Bahiya receives from the Buddha, and he attains Awakening immediately afterward, so they would appear to be complete in and of themselves. However, in the lead-up to this passage, Bahiya is portrayed as unusually heedful and motivated to practice. He already knows that Awakening is attained by doing, and the instructions come in response to his request for a teaching that will show him what to do *now* for his long-term welfare and happiness—a question that MN 135 identifies as the foundation for wisdom and discernment. So his attitude contains all the seeds for right view and right intention. Because he was wise—the Buddha later praised him as the foremost of his disciples in terms of the quickness of his discernment—he was able to bring those seeds to fruition immediately.

A verse from SN 35.95—which the Buddha says expresses the meaning of the instructions to Bahiya—throws light on how Bahiya may have developed those seeds.

*Not impassioned with forms
—seeing a form with mindfulness firm—
dispassioned in mind,
one knows
and doesn't remain fastened there.
While one is seeing a form
—and even experiencing feeling—
it falls away and doesn't accumulate.
Thus one fares mindfully.
Thus not amassing stress,
one is said to be
in the presence of Unbinding.*

[Similarly with sounds, aromas, flavors, tactile sensations, and mental qualities or ideas.] (SN 35.95)

Notice two words in this verse: *mindfulness* and *dispassioned*. The reference to mindfulness underlines the need to continually remind oneself of the intention not to add anything to any potentials from the past. This again points to the willed nature of the attention being developed here.



Some interpretations of the instructions to Bahiya identify the added factor as a metaphysical view about there being something behind the data of experience, but this sort of metaphysical view—even though it can form a basis for passion—is only one of many such bases. The belief that there is something out there that can be grasped and possessed can obviously form a condition for passion, but so can the belief that there's nothing there: When there's nothing, there's nothing to be harmed by giving in to desire, an idea that can excuse all kinds of harmful passions. So the meditator has to be careful not to add any assumptions to the data of experience that would foster passion in any way, shape, or form. And this involves more than bare attention. It requires right view about how passion works and what's necessary to thwart it.

Our sense of who we are is defined by our passions (as SN 22.36 and SN 23.2 indicate). Even when we don't consciously think of "self"—as when we're totally immersed in an activity, at one with the action—there can be a passion for that oneness with a strong sense of "being here," "being the doing," or "being the knowing," which is identity in a subtle form.

But when discernment is sharp enough to see that even this equanimity is fabricated and conditioned, something that's *done* (see MN 137 and 140), any passion for it can be undercut as well. When passion is consistently offered no place to land, there's no nucleus for a "place"

of any sort: no "here," no "there," no nucleus for a sense of identity to be constructed around anything anywhere at all. This explains why the state of non-fashioning is expressed in terms devoid of place: "When there's no you in that, there's no you there. When there's no you there, you are neither here nor yonder nor between the two."

With the total fading of passion, the final intention to undercut passion can thus be dropped. When it's dropped—with no need to replace it with any other—nothing more is constructed. This brings a true opening to the Deathless, which lies beyond all conditions—even the conditions of right view, mindfulness, and appropriate attention.

The extraordinary nature of this experience is indicated by the verse that concludes the discourse on Bahiya:

*Where water, earth, fire, & wind have no footing:
There the stars do not shine,
the sun is not visible,
the moon does not appear,
darkness is not found.
And when a sage,
a brahman through sagacity,
has known [this] for himself,
then from form & formless,
from bliss & pain,
he is freed.*

When the awakened person emerges from this experience and resumes dealing with the conditions of time and space, it's with a totally new perspective. But even then, he/she still has use for appropriate attention. As Ven. Sariputta notes in SN 22.122:

An arahant should attend in an appropriate way to these five clinging-aggregates as inconstant, stressful, a disease, a cancer, an arrow, painful, an affliction, alien, a dissolution, an emptiness, not-self. Although, for an arahant, there is nothing further to do, and nothing to add to what has been done, still these things—when developed & pursued—lead both to a pleasant abiding in the here-&-now and to mindfulness & alertness.



So it's important to understand that there's no such thing as bare attention in the practice of the Buddha's teachings. Instead of trying to create an unconditioned form of attention, the practice tries to create a set of skillful conditions to shape and direct the act of attention to make it appropriate: truly healing, truly leading to the end of suffering and stress. Once these conditions are well developed, the Buddha promises that they will serve you well—even past the moment of Awakening, all the way to your very last death.

Ajaan Thanissaro (Geoffrey DeGraff) has been a Theravadin monk since 1976 and is the abbot of Metta Forest Monastery in San Diego County, CA.

Mindfulness for Educators

Claire Stanley

The most practical thing we can achieve in any kind of work is insight into what is happening inside us as we do it. The more familiar we are with our inner terrain, the more surefooted our teaching—and living—becomes. —Parker Palmer

These words from Parker Palmer's book *The Courage to Teach* (Jossey-Bass, 1998) have inspired many educators to explore the inner landscape of a teacher's life. Eloquent and provocative, Palmer's work illuminates the perils, paradoxes and challenges that one faces in the world of teaching from a non-sectarian perspective. The Buddhist tradition offers a methodology for uncovering our inner terrain and for gaining insight into what is happening inside us as we teach. It is called mindfulness, and it is of growing interest and significance to teachers, students, and the world of education in general.

Understanding Mindfulness

Despite its growing use in common language, there remains considerable confusion about what mindfulness is. Jon Kabat-Zinn offers a simple description of mindfulness: "Paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally." The Venerable Sayadaw U Tejaniya, a Burmese meditation master, says, "You should be relaxed and practice without tension, without forcing yourself. The more relaxed you are, the easier it is to develop mindfulness." These descriptions pointing to the experience of mindfulness emphasize a certain level of simplicity and ease of the practice.

Many Western students (and I know this from my own personal experience) come to meditation with habits of getting things done, of

mobilizing a lot of energy to take on a project, and of judging how well we are doing whatever we are doing. We then identify with our successes and failures. Mindfulness, in either formal or informal meditation contexts, involves just the opposite of these habits of mind. It is helpful when we can change our habits of mind by letting go of a doer doing mindfulness, and by no longer identifying with success. If we can begin to bring a sense of open ease, interest, and relaxed non-judgment to our practice, either on the cushion or in the midst of our lives, there will be a flowering of more continuous mindful awareness. As one of my teachers has said, "This is not difficult to do: it is difficult to *remember* to do."

We gain confidence when we begin to practice a nonjudgmental, observing attentiveness to all we do, both internally and externally. At the same time, we cultivate a light touch and come to understand that mindfulness is not fussy. We recognize and then let go of judgments projected onto ourselves as we try to be mindful in the world, in the midst of complex jobs, and in educational contexts. If we make an attempt and then judge our experience, we can shift our attention to recognizing the thinking and judging of the experience. Mindfulness involves a mirror-like awareness, accepting whatever arises. So we make attempts to be mindful, even in difficult circumstances...and then we lose it. But the important thing is we then notice we have gotten lost, and begin again with renewed interest and curiosity.

As an educator of teachers, I find it essential not only that teachers learn and practice mindfulness, but that they also cultivate lovingkindness and compassion for themselves and their students. As mindfulness increases, the heart develops a greater capacity for caring, and the attitudes of lovingkindness and compassion naturally follow. The mind learns more generous attitudes of the heart simply through the persistent, gentle, yet pervading application of mindfulness. It is said in the Buddhist tradition that every moment of true mindfulness is also a moment of lovingkindness.

Teachers serve as examples to students and to their community through their attitude, their actions, and their interactions. They can teach mindfulness and compassion simply by the way they model these qualities in the classroom and in the school community. This can only be of great benefit, and will affect the welfare of our society and the world. It begins at any moment when the light of mindful awareness shines on experience.

Opportunities for Educators

The challenges of cultivating and applying mindfulness are the same for all people, but educators can learn to take advantage of particular opportunities. Teaching and learning are interactive human endeavors. Because all human activity is unpredictable, and since teaching and learning involves human beings in relation to a subject matter as well as to one another, there are numerous opportunities to cultivate at any moment the insightful practice of mindfulness of mental states. For example, the hindrances of desire, aversion, lack of energy, too much energy, or doubt are some of the most common mind states we pay attention to when we practice both formal and informal meditation. They come up repeatedly in educational contexts, both when we are learners and when we are teachers, perhaps because of the particular nature of our work.

Yet teaching is not simply a mental activity:

it also involves one's bodily presence. Because we are standing, writing on the board, gesturing with our hands, speaking, listening, and being silent, while walking and moving throughout the day, we as teachers have a wonderful opportunity to cultivate the grounding practice of the first of the four classical foundations of mindfulness, mindfulness of the body.

For example, several teachers I have worked with have cultivated awareness of drinking water in the midst of their days. Thirst arises from talking, from warm rooms, from expenditure of the physical energy of circulating and engaging with students around the subject matter. Each time a teacher feels thirst, an opportunity arises for feeling the hand touch the glass or water bottle, feeling the contact of the water in the mouth, feeling the swallowing and the diminishing of thirst. At the same time as mindful awareness of the body is practiced, there is also a pause, an interruption in the fast pace of a classroom period. This pause brings moments of greater spaciousness. We need not bring strong, concentrated energy to any of this, but rather a light, compassionate, mindful touching into the body in the midst of our work. When we do not judge or seek success, there is a relaxed, unforced quality that allows mindful awareness to flourish.

Educators I have worked with over the past years have reported simple yet profound shifts in understanding in how to bring mindful awareness into their work lives. When the experience of mindfulness of the body is practiced often and then comes more naturally, it can be a touchstone from which a teacher can make decisions in her teaching practice in the moment. Awareness of the body opens up the possibility for pausing and noticing not only internal changes but also external changes that are asking to be made. Awareness of mind states opens up the possibility of asking ourselves whether the arisen states are necessary or not. If we can see mind states arise in the moment while teaching, then in the same moment we can change our minds and change the impact on ourselves and on our students.

Applied Mindfulness 1

In an online course that I taught recently, one elementary school teacher wrote about her experience of applying mindfulness to a particular classroom situation. She had noticed a buildup of stress in her body from students' lack of attention: the weather was beautiful, it was nearing the end of the school year, and a certain infectious, bubbly distraction had overtaken the class. We all know what this feels like, right?

She made the decision to turn off the lights for a moment and to ask the students to take their seats. Even though it took repeated requests for the students to take their seats and to calm down, during those moments of pausing she found an ability to reflect on what was happening and what needed to happen next. The students eventually quieted down and became more attentive. This allowed her not only to transition to the next activity with more ease but also to let go of the tension in her body, which she recognized was triggered by negative emotions toward herself and her students.

Taking a moment to pause mindfully in the midst of teaching brought greater clarity to this teacher's mind. By noticing the tension in her body, she was also able to see how the bodily stress brought delusion in the mind, clouding over her ability to see clearly in the midst of her work as a teacher. She talked about how the mindful awareness, coupled with a pause in the classroom's activity, helped her to see "a way out of the chaos."

This example of this teacher's practice illustrates how mindfulness of the body leads to awareness of mind states. When mindfulness of the body is established, we begin to notice the hindrances of desire, aversion, restlessness, boredom, and doubt. Many of us might feel these hindrances indicate our practice has failed, that we have let the students or the situation get under our skin. Yet a nonjudgmental mindfulness of their impact on mind and body will lead to a more subtle understanding. By opening to the hindrances, or to any other of the myriad emotions that arise during teaching, we can begin to understand them and find more skillful ways to change the situation.

Applied Mindfulness 2

For several years I held the position of Chair of the Education Department at the graduate school where I worked. Almost every meeting I attended on a daily basis was a situation of conflict. Competition among various forces and groups for limited funds was often the source of the conflict, and in my role I would usually have to jump into the middle of the fray one way or another. I would leave the meetings utterly drained from the experience. When I got home I would sit down for a short meditation, and for the first ten minutes or more I was simply reliving the meeting—arguing with this person, remembering the painful thing that person had said, and imagining what I could have or should have said. The thoughts and emotions triggered by the meeting were reflected in the tension and stress held in my face, shoulders and stomach.

I learned that if I could just let these thoughts run their course, like sheep out to pasture, they would eventually quiet down. With the thoughts still in the background, I could feel a shift from an external focus to an internal one, where the attitude of mind became the foreground. At that moment, there would be a sense of integration and wholeness at the level of the body-mind process.

As I was able to reap the benefits of meditation practice each day in helping me better understand and balance my reactions to the stresses I was facing, I got curious as to how to bring this kind of integration to the actual experience of the meeting, rather than waiting for formal meditation on my own at home. In reflecting upon it, I was able to identify a few simple steps to the meditation-in-action process I used. I still aspire to use these regularly in all daily life settings, and find them especially useful in my work as an educator:

- As I applied mindful awareness to the meetings I attended, I learned that by paying attention to my body first, feeling myself sitting, and staying in contact with the chair either at the buttocks or the back, I could reconnect with being in the present moment and being in contact with my body. This was an important first step.

- Then, from that experience of mindfulness of the body, I could observe the various emotional states as they came up again and again in the meetings: annoyance, anger, aversion, nervousness, or contraction in the mind. I saw clearly how the body could serve as a beacon, shedding light on mind states that the ordinary thinking and reacting mind cannot pick up on. At those moments of clarity, I experienced the kind of integration and wholeness of the body-mind process that would arise in formal meditation practice. It came to me as a kind of “meditation-in-action” experience.
- However, the in-the-moment realignment of body, heart, and mind states did not automatically bring about change. It was through reflection and inquiry that I began to see, after the fact, the mechanics of suffering. At the root of it all, I was identified with my position, my views and opinions, and my reputation. I realized that this level of identification caused me to promote self-advocacy and take an adversarial stance. These in turn created a high level of negativity all the time, which kept the cycle of suffering constant.
- From flashes of understanding gained through reflection and inquiry, both in the moment and in retrospect, I decided that I did not want to remain identified with that level of negativity all the time. Perhaps this is what the Buddhists regard as wisdom, an understanding of the texture of suffering at more and more subtle levels, accompanied with an aspiration to heal the suffering.
- Back in the midst of difficult meetings, I would practice noticing the arising of the mind states, coupled with identification—and then I would mentally let go. It’s an incredible relief to discover you don’t have to hold on to the things you are accustomed to holding on to. This internal letting go eventually allowed me to respond with greater ease to the people and the issues presented in the meeting with less reactivity.
- Paradoxically, by feeling the suffering of the moment in my body, mind, and heart,

and then by opening to it, accepting it, and letting it go, I found I was a more effective participant in meetings and in the educational community as a whole. Working with mindful awareness in the midst of work also allowed me to stay in contact with the possibility of freedom at any moment.

All of this took both practice and training, and yet over time I noticed that I could find joy and ease in situations that were formerly almost intolerable. Mindful awareness in the moment, coupled with reflection and inquiry after the meetings, as well as patience and an easy perseverance, brought a change in the mind. I still get caught, but it is easier to see how it happens (by identification) and how it is changed (by letting go).

As I have gone on to share these insights and practices with teachers, educational administrators, and school counselors in retreats, workshops, and in online courses, many have reported similar experiences. With guidance and encouragement, and with a clear understanding of what mindfulness is and how it can be developed, educators can make a significant difference not only in their own lives but in the precious gift they bring every day to others. Our work as educators is so important, and the quality of self-understanding we bring to it is equally important.

Claire Stanley, Ph.D. in Educational Studies, teaches at the School of International Training. Through her organization the Center for Mindful Inquiry she has been working on mindfulness training for educators.



Barre Center for Buddhist Studies Upcoming 2007 Courses Offerings

July	7	Sharon Salzberg	Transforming the Roots of Suffering
	8—13	Charles Genoud	Compassion in Mahayana (Bhāvāna Program)
	15	Kate Lila Wheeler & Jess Row	Writing Buddhist Fiction
	20—22	Taitetsu Unno & Mark Unno	Shin Buddhism
	27—29	Jason Siff	Learning Meditation from Within
August	Jul 31—5	Mu Soeng	Mind Only (Bhāvāna Program)
September	3—8	IMS & BCBS Teachers	Teachers' Training (Closed program.)
	9	Joseph Goldstein	Liberating Practice in Daily Life
	14—18	Steve Armstrong	Refined Knowledge, Subtle Wisdom
	29	Narayan & Michael Liebenson Grady	Investigating the Nature of Fear
	30	Jack Engler	What is Enlightenment?
October	6—10	Martine Batchelor	Breaking Free of Habits
	12—14	DaeJa Napier	Overview of the Brahma Vihāras
	20—27	Gregory Kramer	Insight Dialogue: Contact
	28—Nov 2	Andrew Olendzki & Taraniya Ambrosia	Essentials of Buddhist Psychology
November	4	James Ford	Does a Dog Have Buddha Nature?
	9—11	Chip Hartranft	Yoga and Dhamma
	16—18	Mark Hart	Relaxing the Compulsion to Control
December	1—8	Andrew Olendzki & Taraniya Ambrosia	The Five Indriya (Bhāvāna Program)

For complete course descriptions, teacher biographies and registration information, please contact us for a free program catalog or visit our website.

YEAR-LONG PROGRAM INTEGRATING STUDY AND PRACTICE

The Barre Center for Buddhist Studies will be offering a one-year program that seeks to integrate meditation practice with the study of Buddhist thought. This program is similar to the recently concluded Advanced Study and Practice Program (2006-2007) in that it is generally designed for students with an established vipassana meditation practice.

The program has a structured and supported year-round curriculum, based on readings in a sourcebook and four five-day study-retreats. Each week-long, beginning Friday evenings and ending Wednesday afternoons, will have significant practice time, with study, discussion and reflection woven throughout the day. Study-retreat dates are:

February 1st to 6th, 2008

June 6th to 11th, 2008

October 3rd to 8th, 2008

February 6th to 11th, 2009

Andrew Olendzki, Executive Director and Senior Scholar at BCBS, will lead the study periods, and Gloria Taraniya Ambrosia, a member of BCBS' visiting faculty for ten years, will guide meditation practice.

Full details on the program, including an outline of the curriculum, eligibility, and how to apply, will be available, soon. If you would like to receive an email announcing the program in full, please contact Sumi Loundon, program administrator, at SumiL@dharm.org. Notification will be sent out by early September 2007, and program details will be announced on the BCBS website.



About the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies

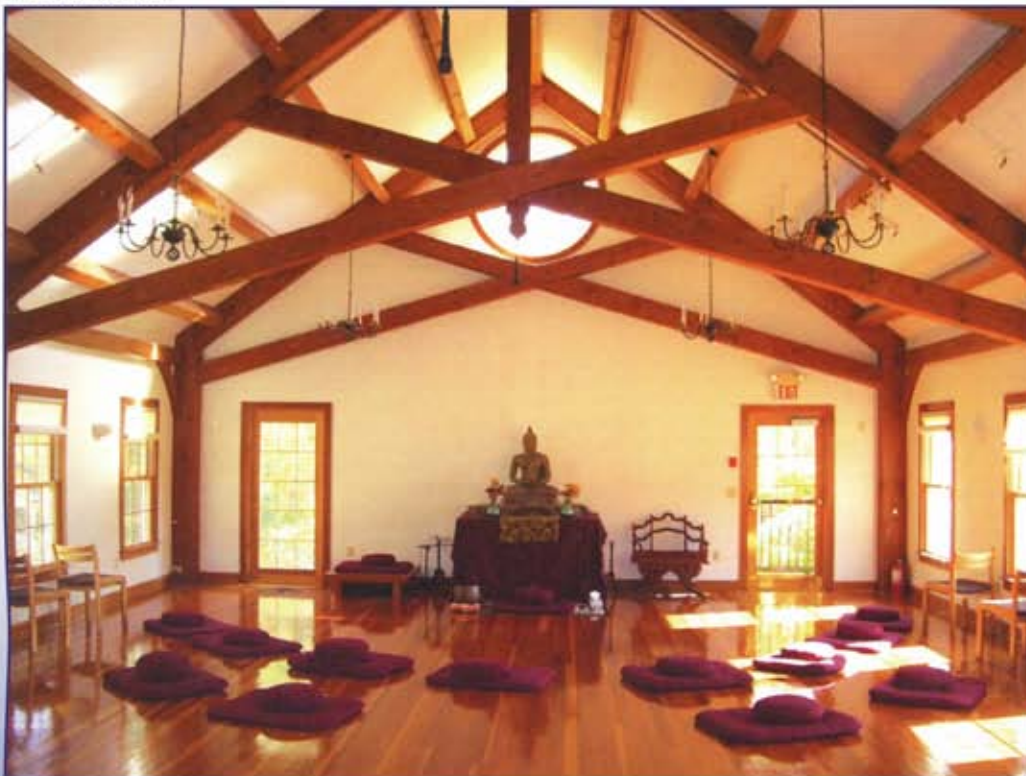
The Farmhouse



The Barre Center for Buddhist Studies is a non-profit educational organization dedicated to bringing together teachers, students, scholars and practitioners who are committed to exploring Buddhist thought and practice as a living tradition, faithful to its origins and lineage, yet adaptable and alive in the current world. The center's purpose is to provide a bridge between study and practice, between scholarly understanding and meditative insight. It encourages engagement with the tradition in a spirit of genuine inquiry and investigation.

The study center offers a variety of study and research opportunities, lectures, classes, seminars, workshops, conferences, retreats and independent study programs. Its program is rooted in the classical Buddhist tradition of the earliest teachings and practices, but its vision calls for dialogue between different schools of Buddhism and discussions with other religious and scientific traditions. All BCBS courses involve some level of both silent meditation practice and conscious investigation of the teachings.

The Dharma Hall



Located on 90 acres of wooded land in rural, central Massachusetts, just a half mile from the Insight Meditation Society, BCBS provides a peaceful and contemplative setting for the study and investigation of the Buddha's teachings. A 225-year-old farmhouse holds a library, offices and a dining room that provide a comfortable setting for students, staff and teachers. A dormitory and classroom/meditation hall provide space for classes, workshops and retreats, and three cottages provide secluded space for independent study.



Barre Center
for Buddhist Studies

149 Lockwood Road
Barre, MA 01005
(978) 355-2347
www.dharma.org
bcbs@dharma.org

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No Harmful Thought

by Saṃkicca Thera, *Therāgathā* 602 & 603

vasitam me araññesu
kandarāsu guhāsu ca
senāsanesu pantesu
vāḷamiganisevite.

I have lived deep in the forests,
In canyons and also in caves,
Upon wilderness seats and beds,
—All haunted by predator beasts.

ime haññantu vajjhantu
dukkhaṃ pappontu pāṇino
saṃkappaṃ nābhijānāṃ
anariyaṃ dosasaṃhitāṃ

“May these creatures be slain or harmed,
Or come to pain in any way.”
Such a hateful, ignoble thought
—Has never occurred to me once.

Is it really impossible to imagine that such an attitude is attainable? We so often hear such sentiments dismissed as idealistic or impractical. It seems taken for granted that humans are just hateful creatures, that animosity is an adaptive instinct, and that “of course” we will hate those who threaten us. Who could blame us?

The Buddha was showing us a more noble way of being human. Yes, the impulse to lash out against those we fear does lie within us all as a latent tendency, and it is all too easily provoked. But if we indulge that reflex without awareness, we are operating at the level of the most primitive animal. The freedom to be human begins with the understanding that we need not act out all the inclinations arising within us.

Just behind that first impulse towards greed, hatred and delusion lies a capacity for non-greed, non-hatred and non-delusion. When we let the first response blow through our mind and body as a breeze might blow through an empty house, perhaps noticing that it is occurring or even reflecting upon its texture and effects, we give a chance for other, more wholesome qualities to follow: generosity and non-attachment; kindness and compassion; insight and wisdom.

According to the commentary on the *Therāgathā*, from which these stanzas are taken, the elder Saṃkicca modeled this noble attitude in quite dramatic ways. Once, when a gang of robbers came upon his forest-dwelling community demanding a victim for sacrifice to a local forest spirit, Saṃkicca insisted they take him. He submitted willingly to their sword, and we can assume from his verses above that he did this with a mind free of animosity. The robbers were so moved by his example that they renounced their murderous ways and wound up ordaining as Buddhist monks under Saṃkicca.

I know it sounds a bit implausible, but I see this as a story of hope, honoring the better part of human nature. Not only did Saṃkicca himself demonstrate astonishing courage and altruism, but more significant was the transformative impact this had on the robbers. Perhaps we are not in a position to take things to this extreme, but I can't help but wonder what incremental, cumulative effect ten thousand little acts of good will and lovingkindness might have on bringing out the best in ourselves and others.

—A. Olendzki