



“Self-compassion, grounded in wholesome self-love, motivates us to reach out sincerely to help.”

-*Bhante Gunaratana*

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The Path Leading to the End of Suffering



The Fall 2017 edition of the Bhavana Society's quarterly newsletter, 'The Forest Path', features the Importance of the Rains Retreat, written by Bhante Seelananda. This article highlights the history, purpose and guidelines of the 3-month retreat. Our second article is from our 'Ask Bhante G' series, in which Bhante G answers questions posed to him during interviews and retreats. The third article is on the second of three factors on the Buddha's path to liberation, Right Samadhi, by Mangala Bhikkhu. We hope you enjoy this issue of The Forest Path.

May you be well, happy, and peaceful, and may you find freedom from suffering.

- The Bhavana Media Team

The Importance of the Rains Retreat

By Bhante Seelananda

The Rains Retreat (vassāna in Pali) starts with the dawn of the full moon day of July every year. It was on this very special full moon day that the Buddha delivered his first sermon. After this first sermon to the five disciples, the group of six observed a three months rains retreat at Isipatana; presently Sarnath, Varanasi in India.

The Incomparable Service of the Monks

During this retreat, the number of the Arahants in the world increased to 60. At the end of the three-month's rains, the Buddha dispatched them all for the dissemination of the word of the Buddha. Since then, the monks started their incomparable and selfless service of Dhamma. They did not care whether it was the day or night, rain or shine. They walked and talked to different people and did their yeomen service for humans irrespective of their petty differences like caste and creed. In brief, for their tireless service, no matter what conditions they confronted, they walked on highways and byways in India and did it unreservedly.

Criticism from Other Religions

However, while they were wandering in this manner, unintentionally they had trampled the tiny sprouts and little creatures such as ants, termites and ladybugs. Seeing this, other religious masters and their followers started to criticize the disciples of the Buddha saying, "How come these disciples of the Buddha even during the rains do not stay at one place? They wander here and there trampling these tiny sprouts and creatures. Is this how they help others?"

On hearing this, the Buddha imposed a rule for the monks. He proclaimed, "Monks, I instruct you to observe rains retreat during the rains". It was from that day that the monks and nuns started to



observe the rains retreat. In accordance with this proclamation, all full-fledged monks and nuns of the Theravada tradition must observe the three months rains retreat wherever they live, whether in the East or West.

The Purpose is Clear

The Buddha pointed out a very clear purpose of being secluded at one particular place during the rains. Unlike in other traditions of the day, the Buddha advised the monks to dedicate themselves in strengthening their practice more and more so that they could achieve the different stages of the holy life. As a result, according to the history of Buddhism, many monks and nuns have attained higher stages of the holy life during the rains retreat. Even today, it is clear that during these three months, many events take place based on the practice of generosity, morality and meditation in the temples, monasteries and nunneries in the world.

How to observe Rains Retreat

In order to observe this retreat, the monks should get together either in a sima (a boundary room for the monks to perform their collective activities) or in a shrine room and should do their confessions and perform the ecclesiastical duties like reciting the Patimokkha. When the monks and nuns observe this retreat, there are some certain things to be followed by them. For instance, they cannot go out as they normally do.

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During this time, they are allowed to stay outside of the monastery for maximum six nights and on the seventh night, they should be back.

Whenever they go out even for a day's visit, they should be mindful that in observing the rains retreat and must be back on the same day. If they do not observe this properly, they become ineligible to become the recipient of the special robe offered by the lay community at the end of the retreat.

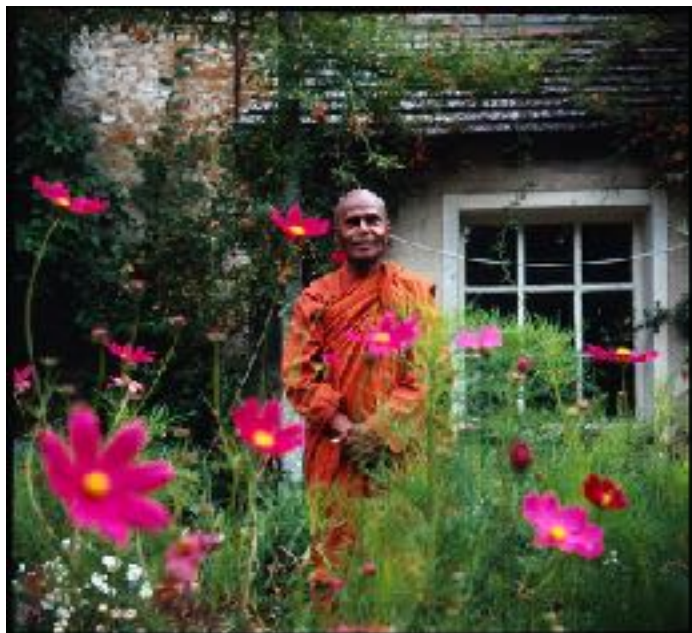
Kathina Robe

The Rains retreat is a collective effort of both monks, nuns and lay people. It is a great and meritorious deed that one can perform throughout one's lifetime. This is a unique meritorious deed because of the holy dedication and striving of both the monastics and the lay community for this

purpose throughout the three months. If everything goes well, at the end of the three months, a special robe is offered for the whole community of monks and nuns as a common gift. Eventually, the robe is conferred to the right person chosen by the community of monastics. Only one person can use this robe called the 'Kathina Robe'. The real importance of this event is that both the monastics and the lay community have the opportunity to renew their relationship and work together amicably for the benefit of the Buddha's dispensation and for peacefulness, happiness and well-being in this life and the next.

Since this type of meritorious deed can be done only once a year at one particular temple or monastery, we should, as the Buddha encouraged, be vigilant, wise and practice diligently.

May all beings be well happy and peaceful!



Ask Bhante G

Q: While sitting in meditation, I try to keep at it when pain and discomfort arise. But after awhile, I feel I just have to change my position.

How do you handle pain and discomfort in trying to sit for longer periods of meditation?

BHANTE G: Normally, the first and immediate reaction to pain and discomfort is to want to change position. That can be conquered if you have a little patience and if you stay with the pain. Pain that arises in meditation is not going to kill you. But if it does kill you, well, that is the best way to die — while meditating! After all, there are a whole lot more miserable ways to go!

But you won't die. You just need to work with the pain or discomfort. When you have a pain in your back, your knee or somewhere else while meditating, just watch it at first. Pay mindful attention to it. If you think you will lose your leg or something like that, watch even that reaction — since the way you react can intensify your perception of the pain.

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The first dart that you experience is the physical sensation of the pain. But the second dart is your attitude to the pain. So try and have a positive attitude by looking at the pain and seeing it exactly for what it is. Try just sitting with the pain without immediately shifting your position. Say to yourself: 'Let me sit with this pain and see how it increases and what happens after that...'

You will be surprised as you pay careful attention to the pain. It seems to increase in volume and intensity. It increases until it reaches its painful climax — then it breaks down and even disappears. It becomes a neutral sensation. It becomes weak and blurred. Then your mind is able to return its focus to the breath. If you stay with that neutral feeling, it turns into a pleasant feeling. Then, as you watch that pleasant feeling, it turns into a neutral feeling again. Then, that neutral feeling may again turn into the unpleasant feeling of discomfort again. So it goes in a cycle like that. Try to see this whole cycle of pain and your reaction to it, ebbing and flowing throughout your meditation.

Suppose you are sitting and after 30 minutes you start to experience a lot of pain. If you tolerate the pain for 5 or 10 minutes with this wholesome, positive attitude, you will see the pain or discomfort change into neutral and then pleasant feelings. Then it may become unpleasant for awhile. Then, it's a neutral again. When you come to that neutral feeling a second time, you have spent perhaps 45 minutes meditating. Through such effort, you can overcome the immediate desire when encountering discomfort to shift away from it. Sitting through these cycles of pain and discomfort, seeing how the mind reacts, can be a very powerful experience. In this way, you can really get to deeper levels of meditation.

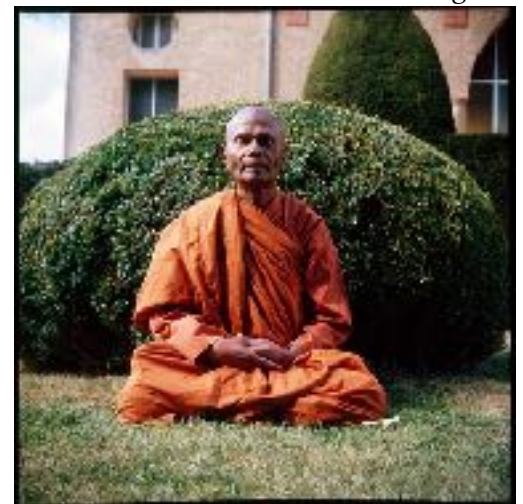
The trouble is that many people don't have a lot of patience, or have not developed it enough. So, this difficulty is always coming up in meditation practice for them. I just advise them to stay with the pain and see the whole cycle. Certainly, if you

feel you really need to you can mindfully shift your position or get up quietly and do standing meditation for awhile, and then return to sitting. Working with pain and discomfort in meditation can offer deep insights into how our minds work. Plus, as you learn to sit longer, your body will grow used to the posture and discomfort will not be such a big issue. Please don't get discouraged when you have discomfort as you sit. That is a part of the deal. Accept it and work with it.

Q: Are we trying to empty the mind when meditating? What is the ultimate aim of meditating?

BHANTE G: Sometimes people think insight meditation is just sitting on a cushion doing nothing. This is not mind-emptying meditation! This is *mindfulness* meditation. There is more to it than just sitting there. After all, you can devote 100 percent of your attention to what you are doing and still not gain any insight. A cat or a tiger pays total attention to its prey but doesn't gain an iota of insight about anything. Why? All they have is simple concentration as they focus intently on their prey in their minds. But in insight meditation, we pay total attention with mindfulness. We work on gaining the ability to look at everything that arises with the clearest state of mind — without greed, hatred or delusion.

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Photography © Virigine Suarez

That is *not* how we normally pay attention to things. Usually our minds are obsessed or distracted by some variation of greed or desire for things or a rejection of things. We feel annoyance, dislike or dissatisfaction with our current state. We want to be someplace else, anyplace else than where we are. Or there is ignorance about what is really going on around us and inside us. But when we start to pay mindful attention to our moment-to-moment experience, we learn to see the mind's restlessness and distraction, its illusions and desires, more keenly. That is where letting go comes in. Very often you hear about 'letting go of things.' Sometimes meditators become confused about this. We must remember what is meant by this phrase. We must learn to let go of those things which are harmful to our practice. But we keep those things which are beneficial. What is harmful to us? Greedy thoughts are harmful. Hateful thoughts. Jealousy, fear, worry, confusion — we must train ourselves to abandon these states by cultivating their opposites. When we have

mindful reflection, what do we see? What do we gain? We gain clear comprehension.

Clear understanding of the purpose, according to the Buddha, means we understand our aim. It means that we meditate not just to gain a little relaxation or to temporarily feel good. Those are certainly nice by-products of meditation practice. But the ultimate aim of practicing meditation is the purification of our being. We aim at no less than overcoming suffering, treading the path that leads to liberation and finally attaining that liberation. Our mind and body is our laboratory for this effort. In the "Four Foundations of Mindfulness," the Buddha repeated something so many times that it is like a chorus: 'This body is not something to cling to. This body exists for me to gain knowledge and insight.' So, that is really what we what we are doing in meditation practice, not just blanking out.

"Ask Bhante G" is a regular feature of "The Forest Path," drawn from questions posed at Bhavana Society retreats and interviews with Bhante Gunaratana, abbot of the monastery.

Right Samadhi

By Mangala Bhikkhu

In the last article, we reflected upon the first steps we take in developing our minds and lives, but there is much more to the Path. The first step — the development of wholesome actions of body speech and mind — lays the foundation; the next steps, in turn lay the foundation for the last. To be able to achieve our goal, we have to be careful to fulfill all the steps with devotion and understanding not just blind devotion and halfheartedness.

This leads us to the second set of three factors on the Buddha's path to liberation.

The three factors that fall under the training of Samadhi are:

- Right Effort

- Right Mindfulness
- Right Concentration

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Right Effort:

When we think of putting effort into something, we tend to think of focusing all of our time and energy onto something we're passionate about — and not stopping until we achieve our goal. While this may seem to be a positive way of thinking about our practice, sadly this kind of thinking can also be infected with unwholesome attitudes like pride and egoism, which will hinder your practice; or the attitude might lead to tiredness and ultimately will dwindle your practice to nothing. Remember what can happen when we become frustrated about something; it's all-too-easy to quit (e.g., how many times have we begun a meditation practice and then quit? Be honest.).

The purpose of Right Effort, like all elements of Buddhist practice, is to purify our minds of all unwholesome mental habits. In Buddhist Pali literature, it is often broken down into four categories:

Prevention: We are aware of what can pollute our mind and can have unwholesome outcomes. We stand guard and make sure that those states do not arise in our thoughts, words, and deeds.

Abandon: We are honest with ourselves about our shortcomings and then prevent them from disturbing our peace of mind.

Develop: We are aware of our shortcomings and know that they can be overcome with the proper remedies.

Maintain: We continue to strive until mental purification is complete. We do away with what needs to depart from our lives, and develop what needs to be developed for true peace and happiness.

Right Mindfulness:

The Buddha taught that Right Mindfulness consists of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, which are Mindfulness of the Body, Mindfulness of Feelings, Mindfulness of Mind, and Mindfulness of Phenomena.

Right Mindfulness is being aware of the Four Foundations in their proper contexts, and not letting awareness of them be hindered by our own preconceived notions or biases. We watch and observe the Four just as they are, allowing them reveal their true natures to us.

In the case of Mindfulness of the Body, we are able to see the body not as a solid mass, but rather as a combination of parts and elements that are in states of constant change; these parts and elements are unstable and break down with time.

Feelings arise through contact with stimuli from external objects, and change when those objects change.

Our mental habits do not need to define us, and can be changed with the proper training and effort. First we require mindfulness to be aware of our true mental habits (sometimes we ignore them or deny they exist), what causes them to arise, and to avoid attachment to them. And Mindfulness of Phenomenon is nothing more than awareness of things that need to be abandoned, and awareness of those things that need to be refined and developed, seeing what is lacking in the mind and that which is strong. This requires being honest with ourselves.

Right Concentration:

As with Right Effort and Right Mindfulness, Right Concentration is composed of the Four Material Jhanas, which are deeper and refined states of concentration culminating in purified mindfulness and equanimity.

We use our Right Effort and Right Mindfulness to stay focused on a single object to keep the mind from wandering. We will become aware of what the Buddha called the Five Hindrances — toxic states of mind which block us from gaining any momentum in our concentration. With the previous factors, eventually we subdue those hindrances, and with that nothing stands in our way from progressing in Right Concentration.

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These are the three factors that make up Right Samadhi. When we've learned to develop these factors and apply them in our daily lives as did the Buddha, we come to see that indulging in mindless amusements cannot compare to what awaits us when we learn to develop our minds.



News & Resources

News

- As a monastery and meditation center, Bhavana is a place that relies entirely on the generosity of others. It is through dana that Bhavana is able to thrive and provide retreats to those who visit. Any contribution is welcome and greatly appreciated. If you're interested in providing dana to the Bhavana Society please visit: http://bhavanasociety.org/page/what_is_dana/.

Resources

- The Bhavana Society website offers many older Dhamma Articles & Talks as well as a Recommended Reading list. They can be found at <http://bhavanasociety.org/resources/>. Alternatively, all aforementioned resources can be accessed via <http://bhavanasociety.org/>. For more recent Dhamma Talks please visit our Youtube Channel.
- For the first time in five years, the Bhavana Society is uploading audio Dhamma talks onto the Dharmaseed platform. New content is being uploaded regularly and you can find the material at <http://bswv.dharmaseed.org/>.
- Works by Bhante G can be found at <http://www.wisdompubs.org/author/bhante-gunaratana>.

Acknowledgement

Many thanks to the residents of The Bhavana Society of West Virginia for their ongoing support and commitment to the Dhamma.

To those who support The Bhavana Society by any means they can, whether through dana, attending meditation retreats, or simply by being a part of our community: Thank you.

The Bhavana Society Media Team is currently comprised of: Bhikkhu Mangala, Bhikkhu Jayasara, Douglas Imbrogno, Karen Warnaka, Michael Summers, and Paola Victoria.