



The Essence of Life

Dāna, Sīla and Bhāvanā

Venerable Ariya Ñāṇi

Venerable Ariya Ñāṇi is a Swiss-born Buddhist nun who lives and works in Burma, guiding foreign yogis at the Hmawbi Meditation Centre founded by Sayādaw U Janaka.

This article is a talk by Ven Ariya Ñāṇi from the recent Easter retreat at BMIMC. Thanks to Beth Steff (on staff) for her transcription work.

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Today it is New Year’s Day for the Burmese people. The New Year celebration is quite a big thing in Burma. It’s also called the Water Festival, it lasts from April 12th until today, April 17th. It has this name because during these days people sprinkle water over each other.

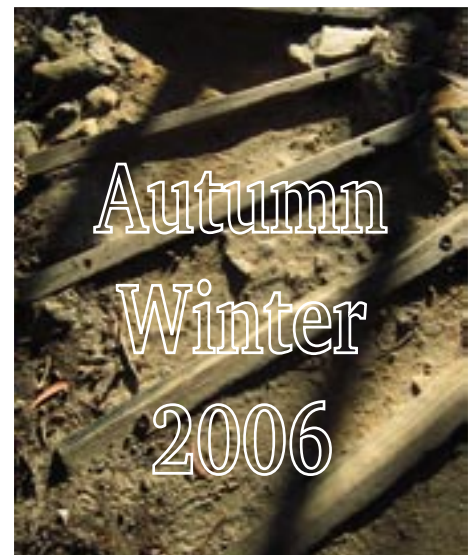
You must understand that now it is the hot season in Burma. It’s really boiling hot, so if one gets sprinkled with water, that’s really quite nice—cool and refreshing. At this time in Burma, everything is closed. All the offices are closed, factories are shut down, it’s a National holiday where people go out on the streets.

Nowadays it’s not only sprinkling water on each other but it’s actually throwing buckets of water at each other. Some people use cars on which they have a big tank of water with a hose and drive through the streets splashing water at everybody on the side of the road. There is a lot of merry making—there are many stages all over the towns and the villages with music, singing, dancing and performances.

That is one side of the Water Festival. The other side is that people do not just have fun but they go to a meditation centre or a monastery and practise meditation. This year it has been a coincidence that the Burmese Water Festival and the Western Easter holidays fall on the same days, and so you have come here to practise meditation. In Burma, those who do not join in the fun go to the meditation centre and meditate.

For example, in our centre, the Forest Centre in Hmawbi we have an average of about sixty to eighty people meditating. For the six days there are eight hundred or one thousand people in the centre practising meditation. Of course, it’s a bit cramped—four, five or six people in each room but for Burmese people that’s not much of a problem, they just roll out their mat and there they sleep.

It’s not only in our centre that it’s like this but virtually in *all* the centres *all* over Burma, everywhere it is packed with people meditating. As you can imagine having eight hundred or one thousand people in the centre



is not as quiet and peaceful as it is for the rest of the year. Having one thousand meditators means there is a lot more to do, for example, having to feed all these people. There is the regular dining hall and then there is a make-shift, open-air dining hall. Still, there are three sittings when people come for breakfast, the first group, then the second lot, and the third lot; and it is the same for lunch.

But it all works out—also with the helpers who do the cooking, washing up and cleaning. Some people do not come to meditate but they come to offer their help. So, every year there are always enough helpers during that time to help with all the necessary work.

The reason for people to go to a meditation centre is to finish the old year with doing something good, doing something wholesome and beneficial. In Burma, practising meditation is considered the best thing that you can do for yourself, the best thing that you can do for others. So, they are starting the New Year engaged in a wholesome activity. Then on New Year's day, today, after lunch, just like here, people go back home.

Already last night I addressed the topic of how to continue the spiritual practice at home, and I hope that you came to understand that the spiritual path or a spiritual practice does not only consist of meditation. Although meditation is an important part it's not the only thing to do. A spiritual practice needs to encompass our whole life. We cannot segregate it from the way we live our life or from what we do. We have to include other areas of our life and also we have to be careful of what we do and how we do it.

The Buddha's teachings encompass all of our life, all different aspects. The Buddha was not only teaching meditation. That was one part of his teaching, an important part, but not the only one. As I mentioned last night there are three aspects which we have to practise, that we have to take into consideration: *dāna*, *sīla* and *bhāvanā*: generosity, ethical conduct and meditation or mental development.

Dāna

Dāna, the practice of generosity, of giving, is such an important thing because giving is a first step in letting go. Letting go is another way of characterizing the Buddha's teaching. We have to let go of our wrong views, let go of our opinions and ideas. So letting go is a key phrase. The famous Thai meditation master,

Ajahn Chah, who passed away some years ago, said:

'If you let go a little bit, you will get a little peace. If you let go a lot, you will get a lot of peace. If you let go completely, you will get complete peace.'

Letting go—as we realize it's not so easy, so there are different ways of practising it, of getting better at it.

A first step is to let go of our material things, give our time, share our knowledge. Letting go, not holding on to things, is a very important thing to do because, in the Four Noble Truths, the Buddha stated that the cause of our suffering, of our unsatisfactoriness, is craving, attachment, wanting or desire. Therefore, giving, sharing, letting go is a good antidote to counter this conditioned habit of always wanting more, of craving for things, of not letting go of things.

Nowadays we live in a consumer society that actually wants you to want things. It always suggests that if you get this or that, *then* you will be happy. It makes you want this or that implying that *if* you get that, *then* you will get satisfaction, happiness, and contentment. But this is an endless game. Once you have the things that our consumer society tells you to get, for a short time you may think, 'Ah yes, that's nice, it makes me feel good'. But this feeling is very short lived and after that you get bored with it, it's not so exciting anymore. In the meantime, they have invented new things, come up with something else, and they come again and say, 'Now we have the latest product—*this one* makes you really satisfied. Just get it and *then* you will be really happy.'

It's in this kind of society that we live and now many people start to realize that this is not the way. It's not by fulfilling all your endless desires and cravings that you become happy and contented. It's actually by not having all these desires and cravings that happiness and peace will arise in our hearts and minds.

Sīla

The second area that I mentioned is *sīla*, morality, ethical behaviour. In our lives, we have to deal with other people, with other beings, so it's really important that we pay attention to that area in our lives as well. As I said we should treat other beings in the same way as we want to be treated, namely with respect and dignity. Having these guidelines, the precepts, as a standard of a decent human behaviour allows us to reflect every now and again whether or not we are

Whatever beings, O monks, behave righteously by body, speech and mind during the morning, a happy morning will be theirs.

Whatever beings behave righteously by body, speech and mind at noon, a happy noon will be theirs.

Whatever beings behave righteously by body, speech and mind during the evening, a happy evening will be theirs.

Anguttara Nikaya III, 150



actually performing our actions on the base of these guidelines or precepts. We may think, 'Oh yeah, I am living according to the precepts, I don't go and kill other people on the street.' But there are subtleties in this and if you really pay careful attention to it, then you may find areas where you still might be inflicting suffering on other beings or hurting other beings.

This can be refined more and more, when you start to look a little more closely at what you do. The same applies to the other precepts. Regarding the second precept, not taking what is not given or not stealing, there are grey areas where it's not stealing but are you in the place of just taking it without anyone giving you permission?

Then there is the whole area of speech. The precept just says to refrain from false speech. False speech means not saying what is not true, not speaking harshly or angrily, not engaging in frivolous talk and also not speaking maliciously, slandering or backbiting, speaking behind the backs of others. This is also quite an important part that we should carefully consider: what do we say, how do we speak to other beings, and what is the intention, when we say something? Is it really for their benefit? Is it true what we say? Is it helpful? Is it conducive to mutual understanding and harmony in our relationships? Even if you don't sit down to meditate during your day, but if you are aware or if you try to be aware of what you do, how you do things, what you say, how you say things—this is practising a spiritual path. Do not think it happens only on the cushion when you close your eyes—not at all.

As you have probably come to see during this retreat or a previous retreat some of your past actions come up during meditation, especially those things that you should not have done—unwholesome things like hurting somebody. These actions come up and cause all this worry or regret. You go over and over it again in your meditation and think, 'Oh, I shouldn't have done that, next time I will do this'. This is just the way our minds work.

So, if we pay attention to our speech and our bodily actions and try as much as we can to ensure that they are of a wholesome or beneficial nature, then this already contributes a lot to calming down our minds. The mind will not be agitated so much with all these worries, regrets and anxieties that arise because we

have engaged in unwholesome actions. For your general peace of mind and, especially for an intensive meditation retreat, observing *sīla* is very helpful, very beneficial.

Bhāvanā

As to the third part *bhāvanā*—which means mental development or meditation—we can do that in a formal way by sitting on a cushion or walking back and forth. We can either practise vipassanā meditation, by being mindful of any phenomena that come up in the body or the mind or by practising mettā meditation, developing loving kindness. Vipassanā and mettā meditation can also be integrated into one's daily life.

Mental development or meditation is not dependent on any bodily posture or any particular place to practice but it's rather an attitude of how we want to go through our life. If we make it our aim to go through our life awake, alert, aware and mindful, then whenever we remember to be fully present and mindful to what is happening right now we are developing our mind. Then we can be said to be practising meditation.

Or else in daily life, you can integrate the mettā practice as well. Wherever you are or in whatever activity you are engaged you can develop and radiate thoughts of loving kindness: to the people in the bus you are riding, or in the car, when you are waiting in front of a red light. Instead of getting impatient because you want to be moving, just practise a few moments of mettā: 'May all these people here be happy and well.' Or in the shopping centre when queuing up, instead of just standing there and thinking, 'Oh there are so many people, couldn't they open some more checkouts?' develop *mettā* for all the people in the queue, for the cashier, or for all the people that work in the shop, etc.

As I mentioned in the talk about mindfulness, *sati* or mindfulness can also be translated as non-forgetfulness. During your day to day life, when you are not forgetful, when you remember, then in that instant, you can come back to the present moment, and be aware of how your body feels. Or you can pay attention to physical sensations, stiffness, warmth, or cold, or being aware of the thoughts or emotions that are there in that moment. So, you don't have any excuses not to meditate.



From the manager

Tara MacLachlan, Manager

In late March I took on the role of manager when Chris left to further his practice in Burma. Although this has not worked out as planned for him, Chris has settled for the moment in Thailand, near Chiang Mai.

During his time as manager, Chris was very committed to providing the best possible environment for teachers and yogis and his departure meant a gap at the staff level and, as well for me, a separation from my husband. Chris and I have helped each other in this way over the years and I find this mostly a rewarding experience, an opportunity to support my partner's meditation practice and to have some quiet time alone. It is likely Chris will return to the centre later this year.

I have been enjoying my time here at the centre since coming on staff in 2004, working alongside Chris and the other resident staff members. So it has been a relatively smooth transition into the manager's role. Pixy our daughter, who has grown up around the centre and the teachers, taking robes for a 2 week period at age 14, was here on staff for a few months early in the year. She was popular as a dessert-maker on the January month retreat and did a lot of work in general around BMIMC. Pixy is in New Zealand at present and may come back for another short stay on staff later in the year.

Darren Procter was here on staff for a few months over summer, finishing in late January. This was during my retreat in Nepal, so I did not have a chance to work with Darren but I know his contribution was appreciated. A few days before Chris left, David Smith arrived, kindly giving up his coastal hideaway to help here through winter until early next year. He has been at the centre often as a yogi and staff member, so he is familiar with many of our teachers, yogis and visitors, and the centre's daily routine.

Beth Steff arrived early December bringing her warm manner and many skills. She quickly settled in to provide invaluable support as staff member and friend. Beth plans to leave for Burma in August and I hope we can convince her to come back for some time in the future. Beth's daughter Tara came over from New Zealand for a week in May, helping and sitting a weekend retreat.

Retreats have been well attended, perhaps a reflection of the comfortable conditions we have been able to provide. As from early April Sāsana House, the main house at the centre, now has the comfort of the same central heating used in the accommodation and



the hall. This has been made possible by many generous donations. We have had much generous support in (and good food from) the kitchen during retreats with volunteers recently including Daw Khin (Aunty) Pyone, Brenda Myat, Grant Keene, Fiona Munro, Colin Armiger, Isabelle Phillips and Tim Edison. Selina Blair donated a beautiful garden bench for the stupa area, as well as some useful household items.

Of course, at the heart of the centre is the Buddha Dhamma and the Mahāṣī meditation practice, together with the teachers who offer their knowledge and experience.

The year began with Patrick Kearney's popular four-week retreat in January. Since then, three weekends have been led by Graham Wheeler, Danny Taylor and myself—all of us long term supporters and committee members of BMIMC. It is always a great pleasure for me to see Sayadaw U Pannathami, who came in March for a nine-day retreat and returns for another in August. Venerable Ariya Nāṇī's two retreats in April were very successful. Five yogis stayed on for both retreats and were able to sit for two and a half weeks. While she was here, we discussed the exciting possibility of her coming for three months in 2008.

I also want to acknowledge the members of the BMIMC committee, who do a lot of work behind the scenes but are not always around to meet yogis and visitors. Apart from Graham and Danny, the committee members are Gabrielle Cusack, Peter Douglass, Theresa Baw, Robyn Howell, John McIntyre and Ian Baird. John, Peter, Gabrielle and Ian are Blue Mountains residents, and they are more likely to be seen at the centre. I'm happy to have Ian around again after his recent return from a year working in South Australia. John, a 'retired' academic and our newsletter editor and webmaster, regularly helps in the office. Peter and Gabrielle are both dentists who work locally.

Finally, I'd like to offer thanks to everyone for the support I've received in the past months and for your ongoing support of the centre. I've had very positive feedback from teachers, yogis and visitors about the centre and its facilities all due to your contributions – either by meditating, volunteering or donating material and financial resources. I welcome your ongoing participation in the life and development of the Blue Mountains Insight Meditation Centre.

Beyond the Centre

Bodhi Tree at Tullera, NSW

Ven. Pannyavaro Thera and the Buddha Dhamma Education Association (BDEA Inc.) are establishing the Bodhi Tree Forest Monastery and Retreat Centre on 95 acres at Tullera, near Lismore in the Northern Rivers of New South Wales. Ven. Pannyavaro is a well-known teacher in the Mahāsī tradition, visiting BMIMC to teach regularly.

Bhante Pannyavaro is assisted by Venerable Bodhicitta who is now looking after BuddhaNet, and generous lay volunteers. January saw the first two-day and ten-day intensive vipassana retreats. Since there are no insight meditation centres north of Sydney, there is much interest from Brisbane, only a few hours away. All teachings at Bodhi Tree are by donation (dāna) to help support the monks.

The aim of Bodhi Tree is to provide supportive conditions for both ordained and lay practitioners to undertake long term intensive meditation practice—conditions hard to find in western countries. Three ‘hermitage’ areas in addition to a large meditation hall and group accommodation are planned.

The Bodhi Tree Monastery is non-sectarian. Whoever wishes to train and practise in the insight traditions of Theravada Buddhism is welcome.

A plateau of 15 acres of rich red soil and expansive views falls away into two valleys with streams and both cleared and forested land with many impressive old trees. Much has been done including painting and general property maintenance, weed clearance from the fields and streams and creation of basic accommodation, a meditation hall and a large functioning retreat kitchen.

With the approval of finance, the acquisition of the property will be complete. Donations from supporters of the Mahāsī insight meditation tradition are invited to help with this significant development.

Further information about Bodhi Tree Forest Monastery and Retreat Centre and ways to donate can be found at <http://www.buddhanet.net/bodhi-tree/index.html>. Email Ven Bodhicitta at bodhicitta@buddhanet.net



Patrick Kearney's teaching schedule

Patrick's teaching schedule is published in his newsletter, *Clearview*, distributed through the Friends of Patrick Kearney (details at foot of page). Highlights in the coming year include:

28 July-5 August, Alice Springs. One week retreat taught with Jenny Taylor. Residential, venue Hamilton Downs Youth Camp, near MacDonnell Ranges.

Contact Jenny or Sue on (08)8953 2776.

11-25 August, Byron Bay. Two week retreat at Sangsurya, near Byron Bay. For experienced practitioners. Contact Christine on 02 6689 7116, cwynyard@pocketmail.com.au.

1-9 September, Perth. One week retreat. Residential. Redemptorist Retreat Centre, North Perth. Contact: Julie on 0427 766 716 or Kanthi (08 9386 2171), Bavali (08 9335 3847) or Ann (08 9758 8631).

23 September - 1 October, North Coast NSW. Residential retreat for young people. Bodhi Tree Forest Monastery and Retreat Centre, Tullera, near Lismore. Dāna basis. Contact Emma Pittaway at emma_pittaway@yahoo.com.au.

27 October - 5 November, South Coast NSW. One week residential retreat at Tathra. Contact Mary McLean on 02 6494 0259, or Geoffrey Badger on 02 6492 0518, email badger@acr.net.au.

18-25 November, Bellingen Dhamma Gathering. Taught with Christopher Titmuss, Subhana Barzaghi and teachers from the Insight Teachers Circle of Australia (ITCA). Contact Will James at wvjames@yahoo.com.au.

2-27 January 2007, Blue Mountains. One month retreat at BMIMC. Medlow Bath. For experienced practitioners. Contact 02 4788 1024. For information about other retreats in 2007, please see *Clearview*.

Contact Patrick at PO Box 10, Woodford NSW 2778, or pkearney@netspeed.com.au, mob 0425 206 179. Contact *The Friends of Patrick Kearney* through Peter Robleski (pjr@grapevine.net.au) or Bruce Boreham (borehamb@dodo.com.au).

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My life at BMIMC

Beth Steff, staff member

I came to work at BMIMC at the beginning of December, 2005. I have thoroughly enjoyed being on staff and wanted to share some of my experience in case there are readers considering coming on staff, short-term or long term, at some future date.

I've never found it easy in the past to compromise my values when I worked in the corporate world. Here I have realized the satisfaction that can be enjoyed when work and values are both expressed together, where there is no conflict. Each task I undertake is closely related to the Dhamma and there are many learning opportunities in the day to day life.

There is access to a great library and hundreds of Dhamma talks on tape or CDs. The people who visit, to say hello, to meditate or to help us out, are a wonderful mixture from all walks of life who add texture and colour to our core staff group. I have worked with five different staff members and have valued the sense of community apparent when people communicate and co-operate together for a common purpose. Our purpose, supporting people on retreat, is a very worthy and beneficial one.

One of the highlights for me is the privilege of proximity to some of the best Mahāsi teachers in the world. I am both inspired by and in awe of the decades of daily practice in purification and mental training undertaken by the monastic teachers. I have been fortunate to hear their profound understanding of the Dhamma but more especially I have valued their presence, their peace and their deep faith. They demonstrate what is possible with this practice.

Another real joy for me has been an opportunity to meet some of the Burmese community of yogis and supporters, some of whom have known great trauma and loss. Their soft, gentle and respectful commitment to their faith is a delight to experience. Being in the kitchen with Daw Khin Pyone is a practical lesson in moment to moment noting—it is also a great pleasure to work alongside such a wise and wonderful woman.

How did I come to be at BMIMC? A couple of weeks into a one month retreat not long after my husband died I faced gridlock with my suffering. I was feeling the emotional pain of my wanting mind—my mind wanting my husband to be alive again. After a few days it passed, but my commitment to my practice moved to a different place. Proximity to terminal illness and death has altered what I value and the way I live life. Three years ago I was caught up in the work, eat, clean, buy food, cook, sleep, work, eat, sleep etc

style of life. We were working to save for an imagined future that was never to eventuate. Much of my energy was devoted to my working life. Little was left over to pursue what I valued most—my garden, my husband, my family and friends and particularly my Dhamma life. With the massive re-evaluation that accompanies grief I was able to choose the Dhamma first—everything else seemed to fall into place from that point.

I travel to Burma to practise meditation in August. I am very grateful to all who have been part of my BMIMC experience and especially grateful to Tara and Chris MacLachlan for their committed and inspiring service.



You should train like this:

I will not get upset and angry; I will not utter one malicious word.

I will remain friendly, loving and compassionate;

and I will meet these people with an open heart.

Free from aversion and ill-will, with a heart open and wide

I will radiate my loving kindness (metta) over the whole world.

Majjhima Nikaya 21
Chosen by Ven Ariya Ñāṇi

Donald, Beth and Fiona with Tara, early 2006.



Our 2006 Vesak appeal

John McIntyre
Management Committee member

The coming of Vesak, marking the Buddha's birth, enlightenment and passing away, is always a time to reflect on what we have achieved over another year in the life of our meditation centre.

During 2005 we saw the completion of the first stage of our building program, with the installation of gas central heating in the second accommodation block. This is a wonderful achievement representing four years of continuing effort and the generosity of you, our donors.



At the end of last year, therefore we were able to turn our attention to improving Sāsana House, and with funding from our Spring Appeal, have now been able to install heating to the house. This, together with other changes, has made it a more pleasant workplace for staff and more welcoming place for students and visitors. We also have been able to honour many of our loans, reducing our debt considerably.



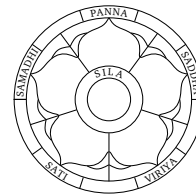
As 2006 unfolds, our thoughts are turning to planning the future. At the last management committee meeting in May we discussed options for the next stage of the building program. The development plan approved in 2001 by Blue Mountains City Council envisages a more spacious and comfortable dhamma hall, as well as new staff accommodation, separate dining and kitchen facilities and extra yogi rooms.

So this Vesak we are appealing for donations to build our finances for the next stage of BMIMC's development. The committee's preference is to extend the Dhamma hall and upgrade the walkways that connect the house, hall and carpark. We offer you the opportunity to contribute and begin the process. Perhaps, also looking to the future, you may wish to consider a bequest to the Centre in your will, as one yogi has recently offered.



As usual, all donations to the Building Fund are tax deductible and a special receipt will be issued. It is easy to complete the form on this page and mail it back to us or to return the appeal letter. If you wish to discuss a donation, please contact the manager on 02 4788 1024.

Right: Sayādaw U Lakkhaṇa visits the Australian Buddhist Vihara at Leura



Vesak Building Appeal 2006

I would like to donate -

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- \$50
- \$100
- \$200
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All donations to the Building Fund are tax deductible. A special receipt will be issued.

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Medlow Bath NSW 2780

Thank you.



INFORMATION REQUEST AND DONATION FORM

If you would like to receive the newsletter or make a donation to the Centre, complete this form and send to BMIMC, 25 Rutland Road, Medlow Bath, NSW 2780.

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Signature

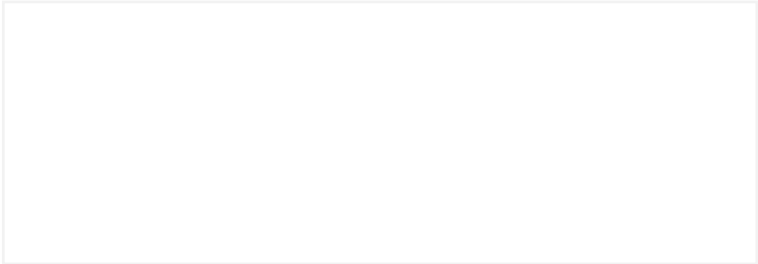
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