

BUDDHA SĀSANA



NEWSLETTER OF THE BLUE MOUNTAINS INSIGHT MEDITATION CENTRE

SUMMER 2011

Editorial

Welcome to the Summer 2011 edition of Buddha Sāsana. During our 'transition year' we have slowly been evolving new arrangements for centre management in the coming year. We thank Beth Steff for once again holding the Centre's operations in her competent and generous hands for much of the year.

Bushcare enthusiasm

For more than six months, Meredith Brownhill has been leading a band of enthusiasts in bushcare work in the extensive grounds, controlling weeds and planting suitable native species. This is a wonderful way to join others and contribute to BMIMC.

Farewell dhamma friends

Long-time friends of Maggie Lane gathered on one Wednesday night sit in September to mark her recent passing away. We note too, the passing of Siew Mow Fong, a donor to the Centre and Megan Llewelyn of Lawson, an early supporter of BMIMC.

The Therigata

The *Therigatha* is the ninth book of the Khuddaka Nikaya, made up of 73 poems composed by early nuns (bhikkhunis) and telling of their dhamma journeys. Lesley Lebkowicz writes about the inspiration of these ancient texts for practice today.

Dhamma Classics

The editor reflects on Soma Thera's *Way of Mindfulness*, first published in 1949 and a classic discussion of the core text in our tradition, the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*. This is an excellent study resource because it includes translations of the ancient Commentary and sub-commentary.

Events and activities

As readers will notice, this edition brings changes to the newsletter. We are preparing to move to a wholly digital edition next year, simplifying publication and reducing our costs. Other news from around and beyond the Centre includes an evening talk at BMIMC by the Stephen and Martine Batchelor on Wednesday 29 February next.

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Editorial

Welcome to the Summer 2011 edition of Buddha Sāsana. Our last issue in winter carried the message that BMIMC was entering a period of transition following the departure of our long-serving Centre Manager.

The Management Committee felt that it was wise to allow for a period of reflection and adjustment as we explored future directions for the Centre.

During the year Beth Steff has played a vital bridging role, managing BMIMC during the period of Sayadaw U Vivekananda's month long retreat in May and through to November.

Beth has made it her mission to encourage a greater engagement with the upper Mountains community and to strengthen the local supporter network. There is now an active sitting group on Wednesday night and a concerted effort led by Meredith Brownhill to address our bushcare and gardening issues (see next story).

We thank Beth for her wholehearted service over these last six months and wish her well on her dhamma journey. Ka kite ano!

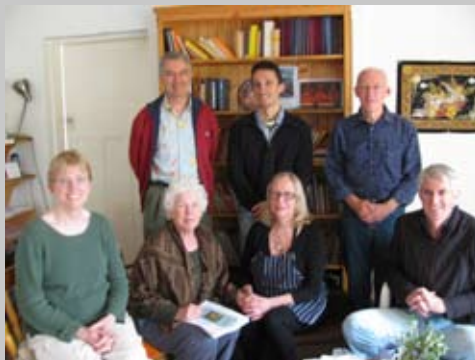
New arrangements

New arrangements for managing the Centre are emerging. We are moving away from the idea of the full-time resident manager. This role has always involved a great span of responsibility, combining office administration and organising and running intensive retreats, with long days of being 'on-call'. This kind of workload is not sustainable in the longer term.

A dedication to dhamma service has been fundamental for those who have undertaken it, usually exceptional individuals prepared to carry the workload for little recompense. The alternative of a well-remunerated 'professional' manager we have never really contemplated.

We are trying a new approach that will split the old centre manager role into different roles, separating office administration from the process of retreat organisation, preparation and management. Individuals supported by a team of volunteers will manage particular retreats.

The intention is to strengthen the community of support that the manager has always relied on and at the same time create a more sustainable work roles for the longer term. There will be a greater involvement



of management committee members and supporters. Other roles (like retreat scheduling) will become a 'custodial' responsibility of a person on the committee. (There are a range of existing custodial roles, for example, financial).

We are keen to strengthen volunteer support around these roles much as we are now doing with Meredith's bushcare and gardening network.

We are also expanding membership of the Committee to ensure stronger local representation and younger members.

Centre co-ordinator

Splitting the old manager role creates a need for someone to facilitate communication and co-ordinate activities, so we have defined a new position of Centre Co-ordinator. This will be non-resident and part-time, with some flexibility.

We welcome Edwina Dawson and thank her for her enthusiasm in taking up and developing the new role. Her's is the friendly voice in the office on Mondays,

Wednesdays and Fridays in the mornings, 10am to 1pm (these hours may change).

The centre is still very much in an exploratory phase, and we invite your support and thank you for your patience as events unfold in 2012.

In the meantime, we invite you to join us in supporting the Centre's new directions in whatever way you can.

—The Management Committee



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Landcare enthusiasm

The Centre is benefitting greatly from good support for landcare working weekends. Meredith Brownhill is leading a keen team of enthusiasts now numbering 17 people.

The September dhamma service weekend was very successful with weed removal and native planting carried out on a scale not seen since the early days. Another weekend followed in early November and the next will be in late January.

The Management Committee has accepted an offer from the Blue Mountains City Council to become members of the Bush Backyard Scheme.

BMCC will support us with some supplies including bamboo stakes, cardboard tree guards and a voucher for native plants from the Conservation Society or Wildlife Plant Rescue Nurseries. It also includes the loan of tools, a voucher to hire a chipper and training workshops.

Our obligation is to continue to restore bushland and remove noxious and environmental weeds. Both the Vipassana Centre & Brahma Kumaris Centre have active landcare groups working with Council under the scheme.

People may have heard of the calamitous windstorm that felled century old Radiata pines throughout Medlow Bath, bringing one of our retreats to an abrupt end. We have had to arrange inspections by arborists and the removal of dangerous overhanging broken branches.

As part of the landcare and gardening effort, there has been a thorough review of the gardens and the weed infestations to be dealt with (cotoneaster, holly, honeysuckle and monbrechia being the chief culprits).

A plan to guide the landcare work is being developed. Please let us know if you want to join the group (4788 1024).



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Farewell to dhamma friends

Maggie Lane

Maggie Lane (1948 – 2011) attended many retreats over the years and cooked numerous delicious meals for yogis and staff both at BMIMC and in the early years of Wat Buddha Dhamma. She was a wonderful illustrator and artist and contributed some illustrations for the BMIMC cook book.



Her favourite teacher was Patrick Kearney who with wisdom and compassion allowed Maggie to practise at her own pace. We were not surprised occasionally to see her having coffee and a cigarette in Katoomba Street during a break from a retreat then go back and continue to sit as best as she could.

We knew her struggles and suffering with a mental illness and during her darkest days and months with hospitalisation we never gave up support and learned to love her as she deserved.

During one of our regular Wednesday night sits we held a memorial evening for Maggie in the meditation hall. With her photo positioned in the teacher's seat, Maggie taught us that we too will pass from life and must strive with our practice lest we should we have regrets at our own deaths.

Buddha taught that all life is impermanent and that all living beings who are born will at some stage get ill, become aged and die. Everyone has within them the karmic seeds of their past virtues and misdeeds which have the power to bring a fortunate or unfortunate rebirth in the future.

We wish that through the power of her virtues and the blessings of all Buddhas and Bodhisttvas throughout space and time our dear yogi friend Maggie will experience great fortune, peace and happiness. May all beings without exception be released from suffering.

—Liz Oski

Siew Mow Fong

The Centre acknowledges a donation to the Vesak Appeal from one of our donors, Siew Mow Fong, who passed away recently. Her sister Siew Wan Fong and family wishes her to be remembered as a devoted Buddhist who observed the precepts and gave dāna and performed much charity work.

Megan Llewellyn

Also remembered by her friends at BMIMC is Megan Llewellyn, who passed away recently. We send our condolences to Dee Llewellyn, her partner of many years. Both were supporters of the Centre in the early years of its establishment when Dee donated the stained glass (of the five faculties) in the meditation hall.



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The Therigatha

The *Therigatha* are the songs of enlightenment uttered by nuns in the time of the Buddha. They are songs of celebration, of delight. They exult in the spiritual freedom the nuns have so recently gained. Stock phrases are often used to describe the moment of liberation: “the arrow is out”, “I have put my burden down” and “what had to be done has been done”. My favourite is “the great dark was torn apart.”

I first read the *Therigatha* in *The First Buddhist Women* by Susan Murcott (1991). I had been practising intensively with Burmese Sayadaws for some years. I was fortunate—great teachers like Sayadaw U Pandita came here to teach. I will always be grateful to them. But I was hungry for female embodiments of the Dhamma. Gender is a fundamental descriptor of our conditioned identity—and that’s what we bring to practice.

Murcott describes the discriminatory conditions of women’s lives at the time of the Buddha. Many of the nuns were the wives of men who’d left to ordain, or they were widows or had lost their children.

There are some heart-rending accounts by women who lost their children in shocking ways. At a time when women were defined by their marital and maternal status, these were even greater calamities than now. The nun Canda wrote:

I was in a bad way,
a widow,
no children, no friends,
no relations to give me food and
clothes.

Things are different today. Despite these differences, the female poets

of the *Therigatha* are women I recognise. From Vimala’s song:

Young,
intoxicated by my own
lovely skin,
my figure,
my gorgeous looks . . .

Today,
head shaved,
robed,
alms-wanderer,
I, my same self,
sit at the tree’s foot;
no thought.

Not all the women so readily entered a thought-free state. Vaddhesi had a difficult practice. ‘I left home’ in her poem refers to her entering a life of practice:

It was twenty-five years
since I left home,
and I hadn’t had a moment’s
peace.

Finally, though, she has ‘annihilated’ all the obsessions of the mind.’

The formal teachings as we know them are often referred to—the Seven Factors of Enlightenment, the Four Noble Truths, and the Noble Eightfold Path—but rarely elucidated. The poems are not teachings so much as they are personal testaments of successful practice. Uttama sings:

The Buddha taught
Seven Factors of Enlightenment
They are ways to find peace
and I have developed them all.
I have found what is vast and
empty,
the unborn.
It is what I’ve longed for.
I am a true daughter of the
Buddha,
always finding joy

In peace.

The personal quality of the songs embodies the softness so necessary to mental and spiritual development. For the cultivation of this quality *Dipa Ma* by Amy Schmidt is a valuable resource. Dipa Ma (who died in 1989) was a Buddhist saint who emphasised the loving aspect of mindfulness.

Ultimately in the deep peace of practice, gender is irrelevant. Mara, a mythological embodiment of everything that distracts us from realisation, addressed Soma:

That place
that sages gain
is hard to reach.
A mere woman can’t get there.

She replied:

If I asked myself:
‘Am I a woman
or a man in this?’
then I would be speaking
Mara’s language.

No one celebrates enlightenment like this nowadays. To do so would be considered sure proof of how far that person still had to go. Perhaps it’s also a result of the lesser state of our practice compared to the abundantly successful meditation of those taught by the Buddha. The introduction to Eckhart Tolle’s *The Power of Now* comes close.

Our tradition has been used to great benefit, in various therapies. Mindfulness is everywhere from psychotherapies to weight loss programmes. This is clearly a good thing. It is, however, only part of the story. The mind can go further, to the great freedom the nuns celebrated.

—Lesley Lebkowicz

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Classic dhamma books

The Way of Mindfulness

Taking part in a dhamma discussion group on the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* recently has led me to a new appreciation of a classic dhamma book—Soma Thera's *The Way of Mindfulness: The Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta and Its Commentary*.

This is not perhaps as well known as more recent books to which it might be compared, such as Analayo's *Direct Path to Realisation*, Gunaratana's *Four Foundations of Mindfulness*, or Nyanaponika's *Heart of Buddhist Meditation*. All of these are treatises or modern commentaries that have the same purpose of developing the meditator's understanding.

Soma Thera (1898-1960) was a Sri Lankan monk, a contemporary and friend of Nyanaponika Mahathera. The book was already forty years old when I found it in the Adyar bookshop in 1990. It is still in print thanks to the Buddha Dhamma Association publication project, though it can be retrieved on-line from <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/soma/wayof.html>.

The book's great value is that gives translations of the Commentary and Sub-Commentary together with the Sutta and the author's introduction. The Commentaries are ancient interpretations of the Sutta that are aids to reading and interpreting the text. The Commentary gives us traditional readings of key phrases like the opening refrain 'This is the only way, O monks'—the Pali word here translated as 'only' may be understood in several ways. The Commentary explores these.

Again, of the phrase, 'the Four Foundations' the Commentary asks 'Why Four?' and then gives various explanations. One of these is that 'these Four Arousings of Mindfulness are taught for casting out the illusions [vipallāsa] concerning beauty, pleasure, permanence, and an ego'.

It then explains these four illusions (or, 'distortions of thought' in some translations): the first is that the body is a thing of beauty, not ugliness; the second, that feeling is pleasure rather than suffering; the third, that consciousness is permanent rather than ever-changing; and the fourth, that mental objects are substantial when they are soulless and without entity. So the Commentary says, each 'foundation' helps to establish a right understanding about our experience and destroy its associated 'wrong view'.

Thus the Commentaries can deepen understanding for the meditator trying to relate their experiences to the teachings, as many generations of meditators have sought to do before us. In this age of easy access to texts, it is sobering to remember that when Soma Thera wrote there were apparently no English translations of the Commentary.

Though we may not be Pāli scholars, practice and experience make us interested in what the Commentaries can tell us, can illuminate key ideas and benefit our discussion with dhamma friends. Soma Thera has given us a resource to be treasured.

John McIntyre



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Events and Activities

Medlow Bath sitting group

There is a weekly group meditation at BMIMC in Medlow Bath, usually on Wednesday evenings. The sessions are from 7pm to 8pm and the format is sitting meditation with occasionally a short reading at the end of the sit. There are paths outside for walking meditation if people wish to walk instead of, or as well as, sitting.

Several local supporters who are experienced meditators, share responsibility for leading the group. For those unfamiliar with the practice, please contact BMIMC to arrange some guidance before the session and stay for a cuppa and chat afterwards.

Sydney group sits

There is a group meditation each week in Sydney. The group meets at the Life & Balance Centre, Australia Post Building, Level 1, 181A Glebe Point Road, Glebe (entrance from St Johns Road).

The sessions are from 7pm to 9pm each Friday evening (except long weekends) and although there is no charge for attending, you are welcome to make a donation. If you arrive after 7pm and the door is locked, please knock. Each year the group is in recess from mid December to early February.

The format is 30 minutes sitting, 30 minutes walking, 30 minutes sitting then usually a talk or some discussion. The group is open to anyone who would like to learn how to practise insight meditation. If you are unfamiliar with this type of meditation practice and would like some

guidance, please try to arrive a little earlier and let the group leader know.

Four experienced meditators share responsibility for leading the group: Graham Wheeler, Danny Taylor, Michael Dash and Marc Allas. The group now has an informal lending library of dhamma books that is available to anyone who attends the group on a regular basis.

Canberra Insight Meditation Group

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. Contact Lesley on lesleylebkowicz@iinet.net.au or just turn up. Bring your own cushion or bench. The teaching is offered free of charge but donations to the temple which hosts our practice are encouraged.

The group is in recess over the Christmas-New Year season.

The group will also have one-day sits held in the same venue. Please visit www.canberrainsightmeditation-group.org for details of these and other activities of CIMG.



Batchelor's evening talk

Stephen and Martine Batchelor will visit the Blue Mountains on Wednesday, Feb. 29 from 7pm to 9pm as part of their 2012 Sydney visit.

Both are scholars and teachers whose secular approach to the Dharma is an important part of the conversation about Buddhism in the West. We look forward to a stimulating and warm-hearted evening with these two internationally-esteemed teachers.

To register for the evening with Batchelors, please email Joyce Kornblatt at joyce.kornblatt@gmail.com. The group will be limited to 35 people.

Stephen Batchelor was a monk for ten years in the Tibetan and Korean Zen traditions. He is the author of many books, including *Buddhism without Beliefs*, his newest is *Confessions of a Buddhist Atheist*.

Martine Batchelor was a Zen Buddhist nun for ten years. She is the author of *The Path of Compassion* and *Women in Korean Zen*. Her latest book is *Let Go: A Buddhist Guide to Breaking Free of Habits*.

The teachings are offered freely, and dana can be given on the night of their talk. The facility fee is \$5, which will cover refreshments.

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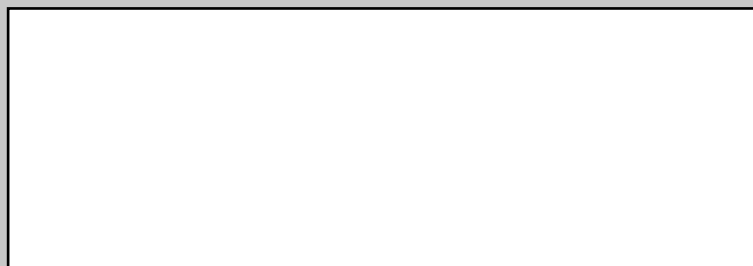
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Address:

25 Rutland Road,
Medlow Bath NSW 2780 Australia

Phone/fax: +612 4788 1024

E-mail: bmimc@eftel.net.au

Website: www.meditation.asn.au