

Buddha Sāsana

Newsletter of the Blue Mountains Insight Meditation Centre



Practising ethics

by Patrick Kearney
Resident teacher

We begin meditation practice because we are dissatisfied with the way we live now, imprisoned in habitual patterns from which we seem powerless to break free. We want to be free, but don't know how. So we look for a circuit breaker, something that will propel us from our normal way of life into something new, a life more satisfactory. We look to meditation for this circuit breaker, seeing it as some kind of spiritual technology which, if we master its arcane mysteries, will eventually engineer a transformative experience that allows us to live happily ever after.

But is this the way it is? Or have we forgotten something? Perhaps we have forgotten the centrality of ethics (*sīla*). Ethics answers the question, "How shall we live?," a question that arises today, and demands an answer today. But if we are waiting for the circuit breaker, the powerful experience which will blow away all our confusion and pain, we are left, today, without a response. And we must have an answer today. We cannot afford to wait for "enlightenment" some time in the indefinite future, for we cannot

postpone our life. We must *do* something, today.

Often we see ethics as law, a code of rules we are obliged to obey. But for the Buddha, ethics is an expression of understanding (*paññā*). He sees ethics as the natural consequence of an escape from self-obsession. An unethical life is a life lived for me. It is a life which sees no higher purpose than my satisfaction, my fulfilment, my personal development.

The foundation for this kind of life is identity view (*sakkāya ditṭhi*), the fixed belief that "I" am fundamentally real, separate from all others, the fixed point around which the universe revolves. We demonstrate this attitude by the way we relate to all the events that make up life - *my* life. Without needing to think about it, we see the world in terms of "What is this *to me*?" This way of life, locked within identity view, is a life of self-obsession where I am imprisoned within myself, condemned to a life of deep selfishness and futility.

Inside ...

Beyond the Centre.....	3
Journeys.....	4
Dhamma service, generosity & gratitude.....	5
The 'Spiritual Friendship' group.....	6
Around the Centre.....	7

An ethical life is one lived for another as well as oneself. When we live ethically, we suspend our normal self-obsession and become sensitive to what's really happening within and beyond the walls of our skin. This involves understanding the provisional and constructed nature of our self, the object of our constant fascination. We are enchanted with ourselves because we take for granted our own separate



reality, but when we study our self through insight (*vipassanā*) meditation we realise it is contingent, a construction made up of parts, all of which arise and cease in dependence on things other than itself. Seeing this, we begin to open to a wider frame of reference, to self and world rather than *my* self and *my* world.

Meditation entails cultivating energy (*vāyāma*) attention (*sati*) and concentration (*samādhi*), maintaining a steady attention on the nature of the self and its interactions with the world. When we do this, what we had not seen before becomes apparent. Things become clear; something new emerges.

When I examine something with steady attention and concentration, patiently maintaining that attention over time, suddenly I see it differently. An emotion comes and goes, I attend steadily to the process, and suddenly I realise its impermanence. Of course, I always knew that emotions are impermanent, but suddenly I understand that just as this particular emotion, with its self-obsessive story, comes and goes, *all* emotions, and all stories, come and go. I awaken to impermanence itself.

Awakening results from a shift of attention away from the particular towards the universal. Attention always begins with the particular - "What is *this*?" What is *this* breath, *this* movement, *this* distraction, *this* emotion? Becoming fully intimate with *just this*, we see that *just this* is in constant motion, that it changes, it comes and

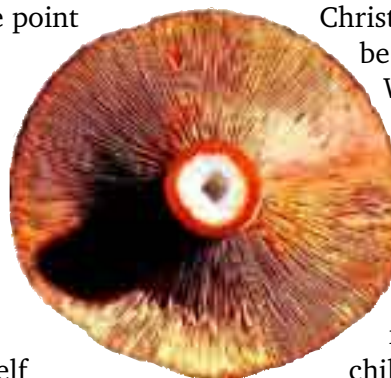
goes, arises and ceases. Becoming intimate with the fact that *just this* is impermanent, at some point understanding emerges. Coming to see that *anything* we experience is impermanent, we awaken to the fact that *everything* we experience is impermanent. A reality that was hidden is now revealed, and I find myself in a new situation where a new response is called for. I must do something about this, I must respond in some way, and it must be something new, something different.

In other words, there is an intimate connection between awakening and action. Awakening includes both seeing something - "This is impermanent; All things are impermanent" - and a response to this seeing - "What am I doing with my life?;" "Why am I wasting time like this?" I awaken to reality, and to the response to this reality. My response is ethics, the expression of awakening.

An experience of awakening can pass in a moment; but the responses that constitute an awakened life must be sustained over time. So we must stay in touch with the experience of awakening that has shown us something new. How? This is the job of our practice, what we *do* from day to day, and practice includes ethics.

No experience of awakening is enough to transform our life, because no one experience is enough to transform our habitual responses to life. It's true that insight has permanent effects.

It's like the Santa Claus effect: once we *know* there is no Santa, Christmas can never be the same again.



We cannot go back, even if we wanted, to the world we lived in as children; but this does not stop us from living childish lives if we are determined to do so.

Awakening must become habitual, our usual way of life, of doing things. It is not enough to attain awakening, we must learn to live it. Awakening is not an experience, but an on-going experienced orientation, a dwelling in a new world.

The mind is divided, and often we do what we wish we would not. When we have seen a new reality, and so have sensed the possibility of a different way of life, we no longer want to make certain choices; but propelled by the force of old habits, we find ourselves making them anyway. So to move from our habitual way of life to one compatible with our new understanding requires self-control, where we act against the grain of our contrary impulses, and where each ethical decision is a victory over the routine habits that express our ingrained self-obsession.

The practice necessarily begins with the ethics of self-control, the ethics of *thou shalt not*, expressed for us in the five precepts. But when joined with awakening, it matures into effortless ethics, where ethical action becomes the natural response to this situation, as it really is. So ethical action is not necessarily the result of an inner conflict - "I *should* do this, but I *want* to do that" - but of a sudden recognition of what this situation really is, what is *really* going on, and therefore what I should be doing about it, but have previously failed to do.



We cannot *force* this transformation, any more than we can force the coming of spring, because transformation is a natural process, taking its own time according to its own laws. We cannot speed up this development, but we can slow it down. We slow it down every time we react according to our old habits, habits formed before awakening showed us a different reality and a new possibility. We can always respond *as if* we had not really seen what we have seen. Hiding our new understanding from ourselves, we can always pretend Santa is still there, identifying with our old habits and resisting our awakening for as long as possible.

But if we practice our awakening we discover glimpses of ethical freedom, a capacity for disinterested action. Disinterested action is an expression of disinterested attention. When we practice attention, we attend to something for its own sake, not because we want something from it. When we practise ethics, we also attend to the person, whether ourselves or another, for their own sake, not as a means to our own gain. Ethical action is action for the sake of the welfare, not of all, but of *any*, oneself included. There is a difference between all and any. "All" implies a vast stage, working for the welfare of "humanity" or "all beings;" "any" is both more

modest, for it is ourselves and those we meet each day, and more extensive, since it excludes no-one with whom we are in contact, with whom we have any kind of relationship.

Through ethics we learn to stop postponing our awakening and live it today, in relationship with the person we meet today. Practising in this way, we learn to live beyond the boundaries of our taken for granted self-obsession, and discover the lightness of being displayed by all the *buddhas*.



Beyond the Centre

Patrick's away-from-home teaching schedule

ALICE SPRINGS RETREAT

A non-residential weekend workshop.

When: Friday 16 August to Sunday 18 August.

Where: To be advised.

Cost: To be advised.

Information & bookings: Call Jenny Taylor or Sue Fielding on 08 8953 2776; or email redbetty@ozemail.com.au

SERENE & CLEAR

THE BUDDHA'S WAY OF MEDITATION

This is a six week course at the Buddhist Library which will introduce the student to Buddhist meditation in both its serenity (*samatha*) and clarity (*vipassanā*) aspects. Serenity is the mind's deep rest in the midst of everyday life. Clarity is the mind's deep seeing into the nature of everyday life. We will explore standing, walking and sitting meditation, how to develop a firm and comfortable posture for meditation, and the fundamental theory that guides the practice. There will be ample opportunity for discussion about the practice and how it is applied in daily life.

When: Wednesdays 21 August to 25 September, 7 - 9 p.m.

Where: The Buddhist Library and Meditation Centre, 90 - 92 Church Street, Camperdown.

Cost: \$75, or \$50 concession.

Information & bookings: Call the Buddhist Library on 02 9519 6054; or fax 02 9519 3402; or email info@buddhistlibrary.com.au

NORTH COAST RETREAT

This is a residential insight meditation retreat conducted at Byron Bay.

When: 27 September - 5 October

Cost: To be advised.

Information & bookings: Contact Sonya Nourse at sonyanourse@hotmail.com

MINDFULNESS WEEKEND - LISMORE

A non-residential weekend retreat at the Kuan Yin Meditation Centre in Lismore. There will be periods of sitting and walking meditation, a dharma talk in the middle of the day, and will a group discussion at the end of the day.

When: 16 - 17 November

Cost: \$15 for a day or \$25 for the weekend, and *dāna*.

Information & bookings: Contact Sonya Nourse at sonyanourse@hotmail.com

Journeys

by Ian Bett,
departing manager

On September 11, 2001, Mary-Ann and I set out on a voyage from our homes in Victoria to the Blue Mountains to begin a period of *dhamma* service at BMIMC. En-route we rented an overnight cabin and in the morning turned on the TV hoping to catch some news before setting off. But there was only some weird over-the-top Hollywood film which involved jet airliners flying into skyscrapers. After a few minutes, with no sign of Arnie Schwarznegger, Bruce Willis or an African-American head of the FBI, it became clear that this was non-fiction.

The events of 'nine-eleven' had totally rocked the world by the time we arrived at BMIMC later that day, but our reaction is interesting to note. Rather than feelings of insecurity and regret about leaving secure employment and established lifestyles at a time when the world seemed suddenly to have fallen into total chaos (to westerners at least), we found it very comforting to be moving into a *dhamma* environment with no TV and no violent images from New York ad-nauseam. Instead we found a very good space to reflect on things such as greed, hatred and delusion, and to practise *mettā bhāvanā*.

Now after almost eight months Mary-Ann and I are nearing the end of our time here. By the time of publication we will have left Medlow Bath, and indeed Australia, for a period of about seven months abroad, predominantly in Thailand but also Laos and Malaysia. On the agenda is a 20 day retreat at Wat Kow Tahm followed by some relaxation on the island paradise where the Wat is situated. We also hope to undertake some studies, including Thai language, English teaching, massage and Thai



Ian Bett multi-tasking: making porridge and learning Thai

cooking, as well as volunteer work in hospices and/or orphanages. Exploring our recently-developed Mahāsī connections and practising with Sayādaw U Pannathami at a monastery in Penang, Malaysia, is also likely. It promises to be a fairly diverse and interesting few months!

Contrary to the beliefs of some, life at a *dhamma* centre is not a picnic. It is still in the realms of *saṃsāra* (for me at least) and presents many challenges as one renounces aspects of one's life, and strives to live and work in harmony with fellow staff and community members. Finding the delicate balance between working effectively in an environment where the work is never finished, attending to one's practice and making time for recreation is not always easy. Having said that, our time at BMIMC has been extremely valuable and rewarding, probably beyond our expectations. A major inspiration for coming to BMIMC was to be active in *dhamma* service and generosity practice, but we have, in addition, experienced a deeper understanding of the precepts, and the benefit to our meditation has been enormous.

Mary-Ann and I have been fortunate to have participated in two nine day retreats each and have developed important friendships along the way.

It has been interesting to witness the evolution of the Centre, even in our short time here. A greater emphasis on promoting an all-encompassing *dhamma* environment, expanding beyond simply providing *vipassanā* retreats, is helping to provide regular events for our dedicated band of volunteers, whose assistance we rely on greatly but who cannot necessarily attend retreats. Jill's initiative of the *kalyana mitta* or spiritual friendship group has been well received. It gives people a great opportunity for a more interactive and less formal approach to *dhamma* study while developing friendships. Most BMIMC retreats now book out several weeks in advance, which rarely happened even one year ago. The new buildings are now sorely needed to cater for demand.

For Mary-Ann and I, what was to have been a finite period of service has now become somewhat more of a lifestyle ideal for us, and we leave BMIMC with some sadness. We would like to extend our gratitude to Jill and Patrick for their friendship and support, and to them along with the Committee for offering us this opportunity. We would like to thank them and all others who have helped with the establishment and evolution of the Centre. It has been uplifting to witness the devotion of those who donate time and money to the cause, and also those who attend retreats and apply themselves to this difficult but worthy pursuit of *satipaṭṭhāna vipassanā*.

We hope to see you all again.



Mary-Ann Sharrock happy to be cleaning the verandah bathroom for the last time?

Dhamma service, generosity & gratitude

by Jill Shepherd,
Centre Manager

Once there was a time, not so long ago, when reading that kind of heading would have set off a mental chain reaction: “Oh ... moral stuff. They have to put that in because it’s the tradition. But I’m modern, it won’t apply to me. Besides, I’m not selfish. I always pay for meditation retreats, and sometimes I give *dāna* too (if I like the teacher). Yes, it’s just a kind of emotional blackmail. I’d better make sure they don’t suck **me** in with all that moral stuff.”

More recently, just a few days ago, I had the opportunity to sit a three-

day self retreat at the Centre, along with one other meditator. Patrick and two local committee members, Ian and Gabrielle, took turns cooking lunch for us. Seeing their efforts to support us I felt quite inspired, and the practice seemed easier with a mind full of gratitude. As I moved round the Centre each day I started to see more and more of the collective effort which has gone into this place over many years, and how easy it is to take it for granted.

As an example, imagine arriving at the Centre as a visitor for the first time. Signs outside tell you you’ve found the right place, and show you where to park. Simple things, but how many people would recognise the effort that went in to installing those signs? Not many visitors would park in the carpark and feel grateful to the person who spent days negotiating with Council and contractors to have the carpark made. Walking across the brick paving by the meditation hall, would their backs ache in sympathy for the people who laid them? Seeing all the native birds in the shrubs, would it occur to them that someone chose and planted those plants specially to provide habitat for bird-life? On entering the office to talk to the manager, it’s unlikely they would feel relieved that the smoke alarms stayed silent because they’d recently been serviced. And being given the latest edition of the newsletter, would they wonder at how many donations it takes to pay for printing and production? Each example by itself may seem small (and there are thousands more examples like them), but together they coalesce into the creation of a functioning meditation centre.

Most of us aren’t aware of the cumulative community effort that goes into establishing, maintaining and developing this facility. Instead, we’re more likely to see a bunch of buildings with a few people looking after them. We’re used to relating to community facilities with a sense

of entitlement, because we are rate-payers or tax-payers and have indirectly paid for them to be there for us. Our relationship to these facilities is impersonal and one-sided, and for the most part we are passive consumers of whatever resource they have to offer.

Here at this Centre, though, there are opportunities to develop a completely different relationship to the facility. For a start, the Centre is not funded by rate-payers or tax-payers, and it is totally reliant on course costs and donations to keep running. Just by coming to a meditation course and paying your course fee, you are supporting the Centre’s activities. Behaving respectfully while doing the course and making the effort to follow the teachings is also a form of support for the teachers and staff.

The practice of *dhamma* doesn’t stop once we leave the meditation hall, however. Many people find that by helping out in the kitchen as a cook or kitchen assistant, or by attending the regular community work days, or even just coming to the Centre regularly and sitting with the resident community members, they have an opportunity to develop the daily-life aspects of their practice.

Spending time in a supportive, peaceful environment can make a big difference to our ability to keep up the practice, but the effort to be here and participate in some way also sustains the momentum of the Centre. It can be a reciprocal relationship of mutual benefit, if we approach it with the right attitude.

Next time you come here, can you see beyond bricks and mortar, timber and plasterboard, to the effort, inspiration and aspirations of all those who’ve contributed to this place over many years? Please make the most of your opportunity to practise here, as a way to honour the time, money and energy which has gone in to developing this Centre for our benefit.

Why the ‘spiritual friendship’ group?

by John McIntyre,
Committee member

It seemed an ambitious idea to start a *kalyana mitta* or “spiritual friendship” group, which over six weeks would meet and discuss the meaning of a Buddhist life. Jill suggested that we might try such a course, Patrick agreed, and it has been a great success. As the second cycle of meetings come to an end, we can look back and reflect on the potential value of such activities.

Why a course on “spiritual friendship?” There has been a growing network of local supporters stimulated by Patrick’s teaching, and it seemed time to expand the ‘community life’ of the Centre by such an experiment.

Many of us have come to *vipassanā* meditation practice as a solitary, even a self-centred activity. We tend, perhaps, to believe that the main way of developing a Buddhist life is through the practice of meditation, especially through the intensive retreat. Beyond the retreat there is, of course, the ordinary life of the householder, with its many challenges of work and family relationships. We are “swimming in *saṃsāra*,” and when swimming it is best to bathe between the flags. So how one lives an ordinary Buddhist life, beyond the retreat, can be explored - without getting out of one’s depth or being carried away.

It seems that the life of the Centre is creating conditions where people might be able to learn from each other about being a Buddhist practitioner and what this means, and how it relates to the practices



A community of spiritual ferns

of *sīla* (ethics) and *dāna* (generosity) that support *vipassanā* meditation practice. This kind of course needs a sufficient level of trust and goodwill. It needs to be skilfully led. As a participant, I would like to mention how very ably Jill did this, organising the two groups in addition to all her other work as manager.

Each week began with a guided *mettā* meditation to anchor the meeting. For six weeks the participants spoke about their understanding of *vipassanā* in their daily lives, or the application of *mettā*, or the five precepts. To give one example, two meetings were taken up with the difficulties of dealing with anger in family relationships, clarifying the way insight practice, restraint and *mettā* can work together in resolving problems.

I think the course has shown us that the spiritual life is not one of isolation, but one that needs friendship within a social framework, or a practice community, constituting a kind of reflection of the ideal of the *saṅgha*. I am sure this course will be the first of many in coming years, as we expand the activities offered to support the Buddhist life of our members.

COURSE BOOKINGS - NEW GUIDELINES

Because of the large increase in course bookings, we need to keep track of them more closely than ever before. We are spending a lot of time chasing up people who have sent registration forms without the deposit or vice versa, or who have asked to be ‘pencilled in’ to a course but haven’t got back to us.

Reserving a place on a course

If you are interested in a course we can reserve a place for you for a maximum of two weeks. If we don’t receive your deposit and registration form within that time, you will lose your place on the course. The same cancellation rules will still apply, which means that your deposit is still fully refundable up to two weeks before the course starts.

Refundable deposits for *dāna* retreats

We are also finding that where no money is paid for a course (e.g. if it is a *dāna* retreat or you are using your volunteer cooking days to ‘pay’ for it), people are more likely to pull out at the last minute. To avoid those on the waiting list missing out in such a situation, we are introducing a new system of refundable deposits. If the retreat is a *dāna* retreat or the entire course is being ‘paid for’ using cooking days, the deposit will be \$25. This will be refunded when you arrive for the course. If you have to cancel and no replacement can be found, the \$25 will go into our scholarship fund as with other course cancellation fees. These new guidelines aim to be fair to everyone trying to attend courses. Thanks in advance for your understanding.

Around the Centre

by Jill Shepherd
Manager

The first few months of this year have been extremely busy ones for the Centre. Almost every course has been fully booked weeks in advance, with long waiting lists of people we were not able to accommodate. This is good news for the Centre, but frustrating for those unable to get into the courses they'd hoped to do. Please take this into account if you were planning to do a course later in the year - we are taking bookings for courses in October, November and December already, so it pays to plan well in advance.

The good news with all this increased activity at the Centre is that donations to the Building Fund have also been steadily increasing. Many thanks to all the people who have been giving so generously. The Management Committee has decided that although there isn't yet enough money to build and completely finish two new accommodation blocks, we will start the construction of both buildings and get them to 'lock-up stage' so that they are weatherproof, but unfinished inside. Then as the funds become available, we will finish off the interiors using mostly volunteer labour. As each new building is finished we will be able to stop using some of the outside dormitories, and the pressure on the bathroom facilities will be eased.

Sayādaw U Pannathami kindly blessed the site of both new accommodation blocks on Sunday March 17, officially launching the start of the construction programme. After the blessing a celebration lunch was served: Daw Khin Pyone and helpers served mohinga, the Burmese national dish of delicious spicy fish soup,

and local Committee members and friends made pizzas, salads and deserts for the gathering. Thanks to all who participated and helped out in so many ways.



Sayādaw U Pannathami performing the site blessing ceremony

Since the blessing took place, the building site has been cleared of all superfluous vegetation. On April 10 and 11 our normally quiet and peaceful environment was temporarily invaded by many tonnes of heavy machinery and nearly a dozen workmen with chainsaws who came to clear away the pine trees from this area. Although at times it was almost painful to hear the thud of the falling trees and imagine what number of living beings were being harmed in the process, the end result is that the site is now ready for building. A side-effect of the tree-clearing is that this part of the land is much sunnier. This should make it easier to establish new native planting as soon as possible, and supplement the existing screening to our neighbour's boundary. Thanks to Ian Baird for supervising the work.

More thanks are due to the dedicated work team who finished off the painting of the sunroom over several extra work-days: Patrick Kearney, Ian Bett, Mary-Ann Sharrock, Ian Baird and John McIntyre. The sunroom is now finished (apart from carpeting) and is one of the most pleasant rooms in the house. John McIntyre has also donated the latest version of the software which is used to produce this newsletter - having the most up-to-date programmes available certainly makes the job easier. Gavin Cusack has made three large new cork pinboards for the dining room, as we were running out of display space for all the information about this and other meditation centres.

By the time you receive this newsletter, our two current management staff members Ian Bett and Mary-Ann Sharrock should have left the Centre for their travels in South-East Asia. I'd like to wish them all the best with the next steps on their path, and give many thanks for the support they've given me personally and the Centre generally in the time that they've been here. Pity it couldn't have been longer, but for some strange reason palm trees and white-sand beaches seem to make a more appealing backdrop for *dhamma* service than pine trees and misty mountains!

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.

Name

Address

I would like to make a donation of \$ to the Building Fund General fund
Donations to the Building Fund are tax deductible

Authorisation to debit my credit card:

Bankcard Visa M'card Card No

Cardholder Name Expiry date /

Signature

Print Post Publication No.PP246166/00005

If undeliverable return to:

Buddha Sāsana Association of Australia
25 Rutland Road Medlow Bath
NSW 2780 Australia

Surface
Mail

Postage
Paid
Australia

If the word LAST appears on your address label, you will need to contact us if you wish to continue to receive our newsletter. There is no charge but donations are welcome.



The Blue Mountains Insight Meditation Centre is a non-profit organisation owned and managed by the Buddha Sāsana Association of Australia.

Address:

25 Rutland Road, Medlow Bath,
NSW 2780 Australia

Phone/fax: 02 4788 1024

E-mail: bmimc@mountains.net.au.

Website: www.buddhanet.net/bmimc.htm

ABN: 11 005 353 218