



AUKANA

*newsletter* 1/2024

HOUSE OF INNER  
TRANQUILLITY



*“We have all been born into this human realm at a time when the teaching of an historical Buddha is available. Please do not assume that this is the normal state of affairs.”*

PAUL HARRIS

## EDITORIAL

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Do we live in a simulation? A strange question, but one that more and more scientists, philosophers and cultural commentators seem to be taking seriously. For instance, given the probabilistic behaviour of subatomic particles popping in and out of existence, could the macroscopic world of beings, objects and things actually just be a hologram? Our computer technology is rapidly evolving, creating increasingly realistic virtual worlds. Some suggest, therefore, that simulating entire realities may become possible. If we can achieve that level of technological sophistication, is it plausible that even more advanced civilisations in the universe have already done so, potentially running countless simulations of reality, including our own? Are we, after-all, nothing more than soulless characters in some extraterrestrial school kid’s computer game?

These may seem like outlandish suggestions, but isn’t it the case that, in many respects, we have already

given ourselves over to simulated versions of reality? For instance, television programmes and films simulate reality. Even the news is a simulation of world events. Another example, are our ‘smart’ phones giving us an exaggerated sense of how much we really know and understand about the world? And, what kind of impact is that having on people’s behaviour?

Worryingly, there is now a growing appetite for AI generated boyfriends and girlfriends. Why bother going through the pain of learning how to relate to your fellow human beings, when a bespoke simulation can be generated instantly to satisfy your needs? Even if you do choose to go out and meet real people, how real are they? For instance, the demands of modern beauty standards are such that people have begun routinely using enhancements such as Botox to hide signs of ageing. Isn’t this a kind of lie, though? Don’t wrinkles help to tell the true story of life?

With the advent of social media we

are constantly being encouraged to create alternative, idealised versions of ourselves. It seems our culture now prefers to reward those who outwardly present themselves as caring and virtuous, without any apparent need to act in genuinely caring and virtuous ways at all.

This ever-evolving trend of simulating reality has profound implications. Increasingly, people are unable to place their trust in anything. What is real? Are you real? Am I? Was this editorial written by a human being or generated by an AI chatbot? What does it mean to live authentically, beyond just trying to give the impression that you are? How do we live authentic and genuine lives?

Buddha-Dhamma is a truth teaching. It describes the fundamental laws that govern conscious existence. Significantly, it also provides us with the tools we need to thoroughly test the reality of it for ourselves. If, therefore, we are willing to follow the Noble Eightfold Path, to undertaking the trainings in ethics, mental development and wisdom, the difference between what is real and what is a simulation will become ever more apparent.

Through the development of mindful noting, for instance, students become intimately familiar with the law of action and result. They know

from experience which actions and the intentions behind them bring happiness, comfort and peace of mind in their wake. They, therefore, naturally incline towards acts of kindness and service. They have no need to broadcast their 'good' behaviour, they can simply allow the results to speak for themselves. Following the Buddha's mundane teaching, therefore, helps us to develop a relationship with the outside world that is unselfconscious, genuinely virtuous and authentic.

Exploring conscious experience through the lens of the Buddha's higher teaching, students can see for themselves the laws that govern the very 'nuts and bolts' of reality. Doing so, they realise that what they had so casually overlooked as ordinary and unimportant, and as being merely 'me' or 'mine,' is nothing of the sort. Far from it. They come to see that the whole of conscious experience and every single last component 'thing' that arises and passes away is nothing less than the magical, finite and empty display of endless, infinite mystery. This is a truly monumental and transcendent discovery. Is life an empty hologram, then? A mere simulation? Why not find out for yourself? ■

## NEWS

**Online Community:** The Centre has had an online presence for many years with its website, YouTube channel, audio podcasts and Facebook page. The Centre's members group on Facebook has been in existence for five years now, administered by **Sally Passfield, Natalie Watson** and **Glenda Brewer**. Sally has kindly contributed a few words to mark the anniversary.



*Sally Passfield*

**Facebook Group:** by Sally Passfield. "As of this month, the HoIT Facebook group is five years old. Natalie Watson, Glenda Brewer and I continue to run the group between us. We manage to put up a post containing quotes from the Centre every day.

"With such a wealth of material available, including books, newsletters, podcasts, talks and zoom meet-

ings, we are never short of material. It is amazing that we never clash with our posts. There is no previous checking, yet we seem to dovetail posts which support each other.

"The benefits to the three of us have been huge. The need to continually have fresh material means that we are always reading or listening to the teachings, learning more all the time. It also helps in motivating our meditation practice and because we are in contact with each other most days, a close and supportive friendship has grown up between us.

"The group membership now numbers 731, including those who attend the Centre in person and others from around the world. Many tell us how they find it beneficial to be able to read the Dhamma each day. Some posts generate lively discussion, usually those on *kamma* and rebirth.

"We really value interaction from group members and are happy to have been able to share the introductory talks given by members at the beginning of some of the Wednesday evening meetings. These have been very inspiring. We have also had posts from members discussing their thoughts about books or lectures that have helped to motivate their practice.

“One thing that is very noticeable about our group is its strong basis in *metta*, which serves to harmonise all interactions, even those involving different viewpoints. We would like to say a big thank you to all who have contributed to the Facebook group. We really value your posts and comments, so please keep them coming.”

As a means of maintaining contact with students when the lockdowns began in 2020, we started regular live Dhamma talks on Facebook. In that first year, Paul did more than ninety livestreams. As things began to return to normal and the Centre reopened its doors, the necessity for that level of online contact diminished.

Demand for live online support, however, continued to grow. For a time, we experimented with recording Wednesday meetings live, but they were difficult to produce and did not provide students with the opportunity to interact. Thanks to a suggestion from **Mandy Bogaard** in the Netherlands, more recently we have begun regular fortnightly online video meetings. These have proven to be much easier to produce. They also have allowed for a far greater degree of interaction between Paul and students, making for a much more engaging event. We have found that, typically, about half the attendees

are those who also regularly attend Wednesday meetings. The other half are people who live further afield in the UK, on the continent, in Canada and the USA.

An even wider audience has been reached with people being able to catch up on the recordings later on Facebook and YouTube. This is where students can also access the other online material that Paul has produced over the years. As a consequence of this increased online presence, from time to time we have been contacted by people from around the world wanting advice on meditation. **Joe Rediger** from the USA, ended up coming for a stay at the Centre in May 2022. Another, **Alex Voloch** from Brazil, is due to arrive for a two week stay in early February. He has been in regular contact with other Facebook group members and will be visiting with some of them at either end of his stay at the Centre. We look forward to welcoming Alex and appreciate the care, kindness and friendship offered to him by members of the community.

**Maintenance:** Our regular decorators **Simon Prudames** and **Tom Hammond** have returned for another job at the Centre. This time it is the turn of the office at the far end of no. 10, formerly used by **Alan James**. It has been in need of attention for some

time. The stone mullion windows in particular have suffered from the cold and damp. They will be treated and painted in the same way as the similar windows in the Shrine Room that Simon redecorated in 2020. This should prevent recurrence of mould and unsightly discolouration.

The room is quiet and out of the way, an ideal space to use as a dedicated studio for recording videos and the like. It benefits from being connected to the broadband hub in the office in no.9, enabling access to the internet. Work started on 9th January and is currently in progress.

**Garden: Brother Nigel** has been busy in the garden doing general maintenance work. Given all the preparations in the run up to Open Day in June, the autumn is a time for pruning back and removing old plants that are past their best. The plant near the kitchen, *Amelanchier lamarckii*, common name Snowy Mespilus, gave up the ghost after many years of putting on a show. It produced delicate white flowers in the spring and vivid orange autumn colour. The red berries that followed the early flowers were much coveted by birds that hopped and flapped in a frenzy to reach them at the extremities of the spindly branches. The plant had been ailing since last year and was

dug up in the autumn by day student **Peter Andrews**. The space has now been filled with a Japanese maple donated by day student **Julia Barton**. Her maple was struggling as it had outgrown its pot. Julia had previously donated another maple which had been in a similar condition. That one was planted between the Japanese garden and the bothy and, inspired by how well it has done, Julia offered the second maple on hearing a space was available. At the time of writing it was being well rained in.

The vegetable plot this year produced an abundance of carrots which saw us through till the end of December. There was also a glut of squashes of various sorts. They must have come from seeds left in the compost as few of them had been planted intentionally. They made terrific soup.



**David Gilbert**

## A Message from the Chair of the Aukana Trust Board of Trustees:

by David Gilbert.

“At a recent meeting of the Board, the trustees agreed it would be useful to explain to the wider community the charity’s purpose and to clarify the trustees’ role in its governance. As Chair of the Board, I’m taking this opportunity to outline a few key aspects of the work we do on behalf of members who so generously support and, simultaneously, benefit from its activities.

“Ever since its inception in the mid nineteen-eighties, then under the guidance of the Centre’s founders Alan and **Jacqui James**, the objective of the charity has been clear and consistent. This purpose is summarised concisely in the Trust Deed as follows: the Aukana Trust exists ‘to promote the Buddhist faith and all aspects including both meditative and theoretical aspects’. We are pledged, therefore, to provide a healthy space for the spiritual development of community members. We seek to meet this core aim through a variety of means that will enable meditators to successfully pursue the Buddha’s path to enlightenment. Under the expert guidance of our spiritual director, the Centre offers lectures, evening meetings, workshops and retreats as well as online teaching and resources.

Full-time monastic training is also available for those who wish to take advantage of intensive training in Buddhist meditation.

“It is the role and responsibility of the trustees to provide effective leadership for the charity, ensuring that it meets the core spiritual purpose by being financially and operationally fit, and that all legal obligations are met. In line with Charity Commission guidelines and requirements, we regularly review the Trust’s governance procedures and legal duties to ensure that they are in line with best practice. Our policies and procedures can all be found on our website: [www.aukana.org.uk](http://www.aukana.org.uk).

“I have been involved with the Trust for almost thirty years and it has provided me with a very supportive environment in which to learn about ethical conduct and meditation, and to develop wisdom and compassion. I am grateful for the opportunities the charity has given me to follow and put into practice the Buddha’s teachings. Chairing the Aukana Board of Trustees is a way of contributing to an institution that has given me so much. I and the other trustees are committed to ensuring that the organisation continues to thrive and that as many people as possible may benefit from the opportunities for spiritual development that it offers.” ■

# BRADFORD ON AVON

HOUSE OF INNER TRANQUILLITY

## RETREATS

### 6-Day Integrated Retreats

March 18-23

May 6-11

### 6-Day Silent Retreats

February 12-17

February 26-March 2

April 1-6

April 22-27

May 27-June 1

June 10-15

### Weekend Retreats

March 8-10

April 12-14

May 17-19

## TAPE & LECTURE EVENINGS

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

February 7	<b>Lecture</b>
February 14	Tape
February 21	<b>Q&amp;A</b>
February 28	Tape
March 6	<b>Lecture</b>
March 13	Tape
March 20	<b>Q&amp;A</b>
March 27	Tape
April 3	<b>Lecture</b>
April 10	Tape
April 17	<b>Q&amp;A</b>
April 24	Tape
May 1	Tape
May 8	<b>Lecture</b>
May 15	Tape
May 22	<b>Q&amp;A</b>
May 29	Tape
June 5	<b>Lecture</b>
June 12	Tape
June 19	<b>Q&amp;A</b>

## OPEN MEDITATIONS

Saturday mornings 10.15-11.15. The door will be open from 10.05am, February 10 - June 15 inc.



## **MONDAY ONLINE MEETINGS**

### **Evening starts 7.30pm**

February 12, 26,  
March 11,  
April 8, 22,  
May 13, 27,  
June 10

## **SATURDAY WORKSHOPS**

### **10am to 2pm**

March 16  
April 20

## **WESAK**

### **Thursday May 23**

Evening starts 7.30pm  
Door open from 7.15pm

## **SATELLITE GROUPS**

### **Toronto Canada**

Please contact: Jim Vuylsteke  
Tel: +1-416-571-4932  
Web site: [www.sunyata.ca](http://www.sunyata.ca)

### **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.*

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## “Devotion” by Paul Harris

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**Paul Harris**

I had been practising calming meditation on a six-day silent retreat, repeatedly focussing my attention exclusively on the breathing process. I was reflecting on the previous hour's meditation. It felt like the mind was perpetually oscillating between attending to thoughts and attending to the breath. As I pondered on that experience, it dawned on me that I seemed to be more interested in trying to deal with the stray thoughts than I

was in becoming calm. It occurred to me that this might actually be the wrong way round. I was holding on to an assumption that it was first necessary that all thoughts had to be dealt with and only then was it possible to focus and become calm. Was this idea true, however?

What if, instead of attending to the thoughts every time they arose, I stopped worrying about them entirely? What if I just gave my whole, undivided, willing, loving attention to the breath? I considered what other factors of mind might be needed. I would need the inspiration, the whole reason for doing the practice, to be fresh in my mind. This would give me a clear sense of purpose and direction, and would help to invoke really strong intentions to that end. I would need to have faith and also the patience to rest content in the moment and wait, knowing that the fruits of practice will come when the conditions are right. I would also require the determination, courage and persistence to sustain application of the mind on the breathing to the exclusion of everything else. Focussing on the breath would also be far easier if it were accompanied by a strong sense of peace, happiness and zest for the

practice.

“That’s interesting.” I thought, “Inspiration, purpose, direction, intention, commitment, focus, sustained application, persistence, faith, patience, courage, happiness, zest... love. I wonder if there is a single word that might encapsulate all of that?”

And there is. And that word is, “Devotion”

This word, “Devotion,” when it arose, made a deep impact on me. Its significance became clear, not just in terms of my meditation in particular, but also generally for any student walking the Buddha’s Noble Eightfold Path.

As part of our psychological make-up the quality of devotion can be thought of as a kind of “gestalt,” which means to say something that’s nature is above and beyond the sum of its parts. For instance, devotion means more than just inspiration, but without the inspiration, the purpose, the objective, there can be no devotion. Devotion means more than just faith, but without faith there is no devotion. Devotion means more than just undivided attention, but without undivided attention there is no devotion. Devotion means more than just loyalty, but without loyalty there can be no devotion.

Putting these ideas into practice during the next meditation was a

revelation. Now, when I closed my eyes, it was as though I had entered a sacred space. The breath became, as it were, the central axis of that space and the point upon which the entire universe turned. Giving the breath my full, undivided attention became an act of unconditional love. There were no assurances, no alternatives and no safety nets. Yet there was peace, faith and happiness. There was a sense of rightness.

Were there thoughts? Yes, of course. Wherever we discover the sacred, we know the profane is never too far away. Now, however, there existed a new context. Thoughts were no longer a problem, because they were no longer the point. “Thoughts are like vampires,” I decided. Vampires, it is said, need our express permission in order to cross the threshold. Without it they must remain where they cannot hurt us. Through the sheer sincerity and completeness of the devotion to observing the breathing process, the thoughts are simply no longer considered important. They remain at the threshold of consciousness as potential hindrances, waiting to be granted permission to enter. However, because they are no longer considered important they do not need to be gotten rid of. They are no longer a source of obsession in the meditation. They come, they go. Whatever. ■

## Extract from a Dhamma Talk with full time students

**Dying unconfused is one of the stated benefits of practising *metta*. Does loving-kindness generally help cultivate being unconfused? Does ill-will condition confusion?**

**Paul:** Excellent questions. Dying unconfused is one of the eleven stated benefits of practising *metta*. Why would that be? How does it feel when you practise loving-kindness?

**Student 3:** One reason is because you are accepting the situation that you are in and with that there is less self-concern around. It is easier to be with that warm, pleasant feeling.

**Paul:** Good. Let's state the case differently. Why might people be confused at death?

**Student 2:** They can be fearful, not knowing what is going to happen next. Depending on how they have lived their life, they might have guilt coming up. With loving-kindness, you have a positive sense about yourself.

**Paul:** You have a positive sense about other beings too. How many kinds of beings are there?

**Student 2:** According to the teaching, there are thirty-one different realms of existence we can be born into. So, lots.

**Paul:** And, if you have been practising *metta* to the north, the south, the east, the west, above and below, does that

include other dimensions of existence as well?

**Student 2:** Indeed.

**Paul:** The practice of *metta* can, therefore, act as a thorough training in comprehending the nature of the mundane world. Which means that you are getting your views about the world straight. Old age is the relentless destruction of somebody's faculties. Unfortunately, for some, confusion becomes part of life, sometimes to a substantial degree. Someone can be standing in the kitchen wondering why they were there, literally having moments ago just asked if you wanted a drink. This is just what happens.

With the best will in the world, even if you have practised mindfulness for your entire life and *metta* for your entire life, but your genetic code is such that you have a disposition towards neurological decline as you age, then you are going to experience more confusion as time goes by. The question is whether somebody, with all that meditative power, with such a strong habitual tendency towards *metta*, and having already gotten their views straight about the world, is such a person going to be as confused as they would have been if they had done none of that? Of course not, it is relative. In some cases, you can't

help the confusion of old age, though, you just can't.

It is how you respond to these discoveries. If you have been making much of *metta*, there is a strong probability you have also been working on being more accepting of your fallibilities, your humanness, your tendency to make mistakes and errors. You will have learnt how to let go of all kinds of concerns, through the recognition of the law of action and result, and the observation of transience. It isn't, therefore, just the *metta*, that can help you. You have got your views straight about the mundane world and, perhaps, you are also getting your views straight about ultimate reality, too. Nobody lives the perfect life, you do not have to be a saint, but, generally speaking, if you live a good life, are willing to take responsibility and are willing to learn as you go along, the future is going to be bright. Whereas, the person at death, who has done no real spiritual work, is far more likely to be genuinely confused and frightened.

The conversation has expanded somewhat beyond the remit of the question, but that is how you can ensure that you are as least confused at death as possible. Was there a concern underlying the question?

**Student 1:** I thought of it because I know it is one of the benefits of *metta*

and I do not want confusion. (*Laughter*).

**Paul:** Here's the thing, though, you do sometimes appear confused, with all the old cogs turning, (*laughter*), and I wonder if it is because you so desperately do not want to be confused. This leads into the second part of your question which is, "Does ill-will condition confusion?" Is there a strong rejection of confusion, or even the very idea of confusion as a thing?

**Student 1:** There is a strong desire to know and understand things.

**Paul:** If there is a strong urge to know and understand, what does that say about how you regard your current state of mind?

**Student 1:** That I do not know or understand and that, therefore, I am confused.

**Paul:** Exactly. Whereas, here you are having chosen to live in retreat at a Buddhist meditation centre, one to which you have belonged for some considerable time. To my mind, that suggests somebody who is not confused.

**Student 1:** That is so nice, it is lovely to hear that.

**Paul:** Obviously, there are relative levels of confusion. However, because you have this view, that you do not wish to be confused, that you wish to know and understand, it inadvertently reinforces the perception that you do not know and, consequently,

that perception becomes your living reality. I think the cure is to stop trying so hard. Accept that you do not currently know. Be content to learn as you go along. That will bring clarity. Whereas, if you are hankering to know and understand, if you are hankering for clarity, you will feel confused, even though, relatively speaking, you are not. You perpetuate confusion through rejecting it.

**Student 1:** Thank you. Thank you very much. I will ponder on that very happily.

**Paul:** You know that, when everything is upside down and it all seems counter-intuitive, that usually means it is probably true. We might as well finish the last question.

**Student 1:** Apologies! (*Laughter*).

### **Is pain a perception or tactile sensation or both?**

**Paul:** Or neither? Which is, perhaps, what we needed there. Why is it that, in terms of ultimate reality, pain is neither a perception nor a tactile sensation?

**Student 1:** It is not a tactile sensation because it is not fundamental like 'pressure' for instance.

**Paul:** Pain is fundamental at the ultimate level.

**Student 1:** Well, you could have an 'achy' pain or 'sharp' pain.

**Paul:** No, in strict ultimate terms, you

cannot have an 'achy' or 'sharp' pain.

**Student 1:** Okay. I have no clue about any of it, which is why this question keeps coming up.

**Paul:** That is perfectly fine. Can you list the five aggregates?

**Student 1:** Yes. Materiality, feelings, perceptions, mental formations and consciousness.

**Paul:** Excellent. Which aggregate do tactile sensations belong to?

**Student 1:** Materiality.

**Paul:** Good. This next question is a fairly simple one. Which aggregate do perceptions belong to?

**Student 1:** Perceptions.

**Paul:** Good. 'Achy', 'dull'?

**Student 1:** Perceptions.

**Paul:** Good. What aggregate does pain belong to?

**Student 1:** Perceptions. (*Laughter*). No, you indicated it is not that one. But, to me, pain...

**Paul:** Go through the five.

**Student 1:** Body? Consciousness? Feeling? It is an unpleasant feeling.

**Paul:** Good, so it belongs to the aggregate of feeling. At the ultimate level of reality, all conscious experiences are made up from a combination of these five aggregates. Say you are sitting in the meditation with what conventionally we would call, 'a pain in the back.' Materiality is the tactile aspect of the experience. It is, literally the pressure, the hardness or softness

and the temperature of the experience. The painful feeling is simply the sense of discomfort. The perceptions are the labels the mind applies to further distinguish what kind of experience it is, such as, 'back', 'achy', 'me', 'chair' and 'meditation'.

**Student 1:** But not 'pain'?

**Paul:** The pain is the discomfort, yes? We might apply the label 'pain', but the label 'pain' is not the actual experience of discomfort. The actual experience of discomfort is the feeling component. You also have mental formations and consciousness. Consciousness is the knowing of that experience. Mental formations are any thoughts or responses with regards to the experience. For instance, "I don't like this." In any given moment of conscious experience it is these five aggregates at work, arising and passing away in a complex series.

Let's use another example. What if it is a memory and the memory prompts a painful feeling. In this case, could you say the painful feeling is a tactile sensation?

**Student 1:** No.

**Paul:** It can't be can it? There are feelings that are connected to, or conditioned by, physical events. There are also feelings that arise due to mental events. A memory produces a painful feeling, that is called a 'painful mental feeling.' A painful feeling

arising on a tactile sensation, that is called a 'painful physical feeling,' but the pain is always a mental event, the aggregate of feeling. The pain is neither the sensation nor the perception. The sensation can be 'hard' or 'cold', the perception can be 'sharp' or 'achy', but the feeling of pain is the actual experience of discomfort or displeasure.

You have to willingly look at an unpleasant experience mindfully and investigate it by breaking it down into its aggregates. For me, the easiest way to gain insight into the nature of feelings was to note sense-contacts. A sight, a sound, a smell, a taste or a touch. Or a mental contact such as a memory or a thought. With every one of those contacts, one of three feelings arises conditioned by it. It will either be a pleasant feeling, a painful feeling or a feeling which is neither pleasant nor painful, it is a neutral feeling. By just observing contacts again and again, noting them and seeing what feeling came with them, I gained a far deeper appreciation of what the feeling component is and its influence in any given experience. I do appreciate it can be confusing at first and we do not like confusion, do we? (*Laughter*).

**Student 1:** That is great, thank you, I have some work to do and that has helped. ■



AUKANA



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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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