



# Buddhāloka

L I G H T O F T H E B U D D H A

Newsletter of the Buddhist Society of Victoria

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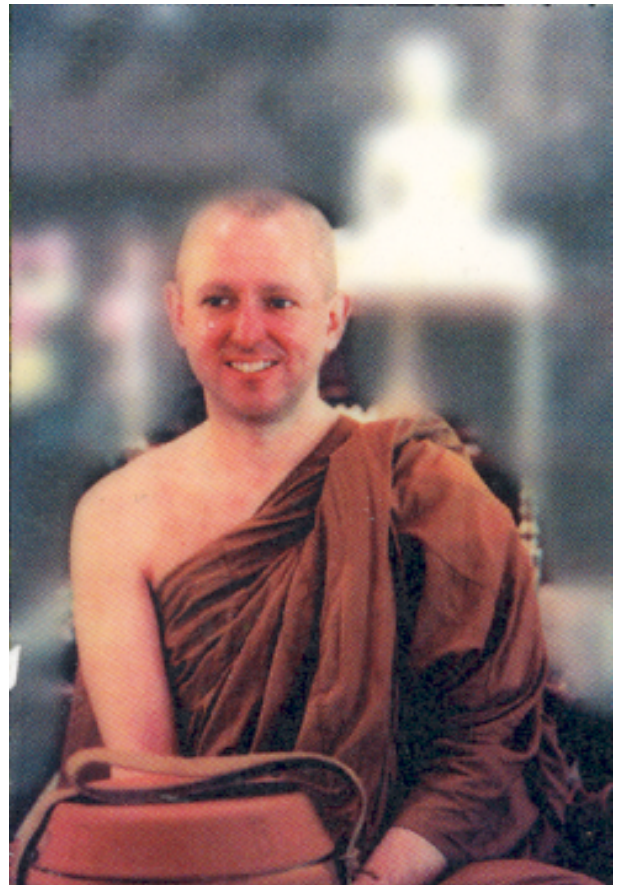
## Ajahn Brahm on why he was excommunicated

7<sup>th</sup> November, 2009

*A Theravada Bhikkhuni Ordination was held in Perth on Thursday 22nd October. The decision to proceed with the Bhikkhuni Ordination was finalised only on 20th September 2009, when the Committee of the Buddhist Society of Western Australia unanimously gave their support. We did realise this was a sensitive matter and resolved to keep it in-house for the next month as we finalised the preparations. On Wednesday 13th October, 24 days after the decision was finalised, I informed Ajahn Sumedho in Amaravati, as a matter of courtesy, during my brief visit to the UK to see my mother (who has severe dementia).*

*The matter of Bhikkhuni Ordination had been discussed in Wat Pah Pong about two years ago and, as I recall, they resolved to follow the lead of the Mahatherasamakom (the supreme Monks' Council of Thailand). I was and remain under the impression that the ordination of Bhikkhunis outside of Thailand was not contravening the rulings of the Mahatherasamakom. This is because I had consulted with the acting Sangharaja, Somdej Phra Pootajarn, well beforehand to ask him precisely his opinion on the ordination of Bhikkhunis outside of Thailand. His response, which I have circulated amongst the Western Sangha for a long time now, was "Thai Sangha law does not extend outside of Thailand". He repeated this another two times to make his intention clear.*

*Even though my ordination as a monk was in Thailand, I understood that my obligations were to the Dhamma and Vinaya, not to the Thai state. Nor was allegiance to Thailand part of the advice given to me by the Acting Sangharaja who presented me with the Thai ecclesiastical honour of Tan Chao Khun.*



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*The certificate that I received at the ceremony merely states that “Phra Brahmavamsa of Bodhinyana Monastery in Australia is a monk of Royal Grade with the title of Phra Visuddhisamvarathera. May he accept the duty in the Buddha’s dispensation of teaching, settling Sangha business and looking after the monks and novices in his monastery in an appropriate manner. And to develop happiness and well being in the Buddha’s Dispensation.”*

*At the meeting in Wat Pah Pong on Sunday 1st November 2009, to which I was summoned at very short notice, it was apparent that the senior Thai monks had a poor understanding of the Vinaya rules concerning sanghakamma (formal acts of Sangha governance). For example, it took a long time to convince them that a Bhikkhuni Ordination is a double sanghakamma. The first part being performed by a gathering of Bhikkhunis presided over by the Preceptor (“Upajjhaya” or “Pavattini” - Ayya Tathaaloka from the USA) and the second part where the new Bhikkhunis approach the Bhikkhu Sangha to have their ordination confirmed by a ñatticatutthakamma (a formal motion followed by 3 announcements). I was one of the two Bhikkhus who chanted the ñatticatutthakamma in the Bhikkhu Sangha.*

*Once the senior Thai monks understood that I was not the Upajjhaya, they were willing to let the matter drop, provided I would promise in the midst of the Sangha not to participate in the ordination of any more Bhikkhunis. Remembering the example of Venerable Ananda at the First Council, I made that promise to the assembled Sangha three times. It looked as if harmony would be restored.*

*However, some senior monks raised the question of the status of the four women who had received Bhikkhuni Ordination. I accepted that they would not be regarded as Bhikkhunis in Thailand under the present climate, but the ordination was legitimate and they were Bhikkhunis. A senior monk then claimed that the ordination was invalid because of “ditthi vipatti”, which he explained as meaning without the approval of the Sangha of Wat Pah Pong. As anyone with a basic knowledge of sanghakamma knows, this is nonsense. However, that unfounded view held sway and the meeting came down to a single clear choice: If Ajahn Brahm would state in the midst of the Sangha that the four women were not Bhikkhunis then there would be no penalty, otherwise Bodhinyana Buddhist Monastery would be removed from the list of branch monasteries of Wat Pah Pong. I paused for a minute to reflect and, considering that I could not go against the Vinaya and state the Bhikkhunis were not properly ordained, nor could I go against the wishes of the Sangha of Bodhinyana and the thousands of lay Buddhists that support the Bhikkhuni Ordination, I refused to recant.*

*As a result, Bodhinyana Buddhist Monastery was removed as a branch monastery of Wat Pah Pong. I emphasise that this decision had nothing to do with the process, secretive or otherwise, through which the ordination took place. The decision to excommunicate Bodhinyana Buddhist Monastery rested solely on my refusal to state that the Bhikkhuni Ordination was invalid.*

*After the meeting formally concluded I paid my respects to many of the senior monks who reminded me of their continued friendship. For example, one old friend said to me “meuan derm” (meaning “just as before”). I hope that a similar attitude will prevail among all my friends in the Western Sangha.*

*With mega metta, Ajahn Brahm*

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## Report from Wat Nanachat regarding Wat Pah Pong decision

Written by Wat Nanachat    Wednesday, 04 November 2009

Receiving ordination as a bhikkhu in Thailand, entails acceptance of the authority not only of the Vinaya, but also that of the Mahatherasamakom, (the Thai Sangha's governing body) and the laws of the land.

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The Wat Pa Phong Sangha considers as a matter of course, that all of its members are ethically bound to respect their commitments to the Mahatherasamakom and to the Thai State. Ajahn Brahmavamso deliberately and unilaterally performed a ceremony knowing it to be considered illegal by the Thai state, illegitimate by the Mahatherasamakom and thus unacceptable to the WPP Sangha. There could be little doubt that by doing so he was, in effect, turning his back on continued membership of the Wat Pa Phong Sangha.

Wat Pa Phong and its branch monasteries constitute an informal grouping within the Thai Sangha. Membership of this group is voluntary and dependent on a willingness to conform to certain broad standards, most of which were established by Ajahn Cha. They include dhutanga practices such as daily alms-round and eating one meal a day from the alms-bowl. Special allowances are granted for overseas monasteries and generally speaking, abbots are almost completely autonomous in the running of their own monasteries. However, in the case that a monastery develops practices that significantly deviate from the Wat Pa Phong template, the matter is raised at the annual general meeting in June. The abbot in question is interviewed and asked to choose between the unacceptable practice or exclusion from the group. This procedure was followed in the case of Ajahn Brahmavamso with a meeting held on 1st November.

Exclusion from the Wat Pa Phong Sangha is primarily intended to maintain the harmony and integrity of the group. It is not a punitive measure, although in Thailand at least, exclusion may lead to a certain loss of prestige and material gains. Ajahn Brahmavamso is unlikely to be adversely affected by the exclusion. His reputation and fund-raising activities may well be enhanced. His social ties with Wat Pa Phong were already weak. He has neglected relations with his Thai colleagues for some time now. Over the last few years several of his trips to Thailand have been devoted to teaching laypeople without including visits to Ubon (most notably the one that coincided with the Wat Pa Phong annual general meeting of June 2009 in which the bhikkhuni issue was discussed).

The most common view of the Western theras is that Ajahn Brahmavamso had agreed to host a 'World Abbots Meeting (WAM)' in December in which discussion of the bhikkhuni question was on the agenda. If he had waited until that meeting, and after talking things through, announced his decision to leave the WPP Sangha in order to follow a path he felt deeply to be correct and noble, his actions would have been considered regrettable but honourable. In planning a bhikkhuni ordination for a couple of months before the WAM was to take place, in concealing his plans until a week before the ordination, and in carrying out the ceremony without speaking to either his preceptor, Somdet Buddhajahn, or the leader of the WPP Sangha, Luang Por Leeam beforehand at all, he acted in a way that suggested deceit and disrespect.

For most of the Wat Pa Phong theras, the intellectual argument over the validity of bhikkhuni ordination is not the point. Their lack of knowledge of the latest studies on the subject is, in their eyes, irrelevant. To them the issue is that Ajahn Brahmavamso reneged on commitments implicit in his ownership of a Thai monastic passport, his role as abbot of a Wat Pa Phong branch monastery, his position as an officially sanctioned preceptor, and his acceptance of the Jow Khun title (formalizing his membership in the elite strata of the Thai monastic order). In the meeting of the 1st November, it was the perception that Ajahn Brahmavamso had acted disrespectfully to his teachers and lineage, that aroused emotions, not his wish to elevate the status of women.

Time only will tell if the bhikkhuni ordination at Bodhinyana monastery in October 2009 will be seen as a key breakthrough in the acceptance of a Theravada bhikkhuni order, or as an overly hasty and confrontational move that alienated many of those it was intended to persuade.

Wat Pa Nanachat, 4th November 2009

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**Statement from the Committee of the Buddhist Society of Victoria**

Sent before the meeting at Wat Pah Pong

21<sup>st</sup> October 2009

The Committee of the Buddhist Society of Victoria overwhelmingly supports the ordination as bhikkhunis of the nuns at *Dhammasara* Nuns' Monastery in Western Australia.

*Dhammasara* Nuns' Monastery functions under the auspices of the Buddhist Society of Western Australia. In 2007 the Buddhist Society of Victoria established *Sanghamittarama* under its auspices, a nuns' monastery which has presently two bhikkhunis in residence, one ordained in India eleven years ago, and the other ordained this year in India. The lay people of Melbourne strongly supported the nun in residence at *Sanghamittarama* to recently achieve her aspiration of full ordination and wish that full Bhikkhuni ordination be available to all suitable aspirants.

Australia has very clearly expressed policies on gender, race and religion and it would seem contrary to these to discourage in any way the religious aspirations of women in Buddhism. Limitations on the ordination of women are also contrary to the experience of men and women in the time of the Buddha and in our 21<sup>st</sup> century society these restrictions can create unnecessary negativity towards Buddhism within both the Buddhist and the wider community. Inclusivity and open-heartedness have always been a necessary and inspirational part of our spiritual practice and journey and it is more than timely that it is reflected in the development of the Sangha and all other aspects of practice. It is our belief that such practices ensure as far as it is possible to do so the good health of the Buddha Sasana.

*from the Committee of the BSV & signed by the President, Dhananjaya Jayasekera*

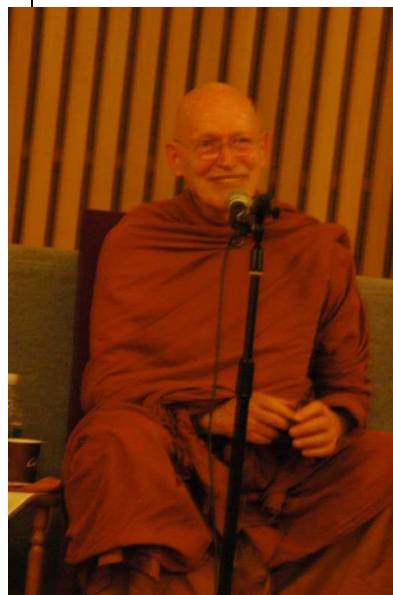
## Sangha

**Ajahn Ariyasilo** A warm welcome back to the BSV to Ajahn Ariyasilo after his time in Brisbane and particular thanks for the retreat conducted between Christmas and New Year. It could seem surprising just how many people came to the retreat, but the BSV during that time was a centre of joy, peace and contentment. New Year's Eve Ajahn led a celebration which brought in the new year. While our circumambulation plans had to be quickly revised because of the storm, we circumambulated the bodhi tree under the shelter and those present joined in and led some impromptu chanting. Ajahn's paritta chanting close to midnight was very much appreciated.

**Bhante Buddhakkita** has kindly accepted the Society's invitation to spend the Rains retreat this year at the vihara in East Malvern.

**Ayya Sucinta** has left for a year's sabbatical and is presently in the nun's monastery in Perth. We wish her well and hope her later

time in Germany will also be a peaceful and positive one. We feel great gratitude for the



e n o r m o u s amount of work Ayya has put in to establishing the Bhikkhuni vihara and for her dedication to its success. We thank her for the many Teachings she has offered both at Sanghamittarama and at Buddhāloka Centre, and in many other

venues. Before she left in January she again participated in the Buddhist Summer School at Melbourne University and she has recently contributed to a Psychology and Buddhism Conference in Healesville at the Maitripa Contemplative Centre. We wish her well for next year and trust it will be a peaceful and

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restful one. We also hope that it will be possible for her to return in 2011.

**Ajahn Sumedho** presented a Dhamma talk (sponsored by the Society) at Monash University Religious Centre on the evening of 16<sup>th</sup> December last.

← Ajahn Sumedho at Monash University

**Ayya Dhammananda** – is planning to visit *Sanghamittarama* in April. We are hoping she will stay with us for some time.

### Forthcoming Retreats

**Ajahn Dtun** will be conducting a meditation retreat on 12<sup>th</sup> to 21<sup>st</sup> March coming. Ajahn Dtun is a respected Thai meditation teacher and has been a bhikkhu for over 29 years, originally training under the revered Thai meditation teacher, Ven. Ajahn Chah.

Depending upon numbers, options to attend for only part of this time will be available for experienced meditators. The retreat will be held at *Forest Lodge*, corner of Forest and Gundrys Roads, Anglesea. The dates and costs for the retreat are:

12 March to 15 March (3 nights) \$180 BSV members, \$200 non-members

12 March to 21 March (9 nights) \$500 BSV members, \$520 non-members

19 March to 20 March (2 nights) \$140 BSV members, \$160 non-members

Please watch the message boards and the web page for further details.

### Past Retreats

- (1) The retreat conducted by Sayadaw U Lhakana at Maitripa Contemplative Centre from 10<sup>th</sup> December to 16<sup>th</sup> December last was, as the same time last year, very peaceful and purposeful. Silence was very easily observed as our

meditation instructions were made very clear each evening by the Sayadaw and very ably translated for the many non-Burmese speaking people present. Sayadaw is a highly respected practitioner and teacher of the Mahasi meditation method so daily interviews, reporting as exactly as possible, our experience in both sitting and walking meditation were a vital part of our retreat.

We thank Sayadaw very warmly for the blessings he brought to us. We also offer thanks to Lydia Brown for organizing the day-to-day running of the retreat in such a mindful and skillful way and to Nandene Rajapakse for so generously and at no cost providing us with the results of her wonderful cooking.

- (2) We were very fortunate to have had Ajahn Sucitto offering to conduct a five day retreat at the BSV last November during his visit to Melbourne. It was a non residential retreat. His emphasis at this retreat was the relevance of the teachings on Kamma in the practice of meditation, mental action that helps to terminate some of the unconscious habitual mental activities such as worry, anxiety, frustration that adds to the suffering of beings. In spite of the very bad throat infection he suffered from during this period he offered us very valuable teaching. Thank you to all those who helped to run the retreat smoothly, to those who offered meals to the monks.

### *From the Committee*

**Annual General Meeting** – The Society's Annual General Meeting has been scheduled for Sunday 28<sup>th</sup> March coming.

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**Annual Membership fees** are due for the current year. A full membership form may be –

- downloaded from the Society's website,
- or can be collected at the temple,
- or is available as part of this newsletter. (see below).

Completed forms may be posted or left at the temple.

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**Ajahn Sumedho** – A donation was sent to *Amaravati* to help defray costs associated with Ajahn Sumedho's recent visit and talk at Monash University Religious Centre.

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**English Sangha Trust** – The Society has donated \$1500 to Chithurst Monastery in England to help defray the costs for Ajahn Sucitto's recent visit and the retreat he led while he was visiting Victoria.

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**Overdraft** – The Society's bank overdraft (which was taken out principally for the recent renovations at the temple) has been settled in full.

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**Sanghamittarama establishment** – The Committee of the Society will request the Society's approval for the establishment of the Nun's Monastery as per clause 4(1) of the Society's Constitution. If this motion is approved, the Committee will be empowered to draw up a separate draft constitution for the Nun's Monastery (to be presented for Society approval at a Special General Meeting, at some future date).

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## Sunday Forum

The next Sunday Forum (a philosophical group discussion) is scheduled for 12 noon, February 14<sup>th</sup>, in the upstairs library at the temple. It will be led by Satish Wimalajeewa.

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### Sweet Stall at the BCV fundraiser

BSV responded to a call from the Buddhist Council of Victoria to participate in their Fund Raiser, a food fair, by offering to hold a Sweet

Stall. The food fair was held on the 26<sup>th</sup> September at the St Kilda Town Hall.

All the food that we had for sale were gifts from members and friends of BSV except for the very interesting and popular "Wisdom" and "Compassion" balls offered by another organisation.

Thank you very much to all those who offered food items and all those volunteered to staff the sweet stall. The arrangements at the hall were very well organized and we had very good support by the BCV members in running the stall. It was run quite successfully and we made about \$600, in spite of a very cold day.

*from Committee member Padmini Perera*

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## Gratitude

To Pynfui for taking such wonderful care of the garden. Her plantings and pruning have enhanced the property hugely.

To the family of Janet Tan, a member who died last year and is very sadly missed by so many. Her family members visited the BSV recently from Malaysia and made a very generous donation in her memory.

To Nandene Rajapakse for so generously offering her skills to the BSV to cook for Sayadaw U Lhakana's retreat in December at Healesville.

To Diana Wadjesinghe for opening the BSV for an extended period over Christmas. New Year's Day was also a very joyful day as many people visited the temple to offer flowers and meditate.

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## *Pali for Daily Reflection*

*A Pali Word a Day* by the Mahindarama Sunday Pali School is a publication of the Buddha Dharma Education Association Inc. It aims to assist new Buddhist students who are unfamiliar with some of the Pali words often used in Buddhism. An example excerpt follows –

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### Buddha – ... *the Enlightened One, the Perfect One, The Holy One, the Omniscient*

In order to attain Buddhahood, one must perfect oneself in the ten **Pārāmis** (prerequisites for enlightenment).

**Nibbāna** can be attained through one of the following three **Yanas** (vehicles):

1. **Samma-Sam-Buddha** (Fully Enlightened One) One who aspires to become a Buddha must make a firm resolution (**Bodhisatta** vow) in the presence of a Buddha. Once proclaimed to be a Buddha in the future, he will have to practise the 10 pārāmis with a self-sacrificing spirit to serve suffering humanity.
2. **Paceka Buddha** One who attains enlightenment without any spiritual assistance. One who does not possess the faculty to enlighten others.
3. **Savaka Buddha (Arahant)** One who has completely eradicated all the defilements, including the 10 fetters, with guidance from the Buddha's teachings. This one is capable of rendering spiritual assistance to others for their liberation.

*extracted from A Pali Word a Day – A selection of Pali Words for Daily Reflection pub. Buddha Dharma Education Association Inc, email <bdea@buddhanet.net>*

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## New Members

The following new members are welcomed to the Society –

Hien Nguyen  
 Ian Wembridge  
 Jennifer Fenton  
 Kay Bright  
 Kongphet Luangrath  
 Lee Yean (Metta) Low

Loretta Arcefi

Rajeewa Munasinghe

Sajith Peiris

Sharon Sai

We hope they find that the Society is of real assistance in aiding their understanding of the Dhamma and of the value in permitting the Dhamma to guide our daily lives.

***One should not pry into the faults of others,  
 into things done and left undone by others.  
 One should rather consider what by oneself is  
 done and left undone.***

Dhammapada 50

The *Dhammapada* ('Words of Truth') is a collection of 423 verses in Pali, uttered by the Buddha on some 305 occasions for the benefit of all. The stories about the circumstances in which the verses were uttered were added by the commentator Buddhagosa in the 5<sup>th</sup> century CE. It is generally believed that most of these stories associated with each *Dhammapada* verse have been handed down orally for generations since the days of the Buddha. The Buddha's teachings were not committed to writing until more than 400 years after his *Mahā Parinibbāna* (passing away).

Copies of the *Dhammapada* are available for loan or purchase from the library. We have also received many boxes of books for free distribution from *The Corporate Body of the Buddha Educational Foundation* of Taiwan, including copies of the *Dhammapada*. Contact our librarian, Yasmin, if you'd like a copy.

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*As a flower that is lovely and beautiful but is  
scentless, even so fruitless is the well-spoken  
word of one who does not practise it.*

*As a flower that is lovely, beautiful and  
scent-laden, even so fruitful is the well-spoken  
word of one who practises it.*

Dhammapada 51 & 52

Buddhism as it unfolds in Australia or elsewhere. If you would like to make a contribution, please leave it in the library at the BSV or email it to the Society. Electronic contributions on disk or CD are particularly easy to incorporate, but typed or hand-written contributions are also welcome. The Newsletter is published quarterly. Deadlines for contributions are the end of the first weeks in July, October, January and April.

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### End Stage

On Dec. 23rd my mother Peggy Dellora died at home of aspiration pneumonia following a 19yr. struggle with Parkinson's Disease. She was 89. Peg remained clear in her mind up till the last day of her life, which was a great blessing; and many knew she was uncomplaining with this unremitting disease. Many BSV members and Sangha in their compassion showed small acts of kindness to Peg over the years and I wish to thank them for this. The importance of high quality palliative care at home has come home to me. While in Victoria we do not have a 24 hour palliative care centre run on Buddhist principles with Sangha involvement in management etc., in Queensland they do. The service which allows terminally ill patients to remain comfortable at home is *Karuna Hospice Service*, which lives up to its name, [*karuna* meaning compassion]. Any reading this who can give input to try to help get something up and running in Victoria along these lines please contact me; need and interest has been shown.

The Melbourne Zen Hospice has made a good start, as can be seen from their website, at [www.zen.org.au](http://www.zen.org.au).

*from Committee member Gary Dellora*

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This edition of *Buddhāloka* was edited by David Cheal. The views contained within do not necessarily reflect those of the Buddhist Society of Victoria. We welcome member contributions to the newsletter of the Society. These may include news of events, personal news, accounts of trips or retreats, happenings around the temple or comment on



## *Near-death Experience through Dhamma Lens*

*by Gerald Frape*

Nearly six years ago, while gardening just before going to yoga I suddenly felt faint. Starting to sweat profusely, I thought I was going to pass out. Just managing to make it inside, I collapsed, sweat-soaked, on the couch – my body racing out of control. Pressing speed dial to my eldest daughter, Asha, I told her that I had no idea what was happening but that I was ‘losing it’. She called her sister, Zeena, who rang me and, hearing that I was slurring my words, called an ambulance.

I was having a heart attack.

The ambulance team arrived and tried to stabilize me before taking me to hospital. They carried me on a stretcher to the ambulance and just as they were about to close the door, I had the sense of ‘falling away’ from myself. It felt like when air escapes from a deflating balloon. It also seemed similar to water spiralling down a sink. I heard the ambulance team asking my daughter to get out of the vehicle as they started to resuscitate me. Then, suddenly everything went white – like a pixilated TV or cinema screen – and I was unconscious. I was having a cardiac arrest and the paramedics moved fast to bring me back to life – first using CPR and then a defibrillator. Although I don’t remember this happening, the next day I discovered the leaf-like burn impressions on the side of my chest from where they placed the contact pads of the machine that literally shocked me back to life. The first thing I remembered after going unconscious was waking up in the hospital emergency ward. I was having my clothes cut off me, and a nurse kept repeating my name – asking if I could hear her.



This experience – which I later called my ‘enlightenment attack’ – led to a series of insights that related to years of meditation and yoga. I have framed the following account of my near-death experience as nine learnings through the dhamma lens. Although I had a long experience with Buddhist meditation and yoga, I was never a person who had a traditional religious or cultural ‘faith’ in these practices. The ‘enlightenment attack’ gave me a new understanding of ‘faith’ as the core teachings of these disciplines were tested in the laboratory of crisis.

### **Learning 1: All component things are impermanent**

Later that evening in the intensive care ward of the hospital I realised the enormity of what had happened. I’d been through dying and back but I was still alive. Having been a ‘dhamma practitioner’ for 30 years, I had heard many times how ‘all things were impermanent’ and suffering was guaranteed if you were attached to any notion of permanency. I had listened to a lot of dhamma talks and read many words about this over the years, but now I really got it.

Sometimes there is unexpected humour in serious situations. In this case the worst thing had happened. I had ‘died’ but luckily, had been brought back to life. So, it occurred to me, even death was impermanent (*anicca*). I laughed to myself at the notion that death was also *anicca*. It seemed a great dhamma in-joke.

### **Learning 2: The truth of *dukkha*, *anicca* and *anatta***

I wondered whether I now had direct contact with the dhamma trifecta of *dukkha* (unsatisfactoriness), *anicca* (impermanence) and *anatta* (non-self).

Firstly, the attack was definitely a reminder of *dukkha* – unsatisfactoriness – and my essential fragility and mortality. Secondly, it was an experience of *anicca* – impermanence – here one minute, gone the next and, thankfully, back a few minutes later. It also seemed like a taste of *anatta*, the elusive non-self. The physical nature of the heart attack was quintessentially a powerful reminder of life being ultimately unmanageable. I remember as the attack came on, and reached its peak, that I had no control over my body – the attack was happening of its own accord. What I might normally call ‘me’ was barely able to keep up with, or even observe, the disassembling of my self. There was nothing I could do to change it. Where was ‘I’ in this situation? Was this sense of being ‘out of control’ an insight into the non-self of *anatta*?

In the Mahayana tradition, the famous Heart Sutra states that ‘emptiness is form and form is emptiness’. The near-death experience I had in the ambulance, felt like the air being let out of a balloon or water spiralling down a sink. Was I the air or the balloon? Was I the water or the sink? Or the visual experience I had just before losing consciousness as everything went white – like a pixilated cinema or TV screen – when the transmission cuts out. Was I the projection or the screen?

### **Learning 3: Dhamma works!**

SN Goenka was my first meditation teacher and he often used to inspire us in his evening talks with the exhortation: ‘dhamma works’. Following the near-death experience it seemed everything I had learned from the dhamma became active in me. However, it was not in a contrived, conscious or projected mental sense but felt like it was coming out of my bones. The core teachings were automatically ‘kicking in’ to support me. The meditation training; the teachers I had learned from; the retreats; the dhamma talks and books; all those agonising hours on the cushion and the meditation cell enabled me to make sense of the heart attack as a positive experience. When I came home from hospital I sent an email to all my friends, calling the experience my ‘enlightenment attack’. If the term ‘Buddha’ described someone who was fully ‘awake’, I was having a big dhamma ‘wake-up call’.

### **Learning 4: Kamma comes in many shades**

As I started to recover, the notion of kamma was uppermost in my mind. People often talk about kamma like it’s a cosmic bank account – framing it as reward and punishment. Looking into kamma to understand what had happened, I saw it in many different ways. The first was as a ‘ripening’ kamma. The heart attack had happened like ripe fruit dropping from a tree.

Then – trying to understand the cause – I discovered another aspect of kamma.

I did not have most of the major risk factors for a heart attack; smoking, high cholesterol or blood pressure. However, I did have one – a genetic history in my mother’s lineage of cardiovascular disease. Later, a cardiologist bluntly told me to blame my mother! So there was a genetic kamma – contributing to my situation.

However, I also had a lucky kamma. Prior to the attack I had been planning to go to India and a fortnight earlier I had delayed the trip. If I had gone on the date intended, I would have been working in a village in South India and nowhere near the medical attention I received in Australia. Having access to medical

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technology, my daughter calling the ambulance, the skills of the ambulance paramedics and the team at the hospital were a fortunate kammic synergy.

Then there was another version that related to my future – a type of throwing kamma. It begged the question. What kamma was I going to create given this second chance of life?

### **Learning 5: Compassion arises out of suffering**

As I started to recover from the near-death experience, I became aware that there were many other people suffering much more than I was. One day in hospital I read an article in the newspaper about young US soldiers in Iraq with their arms and legs blown off. Seeing the photos of these young men I had strong feelings of compassion for them. At the same time, I realized hospitals were places of great suffering and kindness. There were many patients who were more ill than I was and often visitors were crying as they discovered, or waited, for the outcome of their relative's treatment. I started practising Tonglen meditation – breathing in of all the sadness of the patients and their relatives around me and breathing out heartfelt wishes for them all to get well. The idea to do this just spontaneously occurred to me as I realized the hospital was a perfect place to practice compassion and loving kindness. I often walked around the wards generating wishes of recovery to all the sick patients and their worried visitors.

### **Learning 6: Friendship is the whole of the path**

One of the most important lessons from the experience was that friendship and love matter most. I felt strong love from my daughters and my mother who had accompanied me through this crisis. I could tangibly feel their love towards me, and then later on, the kindness of friends who were sending get well wishes. It struck me that this interdependence of family, friends and the 'kindness of strangers' among the hospital staff, were an important part of a wider human friendship. One night, due to contracting pneumonia, I was struggling to breathe and a friendly English nurse suggested I try using the Bipac breathing machine that literally forces oxygen deep into your lungs. She said if I could handle having it on all night it would help break the pneumonia. A Bipac machine is like flying in a World War One plane with an open cockpit. They strap a cap on your head to fix the mask firmly to your face. You have to breathe in rhythm with the machine as it blasts oxygen into your lungs. I remember the healing kindness of a stranger as the nurse sat by my side, encouraging me and gently stroking my head. After I woke in the middle of the night having hallucinatory dreams of skateboarding down Tolkienish mountains singing rap songs, my compassionate 'friend' laughed and said it might be time to turn off the Bipac.

There were many other times when I felt overwhelming gratitude. After the heart attack the hospital social worker would regularly visit and ask me if I was feeling depressed. I replied that, on the contrary, considering my good fortune I was full of gratitude. Statistics showed that half the people who had experienced a heart attack like mine were dead. Had I been in a village in India at the time of the attack I would have died. Without the timely convergence of my daughters, the ambulance team and the hospital staff, I would not be here. I was dependent on all those people and I felt a sense of empathetic joy (*mudita*) at this human interdependency.

I asked the social worker what was there to be depressed about. She replied that she had just come from another patient who had the same condition as me and whom was lying in bed petrified. "But, you're telling me this is like some kind of personal growth opportunity, aren't you?" She looked at me inquiringly. "Are you into the Dalai Lama or something?" I replied that it was 'something' like that.

### **Learning 7: Equanimity is a measure of our progress**

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*Upekkha* or equanimity is a foundation of mindfulness. I remember Goenka repeatedly reminding us that a measure of our meditation progress was the ability to remain equanimous in the face of the ‘vicissitudes’ of life.

Equanimity has a feeling of spacious centredness. When you are equanimous you experience a sense of calm – like being in the middle of a still lake. Even though disturbing events may be occurring, they do not upset you. After the heart attack my dhamma capacity allowed me to maintain this ‘spaciousness’ in the midst of whatever was happening. For instance, in hospital there are round-the-clock medical interventions. Doctors regularly inserted various drips in my arm and many times had difficulty in locating the vein. After days of this and constant blood pressure tests I was bruised all over my hands and arms. With equanimity, I accepted they were trying to do their best. I also become an observer of the different responses and personalities of hospital staff coming into the room. I could quickly sense who was warm, compassionate and kind, who was tough, direct and bossy and who would be the cool, detached and ‘professional’. Sometimes, there were touching moments, like when the Vietnamese cleaner, seeing the healing Buddha statue in my room, turned to me and smiled knowingly, pressing his palms together in a shared moment of understanding.

Of course, this sense of equanimity was also subject to the law of impermanence.

When I got the diagnosis from the angiogram – the process that determines the level and number of blockages in your arteries – it wasn’t the news I wanted to hear. I had been hoping they might find a few small blockages and insert some stents during the process. The Indian woman doctor who conducted the angiogram explained that a major artery was completely blocked and there were blockages ranging from 60 to 80-percent in four others. I remember having that sinking feeling when you get bad news and saying that this was my ‘worst case scenario’. The doctor gave me a reality check.

*“No, Gerald, it’s not your worst-case scenario,” she said. “Let me explain the situation. Your heart is like a house and the arteries are its plumbing. Your worst-case scenario is a bad house and bad plumbing. You have an OK house, but bad plumbing. We do go good plumbing here. Don’t worry. My father had the same problem at your age and now he’s home looking after the grandchildren. Everything will be OK in a few months.”*

It was a wonderful pep talk. As I was wheeled back to my room I remember thinking that the dhamma says be realistic and accept things as they are. This was reality. Accepting it was another learning.

### ***Learning 8: Practise dhamma wherever you are***

I was wait-listed for bypass surgery and a month later received a call from the hospital asking if I could come in immediately for a briefing on the operation to be performed the following day.

When I turned up for the coronary bypass it was like a monastic renunciation ceremony. Firstly, I was shaved all over my body and washed in an anti-bacterial liquid soap. The hospital staff then took my clothes and handed them in a bag to my daughters. I was dressed in a white smock and wheeled off to a series of waiting bays outside the operating theatres – where the surgeons perform up to six of these operations a day. While I was waiting, I noticed a male nurse who looked like a Sri Lankan. I asked him if he is a Buddhist. Looking surprised at my question, he replied that he was and I asked him if he would take refuge with me. The two of us chanted softly in the hushed stillness of the dimly lit waiting bay.

*Buddham saranam gachami*

*Dharman saranam gachami*

*Sangham saranam gachami*

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A teacher I sometimes take retreats with, Venerable Mahinda, starts each morning meditation with contemplation on the 32 body parts. In this meditation you contemplate the disassembling of the body components part by part until there is nothing left. You imagine that the parts are taken and placed in front of you. It is aimed at helping you overcome attachment to your physical body and give you a sense of non-self. I discovered having bypass surgery could also do the same and after the operation, I had a different experience of body part meditation.

When I woke up in the intensive care room, and I could hear the nurses speaking to another patient, who was trying to pull out the hoses and pipes attached to his body. I remember looking down and seeing tubes coming out of my body attached to bags of urine and blood and it reminded me of the 32-body part meditation. Except this time I did not have to imagine it. These bags and tubes are removed after day two or three and you then get a chance to stand up and go to the bathroom. It was the first time I had seen myself in the mirror, covered in bruises with a purple ‘zipper’ up my chest and scars along my arms, from where the surgeons harvested the arteries for the bypass. I remember thinking about the practices designed to overcome your attachment to your body. After an operation like this the body beautiful was hardly relevant.

After returning to the main cardiac ward with all the other ‘zippered’ patients, the physiotherapists get everyone up to start gentle exercise and walking, to avoid fluid on the lungs. You are encouraged to exercise and walking is one of the things you can do easily. Hospitals are noisy places and I would often wake up at three in the morning to the beeping and blipping of medical equipment and monitors. With a body full of drugs including powerful painkillers, I often woke from hallucinatory dreams and glad to get out of bed. It was a perfect time to practise mindful walking.

Walking meditation is good for absorbing mental distractions and I practised it up and down the hallway. At first walking 15 steps, then 30, then 40 and I would gradually increase the amount of rounds each morning. Later I walked around whole ward and other parts of the hospital. When it came time to leave hospital, the doctor tests you by taking you on a walk around the ward. I easily passed the test and received an early mark from hospital.

### **Learning 9: Death is certain: time of death is uncertain**

Probably the biggest lesson I had was that although death is certain, the time of death is uncertain. This raises the question of, to paraphrase the Buddha, getting your house in order, with haste. What are you going to do with this precious life?

The thought that there was little time to lose became paramount in my mind. I knew for sure that death could come at any moment, and it can come fast. There was no time to refer to the right way to die. It was important to install the dhamma manual prior to death. Fortunately, for me, the capacity to deal with the near-death experience was through previous ‘dhamma installations’ I had been lucky enough to receive.

Another outcome of the ‘enlightenment’ attack was that I seemed to have an ‘impermanence microchip’ implanted in me by the experience. I quickly adopted the practice of reflecting each morning on the good fortune to be alive – with the awareness that I may not be later in the day. The inherent question in this reflection was what good could I do in the uncertainty of time available?

I experienced other changes that I discovered were common to people who had been through similar situations. A study of 600 people who had near death experiences reported the following three common reactions to the experience:

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1. They were no longer afraid of death.
2. They made significant changes in lifestyle.
3. They wanted to work for the benefit of other people.

I had similar responses. Although nearly six later, I sometimes find myself caught in the familiar mundane patterns of life, the *anicca* microchip always brings me back to the essence of the enlightenment attack. A few years after the event I read dhamma counsellor Stephen Levine's *A Year To Live* and decided to approach the year as if I had only 12 months left in my life. As a result of making this decision I quickly revised my priorities – eliminating the unimportant and focusing on the meaningful. As you might not be here much longer your thoughts turn to how you might help others.

The idea of a year to live also changes the way you work. I earn a living as a consultant and casual lecturer on communicating about environmental sustainability and social issues. I decided to only do work that really made a positive difference in the world and to take on just enough to sustain me financially. In my non-paid work I helped organize retreats, served as a personal assistant to visiting teachers and offered free communication workshops to social cause organisations. I also returned to creative work, particularly poetry and playwriting.

Since the enlightenment attack I live with greater freedom, clarity and realism. What was once theory I've now tasted in life's practicum.

Amidst the excitement of a second chance to live, I constantly remember the sobering words of the Buddha:

*I am of the nature to grow old*

*There is no way to escape growing old.*

*I am of the nature to have ill health.*

*There is no way to escape having ill health.*

*I am of the nature to die*

*There is no way to escape death.*

*All that is dear to me and everyone I love*

*Is of the nature to change.*

*There is no way to escape being separated from them.*

*My actions are my only true belongings.*

*I cannot escape the consequences of my actions.*

*My actions are the ground on which I stand.*

**BUDDHIST SOCIETY OF VICTORIA**

71 - 73 Darling Rd, East Malvern Vic 3145.

Web: <http://www.bsv.net.au/>**MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION / RENEWAL FORM***Please fill in **all details** requested below. (Print)*

Date ...../...../2010

Title:.....First Name(s):.....

Family Name:.....

Address:.....

.....Postcode.....

E-mail (Please print):.....

Phone:.(Home).....Mobile.....

(Work) .....

**Tick Renewal or New Application**
 **Renewal - Year:2010**       **New Application**      ↓
**I agree with the conditions of BSV membership**

Signature:.....

**Please note: New applicants need to have a sponsor sign this application.**

Sponsor's Name (Print):.....

Sponsor Signature:.....

Committee Approval Date: .....

**Tick Membership Type** **Ordinary**       **Associate****Tick Membership fee      Year 2008 (Inc. GST)** **Single \$75**       **Family \$95**       **Concession \$45****Donation (If any)      \$.....      Total Enclosed      \$.....** **Tick If payment is for Building fund.**  
**(Donations to building fund are tax deductible.)** **If payment is by cheque, tick if a receipt is required.**  
**(A receipt will be provided for all cash payments)**

**Cheques should be made payable to: “Buddhist Society of Victoria”**

**All payments should be forwarded to: The Treasurer, BSV.  
71-73 Darling Road East Malvern Victoria 3145.**



### Reasons For Becoming A Member Of The Buddhist Society Of Victoria

1. To support the Buddhist Society Of Victoria's free teaching programme by contributing to the costs of:
  - Upkeep of the Buddhhaloka Centre;
  - Bringing visiting teachers to the centre and their ongoing support.
2. To formalise a commitment to support a Centre for the Buddhist Community.
3. To receive the following tangible benefits:
  - The right to borrow from the BSV library;
  - Discounts for meditation retreats,
  - Receive a copy of the Society's regular newsletter per E-mail or Post.

### Notes On Membership

**1. Sponsorship:** New members are required to have a sponsor sign their application form. A sponsor can be any member of the Society who is both financial and eligible to vote at the Society's Annual General meeting. Anyone seeking to join the Society can approach a member of the Committee for assistance on this matter if they do not know of anyone who can sponsor them.

**2. Approval process.** An applicant does not become a member of the Society until the Committee formally approve the applicant's nomination.

**3. Voting rights** Only financial Ordinary members of not less than two years standing may vote, stand for election to the Committee of the Society or nominate members who wish to stand for election.

#### 4. Main Classes of Membership

- **Ordinary Membership** is for those prepared to commit themselves as Buddhists (i.e. go for refuge to the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha).
- **Associate Membership** for those wishing to have the benefits of membership without making that particular commitment.

Both classes of membership have the same privileges but Associate Members may not vote at Annual or Special General Meetings.

#### 5. Sub Classes of Membership

- **Family membership.** Entitles members of ones immediate family to borrow from the library and enjoy discounts on meditation retreats. For voting purposes is regarded as being a single membership.
- **Concession Membership** This is provided for members who are retired or otherwise not in a position to afford the full ordinary membership subscription.

#### 6. Membership Renewal

Except for those who have joined as new members since October of the previous year, Membership of the Buddhist Society of Victoria falls due on January 1 & must be paid by the AGM date of the year..

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## **Activities at Sanghamittarama**

### **Regular Program**

Ayya Atapi will be leading the Dhamma program at *Sanghamittarama*

**Chanting and silent meditation - Wednesday, Thursday and Saturday, 7:30 pm**

**Chanting, meditation with guidance and Dhamma teaching - Every Friday, 7:30pm**

**Meditation and Dhamma discussion for Young Adults (age 18-35) – to be announced**

**Meditation Days - 4<sup>th</sup> Saturday of each month, 8:00 am to 500 pm, with a communal lunch**

**Dhamma teachings for Children (age 6-12) - Every last Sunday of the month, at 3:00pm, with Ayya Athapi**

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## **Sanghamittarama and Anicca**

Many of you might have heard that Ayya Sucinta and Ayya Atapi went to Perth in October last year. Their mission was to take part in the first Theravada bhikkhuni ordination in Australia held at Bodhinyana Monastery. All four nuns from Dhammasara Nuns' Monastery in Gidgegannup were ordained as bhikkhunis, Venerable Ajahn Vayama being the most senior and the most well-known of them. This could only happen thanks to Ajahn Brahm's courage and determination. It was to be expected that this event would cause quite a bit of criticism and could result in repercussions or sacrifices for those involved, especially for Ajahn Brahm, and unfortunately this has already happened.

Since Ayya Sucinta as one of the “Kammavacacarinis” was considered bearing some responsibility for this ordination as well, her retreat in New Zealand, planned for November, was cancelled. Ajahn Sujato and the residents at Santi Forest Monastery made it possible for her to go to Santi Forest Monastery instead. She was away from November 11<sup>th</sup> until November 28<sup>th</sup>. Ayya Atapi was at Sanghamittarama during this period and continued the regular program, except for the Young Adults' Dhamma discussions.

Ayya Sucinta resumed these teachings again from November 29<sup>th</sup>

On Saturday the 5<sup>th</sup> of December, Sanghamittarama commemorated Sanghamitta, the great Arahant Bhikkhuni who brought the bhikkhuni lineage from India to Sri Lanka. In Sri Lanka she has been traditionally celebrated on the full moon day of December called “Unduvap”. This last year there were two full moon days in December, and due to the forthcoming summer holiday season, “Sanghamitta Day”, a meditation day, was held on the first Saturday of December.

*The advent of Bhikkhuni Sanghamitta to Sri Lanka signifies two major historical events of Buddhist religion and culture:*

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- 1) *the planting of a sapling from the southern side of the Siri Mahā Bodhi Tree at Anuradhapura in Sri Lanka, and*
- 2) *The inauguration of the order of nuns in Sri Lanka*

*from Ven. Dr. Pategama Gnanarama*

**Buddhāloka Centre**  
**71-73 Darling Road, East Malvern 3145**  
**tel: (03) 9571-6409**  
*www.bsv.net.au*

**REGULAR PROGRAM**

(check on the web page for recent updates)

Tuesday	7:30 pm – 9:00 pm	Meditation for beginners & experienced meditators with Ajahn Ariyasilo
Thursday	7:30 pm – 9:00 pm	Meditation for beginners & experienced meditators with Sayadaw U Pandita
	8:30 pm – 9:00 pm	Dhamma talk for all by Sayadaw U Pandita
Sunday	8:30 am – 9:30 am	Silent Meditation.
	9:30 am- 10:30 am	Dhamma talk
	11.00 am	Offering of dana to the Sangha followed by a shared meal. All are welcome to enjoy the food brought by members and friends. You may bring some food, as you wish.

The **Dhamma School** is held on Sundays from 9:30 am – 10:30 am during the school term.

For enquiries contact Suzanne Palmer–Holton on 9776 4425

All regular activities of the Buddhist Society are free and open to the general public. Non-members may not borrow from the library and do not have voting rights.