

In this issue: This season we are talking about the importance of connecting with nature, the benefits of silence on retreat and how the two are linked. Please enjoy these articles from recent retreatants and thanks for being part of Dhanakosa!

Coming back to my senses

After a long journey with many connections, it's always a relief to take the short taxi ride to Dhanakosa from the main road. On this final leg, I catch occasional glimpses of the loch, the striking sight of highland cattle and the looming presence of the hills above. Arriving at the loch (kosa) of generosity (dana), it's often the silence and clean air that strike me most.

Somewhat uncomfortably too, the silence and beauty of nature also mirror more vividly my states of mind. Whether I'm say anxious, tense or relaxed, I become more aware of that. So having arrived at Dhanakosa, another journey starts. One where, through Buddhist practice and community, I seek to see through and let go of what limits me. The beauty of the surroundings can feel very much like an ally in this process.

Whilst in popular culture, Buddhism and meditation can be caricatured as all about relaxing and chilling out – the message of the Buddha is far more profound. So, far from being about cultivating interludes of pleasant feelings in a otherwise fraught life, Buddhism presents the possibility of transformation, of becoming equanimous and liberated even from the struggle of yearning for pleasure and resisting the unpleasant. It is, to coin a phrase from Sangharakshita – an inconceivable emancipation.

There is this noble truth of the path leading to the Cessation of Suffering

– Samyutta Nikaya LVI, 11

One of the things I love about being on retreat at Dhanakosa is the space to take a silent stroll. In the Glen, life keeps flowing in all its simplicity – the trees swaying in the wind, the swooping swishing sound of the swallows and the occasional seemingly urgent courier van. On top of that there are my own personal and often muddled mental dialogues. Walking in nature helps me see more clearly what stories (or chains of thought) drive how I live my life. I can clarify what's really important for me and illuminate the unhelpful stories and see the suffering that follows in their wake. This means clocking positions or stances which come from a tight restricted space, which

want to dictate how I and others should or must be.

Stories create my world. How liberating to break the spell of those that limit and cause stress. To see them for what they are – just abstract concepts and interpretations – and thereby weaken their hold. A process that starts to unveil the world as full of paradox, nuance, promise and mystery. The world of Dhanakosa calls me back into my external senses, as what is seen, heard, smelt, tasted (oh the food!) and touched can feel so rich. Its enchanting beauty entices me out of the familiar habit-driven world of thoughts and stories. Underneath my feet, when I allow myself to just feel the contact, is the utterly still and tranquil ground. On retreat I can remind myself that I live and move about on an ever present source of stillness – right under my feet! During a silent mindful breakfast, what bliss to fully savour moment by moment hot toast with Marmite!

Why are we so stirred and attracted to the beauty of nature? Buddhism teaches that our basic nature is pure, like the white of fresh snow. I wonder, is there some undiscovered groundswell of beauty and stillness in us that resonates with these qualities in nature? Is a longing for nature and beauty an expression of the heart's desire to return home to this underlying pure nature?

Looking at sunlight glistening on the loch, I feel the Buddha's teaching on the true nature of experience, as diaphanous and ungraspable. At times the utter stillness of the loch seems to be connecting me to something deep within. On the other side of the loch a solitary figure, both minuscule and humbled within the scenic context, but also inseparably part of the whole. So thank you Dhanakosa and the Glen for the depth of what you give, as step by step, we trek our way to freedom. §

Balajit has recently moved to Birmingham, having lived at the Vajraloka Retreat centre in Wales for seven years. He splits his time between working as a SHEN therapist and leading workshops and retreats across the UK.





mindful acceptance



Robin Scarborough lives in London with his wife and their two young children. He came to Dhanakosa for the first time to attend the mountain biking and meditation retreat.

As the months and weeks passed ahead of my first retreat at Dhanakosa, I grew increasingly apprehensive. Difficult family situations, a demanding job and the intensity of the modern world meant there was always an immediate distraction to focus on and made finding the space for mindful acceptance of life's challenges impossible.

The removal of distractions and the prospect of silence on retreat was something I craved, yet it also filled me with dread. Left free to run,

where would my mind take me? What unresolved issues would I be confronted with? I had gained experience of mindfulness meditation over the past year, but wasn't sure I had the stamina for a full week of self-exploration.

As I arrived and settled into the daily routine at Dhanakosa, these concerns quickly faded. While I had not had any previous exposure to Buddhist meditation, I was surprised at how familiar the mindfulness of breathing practice was to the (albeit intermittent) mindfulness practice I had developed over the previous year. Knowing that I had the time reserved for practice with no outside obligations, interruptions or temptations meant that I was able to go deeper in my practice than previously, and with each session in the shrine room I could feel myself let go just a little more.

As the days unfolded, I felt the very physical sensation of a weight being lifted off of me. We spent progressive amounts of time each day in silence, which I found really allowed me to prolong and explore the stillness of the meditation practice. Our group of retreat participants and leaders had quickly become one of trust and open exchange of what we were experiencing, which even in silence seemed to have a sense of mutual understanding and respect. Although I do remember most of us cracking up with laughter for no particular reason at breakfast on several occasions!

Even the smallest of sounds and faintest of smells captured my imagination....

I also found that the beautiful surroundings of Loch Voil - and the areas nearby that we travelled to on mountain bikes - took on a whole new quality, as with more focused attention I was able to notice a depth and richness to the landscape. Even the smallest of sounds and faintest of smells captured my imagination, and on several occasions I completely lost track of time while just experiencing the environment around me.

It's several months now since my week's retreat. Life is as full as ever - made even richer by the arrival of our second child, a little girl a couple of months ago - but the memory of the stillness I experienced that week has helped me to return to practice with curiosity and patience, time and time again, no matter how long it's been since the last time. I look forward to returning to Dhanakosa. §

community news

Fundraising Appeal

As you will know we are raising money for plumbing work and redecoration of the back of the house this autumn. We've had some very generous donations and currently have raised around £9,000 for the project. We have now started planning the work (due to start in November) but please keep the donations coming in. The more money we have, the more we will be able to achieve. Your donations really do make a difference. You can give directly from our web site: <http://www.dhanakosa.com/giving-dhanakosa> or phone the office on 01877 384 213. All donations are gratefully received.

Volunteers

Thank you to everyone who helped on the working retreat in June this year and to our summer volunteers. It's really fantastic to see all the extra work getting done about the place. Particular thanks goes to Sanghajoti whose stay has extended over most of the year!

Hellos and goodbyes

There are going to be lots of changes in the community over the winter. We will be saying goodbye to Lisa and Priyadasa. Priyadasa particularly has given many years service to the project and has been a mainstay of the office, a steady hand on the finances, and a ready hand in all manner of emergencies! We wish them both well for the future. We will be welcoming Ruth and Ben and are looking forward to getting to know them both. Keep an eye on our website if you are interested in working with us either as a full time member of the team or as a volunteer.





nature and silence

We follow the steeply rising path, zigzagging up through the tussocked grassland, over rocks, up to the peat, wind-blown cotton grasses and purple heather moor. Each step a little higher, each step taking us into dense cloud. The sounds of breathing, steady foot fall and of the wind. A great cool space is opening outside and inside.

A small break in the dense whiteness brings a glimpse of colour and form, far below the iron-grey loch, green forested slopes, straight ahead a view of craggy hill tops, then immersion into cloud. Climbing towards the top, we reach a long, gently rising ridge. Patches of snow lie beside the narrow path, on either side the hill falls steeply away. Wild thoughts of wading into the sea of soft, white emptiness that completely surrounds us.

A sangha in silence, spacious and connected.

Standing still now. Wet, cool air on skin. Listening and more listening. A quietening inside, eyes resting into the whiteness. Silence comes, though the wind is blowing. Awareness of the breath. Quietening some more, becoming present. How still can we become inside, how alive?

We turn, quickly. A Ptarmigan is hurtling itself through the heather, running down into the empty whiteness and disappears. Smiles and delight at good fortune! Being present, the breath, the wind. More smiling and we step back onto the path, to walk to the cairn.

We are coming down now: standing on the watershed of two glacial valleys, falling away to left and right, the hills high above us. In this quiet contained place there is an oozing peat bog that drips and drips, then trickles. The small trickle becomes a tiny flow through peat and runs over bare rock, drops down through the cracks.

We walk the water course, spreading out across the valley, a companionable silence again. The water trickles are becoming a rivulet, a giggly bubbling over rocks and ledges; now becoming a running stream, joined by others falling down the hillsides all around; now it is a young river tumbling and swirling over pebbles and scalloping the soft peat banks; and now a full flowing wide river, richly fed by hillside waters the length of the valley, falling over boulders and edges, throwing spray, plunging into dark pools, where it circles round and round and flows on more gently now, moving waters, always moving, downwards. To the sea.



Louli Salmon works as a Homeopath, as well as with refugees, in London. She delights in hillwalking, good company and singing, among other things.

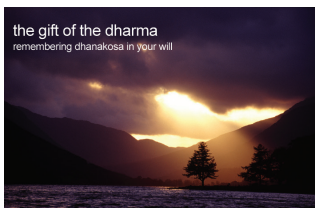
On this river journey, we wade through tall grasses on the banks, jumping the streams, treading wet peat, climbing rocks, led by the water. A sangha in silence, spacious and connected.

And here in this place, such appreciation of the beautiful deep valley: empty, spacious, alive...

No words, we sit beside the river, resting. Just being together. Looking, listening, wondering at the richness of the day. And here in this place, such appreciation of the beautiful deep valley: empty, spacious, alive and dancing, and the stillness of the hills rising above. Simple presence. Breathing and sitting, silence in nature.

Later, in the shrine room, there are some moments when I feel 'body like the mountain, heart like the ocean, mind like the sky'.§

the gift of the dharma



At Dhanakosa, we aim to provide the conditions which allow people to connect more deeply with themselves, with others, with nature - to explore the Dharma. Your donations allow us to continue to grow, to support and inspire, to teach and practice the Dharma. We invite you to share in our vision for the future, by remembering us in your will. Take a look at the **"Get Involved"** section on our web site to find out more: www.dhanakosa.com/gettinginvolved.htm.



notes from the directors's desk



W. H. Murray, the Scottish mountaineer and writer, comments that whilst in wide, open, high places man is dwarfed by nature, and yet not diminished by it. But is in fact, expanded by it.

This is an observation I have often reflected on over the years, during the many days of solitude I have spent in the wilderness. In fact, it seems to me as though the very fact of our being dwarfed by nature somehow puts things into perspective, and enables us to let go of so many things that clutter the mind and constrain our sense of identity.

It enables us to at least start to surrender to the reality of existence without the constant reference to ideas and views of ourselves and others.

What is curious about this letting go, this deep existential relaxation, is that though it can arise in the ease of a warm sunny afternoon, or the drama of a beautiful view, it often goes its deepest in response to mild adversity, when we give up fighting the rain or the discomfort of the climb or, when we surrender to the loneliness and even boredom of a grey day.

But then, deep letting go could never be dependent on "nice" things. It seems far more likely to arise when "nice" and "nasty" are transcended. The dramatic view may be beautiful, and may even inspire awe and high emotion, but, true beauty is in receptivity: receptivity to the ordinary everyday experience and receptivity to the ceaseless flow of emotion that accompanies those experiences.

To be truly open to the world around us, we need to be

truly open to our own hearts, and, the greatest test of all, to be truly open to those people around us: to our fellow human beings. However, the greatest test is also the greatest gateway.

Whilst solitude in the wilderness is a powerful teacher to those who have the good fortune to be able to experience it, receptivity allows all those lessons to be learned in the crucible of everyday life.

**True beauty is in receptivity:
receptivity to the ordinary
everyday experiences and
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emotion that accompanies those
experiences.**

Retreats give an opportunity to hone and develop some of those attitudes of mind that support that receptivity and openness. Silence on retreats can be one of those crucible situations - loved by some, hated by others and, sometimes, both loved and hated. Silence can bring us up against things we find uncomfortable, and it gives us an opportunity to let go and relax into simply being without having to be this person or that person, freeing us from the tyranny of views and opinions.

Yet, we are still a community. We are still with others. We can still experience connection. We can practice receptivity to ourselves and to others in the simplified world of retreat silence. And develop inner silence and inner connection that we can carry forward into the complex world of our lives and our relationships.§

retreat highlights 2015

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| 27 feb - 6 mar | in spacious awareness regulars
<i>led by smritiratna</i> |
| 27 mar - 3 april | body, earth & breath regulars
<i>led by padmadarshini & Inalu</i> |
| 3 - 10 april | a living mirror triratna
<i>led by dhivan</i> |
| 15 - 22 may | painting and meditation introductory
<i>led by tejini</i> |
| 26 june - 3 july | mindfulness, path to freedom introductory
<i>led by balajit</i> |

check www.dhanakosa.com for our full 2015 programme of retreats

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