



Non-self

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 talk was given by Venerable in the last month of her recent three month retreat from April to June at BMIMC. It has been transcribed and edited by Kylee McGrath.

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Tonight I am going to talk about *anattā* or Non-Self, the impersonal nature of all phenomena. In the past week I have talked about *anīcra* and *dukkha*, the first two of the general characteristics, explaining change and the unsatisfactory nature of phenomena.

And as we have seen, impermanence and unsatisfactoriness are concepts, or names given to certain experiences. Then we looked at how we actually experience this impermanence. What is the actual experience by which we come to understand the impermanent nature of phenomena. And we have done the same thing with regard to unsatisfactoriness, or *dukkha*.

We have seen that with *anīcra*, the impermanent nature, it is to see the constant arising and passing away, or change, or the non-existence after having arisen. This has to be experienced in regard to the specific characteristics of phenomena. With *dukkha*, it is to see that this constant arising and passing away of phenomena is actually oppressing, it is not satisfying—seeing it as a torture, and seeing it as unable to provide a basis for lasting happiness and peace.

So today, to make this trilogy complete, we look at *anattā*, non-self. Again, how do we actually experiencing this Non-Self nature of phenomena. What is the actual experience by which we come to understand that all phenomena are *anattā* or Non-Self. It is said that the characteristic of non-self is the mode of being insusceptible to the exercise of mastery, which means that one cannot exercise complete control over this phenomena of mind and matter.

Another definition of *anattā*, or non-self, is that mental and physical phenomena are void of any inherent existing entities.

So the understanding of this non-self nature of phenomena, the understanding of *anattā*, comes about by observing the specific or individual characteristics of mental and physical phenomena, and seeing that they are unamenable to the exercise of control. Or, seeing that specific characteristics, heat or movement and so on, are phenomena happening on their own, according to their inherent laws. So when we talk of *anattā*,



this is opposed to *attā*.

What people refer to as *attā* is self or soul in the person, that phenomena are endowed with an inherently existing entity which is called *attā* or self. People think that this self or *attā* is either the master over phenomena, the doer, the self that does things, acts with bodily actions, speaks with verbal actions, or thinks. Or that this *attā* is the feeler, that which feels what is happening in body and mind. Or this *attā* is considered to be the director, the director that has everything under control, directing according to his or her vision. Or another way to see *attā* is to see it as a controller, that entity which has absolute control over phenomena.

So where can this self be found? The Buddha looked very carefully into his body and mind, in all existing phenomena, and he came to the conclusion that this *attā* or self could not be found in the five aggregates. He could not find this *attā* inside these five aggregates, nor could it be found outside of these aggregates, nor could he find it related to the five aggregates. So he came to understand that this thing called *attā* was merely a concept or idea of ordinary people who are not yet free from wrong view. The Buddha saw clearly that *attā* was only imposed on these naturally occurring phenomena.

So when we look at these five aggregates, we can investigate and go through each of these aggregates and see if we can find any *attā*. So in regard to form we can have a look at *attā* in relation to the body. One way to do it is in relation to the thirty-two parts of the body, and to ask: Are any of these parts the self? As you might know these thirty-two parts include hair of the head and hair of the body. So if you look at the hair of the head, do you think your self is in the hair of the head? Often you cut your hair, so it is unlikely that you would consider the hair of the head self.

But then there are other parts in the body we are not so sure about. For example the heart is one of these 32 parts. So is the heart our self, or is the heart the seat of ourself? Maybe here it is not so clear. People might think yes, the heart is really my core that is where the Me resides. But the Buddha clearly saw that even the heart is not the self or not the seat where the self resides.

The same can be done for feelings; there are three

kinds of feelings, pleasant feelings, neutral feelings, unpleasant feelings. Which one of the feelings do you consider part of our self? The unpleasant feelings? Most likely not. The pleasing feelings? That would be nice.

If the self was in the feelings, why would the self allow unpleasant feelings to arise? You must remember that the self is something over which we have control. If the self had any control, very quickly one would use this control to abandon unpleasant feelings. As we know from our experience we don't have this control.

The Buddha came to the conclusion that all these aggregates are *anattā* or non-self. If there is a self it would mean that there is control over these aggregates. There is no such a thing as control over these aggregates. If there is control, then at our will we could create any feeling or emotion we wanted. If we had unpleasant feelings, we could immediately make them go away. But very obviously we don't have control.

When we observe what is happening in the body and mind, we see that whatever arises happens on its own

accord, according to causes and conditions. In this way, we cannot find any *attā* that exercises control over these phenomena.

In our meditation practice we can experience this in different ways. For example in walking meditation, when you observe the movement of the feet, we can note the intentions that precede these movement. So then with good mindfulness and deep concentration, it becomes very obvious that it is the intention that causes the movement to happen. So the intention to lift makes the foot lift, the intention to push the foot forward, causes this forward movement. The intention to drop the foot, then causes the foot to be dropped.

Observing these processes in this way, meditators can feel as if it is walking by itself. There is no more person, no more Me, I, that is walking, but sometimes it feels like 'being walked'. Sometimes meditators relate

that it feels like a robot, that it is not them anymore, but somehow just a natural process happening by itself. Sometimes meditators feel like a marionette, like something or somebody is pulling invisible strings. It is like a string attached to the foot, then oops! the foot is lifted, there is an intention to push the foot,



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and oops! the foot is pushed forward. So in this way the meditator experiences this as an impersonal process, so there is no longer them who is walking, but walking is happening on its own. It becomes very obvious that intentions just cause the movements to happen. This is seen and understood as natural processes happening on their own accord.

Another experience can happen in sitting meditation when mindfulness on any given object becomes sharp and penetrating, and is quite concentrated. Then all the mind knows is some sensations of tingling, arising and passing away one after the other, and by that time the meditator loses the form of the body, and there is no more notion of somebody sitting there, but it seems like the tingling sensations are just happening in space. Just tingling sensations coming up and going one after the other, and there is just the mind that is aware of that. So it feels like some sort of empty feeling, like the body is hollow. Because the body is often identified, as the self, or the seat of the self, so having no more notion of a body, then this identification of the self being in the body just falls away. So in this way anatta or non self can be experienced.

Or yet another way to experience it is in awareness of daily activities. Lets say when someone has made a cup of tea, and is carrying this cup of tea to the table, and being very focused on holding this cup of tea, not wanting to spill the hot tea, the focus is just on that, and as one is walking towards the table, as the focus is completely on the cup, perhaps on the sensations of heat, then it seems like this cup of tea is moving or going by itself to the table. The notion of Me, I am walking, is completely lost. There is nobody walking to the table, it is just a cup of tea moving. It becomes a very impersonal process.

Sometimes it is explained as emptiness (the Pali word is *suññatā*). It is not empty in the ordinary sense as we understand it, such as an empty cup, or empty glass, as when all the water is poured out of a glass there is nothing remaining. People get the notion that emptiness means nothing. But emptiness refers to being empty of an inherent existing entity, void of self, void of an ego, or Me.

As we have seen before, the understanding of *anīcca* (impermanence), leads to the understanding of unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*), because things are

changing all the time, because things are arising and passing away, so this constant arising and disappearing of phenomena is unsatisfactory, and cannot be the basis for lasting happiness. From the understanding of *anīcca*, one can come to the understanding of *dukkha*. What is impermanent or unsatisfactory, how can this be *attā* or Self?

May all of you be able to realize *anattā*, and understand that the body and mind are just natural processes happening on their own accord, according to their causes and conditions. May all of you swiftly become fully liberated and realise *Nibbāna*.



Resident staff wanted

BMIMC needs resident staff. We are looking for experienced meditators with a strong commitment to dhamma service, an ability to relate to people from diverse backgrounds, familiarity with computers and common office software and strong communication skills. Additional skills may be required in small office administration, including book-keeping; cooking and house-keeping; building, and gardening and grounds maintenance.



The positions are live-in. Applicants will be working and living in a small meditation community of two or three people, supported by the Centre's management committee and a network of local volunteers. Staff receive a small stipend (if they can legally work in Australia) in addition to full board and accommodation, and a contribution towards car use if they

are able to provide their own vehicle. They are also entitled to sit one nine-day retreat gratis every six months.

To discuss these positions at BMIMC, please ring Tara (02 4788 1024) or email bmimc@eftel.net.au, or Graham (02 9638 5805).

From the manager

Tara MacLachlan

I want to welcome both new and ongoing recipients of our newsletter. I hope that you enjoy our feature article, an excerpt of a talk given by the Venerable Ariya Nāni during her three month retreat here from April to June.

This was the first time we had conducted a three month retreat at BMIMC and I began to feel a bit of apprehension as it got closer to the starting date. So, Pixy and I spent some time discussing how we should proceed and established some guidelines with the hope that this would make everything run smoothly. This did help to calm the nerves and seemed to be reasonably effective. Of course there were a few hiccups, including no hot water or central heating in the main house for a few days. But we had such incredible support from Venerable Ariya Nani and a fantastic group of volunteers so that nothing proved too difficult.

I'm very grateful for this support and heartened that so many people thought to offer their time and energy to the centre - many thanks to you all. I'm not sure if I can remember everyone, (so apologies in advance to those of you I don't name personally) but the volunteers included Beth Steff, Tara McLelland, Leela Meehan, Robert and Lianna Wiles, Daw Khin Pyone, Thida Swe, Aye Aye Kyaw and friend, Geoff Bickley, Marcus Allas, Robyn and James Howell, Di Evans, Brenda and Alfred Myat, Theresa Berg and friend, Khin Khin May, Roger Myint, Chris and Jan McCarthy, Gabrielle Cusack, Liz Oski, Sandhya and Chandini Jayawardhana, Linda Pheeley, Akino Curran, Barbara Makgill, Gayle Stanaway and Kylee McGrath, who gave such amazing service (and made fantastic meals) as volunteer cook for the whole three months. (Kylee has an article about her time on the retreat in this edition).

All up 38 yogis attended – 7 full timers with the rest sitting various lengths of time from 5 days to 8 weeks. Although it was a lot of work, I felt very fortunate to be able to provide this opportunity for so many yogis.

Also, it was a pleasure and privilege to support Venerable Ariya Nani as well as two nuns who came to meditate. Ven. Bodhicitta, a Sri Lankan nun based in Dandenong in Melbourne was here for the full three months and Ven. Adhimutta from Santi monastery in Bundanoon came for the month of June. I hope to keep in contact with both these Australian-based nuns as well as develop relationships with other Dhamma centres and Sangha. I think it is important and beneficial to build these connections and I would like to visit other centres to share BMIMC's resources and experience and learn from others.



It would further benefit BMIMC to run [three month] retreats again. However, it would be crucial to have a strong core team of staff, maybe on and off site, to be committed to support such a retreat for the whole time, from the planning stages to the last day, who could then be supported by other volunteers working for various periods of time.

Also, during the three month retreat, we were very happy to have Ven. Kovida and another monk from the Australian Buddhist Vihara in Katoomba attending several Dhamma talks, as well as a number of other local Blue Mountains residents. The centre

does provide this opportunity for anyone visiting or living in the Mountains to join in a retreat for talks or practice sessions with the yogis. (We do also have a group sit on Monday night between 7 and 8pm when there is not a retreat in progress, although with the constant schedule of retreats it is difficult to build up a regular group sit routine.)

It is very inspiring to meditate with a group of yogis who undertaking a retreat or listen to a Dhamma talk given by one of our visiting teachers. There were times when I was in the meditation hall for the early morning sit or the evening talk that I would just take a moment to look around. Venerable Ariya Nani was seated up the front, two women in robes were meditating or listening attentively to a

Dhamma talk. A few times two monks were seated up the front listening respectfully, there was the group of dedicated lay yogis and visitors would be crowded into the few gaps left in the hall and I would feel so

uplifted to be a part of it all.

A number of people have inquired if there will be other retreats of this length at BMIMC. Personally I think this retreat was great for the centre, building on the already solid Dhamma life here, and that it would further benefit BMIMC to run retreats of this length again. However, it would be crucial to have a strong core team of staff, maybe on and off site, to be committed to support such a retreat for the whole time, from the planning stages to the last day, who could then be supported by other volunteers working for various periods of time. It does need a lot of work to organize and run a long retreat. So if you think it's worthwhile and are interested in helping on a longer retreat please let me know.

Prior to this three month retreat we had Graham Wheeler and Danny Taylor's weekends. These teachers, both on the BMIMC committee, have become regulars on the retreat schedule. Their weekends are very popular and are always booked well in advance. Then over Easter, Venerable U Vamsarakhita taught at the centre for the first time. I really enjoyed meeting and getting to know him (one of the perks of being on staff) and he was very well received by the yogis. Ven. U Vamsa, a Canadian by birth spent a number of years in Burma but has now moved to the USA to establish a new meditation centre. We did discuss the possibility of his return to BMIMC but with his commitments I'm not sure when this will be possible. He did recently return to Australia for a short visit to attend a Buddhist Conference in Sydney.

Though many of the forthcoming retreats are already fully booked, ask to be placed on a waiting list since places often become available nearer the date. Places are still available on Steven Smith's October retreat, Sayadaw U Lakkhana's November retreats, Lesley Lebkowicz's November weekend and Patrick Kearney's month in January. Also we have recently confirmed dates for the first two weekends in 2009 so be quick to book if you want to attend.

Pixy and Kylee remain here on staff for only the next few weeks, since both will leave in early August. I want to offer my heartfelt thanks and wish them much happiness for the future. I have only known Kylee for a few months but quickly came to appreciate her fine qualities and the practical skills she has generously offered. I am sorry to see her go

and hope she will return again sometime. My daughter Pixy has been here now for almost two years and she is now ready to move on. Over that time we have been supporting each other both as resident staff members and on a personal level. Pixy has become an extremely adept worker, confidently dealing with all aspects of the centre's activities. I really have come to rely on her support and sensible advice, and there is no doubt I will miss her very much. It will be very

different being here on my own. Fortunately, several people have kindly offered some of their time, either to provide some back up in the office or around the centre in general.

As a result of these staff changes, we are again looking for people interested in a resident staff position. There have been some inquiries from our publicity, which perhaps may lead to a

new person living on site. Further information can be found on our website (and see details below).

In general I welcome any offer of help, either during retreats or over the quieter times, and you can always drop in for a sit or a cuppa (maybe best to give a quick ring, especially if you're coming from a distance). Also, don't forget the Dhamma service weekend in late September. If you have any suggestions or ideas about projects that you would like to work on please let me know. I look forward to seeing you here at BMIMC for all or part of this weekend, or at any other time over the coming months.

With metta
Tara

Pixy's farewell dinner

On Monday 4th August Pixy said goodbye to friends and associates of the centre by cooking dinner for twenty or so regulars and not so regulars at the Monday night sit.

Cooking has been one of Pixy's many areas of competence as assistant manager, so those present enjoyed a sumptuous vegetable curry, two kinds of rice, banana sambal and filo spinach pie followed by strudel and cream and good conversation.

Thanks to Pixy for her generous parting gesture and we wish her well in her new life in Melbourne, though of course we expect to see her occasionally visiting the centre. May she have a happy and fulfilling time there in years to come.



'I give myself over for service'

Kylee McGrath, staff member and cook for the three month retreat

About eighteen months ago when taking a dance workshop with a wise elder, we were invited individually to bring forth an authentic expression, from deep within. Spontaneously I brought my hands together into prayer, and then bowed down in full prostration, voicing from my heart 'I give myself over for service'. I lay there outstretched, silenced, and emptied of myself for an extended moment.

What transpired after that was extensive inner and outer journeying, working in different communities ranging from waitress at a Zen Buddhist Retreat Centre in US, to co-ordinating a peace project in Italy. Reflecting back upon that genuine moment of going into the depth of my heart's desire, I knew there was a mysterious response to my call to surrender myself.

At the beginning of March I was back in Australia sitting with my closest meditation friend, and to my surprise he recalled that moment of authentic expression in the dance workshop—it had touched him deeply. He also questioned for himself whether the heart needed to be fully open in each moment of life for full awakening. I had no words I merely sat with him lovingly and smiled compassionately.

Facing the culture shock of returning from India, I felt called to be in a meditation community. I was somehow guided to the Blue Mountains and found myself signing up for three months of cooking at BMIMC.

Before arriving I set a few clear intentions for the three months. One intention was 'to know what it is to serve'. During the retreat there were challenges—each day my intention was to integrate mindfulness in daily action, and to be of service. It was a good intention, but there were many mirrors to reflect back to me my attachments and aversions. One moment I remember clearly, it was nearing 11am, the busy time just before serving the meal. Several generous hearted Burmese women came into the kitchen with a Dana offering, and keen to chat. Straight away I wanted to direct them out of the kitchen so I could maintain control, but they didn't respond to my gentle words and gestures. Aware of the time constraints I became a little more determined, and perhaps I was physically marching them out of the kitchen, and within the continued conversation one woman, standing right in front of me, asked with genuine interest 'Are you here doing meditation also?' and in that moment I was pierced so deeply with a reminder that every act, and every thought, every moment is the meditation of mindfulness and loving kindness. There in the midst of the kitchen chaos I was trying to control, was a beauti-

fully disguised gift of mindfulness.

Working with different people in the kitchen, presented its own challenges. In my growing mindfulness, there were

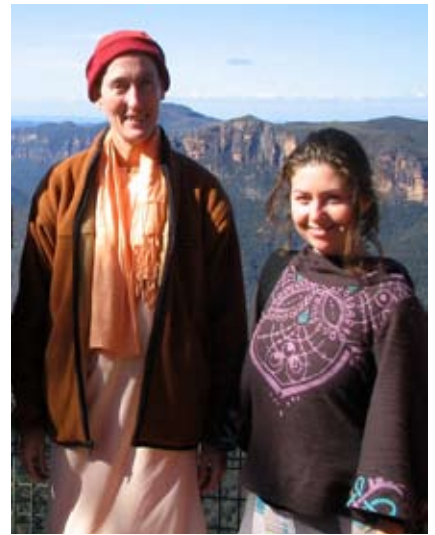
times of seeing clearly my imperfections, and there were also moments where I was torn apart on the inside, knowing that on subtle levels I had judgemental thoughts, controlling actions, or had not been considerate or kind in some way. Amidst the deeply penetrating mindfulness, there was a renunciation happening within, and I could recognise some of my desires and aversions were being washed away. I discovered more selflessness, I let go of expectations, I found more balance, and I began to cultivate integrity, compassion and wisdom.

The privileges of cooking for a three month retreat were momentous. I was honoured to be able to offer Venerable Ariya Nana food for three months, and towards the end of the retreat it became more and more an honour, as my love for her grew. Initially I was nervous about offering her food, and it probably took a couple of weeks before the crockery shaking on the trays began to settle.

As I became further immersed in the retreat, the cooking became more and more a pure labour of love. Sometimes a yogi would generously donate the meal (pay for it), and it was my responsibility to cook their offering, a responsibility which penetrated my heart. It needed extra care and attention, especially the Japanese egg rolls which were done for one yogi who still remains unknown to me.

Towards the end of the retreat there were moments where I was a little worried about my cooking, as it seemed that some of the yogis were fading away, with clothes hanging from their slight frames. I really valued the third month, the meditators were deeper into their practice, so I felt absorbed in a bubble of penetrating energy whenever I landed on my meditation cushion, and from this I experienced a great difference in the level of mindfulness that I could bring into my daily activities.

I began to wonder who was benefiting more, the yogis or myself, and I still wonder this. May all beings experience loving kindness coming from their own hearts, and may they become fully liberated.



Fundraising news

John McIntyre

Management Committee member

Once again this May we held our annual Vesak building appeal. Vesak, marking the Buddha's birth, enlightenment and passing away, is an occasion to reflect upon the development of our meditation centre and to appreciate the continuing generosity of staff and supporters that is the foundation for everything the Centre achieves.

The appeal recognised that we have nearly completed the pathways project. There is new paving from the back verandah to the meditation hall, upgraded main steps and new retaining walls. Thanks to the generosity of one family, we now have bollard lighting and new handrails.

Later this year we plan further improvements, including a new path uphill from the carpark to the yogi accommodation. The small caravan will be removed and further landscaping carried out in this area. This will draw heavily on our reserves in the Building Fund.

We will need to strengthen our reserves for further building developments, now that Sydney Water has extended the sewer to Medlow Bath. In 2008, the management committee is considering how we might approach the next stage, and seeking professional advice to this end.

This year's Vesak appeal came in the aftermath of the Burmese cyclone disaster affecting millions of people in the Irrawaddy Delta. Many supporters will have



responded to appeals from aid, and the Centre itself gave \$2000 through two Australian organisations. Venerable Ariya Nani was able to make the centre as a collection point for donations from yogis all over the world.

If you haven't yet considered contributing to this year's Appeal it is not too late to do so. Donations are tax deductible and a special receipt will be issued. If you wish to discuss a donation, please contact the manager on 02 4788 1024.

Sydney and Canberra Group Sits

In Sydney each week there is a group meditation sponsored by the Centre. Three teachers from the Centre (Graham Wheeler, Danny Taylor, Michael Dash) take it in turns to lead the group and will give instructions on the practice if needed.

The meditation group meets at the Life & Balance Centre, 132 St John's Road, Glebe from 7 – 9 pm each Friday evening (except long weekends).

Entry is via the side gate, not at the main entrance to the building. There is no charge for attending but donations are most welcome. The format is thirty minutes sitting, thirty minutes walking, thirty minutes sitting then usually a talk or some discussion. The session is primarily one for people who have attended a retreat at BMIMC but is open to anyone who is interested in meditation.

The Canberra Insight Meditation Group meets from 6.30 p.m. till 8.30 p.m. on Sunday evenings at the Sakyamuni Buddhist Centre, 32 Archibald Street, Lyneham.

The evening begins with thirty minutes loving kindness practice, followed by thirty minutes walking meditation and another thirty minutes of sitting meditation. The last half hour is taken up with questions and answers or a five minute dhamma talk and discussion.

The group is led by Lesley Lebkowicz (formerly Lesley Fowler). Contact Lesley on lesleyf@netspeed.com.au or just turn up. Bring your own cushions or bench. The teaching is offered free of charge but donations to the temple which hosts our practice are encouraged.

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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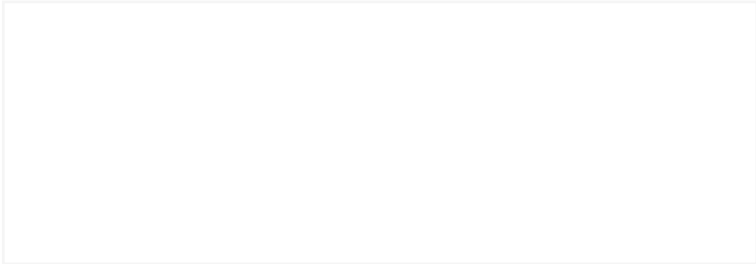
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