



GAIA HOUSE

INSIGHT MEDITATION IN THE BUDDHIST TRADITION

# NEWS

AUTUMN 2009



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My very recent arrival as the new Director was met by a week of deluges outside as Autumn began to show its presence. Inside, though, I very soon found a warm and encouraging welcome from Coordinators, Managers, Teachers and Trustees.

It is quite an unnerving prospect to take on this role, hoping to add something of worth to such a polished and self-assured organisation, staffed by such committed and capable individuals. That Gaia House has operated so smoothly in the absence of a Director for much of this year is a testament to the robustness of the team. However, the life-changing impact of what takes place here for so many people every single day is an inspiring and exciting thought, and to help to contribute even a little to creating the right conditions for that to continue will be rewarding.

Foremost amongst those conditions is Gaia House's ethical stance, and I am keen to take forward the comprehensive groundwork done by the previous Director, Kate Fyfe, and Iain Frazer the Maintenance Manager, in greening the organisation. Such enthusiasm does not make me an exception here, of course. Small things may seem insignificant, but a decision about whether to scrap an old lamp – adding to landfill and thus requiring a new one needing wasteful manufacturing processes – or to repair it – which may make a room look less attractive – receives careful thought and consideration by household and maintenance. Equally, debates go on in the kitchen about the relative merits of organic versus locally-grown foods, and the problem of the lack of seasonal foods in the depths of winter. Everyone at Gaia House takes great care to make every decision as ethically-based and considerately as possible. In aggregate, all of those tiny considerations make this place what it is: occasionally, it means that we don't quite get it right. Overall, it works.

After two weeks here, with the beech leaves just beginning to turn yellow and orange outside my window, I can really appreciate the value of those good intentions and the heartfelt warmth to be found here..

**Andy Power**  
Director



## A MESSAGE FROM THE TRUSTEES

A year ago, as the programme and newsletter were about to land on your doormats, and people could talk of nothing but the impending financial crisis, many of us at Gaia House wondered how our retreatants would react to the storm of uncertainty that was engulfing us. Would they feel that they could no longer afford to come on retreat or would they feel, as we thought they would, that this was exactly the time when the precious space of Gaia House, away from the relentless focus on material things and the wonderful teachings of the Buddha, were exactly what were needed?

We sensed that people had been grappling for some time, often for years, with a growing sense of dissatisfaction with their lives and discomfort at the endless media focus on wanting and getting. Would they feel that this was the moment to take a big step and come to Gaia House for the first time, and to explore whether there were more fulfilling ways of engaging with the world around them?

We were right to be optimistic. During the last year more people than ever before have contacted us, asking about what Gaia House has to offer and what they can expect if they take the plunge and come on retreat. Our reception team tells us that they talk to many people who are making contact for the first time and giving voice to this feeling of dissatisfaction which we sensed was troubling them. And of course, we are very pleased indeed to find retreatants returning to Gaia House again and again to enjoy the very special environment that the fantastic team of coordinators and managers work so hard to create. It is a wonderful place where we can reflect on what is truly important to us.

We would also like to warmly welcome Andy Power to Gaia House as he takes up his position as Director. We as Trustees look forward to working with Andy and continuing to support this precious resource that is Gaia House.

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## Credits

Editor:	Sarah Abdy
Design:	Andy Gooding, Vision Graphic Design <a href="http://www.visiongraphicdesign.co.uk">www.visiongraphicdesign.co.uk</a>
Photography:	Simon Morris Rick Lawrence, <a href="http://www.samskara-design.com">www.samskara-design.com</a> Sarah Abdy Vision Graphic Design
Printed by:	Kingfisher Print and Design Ltd on 100% recycled paper using vegetable based inks.



# MEDITATION, AWARENESS AND CONTEMPLATION

Meditation is the stillness of the mind without the entanglement of the past and without agitation towards the future. It can be seen as the ending of a certain kind of thinking, a thinking which is dominated by past experience and memory, classified and projected into an image of the future.

Meditation as contemplation is, however, a mere awareness and watchfulness of the process without entrapment and entanglement.

When the mind is merely watching the entire process without being caught up in it, it is still and quiet, without anticipation and fear.

There is neither a striving to attain or a desire to escape. Without goal or purpose, in mere watchfulness, there is no conflict, no entanglement and an absence of agitation. And in that quiet peace there is a new revelation which is free from the usual idealistic colouring. It is the stillness of understanding and love. This is meditation without thought and without 'self'.

Meditation is not a search for power, quiet, relaxation and achievement, but is the simple watchfulness of what is, in the beauty of a flower, in the squalor of a mind in search of power, in the striving for spiritual attainment. In that simple watchfulness and awareness there is immediate contact with actuality, not with the ideal of the future, based on a 'dead' memory. And with the cessation of this striving there is also the cessation of the imaginary 'self', which in striving and in projecting isolates and opposes, thus ensuring the continued existence of conflict and enmity. Within this process there is an obscuration of vision that prevents us from seeing the way things really are, and which idealises them in a desired form, thereby creating chaos instead of peace.

It is natural therefore to assume that the mind and its thoughts need disciplining. However, the disciplining and the control of thought is not meditation, as it remains wedded to thought and the striving for an ideal state. Such striving is merely a reaction of the mind in bondage.

Can the mind operate without the operation of thought? If so, what happens? In simple awareness, without choice or selection, there is an attentiveness of mind which is not of thought. There is no comparing with other mental states, which is the work of memory. There is no manipulation for purposes of exploitation, power, and acquisition. There is no responding to any action through feeling or concept; no distortion through memory, and no pressurisation through ideology. Perception which is not linked to clinging or justification, nor rejection or condemnation, is therefore not a repetition of the past, nor does it act according to an habitual pattern. It is free.

In observing what is, thought does not intrude. There is no thought of a thinker or of an observer; there is no division, no opposition. Thus there is no conflict, distortion, bondage and no desire to become.

Listening, seeing, being aware of what is, is learning

the truth about the way things are. It is free from memory, from ideals and bondage to the delusion of a fixed 'self' as the centre for all experience.

Meditation as contemplation is the emptying of the mind of all conditioning, so that distortion and delusion are eradicated.

Delusion begins with the feeling that one must be something. It is this attitude that becomes the basis of self-deception and egotism. The feeling that one must be something is, of course, the implicit acknowledgement that one is not what one should be. That acknowledgement is the outcome of the mind's activity in comparing, measuring and judging, all of which require an ideal measure of what is good or bad. This measuring rod is the ideal formed by thought from past experiences, and preserved in memory. This occurs after a careful selection and registration process which equates the 'good' with being that which preserves the image of the self, its continuance and growth, as well as security and gratification. 'Bad', however, is equated with the very opposite of the qualities listed. Thus, thought is conditioned by the ideal, and the ideal being conditioned by selective thought, with neither possessing an independent foundation. In hope and fear the ideal is sustained in distortion and delusion. Even the very desire for the overcoming of delusion is a distorted ideal in which the 'self' hopes to continue isolated from conflict.

Delusion is not something to be got rid of, for that would be just another identification of the 'self' with some new achievement. Delusion is the measuring of 'self' with the ideal. When there is no measuring, neither the 'self', nor the ideal have any meaning of their own. This freedom from measuring, comparing, and judging is not an achievement, acquisition, or virtue. It is there when there is no identification, no desire for achievement, and no will for becoming.

It is in this act that the mind empties itself of conditioning, desires, hopes and fears. It is a state in which the mind does not concentrate on a pre-chosen object or state, as in concentration practices, but just watches with direct awareness what is. Without focussing on 'what should be' as the ideal, and without relying on memory as the foundation for such an ideal, there is a direct perception of 'what is' without judgement, conditioning, delusion and conflict generated by attachment to 'self'.

Meditation as contemplation of 'what is' is not impelled by desire for success or achievement; there is no thought of experience which would be a thought of 'self'; it does not aim at a goal, an ideal, at being, or becoming.

It is the negation of both past and future, in which there is only the present moment. In this there is no aim to mould or shape, but simply to observe. In observing the present moment without introducing

a thought about it, there will arise a reaction - a reaction that we familiarly understand as 'self'. Meditation is to understand that reaction, to see the 'self' as it is, as it works, distorts, exploits, hides and manipulates. When awareness observes this reaction the mind will become quieter. Without any fixed object there is no thought for concentration, but whatever is present is seen as it is in itself, not as useful to the 'self' in approval or rejection.

Meditation is an awareness that sees things as they are, without trying to make them as they should be. Thus meditation does not introduce thoughts, but see, contemplates and understands them as they arise and pass away. In that awareness there is no reference to some putative ideal, but just the silent contemplation of the genesis and disappearance of thought.

Meditation as contemplation is an actual awareness of the present state of the mind, whether that be lofty or mundane. This awareness or 'mindfulness' is an observation of the actual state of the imperfect mind. In that awareness there is an awareness of the desire for that mind to become perfect. Awareness does not, however, pursue that ideal, but observes the thought of desire. This is simply the observance of the desire in its actuality - the desire is here, is actual, because I do not like the fact of being imperfect; my reaching out for that ideal is thus an escape. In the awareness of this can be seen the futility of reaching out for an ideal, which after all is made by the same mind, the idea of escaping from what I am, to become what I am not. In this awareness thought ceases, as the ideal becomes meaningless and void.

In the cessation of thought - the cessation of thought linked to past and future - there is the freedom from all conditioning. This meditation is an awareness where thought becomes silent. It is not a silence that is generated from some centre; it is without thought, and there is no awareness of a 'self' being involved. It just is, without movement, without quality and without purpose.

There is no centre, and there is no thought. There is no concentration, no focus and no one-pointed-ness. It is complete, with tenderness and subtleness, fresh and new, without memory, clinging, hope or fear.

In this state there is just stillness, peace and freedom. And in that complete stillness there is a complete tenderness; in that utter peace there is great love; in that total freedom there is a direct understanding which is the penetrating understanding generated by insight

**John Peacock**





## SUPPORTING THE DEEPENING OF DHARMA PRACTICE

As an Insight Meditation retreat centre, Gaia House is dedicated to the making the teachings of the Buddha available to all who wish to explore a path of deepening wisdom and compassion.

Gaia House is extremely fortunate to have been given recently a real human skeleton. This is a rare and precious offering for which I would like to express our gratitude.

The contemplation of impermanence, change and death are central themes in Dharma teachings. In our modern western culture it is easy to be somewhat insulated from the fact of our own impermanence, and to miss out on the transformative power of reflecting on this. The Buddha himself regularly encouraged his followers to practice contemplation of death, known as *maranasati*.

In this spirit, the Teacher Council has decided to make this skeleton available at Gaia House for contemplation. While we are aware that some people may perhaps find this challenging, as Dharma teachers we feel fortunate and grateful to be able to offer retreatants the opportunity to reflect on this aspect of the Buddha's path.

To remember death is also to be reminded of our shared participation in the preciousness and mystery of life. I was recently very moved after hearing from participants on a recent daylong in Cambridge, where we were contemplating this topic. As well as encountering the tenderness and sorrow which our hearts may be touched by, in feeling the loss of those we have loved, many also found a sense of uplift, lightness, friendliness and connection with others.

The skeleton has now been installed as our new resident in the walking room, for contemplation. As we open to the truth of death, may we also come to understand the deathless liberation of heart and mind that lies at the heart of the teachings and practice.

Every year, Gaia House offers a limited number of subsidised places for 3 month retreats, to support retreatants wishing to engage in meditation for extended periods. Such retreats are a precious opportunity to deepen in wisdom and compassion. Through the generosity of a sponsoring retreatant, a further place is now available, and I would like to express my great appreciation for this offering.

**Yanai Postelnik**



In late June this year, Gaia House had the honour of hosting the triennial International Insight Meditation Teacher meeting for teachers from Gaia House, Insight Meditation Society, Spirit Rock Meditation Center and Meditation Center Beatenberg, and the monasteries of the Amaravati community. Around 45 lay and monastic Dharma teachers attended, from around the globe. The meeting went very well and was greatly appreciated by all participants.

We were blessed with warm sunny weather, lively and stimulating discussions and debate, honest, tender, profound and passionate personal sharings and the sweetness of many friendships renewed, made, and deepened. We were touched by our shared sense of deep respect for the Dharma, and the privilege and responsibility we share in seeking to transmit the teachings of the Buddha, as well as the joy of practising the Dharma and living in its light.

The teachers were very grateful for the hospitality and care provided by Gaia House and our wonderful staff. I would like to thank the coordinators, managers, trustees and everyone who supported this event for their great efforts and heart-fullness.

**Yanai Postelnik**



**Back row:** Joseph Goldstein, Rainer Kuenzi, Paul Burrows, Michael Leibenson-Grady, Samuel Theiler, Akincano Weber, Stephen Batchelor, Charles Genoud, Rob Burbea, Chris Cullen, Hugh Burne.

**Middle row standing:** Renate Seifarth, Martine Batchelor, Coby Van Herk, Caroline Jones, Jenny Wilks, Ursula Fluckiger, Gil Frondsdales, Adrienne Ross, Catherine McGee, Marie Mannschatz, Julie Wester, Sharda Rogell.

**Middle row sitting:** Carol Wilson, Christina Feldman, Kittisaro, Ajahn Jayanto, Ajahn Sucitto, Bhante Bodhidhamma, Ajahn Sundara, Ajahn Chadasiri, Ajahn Thansanti, Patricia Feldman, Sharon Saltzberg.

**Front row:** Kate Lila Wheeler, Heather Martin, Leela Sarti, Yanai Postelnik, Mark Coleman, Martin Aylward, Fred von Allmen, Sally Clough, Alan Lewis.



## WHAT DOES IT MEAN to be a volunteer coordinator?

People leave Gaia House with differing ideas about this: for some the sense of having connected with a supportive sangha has been of deep importance. For others, it is about having deepened their practice on the cushion and in relationship; it is about having learnt more about practising in the midst of daily life. People report that they have discovered more skilful ways of communicating difficult whilst living in community and others talk about engaging with all the challenges that can arise in life (and at Gaia House!) with an open heart and inquiring mind. The personal benefits are many but we all recognise that being a coordinator at Gaia House also means offering service: service to all those who come to Gaia House wanting to find an end to suffering. This service to dhamma equates, in my mind, to an offering for the whole world. It is an act of compassion.

Bodhisattva coordinators who have recently left Gaia House are Richard Reid (maintenance) and Andy West (kitchen). Richard is one of an unusual breed who come back to offer service a second time. He showed great flexibility in picking up an area of work in which he did not have huge amounts of experience, and he tackled maintenance with the sort of enthusiasm and optimism that are his trademarks. Richard has contributed enormously to the ongoing maintenance work happening at Gaia House, and his sunny personality will be missed. Andy West is

also one of an unusual breed – a kitchen coordinator who stayed for 18 months rather than just a year. I think this is unusual because of the physical demands of handling large amounts of food but also maybe because of the challenge of ‘holding’ this important part of the work here. Andy impressed all with his ability to do just that, and his warmth (and good cooking) will also be missed.

Taking over from Andy is Owen Barnett. Owen brings a lot of experience as a yogi here at Gaia House, and a PhD in mathematics. He is obviously applying his mathematical mind to all manner of recipes and producing delicious food. Welcome to Owen. Taking over from Richard is Isla MacDonald in maintenance. I for one am very happy to see gender stereotypes being challenged, and when I see Isla fixing fridges and yielding power tools I feel the certain sense of awe that one normally, as a child, reserves for the cool older kids at school. Welcome, Isla.

I feel a deep appreciation for the offerings of all the coordinators. Thank you.

**Rachel Davies**  
Retreat Manager

### Volunteer Co-ordinator Opportunities

We need a Kitchen Coordinator in Jan 2010. Anyone interested in applying or with questions to ask is welcome to call 01626 333613 or email [admin@gaiahouse.co.uk](mailto:admin@gaiahouse.co.uk). Other positions will be available at different times in 2010 – please get in touch if you are interested in other departments.



Back row: Gerald Vertbauer, Juliet Grace, Doug Aitken, Tony O'Connor, Aoife Valley, Owen Barnett.  
Front row: Neil Croom, Isla Macdonald, Gavin Milne.

## Retreats in FOCUS

### The Wilderness of the Heart - Relationship on the Path

Akincano M Weber

**Fri 4th – Sun 6th Dec 2009**

**Code: 9167 Cost: £101 (£86) £121**

Contemplative exercises for bringing sustained attentiveness and insight into our being with ourselves and others. Gradual steps in the foundations of awareness. Silence, breathing exercises and guidance from the wealth of Buddhist contemplative tradition. Gentle and precise training in unifying the mind, in object- and field-awareness and meditation on loving kindness help to transform the heart and deepen our understanding.

### Lovingkindness Weekend

Yanai Postelnik

**Fri 11th – Sun 13th Dec 2009**

**Code: 9168 Cost: £101 (£86) £121**

Learning to live with an open heart is the invitation of Lovingkindness meditation, known as Metta in the language of the Buddha. Through this practice we can free our hearts from fear and contraction, open to forgiveness, and connect with a natural caring for ourselves and a boundless love for all beings.



### Stillness, Clarity and Freedom

Chris Cullen and Jenny Wilks

**Fri 18th – Sun 20th Dec 2009**

**Code: 9169 Cost: £101 (£86) £121**

A retreat to explore how meditation and mindful awareness can enable us to see ourselves and the world more clearly, in ways that release us from limiting views, open our hearts and free us from anguish. The retreat will include silent sitting and walking meditation, and opportunities to discuss our experiences of the practices.

### The Ten Ox Herding Pictures – stories of Zen Practice, ancient and modern

Meiya Wender

**Sat 13th – Sat 20th Mar 2010**

**Code: 10138 Cost: £262 (£223) £314**

We will practice with traditional Soto Zen forms of sitting, walking, standing, bowing, chanting and making offerings, and traditional meal practices during the retreat. The daily schedule will include periods of sitting and walking meditation as well as traditional Zen services (bowing and reciting scriptures). Additional detailed instruction on how to hold Zen services, and in rakusu sewing, for those preparing to receive Buddhist precepts may also be offered. Those who would like such instruction are requested to indicate their request when registering.

### Insight Meditation – Awakening Love and Wisdom

Catherine McGee and Martin Aylward

**Sat 12th – Sat 19th June 2010**

**Code: 10150 Cost: £262 (£223) £314**

Each of us shares the potential to awaken to deeper levels of love and wisdom, yet this potential can often be obscured by our patterns and beliefs about ourselves and the world. In this retreat we will learn to welcome our heart and mind with a kind and spacious attention while seeing deeply into their nature. As we begin to understand that we are not the contents of our mind we can relax and take our place in this life with a heart whose natural love is less obscured and more available. This mostly silent Insight Meditation retreat will also include occasional dialogue exercises.



#### Our prices and what they are:

**Code: 10130 Cost: £102 (£87) £122**

Standard Price

Supported Price

Sponsor Rate