



BLUE MOUNTAINS INSIGHT MEDITATION CENTRE

# *Annual Report 2016*





## WELCOME

This year marks the thirtieth year of operation of the Buddha Sāsana Association of Australia (BSA) as an incorporated body. Over this time, we have been blessed with a relatively stable organisational history, evolving year by year as new challenges arise and are met mostly with thoughtfulness and creativity and sometimes, in testing times, with patience and forbearance.



As the organisation has evolved, so has the Centre's communication with its supporters. For many years we printed and posted a newsletter, and then with the advent of the internet we developed a website alongside the newsletter. Over time, the newsletter assumed a digital form and gradually, the website became the key source of up-to-date information, making a newsletter less relevant.

It has been over a year since our last newsletter. With the end of the year approaching, it seemed timely to try something different by way of communication with our supporters. So we entertained the idea of an Annual Report that has some features of the newsletter, with contributions from members of the committee.

We have aimed to be informative about the Centre, its activities and its organisation, and to improve the ways we communicate with our volunteers, our donors and supporters and our meditators. The result is in your 'digital hands'.

We hope that this first published Annual Report is interesting and informative. Your feedback about this innovation (via email) is most welcome.

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*We gratefully acknowledge the gift of photography by Martin Ryan and Gavin Cusack. Report edited by John McIntyre.*

## OUR ORGANISATION

The Blue Mountains Insight Meditation Centre is owned and managed by a not-for-profit, charitable organisation, the Buddha Sāsana Association of Australia. The Association was founded in 1981 and incorporated in 1986. About 1991, after some years searching for a suitable property, the Association decided to establish a retreat centre at 25 Rutland Road, Medlow Bath with the aim of providing organised instruction on the practice and theory of Buddhist meditation on a regular and continuing basis.

The objects of the association are:

1. To provide facilities for the teaching and practice of satipatthāna vipassanā meditation in the tradition of the late venerable Mahāsi Sayādaw.
2. To provide facilities for the study of Buddhist teachings.

### *Our logo*

The logo of the Blue Mountains Insight Meditation Centre symbolises the Five Faculties necessary for development of the Buddhist Path:



sati (mindfulness)

saddhā (faith or confidence)

virīya (effort)

samādhi (concentration)

paññā (wisdom)

The Faculties surround a 'heart' of sīla, understood as moral restraint and principled conduct.

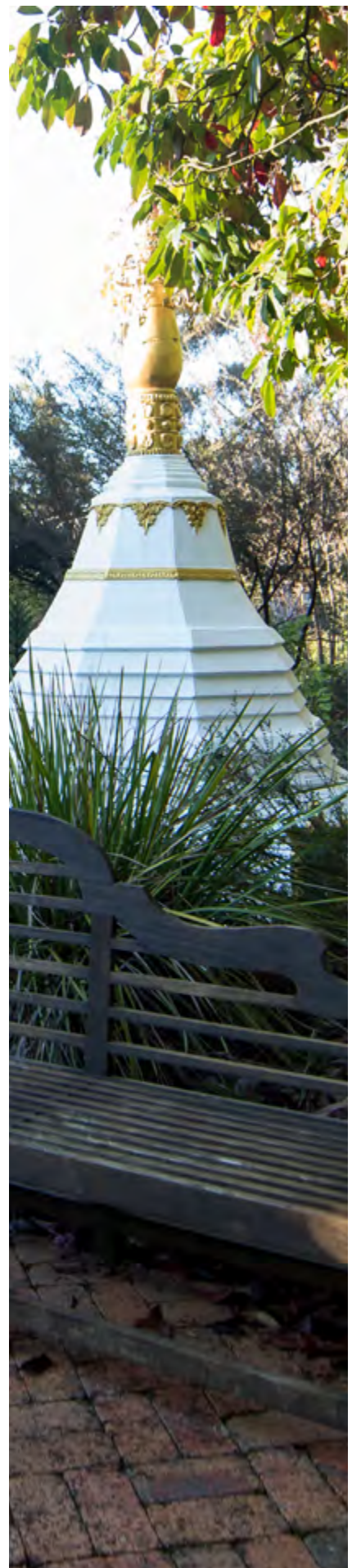
Bhikkhu Bodhi has observed: 'The qualities that exercise the function of faculties are of humble origin, appearing initially in mundane roles in the course of our everyday lives. In these humble guises they manifest as trustful confidence in higher values, as vigorous effort toward the good, as attentive awareness, as focused concentration, and as intelligent understanding'.

## THE MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE

The Association is managed by a committee of up to eight members who meet at least four times a year to oversee the Centre's operations and development. Meetings are usually in February, May, August and November.

The day to day work of the Centre is carried out by a few part-time staff with support from numerous volunteers.

The members of the management committee in 2016 were:





The 2016 Committee (top to bottom): Gabrielle Cusack, John McIntyre, Graham Wheeler, Danny Taylor, Theresa Baw, Robyn Howell, March Alas, Selina Blair.

Name	Area of responsibility	Appointed
Gabrielle Cusack	Staffing	1991
John McIntyre	Publicity & fundraising	1999
Graham Wheeler	Legal & regulatory	1999
Danny Taylor	Financial management	1999
Theresa Baw	committee member	2003
Robyn Howell	Retreat Management	2003
Marc Alas	Retreat planning	2006
Selina Blair	Committee member	2008

### *Appointments to the management committee*

When a vacancy occurs, new members of the committee are appointed at the Association's annual general meeting. Once appointed, committee members hold office until they choose to resign. This system has provided great continuity in the Centre's operations over the years.

The committee is aware that many of its long serving members are starting to get old! In recognition of this, and the need to periodically refresh the committee, two of our dedicated members, John McIntyre (17 years of service) and Selina Blair (8 years of service), have decided to step down. We are grateful for their contributions as committee members and also appreciate their ongoing willingness to support the Centre in other capacities.

As John and Selina step down we are fortunate to have some new members willing to step up. Yael Wasserman will be known to many from his time (together with his partner Danielle) as the Centre's resident managers. The committee is very pleased to have someone with Yael's hands-on experience and organisational skills. We welcomed Yael to the committee last November.

Constance Ellwood has also agreed to join the committee. Constance lives locally and is active in volunteering in various capacities, including cooking and retreat management. She has an academic editing and publishing business so we are gaining a skilled communications person.

### *Service on the committee*

It is anticipated that the process of renewal will continue gradually over the coming years. So, if you're an experienced and committed dharma practitioner with the time and skills to serve on the committee we'd like to hear from you. We hope to provide an opportunity for interested people to grow into the role of being an engaged and active member, initially by attending a few meetings as a visitor to see how things work before deciding if a role on the committee is suitable. Then, over time, providing the opportunity to take on increasing amounts of responsibility and help the Centre continue to develop as a place of learning and community.

The Association also has a Public Officer who acts as the official point of contact for legal matters, is the keeper of its registers and official records, and ensures that the various annual reports, etc are completed and lodged on time. Graham Wheeler has fulfilled this role for the past 28 years.

## FINANCES AND FUNDRAISING

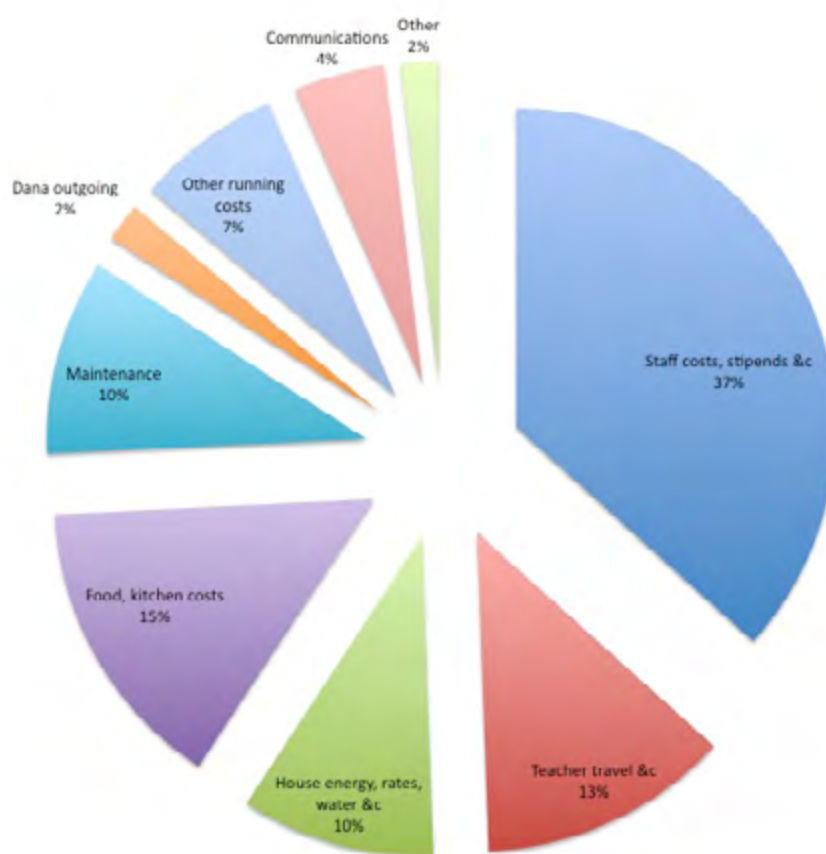
The Association operates as a not-for-profit charitable organisation and all income received from retreat fees and general donations is used to cover our operating costs and carry out our objectives. We also have a School Building Fund that receives donations that are tax deductible for the donor. School Building Fund donations can only be applied to new building projects or major building repairs and maintenance.

Our retreat fees are reviewed regularly and set with a view to making retreats as affordable as possible. We also try to ensure that the Centre is efficiently run and able to cover its costs.

Our income for the 2015/16 financial year totalled \$183,118. This included \$135,624 in general revenue (mostly from retreat fees), \$14,647 from donations to the building fund, \$23,010 from student donations to be passed on to teachers, and \$9,837 from donations to the general fund.

Our expenses for 2015/16 totalled \$175,327 and included payments of \$92,279 for expenses (including building maintenance, power, water, food, teacher travel, insurance and telephone), \$54,951 for payments to staff and contractors and \$28,097 in donations to teachers and the Burmese Orphanage. Overall, the Centre had a modest surplus of \$7,791 for the 2015/16 financial year.

The pie chart below shows a breakdown of the major expenditure into categories by percentage—staff and contractors comprised 37% of expenditure, kitchen food, 15%, teacher travel, 13% and house costs such as gas, electricity, and water about 10% and maintenance, 10%. (The chart excludes dāna received and passed on to teachers).







## THE VESAK APPEAL

Every Vesak we recall with gratitude the thirty-year history of dāna that has created the Centre—the founding donations of property and funding of major building works, and equally, the continuous donations that have maintained and improved the Centre over subsequent years.

In recent years we have carried out a program of renewal and improvement, including the complete renovation of the kitchen, the rebuilding of the corner bathroom and the design and construction of a new entry way. Energetic staff and generous supporters have made this possible.

Our Vesak Appeal for 2016 took the theme of maintaining a safe and comfortable environment for meditators, staff and volunteers. We listed a range of specific projects of renewal and improvement and received a heart-warming response that raised over \$14 000. This is to be applied to improvements to the meditation hall, and renovation of the exterior including finishing work such as gable finials, replacement of heating system (the gas boiler) and replacement of the underfloor fire screening in the yogi accommodation. It also funded various improvements to Sāsana House, including weather-stripping of doors and windows, and new carpet for the hallway and office and teacher's room to eliminate trip hazards and renovation of the front steps to the dining hall.

This was surely an ambitious program of work and we extend our heartfelt thanks to our supporters who gave so generously to the appeal and hope for their continued support for the Centre's development.

## RETREAT PLANNING

*Marc Allas*

The BMIMC committee has a particular role reserved for retreat planning, that has oversight of the kinds and number of retreats held at the Centre each year.

Organising retreats takes considerable time and effort, in particular liaising with the teacher, arranging transport, fulfilling any special requirements, ensuring the teacher is aware of the Centre's policies and procedures. This all ensures that the yogis receive the best possible standard of care and beneficial retreat experiences.

The committee is very fortunate to have the assistance of Tara Frances in taking the responsibility for the retreat schedule each year. It has been a pleasure to continue this working relationship, since Tara brings considerable experience, her connection with many teachers around the world, and expertise in retreat planning.

Tara is a co-founder of the Centre and a major donor in its establishment. She was a member of the management committee for many years and also served as a resident manager for six years ending in 2010. She has continued to be active in the Centre's retreat scheduling that involves planning the program one or two years ahead, contacting teachers and helping to ensure all that everything comes together smoothly.

The committee, through the Retreat Planning custodian member, liaises with Tara during the year as to any retreat planning issues, and collaboratively the retreat schedule for the following year is organised and then agreed to by the committee. Typically this occurs in about July each year, for the following twelve months.

A variety of issues arise in planning retreats—for instance, ensuring that they are spaced evenly throughout the year. We endeavour to ensure that retreats are not scheduled too close together, in order to give staff a decent break after finishing a retreat before starting another.

The Centre seeks to hold at least one longer retreat each year, usually in April or May, and this is often an appropriate time to invite an international teacher. Throughout the year there are three to four retreats of nine day duration, and then there have typically been several weekend or extended weekend retreats.

Some teachers have been coming to BMIMC for many years, and are popular with a wide following of yogis that usually ensures that places are quickly booked. (This is why we have a strict bookings and cancellation policy). Whilst continuing to facilitate retreats by those teachers, the Centre is mindful and endeavours to foster newer teachers, and expand the ranks of teachers who are well-known at the Centre.

During 2015-2016, BMIMC invited and welcomed seven local and three international teachers to teach at the centre. The longest retreat at the centre in recent years has been five weeks duration. Whilst some yogis have requested that the Centre hold a three month retreat, this is not planned for presently.

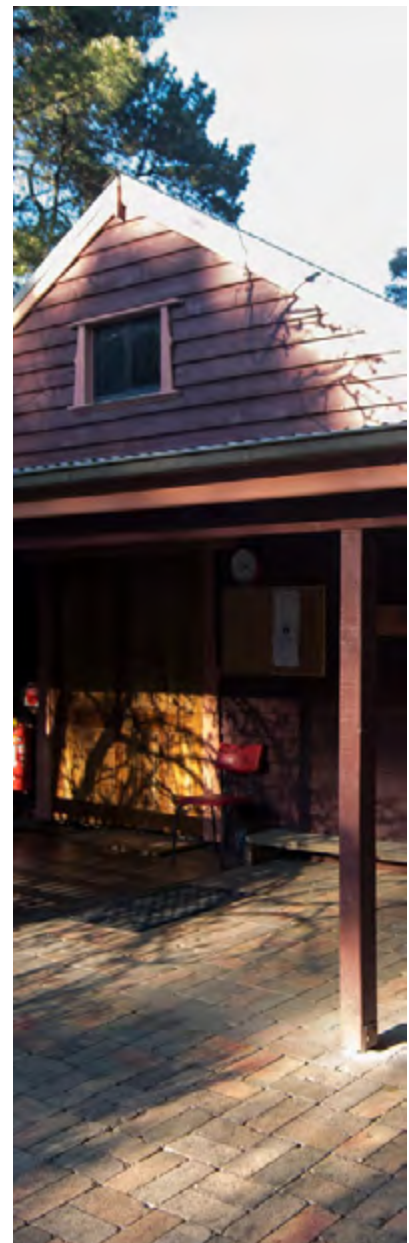
When circumstances permit, the Centre schedules a self retreat, that in the past has been held in January or July. This offers more experienced yogis an opportunity to foster a sense of independent practice, supported by suitable conditions and meals provided at the Centre.

Usually our teachers are invited from the Mahāsi tradition of Buddhist insight meditation. However, the Centre is also aware of the benefits that can come from other teaching traditions. Though retreats emphasise the Mahāsi lineage, there is ongoing discussion about holding retreats to present a broader understanding of Buddhism.

In future years, we look forward to extending invitations to a wider variety of teachers, including those from the Burmese community. In 2017 this will include Sayalay Bhada Manika, a resident teacher at the Panditarāma International Meditation Centre in Lumbini, Nepal, who will teach a three-week retreat in late April and May. Such retreats help to maintain our close links with the Burmese community.



*Ariya Baumann came to teach in 2016*







## OUR STAFF

Our capable staff work with our volunteers to make the Centre run efficiently and happily. In 2015 Yael Wasserman and Danielle Clarke finished their term as joint managers and in November Nicky Lumb took on the challenge of the combined role of retreat manager and caretaker. Mid-year Nicky decided to focus her attention on the caretaker role and put a great deal of energy into dealing with maintenance issues of the kind that slip under the radar in an organisation such as ours, assisted by Daniel Divananda, our part-time maintenance contractor. She has made a visible difference in the garden and grounds, enhancing the work of our long term gardening team. Nicky finished her term at the Centre this November and decided to stay in the Mountains—which is good news for the gardens and grounds!

Our thanks to the superlative office team. Maureen is the book-keeper and guardian of accounts who keeps our financial systems transparent, accountable and efficient. In Edwina Dawson, the Centre Co-ordinator, we are fortunate to have an 'anchor person' who holds together the various administrative of the Centre, while making this work seem effortless and enjoyable. Her role in relating to our volunteers is all-important. During the year she added the co-ordination of volunteers to her management responsibilities. As Edwina says in her reflections on the year, the organisation continues to adapt to changing circumstances.

## OUR VOLUNTEERS

*Edwina Dawson*

We all experience great vulnerability in times of change and the Centre is no different. Like a supportive family members of the BMIMC community have gathered round to shop, cook, mulch gardens and most importantly be present with the needs of the Centre to maintain its functioning.

There has been thoughtfulness and generosity in every donation of time. Managers such as Gavin and Gabrielle Cusack, Ian Bett, Marina Suarez, Liane Fryer, Hugh Nelson and Jenene James and Robyn Howell have continued to steer the ship with ease.

In the galley amazing meals have been prepared from Donald Elniff, Jan and Chris McCarthy (where would we be without them), Marcela Klein, Conny Krebs, Ken Cameron and our dynamic duo Rita and Christian Poisson. Penny Small, Justine Lee and Hugh and Jenene continue to create masterpieces in the kitchen—Jenene's chocolate cake that you must 'try before you die' truly lives up to its name.

A very special mention to Liane Fryer for doing two weeks of cooking for Patrick's retreat with flair and magnificent flavour. Bronwyn Berman who combined cooking with furniture removal – making our cabin look and feel very comfortable. Also Isabelle Phillips, Katy O'Neill and Stephanie Maraz for just being adorable and helping us through a super busy time. Last but not least Judy Swan for not only having a delightful manner for showing a real care for the Centre.



This care for the Centre, teachers and yogis is a powerful reflection of the dedication to each other. Every dish washed, mouthful eaten and bathroom scrubbed is honouring each other and these are the signs of a real community growing stronger with change.

## GENEROSITY AND THE KITCHEN

*Robyn Howell*

When we first start meditating at BMIMC we are asked if we want to help in some way, for example, cooking or assisting the kitchen, and I thought it would be a good idea to give back to the Centre by cooking. Of course I had no understanding of 'generosity'. I thought it was me who was doing the giving and not the receiving. But generosity has many sides to it. When one gives one receives. The generosity goes both ways—no, many ways:

- Cooking with other yogis, I get to know them and talk about practice with them.
- Cooking for the teachers, the managers and other wonderful people who drop into the centre.
- Spending time with the teachers, asking those questions I have wanted to ask for years, but found no one to ask.

Thus I learnt that teachers love to share their experience, they enjoy teaching us.

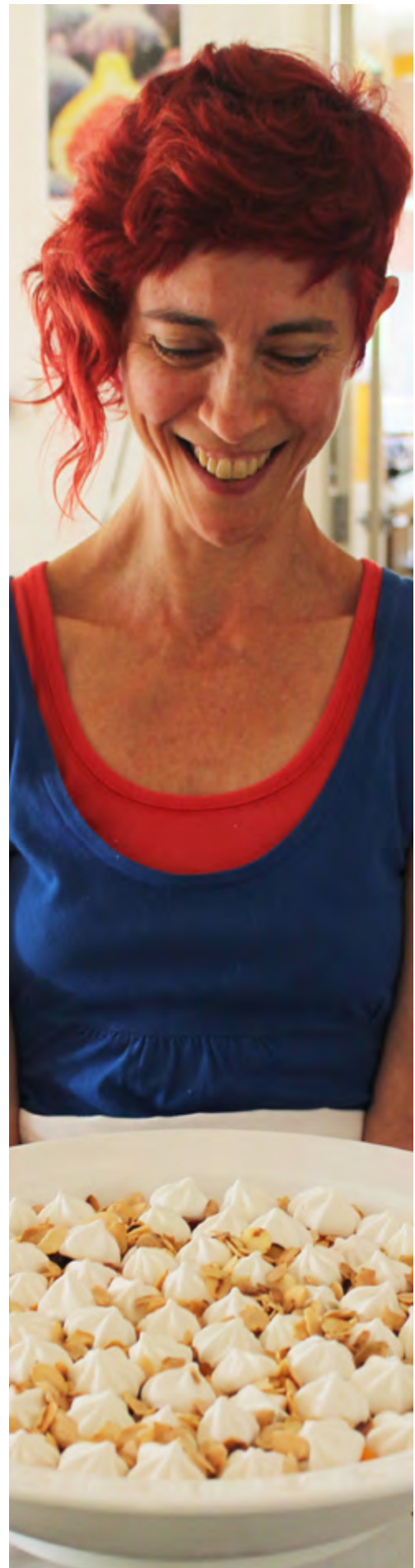
I watched and found out how the Centre really runs, which takes an enormous amount of time and generosity from so many people. I saw great difficulties dealt with smoothly so that the yogis practice wouldn't be ruffled.

There are challenging problems that arise in the kitchen, for example, when someone was bringing lunch and their car broke down. We went to Katoomba and bought take-away.

There was a dessert I made which didn't set. When the first yogi cut it the middle slid off the table and on to the floor. I cleaned up the mess and got out the ice cream and fruit. We all had a great laugh.

When the cooks forgot to turn the rice makers on. Quick! Boil up some pasta!

So cooking in the kitchen is not only about food. Yes, we all get fed really well, but we learn and grow spiritually, and receive a broader understanding of generosity and what the Buddha meant by Sangha.





## THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

*Gabrielle Cusack*

I recently heard on one of the ABC's religious programs that churchgoers, overall, score higher on a well-being index than non-churchgoers. This was a trigger for some Buddhist reflection on the subject.

The equivalent of a Sunday service for BMIMC is, I suppose, the Wednesday evening group sit for the local community. This has waxed and waned over the years—thriving, as expected, whenever there has been a teacher in residence. At other times, with no-one to lead the group, it has been little more than provision of a space to do an hour's group meditation.

At the moment, we have begun a new format of a 45 minute sit then an introduction and Dhamma reading for 20 minutes by one of the six regulars on a topic of their own choosing. Four of us are former Wat Buddha Dhamma residents and we finish with Phra Khantipalo's 'Dedication of Merits' as we are all great fans of his translations and melodies.

This seems to be working reasonably well. Some people stay for a cup of tea and a chat afterwards. Topics range from areas of profound Dhamma to problems with the local train service—all useful.

I was reflecting that as for the 'churchgoers', I similarly have a warm appreciation for 'my Centre in Medlow Bath' (yes, I know that it too is impermanent) and the people who share it, that I'm certain does contribute to my well-being. The reminder to return to mindfulness as one enters the grounds, the quiet space in the hall, the possibility of safety and peace—all aspects of this precious place. May it endure and prosper.

## BMIMC'S DĀNA ACTIVITY—BURMA

*Theresa Baw*

Generous donations over the years from Blue Mountains Insight Meditation Centre and other people around the world have supported the Thamaingdaw Dah Tha Nunnery. Dozens of orphaned children in Myanmar (Burma) have been given a home, food and the ability to attend school since its beginnings in 2002.

Thamaingdaw is located in the city of Ta Nyin, around one and a half hours drive south of Yangon. Thamaingdaw is run by two Buddhist nuns and they look after a number of girls from the age of five to high school age. These children are either orphans or their parents can no longer afford to care for them and have given them up. The nuns generally have at least seven children and up to around 25 or more children in their care. The numbers fluctuate from year to year. Usually they are caring for at least fifteen girls at any given time. In the aftermath of the devastation caused by Cyclone Nargis in 2008, the NGO, Save The Children, placed a number of orphaned children in the temporary care of Thamaingdaw.



### *Accommodation, food & education*

Before 2013, the children and nuns all lived in a very basic timber building with a corrugated roof, consisting of one small multi-purpose room with an adjoining kitchen and one smaller room. The children sleep in the multi-purpose room which also served as the living room, dining room, study room and prayer room. As it was built on a former rise paddy field, the building was prone to slippage, and was partly damaged by Cyclone Nargis. At the start of 2014 the building was connected to electricity.

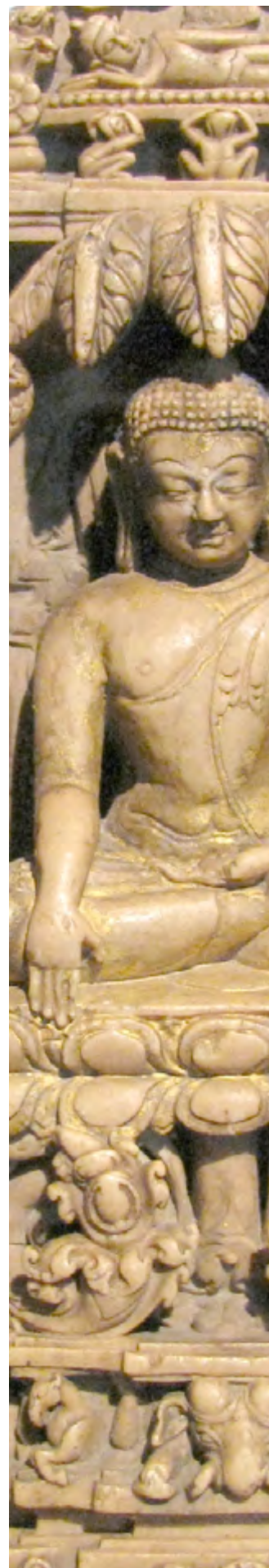
In about 2012, the generous donations from around the world, including from the Centre, funded the construction of another building, to expand the cramped living conditions of Thamaingdaw. Whilst it is modest in size, the building is on a solid foundation, made of brick and rendered in cement, hence, is a much stronger protection against the elements. The additional building gives the children more space for example, for an area to study with good lighting.

As is commonly done in Burma, the nuns and children rely on alms for food—the local people make offerings to the nuns. They also grow their own vegetables. The children mostly eat vegetables. The donations provide them with essentials for their growing bodies like milk and protein. They have access to running water through an artisan well on their land. Whilst the girls are in the care of the nuns they usually wear the nuns' robes, although, they are not expected to become nuns for life. Most often after finishing high school, the girls take a up trade like sewing for a tailor.

### *BMIMC support for Thamaingdaw*

The Centre has generously supported Thamaingdaw for nearly ten years, by raising funds and providing donations to pay for a number of necessities. The individual committee members of the Centre have also donated generously over the year. Without the generosity of many such donors, the orphans would not enjoy the benefits of requirements that we often take for granted, including the building of a toilet blocks and a cement water tank for showering, an electrical pump for the artesian well, soil fill to counter slippage, a fence for the perimeter of the property. Later, there was the repair of the main building when it was damaged by Cyclone Nargis, the purchase of some adjoining land, enrolment fees for the local state school, umbrellas for the monsoon season, school books, school shoes, reading glasses etc for the children, food; and contributing to the building of the new building.

The hope for Thamaingdaw is for it to grow and prosper so that it can continue to be a safe and happy home for the children to live, so that the orphans can have the opportunity to finish school and have a brighter future. The Centre intends to be continue to give dana to Thamaingdaw for that purpose. To make donations to the orphanage, please contact Theresa Baw, a Centre committee member, on her email [tbaw@fjc.net.au](mailto:tbaw@fjc.net.au).





## A CHANGING CENTRE

*Graham Wheeler*

In 2015 we began a process of considering our future directions in a workshop group. This discussion started by reviewing the Centre's history and recognising that many of the supportive conditions which made possible the growth of Mahāsi Centres in Burma are largely absent in Australia. Some of the supportive conditions were identified as:

- A sizable community that provides strong support for the teachers, students and meditation centres (dāna).
- Monks/teachers who are authorised to teach, and provided with ongoing support and review by senior monks and respected institutions.
- Students with strong confidence in the teachers and teachings (sadhā).
- Students who have a clear sense of the purpose of the practice and see meditation as part of a broader Noble Eightfold Path.
- Students who have easy and ongoing access to experienced teachers.
- Students who return from retreat to a family/community that largely understands and supports the dhamma and meditation practice.

We then reflected on how the Centre has managed to evolve and develop, adapting to a less supportive cultural environment:

- The Centre's movement from initially relying exclusively on donations of money and labour (dāna) to charging a very low retreat fee and paying some token stipends, to charging a modest retreat fee and paying a few part time employees but still relying on volunteers to carry out the major roles of managing and cooking.
- The difficulty for lay teachers who want to continue the dāna tradition. While we have made an ongoing effort to educate yogis about the importance of dāna we recognise that lay teachers remain financially vulnerable unless they have other sources of income.
- Our approach to teacher selection which includes the development of a set of 'Guidelines for Lay Teachers', the ability to obtain advice from a senior Western monastic (Sayādaw U Vivekananda) and the initiative of an annual Satipatthāna Dhamma Gathering as an avenue for teacher development.

After the initial workshop we used a small planning group to investigate how students and supporters viewed their relationship to BMIMC and their different reasons for becoming involved, including



'therapeutic' and professional motivations for attending retreats. This then led us to consider our future directions for the courses we offer and the retreatants who attend them, and the wider experience of a Buddhist community the Centre might provide.

As a result we are trialling a number of new approaches, one of which is having Jill Shepherd as a 'teacher-in-residence' in early 2017.

## FUTURE DIRECTIONS

*Danny Taylor*

One of the roles of the BMIMC committee is to actively think about the future. While it's main purpose is to ensure the Centre runs effectively, providing a stable environment for meditators, meditation teachers, and the BMIMC community, the committee also needs to consider what could be different, decide what we want to change, and consider how that change will occur.

A smaller group on the committee again met this year over a few days, to specifically explore future possibilities for BMIMC, as a follow-up to the similar event last year.

At this stage we're committed to actively progressing in four domains:

1. Weekend Retreats that are more targeted and explicit in what is offered, beginning with "Buddhist Weekends" that explore the connection of meditation and Buddhist life
2. Dhamma Pathways, where we consider different offerings for meditators with different levels of experience
3. Dhamma Knowledge, where we consider what specific dhamma knowledge we seek to impart as a Centre, beyond what individual teachers provide, and how we develop this
4. The Long Term, where we will consider the future of BMIMC, our vision for the Centre and its position in the Australian Buddhist context, and how we move towards this in a realistic way



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