

# Insight Journal

Winter 2009



Here and Now  
Editor's Essay

Forty Years in the Dharma  
Joseph Goldstein

Working with Perception  
Ajahn Sucitto

The Good Sal Tree - Jātaka Tale  
Margo McLoughlin

Poems from the Community

Shin Buddhism  
Taitetsu & Mark Unno

Killing Me Softly With Dharma  
Kristy Arbon

2009 BCBS Courses

Free of Fear  
Pali Poetry

**For** Not to be taken  
from the room.  
**reference**

Barre Center for Buddhist Studies





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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. We welcome you to the discussion.

## Here and Now

**Y**ou don't have to have read a lot of Buddhist texts to know that consciousness comes streaming through six doors, each one framed by one of six cognizing organs and opening onto one of six cognized objects. Just take a moment to explore the field of experience, and you will see that you know things in six different ways. One sphere of knowing is visual, another is auditory. Seeing and hearing are two different activities, each using separate parts of the body and distinct processing centers in the brain. If you cycle between one and the other, you will know quite directly what is happening right now in the environment around you. Moment after moment you will see and then hear, hear and then see, some specific input of data flowing through these two sense doors.

The same is happening with the knowing of smells, tastes, and tactile sensations. Each involves a different mode of consciousness, and each translates some aspect of the environment into a different experiential language. Consciousness is singular in the sense that it is all just knowing, but this knowing manifests variously as particular organs respond to particular objects. In classical Buddhist thought these variations are called the five strands of sense experience (*kāma-guṇa*), and they appear to the mindful meditator as a stream of changing experience.

Here is the thing: These five sense inputs can only access information that is happening in the present moment. They are each connected to specialized receptors at the end of nerve bundles, which are responding to real-time stimuli with present moment representation. You cannot hear a bell that has not yet rung, nor directly experience a touch that took place years ago. When we appear to do this, by remembering past experience or by imagining future experience, we are using the sixth mode of consciousness, the mind door. When a mental object (which covers a wide territory of memories, thoughts, plans, computations, and so much more) is known by the mind, a moment of mental consciousness occurs. We generally call this "thinking," but in the broadest sense of the word.

Mental experience is similar to sense experience in so far as it, too, is happening in the present moment. But an important difference is that the content of a mental experience may go well beyond the present moment to represent something far into the past or future. The thought you are having right now is of something you did yesterday or anticipate doing tomorrow. It does not work the same way for the other senses. You can form a mental image of something that happened in the past, and that mental image might even draw upon some of the brain's visual apparatus as you appear to "see" it in your "mind's eye," but you do not see it in the same way you see an object before you in the present moment.

This ability to think about the past and the future yields tremendous learning, planning, and problem-solving skills, but

it also comes with at least one major drawback. It is possible for people to dwell almost exclusively in the mental mode and have very little direct contact with the senses. Yes, one might check in with the other senses enough to navigate the physical world, but often as little as necessary to keep one's bearings and provide basic input for the mind's proliferations. As the human animal lives less in a rapidly changing natural environment filled with sensual nuance and permeated with danger, and more in a synthetic world with all its parameters defined, it becomes more adaptive to rely heavily on the mental realm at the expense of the senses.

But for many people this becomes a trap. What happens when you can't stop spinning out threatening alternative futures, or you cannot help reliving past traumas? What happens when the pendulum swinging from past to future becomes a fiendish carnival ride you can neither slow down nor escape? At a certain point one can feel driven by the mind's habit of churning over various scenarios, and this often results in a great deal of suffering.

The solution offered by the Buddhist tradition is systematic training in attending to the senses. The first foundation of mindfulness, for example, guides the meditator exclusively to the body door. Become aware of physical sensations—whether those associated with breathing, walking, or almost any other activity—and when the mind adverts toward thinking, as it will surely do often, simply re-direct awareness back to bodily sensations. It sounds simple enough, yet it has a huge impact.

The reason this is effective is that the mind can be aware of only one thing at a time. If it is a thought, then there is no sense cognition; but in a moment of sense cognition, there are no thoughts. At first, there may be far more mind moments of mental cognition than of sense cognition in the stream of consciousness; but over time, as the practice develops, one can actually have multiple consecutive moments of sense awareness uninterrupted by "thinking about" what one is sensing. To those who habitually think too much, this is experienced as blissful relief. And it is an essential starting point for growth in understanding.

The Buddha offers an image of the mind like a water jug. If it is half-full of water, Mara can gain access and cause all sorts of mischief. This happens when one senses the world with half of one's available awareness, and thinks about it with the other half. Mara, a trickster figure, represents the unseen (i.e. unconscious) neurotic habitual tendencies that usually direct mental chatter. But if the water jug is full to the brim, Mara can gain no access. Conscious awareness is fully engaged, but with direct sense experience rather than with mental narrative. By filling up the senses, one empties out the mind. With the peace that ensues from quieting the mind in this way, dharma investigation can begin.

—Andrew Olendzki

## A Simple Turning in Place

### Forty Years in the Dharma

Joseph Goldstein

*At a program held at the study center in September 2008, Joseph Goldstein was asked to reflect upon his long experience with meditation and the Dharma. These words have been extracted from that presentation.*

**M**y first real inquiry into any kind of spiritual dimension happened when I was a freshman in college. I became obsessed, as only a college freshman can, with the effort to figure out whether or not God existed. My mind was filled with it, day and night. It felt like my whole life depended on coming to some resolution of this great question. I felt so deeply that if I knew God existed, my life would look one way, and if not it would look quite different. Then after a couple of weeks of this inner questioning, something happened—unfortunately, I can't now remember what (perhaps it was an upcoming exam)—and the intensity of the question seemed to fade away.

#### Early explorations

Then, in my junior year I was taking a course in Eastern Philosophy and reading the *Bhagavad Gita*, one of the great Hindu classics. As we read this text, one line just jumped out at me: "...to act without attachment to the fruit of the action."

I did not really know what this meant, but there was something about it that resonated deeply. I think it was some intimation of the whole notion of non-attachment as a spiritual path. I had come from a really small town of about a thousand people in the Catskill Mountains of New York State, and non-attachment was not something that was spoken much about—in fact, not at all. So for me it was a completely revolutionary idea.

Many years later, I heard the Dalai Lama expand on this core teaching, but with more subtlety and depth. He said the true worth of an action is not measured by its success or failure, but by the motivation behind it. Mostly in

our culture, actions are measured only by their outcome. Here was the Dalai Lama pointing to something else entirely, which was the importance of the motivation guiding the action.

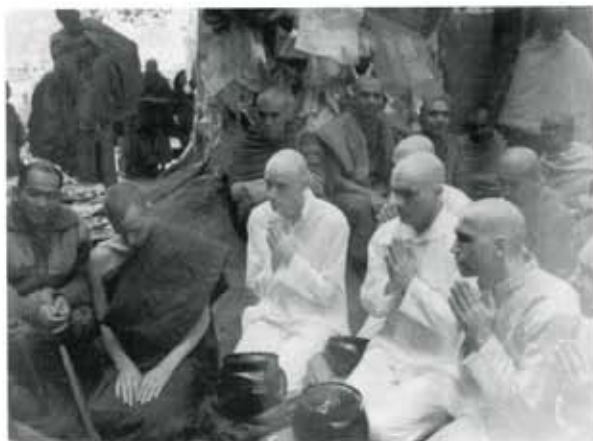
We all know we can not entirely control the outcome of our actions. There are just too many different influences—other people, society, politics, economics. We may decide to do something and engage in it with great passion; but if we are overly attached to the outcome, it is going to be a setup for suffering. One of the few things we do have direct access to, however, is insight into and purification of our motivation. Is it based on generosity, on good will, on wisdom, on compassion? Or is it based on self-referencing, on greed, on anger, or aversion?

Judging from myself and people I know, I think we assume that most of our motivations are pretty good. But we do not often stop to examine them. Motivations are subtle, sometimes mixed, and often hidden. We may not be as saintly as we feel ourselves to be. Although we may have a whole series of mixed motives, if we are not lost in or identified with them, we can let the unwholesome ones go and act from what is skillful. Before we speak, what is the motive? Before we give something, what is the motive? This is a core theme of how we practice in the world. There is a Buddhist saying that "Everything rests on the tip of motivation."

#### Turning inward

Later in my college career I was riding on a subway in New York City, and there was a group of young people on the subway car who were in one of the first Peace Corps training groups. This was 1964 and there was a lot of excitement about this new vision of service. I got to talking with these people and I invited them back to my apartment. After three and a half years of school, I was ready for some adventure. I applied to go to East Africa—I had this Hemingway-like vision of climbing Mount Kilimanjaro and living in the

***Not only could I actually watch my mind,  
but there was a whole system for doing it!***



*Joseph at ordination in Thailand*

African bush. But karma intervened, and the Peace Corps sent me to Thailand instead. In retrospect, I'm very grateful.

It was in Thailand that I received my first real introduction to Buddhism. I started going to discussion groups for Westerners led by two monks, one English and one Indian. I was fresh from studying philosophy in college and my mind was full of ideas; I asked so many questions that some people actually stopped coming to the group because of that. Finally, perhaps out of desperation, one of the monks said, "Why don't you start meditating?" This was the first I had heard about it. Being in Bangkok, meditating at a Buddhist temple—it all seemed very exotic. So the monks gave me some beginning instructions, I got my paraphernalia together, and I sat down, setting the alarm clock for five minutes.

Quite surprisingly, something happened. Not some great enlightenment, but the revolutionary (for me) understanding that there was a systematic way to turn the attention in upon the mind, instead of just using the mind to look out at the world. It was a simple turning in place, but it seemed astonishing. Can you remember that moment for yourself when you had the first direct glimpse of the mind itself? Not only could I actually watch my mind, but there was a whole system for doing it! I was so excited I invited all my friends to watch me meditate. And now, more than forty years later, I'm still doing it.

While I was in the Peace Corps, I taught English at a school in Bangkok. After a year there, I decided to undertake a literary project, to read all of Proust's *A Remembrance of Things Past*. It is a massive book, in many volumes, and it took me almost a year to get through it. The last part of the book is about the nature of time, the theme that prompted Proust to write his masterpiece. Perhaps I had been prepared in some way by having read those thousands of pages, or perhaps it was the rudimentary beginnings of my meditation practice, but when I got to the end I was really struck by his insight that the past is in the present, that the way we experience the past is as a thought or feeling—a memory—in the present.

In that moment of understanding, somehow the mountains of past and future fell off my shoulders. Those of you who have done meditation practice know how much of our time we spend in the past and future, not only in meditation but throughout our days. Thoughts of past and future are running our lives, because we ascribe to them a reality that in fact they don't have. They are just thoughts arising in the mind. When we see this, they become quite light. So it is a tremendous opening, really seeing into the nature of how we experience time.

#### Discovering the power of thought

Thought is one of the most fascinating and seductive aspects of our lives. How many thoughts do you think in a day—fifty thousand, a hundred thousand? What is so amazing from the perspective of liberation is that we rarely pay attention to the nature of thought. Mostly we are just lost in them. They create different feelings and emotions in us, they move us to act or they don't move us to act. We are being driven in our lives by this torrent of thoughts, sometimes loud, sometimes very soft, completely conditioning our lives. Here is where we can appreciate the amazing power of mindfulness. The English word, "mindfulness," is pretty prosaic. But if we can connect to the quality of mind it is pointing to, we begin to get

***The experience of zero, or the unborn, transformed the way I was seeing the world.  
It deeply undermined the conventional view of self.***

a sense of its tremendous power. Mindfulness means really noticing, paying attention to what it is that is arising moment to moment.

When we bring mindfulness to thought a revolution takes place, because we begin to see that there is a way of being aware of thoughts arising in the mind, rather than simply being lost in them. The idea is not to stop thinking, but to see the difference in your own experience between being lost in them and being aware of them. Be mindful of the difference between when you are lost in thought, and that moment of waking up from being lost.

That moment is critical. Most people awaken and say "Oh, I was lost again, what a terrible meditator I am." They just get involved in self-judgment, which is simply being lost again—such judgment is really useless. We all get lost in thought many times a day, but insights arise when we highlight that moment of waking up. Delight in it. Honor it. You are already aware in that moment. And as many times as we notice we are lost, that many times do we awaken.

Thoughts in themselves have no power at all; the only power they have is what we give them when we don't know them as thoughts. When we recognize them, we have a choice. Do I want to continue that pattern? Is it skillful, is it wholesome, is it for my well-being, for the well-being of others? Is it not skillful, is it unwholesome? And most of all: Can I let it go?

#### Experiencing zero

Right at the end of my Peace Corps stay in Bangkok I was sitting in a garden with a friend who was reading to me from a Tibetan text. We were both getting interested in Buddhism, and as he was reading, my mind was becoming very concentrated. Then the text went into a very liberating understanding, at the heart of many Buddhist texts, describing the very nature of mind itself: The mind is unformed, it is without color, without shape, it is like space, unborn—look into your own mind. And in one moment of hearing the word "unborn," the mind suddenly opened to what might be called the unborn nature of the mind.

Afterwards, when thinking came back, I characterized this experience to myself as "Oh, that was like experiencing zero." This "zero" is simply using numbers as a metaphor. If you think of "one" as being self, this zero is the unborn, the unformed, the unarisen. Now when we hear the words, "It felt like zero," for many people that might not seem appealing. Who wants to be zero? There is a mathematician named Robert Kaplan who wrote a book on the history of zero, with a wonderful title: *The Nothing That Is*. When I saw that title, I knew I had to read the book. The first line of the book captured what that experience was about: "When you look at zero, you see nothing. Look through it, and you see the world."

So this experience of zero, or the unborn, transformed the way I was seeing the world. It deeply undermined the conventional view of self, of "I" or "me." This process of seeing and understanding selflessness, or *anattā*, is one of the jewels of the Buddhist teachings. At first, it was a little disorienting, because in my mind I kept saying, "There is no me, there is no me, there is no me." But then, who was getting on the plane to leave Bangkok after two years? And somebody still had a lot of things to do.

The great lesson here is that at different times in our lives we all may have transforming experiences of one kind or another, something that has turned our mind in a certain way and opened us to other possibilities. For me, the lesson was so powerful that it inspired a tremendous enthusiasm for continuing the practice and for going deeper.

I came back to the States after the Peace Corps, having had this transformative experience, but I had no idea what to do. I tried to practice by myself in several places, trying to recreate that experience—not a very good idea!—but I was just getting more confused. At a certain point, I realized I needed a teacher, and decided to go back to Asia.

#### India

Some friends of mine had been in India, so I thought I would stop and see them on my way back to Thailand. But after spending time

in various ashrams in India, I did not find any teachings that resonated. I went back to Delhi, thinking I would get a ticket to go on to Bangkok. But then, something quite unusual happened. As I was walking down the street to the airline office, some force just stopped me from taking the next step. I was really startled; nothing like that had ever happened to me. So I turned around, and decided to stay in India, going first to Benares and then to Bodhgaya, the place of the Buddha's enlightenment.

In Bodhgaya, I met a teacher who had just come back from about nine years in Burma. His name was Anagarika Munindra. He was just beginning to teach vipassana [insight meditation], and within a few days of meeting him, he had me totally hooked. He said, "If you want to understand your mind, sit down and observe it." That's all. There was nothing to join, no big philosophical system; it just seemed like common sense to me. Sit down and observe the mind. So I spent most of the next seven years in India doing just that, sitting and walking.

Munindra-ji was my first Dharma teacher, and he did not fit my image of a Dharma teacher at all. He was a little guy, dressed in white, moving quickly, and very engaged with life. In the bazaar, he would be bargaining for peanuts with the vendor, and really getting into it. One time I asked him, what are you doing? He said, "The path of Dharma is to be simple, not a simpleton." The other thing I appreciated was that he was tremendously open-minded about the Dharma. He was a very curious person himself, and his curiosity translated into an openness with his students. There are many gurus in India teaching all kinds of things. Munindra said, "The Buddhadharma doesn't suffer in comparison to anything, so go, explore, see for yourself." His unwavering confidence in the Dharma inspired me tremendously. I think we can trust that; we don't have to hold tight to our particular vision of things.

After his meditation training in Burma, Munindra-ji did six years of intensive study of the texts, so he was a great scholar as well as a meditation master. He said he did that study because he did not want to rely on other people's



*Joseph and others with Munindra*

interpretations; he wanted to read the Buddha's words himself. He could recite long passages in Pali. I really learned the value and importance of study from him. When we study, it expands our understanding not only of our own experience, but of what is possible.

After Munindra-ji, I studied with Sri S.N. Goenka. As informal as Munindra was, Goenka-ji was pretty formal. When he was in the room, you could feel a powerful presence. Courses were more formal; he would come in and everyone would bow. At first I watched all the projections and comparing in my mind: "I didn't have to bow to Munindra; why do I have to bow to Goenka?" It was all just my mind, making this stuff up. By the end of the first retreats with Goenka-ji, I was very happy to bow.

At that time I also studied with Dipa Ma, who was a student of Munindra's in Burma. She was an extraordinary woman. She had a lot of suffering in her life, very early on. She lost her husband and two of her three children, bringing a huge amount of grief that she said almost killed her. At that time she was encouraged to go to one of the monasteries in Burma. Within weeks, she had attained to high stages of concentration, and advanced stages of awakening. She was one of my greatest inspirations in practice.

Dipa Ma was a small person, but her heart was vast. When you were with her, there was a feeling of profound peace and stillness, combined with the most amazing love. One

*There are some few people who concentrate easily.  
I was not one of those people.*

person described her hugs as being surrounded by "her great, vast, empty heart, with room for the whole of creation." Her inspiration for me was an intimation of what is possible.

#### Practice in Bodhgaya

There are Buddhist texts that describe the perfect meditation space: secluded, peaceful,



*S. N. Goenka*

away from villages, good food. The place I was staying in Bodhgaya, the Burmese Vihara, was exactly the opposite: it was on a major road, with buses and trucks going by all day long, and opposite a public water tap, where the village women came to

wash their clothes. In the surrounding villages, they had loudspeakers that often played Hindi film music day and night. The food was really poor. I was sleeping on a wooden rope bed about five feet long (I am well over six feet). The first few weeks there I didn't even know enough to get a mosquito net.

And I loved it. I had so much gratitude for that place, which honored meditation practice. I had the feeling that I could be there for the rest of my life. The Buddha talked about how our meditation is like swimming upstream. When we find places that support that, it is a tremendous blessing.

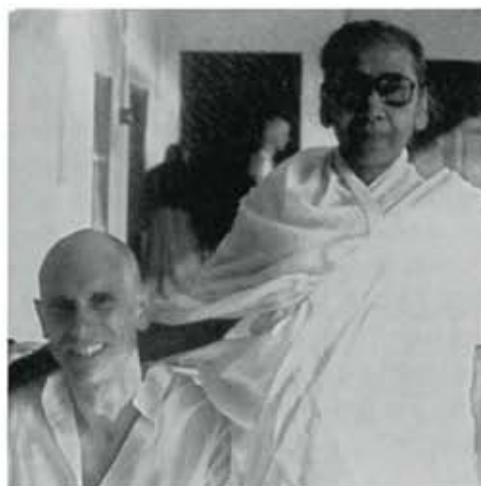
There are some few people who concentrate easily, but I was not one of them. I would sit and meditate, and basically be lost in thought for an hour. Of course, one advantage of that is the hour goes quickly. I also found that I could not sit cross-legged for even five minutes; it was just too painful. So I started sitting in a chair; but since I am tall, even normal chairs are not that comfortable. So I put the chair on bricks, put cushions on the chair, and then put

a mosquito net over the whole thing. It looked a little like a throne—or a shoeshine stand.

I was really embarrassed when one of my teachers would come in. But it worked. That remains my mantra: Does it work? Even though it was weird looking, I found a position that allowed me to settle down and be at relative ease with the body and learn to concentrate a bit.

#### Mettā

During one of my brief visits back to the States while I was in India, I saw the film *Charlie*, based on the book *Flowers for Algernon*. It is about a guy who is mentally challenged, and then has an experimental operation, becoming quite brilliant as a result. After some time, however, this effect wears off and he



*Joseph with Dipa Ma*

returns to his former state. The film shows how people related to him at different times, often with a mocking cruelty. When I saw this movie, I recognized different unwholesome patterns in my own mind, times when I had been unkind; as a result, when I went back to India, I asked Munindra to teach me mettā, the meditation on loving-kindness.

After about two months of cultivating mettā intensively, I was really happy. I had never experienced such happiness. My heart was so full of loving feeling that I thought this was



*When I let go of expectations, the practice got a lot smoother.  
I stopped judging myself.*

the way I would spend the rest of my life. But conditions change more quickly than we can anticipate.

As I mentioned the food in the Burmese Vihara was poor, so I had bought some extra fruit which I kept on a shelf just outside my room. At that time there was a Nepali man at the Burmese Vihara who was studying with Munindra-ji. This man had brought a little servant boy with him from Kathmandu to help cook his food. One day, as I was sitting in my room practicing mettā, "May all beings be happy and filled with love," I heard a rustling by the shelf. The very first thought in my mind was, "That kid is stealing my oranges!" Then, "May all beings be happy, may all beings be peaceful." I went back and forth between these two thoughts, and the contrast was so absurd it was revealing. And it turned out that the whole scenario was a total fabrication of my mind. There was no one outside my room at all.

With practices such as mettā, we may be in places of bliss and happiness for a time, but very often they reveal the shadow side of our minds as well. Carl Jung said, "One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light, but by making the darkness conscious. The latter procedure however is disagreeable, and therefore not popular."

Sometimes the big developments on our journey can come when we are just slogging along. I had been in Bodhgaya for quite a while, but had reached what felt like a plateau in my practice, and it all just felt flat. It is very discouraging when this happens; it is not an easy time to practice. But it is a time when we can really learn what Right Effort is. The Buddha talked a lot about Right Effort, but what he said is easily misunderstood. It is often interpreted as forcing, or struggling, or straining, which does not help. Right Effort is more about staying relaxed, staying open, and just persevering.

I remember telling myself at those times, "Joseph, your job is to just sit and walk. Just surrender to the Dharma." I learned I could let

go of expectations, let go of wanting. When I did, the practice got a lot smoother, because then I stopped judging myself. Self-judgment and self-doubt are among the biggest obstacles on the path.

#### Naropa & catching the wave

After about seven years, mostly in India, I was having back problems and decided to come home. This was 1974. I had no idea what I was going to do upon my return. After a cross-country trip in a back-of-the-truck camper, I ended up at the Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado. This was like a Buddhist Woodstock. Trungpa Rinpoche, Ram Das—whom I knew from Bodhgaya—and thousands of other people interested in Buddhism converged on Boulder for that first summer session of the Institute. The energy around Buddhism, Eastern philosophy, religion and meditation crystallized there, and it was a tremendously exciting and invigorating time.

The whole vipassana scene in the U.S. really emerged out of the interest generated that summer. People started setting up retreats in different places—in California's Sequoia National Forest, in British Columbia, in South Carolina, and Wisconsin. It was like catching a wave. After a year of going around the country teaching ten-day and two-week retreats, in 1975 we taught the first three-month retreat in Bucksport, Maine. That was followed by ten years of steady teaching, riding the wave of enthusiasm for learning insight and mettā meditation. But after many retreats all over the world, I felt that something was missing, although I was not sure what it was.

Then in 1984, I was teaching in Australia and happened to see the Winter Olympics on television. You may recall that at the 1984 Winter Olympics Torville and Dean became the highest scoring figure skaters of all time (for a single program), receiving 12 perfect 6.0s. I was in an open and receptive state of mind, and somehow that idea of perfection—in any field—and the training it required, inspired me to do more practice.

**Compassion is the activity of emptiness, the expression of selflessness.  
They are not two separate things.**

These moments when we are motivated to take stock are important. What do we most value? With work, jobs, family, it is easy to get caught up in the busyness of our lives and avoid asking that question. What do we want to accomplish? What do we want to do with our lives?

The idea of taking extended time off from teaching for practice was a little scary. I had these thoughts—quite ridiculous as I look back on it now—that if I stopped teaching no one would want to come to retreats anymore. But the urge was strong, and from that time on I have taken one to three months each year for intensive practice. That is when I first sat with Sayadaw U Pandita, when he came to Barre for three months in 1984.

Sayadaw U Pandita, as you may know, is a very demanding teacher. We slept only four hours a night and had interviews six days a week. Although he manifested great compassion, he was not into psychological coddling. I once told him that going to an interview with him was like going to the dentist. In his next public talk, he said in his deep and sonorous voice, "Some yogis [meditators] think that coming to see me is like going to the dentist."

Sayadaw was very clear about what was going on in our minds. He saw the defilements arising, and he would reflect this back to us. But often I would feel judged, and then judge myself for being a terrible yogi. A while later, something shifted, and in one interview when Sayadaw proceeded to list all the defilements in my mind, I just started to laugh. I saw, "Yes, that's what's there, all right." It took a while, but when I was eventually able to let go of feeling judged, I could also let go of self-judgment. When you get to that place in your practice, it is a huge opening. When we stop judging ourselves we actually delight in seeing what is in our minds, even the negativities. We would much rather see the defilements than not see them. It is a kind of joy, which is why I could laugh when they were illuminated.

### Confluence of traditions

I sat many retreats with U Pandita in the early 1990s and really learned a great deal about watching my mind without judgment. But then I had that feeling again, that there was something I had not quite integrated. At that time, Lama Surya Das, who was a friend from my time in India, was studying with Tibetan teachers in Nepal. He introduced a few other friends and me to some of his Tibetan Dzogchen teachers—Tulku Urgen (father of Chogyi Nyima Rinpoche), Tsoknyi Rinpoche, Mingyur Rinpoche, and Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche, another great Dzogchen master. Later, Nyoshul Khen came to New York State for a two-month retreat at Dai Bosatsu Zen Center. So here is a flash point in American Dharma: a group of mostly vipassana students doing Tibetan Dzogchen practice at a Zen monastery. That was symptomatic of one of the movements of One Dharma in the West—a movement of an emerging Western Buddhism, where people learn from various traditions.

At the retreat at Dai Bosatsu Monastery, Nyoshul Ken gave a talk on relative and ultimate *bodhicitta*. *Bodhicitta*, in Sanskrit and Pali, literally means "awakened heart." It refers to that aspiration to awaken for the benefit of all beings. Relative *bodhicitta* is that compassionate aspiration. Ultimate *bodhicitta* is the understanding of emptiness, the wisdom side. I had experienced the value of each of these, but I was missing the understanding that put them together. This is exactly what Rinpoche said in his talk. I then understood on a much deeper level that compassion is the activity of emptiness, the expression of selflessness. They are not two separate things.

The more we understand the selfless nature, the more compassionate we are. The more compassion we have, the less self-reference there is, so we understand the empty nature better. Then Dharma practice really begins to feel integrated. We can practice this compassionate emptiness. We can practice it in a Burmese house, in a Tibetan house, in an American house—it does not matter. The nature of the Dharma is the same.

## Working with Perception

Ajahn Sucitto

**W**hat is perception? It's the most immediate derived sense of an object: It's a flower, it's a car, it's a person. There's a mild impact, contact, a sense of, ah—something strikes the eye. There's an immediate flurrying or movement around what that is.

This becomes more apparent when you meditate and slow the mind down, so that you find some space between the rush of ideas and moods. Then as you're abiding in a fairly spacious state you feel how things strike you. It could be pleasant, like a bouncing chipmunk running across the path in front of you, *boing*. There was stillness, then you get the touch of contact, maybe a brief mental movement of alarm. Then, "Oh, it's a little chipmunk." There's contact, then perception (*saññā*, the moment of recognition), then a conceptual label that tells you what it "is" — though really this is what the "thing" means to you.

### Varieties of perception

Perceptions are meanings, so they are subjective and depend upon, first of all, functioning sense faculties which are limited and conditioned. They can't give us truth; they can only give us pieces that work for us. For example, what's the world like to a bat? Humans mostly operate through visual and mental activity. Bats don't do visuals; they squeak thousands of times a second, so they create this huge sound net, reaching out. Flittering around at night, they don't hit things; they form perceptions based on sound, and through that they can detect and catch all kinds of bugs.

What's New York like to a dog? I bet skyscrapers don't mean anything to dogs, but who peed on that fire hydrant is probably really headline news. Dogs check out the scents of who or what passed through an hour or more ago. They're able to track this to a fine degree.

So the first level of subjectivity, of "it all depends," is one of the sense system of each specific being. What is color to a color-blind person? In some cases people suffer from

neurological damage. Some people can't perceive movement because the nerve endings in the little bit of the brain that register and understand movement have been damaged. So for example, they can't track and interpret the range of visual change that tells most of us that a car is coming towards them; first it's a small car, then a slightly bigger car, another bigger car, a fender and then blackness. The brain can't get a sense of the synchronized movement coming out of that.

Another example is synesthesia, a mix up of senses whereby people associate one sense with another. They might see music, or associate a number with a color—number five is blue, or Tuesdays are green. They don't know why, that's just what comes up. Most of us to some degree are synesthetic.

That's what onomatopoeia is about: Certain sounds give you an impression of something. Say you have a kind of very soft, spongy amoeboid object on the one hand, and you have something that's made out of shards of broken glass on the other. A Martian comes down and says, "This one's a bobble-wobble," which one do you think he's talking about? You'll say it's the amoebic thing, because we associate that kind of sound with that particular form. If the Martian said, "This is a kiki-kiki," you'd think of the broken glass as being sharp, narrow sounds. Sounds transfer into visual memories and metaphors.

Some perceptions depend on karmic meaning, on one's own history, even sometimes from uterine experiences.

If your mother is in a state of anxiety or depression when you're in the womb, all

those neuro-hormones are going to affect your neurology, so you can have an unsafe feeling with regard to what you're in that has no specific object; it's because of what you've been doused in. In this case it might set your neurological



Kiki?



Bobble?

**Perception rises up and labels the feeling  
and with it arises the sense of "one who feels."**

barometer to *what's around me is not comfortable*. Some people get extremely afflicted with mental perceptions: Say you're claustrophobic—you always feel oppressed by being in something; or agoraphobic—you feel frightened if you come out of something. You can't be rationally convinced because it can't be rationally processed. It's perceptual.

**Reflex perceptions**

Dependent upon mental perceptions, or "felt meanings", our reflex actions and programs come up. The *sankhāras* ("dispositions" "programs" or "activities") start operating, dependent upon these meanings. So for example, we come to a meditation retreat with the sense: "I chose to come on retreat, I wanted to come on retreat, I really needed to come on retreat." Then we sit down—and the perception arises of lonely, or lost, or estrangement, and, "I don't want to be here with this." What happened? We maybe feel controlled by the structure, or we don't feel safe with so many strange people. All that reflexive stuff kicks in because often when we meditate, we come underneath the surface to the felt meanings of things that have defined me, at a very basic level. And then reflexes start kicking in.

I remember when one of the sisters [nuns] went on a long-distance walk out in the moors. She had to walk ten, twelve miles in the rain, in the cold, and carry her bulky bag and tent, and live pretty rough. But it felt blissful because she was choosing to do it. Whereas to walk up the hill from the nuns' cottage 300 yards from the main house every day just felt like a real pain, and unfair. Because it's something she had to do. That feeling of oppression touched a reflex.

The Honeyball Sutta (*Madhupindika Sutta, Majjhima Nikāya 18*) has a beautiful description:

"Dependent on the eye and forms, eye consciousness arises." Eye consciousness arises from a sense base, an object. "The meeting of the three is contact." So, *bong*, something strikes.

*With contact as a requisite condition, there is feeling. What one feels, one perceives. What one perceives, one thinks about. What one thinks about, one complicates. Based on what a person complicates, the perceptions in*

*categories of complication assail him or her as regards the past, present or future forms cognizable via the eye.*

So there's a process whereby something starts off as involuntary: We've got an eye, and the form arises, and *bang*, eye consciousness happens. There's no action in that, something just occurs. The meeting of the three is contact, so again that's completely passive. With contact there is a requisite condition, there is feeling.

Suddenly a subject has crept in there. Before it was all impersonal, now it's become "one feels." It's not sketched in at this moment as him or her, it's just "one." When feeling arises the first thing that happens is, "Ah, I am feeling." But it's an impersonal sense of self, "I'm feeling this, this is happening to me." So the perception rises up and labels the feeling and with it arises the sense of "one who feels."

Then what one perceives, one thinks about. Now a little more action starts occurring, thinking. This is much more to do with personal history, adding the narrative of "I'm always with this, I'm the victim, He is, She never does" etc. So "what one thinks about one complicates." There's this word "complicate" or *papañca*, which also translates as "proliferates" or "projects" or "diversifies." Suddenly it becomes all kinds of manifestations: it's this, it's that, it shouldn't be, could be, ought to be, reminds me of this, what am I going to do about that? Sound familiar?

I call it the *papañca* fairy. She waves a wand and then suddenly all this stuff comes rising up. You can drop one or two words, like "current president," and *bong*, all this stuff comes rising up. Cascades of emotionally charged thought perceptions of "he, she, it, he can't and shouldn't and how dare they," and so on. You feel drenched in gobs of past, present and future. That's the flooding based on what perception brings up.

Somebody gave an example of twilight: You see this object on the path and the first thing is a shock, it's a snake and then, alright it's a rope. The first perception isn't necessarily accurate, but there's an emotional tone; it could be fear, joy, desire, aversion. Something wants to retract, or something wants to go out and meet it.

You notice it when it's unexpected; you walk around a corner and there's somebody standing there you weren't expecting, and there's an immediate shock, "It's somebody in a uniform, oh dear." Whereas if it was a small person in a jumpsuit you wouldn't feel the same way. It's not just a visual object that's arisen, but a meaning has arisen. That's the perception.

So from an immediate external sense—sight, sound or touch—comes a recognition that something is impacted; that's contact. And there's a naming. With naming, feeling and perception arrive and trigger off an act of conceiving. That "name" may not stay very long. You may in fact go back to that visual object in a split second and check it out: "Oh it's not Jack, it's Fred." "Oh he's not angry, he's just got a headache." Those perceptions shift, but they all refer to mood tones which can be fundamental things such as safety, pleasure or pain, control or freedom.

Some of these perceptual meanings get built up through history. If it's your house and you see things and there's a feeling, "Oh I should do this because the carpet's untidy, or the paint's coming off the wall," or something like that: I should do it. Somebody else's house, you think, "Oh look at that," you don't get the same feeling. You might think "Why don't they do something about it?" The sense of self also comes in with naming things as this is mine or not mine.

These are the kind of root meanings that get established, and they don't necessarily start running as thoughts. They're just emotional positions. As we first perceive an object—green, red, black, white, car, dog, whatever it is—that's the first way in which it's named. Then it's referred to the mind, which adds its own meanings. So you get this interplay between different levels of perception. The concept arises, it's to be protected, it's to be cherished, or whatever it is. It wouldn't be the case if it was a different concept, such as it's somebody else's, or it's a wreck. The mind also has its own sense base, which is concepts, which also generate the same kind of meanings, essentially: safe, warm, comfortable, mine, not mine.

#### Perception and truth

Interestingly enough, in Buddhadharmā the aim is not really to find truth, *per se*. All truth is considered to be contingent, relative. The main

#### What's the world like to a bat?



thing is not ultimate truth, but peace, realization. Truths are of a relative nature, the relative truths of suffering and cessation of suffering, which are contingent upon the experience of suffering and not suffering. They don't exist in abstract. They're not ultimate truths; whereas the Western mind often believes there is such a thing as ultimate truths.

In any action the important thing is the perceptual meaning, because that tells you something about where your own angle is. So you walk through the kitchen here, and your sleeve catches a cup and knocks it onto the floor and smashes the cup. You might get the feeling, "Oh goodness me, I've done something wrong." Or it might be, "What idiot put that cup there, right in the way?" So which is the truth?

Or you could get philosophical about it and say the cup is of a nature to break, it's just fulfilling its purpose. Or you could be Zen—there's no cup, no breaking, everything is just in a neither broken nor unbroken state. Or, it's my karma to break a cup. It had to happen because of something I did in a previous life. Or if you're a politician you can say "We managed to go through the kitchen with no damage at all to teapots and saucers. It was successful, there was a little collateral, but we don't think it's in the public interest to let you know about that." And you could say that's true also.

When you touch into the meanings of what actually happens, they're not concepts that float around as abstract realities of an undying nature. They're actually momentary and subjective and intimate experiences that keep rising up. They're not true in an ultimate sense, but they're actual. All we want to know about is not what's ultimately true, but how do we release ourselves from suffering and stress.

The problem of "truth" is that concepts and ideas are abstract. By themselves they have no

***Perceptions don't give you an ultimate reality;  
they give you a subjective readout of where you're coming from.***

explicit felt meaning until they're introduced to each individual's mind. So if you were in the Second World War, the words "Germany" or "Japan" would have triggered off different meanings in the minds of people who were on the other side of that conflict. Nowadays it would trigger off different sets of meanings. In terms of music, "Germany" means Bach, Beethoven and so forth. If you thought of it in terms of the Second World War, you thought of Hitler and Nazis.

Through examining and contemplating perceptions, we begin to see the relative truths of the angles or biases that we have, the blaming, self-blaming or justifying, or ignoring. So if you knock a cup over, that touches the thing of wrong, done wrong and then you get this whole flurry of, "I hope I don't get found out," or "What an idiot I am" or "I'm always doing this kind of thing." Or "Why can't I be more mindful?" All of which have some "truth" in them, a truth about who we are, or the kind of kamma that's running.

Perceptions don't give you an ultimate reality; they give you a subjective readout of where you're coming from. We begin to see obsessions and latent tendencies that flare up. The more you contemplate this, the more you get a profile of the kind of tendencies that cause one suffering, stress, imbalance, agitation, defensiveness, anger, greed and so forth.

#### **Widening the field**

Perceptions are what you have to bring your dharma practice to bear on, along with the reflex dispositions and programs of self. So there may be the tendency to find fault with yourself or with others, or justify yourself, or to basically space out and forget the whole thing altogether.

It's also the case that practice entails deliberately inducing perceptions through concepts. Meditation itself starts with establishing skillful perception through selective thinking (otherwise known as wise reflection). The first reflection is of Refuge. We check in with the reality of being here and how we can be with that. This means taking Refuge. And we do that by establishing the felt meaning, the

perception of Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha—that which is compassionate, clear and wise, the way and the teachings, the exemplars. We bring those into our lives by bringing them into our minds. And along with those reflections comes the sense of belonging to something good and wise and trustworthy shared by many people throughout time and place.

Another reflection brings up the perception of impermanence: You acknowledge that this changes and that changes. And bringing that into practice is more than an idea: We experience through direct perception that sensations change, and feelings come and go. So the reflex reaction to feeling gets checked.

This is not really making a comment on the nature of what passes, whether you're glad it passed. It just helps to shift your way of perceiving to a wider frame of reference, not focusing so much on the topic itself but upon its changing nature. This lightens a lot of the conceptual intensities that can occur around topics such as a thought sensed as a feeling. Where a thought comes up we may think, "Terrible thought, hideous thought, ugly thought, shouldn't have this thought, wow, where did I ever get this thought from?" Or we can notice that it is a changing energy. You can widen the perceptual field in terms of time, just holding that space of perception for a few moments in which the thought comes, flies around, and fades out. Then there's a different emotional sense that comes with that, detachment and dispassion arises, which is calming and steadying and supports clarity of response. This is what people often call vipassana, developing non-attachment through experiencing change.

This perception allows you to address a very wide field of phenomena, one which includes the liked and the disliked, the urgent, the unimportant, the trivial, the nonsensical, the confused, which fall into that same pattern. Whereas if one wanted to focus purely on the liked, then some objects wouldn't fit into that category. So you grow broader and your confidence in being at peace with the unwelcome and the weird develops accordingly.

Widening the perceptual field also means we include what it is that self and other have in common: such as that we all dislike pain, we all appreciate pleasure, we all want safety, we all like friendliness—simple things. We widen to the "we" sense. This helps to generate sensitivity to ethics and compassion. Generally speaking, the wider the perceptual field, the more skillful, because the more beings you can fit into that, the less conflict, division, and bias there is.

This widening also helps us recognize what we leave out—parts of ourselves, perhaps, that we don't really like to attend to, the grubbier, or the less pleasing aspects of the body, or our death or sickness. But with detachment it's just a body and it changes and all bodies do this. We can widen and be with that and the mind becomes more peaceful, less defensive and less obsessive in those respects.

#### Non-conflict

The Honeyball Sutta makes a related point about views.

*Dandapani ("Stick-in-hand") out roaming and rambling around for exercise went to the Great Wood, went to the Blessed One, who was under the bilva sapling, exchanged courteous greetings with him and stood to one side. As he was standing there he said to the Blessed One, "What's the contemplative's doctrine? What does he proclaim?"*

In other words, what's your statement about ultimate reality? And the Buddha says, well, my statement is that any kind of doctrine,

*...the sort of doctrine where one does not keep quarreling with anyone in the cosmos... that sort of doctrine where perceptions no longer obsess the brahman who remains dissociated from sensual pleasures... Such is my doctrine.*

So he doesn't give him a concept of what it is. He just says basically, it's anything that fits within his sense of non-quarreling, non-conflict, non-obsession.

"So Dandipani shakes his head, wags his tongue..."—which is an interesting gesture,

wagging the tongue—"... raises his eyebrows so his forehead was wrinkled in three furrows..." and "Left, leaning on his stick." In other words, it went over his head. He was looking for some concept that he could quarrel with, and the Buddha didn't give him anything.

You also find this freedom from views in the first Sutta in the *Dīgha Nikāya*, in the *Brahmajāla Sutta*, (The Great Brahma Net) which describes 62 different views of the self in the cosmos that people were arguing about at the time. The Buddha, when asked about this himself, said, well, every one of these views I know. I've been there, and I realize that this view arises dependent upon contact. In other words, something happens, you try to figure it out, and you come up with one of these views and you hold onto it. The Buddha says, I know all that and I know how to release the mind from holding onto that. Because of this, I'm not snared in any of these views or opinions.

So it's interesting isn't it? It sounds so counter-intuitive, but he's actually seen all the positions that you could take, and he's saying, all that action, all that effort, where does it take you? Another place, another position, arguing with other people. Why don't you just come out of needing to have a position?

You realize everything and anything that is held onto can't be an ultimate truth, it's just a naming, based upon a position. So, because of that, "...this is the end of taking up of rods and bladed weapons or arguments, quarrels, disputes, accusations, divisive tale-bearing and false speech. This is where these unskillful things cease without remainder. And that is what I teach."

So what is it that Buddhas do know? "Everything that arises is dependently arisen, is impermanent and not-self, and it passes." And so what? What does that mean? Well, there's no perception for that, because through insight into perception the mind has given up on "naming" and has realized peace. If you do the practice that takes you to that, you'll know it for yourself.

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# The Good Sal Tree

Bhadda-Sāla Jātaka, No. 465

translation by Margo McLoughlin

Long ago, on the banks of the Ganges, in the holy city of Benares, there was a king named Brahmadata. He was a good king and he ruled his kingdom well. He ruled it so well, in fact, that he had nothing much to do. There were no wars and trade prospered. Generosity and kindness flourished, all from the example of the king.

Now there were many other small kingdoms in the land of the Rose Apple (Jambudīpe)—the great land we now call India—and most were plagued with problems of one sort or another. In some there was intrigue in the court; in others, unending battles at the border, or unrest and dissatisfaction among the people. The rulers of these kingdoms heard of Brahmadata and his prosperous, peaceful realm and they invited him to visit. He went. He advised them on matters of kingship. He inquired after their policies and systems of governance, and he took note of their establishments.

He was a modest man, indeed, but he couldn't help reflecting that his own little kingdom on the banks of the Ganges was the most agreeable of realms, and he, himself, the best of kings. And the best of kings ought really to have the best of palaces.

One day he said to himself, "Every single king I have visited lives in a palace supported on many pillars. A palace of many pillars is not so unusual. What if I were to have built a palace supported on one pillar alone? Then it would be clear to all that I, Brahmadata, am the foremost king of all the kings."

He summoned the royal architects and builders. He said, "Make me a palace supported by one single pillar." They nodded and replied, "Very well, your majesty."

The royal architects set to work on the design of the king's new palace. The builders entered a forest where a great many sturdy trees could be found, each one worthy of a single-pillared palace. The builders thought to themselves, "These are certainly the right kind of trees, but the road is uneven and rough. It would be impossible to bring one down and get it out." They went and reported this to the king.

The king said, "By whatever means you can find, bring one down gently, and bring it out." But the builders repeated, "It isn't possible, by any means."

The king was determined to have his single-pillared palace. He thought of the many lordly trees that stood in his royal park. He said to the builders, "If that is the case, you may remove a single tree from my pleasure grove."

The builders went to the king's pleasure grove, and there they found a magnificent Sal tree, a royal Sal tree. It was straight and tall, with great spreading branches and a tremendous girth. The villagers paid great honor to this tree, as did the royal family. The builders returned to the king and told him what they had found. The king was delighted. "You've found the tree for my palace! Go and cut it down."

The builders replied, "Very well, your majesty." They returned to the park, bearing fragrant wreaths. These they hung upon the tree, along with a five-spray garland. They encircled the tree with string and fastened ornaments to the branches. They lit a lamp of scented oil and made an offering of food. Then they announced, "At this place, in seven days, we will come and cut down this tree. Let the tree-spirits who dwell in this tree find another abode. And let there be no ill-will toward us."

The tree-spirit who lived in that tree heard these words and thought, "These men will certainly cut down this tree. They will destroy my home, and, in doing so, they will take my life. And what is worse, this tree in which I make my home is surrounded by my tree-spirit relatives, all of them dwelling in young Sal trees. Many of their homes will be destroyed when my great home comes crashing down. My destruction affects not only me, but also my kindred. I must do what I can to offer them the gift of life."

In the middle of the night the tree-spirit adorned himself with celestial ornaments and made his way to the king's dwelling. He entered the royal bedchamber, made a single sound and stood weeping behind the bed of the king. The king awoke and saw him there. He began to tremble, terrified at the sight of this being beside his bed.

He said:

*Who are you, standing in the night,  
Adorned like a god, shining, bright?  
Tell me why your tears are falling?  
And from where does your sorrow come?*





The Spirit-King answered:

*In this great land of yours, O King,  
they know me as the Good Sal Tree:  
For sixty-thousand years I've stood,  
while great and small have honored me.  
Homes and towns have been built, Great King,  
And many palaces besides,  
And yet no harm was done to me.  
So, just as they have worshipped me,  
Show your respect to this Sal tree.*

And to these words the king replied:

*I do not see another tree  
whose body is so straight and strong,  
your form is perfect, all agree:  
In height and width, you'll be for me  
the pillar of my palace home,  
your home as well, my Good Sal Tree.*

The Spirit-King answered:

*If I must leave my home, this tree  
which is my body, then I ask  
that I be cut not all at once,  
but branch by branch, in pieces small  
enough to fall among my kin:  
the top, the middle and the root.  
And in this way no harm will come  
to those who grow close to my home.*

And so the king responded:

*Just as one might cut off hands, feet,  
ears, nose, and from behind, the head,  
leaving a human being dead –  
That is a painful way to die.  
Broken like this, your ease cut off,  
Why, for what reason, Good Sal Tree,  
Do you wish to end in pieces?*

The Good Sal Tree spoke two verses in response:

*Listen to me, Great King, and hear  
a truth which is the ground of life,  
the truth that guides me in my wish  
to see my limbs fall one by one:  
Safe and protected by my side,  
my deva kindred live in peace.  
But if my ancient home should fall  
much harm would come to one and all.*

King Brahmadatta was pleased by what he heard. He thought to himself: "This tree-spirit is great in compassion. He does not wish the homes of his fellow tree-spirits to be destroyed as a result of the destruction of his own home. His actions benefit his kindred. I will give him freedom from all fear." And so he spoke a final verse:

*Lord of the Forest, Good Sal Tree,  
how noble are your thoughts, I see  
you wish the welfare of your kin.  
I give you safety, and freedom.*

When the Spirit-King had instructed the king in kindness and goodness, he returned to his Sal tree home. The king abandoned his plan to build a palace supported by one single pillar. He followed the tree spirit's instructions, and did much good throughout his life.

### Commentary

The story wraps up quickly, with the king relinquishing his ambition to have a single-pillared palace. Why this sudden change of heart? The king is struck by the difference between his own thoughts, fixated as he is by his desire to outshine all other kings with his architecturally unique palace, and those of the Spirit-King, whose thoughts extend beyond his own fate to the fate of others. Even though his own home (and life) are in danger of being destroyed, it is the effect on those around him that most concerns him. *Bhadda-Sāla Jātaka* is a good story for our times, since our ability to recognize the relationship between our thoughts and the choices that follow from them will determine the future of the planet.

*Margo McLoughlin has been translating the Jātaka for more than ten years. A graduate of the Harvard Divinity School, she is currently the Epicycle Editor for Parabola Magazine.*

**Invitation**

In deep stillness I observe my body  
 its catalogue of ills—eratic heart,  
 crumbling bones, eyes clouded in cataracts.

Clearly I was born to fall apart.

In- and exhale of breath a dance—waltz of lovers—  
 beautiful life, inevitable death. I am ripe  
 fecundity, vast portal, bright energy unleashed.

Come flies, come fishes, come beetles, come squid. Come cormorants  
 herons, hawks, and shrikes. Come shrews, come moles, come mice,  
 come mink. Come lions, leopards, wildebeest.

Come feast! Come feast!

—*Moirra Magneson*

**Letting Go**

If I let go of all I have  
 what becomes of me  
 Do I dissolve as a drop of rain  
 falling in the sea  
 Or does my self expand  
 beyond the bounds now seen  
 And reach that higher state  
 of fully loving being

—*Leonard Goodwin*

**Basho the Skunk**

All the winter he's journeyed, wandering roads  
 burrowing under fences, and the spaces  
 inbetween. His nose an alms bowl,  
 snuffling out compost, garbage cans, traces  
 of accidental kindness. And here he is now,  
 poised on my back stair, stamping his feet.  
 His thick-plumed tail arches, cowl  
 his dark eyes. It is his nature to greet  
 me thus—his form not separate  
 from his given self. Mind and body  
 unified, he does not question the state  
 of his existence. The world is purely  
 pungent scent, this naked moment  
 of clarity—flowering, impermanent.

—*Moirra Magneson*

be

What I would like to be  
is  
a bird  
flying  
touching neither the earth  
nor the sky:

gain and loss  
blame and praise  
fame and disrepute  
pleasure and pain

are  
no more than  
bubbles foaming on the surface of the sea

A bird  
—like a fish—  
never drowning in the sea of sorrow  
is  
what I would like to be

Just remember  
to be aware of the breaths  
as they come in  
and go out  
is  
what I would like to be able to do  
until  
the last breath

—*Theikdi*

The Mourning Dove  
sweeps down from a branch

mistaken for its brethren  
the autumn leaf

cold is this sunrise  
ceaseless is change

—*Mike Mosco*



*Illustration of placed stones from a photo by Gene Parulis*

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.

## Shin Buddhism

Taitetsu & Mark Unno

*Taitetsu and Mark Unno are father and son, both distinguished scholars and authors. They have taught a course on Shin Buddhism together for several years now at BCBS. This article is based on the most recent of those courses and on other writing they've done on the subject.*

### Tai:

When I was a 21-year-old senior at the University of California, Berkeley—many years ago—I had the opportunity to hear the famous Zen teacher D.T. Suzuki give a talk. Afterwards he invited anyone who wanted to ask questions to join him in another room for a discussion. After some hesitation, I asked, “What is karma?” Suzuki, who was 80 at the time, looked at me and said, “The elbow does not bend outward. This is what karma is explaining.” We all said thank you but had no idea what he was talking about.

After I graduated I moved to Japan to study Buddhism, partly because my father was a Shin Buddhist priest who encouraged me to explore Shin Buddhism, but also in some way to find an answer to this riddle of the elbow. I began thinking about it as a metaphor for karmic limitation. We have freedom to move, yes, but only in certain ways—the elbow bends, but only in one direction.

It is a koan, a Zen question, dealing with freedom and limitation. While we generally define freedom as being able to do whatever we want, in Zen that is not real freedom. Real freedom means living within the limitations

on our experience of freedom, such as living and dying. After talking with different teachers, reading different works, and discussions with different people, I realized that the Shin Buddhist path is also dealing with the question of limitations and freedom.

Each tradition has its own language for this. In the Shin tradition we speak of our karmic limitations in terms of being “foolish beings”—*bombu* in Japanese. Understanding that I am a foolish being, which is understanding that the elbow only bends one way, opens the door to the freedom to express my true self, with all my limitations. This is how my freedom as a human being is to be realized.

### Mark: Foolish beings

Our usual ideas about human nature might be based on science, as in evolution, or philosophy, as in Descartes’ “I think, therefore I am,” or some notion of the best that humans can be—skilled surgeons, dancers, athletes, or moral leaders. But whatever that part of human nature might be, it can not be the whole story. What about those who have the potential to achieve, but do not have the good fortune of the right circumstances, such as finances, freedom from injury, good counsel from a teacher or coach? So the desire, the impulse, the potential to be a certain kind of human being can not be all there is to human nature.

In Shin Buddhism, the largest development of Japanese Pure Land Buddhism, being a foolish being is the other aspect of human nature. It has to do with our karmic



*In an area that used to be called Inada village near Tokyo, the Sainen-ji temple was founded by Shinran Shonin (Saint Shinran), whose teachings formed the basis for the Jodo Shinshu (True Pure Land) sect in Japan, Japan's largest, which is part of the tradition or school of Buddhism known as "Pure Land."*

shortcomings as human beings. We do not use words like "evil person," or "unenlightened person;" we use the more forgiving term "foolish being." The expression is coupled with great compassion for ourselves and for others; it is not meant for us to punish ourselves inwardly for this nature, but to take ownership for our full humanity. When we do this, we can look at ourselves and others with more humor and gentleness, more awareness and compassion.

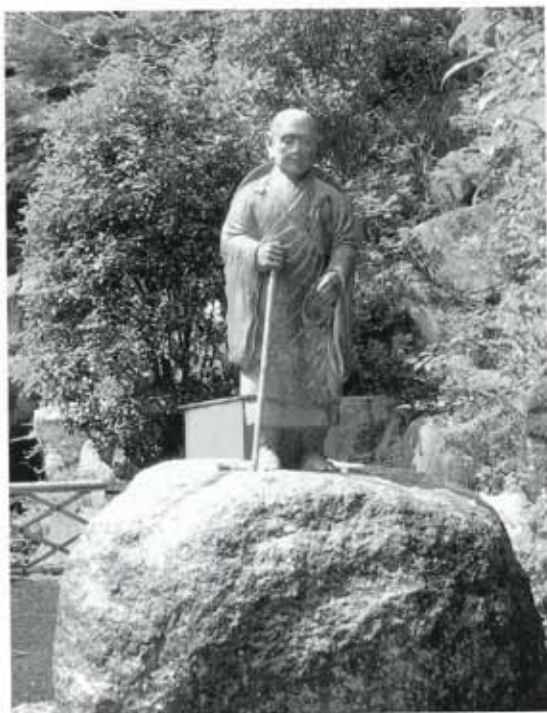
We have to keep in mind that this awareness is not easy. It is easy to ascribe foolishness to other people rather than to oneself, by saying, for example, "He is a foolish being, but not me." But in our tradition, the more deeply I enter into the teaching, the more fully aware I become of myself as a foolish being. Other people are leading their own lives constructively and creatively, but I keep stumbling, making mistakes, making false claims of understanding, and so on.

#### Tai: Transformation

But there is another term always attached to this awareness of foolish being: transformation. By listening to the teachings we do not become wiser and wiser, or more and more enlightened. We come to realize more and more our own foolish nature, our unenlightened self. As we deepen that awareness, a transformation is gradually occurring. While keeping the awareness of foolish self, at the same time one is able to live life with a deep sense of gratitude and appreciation to all of life, to all other beings. Behind the awareness of foolish being there is the transformation of foolish being into its opposite, one who truly becomes a disciple of the Buddha, one who truly lives the Buddhist life. We listen to a teaching, we chant a sutra, we bow before the Buddha, and in that process, the transformation occurs naturally and spontaneously.

The Japanese Shin people use many examples from nature to illustrate this transformation.

*The more ice is bathed in the light of compassion,  
the more it becomes the flowing water of reality.*



*Statue of Shinran at Sainen-ji temple (see previous page.)*

One is the fruit, persimmon, which is common in Japan. They ripen in the autumn, but if you pick them too early, the taste is very bitter. If you wait until it is fully ripened, it is very sweet. So it makes a perfect model of the gradual transformation that Shin people try to live by. Another metaphor for transformation very common to Shin Buddhism is ice and water. The founder of our tradition, Shinran, wrote many poems focusing on this one point. The more ice is bathed in the light of compassion, the more it becomes the flowing water of reality. Ice is a metaphor for my basic nature: hard, brittle, critical of others, always putting myself on top of others. If people criticize me, I have sharp edges, a very brittle ego. The teaching reveals that there is nothing wrong with the hard crust of ego, nothing "wrong" with blind self-centeredness, but they must be revealed within the light of boundless compassion.

This light, in our tradition, is always warm. It is all-embracing, helping us slowly and naturally change from a self that is always thinking of

itself first, to a self that is happy, that is ready to do things for others naturally. The great gift of transformation is granted to us by the light of compassion, by the workings of Amida Buddha and the teachings of Shinran.

#### Mark:

I have my own elbow story. I was born in Los Angeles, but my parents took me to Japan when I was two years old because my father was continuing his studies in Tokyo. We lived in Japan for seven years. I went to Japanese kindergarten, Japanese public school. We came back to the United States when I was eight years old. Although my mother spoke to me in English while we were in Japan, and I thus had some ability to hear it, I basically spoke Japanese and had many challenges with English. Fortunately I had some very good English teachers and overcame the difficulties.

Looking back on it now, I realize that my struggle was not so much with the grammar and vocabulary of the language, but with the very different cultural constructions of meaning. As an example, I remember being assigned four or five books to read over the summer before my senior year at Northampton High School, which we were expected to report on when school resumed. We were given little green booklets, and our teacher wanted us to write as much as we could fit in these exam booklets about what we learned from the books we read. One of the books was *Catch-22* by Joseph Heller, which I enjoyed because it was racy.

But I had no idea what I was going to write about these books, because while they were entertaining, I did not understand anything about them. The culture was completely alien to me. For each book I was only able to write one paragraph or so, which said something like, "This book is about what you should not do when you grow up to be an adult." That's it. The teacher was very kind; she gave me a "C," but that was devastating to an over-achiever like me.

After seeing what I wrote, the teacher called me into her office and said, "Mark, what I want

you to do this year is to read Japanese novels in English translation." So I read *Snow Country* by Kawabata, a Nobel-Prize winner in literature; I read Mishima, Abe, authors' names I got from her and from my parents. Writing about *Snow Country*, I said "This book is a study in human psychology, but it is really more about Japanese aesthetics, about nature and asymmetry." I had all kinds of things to say, because it was all in my cultural matrix. Reading *Catch-22*, I was trying to bend the elbow outward; it was not my natural terrain. Within the context of my own cultural literacy, I found the freedom to express myself.

### Universal language

The language of Buddhism is a universal teaching, and yet each of us brings our own particular cultural history, our own karma, to the way in which we engage it. Each of us must find the perfect freedom that comes from the elbow that does not bend outward. When we do, it is like water that begins to flow. We feel more at ease and at home with ourselves. We start to become released from having to struggle so hard, going against the current.

The Buddhist perspective actually goes against the current of a society that tries to socialize us as adults. Society tries to bend the elbow outward, away from our deepest, truest inclinations. There are many ways to express this; for example, we start to become top-heavy. We live in a highly intellectualized global culture; this is certainly true in my own work as a professor at the University of Oregon.

There is a saying in academia: "Those who can't, teach." It is a bit tongue-in-cheek, but like so many sayings, there is more than a kernel of truth in it. It means, "Scholars are often people who end up in universities because they aren't able to deal with the practical realities of the world." So promotion time is especially hairy in the academic world, because if we don't get promoted it's difficult to stay in the profession. Professors feel they are going to be completely lost then, because we can't "do anything."

Academic cocktail parties are probably among the most awkward social occasions. We cultivate melon-sized brains, and because we don't attend to the heart and to the spirit, pea-sized hearts.

In some ways this is the inheritance of our species: our brains outrun our hearts. We become all excited about discoveries in physics or manipulating genes before we take heartfelt responsibility for the kinds of inventions that we are about to make. But we are not fundamentally defective as a species; deep down we are capable of great heart, great compassion.

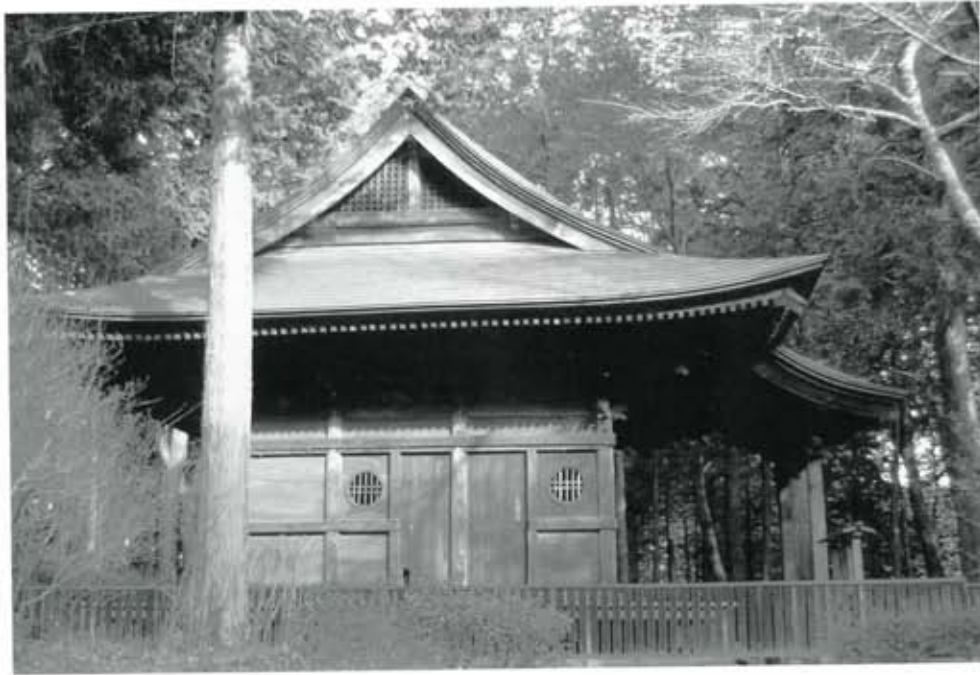
Buddhism is a path, in part, to undo the bad socialization, to help us regain the balance between mind and heart, body and spirit. As a species we have crammed so much knowledge into our brains that to regain our balance we actually have to empty out the mind and fill our hearts. What the Buddha discovered, what the Shin path discovered, is that we do this by realizing our own foolishness.

We scholars can get into a heated debate over the meaning of a comma in a dense academic tome that perhaps only forty people in the history of the world will ever read. We are absolutely convinced that we are right, because we are rational, but it's really not rational at all. In the heat of the moment, nobody cares about the stupid comma; it's all about whether I win or you win. That is our foolishness. To regain our balance we have to realize our foolishness. If we can break out laughing about the comma, then we can begin to fill our hearts.

### Bending inward

We all have this ability to recognize our own foolishness in one form or another, because it is inherent to our deepest experience as human beings. You can all probably remember times as children when you felt free; you were not trying to bend the elbow outwards. You were one with the wind, the sunshine. In these childhood moments, you were in balance, in sync, aware, and bathed in the oneness of the universe. One of the things that coming to a course like this enables us to do is take time out

Regardless of its particular form, it is everything it needs and was meant to be.



*In the 16th century the local Lord of Kasama was defeated in battle and came to the Sainen-ji temple to commit suicide. The priest there talked him out of it and arranged a truce with his foes. In appreciation, Kasama made a generous donation and had this hall built.*

and realize how imbalanced we have become, how top-heavy. Our minds are filled with thinking we are too good, or we are too bad, or we are mediocre. All of that is irrelevant to our deepest nature.

When we see flowers in our yard, we see tall daisies, short daisies, daisies that are full, daisies that are tiny, daisies that bloom for many days and daisies that bloom only for one day. But they are not comparing. They do not say "I'm the most beautiful one of all," or "I'm the tallest," or "I live the longest." Each one is simply manifesting its own particular daisy.

When we can come to simply manifest our own particular natures, each of us can attain the beauty, the freedom, of each daisy in the field. But we must recall this from deep within. If you watch a flower come up from a sprout, there is something impeccable about the way it manifests itself. There is no waste, no rudeness, no excess. Regardless of its particular form, it is everything it needs and was meant to be. We have that same impeccable character deep

within us, along with the desire to realize who we are. We have the desire to leave behind all the rationalizations by which we imprison ourselves, and to manifest the perfect freedom of the elbow that bends inward. This is our karmic nature, our Buddha nature.

Just like a daisy sprouting forth and blooming and dying and then becoming fertilizer for the next generation, it is an organic process. It is irresistible, natural. It cannot be forced, but neither can it be held back. Yet, we must listen closely, watch closely. It is so easy to get distracted. It is fine for us to start a conversation with a friend we have not seen since last year, but we must remember to return to our own impeccable nature. We return to karmic awareness, to the realization that the elbow does not bend outward. By returning to our foolish selves, we return to boundless awareness, boundless compassion. We have a precious opportunity to do it together.



## Killing Me Softly with Dharma

Kristy Arbon

About ten years ago I gave up the notion of ever being a successful manager. I vowed to never again work in a place where my job was to guide and support others. The suffering experienced in that position was too much to bear, and I gave up trying to work out how to manage it. Last year I started work as the Center Manager at the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies. Why did I change my mind? What happened? What part did my Buddhist practice play? Let's go back those ten years.

### The corporate world

My job was to manage people in a public service environment. The government department I worked in was huge, and the opportunities for promotion spiraled up many rungs of a corporate ladder toward heaven. The mind was greedy for status and money; it wanted the world to perceive how successful this self was. Ego thought that success meant approval, that approval meant love, and that love meant I would never have to be lonely. I felt that loneliness was the penalty for not having status and money, and I did not want to be stuck with that.

In the competition, ego did not care how it got to the finish line. I did not often entertain mindfulness, but I did allow myself to be pulled around by all sorts of unskillful motivations that the deluded mind thought would guarantee its success. The defilements stacked up on top of one another, and what the outside world saw was the image of a corporate poster child. Ill will and clinging to preferences were constant threads in my work. I clutched a dark, tight, hot feeling of hatred for management techniques I despised, for bosses I disrespected, for procedures I longed to improve on, and for the imperfect system that allowed people to disregard the rules I clung to for security. Ill will turned some jobs into hell realms. Clinging to preferences created a whole package of suffering. The mind could not let go. It did not have the wisdom of water that moves gracefully around obstacles. I was like a blind drowning victim in a sea of defilements.

All the while, I was not connecting with anyone at work in a meaningful way. My resume looked good, but there was a deep hunger I did not know how to satiate. I was often motivated to help others deal with their suffering, but I had no idea where to start and I did not even know how to acknowledge and accept my own suffering. How could a drowning person help another drowning person? It was easier to focus on status and money than to look inward.

Idealism told me that people in positions of power should be motivated by altruism. Realizing they possess valuable skills, these Gandhiesque folk agree to work hard to serve others. I thought those who seek power were least suited to management positions, because their greed meant they could not be altruistic. I clung to this philosophy strongly, even though I could not meet my own standards. In some warped way, I thought I could be the manager I despised and pretend it was not happening. I could feed my greed and hold the belief in the altruistic manager at the same time, but not without feeling like some kind of Frankenstein character, where things do not quite work. I limped along, with one good eye, thinking I could hold it all together without dropping a limb along the way.

But it did not work. Status and money were not making me happy; ill will and clinging to preferences did not make the world better—they simply made me miserable; and the mismatch between reality and idealism was completely unsustainable. Something had to change. Since I was not living up to my image of an ideal manager, I decided it was better to not even try. I rejected the corporate ladder in disgust, while at the same time bemoaning the fact that I had been an unsuccessful part of it. I quit work and sat down to have a long, hard look at what I should do with my time on Earth.

While trying to figure out the sea I was drowning in, I dog-paddled through a number of different occupations. I deliberately took jobs that did not involve managing people, because I

*Ego wanted to make its mark as the best Center Manager since the invention of the wheel. The folks around me started to revolt.*

saw management as the conduit through which ego could make me miserable. It turned out, however, that other jobs could also make me miserable. Even without the uncomfortable juxtaposition of greed and idealism, I could not settle down. My bosses still did not meet my standards; I grasped at my paycheck because of worry over money, chastising myself for the greed; and I discovered that having less influence in a workplace did not mean my attempts at control ceased. I still seemed to be at odds with the workplace, because I wanted things to be perfect and they never were.

I bounced from one job to another, each time hoping the next one would be perfect. As I moved on toward that mythical place where I could be truly happy, I held to critical judgments of each workplace that fell by the wayside, and to equally critical judgments of my own failure as a useful member of the working class. That perfect place seemed to be nowhere but, in the depths of my intuition, I suspected it might be everywhere. I just could not work out how.

After a few years groping around, I started to spend more time on the cushion, and a tiny switch flicked over in the mind. It did not have a large impact on my way of being, but it was noticeable. The defilements were making me a little less miserable as my attachments loosened slightly. Years of conditioning were not changed overnight but something in this mind was beginning to get a glimpse of the dharma.

My life moved through some interesting phases, and I eventually decided living in a dharma center was a good step to take. I applied for any job a dharma center might accept me for, usually jobs where I could keep my head down and work with my hands, with no responsibility to burden me, no stage for my ego to perform on. I was starting to feel less like a drowning victim. Someone had thrown me a floatation device. As I job-hunted, I knew I still had an unresolved and unhealthy relationship with management and ego. Going through life refusing jobs that might give me a big head seemed silly, and was likely to make me bored and frustrated. Maybe I needed to actually face

this ego challenge. I found myself applying for management positions again.

#### Coming to Barre

In June of 2008 I arrived at the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies for Round Two with ego. I may have come to BCBS an older, wiser, more spiritually practiced person than the one who vowed to never manage again, but I soon found that I had a whole lot to work with. While greed for money had subsided, ill will and clinging to preferences, along with a pile of other defilements, were simply seeds on the ground waiting to be watered. They sprouted once more. I did not see them take root and grow because I was too busy being swept away by ego.

I jumped in to work at BCBS with both feet, carving out a path that the ego could point to and say, "I did that!" I changed procedures, moved furniture, threw things away and pushed staff members to work hard to achieve my goals. Ego wanted to make its mark as the best Center Manager since the invention of the wheel. After an initial period of shock, the folks around me found a footing in the middle of the hurricane and started to revolt. I was changing too much too soon; I was pushing too hard; I was too focused on my own agenda. Staff members started to track into the office to give me a piece of their mind, started to push back.

Ego was confused. What was wrong? I was the boss—why would there be any complaints? After a number of painful encounters, it started to dawn on me: Maybe I could not inflict my preferences on others and change everything to satisfy ego. Being dragged around by this ego was not comfortable for the people I worked with, and, as it turned out, for me either. It all felt a bit too familiar as I began to have some flashbacks. The challenge had begun.

This was where I started to see how my suffering was connected to the suffering of those around me. This was when I started to notice the feral plant I was nurturing, and it was not a soothing observation. Something, again, had to change. I had to tame ego because it was, again, causing misery. How could I manage it more



skillfully this time? From what different vantage point could I view the processes unfolding before me?

I started to get some perspective on what was happening. Lacking mindfulness in the unfamiliar environment at Barre, ego had stepped in to give a sense of security to a self that had lost its identity. I had left a home, jobs, social circles, even my husband (for a short period) to take on the role at BCBS. With none of these identities available, ego stepped in to carve out new identities to grasp at, heedless of the fact that others might be affected.

This was simply a new twist to the old ego games. Greed, ill will, clinging to preferences and trying to reject dharma were all still there, but this time it was different. As they say, when the student is ready the teacher appears. It seems I was ready, this time, to learn a new way of relating to what ego was doing. With a loosened grip on defilements, the ego started to crumble, to let in the imperfection around me, and to shine light on the imperfection within me. It was horrible. The wounding of the ego was demoralizing, painful and death-like. The forced humility was stabbing and exhausting. Every day there was more death, more pain, as the ego lost some more and gave way to a chasm of spaciousness that felt like a gaping hole in my chest where the wind whipped through.

As I let down my guard and the mind fessed up to its tricks, the realization of the ignoble motives of the ego made me cringe. I saw with the dharma all its ugliness—the mind reacting from old patterns of fear; the way this ego collided with other egos to escalate a situation; how in certain situations I simply had no footing, no means of security; and the mind's reaction to this was often a confused state of not knowing that was very uncomfortable. All this seemed to be laid out before me, and also, I felt, to the people around me. I dreaded interactions with people, where my chest might be torn apart for everyone to peer inside, where ego might muscle in only to end up running away with its tail between its legs, yapping like a spanked puppy. I felt I was being broken by a dharma center.

### Learning to let go

As I was being broken, I was also being held together. Working in a dharma center allowed me the space to take some steps I had not been able to take before, and this is where some real growth could take shape. My peers spent a lot of time helping me to work through issues. Other staff members called meetings to air concerns, sometimes in inspiringly skillful ways. Folks were occasionally very blunt with me, aiming straight at the core of my attachments, but when framed in the common language of the dharma these challenges meant more than just painful criticism—they became signposts along a path that could be used for guidance. The people around me held the storm, the whole time looking on, as if benevolently watching a two-year-old burn out a temper tantrum, to see what would happen.

I have not experienced a conventional workplace with that capacity, nor have I been in a work environment with such unique opportunities for spiritual growth. Learning about management from a Pali scholar, an ex-monk, and a mentor working his way through the *Majjhima Nikāya* is, by anybody's terms, an unusual experience. Walking down a country lane—part of business as usual—in intimate conversation with a staff member; drawing on the wisdom of some of the most prominent dharma teachers in the country; and being given all the space in the world to explore the dharma, are not things a conventional workplace could allow. And no conventional workplace had forced me so far into the quagmire of ego, then through a process of dying, and finally toward something else.



Gradually some understanding shone through the chinks. Part of what became apparent is that I am not the manager of my ideals. I am the result of cause and effect, circumstances that have been enough to get me to this point, but that is all. I am not the gracious, wise, tolerant, flexible master of all management skills. Instead I am "this," and "this" is what there is to work with.

In a moment of clarity I saw that while I am not all that ego thinks I am cracked up to be, I also am

**Management takes place in each and every moment, during which each little decision is a choice between skillful and less skillful. It is simply a version of being.**

not the clumsiness of the past. The bits that made up the person that "was" came together in a moment, but that was the only time they ever did. They never did before and they never will again. I am not encumbered by my past actions—my failures, my self-criticism, my unskillful actions, the opinions of others—none of these are me and I do not have to carry any of them with me. I can decide to be a new person every day, and I am in an environment where people are open enough to see me in each day, rather than relegate me to the realms of the unteachable. Coming to some understanding that I am teachable, changeable, and acceptable are some of the most liberating realizations in my experience so far.

I had enough skill and experience to get me to BCBS, where the education I intuitively knew I needed could begin. The piece that came next was learning to be mindful, to cease creating difficult karma in each moment, and to seek right thought, word and action as often as I could. The mind that had previously used every clumsy action from the past to hit myself over the head, and that cringed when it thought someone else might judge it negatively, started to back away from this old way of being. While I clung less to being perfect, I provided less to chastise myself for.

I realize now that management does not take place because I am able to live up to some unrealistic view of what a manager should be. Management takes place in each and every moment, during which each little decision is a choice between skillful and less skillful. This is a new version of management because it is no version of management at all. It is simply a version of being.

### Not self

Events at BCBS propelled me rapidly along the path. During a discussion group in the Integrated Study and Practice Program, a practitioner said that she suffered from ill will. I did a double take. How could a person suffer

from their own ill will? Ill will is a bad thing that you spray out onto the people around you—they are the ones who are suffering, aren't they?

You are a bad person for having ill will in your soul, but that is all your fault, isn't it? Nothing to feel compassion over. I had always considered my own ill will as some kind of bad decision I made that I should be punished for, even though I do not remember actually making the decision in the first place.

Here was a student who put ill will "out there" as something separate from self, as something that visits her, but is not part of her. And what is more, she could pull it out of the closet and talk about it. Shame had prevented me from ever talking about the ill will I clung to. When referred to as a piece of clothing that is put on then taken off, I felt a great burden lift from my being. Ill will is not me; I am not ill will—*working with ill will seems like a manageable task when I can hold it in this kind of distanced relationship.*

Turning around my relationship with ill will was like learning a new word—I could use it when a suitable situation arose. I was delighted. I created little games with the mind—when I found myself mired in some complex thought around ill will, I could catch myself and, while generating a sense of distance, tell myself, "I used to suffer from ill will." This had the effect of creating space from the defilement that previously seemed permanently attached. And when I told myself that ill will was in the past, it was—thoughts created the reality. They might have created the reality in only that moment, but it was a promising start.

In the same way, I started to say to myself, "I used to suffer from greed," and, "I used to suffer from clinging to preferences." A whole new way of being with these defilements blossomed; the disassociation I felt from these mind states freed me up to enjoy moments fully. Ill will, greed and clinging to preferences could be relegated to the



*Ego has not died overnight, but it can sometimes be quietly picked up  
and placed in the corner to play harmlessly on its own.*

past. There has been no permanent freeing from these defilements, but that does not concern me greatly. I have been able to create freedom in a moment, and that is okay for now.

After the group discussion I reflected on the wonder of sangha, especially the sangha at BCBS where the wisdom of hundreds of years of collective practice seeps into every nook and cranny of the space. I had come to the right place to work. As events unfolded, a tiny fire of compassion started to burn in my chest. The chasm started to be felt as the spaciousness around things rather than something to be feared. A pause started to remember how love and patience and tolerance felt much more authentic than pushing and judging. Where the fullness of ego-preferences once existed, there is a growing space of consideration and moderation, where preferences are faded, given no fuel.

#### Death and rebirth

Out of a dying ego sprang new modes of practice. A diligent enterprise in Right Speech has unfolded in a way not experienced before. Where complaining, gossip and idle speech used to drag me along by the nose, I have a new-found strength to often resist fueling these harmful ways of being. A new relationship with preference is also dawning, and each time an experience of liberation is to be found by not clinging to preferences, my practice is bolstered again. Seeing how clinging to preferences contributes to my suffering, and how it contributes to the suffering of others, shows me again and again the only sensible path to follow—the Great Way.

Where greed once held me in its grip, generosity is now often exercised. Like a child learning to walk, generosity has stumbled along clumsily, sometimes causing confusion in the minds of others. Once again, being in an environment where wise practitioners abound, I have been lead through an understanding of how, when ego is tied to generosity, the results can be confusing. There is a growing sense of balance and maturity around the use of this new tool, and delight over the benefits of its discovery. The space left where ego had once been squashed in

seems to have opened my practice up to more and more growth and depth. I can see how this process might have unfolded in any endeavor in my life, but the crucible of the dharma center fueled this process like a dry grass fire.

I still struggle with the notion that I cannot single-handedly defeat the First Noble Truth, but I am starting to get a more balanced perspective on this. When I refuse to accept suffering, I take on the responsibility for shielding everyone else from suffering, setting up many ways for ego to fail. When ego fails, it looks for someone to blame. That someone has been everyone, including me. By accepting suffering, I am more open to the truth of things. When I can look someone in the eye and simply accept their suffering, rather than mentally running through ways to fix things or ways that I have been negligent, compassion flows like a river.

Ego has not died overnight, but it is given less say in decisions, and can sometimes be quietly picked up and placed in the corner to play harmlessly on its own. While I still feel its pull, it is no longer the twelve-foot toddler it has sometimes been. Balancing compassion and patience with what the ego still nags at me to do is a task requiring diligence. I cannot fall asleep at the post, or ego will see its opportunity and force its will again. It is a labor of necessity—it seems there simply is no other way things should be right now.

So I am dying here at the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies, in a good way. Ego is being killed off and, as brutal as the experience is, I would not have missed it for the world. I could not have found it in most other places, because few are interested in holding that process with gentleness and patience. No other workplace would have invested such time in nurturing a death. Eight months ago I did not know my move to Barre would be so difficult and so rewarding. I could not have foreseen the richness of the practice opportunities available in the workplace of the dharma center. May I continue to live in interesting times—and places.

*Kristy Arbon is Center Manager at BCBS. She writes articles for an environmental website and helps edit the Abhayagiri Monastery newsletter, "Fearless Mountain."*



Barre Center for Buddhist Studies  
2009 Course Offerings

<b>January</b>	10	Ellison Findly	Buddhist Art
	16-19	Paul Fulton, Bill & Susan Morgan, et. al.	Mindfulness & Psychotherapy Program
	22-25	Paul Simons & Gregory Bivens	Working with Addiction
	30-Feb 1	Claire Stanley & Jack Millett	Mindfulness for Educators
<b>February</b>	6-11	Andrew Olendzki & Gloria Taraniya Ambrosia	Integrated Study & Practice (Prior Students Only)
	15-20	Andrew Olendzki & Gloria Taraniya Ambrosia	Buddhist Psychology
	21	Phillip Moffitt	Twelve Insights from the Four Noble Truths
	27-Mar 1	Ajahn Thanissaro	The Ten Perfections
<b>March</b>	7	Susan Greenland	Mindful Parenting for Professionals
	8	Susan Greenland	Mindful Parenting for Parents
	15-20	Andrew Olendzki	Abhidhamma: Buddhist Psychology
	21	Bill Waldron	Self, No-Self, & the Unconscious
	27-29	Roshi Pat O'Hara	Lotus Sutra
<b>April</b>	3-5	Jan Willis	How to Become a Bodhisattva
	11	Rick Hanson, Rick Mendius	Neuro Dharma: Mindfulness & Brain
	14-19	Bill & Susan Morgan, Janet Surrey	Mindfulness for Mental Health Professionals
	24-26	Mu Soeng	Understanding Practice & Liberation
	<b>May</b>	2	James Austin
3		Rajesh Kasturirangan	Buddhism & Cognitive Science
4-9		Andrew Olendzki, Claire Stanley, et. al.	Buddhist Thought for College-Aged Students
10		Ellison Findly	Buddhist Activism: At Home & in Asia
15-17		Paul Fleischman	Putting Your Practice Into Words
29-31		John Makransky	Connecting: The Unity of Love & Wisdom
<b>June</b>		5-10	Andrew Olendzki & Gloria Taraniya Ambrosia
	13-20	Andrew Olendzki & Gloria Taraniya Ambrosia	Bhāvanā Program: Formations (sankhāras)
	21-27	Susan Woods & Char Wilkins	MBCT for Depression (Professional Training)
<b>July</b>	3-8	John Peacock	Brahma Vihāras as Paths to Awakening
	10-12	Jason Siff	Meditation from Within
	17-26	Leigh Brasington	Dependent Origination & Jhāna
<b>August</b>	1	Willa Baker	Vajra Songs: Poetry of Female Buddhas
	7-9	Mark Unno & Taitetsu Unno	Shin Buddhism
	15-16	Margo McLoughlin	Jātaka Tales (two one-day courses)
<b>September</b>	6-11	John Peacock	Desire in Buddhist Thought & Practice
	12	John Makransky	Compassion Beyond Fatigue
	25-27	David Loy	Personal & Social Transformation
<b>October</b>	2-6	Martine & Stephen Batchelor	Buddhism, Agnosticism & Atheism
	9-14	Andrew Olendzki & Gloria Taraniya Ambrosia	Integrated Study & Practice (Application Only)
	17	Joseph Goldstein	Buddha's Song of Enlightenment
	18-23	Andrew Olendzki & Gloria Taraniya Ambrosia	Buddhist Psychology
	25	Narayan & Michael Liebenson Grady	Anattā (not-self) in Everyday Life
	30-Nov 8	Gregory Kramer	Insight Dialogue
<b>November</b>	13-15	Chip Hartranft	Patañjali, Yoga Sutra & Insight Practice
	21	Jack Engler	Family Dharma: Family Systems in Practice
	22	Carol Wilson	Muditā: Practice of Joy & Gratitude
	27-29	Mark Hart	Identity, Personality & Freedom
<b>December</b>	4-9	DaeJa Napier	Brahma Vihāras (Bhāvanā Program)
	11-13	Mu Soeng	Restlessness, Narcissism, Ignorance
	19	Myoshin Kelley (assisted by Edwin Kelley)	"It's Not About Me!"

For complete descriptions, teacher and registration info, ask us for a catalog or visit [www.dharma.org](http://www.dharma.org).

Our website,

*www.dharma.org/bcbs*

now features:

- Online Course Registration
- A New Look
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The website makes the *Insight Journal* and *Journal Archives* even more readable and accessible.

## About the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies



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.

Located on 96 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, classroom, and dining room that create a comfortable setting for classes and workshops. A meditation hall holds space for practice. On-campus housing is provided by a dormitory under the meditation hall, rooms in the farmhouse, and three cottages.

The study center offers a variety of study and research opportunities, lectures, classes, seminars, workshops, conferences, retreats and self-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.



## Free of Fear

Bhaddiya Thera — *Theragāthā 863-4*

ucce maṇḍalipākāre  
dalhamattālakottḥake  
rakkhito khaggahatthehi  
uttasam viharim pure.

so 'jja bhaddo anutrāsī  
pahinabhayabheravo  
jhāyati vanam ogahya  
putto Godhāya Bhaddiyo.

With lofty, encircling walls,  
Firm battlements and sturdy gates,  
Guarded by many, swords in hand,  
I dwelt in the city—frightened!

Today Bhaddiya, Godhā's son,  
Is fortunate—and unfrightened!  
Devoid of any fear or dread,  
He meditates, plunged in the woods.



Bhaddiya was a great Sakya chieftain, the son of the matriarch Kālī-Godhā whom the Buddha identifies as the most high-born person in his circle. He was good friends with Anuruddha, the Buddha's cousin (and Ananda's brother), who persuaded him to go forth with him into the homeless life under the Buddha's instruction. Both friends, like Siddhartha, enjoyed a privileged upbringing, and had to make some adjustments to the renunciate life of a wandering bhikkhu.

At one point Bhaddiya was overheard uttering the phrase "Ah, what bliss; Ah, what bliss;" as he sat alone in the wilderness, and his fellow monks suspected that he was remembering the pleasures of

his earlier life and thus not engaging fully in the rigors of forest practice. When called before the Buddha to explain himself, it turns out that just the opposite was true. As he put it in a parallel prose passage of the Vinaya:

*"Formerly, when I was a ruler, there was a fully appointed guard both within my private quarters and outside... both within the town and outside... and throughout the countryside. But although being guarded and warded thus, I dwelt afraid, anxious, fearful and alarmed. But now, dwelling in a forest and at the root of a tree and in an empty place, I am unafraid, not anxious, not fearful and not alarmed. I am unconcerned, unruffled, dependent*

*on others, with a mind become as a wild creature's. This is why I was uttering the phrase, 'Ah, what bliss; Ah, what bliss.'"*  
(*Cullavagga 7:1.6*)

I suspect this was very close to the Buddha's own experience as he traded the closely controlled life of the palace for the open road of the wanderer. There may even be a lesson here for the rest of us. The more one has, the more one has to lose. The greater the position of authority or celebrity, the more of a target one might be for the ill will of others. Living simply and modestly may well be, as Bhaddiya discovered, the source of immense satisfaction.

—A. Olendzki