



AUKANA

newsletter 1/2022

HOUSE OF INNER
TRANQUILLITY



"I liken the cessation of suffering to there being this perpetual background noise that has finally been taken away. It is only when it has stopped that you realise there had been this noise the whole time. It is such a relief. But nothing else has been explained. Everything else just remains this endless mystery. What an absolutely wonderful teaching Buddha-dhamma is because it is not trying to cross every 't' or dot every 'i' for you. The mystery has to remain a mystery in order for life to be perfect. Enlightenment is complete release into the mystery. Suffering comes to an end but the joy of learning and discovery carries on endlessly."

PAUL HARRIS

EDITORIAL

Is our ability to concentrate being stolen from us through our use of social media and other facets of modern life? New research suggests that people's ability to pay attention may well be reducing. For instance, a study of college students found that they tended to focus on any one task for no more than sixty-five seconds. Again, a survey of office workers discovered that they could focus on a specific assignment for, on average, three minutes at a time. Results from another study suggests that obsessive smartphone use combined with the myth of 'multitasking' may be two potential causes for such short attention spans. Participants were divided into

two groups and were given similar tasks to perform. One group were not allowed access to their phones. The other group were. The researchers discovered a 20% reduction in overall performance due to participants having their phones available to them.

It is so easily done, of course. Who hasn't been sat in front of the TV apparently watching a film whilst simultaneously scrolling through social media feeds or checking football scores? Or justified watching online videos of otters eating little pieces of mango as 'important research' for that article you are writing? We can convince ourselves, perhaps, that, by being able to take in various

streams of information concurrently from multiple sources, we are being highly efficient. Are we, though? As meditators we learn through experience that, actually, the mind is only ever aware of one stream of sensory data at a time. We might think that we are performing several tasks in parallel, but in reality we are juggling our attention between them. This constant jumping of attention creates what has been coined the 'switch-cost effect'. According to the research, we lose time when we stop what we are doing to, say, check a text message. The effect, however, is also that it takes time to reconfigure our focus each time we switch. To put this in the language of meditation, with each new switch we generate 'initial application of mind' again and again, but fail to exercise and develop 'sustained application'. Concentration requires both initial and sustained application of mind. That is, to keep the whole mind attending to a single object or goal for a protracted period of time.

This attention deficit does have real-world consequences, and not just in terms of one's efficiency at work. Laws banning the use of hand-held phones in cars have been introduced because of the increase in deaths and injuries on the road caused by drivers being distracted. For meditators, the

consequences of having one's ability to pay attention impaired in this way is obvious. The development of insight-wisdom is contingent upon being able to mindfully focus on the flow of sensory information that makes up our conscious experience. Every meditator is aware of how flighty the mind can be, jumping from one distraction to the next like a demented monkey leaping from bough to bough. We need to consider whether our attempts to practise concentration are being hampered by the potential for distraction offered by these new technologies and the sheer volume of information that they make available to us. Learning to mindfully restrain the temptation to 'multitask' with these new media and to focus properly on one thing at a time will help our meditation practice tremendously.

The secret to sustaining one's concentration over a longer period of time is to choose and hold in mind one meaningful intention or objective, and to practise repeatedly focussing one's attention exclusively on that 'one thing'. For insight-wisdom, that 'one thing' is the observation of the endless stream of information coming through each of the six senses, in order to fully comprehend the truly transient, ungraspable and selfless nature of existence. ■

NEWS

Open Day: With the easing of government Covid restrictions in the summer we were able to hold our biennial Open Day on 29th August. With a new season of retreats due to start in September, it was decided that the bank holiday weekend was the best option available for the day. This is much later in the year than normal. Usually the event is held just after the end of the spring season, giving us a week to focus on preparations. The lifting of the lockdown, however, meant that the regular Wednesday evening meetings had already returned. With all the cleaning of rooms and windows, the garden tidying and flower arranging that needed to be done, we realised we were on a tight time schedule. Preparations for the Open Day, we decided, would need to reflect the extraordinary circumstances we found ourselves in. Being flexible and not comparing this event with what had been achieved in other years seemed like the best approach. Nonetheless, with the help of many members of the community, we were able to complete all the necessary preparations. The Centre's gardens and grounds still ended up looking very neat and tidy. On the day meditators helped out manning the various stalls and guiding visitors around the Centre. Due to the uncertainty as to

whether or when the Open Day could be held, the plants on sale for this year's stall were all exclusively from the Centre's gardens. The tea stall, however, offered its usual refreshments of drinks and cakes donated by meditators. The shop, too, had Buddha figures, incense, cards, books and Aukana published books available. All the stalls did a roaring trade.

It was lovely that the conditions came together to allow the Trust to open its doors to the public. With an estimated one hundred and fifty meditators, guests, neighbours and friends of the Centre attending, it was a rare opportunity for everyone to be able to meet up again in the spacious gardens and properties after such a long absence. Thank you to everyone who helped out with preparations and offered their services to help make such a success of the day.

Retreats: The easing of restrictions also meant that we could once again offer residential courses to members of the community. Attending retreats is a fundamental aspect of the training that we offer. Unbelievably, for many students it had been almost two years since their last stay at the Centre. No wonder, then, that the autumn season of retreats was fully booked. It was heartening to see the

enthusiasm and dedication displayed by students whilst on retreat. The suffering inherent in existence has been obvious for us all to see over the last couple of years. It has, no doubt, helped to focus many a meditator's mind on realising freedom from it. The retreats for spring 2022 are also fully booked.

Due to the development of our online presence during lockdown there has been an increase in retreat requests. We give booking priority to current members of the community who are already under instruction. Given the limited availability of spaces, we request that, once booked, students do everything in their power to ensure that they attend the retreat. Developing the qualities of strong intention, determination and devotion are very much part of the meditative training.

Occasionally a place may become available due to unforeseeable circumstances. If you do not yet have a place but would like one, please refer to the website to check availability or contact the Centre to place your name on the waiting list.

Meetings: Wednesday evening meetings at the Centre began again in July and were well attended. Understandably some senior and vulnerable members were cautious about

returning to a populated space. The newly instigated online livestreams of the lecture and Q&A meetings, however, meant that all those unable to attend in person were able to take part. This included members of the group living abroad and at a distance from the Centre who, for the first time, were able to join the local members in a communal activity. Recording the livestreams and making them available online means that many more people will be able to watch the talks given at the House of Inner Tranquillity.

The government's greater restrictions on public meetings introduced in December 2021 meant that face coverings would have to be worn at the last Wednesday meeting on 15th December. It was deemed unsuitable to hold the last Q&A at the Centre in these circumstances. Instead, a Zoom meeting was arranged at short notice. **David Gilbert** kindly organised and chaired the meeting. Paul went through some unanswered questions that had been posed previously and participants contributed with comments and further questions to Paul's prompts. There was a bumper attendance at the meeting, including members from Canada and Europe, taking the last opportunity to see each other face to face, albeit on a screen, before the winter break.



Peter Andrews

People: On 3rd January 2022 **Peter Andrews** arrived at the male monastery for a month's stay as a full-time lay student. Peter discovered the Centre through Paul's YouTube videos. He joined the Facebook Group a year ago and contacted the Meditation Centre in July 2021 with the view to attending here. Consequent to an interview with Paul, Peter asked to come in as a weekly day student and the rest is history, as they say.

Peter said that he had been teaching himself insight meditation at home in Bristol but had lots of unanswered questions. He understood that he needed guidance and considered going to Myanmar to do a three

month retreat there but searched for somewhere locally to practise first. Peter was not drawn to the Tibetan tradition prevalent in Bristol. He found Paul's *vipassana* videos online which seemed to answer his questions. He then joined the Facebook group and become an active member.

Peter says that he likes this Centre because the original teachings of the Buddha can be found here and there is a teacher he can talk with who guides him in his practice. He also likes that the Centre caters for all levels of practitioners from lay students, who can do retreats and commit to being day students, right through to people under full-time training, both lay and ordained. He is aware that, "You get out as much as you put in." He also says the people here are friendly and nice, and he finds the Centre homely.

Dependent on individual circumstances, it is possible to spend extended periods as a 'lay' recluse at the Centre. Anyone who is interested is welcome to contact Paul to talk about it.

Online presence: The weekly uploading of chapters from Paul's audiobook version of 'Postcards from Beyond' is well underway. They can be found on our website by clicking the headphone icon on the top right

of the menu bar. The House of Inner Tranquillity podcast channel can also be found on audio directories such as iTunes and Spotify, as well as AudioBoom who host our content. At the time of writing 18 episodes have been posted. Once all the chapters have been finished, the series will also be made available on our YouTube channel.

The Facebook group continues to be run very successfully by **Sally Passfield, Natalie Watson** and **Glenda Brewer**. It now has over six hundred and fifty members. Posts are submitted regularly and are the basis for further comments and discussion. Posts are welcome from all members of the Facebook group and can often be the source of some very interesting debates. All such posts are moderated to ensure that friendliness prevails and that the Facebook group remains true to the Buddha's teaching as presented here at the Centre.

All in all our online presence is proving to be a very popular resource for meditators at the Centre. With a burgeoning world-wide community, it means many more people are becoming aware of the Buddha's teaching and the House of Inner Tranquillity.

Garden & Maintenance: The garden lights which illuminated the paths

from the kitchen to the pergola and around the Japanese Garden were quite old and had sustained some damage. They have been replaced by smart stainless steel columns with bright LED lights at the apex. Our regular electrician **Steve Ingram** checked all the wiring and fitted replacement bulkhead lights in the Japanese Garden area.

One of the sensor lights in the drive had stopped working. The other was hanging loose and used a 150 watt filament bulb. Steve replaced both of these with energy efficient LED units and also fitted a switch to a bulkhead light by the back door of the kitchen that he had replaced with an LED unit.

The gutter along the road side of 10 and 10a frequently gets blocked with leaves from the trees across the road resulting in overflows of rain water onto the pavement below. Scaffolding was erected from the garden over the bothy and out above the pavement so that our roofer **Mr Tripp** could access the gutter at the lower end of no. 10. A new downpipe was fitted from the gutter to feed into newly replaced guttering around the bothy. This enables the water to drain from both rooves into an existing downpipe at a lower height. The new construction will assist water flow and will be easier to clean and maintain in future.

BRADFORD ON AVON

HOUSE OF INNER TRANQUILLITY

RETREATS

6-Day Integrated Retreats

28 February-March 5

May 9-14

6-Day Silent Retreats

February 14-19

March 28-April 2

April 11-16

April 25-30

June 6-11

Weekend Retreats

March 18-20

May 27-29

TAPE & LECTURE EVENINGS

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

February 9

Lecture

February 16

Tape

February 23

Q&A

March 2

Tape

March 9

Lecture

March 16

Tape

March 23

Q&A

March 30

Tape

April 6

Lecture

April 13

Tape

April 20

Q&A

April 27

Tape

May 4

Lecture

May 11

Tape

May 18

Q&A

May 25

Tape

June 1

Lecture

June 8

Tape

June 15

Q&A

OPEN MEDITATIONS

Saturday mornings 10.15-11.15. The door will be open from 10.05am, February 12 - June 11 inc.

**HoIT FACEBOOK PAGE
LIVESTREAMS**

Monday evenings 7.30.
Provisional dates:
March 14, May 23

WESAK

Monday May 16

Evening starts 7.30pm Doors
open from 7.15pm

SATELLITE GROUPS

Activities: Please contact

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Expounding the Dhamma by Paul Harris

The Buddha said that one of the best supporting conditions for the development of wisdom was to expound his teaching to others. It must be done with all due humility, of course, as well as with clarity and precision. Under the guidance of an experienced teacher, however, a student can learn a tremendous amount about the teaching; where they have things right and where they still have wrong ideas about it. Giving talks helps to develop a student's wisdom and their capacity for wise reflection. The discipline forces them to ponder on their life experience and how it all fits with the Buddha's teaching. Also, having errors pointed out by their teacher and mindfully dealing with the inevitable nerves that come with public speaking helps tremendously with conquering self-concern.

I remember the first pre-meditation talk I gave after ordaining as a monk. Fearful palpitations coursed through my body literally days ahead of actually sitting at the front of the Shrine Room to speak. This despite the fact that the talk had already been written and had been checked and approved by my teacher Alan. Then,

over many years, came a whole series of written thirty minute lectures which, with Alan's help, gradually honed my understanding of what makes for a good Dhamma talk.

My word, how things have changed. I have no idea how many talks I have given at the Centre now, especially if we include the Question and Answer evenings, YouTube videos and all those online streaming events. I know for some people it might seem as though I am 'pulling rabbits out of hats' when I do these apparently improvised, extemporaneous Dhamma talks. They are, however, the product of many years of practice. Whilst these talks have definitely been 'dynamic' at times they have lacked the precision that I feel students require. Moreover, recently it has begun to feel as though I am now pulling the same rabbit out the hat each time. It feels like a good time to make a change.

What I would like to do is to invite members of the Sangha to prepare and present talks, either the pre-meditation talks or full thirty minute lectures or both. I will be writing talks

again from now on but cannot possibly write them all. The Q&A evenings and livestreams will still give everyone the more 'dynamic' unscripted teaching style. Written talks, however, will mean ideas can be more carefully considered and developed, and more accurately presented.

Having completed the Vipassana training in 2006 and having taught for so many years, I certainly bring the necessary depth of experience. I am, however, just one person with a particular perspective and a limited way of putting things across. What about breadth of experience? We have a diverse Sangha with a richness of life experience and unique perspectives to offer. Why shouldn't your voice be heard too?

You don't have to be enlightened to expound the Dhamma. You just need to be doing it for the right reasons and in the right way. I am more than willing to guide someone through the process of writing a proper Dhamma talk and how to present it effectively. It is a commitment and to have a successful outcome will require a disciplined approach and, importantly, the willingness to be corrected. The best attitude would be to treat it as an integral part of walking

the Noble Eightfold Path. It will help train in many sterling qualities, such as right views, wise speech and service to the Sangha.

Anyone in the group who is interested in taking up this challenge is very welcome to contact me. ■

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DATA PROTECTION ACT

The mailing list used for the House of Inner Tranquillity Newsletter is maintained on computer. If you object to your record being kept on our computer file, please write to us and we will remove it.

A Q&A based on the livestream “Emptiness and the Six-Sensory Fields”

For the purposes of clarity, precision and readability, the text used for this article has been heavily edited and adapted from the original transcript. The complete talk, “Emptiness and the Six-Sensory Fields” is available on both our YouTube channel and Facebook page.

Paul: Only the six sensory fields (of sight, sound, smell, taste, touch and mind) are actually real, although entirely transient, ungraspable and selfless. The enlightened mind has realised that, in the absence of any ignorance and craving, this is the only disturbance that remains. The conventional reality of time and space, and the people, objects and events that seem so real are, in truth, ‘empty’ of any intrinsic reality. It is, rather, that the ‘things’ of conventional reality are made up from the ceaseless interplay of these ephemeral sensory fields. They are illusory. This is the realisation of freedom from suffering because there is literally nothing to crave for; there is nothing to wish to be different than it is. The realisation of emptiness is the realisation of perfection.

When we stop to consider all the apparent problems that confront the

world these days, all the things we are convinced should be different, where is all that? As you sit here now, mindfully observing conscious experience, isn’t it the case that, at this moment, reality is empty of all of that? The mind does, however, retain a conception of those things and this is what allows for the understanding of emptiness. Without the conception of ‘the world’ how could there be the understanding that reality is empty of ‘the world’? The conventional reality has its place, therefore. What the enlightened mind understands, however, is that all those things are empty of any inherent existence. All the politics, philosophy, psychology, religion, even Buddha-Dhamma itself, the whole world and the ‘self’; it is all empty, dream-like. It is all just mere appearances. The only things which are actual are the objects, bases and consciousness that make up the six sensory fields. And even they are utterly fleeting and exist only in mutual co-dependence. Really, there are no things to be separate at all.

Any questions?

Q: How do states of mind fit in?

Paul: There is a whole constellation of mental components that go to make up any experience, such as attention, energy, concentration, feelings and perception, as well as thought processes, memories, desires, faith, compassion and the like. For the purposes of Insight meditation, mind is treated as a sensory field and is, therefore, working in combination with the other five kinds to render the appearances of ongoing experience. My advice is to keep the practice as simple as possible and just note what's there.

Q: You said to retain a conceptualisation of the conventional world, but surely you would retain it anyway?

Paul: Yes, that retaining happens naturally. After enlightenment we still orientate ourselves in the conventional world. We haven't got rid of it, we just realise that it is and has always been empty. The Buddha didn't disappear in a puff of blue smoke and he didn't become like an innocent baby lying on his back unable to help himself. When we meditate, we are literally just sitting down in a chair with our eyes closed. That is all. Nothing is going to change in terms of the way life unfolds, it is our understanding of the way life unfolds that is the change. The process of conceptualising is

non-self, it just arises as a natural part of 'what is'. The difference is that now you are not confused by the illusory world of objects. You see the emptiness inherent in all objects but you can still find your way around the world.

Q: Are you sure this can be understood, eventually?

Paul: Yes. This is not about being clever. It is complicated to put across, but, actually, you are living this. You are all students of Dhamma. You want to come to know and understand. The Buddha's Insight Path, his higher teaching, is the way to come to realise all of this for yourselves. All you have to do is be prepared to keep coming back to mindfulness. Investigate and explore conscious experience and keep noting what arises. Gradually you will recognise how transient and co-dependent all the components that go to make up six-sensory experience are.

Q: A while back I had a strange experience of having left my Dad's house and driving home with the sense that none of that time we had together now exists.

Paul: One of the amazing things

that you discover is how 'flimsy' and ephemeral life is. It just adds to the mystery because reality still holds together as it always has. You still retain the sense of a universe, of which you are a part, but which is also separate from you. Yet, at the same time you see right through it. For a while, you might experience a kind of cognitive dissonance where you are seeing it in one way and then you are seeing it in another, which can be unsettling. Slowly but surely, however, the truth wins out and the entirety of this wonderful illusion is seen for what it is.

Q: Can you say it is empty of the experience as well as the perception? Can the word 'experience' replace the word 'perception' or is that inaccurate?

Paul: Is an 'experience' a thing in itself? Or is it just a simplified way to talk about a collection of complex processes and components? An experience is nothing without the elements that make it up and perception is a foundational element in the emergence of conventional reality.

In the "The Lesser Discourse on Emptiness" the Buddha describes a monk sitting at the root of a tree in the forest. The solitude he experiences, the Buddha states, is such because

it is empty of the disturbances that would be created by perceiving the village and the human beings who live there. To this degree the monk's current experience is empty. It is empty of perceptions of the village and the villagers. The point is, however, that to know it is empty of those things, the monk must be able to retain the idea of them. As the Buddha states, "That being, this is."

In just the same way, by realising emptiness we don't lose that conceptual map of the world. We retain it and use it. The conventional reality does exist at its own level, but now we understand it in its true context. We are no longer confused. It has its place within the whole. That is the joy. Seeing emptiness is joyful because with that realisation everything becomes deeply significant. Even the most innocuous 'thing' like a glass of water becomes significant and mysterious. It is seeing the emptiness of it which is so gorgeous. It is all a 'cosmic play' and we are free to just play.

Q: Why bother focussing on skilful versus unskilful actions if they are both empty?

Paul: Before enlightenment you want to be really careful about what kind of actions you perform because your

actions have results. While you don't see them as being empty and the mind still clings to the 'I am' conceit, you will experience them as being absolutely real. Whilst walking the Path, you want to develop your understanding of what wholesome and unwholesome actions are. You want to limit acting upon unwholesome states and develop wholesome states as much as you can. That is what is going to generate the meditative space, the mental solitude, that will allow you to look more closely at life as it is unfolding. Obviously, it also means that your future is going to be as pleasant as it can be.

After enlightenment it is different. Having come to the highest, truest realisation of emptiness, it really doesn't matter anymore. That said, the Buddha stated that he still carried on living by the Dhamma after enlightenment for the purposes of enjoying ease of living here and now.

Q: Is it like the glass of water is more of an interaction than a thing in itself?

Paul: Yes. More of an unfolding process or event than a 'thing'. The way I like to put it is that the glass of water is the 'fabricated' or 'constructed' reality. There is the conditioned and conditioning 'play' of the components

of the six sensory fields. In each moment, these mutually co-dependent interactions are all that is actually happening, all that exists. Of course, this includes all the components of mind, such as consciousness, perception and conceptualising and so forth. Out of all that interweaving is fabricated this other reality we call 'everyday life'.

I like to use the analogy of a rainbow to help explain this fabricated quality. We understand that a rainbow is insubstantial. It is ephemeral, it is not really a self-existing, independent 'thing.' We know that it is a product of conditions and, as those conditions arise and cease, so too does the mirage of the rainbow.

Q: I love the idea that all things are intrinsically nested in unfolding reality waiting to come into existence.

Paul: It is more accurate to say that life is being rendered in real time. Do things 'exist' in some super-position, waiting to 'emerge' into a finite reality? Not really. Certainly no more and no less than a rainbow does. It is playful. This is the whole point. This is why it is sad to see people so perpetually caught up in and by the world. Enlightenment is to realise that life truly is an endlessly playful mystery.



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*The Aukana Trust is a registered charity
(no 326938) which provides instruction in
the Buddha's path to enlightenment,
from introductory evening classes
to full-time monastic training.*

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