

Buddha Sāsana

Newsletter of the Blue Mountains Insight Meditation Centre



SUMMER-AUTUMN 2014

Welcome

... to the Summer 2014 issue of the Buddha Sāsana newsletter bringing you news about Blue Mountains Insight Meditation Centre from near and far. The Centre has been back at full capacity with its courses and retreats for more than a year now and the team of Edwina, Yael and Danielle continue to bring an energy and dynamism to its work. Besides events close to home like the recent bushfires, this issue highlights the second Satipaṭṭhāna Dharma Gathering convened by Patrick Kearney in November.

News from near

The Centre team reports on recent developments, including the October Blue Mountains bushfire emergency crisis that led to the cancellation of a Steven Smith retreat and the renovation of the verandah bathroom and the kitchen upgrade. There also is a story about the first Friends of BMIMC picnic in December in the Botanic Gardens at Farm Cove.

News from afar—Burma and Nepal

Through the Sydney Burmese community, BMIMC supports an orphanage in Burma called Thamaingdaw Dah Tha Nunnery. Our dāna has helped to construct a new sturdy multi-purpose building able to withstand cyclones. The Canberra Insight Meditation Group has also been active in supporting development at a school near the Lumbini International Vipassanā Meditation Centre.

The second Satipaṭṭhāna Dharma Gathering

In November 2013, BMIMC held a second Dharma Gathering led by Patrick Kearney focussing on the Centre and its teaching of *satipaṭṭhāna vipassanā*. The event was held over five days and nights, and combined meditation retreat, sutta study group and structured discussion. A day of silent practice was followed by four days of meetings, the mornings led by Patrick based on prepared readings, and the in the afternoons, follow-on discussion of teaching issues led by other lay teachers.

What do we mean by the Mahāśī tradition?

The Satipaṭṭhāna Dharma Gathering explored what we mean by the Mahāśī approach as broad tradition and as a specific method of teaching *vipassanā* meditation. The Editor reviews this important discussion, highlights some defining features of the living Mahāśī tradition and concludes that it is ever more important for BMIMC to recognise, value and protect its dhamma heritage.

Reflections on the brahma vihāra

Jill Shepherd, visiting teacher at BMIMC, reflects on her recent experiences teaching weekend retreats, workshops and classes in the Blue Mountains. These offerings have as well as insight meditation practice, some focus on the four brahma-vihāras: the meditative development of good will, compassion, joy and equanimity (*metta*, *karuna*, *mudita* and *upekkha*).

Fundraising

Finally, this year's Vesak fundraising will again focus on the building of staff accommodation as a priority for action. The plans are approved, there is the will to make it happen, a budget has been decided, we just need to add to the funds raised so far to get started.



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FROM THE CENTRE TEAM

Bushfires

It seems a distant memory now but just a few months ago we were on high alert as bushfires raged through the Blue Mountains. Midway through Patrick Kearney's October retreat, the unmistakable smell of the Australian bush ablaze blew in and pervaded the centre. The yogis had their bags packed but continued their practice while keeping their ears open for the signal to evacuate. Fortunately the fires didn't come in our direction and the retreat was able to cautiously continue.

However, a week later the fire situation became critical and with just a few days' notice we had to cancel the retreat led by Steven Smith. The cancellation was, of course, a great disappointment for all concerned. We thank Steven and his assistant teacher Mia (both of whom had already arrived in the country), and the all the yogis for their understanding.

Maintenance

In the process of making minor repairs to the verandah bathroom, we discovered severe wood rot in the walls caused by years of soil build up on the outside of the building. This meant major building maintenance and landscaping was required to restore the bathroom and ensure its sustainability. The good news is that this presented an opportunity to open up the Centre's entrance by adding a beautiful covered walkway on a suspended decking on the adjacent access path

The work is nearly complete and is primarily the handy work of Daniel Divananda, who has done a masterful job. John Orme also helped for a couple days and many others offered important input and advice. We thank Dan, John and others for their commitment and interest in this project. The cost of the work was around \$15,000, and took 8 weeks to complete. Some of the material was donated by Dan and recycled materials were used wherever possible.

The kitchen renovation is also moving ahead in earnest with Robyn Howell, Daniela DeAngelis and Gabrielle Cusack forming the main project team. Renovation work will commence in June, so keep your eye on our Facebook page for pictures of this work as it unfolds.

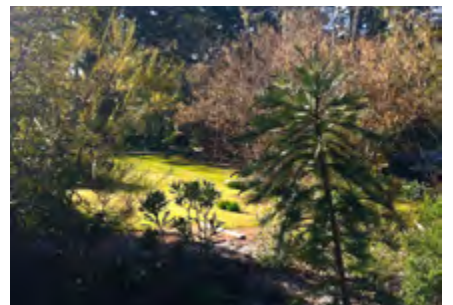
Our Community of Volunteers

Over the past six months we've welcomed many new volunteers to the Centre, who have helped in the kitchen during retreats, in the garden or in other ways. The community feels particularly vibrant lately with new and old faces getting the chance to spend time together, contributing to the many different things that are happening. Thanks go again to Meredith Brownhill for her continuing hard work and planning in the garden, with more than a hundred new plantings at the centre all growing and flourishing over the warm wet summer.

Many thanks also go out to the brave new cooks on the scene: Jenene James, Hugh Nelson, Maeve Dunnet, Constance Ellwood, Leona Kieran, Judy Lissing, Margaret Prentice, Marina Suarez and Evelyn Gerard for their help and dedication to the yogis. Finally we offer our thanks again to the regular and/or long term volunteers; Donald Elniff, Jan and Chris McCarthy, Aunty Pyone, Khin Khin May and Roger, Grahame Byrne, Ken Cameron, Selena Blair, Liz Oski, Justine Lee, Margarita Sampson and Jan and Margaret Mohandas for their continuing and long standing support.

A final acknowledgement must be made to Serena Mei who has generously donated a Buddha rupa to the Centre. This stands one metre high and is placed on the corner of the walking tracks. Thank you Serena.

—The Centre Team



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NEWS FROM NEAR AND FAR

Friends hold a Sydney picnic

Sydney offered up a lovely sunny day in the Botanic Gardens at Farm Cove last December for the first Friends of BMIMC picnic. Among the picnickers were new and veteran yogis (and partners and friends) and past & present managers. There were cherries and mangoes in season and an abundance of home-cooked food, followed by bocce on the grass, where the resident Sydney ibis were unwitting participants.

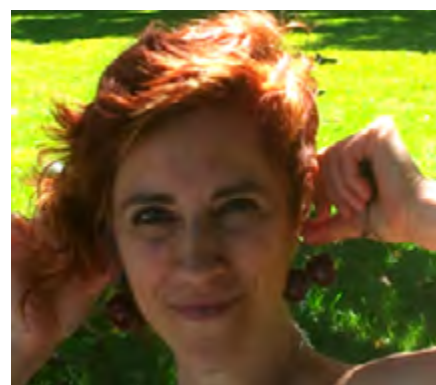
Thank you to everyone who came and shared food and stories, it was delightful to meet you all. Alas, we also had many people contact us to give their regrets as the picnic was at a busy time of year, but hope to catch up with you at an upcoming event.

With a busy schedule of retreats through the year, BMIMC sees many people pass through it's doors, some returning each year to sit with a favourite teacher, some more frequent, some preferring to serve as volunteers, some new and some who have been around as long as the centre has been in operation. Friends of BMIMC aims to connect people and provide support and networks in between retreat times. We are aiming to hold regular events through the year, as the schedule permits. Autumn in the Blue Mountains sounds perfect time for a Friends bushwalk. What do you think?

—Margie Sampson

Work in progress

Work is in progress to transform the entrance to the Centre off Rutland Road and to renovate the verandah bathroom. At the same time, planning has begun in earnest to renovate the kitchen and bring it up to commercial standards, employing funds generously donated last year.



A new cookbook

The new edition of the cookbook is now available, combining all the best elements of the old with a bunch of new recipes that are more reflective of the meals currently served on retreat. Many of these gluten free.

Thanks again to Jan McCarthy who so generously produced the cookbook, bringing together her expertise in cooking, writing and publishing.

Cost: \$25



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NEWS FROM AFAR—BURMA AND NEPAL

Through the Sydney Burmese community, BMIMC supports an orphanage in Burma called Thamaingdaw Dah Tha Nunnery. For some ten years now Thamaingdaw has provided dozens of children in Burma with a home, food and the ability to attend school. This care is made possible through the generous donations of people from around the world, including Australia.

For more details, [please visit the webpage](#) at our website.

Donations from BMIMC and individual committee members have contributed to the construction of a new building due for completion in November 2013. It is brick rendered with concrete and roofed with corrugated iron and proper guttering. The floor is tiled and the building is fully wired.

The new building can sleep up to 15 persons and will be used as a multi-purpose room for sleep, study and dining and will make a huge difference to the lives of the girls. It will provide them with secure shelter and accommodation from which they can attend school, do their studies, eat meals and make a home. The old building next to the new one will continue to be used as a multipurpose room.

To donate to the nunnery, please [email Theresa Baw](#).

The Canberra Insight Meditation Group

Each year, Lesley Lebkowicz who leads the Canberra Insight Meditation Group goes on retreat with Sayadaw U Vivekananda at Lumbini International Vipassanā Meditation Centre in Nepal. A few kilometres away, near the small village of Laxmipur, is the Lumbini Gyan Prabha School. Since 2011, members of Canberra Group through Lesley have made donations to support the school, which was established in 2008 as a community based school by the principal, Moti Lal, with the support of nuns.

The school aims 'to educate the underprivileged children of Lumbini to develop independence and self-reliance' and help the community rise above poverty. The school serves an area of extreme poverty and entrenched gender discrimination, with child marriage, a low valuation of girls' education and low female literacy.

The school is registered with the Nepali government but the funding by government is slow and erratic in the ongoing political chaos. The school works within a Buddhist philosophy but takes children from all religious groups, buys uniforms and books for those children whose families cannot afford them. There are no fees.

Donations from the Canberra group and others have helped to develop the school. In 2011, these donations paid two teachers' salaries for a year and in 2012, the generosity of another Lumbini meditator saw new classrooms built and outdoor blackboards for lessons outside in good weather. The Canberra group dāna enabled the employment of another teacher, a young woman, bringing the total number of teachers to ten and the number of female teachers to two.

In 2012 there were 102 girls and 198 boys. While in nursery classes their numbers are close to equal, by fifth grade there is a high attrition rate for girls. In 2013, donations will help to address this inequality via a women's committee (of teachers and nuns). This will not be easy given the area's poverty and entrenched gender discrimination.

For more information, [visit the Canberra Insight Meditation group site](#).

Motil Lal, founder and principal of the Laxmipur School with two staff



New building at the nunnery



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A SECOND SATIPAṬṬHĀNA DHARMA GATHERING

A second dhamma gathering led by Patrick Kearney was held in November 2013. Unlike the first SDG of 2012, this second event was intended for BMIMC lay teachers and committee members and was concerned with the Centre's teaching of *satipaṭṭhāna vipassanā*. The event followed on from the suggestion of the first SDG for BMIMC to consider its role in developing 'a pathway to dharma teaching'.

The event which was held over five days and nights, combined meditation retreat, sutta study group and structured discussion with a focus on issues in teaching. The first day was silent practice, followed by four days of meetings—the mornings led by Patrick and based on a prepared readings, and the afternoons when another person led a more 'free-form' discussion (Danny Taylor, Jill Shepherd and Graham Wheeler with Tara leading a final evaluation). Each session was three hours, broken up by shorter and longer breaks, including a two hour lunch break, and later an opportunity for evening practice.

The first morning session examined the meaning and relevance of 'the Mahāsi tradition' to the Centre's teaching, a reference that is writ large in the Centre's charter. This was further discussed in the afternoon in a session led by Danny Taylor. For more about this, see the following story.

The second day focussed on meditator difficulties as they are encountered in the so-called '*dukkha ñāṇas*'. Again, Patrick led with a paper reviewing the Buddha's teaching of *dukkha* and its relation to progress through the insight knowledges that is given such emphasis in the Mahāsi tradition. Jill Shepherd led the discussion of meditators' experiences of the *dukkha ñāṇas* and how they may be helped with difficulties that inevitably arise.

The third day began with some intensive examination of the Malunkyaputta Sutta, one that often figured in the Mahāsi Sayadaw's teaching and one that represents his distinctive approach. Patrick led with his reading of the sutta and contrasted this with the discourse given by Mahāsi, which runs to many pages (the recommended edition is edited by Bikkhu Pesala, trans by U Htin Fatt, 2013). The afternoon discussion led by Graham Wheeler discussed the role and direction of the BMIMC. If we are clear that *satipaṭṭhāna* is our focus, how do we locate BMIMC within the Mahāsi tradition and its Burmese origins and also in relation to contemporary Western Buddhism and the emergence of secular mindfulness training.

On the last morning, Tara led a review and evaluation of the experience. Those attending valued the intensity of the event, its balance of sutta study in the morning and less structured afternoon discussions. This was a unique opportunity to consider deeply dhamma teaching philosophy and practice and BMIMC's role in teaching *satipaṭṭhāna vipassanā*.

—The Editor



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WHAT DO WE MEAN BY 'THE MAHĀSĪ TRADITION'?

When it founded the Blue Mountains Insight Meditation Centre, the Buddha Sāsana Association set its principal objective as the teaching of *satipaṭṭhāna vipassanā* in the tradition of the Venerable Mahāṣī Sayadaw of Burma.

This ideal continues to be the guiding inspiration for the Centre. We maintain a close connection with Sayadaw U Vivekananda and other senior teachers and we expect teachers to have experience of the tradition. Many familiar features of our courses, such as the intensive retreat mode and meditator interviews, reflect the Mahāṣī approach as it was developed in Burma.

Yet, what do we mean by 'the Mahāṣī tradition' and more specifically, 'the Mahāṣī method' of teaching of *vipassanā* meditation? It is by no means clear what this teaching method includes, since teachers teach in different ways according to their own understanding and experience and their students' background.

This important question was discussed at the recent Satipaṭṭhāna Dharma Gathering. Patrick Kearney's morning session framed the issues. In the afternoon, the group tried to define Mahāṣī teaching, comparing individual lists of key features. Though there was a good degree of agreement, it was less clear which features were the most significant. It was suggested that 'tradition' is broad, while technique or method, is narrow. Tradition can encompass different techniques.

On the basis of the day's discussion, two lists of defining features can be drawn up. The first is a set of *philosophical tenets* to which most teachers in the lineage would attach great importance. Thus, teachers in the Mahāṣī tradition—

- Emphasise that liberation from suffering is achievable in this life through intensive meditation practice
- Emphasise *sīla* (morality) as the foundation for practice
- Describe progress in meditation in terms of the classical stages of insight and the insight knowledges (*ñāṇas*)
- Take the four *satipaṭṭhānas* (foundations of mindfulness) as the framework for the intensive practice of *vipassanā* meditation
- Emphasise maintaining continuous mindfulness (*sati*) in formal meditation and daily activities
- Emphasises vigilant observation of objects arising at the six sense doors

A second list might include *specific techniques and practices* that are often equated with orthodox Mahāṣī teaching, though a contemporary teacher may or may not recommend these practices. These include—

- Anchoring attention in the 'primary object' of the rise and fall of the abdomen (understood as the wind element)
- Instructing the meditator very specifically as to the application of mindfulness to every aspect of their experience
- Working with the fundamental distinction of *nāma* and *rūpa*
- Labelling and mentally noting the details of whatever mental and physical phenomena arise
- Expecting that meditators report in detail on their experiences in an interview situation
- Balancing formal sitting and walking meditation



The SDG discussion affirmed that the heart of the Mahāṣī approach was the teaching of *satipaṭṭhāna*, no matter how teaching approaches might vary. We considered the argument that Mahāṣī is a living tradition rather than a strictly defined teaching approach. The teaching practices and values originally developed in the Burmese Theravadan cultural context have been adapted to Western contexts.

A living Mahāṣī tradition is an evolving one, and in the Australian context BMIMC is almost unique in representing that evolution.

With *satipaṭṭhāna vipassanā* as our clear focus, how do we locate BMIMC within the Mahāṣī tradition and its Burmese origins? More broadly, how is our philosophy and practice different from, say, the Goenka *vipassanā* school which springs from the same Burmese lay meditation movement (as Erik Braun's new history shows). Or from the Thai forest tradition and the lineage of Ajahn Mun? Where do we stand in relation to emerging secular forms of mindfulness training or a contemporary Buddhism that does without 'Buddhist belief' altogether (as in Stephen Bachelor's works).

In the big picture of contemporary Buddhism, what BMIMC represents is significant, for there are surprisingly few centres like ours worldwide teaching *satipaṭṭhāna* as we do. That significance should be understood.

As Sayadaw U Vivekananda has said, speaking of the world heritage sites of Blue Mountains and Lumbini, we have in the Mahāṣī tradition at BMIMC, a comparable dhamma heritage that is ours to recognise, value and protect.

—The Editor

Erik Braun, *The Birth of Insight: Meditation, Modern Buddhism and the Burmese Monk Ledi Sayadaw*, U Chicago Press. 2013

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REFLECTIONS ON THE BRAHMA VIHARA PRACTICES

Since returning to this side of the world from the United States eighteen months ago, I have been teaching several weekend retreats, day-long workshops and evening classes in the Blue Mountains. Alongside the insight meditation practice, most of these offerings have also included some focus on the four brahma-viharas: the meditative development of good will, compassion, joy and equanimity (or *metta*, *karuna*, *mudita* and *upekkha*, to use the Pali terms).

At the beginning of my own meditation practice, I tended to avoid the brahma-viharas because I found them so incredibly challenging. As I've supported other meditators over the last few years, I've observed many people going through similar struggles. And yet, I've also often noticed that there seems to be a direct relationship between how resistant a person is to exploring the brahma-vihara practices, and how much benefit they eventually end up receiving from them!

Much of the resistance seems to come from the misunderstanding that the purpose of these practices is to cultivate positive emotions. So there's a tendency to try to force or manufacture an idea of how that emotion is supposed to feel, which often leads to the exact opposite: unskilful emotions of frustration, self-judgement, tension, irritation, boredom, and various other flavours of aversion.

Rather than trying to manufacture positive emotions, the purpose of these practices is to cultivate the intention to wish well to others, to care about their suffering, to appreciate their joy, and to stay even-minded in the face of life's "ten thousand joys and ten thousand sorrows." Sometimes a positive emotion arises naturally as a result of that intention, but this is a side effect rather than the main goal. Understanding this can take the pressure off, reduce performance anxiety and help develop more patience for the organic development of these skilful mind-states.

Think not lightly of good, saying, 'It will not come to me.' Drop by drop is the water pot filled. Likewise, the wise man [or woman], gathering it little by little, fills himself [or herself] with good.
—*Dhammapada* 9. 122

A more contemporary metaphor I like to use is that of the Hubble telescope. My understanding is that this highly sophisticated piece of machinery is constantly scanning the universe in search of the faintest signs of life. In a similar way, when I practice the brahma viharas, at times it feels as if I'm turning my own Hubble telescope inwards in search of the faintest signs of *metta*, *karuna*, *mudita* and *upekkha*.

There's a deep listening that has to happen to access these tiny pulses of good will, compassion, joy and equanimity, but when they're recognised, the metaphorical Hubble telescope transmits them into consciousness so they can be amplified. Once recognised and amplified, these skilful mind-states become resources that help to develop the deep calm and concentration necessary for insight to arise.

There are several suttas which describe the kind of chain reaction that happens when wholesome mind-states such as joy, tranquility, and happiness develop naturally into 'vision and knowledge with regard to Deliverance', for example, . AN 10.1 (see quotation of this sutta opposite).

The brahma vihara practices are a powerful way to jump-start that development, so if you have found these practices a struggle, I encourage you to persevere, with patience, and be open to the transformations that may arise!

—Jill Shepherd, Visiting Teacher



Jill's recent metta weekend

The rewards of virtue

[Ananda:] "What, O Venerable One, is the reward and blessing of wholesome morality?"

[The Buddha:] "Freedom from remorse, Ananda."

"And of freedom from remorse?"

"Joy, Ananda"

"And of joy?"

"Rapture, Ananda"

"And of rapture?"

"Tranquillity, Ananda."

"And of tranquillity?"

"Happiness, Ananda."

"And of happiness?"

"Concentration, Ananda."

"And of concentration?"

"Vision and knowledge according to reality."

"And of the vision and knowledge according to reality?"

"Turning away and detachment, Ananda."

"And of turning away and detachment?"

"The vision and knowledge with regard to Deliverance, Ananda."

Anguturra Nikaya 10.1 (trans. Nyanatiloka Mahathera, from Path to Deliverance, pp. 65-66).

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LET'S BUILD THE STAFF ACCOMMODATION!

So much has been achieved in improving the conditions for yogis since the first retreats were offered at Sasana House 25 years ago. Yet sadly, little has changed for staff and our greatest challenge still remains to provide some suitable accommodation for resident staff who choose to serve the Dhamma by living and working here.

We want to ensure the best conditions for staff. It is important that they are able to switch off and 're-charge' in staff quarters that are set apart from the house and private and self-contained. In turn, suitable living and working conditions will help us to attract and keep good managers, an important factor in creating a strong team to support to yogis on retreat.

This far goal is much closer to realisation than we imagine. Most of the conditions to achieve the goal are present—the will to build, an approved building plan, a project manager to take charge, and a starting budget allocated. One obstacle remains. We need a significant boost to the funds in hand.

So, what could a be more appropriate, as a way of marking the twenty fifth year of the Centre's existence, than to build the staff accommodation unit?



Adequate staff quarters will allow staff to rest and recharge.



Plans for the staff accommodation



Now it is time to build the staff accommodation!

Twenty-five years ago the founders of the Centre, working under difficult conditions, imagined a future where matters would improve.

Eventually things did improve through the generosity of supporters—a dhamma hall was built, unheated dormitories were replaced by purpose built individual student units, and hall, house and accommodation were centrally heated. A commercial kitchen will soon replace the old and less adequate cooking arrangements.

Plans are approved for two self-contained one bedroom units near the top north-eastern corner of the property on Rutland Road.

We want to make living at the centre more comfortable and pleasant for resident staff who often give up employment or careers to serve the Dhamma. This will help us retain good staff and improve our capacity to support yogis in their practice during retreats.

We need significant funds to advance this project. Quotes from builders in 2011 put the cost at \$100 000 to \$120 000 to build to lockup stage or a total figure of \$180 000 to complete the work.

There is an amount already donated from appeals in early years to this worthy objective. We need to add to this earlier effort.

All donations to the Building Fund are tax deductible. Your donation will work to expand the Centre and bring the benefits of the Dhamma to more people. You can donate now online through the 'Givenow' facility by going to:

www.meditation.asn.au/donating.html

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The Buddha Sāsana Association of Australia Inc is a not-for-profit charitable organisation that owns and manages the Blue Mountains Insight Meditation Centre.

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