

Buddha Sāsana

Newsletter of the Blue Mountains Insight Meditation Centre



What do I want?

by Patrick Kearney
Resident teacher

What is it that drives us, that determines the trajectory of our lives? We are driven by and towards what we desire. Desire is a raw energy that directs us, that moves us, and that forms us. In Buddhist cosmology we are beings of the *kāma-loka*, the “universe of desire,” which means we are beings who are formed and moved by desire. Our bodies are the products of desire, as are our minds, and desire is the force that drives them from the experienced present into an unknown future. This is our nature, like it or not.

If we rejoice in this condition we may idealise our desires and passions, seeing them as the forces that create love, ideals, devotion, life itself. Or, if we are appalled by this condition we may rail against and reject our desires and passions, seeing them as the forces that create pain, hatred, intolerance, conflict and exploitation. But whether we like it or not we are, by virtue of being human, a manifestation of the universe of desire. We are the products and producers of desire. If we try to avoid or escape from this fact we are simply expressing

our desire-bound nature, for our escape is motivated by aversion, and aversion is simply the shadow side of desire, the desire to avoid or escape from that which we do not desire. Whether we live a life devoted to indulgence, or a life devoted to renunciation, we cannot escape desire, for that very devotion is desire.

Desire brings us to the path. As beings driven by desire we have many times worked to satisfy this unquenchable thirst (*taṇhā*) which is desire. When we realise that this thirst is, by its very nature, unquenchable, we discover the depths of *dukkha*, unsatisfactoriness, and begin to look for some alternative strategy. The unsatisfactoriness of desire pushes us onto the path, and the desire for some satisfactory alternative lures us forward on it.

In our practice we seek to know ourselves, and this means knowing our desires, for there is an intimate connection between our desires and our identity. We are what we desire. We are told to let go of attachment or clinging, and the Pāli word for clinging is

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upādāna, which also means “fuel.” Attachment or clinging is what feeds or fuels a process. Our attachments feed or fuel our identities. If my desires are focused on the physical senses, I can become addicted to certain pleasures or physical habits. If my desires are focused on views, I can become dogmatic and intolerant, obsessed with the correctness of my chosen ideology. If my desires are focused on



precepts and vows, I can become fixated on specific moral codes and spiritual practices, complacently convinced that merely by reproducing certain traditional practices my liberation will be assured. However, our fundamental desire is to hold ourselves as a fixed identity, a "self," which has the capacity to imagine itself to be separate from and independent of the world and other beings in the world. This identity is defined by our unique patterns of individual desires and aversions. We are created by our desires, and we suffer because of the open-ended nature of these desires.

Desire is inescapable, and the patterns of our particular desires are central to our individual identity. The Buddha says, "What one desires gives rise to its appropriate identity, whether favourable or unfavourable." (A 3.411) We are our desires, and desire is always aimed at something, what we desire. Our commitment to dharma, to the real, is the expression of our desire for dharma; we commit ourselves to the attainment of *nibbāna* (release) to the extent that we desire *nibbāna*. Our practice requires our wholehearted engagement, and therefore it requires our passion. Our practice is an expression of our desire, and so it must include a re-education of our desires, a channelling of our passion. The Buddha distinguishes between *kāma-chandha*, the desire for physical pleasure, and *dhamma-chandha*, the desire for the real. Desire itself is just energy, directing us forward into the unknown. What is central to the question of how we are to live is the direction our desire takes us.

Why do we meditate? We desire what we think meditation can offer us. Without being moved by that desire, we would not bother. We would remain sunk in our normal state of self-obsession, restlessly catching at what does not satisfy

in an attempt to bury our deepest desire, the desire for the real. It is our desire for something better, the sense of chronic dissatisfaction that comes from our failed attempts to satisfy our ordinary desires, that brings us to dharma, to the real.

When we meditate, we come face to face with our desire. Often we first notice this in the experience of



distraction. What is it that distracts us? It is what grabs our attention without our noticing, lost as we are in our project of reproducing a meditation technique. And what is it that grabs our attention? That which we desire; that which we *really* desire right here and now, which is often not what we think we desire, or what we desire to desire.

The act of attention or mindfulness always entails choice (*cetanā*), and choice entails desire. We want, and direct attention to where and what we want. Perversely, we often want our pain, and cannot let go of what we can see is causing us pain. We sense our tightness and holding, and see the pain associated with it; but often when we focus on our pain we bury ourselves in it rather than let it go. How can this happen? Perhaps we desire our pain, or rather, desire what is immediately giving rise to our pain. We hold tight, and this

causes pain; but we hold tight because we desire to hold tight. Because we sense, deeply and obscurely, that letting go would cause more pain. So we cling to what we think is the lesser pain, even though another, more surface, aspect of mind believes that we want to let go. But the self is divided, and wars against itself. What one part of us wants, the other does not. We are divided, and only faintly sense our division. This is an aspect of our delusion.

For when we examine the self we discover that we are at war with ourselves, and do not necessarily desire what we want to desire. The mind is divided, and we experience that division in the conflicts of our desires. We can always see *what* we desire, for our actions directly reveal the state of our desires. Our behaviour reveals the state of our mind, for we act according to our mind's impulses. These impulses are our desires, and they are not necessarily what we think them to be or what we want them to be. We act according to our disordered and unacknowledged desires, and our attention goes to what we desire. This is why attention is so difficult, why it slips away so easily and unnoticed.

Practising dharma is largely a matter of re-educating our desires, away from what cannot satisfy towards what does satisfy. Craving (*taṇhā*) is the restless desire for more; always for more. Craving is desire that can never be satisfied, because it is part of a loop in which satisfaction generates more desire, like scratching an itch generates the desire to scratch an itch. In our confusion we desire that which harms us, that which falls short of our ideals, and we must train ourselves to desire what gives us happiness.

The desire for dharma, for the real, is also desire. This desire appears as our aspirations, our ideals, and

our ideals must be desirable, for otherwise they could not be ideals. We are pushed by our suffering and pulled by our desires, whether this be in terms of dharma or of ordinary life. Dharma is natural process, and it works the same way as the rest of our life. A disordered mind has disordered desires; a harmonious mind has harmonious desires. So our desires are not to be denied, but trained; the training or cultivation (*bhāvanā*) of the mind entails the training or cultivation of desire.

A harmonious mind is one in which our desires predominantly tend in a single direction, toward dharma, that which is real and which therefore can genuinely satisfy our desire. Desire can be cultivated and refined, until it becomes aspiration or intention (*saṅkappa*), which is one of the factors of the path. Aspiration, like our disordered desire, is the forerunner of action, since our aspirations direct our actions of body, speech and mind. The Buddha taught that whatever we habitually think about creates our “inclination of mind,” the direction that creates our destiny.

As we practice, as we mature in our relationship with the real, we discover that what we desire, changes. What gives us satisfaction today is not what gave us satisfaction yesterday. And so we can check our spiritual “progress” by seeing what we want now, asking how this has changed from the past. This question carries a capacity to shock, for there is a fundamental truth to be found in acknowledging our desire. And what we desire, now, is revealed by what we attend to, now.

Our ideals are important for us, for they provide us with a sense of direction. Hence the centrality of our relationship to the Buddha, and to the practice of making the ideals the Buddha embodies more real, and therefore more desirable



- more capable of providing a direction.

The Buddha represents for us the negation of our own failures, our *dukkha*. He represents the possibility of somehow abandoning them for something better. “Buddha” is a symbol of a possibility, and the ultimate source of this symbol is our *dukkha*. “*Dukkha*” and “Buddha” are both symbols, one representing what pushes us to search for something better, the other the possibility of that something. But for these symbols to work, they must have some content; they must resonate, move our emotions, generate motivation. We need to be intimate with them; we must personalise them in reflecting on our experience, so they refer to our own lives and struggles. This implies we must absorb a tradition, for tradition is the repository of symbols, and as long as the tradition remains “out there,” something that concerns other people, the symbols it contains do not come to life within us. And this coming to life is measured by their ability to move us, to become central to our strategies for life. Not just abstract concepts on a page in which we may or may not be interested, but living forces in our individual and communal lives.

So we take the stories of the tradition and make them our story. Reading the stories of the Buddha and his students, we read our own story, its aspirations and failures, its guiding and defining desires. Every culture has its ancient, sacred stories, and its sense of direction and meaning comes from these stories, and how they are applied in each generation to the circumstances of this time and this place. These stories guide our passion, our desire, as they clothe our aspiration for the real with flesh, blood and bones, and so allow us to recognise ourselves in them. And it is our desires, in the form of our highest ideals and deepest aspirations, that move us along the path towards the real.

A meeting with Bhikkhunī Kusuma



Bhikkhunī Kusuma is a fully ordained Buddhist nun in the Theravāda tradition. She is a Pāli scholar, with a PhD in the *bhikkhunī vinaya*, and is head of the Ayya Khema International Buddha Mandir in Sri Lanka. She speaks excellent English, and is well known in India for her radio *dhamma* talks.

The Centre is delighted to host her for a public talk and a one day workshop.

Public talk
Wednesday 24 October at 7.00 p.m.

Cost: By donation

One day workshop
Sunday 28 October

Cost: \$50

The Path

by Bhikkhuni Kusuma

During the Buddha's time there were no sealed roads, only paths made by the treading of people, animals and carts. Such paths, if not constantly used, become overgrown with weeds and eventually hidden. The Buddha discovered the path that leads to deliverance from suffering, a noble path hidden due to long disuse, but walked again once he set in motion the wheel of *dhamma*.

The wheel of *dhamma* has eight spokes symbolising the eight *dhammas* that turn it: right view, right contemplation, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration. Those who practise these *dhammas* keep the wheel rolling and the path well-trodden, as they use it to reach deliverance from suffering. Those who practise wrong view, wrong contemplation, wrong speech, action, livelihood and so on remain in the world. They do not see the path and miss the chance to enter upon it.

Those who travel along the path can see the world passing by, a world they eventually transcend. What is the world? The Buddha said the eight vicissitudes are called the world: profit, loss, fame, disrepute, praise, blame, happiness, and unhappiness.

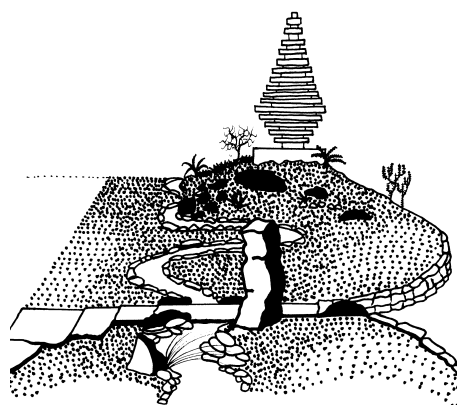
Is it possible for one living in the world to avoid these vicissitudes? Surely not completely, but one can avoid over-reacting to them, and one can learn how to face them with wisdom and forbearance. One who practises the *dhammas* of the path learns how to transcend the world of vicissitudes and live happily and in contentment.

It is recorded that during the Buddha's lifetime there were seven million lay devotees in *Sāvatti* who had attained *sotapatti* (stream

entry), entering the path with no possibility of turning away from it. So even lay people living a mundane life can come to terms with the eight vicissitudes and enter the path. How is this possible?

The eightfold path can be broadly divided into three sections - virtue, concentration and wisdom - and practising these in daily life, one momentarily enters the path. How can we practise virtue? Virtue is not only keeping precepts but also developing loving-kindness, compassion, altruistic joy and equanimity.

This means that we must not only refrain from killing living beings, but also practise kindness and compassion, the opposite of



killing. We refrain from robbing or stealing, and practise giving and generosity, the opposite of stealing. We refrain from sexual misconduct, and treat our family with love, respect and loyalty. We refrain from telling lies, and practise speaking the truth, even if it means we lose by it. We refrain from slander and sowing division, and try to unite those who are divided. We refrain from speaking harshly, and speak in a mild and helpful way that will bring others joy and comfort. We refrain from frivolous speech, which is unproductive, and engage in speech that is helpful and useful for wholesome living - words that can be treasured in memory and oft repeated for the welfare of the world. We refrain from drugs and intoxicants, and take food

in moderation, for sustaining the body. In this way virtue can be cultivated in daily life.

Consider the act of killing. If there is the opportunity to kill, along with anger, craving and ignorance in the mind, then one will yield to the impulse. But if there is non-anger, non-craving and wisdom in the mind, then one will refrain from killing. Thus we can see that a wholesome consciousness must arise in the mind to maintain a precept. At that moment of keeping a precept, one momentarily travels the path and abandons the world.

Similarly, if there is the opportunity to steal, and the mind is filled with anger, craving or ignorance, then a person will succumb to stealing. But if there is non-anger, non-craving and wisdom in the mind, then there will be the strength to refrain from stealing. At that moment one travels the path and abandons the world. To refrain from misconduct one needs the support of wholesome mindstates such as non-anger, non-craving and wisdom. Thus keeping the precepts encourages wholesome mental states. Developing these benevolent mind states, one travels the path and transcends the world.

For this the mind must be constantly vigilant. In *vipassanā* meditation we train the mind to be aware of all physical and mental actions through the power of mindfulness (*sati*). Since all physical action, however small, is directed by the mind, we need to constantly develop non-anger, non-craving and wisdom in our daily life. As soon as anger, craving or ignorance arises one must be quick and precise in recognising it. In the very act of recognition, unwholesome mind states disappear and are replaced by wholesome ones.

It is as if unwholesome mind states are actually like burglars that come and disturb our mental household and carry away our good qualities. Suppose some burglars enter your

house in the night and you are weak and alone. They will surely overpower you and take away everything, if not destroy you. But if you are strong, healthy and alert, and are fully equipped with the necessary powers, then you can overcome and drive them away.

Similarly, the defilements that arise in the mind, such as anger, craving, pride, conceit and the like, are robbers that would destroy you if you are weak, but if you are strong, like a *vipassanā* meditator, you can recognise these mind states by causing mindfulness with wisdom to arise. Instantly the unwholesome states cease and a train of wholesome states replace them. In this way a great battle is won. One becomes the master and not the victim of one's own unwholesome thoughts.

Thus a trained mind is able to think in a wholesome way, and speech and physical action also become noble and pure. Such a person finds it easy to keep the precepts and live with loving-kindness, compassion, altruistic joy and equanimity. They travel the path which leaves the world behind. Thus profit, fame, praise and happiness do not cause greed to arise, and loss, disrepute, blame, unhappiness do not lead to hatred. Such a person overcomes the vicissitudes of the world.

There are many incidents in the Buddha's life which record how he experienced both profit and loss in worldly terms. We know how rich devotees erected huge monasteries for him, covering the ground with gold coins to buy the land. He also experienced the loss of his kingdom, royal luxuries and wife and child, going from house to house for alms-food. But without desire for profit or aversion for loss, he experienced both with equanimity. Even as a *bodhisatta*, before attaining buddhahood, he was treading the path.

One who develops greed or resentment regarding these vicissitudes remains in the world.

One who accepts them with equanimity treads the path. What is equanimity? It is the opposite of indifference, lack of feeling or care. One who acquires equanimity has already fully practised the other three divine abidings of loving-kindness, compassion and altruistic joy. Equanimity is a highly skillful state, while indifference is unskillful. Developing loving-kindness, one overcomes anger, prejudice and so on. Developing compassion, one overcomes wickedness and refrains from hurting others in speech, action, and thinking. Developing altruistic joy, one gives up jealousy and comes to appreciate the good fortune of others. Such a person develops equanimity. The Buddha referred to these mental states as *samādhi* or right concentration. Such a person traverses the path, abandoning the world of vicissitudes. In their midst they remain calm, without greed, anger, resentment or craving.

In daily life the speech and action of such a person becomes mild and forgiving, and their generosity is so developed that they give without expecting returns. Their ego conceit and pride, their 'I', 'me' and 'mine,' is greatly reduced. They have no pretence, no divide between public and private life. They are honest and pure in their dealings. The world does not hurt them because they are full of forbearance and willing to forgive. Their mind becomes peaceful as it never carries a grudge. They see the frailties of others as much as they see their own, and traverse the path in spite of the world of vicissitudes.

The virtue and concentration of the four divine abidings was known to the Indian sages even before the advent of the Buddha. Able to traverse the path a long way, they lacked the wisdom of the four noble truths, and so failed to see *nibbāna*, the complete cessation of suffering, the transcendence of the world. Therefore it is important to

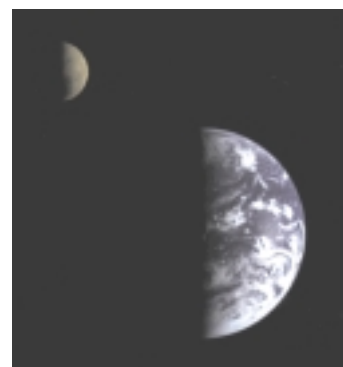
practise according to the wisdom of the Buddha.

In *vipassanā* meditation one understands the impermanence of all physical and mental phenomena, the body and mind. One understands causes and conditions, non-self (*anattā*) and the utter lack of ownership by a self. One sees 'me' or 'mine' as mere convention. Finally, one gives up the vice-like grip of the vicissitudes of the world in the attainment of the *arahant*.

Global terrorism

by Jill Shepherd

The recent events in America have left many of us wondering how to respond to such extreme acts of hatred. Here at the Centre, a hastily-organised special group meditation was held from 10 to 11:04 p.m., timed to correspond with other Buddhist group meditations around the



world, exactly one week after the terrorist attacks. In spite of the short notice and the lateness of the hour, it was well attended. During that meditation, struggling to be with a mind utterly unable to comprehend the depth and breadth of *dukkha* that has been unleashed, it was comforting to feel the presence of others also engaged in

their own ways of understanding the tragedy.

Later, after all the candles had been extinguished and the warm glow cooled, questions about the *need* for this sense of community arose. When the founding motivation of a community is one of insecurity, it seems to be too easy for the original sense of sharing to harden into something which first defines - "my community;" and then excludes - "the rest of society." The intense identification with a particular group of people sharing common experiences is one of the roots of the present conflict.

For me, the challenge in working with these events is in finding ways to strengthen the bonds of spiritual friendship without falling into the trap of exclusivity. My mind may distance itself from the extremity of the violence in America and elsewhere, but I also need to recognise that the same roots of ill-will, craving and ignorance are present within me. Whether I can acknowledge it or not, there is a connection between my irritation at the queue-jumper in front of me and the mind which can plot to murder thousands.

For the sake of those that died in the attacks, and for all living beings affected by terrorism, we can keep working to overcome the defilements in ourselves and not proliferate the mind-states which permit hatred to increase.

May the recent terrorist attacks strengthen our resolve to keep practising. Please keep making use of the Centre - going for refuge is more important now than ever, and your support is appreciated as much as ever.

Winter building

by John McIntyre
Management Committee member

Significant building work took place during July and August, the Centre's winter recess. A team of volunteers donated their time and skills to do some long-needed renovation work on the ageing front verandah of Sasana House.



An inspired effort by a dozen people over several weekends and weekdays tore up the old floorboards and rotted joists and subfloor. New bearers and joists were laid where needed, and old structural defects fixed. New cypress boards were laid, drilled and nailed. The existing verandah posts had to be jacked up at each stage. The balustrades and railings is almost complete. Thanks to Ian and Gavin, who organised the work, and David, Peter, Graham, Tim, Brendan and others.

The energy and building skills that became evident in this work have made us all optimistic that volunteers will be able to *dāna* much of the building of the first new yogi accommodation block next year.



Around the Centre

by Jill Shepherd
Manager

The big news this issue is that we have finally been granted planning permission for our new building project by Blue Mountains City Council. We have just enough money in the bank to build the first of these proposed buildings, a nine-bedroom yogi accommodation block (see the drawings below). There is still quite a lot of work to be done before we can start the actual building, but if all goes smoothly, we hope to be starting construction early next year.

We will also be starting a serious fund-raising drive to try to get the rest of the buildings under way. As well as trying to raise donations from our supporters, we will be researching what grants or loans are available to non-profit organisations, so if any of you know of anything in this area, please contact me.

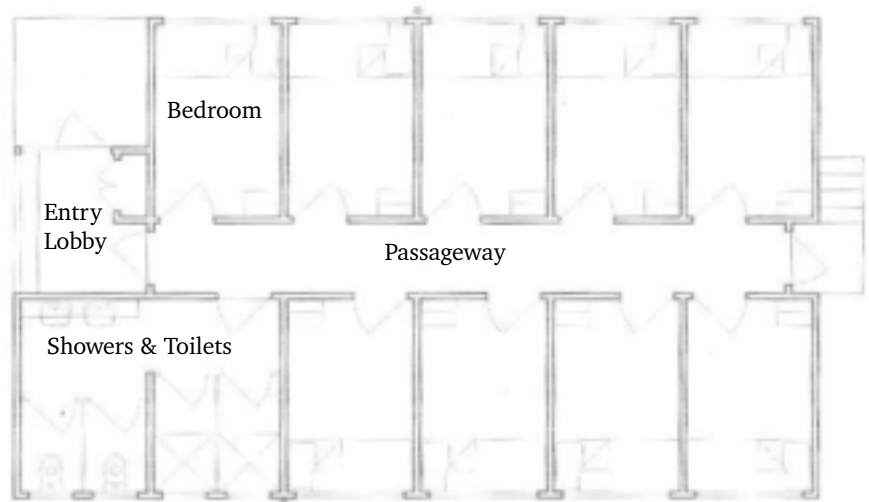
This year has been a big one for building projects: as well as upgrading the sunroom, a team of local volunteers has put many hours into renovating the front verandah (- see previous page). With the verandah work finished, the main house is now mostly in good shape and we can focus our energy on getting the new building under way.

A big welcome to Ian Bett and Mary-Ann Sharrock, our new assistant managers who arrived from Melbourne in mid-September to help with the day-to-day running of the Centre. I plan to stay on to keep working on the new building programme, hopefully to see the first building completed some time next year.

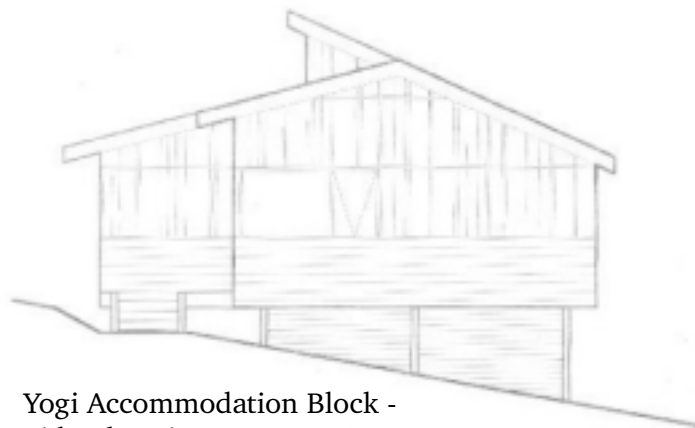
Calling all locals! Now that there are four of us in residence here, we are trying to maintain regular daily meditation periods at 7 a.m. and 5 p.m.

Already we are sometimes joined by a regular Monday-nighter, and if anybody else would like to join us on a casual basis, you're most welcome. In addition, the hall is always open for anyone to meditate at any time; if there's a retreat on, just be aware that people will be in silence.

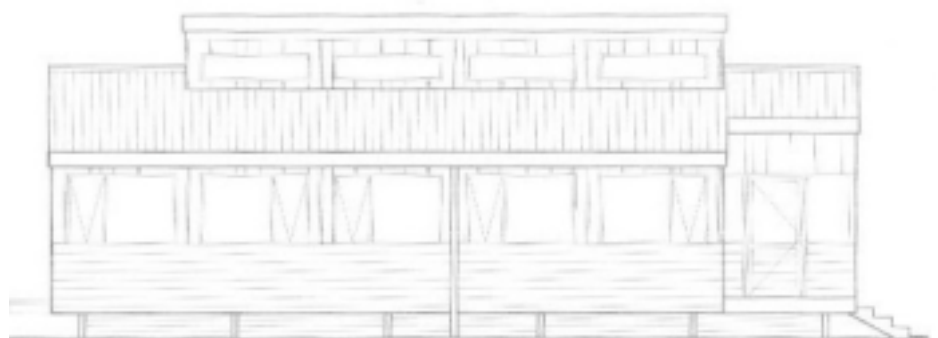
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Yogi Accommodation Block (nine bedrooms)
- Floor Plan



Yogi Accommodation Block -
Side Elevation



Yogi Accommodation Block - Front Elevation

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