



GAIA HOUSE

INSIGHT MEDITATION IN THE BUDDHIST TRADITION



news | spring 2010



Introduction

Our ongoing commitment to greening is taken forward another step in this edition, using 100% recycled paper originally from sustainable sources, as shown by our FSC stamp. For more information on the progressive greening of Gaia House, see page 11.

We have also changed the presentation of the newsletter slightly, trying to bring it a bit more up to date while retaining an understated, light feel to it. Feedback on the newsletter is rare, but please do email, write or phone if you have an opinion.

The website has also undergone a lot of change recently, and we hope that it provides a much better service to anyone wanting to find out about us or what we do. We hope to introduce an automated online booking system later this year, improving our service, accessibility and responsiveness further still.

On the subject of changes, winter retreatants may be interested to learn that the Trust is investigating going renewable with our heating system.

We would like to invest in a wood chip boiler, and then to rework a lot of the ancient pipes and radiators snaking through the building.

In this issue of the newsletter we are quite engaged. Rob Burbea travels to the UN climate change talks in Copenhagen, reflecting upon life and practice off the cushion. I walk you through the challenges of my first six months in post and the ups and downs of Gaia House behind the scenes. At our very own cutting edge, Rachel Davies regales you with the arrivals and departures of those remarkable men and women who make day-to-day life at Gaia House so special, who make retreats into such a smooth and careful operation: the coordinators. For those with a desire to balance their practice with a broader knowledge base, you can find out about a study programme beginning next year.

Andy Power
Director

A word from our Trustees

Spring is upon us, providing a welcome change after the long winter with its mixed bag of beautiful snowy landscapes and freezing ice and rain. At the same time, the world around us is also in change, as the General Election looms and the various parties scabble to set out their stalls. It is at times of so much change that we are particularly happy to be part of the large community who make Gaia House possible and who share a deep belief in the importance of its quiet refuge, away from the ceaseless demands of the material world, where people can come to explore different, deeper aspects of existence.

There has also been change within the organisation. We are delighted with Andy's first six months as Director, during which time he has built on the wonderful work done by previous directors Kate Fyfe and Leya Ostell. His enthusiasm and capabilities have added to those of the coordinators, managers and teachers and we are delighted to have him as part of the team. We are also delighted to welcome a new trustee, Sarah Hamilton, who came on board at last December's Trust meeting. Sarah brings a wealth of experience from her private sector and charity sector work, particularly in relation to strategic marketing, design and project management, and we are very fortunate to have her join us.

On that front, we would repeat our open invitation that anyone interested in becoming a trustee should contact Andy. We would be particularly interested to hear from local inhabitants and/or people with formal training and a good understanding of accountancy and finance (as, it seems, would many banks and the Treasury!). But these skills are not a prerequisite and we welcome approaches from any experienced practitioners at Gaia House who would like to support the organisation by becoming a trustee. You would be joining an eclectic bunch of varying age, experience and profession, all of whom are bound together by a deep desire to maintain the wonderful offering that is Gaia House.

As we head towards the summer, we move into the busier part of the retreat schedule and we look forward to welcoming many of you back. Please do take a moment to thank the coordinators and managers, who all do such an amazing job of supporting the teachers and making retreats run as effortlessly as possible. And, whoever and wherever you are, may your practice go well and may you be happy, at peace and free.

Rob Sully
Trustee

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Giving voice to compassion...

Reflections on a journey



In December 2009, Resident Teacher Rob Burbea and a number of practitioners associated with Gaia House made the journey by train to Copenhagen to be there during the UN summit on climate change. Here he offers some reflections on the experience and on aspects of compassion and engagement.

Back in England, at St Pancras Station, saying goodbye as folks began to go their separate ways, Rachel said something beautiful – “It felt like a kind of pilgrimage.” The others seemed to share that sense keenly, and certainly for me it had very much felt that way.

The truth is, even in the first stages of mulling over the possibility of going, I had, just privately, envisioned it as a kind of ‘prayer’. But foolishly, not even consciously, maybe I had thought that perhaps people wouldn’t understand. So when we originally sent out the email inviting Dharma practitioners to join us in Copenhagen, we wrote that we wanted ‘to be there together as a peaceful presence to ask world leaders to agree to a deal that would respond adequately to the climate emergency facing the planet and human civilisation’.

And of course that was true. We were there for that, with a request for decisions and results, to be a few more bodies for the count, to try and persuade the politicians, (though not so completely naive to believe that our being there would, in itself, make that much significant difference.)

But somehow it felt like there were also other dimensions and reasons for going, reasons which perhaps may not make much sense to a solely ‘practical’ or ‘rational’ mind-set. A desire to be there to give voice to something very deep and very (dare I say it?) precious. Regardless of the outcome. To stand and walk in alignment with our deepest care and truth. To sing the indestructible song of human care, no matter what. We wanted to make a pilgrimage, to pray.

And just to be there. And to bear witness to humanity at a major crossroads, at what seemed to be such a potentially pivotal and powerful moment in human history, not knowing what we will choose together, nor what the future will bring. And in that prayer to be willing to open the heart to the pain and the joy of it all. To drink it all in. All the complexity, all the confusion, all the care, the togetherness, the celebration and appreciation of humanity...and all the seeming indifference too.

The morning after the march, some of us went to the Klimaforum, (one of the alternative ‘summits’ in Copenhagen running parallel to the UN Summit), where there was a vast wealth and range of workshops and lectures on all kinds of aspects of the climate change emergency and the implementation of possible solutions. The first workshop Hannah and I went to was on ‘Debt, Trade, Finance, Agriculture and Climate Change’. Hard not to feel despair and grief sitting there and learning of the ways that climate change is being supported by colossal and complex global financial systems that are inextricably woven into our modern globalised civilisation. NGOs are only just beginning to uncover how vast amounts of public funds (from our taxes) are re-invested as private funds and then into offshore accounts not obliged to disclose their investments, but often investing in projects that at best have a huge carbon footprint, and at worst are causing large-scale environmental destruction and degradation. Investing, for instance, in massive hydroelectric dam projects in Nepal and north-eastern India, displacing thousands from their homes and causing havoc with those regional ecosystems, without benefiting the local population in terms of jobs or even, strangely, power for their own grids (it all gets exported!). Given both the existing legal right to secrecy and the complexity of global financial mechanisms, it is very difficult to even trace the movement of these multi-billion pound funds, let alone hold any one to account.

Hard too to be in the same room and hear from her own mouth the young woman from Ecuador who said that since Texaco arrived 40 years ago to extract oil, the rates of cancers and kidney disease have soared, and yet without any acknowledgement or apology or legal compensation by Texaco. We may read about this sort of thing in the newspaper. Somehow though, being right next to her, it brought home the pain of it, almost viscerally. Real flesh-and-blood human suffering.

‘Compassion’ in the Dharma is a mix of qualities, including empathy and the desire or energy to heal, to alleviate suffering. Often in compassion practice these two qualities can become imbalanced. Practitioners can tend to unwittingly focus too much on the empathy (taking in and opening to the suffering of others) at the

expense of feeling the lovely, even pleasant, qualities of the outflow of ‘healing’ energy. This will usually result in ‘compassion fatigue’ and fear of opening to suffering. So if we want our compassion to sustain and be steady, and if we want to be courageous in the face of the suffering in the world, we need to play with this balance in our practice so that compassion feels, on the whole, to be a ‘happy’ state. Yet there are times when we should, and will naturally want to, let ourselves descend to the dark places, to feel the magnitude of the pain in the world, the scope of the unfolding tragedy, to open to the unimaginable enormity of it all, trusting and knowing that we can rebalance ourselves again and regain our buoyancy, so that we can serve in some way.

Because as practitioners, and as humans even, we must act and choose and not simply feel. ‘Compassion is a verb’, Thich Nhat Hanh famously says. And it is many things, multi-faceted and multi-dimensional – our jewel treasure, our gift, part of the core of our humanity. Yes, it manifests naturally, but we very much need to care for it, to nurture it, because it can wither, shrink and dry up in us in so many ways. Yet if we can care for it and water it, and let it manifest and express in our lives more and more, we see it holds one of the most powerful keys to our freedom in life, to a whole different sense of being in the world, and even a whole different sense of ‘reality’.

On the way back from the march, Hannah said, “It’s funny, my feet ache from all this walking, but it somehow feels like a very different feeling than if I’d spent the day walking around Copenhagen sightseeing, for myself. The ache feels different walking for all beings.” On the scale of it neither the discomforts of the journey, the sleeplessness and the minor aches etc... of the body, or (for some) the expense of the trip were really that much to bear, yet Hannah’s observation voiced a glimpse of something profound and important.

When we do something for the welfare of others, when we are willing to take on some unpleasantness or even pain for the sake of others’ happiness and well-being, this transforms our experience of the moment. We are no longer approaching the experience through the habitual lens and orientation of self, of ‘What’s in it for me?’. And, as all that we experience is empty of inherent existence, dependent on the way we see it, the experience opens up, it lightens, as it is not burdened and solidified by so much self-view. This is one of the secrets to the Bodhisattva’s practice of ‘Exchanging the Happiness of Self and Other’. The more we begin to realise this, the more we want to and feel able to give and to give up (our comfort, our convenience, our sense pleasures, even our seeming ‘securities’)

for the welfare of others. And so it goes round... We carve out a greater and greater capacity in the heart for service, for offering, for love.

Perhaps it's not easy to admit, but it might be true to say that one of the factors supporting climate change is our lack of feeling strongly and deeply enough our connection with each other; so that somehow it becomes easier not to attend to or prioritise the plight of those 'far away' and 'out of sight' in the Third World, those who will likely suffer most immediately and terribly as the climate becomes more destabilised. We may not always say it or even consciously think it, but with this unawareness of our oneness and interconnection easily comes the attitude of 'me (and my) first'.

I think we all found it beautiful and inspiring on the march to see all that glorious expression of human care and indomitable vitality, all the diverse creativity and good humour on display. To feel oneself part of the miracle of humanity and its endless resourcefulness. On the train back to Devon, we read an English newspaper, which seemed to be mostly reporting on the arrests of activists in Copenhagen. We wondered if we'd been on the same demonstration! We felt we had experienced a very large, celebratory and joyful congregation, walking together extremely harmoniously. If there was some unrest or even ill-will, it was a very small part of the whole.

The evening after the march, yet another gift! We found a cheap vegetarian restaurant that had been put together for the fortnight of the talks catering to demonstrators and those attending the alternative forums etc... Two professional chefs volunteered their services, and a collection of locals volunteered as waiting staff. What a wonderful atmosphere of goodwill! The chef seemed literally overjoyed at cooking for us, and she and the waiters and waitresses were given the most raucous applause of appreciation and gratitude by the hundred or more hungry demonstrators and activists.

We sat at a table there with a group of others including a young American student of environmental studies, and Gavin asked him if he thought the demonstration that day (an estimated 100,000 marched, we had heard) would make any difference to the politicians at the Summit. He replied that he thought it might make a little impact, but that perhaps what was more significant was the support that being there gave to all the activists and NGO groups, those who day in and day out do the difficult work of trying to mobilise change in the way we as a species care for the earth and for each other. I don't do that work everyday. It feels important to support and nourish those that do, to give them a sense that it is worth them keeping on. It feels like we owe them a

lot. And it must be easy for them to despair sometimes, to feel that not enough people are really listening or care enough. I hadn't really realised that that too was a reason for being there.

Sitting in the Klimaforum lectures and workshops and witnessing just how much care and intelligence and thoughtfulness there is in the service of combating climate change and the structures that support it was impressive and inspiring. And yet I also couldn't help noticing how these parallel forums, despite all that intelligence and research and creativity, did not seem to be adequately funded, (and certainly of course not funded anything like equally to the UN Summit!). The microphones and sound systems in the first lecture kept failing so it was hard to hear for many, and then as those speaking started to speak louder, a TV cameraman came in from next door where they were filming a workshop and asked us the speakers to speak more quietly! It seemed a shame that the brightness and willingness to act that was present in that hall was not being supported financially to any degree that might enable it to begin to make a difference in the world.

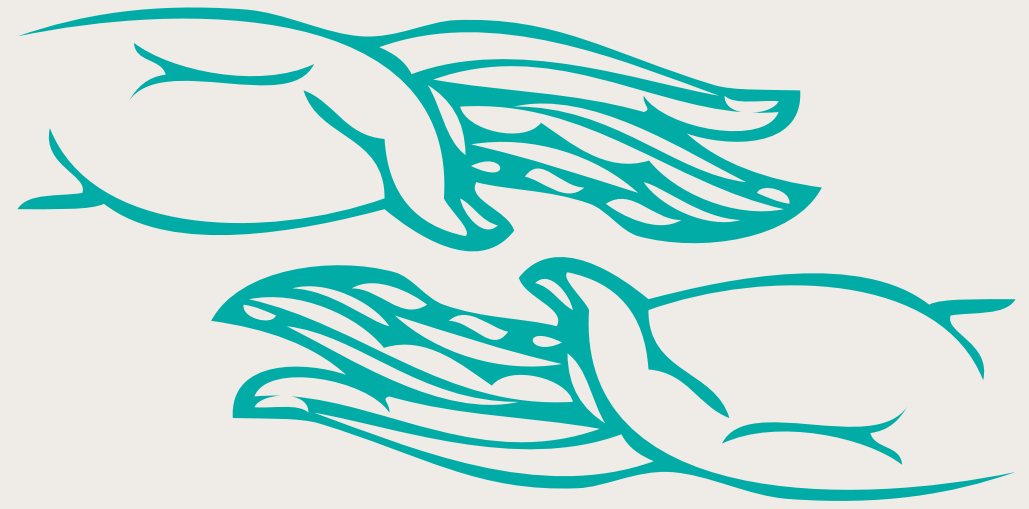
And it was also the case, it seemed to me, that some (not all, I'm sure) of those activists in the room were easily, perhaps understandably, drawn into mind-states of divisiveness and blame and anger. And again, though I could be wrong, some perhaps did not seem to intuit that at root the multiple crises of the planet (global climate destabilisation, species extinction, the degradation of the environment, over-population, world poverty, the decline in natural resources etc...) are spiritual crises, symptoms and manifestations, now obvious on a global scale, of greed, aversion and delusion, to put it in Buddhist terms.

If that is so, it seems necessary that together we address the crisis on that level, as well, of course, as on the immediate practical level. And as practitioners this may just be part of what we have to offer in the way we meet the issues –

by speaking up, acting, making choices, being involved, but without feeding blame, divisiveness, anger and fear;

and also by never losing sight of the need to inquire into and to address deeply the root causes and conditions of this common dukkha, to work to try to support a collective change in human attitudes and consciousness, in the ways we see and relate to the earth and to each other –

even as the debates and consequences of climate change and environmental degradation become more heated and more intrusive and demanding in all of our lives.



Both of these aspects may be easier said than done. Sometimes, when reflecting on our own relationship with all this, we may realise that we do not speak up much or change our actions and choices too much. In 2008, David Loy and others edited a book called 'A Buddhist Response to The Climate Emergency', which contained many thoughtful, insightful and moving reflections on the climate crisis and its psycho-spiritual roots, yet, as one reviewer pointed out, on the whole there still seems a relative paucity of (even suggested) concerted action on the part of the wider Buddhist Sanghas to really take a stand on climate change.

I feel it's important to ask ourselves why that might be. What's in the way? (While the tangle of reasons why we as a species do not seem to be meeting this challenge with a great enough sense of priority is complex in the extreme, surely it behoves us as Dharma practitioners to inquire into our own choices, hesitations, confusions, and the cauldron of inner forces operating, just as we might in our practice in relation to purely 'personal' dukkha? Even this much is way beyond the scope of this article, but I want to offer, in the briefest sketches, a few of the possible factors at play within us.)

I wonder if one aspect may be that traditionally Buddhist practitioners have always been 'better at' (certainly more inclined and habituated to) meditating rather than taking action. While we may feel our practice to be primarily meditative and our sanghas to be a support for that, perhaps we don't really, for the most part, think of our practice or our sanghas as active, and as taking action together or supporting each other in life-style changes and other choices that may impact the way we live or even the way the sangha operates.

So, is there something more we could collectively be doing together? Some ways of taking action together and supporting each other in that? Is it possible for sanghas to send a clearer and louder message of real and manifest care? There are many possibilities. For instance, do we want to, individually and collectively as a sangha, examine our attitudes to flying? (Not necessarily easy, or simple.) Do we want to inquire into and challenge the subtle and seductive reach of consumerism into our lives? (Also not necessarily easy.) Do we want to find real ways to support each other in lowering our personal carbon footprints, and prioritise finding ways that Dharma centres can do the same? And find ways of becoming more educated and involved together? Can we unleash our innate creativity and resourcefulness around this? If the Dharma is really to take root and flourish in a healthy and vital way in the West long-term, it seems to me that both the contemplative and the active, engaged dimensions need to be included equally. The true fullness and expression of wisdom and compassion must require both.

Sometimes, in inquiring into what may be 'in the way', if we look inside really honestly, it may even be that we realise that we don't actually seem to care that much. What is happening here? Sometimes this is in fact a sense of despair or defeat in disguise. Or perhaps it all seems unreal or unbelievable, or doesn't seem to concern us. One potential dark shadow side of spiritual and psychological inner work is that it becomes just another manifestation of 'me first' - 'me and my practice, me and my process, me and my problems'. Understandable sometimes, but a dangerous trap, a cul-de-sac of limiting and ultimately painful self-contraction. Can we find ways and resources together



and will help us to act, to choose, to speak up for the welfare of all, especially when these things do not feel easy. And the more we choose that way, the more those qualities are developed in us and actually bring a whole other dimension of joy, of freedom. And then the stronger and wider and more capable of giving the heart becomes, or realises itself already to be... And so it goes round... how beautiful and how blessed... the opposite of samsara.

Rob Burbea is Resident Teacher at Gaia House, and a co-founder of Sanghaseva, an organisation dedicated to exploring the Dharma through service work internationally.

to open our sensitivities to the cries of the Earth and the plight of those not granted a voice?

And again, if we investigate a little more carefully, we see that, both individually and collectively, of course fear usually plays a role in our resistance to making certain choices or (what can seem like) sacrifices. There are so many possible ways, often not even immediately obvious, in which fears can manipulate our thinking and feeling with respect to these crises and their implications. It may not be easy at all, but it's pivotally important to expose and challenge these pathways of fear, without condemning ourselves.

Because what can also stall and corrupt the whole process is the all-too-frequent presence of the 'inner critic' and the 'self-judge'. Here we may get stuck in feelings of guilt about it all, or, perhaps fearing that we might feel guilty, we disconnect before we feel much at all. The 'inner critic' can turn everything into a case for self-recrimination or a desperate trying to prove we are 'good enough', so that it then becomes so much more difficult, or sometimes even close to impossible, to find a genuine desire to stretch ourselves for love. How to proceed when that particular inner structure is operating may not be obvious.

But to offer that fullness of response as practitioners we need to find ways to see through all that prevents us. I truly hope that together we can help and support one another in these explorations, that we can uncover ways to be catalysts, fomenters of a deeper opening of the heart in ourselves and in each other.

And as we do it will become more and more clear that we cannot offer our fullness just by sitting in meditation (mindfully or with a feeling of compassion) or just by activism, acting and choosing in the world, without the supports of wisdom, compassion, fearlessness, equanimity and non-reactivity. As we begin to walk it, we gradually begin to see how the path works: that these qualities we cultivate in meditation should

FOCUS ON RETREATS...

The Path of Compassion

Jenny Wilks and Paul Burrows

Fri 24 – Sun 26 Sept 2010

Retreat Code: 10160

Cost: £102 (£87) £122

Compassion is an integral part of Insight Meditation practice. It both expresses and nurtures awakening. This weekend we will explore how Insight Meditation activates a compassionate attitude towards ourselves and others, and how compassion supports the arising of insight. Newcomers welcome.

Paticca-Samuppada and Jhana: Dependent Co-origination and the Meditative Absorptions

Leigh Brassington

Fri 1 – Sun 10 Oct 2010

Retreat Code: 10161

Cost: £324 (£276) £389

This retreat combines the two main elements of the Buddha's model of liberation: cultivating the meditative absorptions (jhanas), which lead to calm clarity, along with insight into the dependent co-origination (paticca-samuppada) of phenomena. We will look at selected texts from the Pali suttas, including the famous Satipatthana Sutta, to highlight both meditation practice and the teachings of dependent co-origination.

Free Sitting Time update

Ex-managers who gave service to Gaia House prior to 2002 earned Free Sitting Time (FST) like all of those who have served since. But, in 2002 the rules were changed to give all FST earned afterwards a limited validity of no more than 5 years. It has been a difficult question as to what to do about the pre-2002 liability, since it would have been unfair to apply retrospective rules and yet it is equally unfair not to afford more recent managers the same privilege. We feel that we have now reached a resolution on this long-standing discussion, however.

The Trust has decided that allowing a total of 13 years to use up FST is fair, and is bringing pre-2002 FST into line with existing policy. Those possessing 30 days or more FST dating from before 2002 will have their balance converted to 30 days on 1 June 2010, and this will be valid until 1 June 2015 only.

Those possessing less than 30 days outstanding FST from before 2002 will carry this balance forward, but it will expire on 1 June 2015.

We hope that this decision gives all of those concerned adequate time to use their FST, while acknowledging that leaving this liability permanently open represents an increasing bill whose value was very different a decade ago.

If you wish to discuss this further, please contact us on admin@gaiahouse.co.uk.



How the Retreat Support Fund can help you

The Retreat Support Fund (RSF) is a vital financial support for many people coming on retreat to Gaia House. In my role as Admin Manager I look after applications for this financial support and ensure that the funding is distributed to those most in need. The fund continues to be supported by cancelled retreat payments, direct donations and the Group Retreat sponsor rate. It always humbles me to see how generous so many of you are to this wonderful facility that we are able to offer.

I'd like to share some details from 2009, as I think it important to recognise the generosity that supports this fund and the needs that benefit from it. In 2009, 460 people contributed either via direct RSF donations or via the sponsor rate. We were therefore able to support 380 people to come on retreat. This covered all types of retreats, from those attending a Group Retreat weekend to 2-week, 4-week and even 3-month Bursary Personal Retreats.

But, there is always more that we can do. I am aware that some people who need financial support are unwilling to ask for it, so miss out on opportunities to stay with us and benefit from what we have to offer. Please do not hesitate, as we are keen to help within the limits of what is available: this fund is there to be used. If the cost of staying with us is still too much even at RSF-subsidised prices, then in exceptional circumstances we can offer further support. Please contact me at Gaia House to discuss how we can help you.

Please accept my continued bow of appreciation for the huge amount of generosity that you have collectively shown towards this facility. It is important to realise that your individual acts of generosity often help others in quite profound and life-changing ways.

Sarah Abdy

Admin Manager – Gaia House
admin@gaiahouse.co.uk



Gaia House's true success

Gaia House is an apparent success: around 2,000 people visit each year, staying an average of 6 nights. It seems to work really well, whatever 'work' means. But we know little of what happens afterwards: who never returns, and why; and how Mindfulness impacts day-to-day lives overall. To research this accurately, or even judge it, would be pretty difficult. Yet, out there in daily life is where we really hope to make a difference.

My own learning curve in daily life has been steep since I took over as Director at Gaia House last year. Previous experiences of responsibility were no preparation. But what could be difficult about working somewhere where everybody appears to be so nice, so calm? I will try to explain.

I am no football fan, but the resignation in March of Ian Watmore, Chief Executive of the Football Association, captured my interest. Leaving "in frustration at the impotence of his role", he had been unable to reconcile the interests of the FA, the FA council, the football league and the Department for

Culture, Media and Sport. Thwarted initiatives and fruitless negotiations had ground him down: the search for common ground, the balancing act of concessions, the expectations around others' willingness to compromise. I imagine a sense of personal exposure, of humiliation at repeated failures to create constructive relationships, and a feeling that he had exhausted his reserves of power and charm.

At Gaia House, trustees, teachers, staff (including me), co-ordinators, occasional volunteers and retreatants all have legitimate interests. We all also have the uncanny human ability to be sometimes insightful, compassionate or charming, or clumsy, upset, proud or angry, as our relative make-up, moods and experiences persuade us, in pursuit of the unending process of moving forward. Working at Gaia House, the same conflicts, difficulties or even humiliations that are a part of organisational work life still come up.

Predictably, this can be very painful. But navigating through others' views whilst respecting both theirs and one's own is a painful experience, revealing

skilfully, people 'should' be wiser. I, of course, become the arbiter of wisdom.

It is understandable if Ian Watmore experienced enough of these 'shoulds' to overwhelm him, leaving him unable to foresee cooperative behaviour through those judgements. Dealing with the messiness of human relationships is exhausting and disillusioning, especially in a world that persuades us that a tidy idyllic life 'should' be attainable through cash or graft. It is much easier to judge, dismiss, and look elsewhere, where the 'shoulds' may come true next time. Yet, for his own peace, Ian's decision was probably a right one – his 'shoulds' were undoubtedly stubbornly reciprocated by his adversaries.

For those who are wondering where I'm going with this, a small, uncelebrated but revolutionary depth to those I work with at Gaia House intervenes here. The difference I have found in them is the intention to try to see beyond 'shoulds', judgements and pride; to allow themselves and others to get it wrong sometimes; to admit mistakes without this meaning they or anyone else were 'wrong' or 'right'; and so, to go back, repair and reconnect when things calm down again. Most importantly, they understand the importance of reconnecting. That difference takes a lot of adjusting to, some letting go of old habits.

If some of that intention rubs off on me, or on anyone who comes on retreat here, then Gaia House is a success. If Ian Watmore reads this, we can offer him a reduced rate.

Andy Power
Director

vulnerabilities all around. In compensation, a strong defensive sense of 'should' readily comes into play when aspirations are high. People 'should' be more understanding, people 'should' be less attached to their views, people 'should' communicate more

The greening continues...

We were delighted to reconnect our sewage outlet into a new 'Bio-rock' sewage treatment system in January after our shutdown. While this may sound unglamorous, it has been an important step for us in our greening programme. Previously, we had an ancient Victorian septic tank which was inadequate in treating the sewage and which needed emptying four times a year. Now, we expect to empty it every three to four years, and the final effluent is way ahead of UK environmental standards. Sited behind the Hermitage Wing, it is not yet the most aesthetically pleasing installation, but with a bit of landscaping and growth over the summer, we expect it to fade into the background.

The plan to drill a borehole for our water is still alive, but a number of problems with drillers and installers have repeatedly delayed this project. We will report back with developments.

It will be a relief to many that with rising oil prices and its often dubious performance, we have been investigating replacing our heating system. A wood chip boiler is the favoured choice, but we would have to replace a lot of pipework and radiators in the house as well, to achieve best efficiency and economy in the long term. Altogether, this makes for quite a bill, so trustees are wrestling with the decision at the moment. If we proceed, then a fundraising campaign will be needed as well as grants, to be able to afford it all.



Top row: Rae Davies, Tony O'Connor, Maggie Feeny. Inset: Owen Barnett
Bottom row: Gerald Virtbauer, Isla Macdonald, Juliet Grace, Cari Stubbs

Generosity and goodwill in abundance

Part of what makes Gaia House so beautiful is that it is here because of offerings of time freely given. The teachers, the volunteers, the trustees and the co-ordinators offer their services to Gaia House and to the Dharma out of good will, and this makes Gaia House particularly special. Co-ordinators also live at Gaia House and I've been reflecting on what an offering this is. Much has to be given up to come here, but despite this, co-ordinators leave time and again with a sense of having gained so much in the giving of service. Long may this continue.

Aoife Valley left last autumn after having offered a year of hard work in a particularly busy reception. She has returned to Ireland and hopes to set up a small meditative community. Good luck and huge thanks to Aoife for her service. Doug Aitkin hung up his gardening gloves in November after 18 months of tending the garden with care. He's now taken on a house and garden nearby with perhaps even more challenges than Gaia's. Big thanks to Doug for his offerings and his friendly smile. Neil Croom left at the beginning of this year after 18 months of taking meticulous care in the household department, creating marvellous room plans, and developing the smallest handwriting known to man or woman. Much appreciation to Neil for all he brought to Gaia House. Also recently left is Gavin Milne, who stepped outside of his comfort zone to offer his work in the kitchen having never really cooked before. His giant leap into the world of lentils and tofu produced some fine food, and his selfless generosity and kindness will be missed. Many thanks to Gavin.

Gerald Virtbauer arrived in September from the Upaya centre in the States to take on reception, as well as finishing a PhD and writing articles about Buddhism and psychotherapy in his spare time. How does he do it? Welcome to Gerald. Cari Stubbs who took over in the garden in November, having had experience in permaculture and organic farms, also has interesting stories about her travels in Europe and Africa in a big bus. We also welcomed Rae Davies into the household department in January, who, having recently sat several long retreats at Gaia House, brings lovely yogi energy with her. And we also said hello to Maggie Feeny in kitchen, an artist from Brighton, who has already impressed us with her cooking.

Gaia House couldn't be what it is without the coordinators. Many thanks for their deep expressions of service.

Rachel Davies - Retreat Manager

Upcoming Coordinator Positions:

We are looking for a **Reception Coordinator** to take over in September 2010, a **Garden Coordinator** to take over in August 2010 and a **Maintenance Coordinator** for November 2010.

For the reception post, you will need to be computer-literate, and the gardening position needs someone with quite a lot of gardening experience.

If you would like to apply, or have any questions, please call 01626 333613, or email admin@gaiahouse.co.uk.

Rough Diamonds

I arrived at Gaia House in the summer of 2008, after a fairly long period spent in retreat mode. I had basically two overarching motivations: It felt like time for the spiritual practice to 'hit the tarmac' in a supportive environment, and it felt like a good time to offer an extended period of service to the Dharma. I wanted to be able to meet some of the trickier aspects of my being, but in a form that supported opening and awakening rather than a closing down. Working a job that enabled others to do the same felt purposeful, and was an ideal response to both callings. I had been on retreat at Gaia House back in 2004, and knew I would return, I just wasn't sure in what capacity. When I came across the advert for a Kitchen Manager on a monastery noticeboard in Sussex, it felt like the right place at the right time.

The only 'wrong' part was the kitchen bit. I had only just about managed to feed myself through the years, so cooking for up to 90 people felt a bit beyond me. I promptly replied to the advert, but not for kitchen, rather the Reception Manager post that was listed in smaller writing immediately below, and would be commencing later in the year.

Without going into the finer details of what then unfolded, it was the extractor fan in the kitchen that I switched on at the start of each working morning – not the reception computer. Perhaps things do happen for a reason, and much of my involvement with Gaia House has indeed felt like a journey that needed to happen. However, the day I was left to my own devices in the kitchen I remember the fear levels being pretty high, and it did not feel like a place I was meant to be. During those first few weeks, I wasn't sure if I'd ever become comfortable in there – but I kept stirring the pots!

I found the support at Gaia House excellent, both within the manager group and the wider community, and with teachers and facilitators close at hand, it was hard not to begin to treat any situation as an opportunity. I sometimes did create my own obstacles, but as the weeks passed the possibilities for meeting challenges became increasingly apparent. Somewhat surprisingly, it was a deepening acknowledgment of my own humanness and vulnerability that seemed to pave the way; something that I'd struggled with most of my life. Strong habit patterns reared their head in community, but at Gaia it felt like I was granted deepening levels of permission, both from myself, and those around me. It was sometimes a bumpy ride, but the direction remained towards relinquishing control, letting go and trusting that I was allowed to be as I was in any moment: community providing the grist.

I like the imagery of a bag full of rough diamonds having the effect of smoothing a stone over time. It isn't always easy living in a community, and I think the idea that any spiritual community should be immune to human imperfections is a flawed one. Personalities don't always gel, and besides illuminating my own tendencies towards maintaining comfortable relations, my time at Gaia taught me starkly that this too is 'radically contingent'. Like the rest of the world, the vicissitudes of life are implicit to Gaia House too, but I think unlike the rest of the world spiritual organisations such as Gaia, under the light of Mindful awareness, offer transformative possibilities for empathy, reconciliation and growth amidst the difficult. I was often inspired by people's commitment to seek out intentions, rather than surface shortcomings, and move towards harmony rather than division – even if it sometimes took a while to get there! Everyone's approaches were different, but it seemed like there was an underlying unity in everybody doing their best.

I have had a truly rich and enjoyable 20 months living and working in the Gaia House community. As I sit writing this on a train, experiencing many of the familiar emotions evoked by uncertainty and change, I realise better that the path for me is not about transcending such emotions, but rather watching, allowing and opening to them. I don't want to be at war with my mind, but I do want to wake up from it. And for me, this is what Gaia House is all about.

Gavin Milne



SANGHA NEWS

Sangha Gatherings

Following discussions within the Sangha and based on attendance last year, Jenny and Kirsten have decided to discontinue offering Sunday afternoon Sangha Gatherings at Gaia House for the time being – though they enjoyed running them and we know that some people really appreciated the meetings.

If you have any suggestions for what else Gaia House could be offering for the local Sangha, please contact Jenny or Kirsten: jmwilks108@yahoo.co.uk and Kirsten.kratz@yahoo.co.uk

Sanghaseva Dates for 2010

Earth Care retreat

Dates: 21- 28 Aug

Location: UK

Facilitators: Nathan Glyde and Zohar Lavie

Nourishing our caring heart through caring for our environment, emphasising conservation and reforestation work.

Being Peace work retreat

Dates: 3 – 18 Oct

Location: Palestine and Israel

Facilitators: Nathan Glyde and Zohar Lavie

Working towards inner and outer peace by engaging in olive harvesting with Palestinian farmers and supporting peace activists from both communities.

Earth Care retreat

Dates: 10 – 20 Nov

Location: India

Facilitators: Nathan Glyde and Zohar Lavie

We will participate in the creation of a centre combining meditation retreats and green building education in the foothills of the Himalayas. Reconnecting to a gentle way of living on the earth and with each other.

Leprosy community work retreat

Dates: 7 – 28 Dec

Location: Anadawan, India

Facilitators: Nathan Glyde and Zohar Lavie

Living and working in a flourishing community of the abled-disabled. Exploring our own hearts and what connects us to ourselves and to each other.

All dates to be confirmed,
For more info see www.sanghaseva.org

Retreat in the Czech Republic

The Heart of Wisdom and Compassion:

an Insight Meditation retreat led by Yanai Postelnik.

Date: 18 – 26 June 2010.

Venue: Village House Centre in OTROCINEVES, near Prague.

Contact: Mita Kanerova
mita@villagehouse.cz

Committed Dharma Practitioners Programme

Spring 2011- Summer 2012

This two-year programme of study and practice for experienced students is an integrated approach to the study and practice of the Dharma that is rooted in the Buddha's teaching of the path to liberation. The programme provides an opportunity to study the texts, develop and cultivate our experiential understanding of the teaching and investigate how they apply to our meditation practice.

Year 1 will offer two 5-day modules, one 3-day module and a one-week study retreat.

Year 2 will offer three 5-day modules and a one-week study retreat.

The modules are held at Sharpham House near Totnes and the retreats at Gaia House.

The course will run from Apr 2011 until Aug 2012.

The contributing teachers will be John Peacock, Christina Feldman, Stephen Batchelor and Akincano.

Outside of the scheduled modules further reading and continuing investigations will be suggested an each student will be paired with a mentor who will continue to support the understanding and practical application of the material through a monthly mentoring session.

To apply for this programme you will need to have formal retreat experience and a working knowledge of the Buddha's teaching.

A commitment to the entire length of the programme is required.

For further information, an application form and curriculum details please contact Rachel Davies at sharphamcdpp@yahoo.co.uk.

Closing date for applications is 31 Dec 2010.

Sharpham: Mindfulness in Education

The Sharpham Trust is based on the Sharpham Estate alongside the River Dart near Totnes, just a few miles from Gaia House. For many years we have enjoyed close links with teachers and retreatants from Gaia House through collaboration on courses and workshops.

In recent years Sharpham has become increasingly involved in secular Mindfulness, seeing it as a way in which some of the benefits of Mindfulness meditation can be made accessible to a wider range of people. We are particularly interested in working with teachers to explore how Mindfulness can help them manage an increasingly stressful work role.

While teaching is rightly recognised as a rewarding profession – it is also a very demanding one. New initiatives, classroom challenges and long working hours all take their toll. Not only does a teacher's wellbeing impact on their own health, but research shows that it affects their pupils too. A 2007 report from Birkbeck College, based on research with over 24,000 staff, suggested clear links between staff wellbeing and school and pupil success.

Mindfulness is already well known in the health sector for its capacity to help manage stress and increase wellbeing. Indeed the National Institute for Clinical Excellence recommends it as a response to recurrent depression. More recently Mindfulness has made its presence felt in schools and the national Mindfulness in Schools Project held its first conference in March this year – a well attended and very successful event.

At Sharpham we are building on this work by introducing teachers to the benefits of Mindfulness. On June 16 we have an introductory Day of Mindfulness for teachers to give a taste of how these practices work. In addition we are planning traditional eight-week courses in Mindfulness Based Stress Relief (MBSR) specifically for teachers and support staff, together with INSET to develop school-based Mindfulness and residential courses in MBSR.



We would love to hear from you if you are involved in education and feel that Mindfulness would be a valuable tool in the school setting for teachers or for students.

To find out more about our Mindfulness in Education programme, and to let us know what you feel would help, please contact us on coordinator@sharphamtrust.org or access our website on www.sharphamtrust.org.

BuddhaDharmaSangha Summer Camp 2010

Dartmoor National Park
7 - 15 August 2010

Yanai Postelnik, Brad Richecoeur
& Catherine McGee

You are warmly invited to participate in our tenth BuddhaDharmaSangha camp – an annual gathering of Dharma friends new and old. The camp is a wonderful opportunity to practise Dharma in the time-honoured way of the Buddha – in the beauty of nature, together with a like-minded Sangha.

We combine Insight Meditation, Qigong and Inquiry with the transformational quality of the natural world and being together in both silence and conversation. We also devote some time in smaller groups for sharing our experience in seeking to apply the Dharma to our modern lifestyles and exploring ways to nurture spiritual companionship in our lives. There is space for formal practice and discussion groups, as well as time to enjoy being in nature and hanging out with others, walks on the moor, nights around the campfire, star-gazing, songs, stories and...whatever we decide to create!

The location exudes both the peace and wildness of the moors. It is surrounded by hills, trees and bordered by the bubbling 'Holy Brook'. We are within easy walking distance of the River Dart, with its swimming places and wooded walks, as well as the open moor and its magical wildness. We bathe in the stream and use especially made 'earth latrines'. We have a large yurt for practicing in and several geodomes for smaller meetings.

We have 20 adult places remaining, but unfortunately the child places are full; we are limited to a total of 120 people. We are also looking for some people to help with the childrens' area; contact Brad if you are interested.

If you would like more information or would like to book, please contact Brad on 0845 3305086, bradr@qigong-southwest.co.uk or visit www.qigong-southwest.co.uk



FOCUS ON TEACHERS

Akincano

Why did you begin to meditate?

I was 15 and in Switzerland; a young, inspired Catholic teacher recently back from Taizé was teaching us Catholic school kids once a week. He was inspired by Frère Roger's contemplative community and he taught us simple meditation exercises. Something opened up and I became aware that there was more to my mind than I thought there was.

Time went on, and despite feeling privileged I felt too unhappy – more unhappy than I knew I should have been with all that was good in my life. I sensed that I had a 'software problem'.. Dimly realising that mind is the decisive factor in how happy you are prompted me to take up Zen training, and I began practising in Italy and France. After experiencing the power of sitting still I was conscious of a tremendous potential. I could be different, then and there. This was very tempting. I could come out of this process, of having to become something different in order to be able to change: with meditation, it was possible to be different, to drop into another mode of being right away. It was quite different from what I thought possible; I found this inspiring and very motivating.

Why did you take ordination?

Japanese Zen taught me to sit still, and uncovered some unexpected strengths in myself. But I was unhappy with its unpsychological ways, felt often left to my own devices and wondered how any of its enigmatic teachings related to my painful knees and the painful mind. When I took my first vipassana retreat in my early twenties, I found the teaching to address the things going on in my mind, and was impressed with how immediately translatable they were into my experience. I was also into Aikido, acting and Japanese poetry as well as Zen, so the vipassana folk seemed quite boring. It all seemed less dramatic less wilful, more subtle in how to deal with the phenomena of the mind, and ultimately more promising. I recognised what they were talking about, describing a landscape I could validate from my own inner world.

On one of my first vipassana retreats, I had a glimpse that in all the things of my life in which I had either succeeded or failed, my efforts seemed propelled by a considerable amount of fear and anxiety. I became interested in what there was to be so anxious about, who was so anxious. That really hit home. To see the fear in the driving seat pulled the rug out from underneath my vision of my self-determined, independent, autonomous life. I either could continue to run away from the fear, or try to come to terms with it. I was also touched by the experience of Sangha and decided a monastery was the best place to figure out who was afraid and what I was afraid of.



What is your practice now?

My mainstay is anapanasati and satipatthana practice – the breadth of it. I have always felt the depth of these teachings. I'm grateful to many teachers, Asian and Western, monastic and non-monastic; grateful also to a scriptural tradition that I continually find inspiring.

My work has become more psychological over the years. Like many practitioners, I have re-evaluated often neglected aspects of the Buddha's Teachings: from being initially very samatha-based, I value the role of noble friendship, the brahmaviharas, the refuges and a curious, respectful, but intrepid inquiry.

I still value samatha – it's indispensable and underestimated, but the Buddha spoke of a lot more than just stilling the mind, however useful this may be. One of the key things is the development of sati as a relational quality, relating to oneself and others, and there is a great power in bringing continuity to this. We all have sati. The magic comes with the continuity.

How do you apply your practice?

This seems a strange question! It implies that I stand in one place, and apply a method or technique to some other place in my life. I aspire to apply myself more to an attitude than to a method, aspire to live from an embodied presence. Learning is important, as is curiosity, compassion and awareness in relationship beyond the meditation room. I am particularly fascinated by the meetings between people with authentic contemplative backgrounds and experiential psychotherapeutic insights. And I see great richness when people from both these fields dealing with human suffering look at each other with deep curiosity.

If you could change one thing about the world, what would it be?

I would wish, with that power, to make human beings listen more deeply, more heartfully, to each other.

One Day Retreat Information

Cardiff

Sat 25 Sep Rob Burbea
Venue: Friends Meeting House, Park St, Bridgend.
Time: 10.00 to 5.00pm
Cost: £15.00
Contact: Tim Blanch, 01656 841625 or email at blanchtim@googlemail.com

Bristol

Sun 23 May John Peacock
Sat 2 Oct Rob Burbea
Sat 20 Nov A nun from Chithurst Monastery TBC
Contact: For all other information and how to book see: <http://www.bristolmeditation.org.uk/retreats.htm>

Brighton

Sun 30 May Bhikkhu Bodhidhamma
Sun 5 Sep Rob Burbea
Sun 26 Sep Leigh Brasington
Sun 28 Nov Yanai Postelnik
Sun 5 Dec Jake Dartington
Venue: The Bodhi Garden
7a Ship Street Gardens
Brighton BN1 1AJ
Times: 10am - 5pm (registration from 9.30am)
Cost: Minimum suggested donation: £20 (concessions available).
Booking in advance is required.
Contact: For booking and information call: 07531 556616, email: info@bodhigarden.org or visit website: www.bodhigarden.org

Cambridge

Sat 29 May Bhante Bodhidhamma
Sat 11 Sep Stephen Batchelor
Sat 4 Dec Christina Feldman
Venue: Friends Meeting House, 12 Jesus Lane, Cambridge
Time: 10 am - 5 pm, registration 9.30 am
Cost: £8 (in advance)/ £10 (on day) + teacher dana
Concessions: students, unwaged, retired £5
Contact: Advance booking by cheque for £8, payable to DeMarrais/Retreats, to Liz DeMarrais, 9 George Street, Cambridge CB4 1AL
Further information for 11 Sept or 4 Dec please telephone: 01223 460966
Further information for 29 May please telephone: 01353 659082

Sheffield

Sat 19 Jun Jake Dartington
Venue: The Stillpoint Practice
Cost: £5 - £15 plus Dana
Sat 4 & Sun 5 Sep Catherine McGee
Venue: The Stillpoint Practice
Cost: £10 - £30 plus Dana
The weekend is non-residential
Contact: River Walton 01433 631350
rwalton@phonecoop.coop

London

Sun 23 May Yanai Postelnik
King Alfred School
Sat 3 Jul Catherine McGee
venue tba
Sun 12 Sep Stephen Batchelor
King Alfred School
Sun 10 Oct Bhante Bodhidhamma
King Alfred School
Sat 13 & Sun 14 Nov Christina Feldman
King Alfred School
Sat 27 Nov Yanai Postelnik
venue tba
Sun 5 Dec Rob Burbea
King Alfred School
Times: They all start at 10am with registration at 9.30 and finish at 4.30.
Admission: £12 in advance or £15 / £10 concession on the day.
Contact: For more information see www.londoninsightmeditation.org.uk or email: enquiries@londoninsightmeditation.org.uk

Oxford

Sat 22 May Yanai Postelnik
Sat 12 Jun John Peacock (study day)
Sat 4 Sep Rob Burbea
Sat 9th Oct Bhante Bodhidhamma
Venue: Headington Parish Hall
Contact: Dharma Practice Group
Reynold Greenlaw on 01865 249820
Website: www.alexox.com/sangha.html
Email: reynold@alexox.com
For more information on the sitting groups and day retreat bookings please see our website: www.oxfordgaiahouseretreats.co.uk

UK Sitting Groups

This is the latest UK sitting groups register. If your name and details are not featured here and you run a sitting group in the UK, please do let us know and we can add you to this feature of the newsletter. Please keep us up to date with your plans so that we can ensure we always publish the most up to date information.

Keep in touch via email on admin@gaiahouse.co.uk.

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OVERSEAS Sitting Groups

If you run a group outside of the UK and wish to feature in the overseas sitting groups register, please email admin@gaiahouse.co.uk for more information on how to feature in our bi-annual newsletters.

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Aoife Valley + 353 (0) 86 304 2893

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Michael & Tess Hoey 215 203 39 or 992 774 97

AUSTRALIA

TASMANIA monikaheisswolf@yahoo.com.au
Brian Board & Monika Heisswolf +03 6295 0487

Upcoming 2010 Group Retreats

For more information visit our website www.gaiahouse.co.uk

Dates	Retreat Name	Teacher	Code	Price
4 – 9th Jun	Insight Meditation & Yoga Retreat	Yanai Postelnik Helen Stephenson	10149	£199 (£169) £239
12 – 19 Jun	Insight Meditation – Awakening Love and Wisdom	Catherine McGee Martin Aylward	10150	£262 (£223) £314
25 – 27 Jun	On Being with Others – Noble Friendship on the Path	Akincano	10151	£102 (£87) £122
2 – 7 Jul	Open Field – Meditation & Chi Kung	Yvonne Weier	10152	£199 (£169) £239
10 – 18 Jul	Meditation and Study Retreat	Martine and Stephen Batchelor	10153	£293 (£250) £352
23 Jul – 1st Aug	Awareness and the Path to Awakening	John Peacock	10154	£324 (£276) £389
6 – 11 Aug	LovingKindess (Metta) Retreat	Rob Burbea and Chris Cullen	10155	£199 (£169) £239
5 Sep	Meditation Day at Gaia House	Jenny Wilks	10158	£23
24 – 26 Sep	The Path of Compassion	Jenny Wilks and Paul Burrows	10160	£102 (£87) £122
1 – 10 Oct	Paticca-Samuppada and Jhana: Dependent Co-Origination and the Meditative Absorptions	Leigh Brasington	10161	£324 (£276) £389
15 – 19 Oct	Stillness and Movement – Insight Meditation and Qi Gong	Catherine McGee & Brad Richecoeur	10162	£167 (£142) £200
23 – 31 Oct	Awakening the Heart	Yanai Postelnik and Leela Sarti	10163	£293 (£250) £352
2 – 30 Nov	November Solitary Retreat	Christina Feldman, Yanai Postelnik, Catherine McGee and Rob Burbea	10164	1 wk: £224 (£190) £269 2 wk: £448 (£381) £538 3 wk: £609 (£518) £731 Full: £770 (£654) £924
3 – 5 Dec	Compassion and Insight	John Peacock	10165	£102 (£87) £122
10 – 12 Dec	Lovingkindness Weekend Retreat	Yanai Postelnik and Kirsten Kratz	10166	£102 (£87) £122
17 – 19 Dec	Young Persons' Retreat – The Four Noble Truths (Aged 16 – 25)	Chris Cullen, Caroline Jones & Jake Dartington	10167	£28
27 Dec – 2 Jan	The New Year's Retreat	Christina Feldman, Rob Burbea, Chris Cullen and Jake Dartington	10168	£230 (£196) £276