

# BUDDHA SĀSANA

Newsletter of the Blue Mountains Insight Meditation Centre



## Translating the Buddha

Lesley Fowler Lebkowicz

In this article, Lesley Fowler Lebkowicz describes her experiences in giving poetic form to translations of Pali verses from the Sutta Nipāta, published in a collection called 'The Way Things Really Are'. Lesley has practised vipassanā meditation since 1983 and has spent several years in retreat in Australia, the USA and Burma. She has worked as a teacher, counsellor and writer and currently divides her time between formal practice and writing.

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The Sutta Nipāta is one of the earliest texts of the Pali cannon, coming from the same period as the Dhammapada, before the monastic tradition was very strong. It is a verse cycle created by ascetics as they practised and often refers to 'the wise one', rather than solely to monks or nuns. Book IV is the oldest part of the Sutta and it is this part that is translated in *The Way Things Really Are*.

The work of translation began nearly twenty years ago. Primoz Pecenko mentioned casually that he thought Book IV of the Sutta was one of the most dynamic and interesting texts of the early Theravada. What a pity, he said, that there were no good translations. At that time the only translations were by scholar monks who were not practitioners and who had therefore not made informed translations of some of the references to meditation experience.

Primoz and his wife, Tamara Ditrich, were both Pali scholars. I had begun publishing poetry and literary prose. We all meditated in the tradition of Mahasi Sayadaw. Primoz and Tamara had spent many years in retreat in

Sri Lanka and Burma. Tamara had already completed several translations of Buddhist texts into her native Slovene and was the main translator from Pali to literal English for this project. Primoz had lived in Panditarāma, Rangoon, for several years before he and Tamara married. I had begun spending two or three months every year in retreat. Together we had the skills necessary to translate this text.

Every Sunday night we met and discussed the text of a poem. Primoz and Tamara presented me with a literal translation. For each Pali word they listed all the possible translations. We tried out different subtle permutations of meaning together and then I went off with my notes to write a free verse version.

The first revelation I had was during the first night's discussion. I had no knowledge of Pali. I had studied other languages and understood that each language embodies the universe in a different way, so much so that at times the universe embodied in one language can seem to be a dif-



ferent universe to that described in another language. So it was with Pali. A simple English statement like 'I am hot' becomes in Pali, something like, The sensation of heat is arising in me. That is, there is no solid sense of a self in charge of experience! The emphasis is on the heat not on the speaker. There's the experience of heat and the knowing of the heat. It's an expression of *anattā*.

The understanding of *anattā*, one of the three characteristics of existence (along with *anicca* and *dukkha*) is embodied in the language. And if it's in the language, then it's in the conceptual framework inhabited by the speakers of that language. Imagine coming to meditation with such a deep understanding of the nature of existence. I began to see why many teachers say that Asian meditators find practice much easier than Westerners. We will surely come to see *anattā* as we practise—in fact it's inevitable that we will because it is a characteristic of the nature of existence—but we must practise in order to see it.

There are many allusions to the kind of freedom that comes with this understanding in the course of the poems in *The Way Things Really Are*. This one comes from 'Before the Body's Dissolution':

*You swim  
oceans of equanimity  
are always  
mindful  
never assess yourself  
as superior  
equal  
or inferior.  
You have no haughtiness  
at all.*

The original verses are written in a highly structured rhythmical pattern and with rhyme. Good rhyming is achieved with difficulty and rarely sounds natural in today's English. It doesn't fit easily with the kind of relaxed speech patterns we use in Australia.

When I began work I read all the

previous translations to see what other people had done—they had often attempted to use a rhyming pattern and this sounded laboured and ungainly to my ear. I wanted to write something that felt contemporary, as though the Buddha—a lot of the poems are presented as the words of the Buddha—was a teacher you might have met at the beach or out in the bush. So I ended up with language like this:

*Look! You're self  
obsessed,  
flapping about like a fish  
in a drying creek.  
(from 'The Cave')*

—and from another poem called 'How Opinion and Thought Contaminate the Mind':

*The wise  
see your failings  
if you blow  
your own trumpet  
skite  
about your virtue  
and awareness*

*but they acknowledge  
your virtue  
if you're calm  
don't brag  
are selfless  
and unworldly.*

(I loved using a bit of Australian slang like 'skite' in the middle of direction about how to behave).

When it's working, our practice is as much part of our daily life as it is something we do on our cushions and it seemed that the best way to convey this was by using Australian colloquial language.

The second change I made was in the gender of the person often referred to as 'the wise one'. All the other translations referred to the wise one as a male. Half the wise ones in our translation are women, half men.

*Anyone who's free  
denies there's liberation  
by another  
or by what she sees  
and hears*



Stupa relics, Theravadan  
San Francisco Museum of Asian Art

*by rules of morality  
rites and rituals*

*or through what  
she thinks.  
Neither good  
nor evil  
affect her.  
She's given up  
the grasping self.  
Her action now  
is neither good  
nor bad.*

*(from 'Purity of Heart')*

One of the main subjects addressed in the poems is the role of attachment, particularly desire, in keeping us tied to an unsatisfying existence. From 'On Desire':

*No matter what you long for:  
a house, land, livestock, gold,  
serfs, servants, slaves,  
men, women, family,  
(innocent things of themselves)  
the longing overwhelms you  
till troubles bear down  
and suffering follows  
like water rushing into  
a leaky boat.*

*But if you're mindful  
you evade desire  
as easily as side-  
stepping a snake. You're free  
of the world's sticky  
traps.*

*Be mindful  
abandon desire  
bale out the boat  
& reach the further shore.*

'The further shore' is a traditional metaphor for enlightenment. The speaker in 'On Violence' explains

where exactly the shore lies and why we find it difficult to cross over to it:

*I call greed  
the great river  
and desire  
its current.  
Desire  
makes the river run.  
Our sense pleasures  
bog us down in mud,  
make it hard  
to cross over.*

In one of the liveliest poems, ‘The Cave’, the speaker leaves us in no doubt about the consequences of letting desire run our lives:

*You’re greedy  
intent on desire  
infatuated by desire  
mean.*

*You’re on the wrong track  
heading for a bad time.  
You wail, ‘What’ll happen to me  
when I die?’*

*I see you trembling  
with desire  
for a different state  
of mind,  
a sad wretch  
muttering in the mouth  
of death.*

Modern teachers tend to be much easier on us but this directness, combined with a sense of urgency, often appears in the verse cycle. In ‘Old Age’ we’re told:

*Life’s so short  
you’ll die  
before you turn  
a hundred.  
(Even if you don’t  
old age’ll get you  
in the end).*

*When what you cherish  
fades away  
you grieve  
but nothing’s  
permanent.  
You know  
owning things  
is meaningless  
so don’t get stuck  
in your comfortable*

*house.  
Everything you think  
is yours  
stays here  
when you die.  
Be wise:  
devote yourself  
to truth  
forget about  
owning things.*

And again in ‘The First Discourse on Disputes’:

*When you get stuck  
in your own beliefs  
& argue with others  
you’re likely to say,  
‘If you agree with me  
you know the truth  
& if you don’t  
you’re just not  
realised!’*

*The debate’s  
a slanging match.  
‘You’re stupid!’  
‘Well, you’re wrong!’  
Everyone says  
they’re right  
How can you know  
who is?*

*if you don’t agree  
with someone else  
you’re a fool  
worthless  
an ox.  
All fools  
are daft  
all of them  
stuck  
in their own beliefs.*

The kind of situation described in this poem arises nowadays as we are offered a variety of spiritual practices. I have had to learn to hold my tongue with friends in different traditions, who, no doubt with the best motives, want to convince me of the superiority of their style of practice. Practical approaches to this situation are given in the rest of the poem. (Information on how to access the complete poems is given at the end of the article).

The author (or authors—the text has no clear creator but comes from the time of oral transmission,



so it’s probably the work of several people) emphasises the importance of not clinging to opinions in several of the poems. In ‘Pasura, the Debater’ we read:

*Different people settle  
for different versions  
of the truth. You say  
your way’s  
best.  
You claim: this is  
the way to purity  
and only this.*

*You all gather  
to discuss the truth  
each one believing  
the other’s  
got it wrong.  
You base your claims  
on what others  
tell you.  
You quarrel  
wanting praise  
saying that you  
know best.*

*You’re arguing  
at a gathering  
hoping for praise  
fearing the failure  
which leaves you  
downcast  
furious at their jibes.  
How can you  
get them?*

The most dramatic poem is one from which I’ve already quoted,

*Continued on Page 6*

## FROM THE MANAGER

Tara MacLachlan

Happy 2008. I hope the New Year brings us all much peace, happiness and good health. I look forward to sharing in the continuing life and growth of the Blue Mountains Insight Meditation Centre.

Last year we had a very successful program of retreats. The second half of 2007 was very busy, although immediately after Sayādaw U Vivekananda's five week retreat winter was upon us and we had a little space to recover and regroup. I led a one day workshop in June and a weekend in August, and we had a 9 day retreat early July with Sayādaw U Paṇḍitā from Melbourne. This was the second time Sayādaw has taught here, which strengthened our ties with him and his centre in Springvale Melbourne. It also gave us a chance to meet his new *kappiya*, Soe Htet, and some of his supporting yogis from Melbourne (a few also being active members of the Buddhist Society of Victoria) who took the opportunity to visit and practise at our centre while sitting with one of their local teachers.

As the weather slowly began to warm up (or at least become less cold!), so did the retreat program. Sayādaw U Paññāthami continued his tradition of teaching our one dāna retreat for the year in August during the Vassa, which will again take place this year. This was followed in September by a 9 day retreat led by Patrick Kearney, the dhamma service weekend and the beginning of Michael Dash's long weekend. It was fortunate that we could get Patrick to teach a second retreat for the year as his teaching schedule continues to grow. He is already booked for September 2008 and perhaps this can become a regular time slot for him as well as his one month in January.

As always it was lovely to enjoy the company of yogis and supporters at the annual dhamma service weekend in September. We were able to spend some relaxing time together, catch up with old friends or make new ones, and get the grounds and buildings looking fantastic by the end of the time.

In October Steven Smith and Lynne Bousfield continued their teaching partnership with a nine day retreat, which will be repeated later this year, and in November Sayādaw U Lakkhaṇa arrived with his *kappiya*, Kyaw Htoo Aung for a stay of three weeks comprising two back to back retreats. Lesley Fowler led her second December weekend early in the month then came a

nine day retreat with Venerable Pannyavaro from Bodhi Tree Forest Monastery near Lismore.



At the completion of the 2007 program, Pixy and I, together with BMIMC's trusty 'guard dog', Lil, left the centre to spend the Christmas season with family in Melbourne. The day after the finish of the last retreat for the year—the nine days with Venerable Pannyavaro—we hit the road. We spent a few days travelling along the coast and had a very pleasant and relaxing break before returning, Pixy via Bali, for the new year.

BMIMC has a very exciting and full year ahead, with the 2008 program already underway. As usual we have started with Patrick's one month retreat, which began on January 2 with the full complement of yogis. People have come from many parts of Australia—Adelaide,

Brisbane, northern NSW, Sydney, Melbourne, even some Blue Mountain's locals—to attend this retreat as well as one yogi coming from the USA.

It is always inspiring to see how much effort people make to come and practise. It makes me appreciate what good teachers we are fortunate to have here and how good our little centre is. The centre is quite small, we accommodate less than 20 people at any one time; but I believe the nature of our particular practice tradition and the engaged teaching style which is offered here are complemented very well by its size

and set up. And although the committee continues to promote improvements, the centre is already gaining a reputation as a 'five-star' facility.

After this current January retreat there is a bit of a lull in February. I am taking advantage of the quiet month to escape for my own practice before things get too busy. During that time Pixy will be managing the centre with the support of several committee members and other supporters who have kindly volunteered their services.

Graham Wheeler will lead the first weekend for the

**Staff wanted.** We need an assistant manager to start after Easter or earlier. Please see our website or ring the centre for further information.



Stephen Smith and Lynne Bousfield

year in February, a very popular format and already fully booked. He is also running a one day workshop with Michael Dash for the first time in Sydney to cater for the local Sydney sangha and the high demand in general we have for short introductory meditation sessions. Another weekend is planned in early March to be led by Danny Taylor. We have the four day Easter retreat, which falls in late March. This will be led by the Venerable U Vamsarakhita. We are looking forward to welcoming him here for the first time.

Then in April the Venerable Ariya Ñāṇi will teach our first three month retreat. This is a significant event in the history of the centre and although a stand alone event, it is also something of a testing of the waters to see how the centre's staff, volunteer helpers and facilities stand up to a retreat of this length. We have many people already booked in for various periods of time from the full three months to ten day periods.

Since the last newsletter the staff situation has again changed. Aung Kyaw Myo has moved on after being at the centre for more than a year. So at present Pixy and I are here. Pixy is planning to stay until the end of July, when she intends to move to Melbourne and we will need to replace her. In the meantime Maggie Lavelle has stepped in to a flexible part time staff support role until April, and Beth Steff, who many of you would have met during her time on staff here previously, may be here for a month in the middle of the year.

As usual we have also had some great volunteer support over the last six months. The following people have come for various periods of time to assist in the kitchen during retreats or to help with gardening, shopping and other chores around the centre. They include Grant Keene, Brenda Myat, Leela Meehan, Khin Khin May, Daw Khin Pyone, Chris Jackson, Margaret Prentice, Paula James, Maggie Lane, Gayle Stanaway, Sandhya Jayawardhana, Sarah Brooks, Yoon Suk Hwang-Kearney, Justine Lee, Ian Baird, Gabrielle Cusack and Robyn Howell. And this list does not include the many people who helped during the dhamma service weekend. (My apologies to all of you not mentioned by name.)

Further work on the grounds was carried out in the latter part of 2007. The pathways between the main house, the dhamma hall and the accommodation blocks were completed and look great. They make a great improvement and allow smoother and safer movement between buildings. The next step is the installation of garden lights and a new hand rail, which are in process at present due to a very generous offer of dāna by members of the Aung family. Hope-

fully this work will be completed during the month of February in preparation for the busy time ahead.

So again, wishing you all a great '08 and hope to see you here at BMIMC.

With much metta  
Tara.

## Sustainability

The BMIMC Management Committee is interested in hearing from anyone who can suggest or advise us on measures that will improve the centre's environmental sustainability, including measures to reduce water consumption, reduce energy usage, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, etc.



Venerable Ariya Ñāṇi

Over the years the Centre has documented and implemented its environmental policies. Natural gas is used for hot water and the heating system. The garden is predominantly planted with native species requiring little or no watering. There is a compost system for food and garden waste, and sewerage is treated on-site using an enviro-cycle system (although this will change to mains sewer in the coming months). Fluorescent energy saving light bulbs have been installed.

However the Committee recognises that there is probably more that can be done to reduce the Centre's 'ecological footprint'. We're keen to hear from anyone who could donate some special expertise in the area. Please telephone or email the Centre if you or someone you know might be interested.

## Landscaping and gardening

A short stroll through the grounds and gardens quickly gives rise to an appreciation of the environment management of the Centre. The landscaping custodial role (on the management committee) reflects this. The person taking the role ideally has expertise comprising skills in basic garden maintenance, such as mulching and pruning; a good understanding of weeds and weed management, including bush regeneration skills and knowledge of herbicide use; knowledge of plant selection (the policy has been to plant natives); and oversight of the paths and walking tracks, keeping a balance between formality and informality.

With the removal of the large pine tree on the boundary, this area will need some work before new gardens can be planned. Here, weeds such as holly and blackberry have been cut back, and in the near future, their summer regrowth will need to be recut and spot-poisoned. If you are interested in assisting in some way with this work, please contact the centre.

# Translating the Buddha

continued from Page 3

‘On Violence’:

*The response to violence  
is fear. I'll tell you  
about the dismay I felt  
when I saw people  
hurting each other.*

*They struggled like fish  
fighting  
in a drying creek  
and I was scared.*

*The world's  
not stable,  
everything's  
in flux.  
I wanted a place  
to be safe  
from change  
but there was  
nowhere.*

*In the end I was  
disgusted  
by their hostility.  
That's when I saw  
the barb  
worked deep  
into the tissue  
of their hearts.*

*When the barb  
pierces someone's heart  
she runs first one way  
then another;  
when the barb's  
drawn out  
she neither runs  
confused  
nor falls down  
weary.*

The barb, of course, is attachment and the poem goes on to outline the wise way to respond and find the safe place within us.

Other poems in the verse cycle outline teachings like dependant origination. (They are less satisfying to read in the kind of short quotation I've included here).

‘The Fast Way to Freedom’ begins with the questions we all ask. The ‘great sage’ at the beginning is the

Buddha.

*Great sage!  
Close kinsman of the sun!  
Teach me about  
peace and non-attachment.  
How can a monk  
see enough  
to grow calm?  
Give up grasping hold  
of worldly things?*

*The great sage  
Buddha  
said, “Be wise. Side-  
step the traps  
that trick you  
into believing  
that ‘you are’.  
It's a delusion.  
Whatever deep desires  
you may have  
practise for their  
extinction.  
Be mindful  
all the time.”*

Later in the poem comes the answer we all want:

*Find peace within.  
Don't look for it  
elsewhere.  
Someone who's calm  
takes nothing  
casts nothing  
aside.*

*Be as still  
as the centre  
of the ocean.*

May we all find the stillness at the centre of the ocean.

The complete translation is available as a free download from [www.buddhanet.net](http://www.buddhanet.net) (go to e-books).

*I would like to dedicate this  
article to the memory of  
Primoz Pecenko and Silvana  
del Sole.—L.F.L.*

# Committee news



It is some time since we mentioned the management committee, which oversees the overall health and direction of the Centre. It meets four times a year. Most members take a custodian role (or portfolio responsibility).

Long serving member **Ian Baird** has resigned after some eight years on the committee, relinquishing his position as custodian of the Centre's grounds and gardens (see page 5 for details). From early days, Ian planned and supervised the development of the gardens from a wild and overgrown state to their current functional beauty. Much of the retaining walls, paving and native plantings are his work, a lasting legacy of his dedication to the Centre.

We thank Ian for his wonderful contribution and wish him well in his studies (Ian is completing his PhD on the rare giant dragonfly, found only in hanging swamps such as those of the Blue Mountains—Ed.)



Right: Ian Baird in the swamp

# Fundraising and other news

John McIntyre  
Publicity and Fundraising

As supporters will be aware, our fundraising efforts over the last year or so have concentrated on the upgrading of paths and walkways.

Thanks to the generosity of many donors, this is now nearing completion with the last stage being the 'teacher's path' from the dhamma hall to the stupa area, dining room and front verandah and the installation of lights and handrails (see Manager's page). The work has made a huge difference to the ease with which meditators can move between buildings and is an improvement much appreciated by all.

The management committee will in 2008 again be considering the future development of the Centre and reviewing our existing planning approval. Any further development of the centre was limited until Sydney Water's extension of the sewer to Medlow Bath. Now this limitation has been removed and it is possible to contemplate the further development of the centre. As we do, our fundraising efforts this coming Vesak will continue to build up our reserves for future building projects.

## Day of Mindfulness in Sydney

Graham Wheeler and Michael Dash will lead a Day of Mindfulness in Sydney on Sunday 6 April at the Villa Maria Monastery in Hunters Hill. This is a chance to deepen meditation practice in the tranquil grounds of the monastery. There will be periods of silent sitting and walking meditation with guidance from two teachers from BMIMC. The day will be structured so that it is suitable for both beginners and more experienced meditators.

Please book through BMIMC. Cost: \$30. Arrive at 9.30 am and finish at 3.30 pm. Please bring your own lunch and sitting cushion or stool. Tea & coffee will be supplied. Venue: The Colin Library, Marist Centre, Villa Maria Monastery, 1 Mary Street, Hunters Hill, (off Ryde Road).

## Helping Hands Network

Helping Hands Network is a Burmese charity run by Mrs Khin Baw (mother of Theresa Baw, a member of the BMIMC management committee). The charity assists promising university students in Burma who could not otherwise afford to go to university.

Since 2006, the Centre has contributed towards the living expenses of a second year medical student at Megui Medical College in Burma for half a year. We have recently received a letter and photo from the student, expressing his gratitude for our assistance. We wish him every success in his studies.

## Sydney and Canberra Groups

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

*Canberra.* 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 group is led by Lesley Fowler, [lesleyf@netspeed.com.au](mailto:lesleyf@netspeed.com.au) or alternatively, Sue Holmes on [sue\\_holmes1808@yahoo.com](mailto:sue_holmes1808@yahoo.com). Bring your own cushions or bench.



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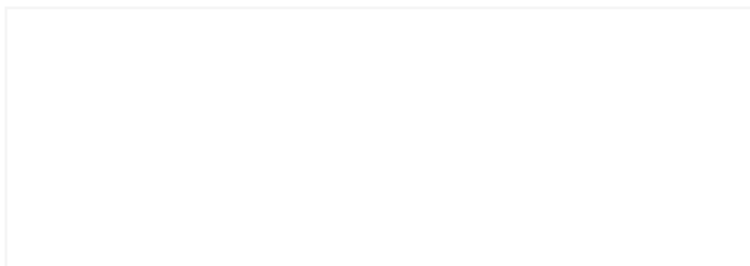
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