

Retreating and Re-engaging; A Year of ‘Special Effort’.

Several years ago Bhante suggested I make a year-long retreat. The idea was exciting but also daunting. How could I just disappear? What about my teaching? What about my mother?¹ For a long time I could hardly think about it, but eventually plucked up the courage to commit to Sep 2011 as the start of my ‘year of special effort’.

That was about 3 years ago and once I’d made that first step, the rest evolved. I started telling people at the hospital where I teach Mindfulness that I wouldn’t be available for that year. Every time I said the words, my commitment grew. Although Bhante had suggested a full year retreat in the East somewhere, I eventually decided 3 retreats of 3-months each separated by a month at home was as much as I could undertake, given my situation with respect to my mother.

I started with the annual 3-month retreat at the Insight Meditation Society, in Barre, Massachusetts. Then I spent December in Dublin and joined Bhante and three others for the Satipanya winter retreat till March. The final three months were spent in Gaia House, Devon, which has a separate wing for up to about 20 yogis doing personal retreats.

There is nothing like an ambitious program to show up delusion! Now that it’s all over and I struggle to take up the threads of life again, I remember the delightful relief of *not* having to fill my diary with dates for meetings etc. last autumn. The freedom of it – a whole year with no responsibilities, no roles, not having to *be* somebody! All I was expected to do was to breathe and walk and let the Dhamma filter through – and that’s my favourite pastime anyhow! I was in such giddy delight that, before I even met them, I loved everybody on the IMS retreat! What a come down then, to find myself confused and tongue-tied during most of those first few days when we were encouraged to chat and get to know one another. The first Dhamma teaching filtered through as a painful lesson in over-expectation - it was a relief to enter the silence.

Naturally there were many ups and downs during each retreat. Doubt, especially self-doubt is perhaps my mind’s favourite dead-end, and I found myself hammering away at the walls of this prison again and again, protesting my need to know exactly what was going on and what would happen if ... until eventually I would relax as a crack in the wall appeared to reveal the open space beyond where no assurances were needed. For a while I would breathe easily in a gentle universe where I don’t need to know so much, and that which I *do* clearly know e.g. sensations and feelings, dissolve willingly into the unknown moment after moment. As the year went on, it became easier to discern this opening into freedom, and to accept it gratefully when it came my way. A few lines from our morning chant sometimes floated through as a reflection on the experience:

*Truly all that is conditioned is transient;
It is their nature to arise and pass away;*

¹ My mum, Maire, is now 86 years old and still living independently at home. But, since the death of my brother, Conor, and my father, Maurice, I am her main support. Happily she also has support from others in the family as well friends and neighbours, but still ... the deep mother-daughter attachment is hard for both of us to bear, and even harder to let go!

*Once arisen, they disappear;
Their cessation is happiness².*

It was the last line especially, that become clearer, more heartfelt: *cessation is happiness*. As one who is usually so attached to precise definitions, I began instead to relish this possibility of release from definition. The analogy of *birds in the air leaving no footprints in the sky* seemed apt, and the soaring joy of this traceless existence captivated me so completely I could willingly forgo my usual preference to mull over truth in my mind.

These moments confirmed the Dhamma as my deepest love in life, my escape from the limitations of what I already know and understand. But the walls of the prison would rebuild themselves and less noble thoughts pull me back to ‘reality’ – worries or regrets perhaps – and my lofty idealism would have to do battle with guilt and fear and the host of emotions which limit and darken our view of ourselves and the world. The battle would rage within me: my recent insight into freedom, peace and stillness insisting on my own and others’ potential for goodness, the opposing emotions denying this vehemently, until some compromise would emerge and I would find myself more willing to forgive myself and others our past misdeeds, our present limitations. Thus, from those few precious moments of feeling myself at ease within a peaceful universe, a new level of confidence and optimism established itself in my psyche, undermining that old rogue - doubt – until the next challenge!

Looking back through the year, I can see how those moments of peace became more frequent and prolonged and even ordinary. Having gone through many years of intense fear and anxiety, it was a wonderful relief to be able to relax and enjoy watching the bees at work in the vegetable garden at Gaia House. The joy of simplicity! I am so grateful to have had this opportunity to let the Dhamma work its way into my heart, reassuring me of the possibility of total release from suffering.

Fear had cast a particular shadow on metta practice, with just the thought of metta being enough to send me into a spin of self-conscious performance-anxiety. Once, sitting with the anxiety of the comparing mind, I noticed a quiet radiance between the polarities of ‘good enough’ and ‘not good enough’. The radiance gently reassured me that it wasn’t remotely interested in whether I was good enough or not good enough. It was equally at ease with either scenario, or neither. I recognised this as the experience of unconditional love. It was pouring forth quietly, unobtrusively, demanding nothing in return. This was perhaps the most beautiful experience of my life, and yet the ‘doing’ mind soon wanted to turn away and get on with the next thing. The fact of being in a universe where unconditional love flows freely was so hard to assimilate – what did that imply for all my anxious ‘doing’? Was it all unnecessary? My mind went into a quiet stupor for a day or so, numbed by the immensity of the revelation, until I found myself gazing into the branches of a great maple tree, murmuring “I’m not separate from all this”. The relief of knowing I was truly part of the universe broke through with tears. After the tears, I felt a lazy, hazy, satisfied attachment to this great prize – wanting to pack my bags and go home! Thus, happily for the ‘doing’ mind, it recognised there was a lot more work to do!

² A stanza from the Vipassana Verses: *Anicca vata sankhara, Uppada vaya dhammino, Uppajjitva nirujjhanti, Tesam vupasamo sukkho.*

But from then on metta arose more and more frequently and this helped me to bring confidence to the formal metta practice, quelling the demons which habitually insist ‘you can’t do this’ – or at least giving them a good run for their money!

The most challenging aspect of the year has been the re-entry into ‘ordinary life’. There were three such re-entries after each of the three retreats. In all cases the loss of easy access to pleasant mind-states came as a shock. On retreat they feel so simple, so obvious, and I fail to acknowledge the multitude of fortunate conditions which support these e.g. the silence, the space, the inspiration from teachers and other retreatants, the way good food appears on my plate without me having to shop and cook and worry about the cost!

Back in the world, it’s been disappointing to see how easily I am captivated by sense pleasures like food and TV, how deep is my attachment to ideas of how life *should* be. But when I’m not being too deeply challenged, it has been wonderful to feel a new level of heartfelt goodwill for friends and family, and more compassion for the disappointment of things not going entirely my way. And when the deeper challenges come, I can more easily resist the temptations of the old rogues of fear, anxiety, doubt, jealousy etc. and choose a more hopeful scenario to fasten onto while I get through the mire. Or if the rogues capture me I can relax more deeply into their tight embrace, searching for the nugget of wisdom or kindness at their core; after all they are just deluded aspects of my mind trying to keep me safe in a world they do not understand or trust. Who could blame them for such fierce love? Again, we come to some compromise and I breathe more freely, letting freedom trickle through all the rogues which accompany me in life.

My resistance to life outside of retreat highlights an attachment which, although it has the benefit of enticing me into the practice, is also an obstacle. It means I am clinging to the freedom and wisdom gained from this. To undermine this attachment I can endeavour to share these goodies I so dearly cherish! I can do this at the mental level, by wishing others the peace and bliss of nibbana. I am also in the privileged position of being able to embody this wish by teaching at Satipanya and elsewhere. Thanks to all future retreatants who thus help me along my path. May we all experience the peace and bliss of Nibbana.

Finally, may I express my gratitude to all those who helped me in this year of special effort. Sincere thanks to my mother for bearing with loneliness and all other challenges that came her way (including a leaking roof!) without disturbing my retreats, and for her warm welcome on each return. Heartfelt thanks to all who supported Mum in my absence. I am grateful to my friends for their kindness, their interest in my ramblings, and for helping me engage with life outside retreat. I am also indebted to my teachers at IMS and Gaia House for their skilful guidance and compassion.

My especial thanks to Bhante Bodhidhamma for suggesting, encouraging and supporting this retreat. For this and all his teachings and guidance over the years, may he be greatly blessed!

Noirin Sheahan