

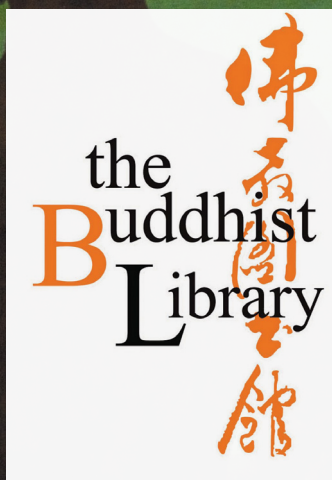
Añjasa

Unravel the Wonders of Buddhist Monuments

The Path of Joy

Issue 47 (March – June 2015)

MCI (P) 099/09/2014



*If my sickness is of benefit to
living beings, let me be sick.
If my death would benefit them,
may I die.
But if my recovery would help,
may I be cured.
Bless me to accept whatever
happens with **JOY** and use it as
my **PATH**.*

Gyelsay Togmay Sangpo



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Publisher :

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Lorong 24A, Geylang, Singapore
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Bhante Says



Thoughts

During meditation, we practise mindfulness as we focus on our breath. When thoughts arise, we try to notice them. Sometimes, thoughts distract us as we try to watch our in-breath and out-breath mindfully. But this can be handled without much difficulty. How?

We take it as a natural occurrence. The mind functions naturally with thoughts. We can see that thoughts are rising and falling. On the other hand, if we take it as a serious hindrance, we cannot practise meditation or improve our mind. We really get disturbed. But by noticing them mindfully, after a while, we can go back and watch our in-breath and out-breath again. In other words, we need to have a friendly attitude towards our thoughts.

Watching our thoughts is very important because it helps us to understand ourselves better. In fact, I can say that the best way to understand ourselves is to watch our thoughts. But we normally don't do that at all. Instead, we act as our thoughts dictate. When thoughts come to us, we react. That is our usual way of living. Whenever we perform an action, there are some thoughts behind it. Our reactions are almost always based on the thoughts that arise in our minds prior to the reactions.

We also need to be aware that sometimes others can control what we think. In the modern world, this has become a huge industry. The commercial world controls people. When we read newspapers, watch television or listen to the radio, they influence how we think.

Have you noticed how fast the media churn out thoughts for us? Within 30 seconds, they

can say so many things, all ready-made ideas which bombard us daily. Time is so important to modern people. People often say '*time is money*'. But in the commercial world, time *really* is money.

So we start to think based on the input from the media. Our mind becomes very active. On this basis, we decide what to buy, what not to buy, how much to spend on this thing or that thing, where to travel and so on. Everything is given to us on a platter in the form of ready-made thoughts.

In a way, this is not so good. Why? Because the intention of the producers of those programmes is not so good also. They have ulterior motives. Of course, these companies want to earn as much money as possible. That is understandable. But in order to make money, they have to get more and more people to buy things from them. As a consequence, they deny us a chance to think for ourselves and decide whether what they say is right or wrong, fruitful or not, good or bad, meaningful or not. And so we become addicted to their ideas. That is how these companies have become very famous and enormously wealthy through aggressive advertising.

Knowing that we live in such a world - where our emotions can go up or down based on what people say - why don't we try to watch our thoughts to prevent interference from advertising companies or the wrong people. In this way, our thoughts are genuinely ours. They can be good or bad thoughts, pleasant or unpleasant, or neither. But they are genuine because they are our own thoughts.

As human beings, we like to see the pleasant aspects of our lives and ignore the unpleasant ones. But we have to be realistic and see both sides. Then only can we improve our mental qualities and strengthen our determination to lead fruitful spiritual lives.

Whether we are meditators or not, the value of mindfulness is real. When we become busier and our lives become more sophisticated, the importance of mindfulness or awareness also increases. We all know that human lives today are much more sophisticated. The sophisticated things we deal with such as computers, tablets and smart phones make our minds sophisticated also.

Years ago in Sri Lanka, when devotees invited monks to their houses for *dana*, the monks used to refuse to travel by car. They thought this was too luxurious. I heard from my teacher and some senior monks that it took quite some time before monks agreed to travel in vehicles. Nowadays, of course, it is a common thing.

In certain ways, the rapid changes that have taken place in the last few decades are good. Life has become much more comfortable.

But there is a downside also which we need to understand and be mindful of. When we live in that way, slowly but surely, we also become like the machines we are hooked to. Everything becomes habitual.

As a result, we may start to become emotionally crippled. We may even start to lose our feelings.

Have you noticed how difficult it has become to talk to people nowadays. I mean, other than saying, “hello” and “goodbye.”

As you know, the Buddha analysed the human personality into five aggregates – form, feeling, perception, concept and consciousness. Feeling is an important component of this analysis.

In an article in *The Independent* on December 18, 2014, Stephen Hawking warned of the

danger of the end of humanity as a result of the transcendence of artificial intelligence in due course.

‘One can imagine such technology outsmarting financial markets, out-inventing human researchers, out-manipulating human leaders, and developing weapons we cannot even understand. Whereas the short-term impact of AI depends on who controls it, the long-term impact depends on whether it can be controlled at all.’

Whether Hawking is right or not about the possible end of humankind at the hands of robots in due course, the more immediate danger, in the meantime, is already apparent. When we live with little or no feelings, we become like the robots that we invent.

Robots can do many things but they have no feelings. Life will become artificial and not so pleasant. It is true that, without feelings, we won’t be able to suffer. But we also won’t be able to experience happiness and the things that make us human beings such as loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity, the four qualities that the Buddha taught as being essential to the attainment of enlightenment.

So what should we do? You may ask. Learning to live moment to moment with mindfulness will help to prevent this from happening.

There is a very short sutra in which the Buddha discussed the importance of ‘reading our own mind.’ I will quote it in full below so that you can not only benefit from the Buddha’s teaching in this sutra but enjoy its clarity and beauty. Although the Buddha here refers to monks, as he usually does, the teaching is equally applicable to lay persons.

Sacitta Sutta

I have heard that on one occasion the Blessed One was staying near Savatthi, in Jeta’s Grove, Anathapindika’s monastery. There he addressed the monks: “Monks!”

“Yes, lord,” the monks responded.

The Blessed One said: “Even if a monk is not skilled in the ways of the minds of others, he should train himself: ‘I will be skilled in reading my own mind.’”

“And how is a monk skilled in reading his own mind? Imagine a young woman - or man - fond of adornment, examining the image of her own face in a bright, clean mirror or bowl of clear water. If she saw any dirt or blemish there, she would try to remove it. If she saw no dirt or blemish there, she would be pleased, her resolves fulfilled: ‘How fortunate I am! How clean I am!’ In the same way, a monk’s self-examination is very productive in terms of skillful qualities: ‘Do I usually remain covetous or not? With thoughts of ill will or not? Overcome by sloth (and) drowsiness or not? Restless or not? Uncertain or gone beyond uncertainty? Angry or not? With soiled thoughts or unsoiled thoughts? With my body aroused or unaroused? Lazy or with persistence aroused? Unconcentrated or concentrated?’

“If, on examination, a monk knows, ‘I usually remain covetous, with thoughts of ill will, overcome by sloth & drowsiness, restless, uncertain, angry, with soiled thoughts, with my body aroused, lazy, or unconcentrated,’ then he should put forth extra desire, effort, diligence, endeavor, relentlessness, mindfulness, (and) alertness for the abandoning of those very same evil, unskillful qualities. Just as when a person whose turban or head was on fire would put forth extra desire, effort, diligence, endeavor, relentlessness, mindfulness, (and) alertness to put out the fire on his turban or head; in the same way, the monk should put forth extra desire, effort, diligence, endeavor, relentlessness, mindfulness, (and) alertness for the abandoning of those very same evil, unskillful qualities.

“But if, on examination, a monk knows, ‘I usually remain uncovetous, without thoughts of ill will, free of sloth & drowsiness, not restless, gone beyond uncertainty, not angry, with unsoiled thoughts, with my body unaroused, with persistence aroused, (and) concentrated,’ then his duty is to make an effort in maintaining those very same skillful qualities to a higher degree for the ending of the effluents.”

I wish you success in your spiritual practice.

Bhante B Dhammaratana
Religious Advisor
Buddhist Library



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Renunciation in Daily Life

*Nothing is so good it lasts eternally
Perfect situations must go wrong
But this has never yet prevented me
Wanting far too much for far too long*

(Composers - Tim Rice, Benny Andersson and Björn Ulvaeus - from the musical *Chess*)

An Australian Chinese monk in his 30s walks down the eastern Australian coast from Queensland to New South Wales with his begging bowl. He attracts curious looks and the occasional alms. In return, he offers inner peace, friendliness, compassion and unconditional acceptance of all who cross his path.

Like a pebble thrown into a pool, this simple (but by no means easy) example of renunciation in due course sparks discussion on a wide range of issues from the viability and fruitfulness of a simple, non-grasping way of life in a crazy, egotistical, constantly buzzing and grasping world to protection of the environment and climate change.

I first came across this story when someone sent me the link to a radio programme called *The Wandering Monk* in the *Encounter* series on Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

Jason Chan (as he prefers to be called) graduated in law from Sydney University and worked for a while in various jobs including a stint in a law firm. Subsequently, he ordained. Then, eager to test for himself whether the Buddha's simple lifestyle two and a half millennia ago can ensure a more spiritually meaningful, less detrimental way of life than a conventional lifestyle in a modern society like Australia, he began his trek.

A few comments from ordinary people, mostly non-Buddhists, who encounter him along the way should suffice to give us a clear picture of the impact this simple monk has on them just by being what he is and doing what he does - a simple, walking monk seeking nothing but sustenance and shelter.

'so cool, so smart, someone to talk to ...'

'a smiling ... open, genuine face ...'

'sane, happy, lucid, logical, very succinct ... most impressed with his clear headedness...'

'an evidence based approach ... quasi-scientific, legal ... wanted to look at the evidence and test it on himself... wasn't didactic, wasn't forcing his ideology down our throats ... very humble...'

'not fundamentalist...uses computers...'

'Everyone has great respect for him in spite of his youth (because of) his dedication to meditation and kindness ...'

'a revolutionary in monk's robes ... owning nothing, holding nothing, asking for nothing to show he could survive (in the way that the Buddha did).'

'He said that Buddhism is post-mortem. Buddhism always owns up to its own subjectivity. Truth in Buddhism is what is useful for a purpose.'

'(He said that) there are diminishing returns to material wealth.'

Jason Chan's example highlights many virtues that the Buddha taught such as loving kindness and compassion but what he represents, in essence, is renunciation, one of the cornerstones of Buddhism.

How important renunciation is in the Buddha's teachings can be seen in the *Parable of the Raft* where the Buddha famously compared his teachings to a raft.

'I have taught the Dhamma compared to a raft, for the purpose of crossing over, not for the purpose of holding onto. Understanding the Dhamma as taught compared to a raft, you should let go even of Dhammas, to say nothing of non-Dhammas.'

In effect, the Buddha there gave permission to his followers to discard even his teachings when they have attained liberation from suffering for he understood that clinging on to something, even the Dharma, after it has served its purpose, is not only senseless but creates, rather than frees us from, suffering.

In an article published in the website *Access to Insight*, T Prince explains in very clear terms what renunciation in Buddhism entails.

In the practice of renunciation, three stages may be distinguished. First of all, there is outward renunciation, as when a man or woman leaves the household life to become a monk or a nun. Outward renunciation has no intrinsic value, and may theoretically be dispensed with, but there is no doubt that it makes true renunciation very much easier. True renunciation is a matter of the heart and mind rather than the body. It is renunciation of the world of desires and aversions within, rather than of the world of "objects" without. Finally, there is the ultimate renunciation, which is the renunciation of one's 'self' in its entirety, and the consequent destruction of all ill.

Obviously, as a homeless monk Jason Chan has *'renounced the world'*. He rejects all material wealth, possessing only, at any one time, three robes and a begging bowl. He also refuses

to accept money and any mode of transport beyond his own two legs, choosing to remain as faithful to the Buddha's way of life as he can. This is, no doubt, an admirable undertaking. But even Jason Chan uses computers, an indication that he is no fundamentalist, as someone has pointed out.

It is easy to fixate on concrete things like money, mobile phones and cars and view them as indicators that any monk who uses or possesses them is somehow suspect.

But that would be too simplistic. As T Prince has pointed out, *'(t) rue renunciation is a matter of the heart and mind rather than the body. It is renunciation of the world of desires and aversions within, rather than of the world of 'objects' without.'*

The extent to which the Buddha expected his monks to go in practising renunciation can be seen in the *Parable of the Saw*, where the Buddha told the monks –

"Monks, even if bandits were to savagely sever you, limb by limb, with a double-handled saw, even then, whoever of you harbors ill will at heart would not be upholding my Teaching. Monks, even in such a situation you should train yourselves thus: 'Neither shall our minds be affected by this, nor for this matter shall we give vent to evil words, but we shall remain full of concern and pity, with a mind of love, and we shall not give in to hatred. On the contrary, we shall live projecting thoughts of universal love to those very persons, making them as well as the whole world the object of our thoughts of universal love — thoughts that have grown great, exalted and measureless. We shall dwell radiating these thoughts which are void of hostility and ill will.' It is in this way, monks, that you should train yourselves.

"Monks, if you should keep this instruction on the Parable of the Saw constantly in mind, do you see any mode of speech, subtle or gross, that you could not endure?"

"No, Lord."

"Therefore, monks, you should keep this instruction on the Parable of the Saw constantly in mind. That will conduce to your well-being and happiness for long indeed."

There the Buddha expressly mentioned loving kindness but the Buddha was also cautioning the monks to renounce hatred for the people who torture them because before love can fill the heart, hatred has to leave it, or be prevented from entering it in the first place.

And so when Jason Chan tells people that what he is doing is just experimenting on a way of life lived and prescribed by the Buddha to find out whether it can be similarly beneficial for him and that others should do the same for themselves rather than accepting his word without questioning, he is only echoing what the Buddha taught a long time ago. Not just that reality is not a matter of belief but of experience that must be tested and discovered for oneself but also that the Dharma requires us to renounce any claim to a monopoly of truth and wisdom which is so tempting to anyone who makes progress along the spiritual path.

Lay people generally baulk at the idea of renunciation, thinking that renunciation means leaving house and home to become monks and nuns. But renunciation, as Jason Chan emphasises, can be practised in graduated stages. *‘If you want to reduce the clutter in your life, do it gradually.’* And, as T Prince says,

An infinity of deaths and births stretches before (a lay person), and he has plenty of time in which to prepare himself for renunciation if he is not yet ready for it — provided, of course, that he continues to lead a morally blameless life, thus ensuring that he will continue to be born in more or less favorable circumstances in future.

And so there are countless opportunities in our daily lives to practise renunciation at a pace that suits us best.

Thus, when people sit down and listen to Jason Chan’s teachings which he gives after accepting *dana*, they are also renouncing any enjoyment they may otherwise have been able to experience performing other, more mundane, activities. They could, for instance, have used the time to watch a movie or chat up their favourite people.

Similarly, when they offer Jason Chan food during his walks, they are able to do so only because they renounce ownership and possession of the food that they offer, not only physically but also mentally.

And when they offer him shelter as, for example, during his rains retreat, they relinquish occupation and use of the space offered, both physically and mentally.

An interesting example of renunciation is the amazing story of Seth Moulton, the newly elected Congressman from Massachusetts, USA which was recently reported by Walter Robinson, a legendary reporter with the *Boston Globe* newspaper.

Robinson’s claim to that exalted status is well established in his penchant for calling out politicians who falsely claim outstanding military service to win elections. In 1982 and 1986, he famously put paid to the election hopes of two candidates who claimed to be heroes in the Vietnam and Iraq Wars. Consequently, they both lost their respective gubernatorial elections in Massachusetts.

Then along came Seth Moulton.

During his campaign to be a Congressman last year, Moulton talked about his military service in Iraq and how he fought in that war even though he disagreed politically with it. But he was vague about what he actually did in Iraq. So Walter Robinson, with his usual tenacity, decided to fill in the gaps. And this is what he found out.

‘The American political graveyard has more than a few monuments to politicians and public officials who embellished details of their military service, in some cases laying claim to medals for heroism or other military honors they never received.

And then, uniquely, there is Seth W Moulton, ... former Marine who saw fierce combat for months and months in Iraq. But Seth Moulton chose not to publicly disclose that he was twice decorated for heroism until pressed by the Globe.

(He) has been so close-mouthed about the (two) medals (he received for bravery) that in his campaign, only the campaign manager - a former marine - knew about the awards before the Globe asked for the citations on Wednesday. Even his parents did not know.’

In the interview, Seth Moulton asked that the Globe not describe him as a hero. “Look,” he said, “we served our country, and we served the guys next to us. And it’s not something to brag about.”

What Seth Moulton was guilty of was, of course, extreme humility but he clearly also renounced praise and fame with all their attendant benefits.

In our daily encounters, we meet people who may be as humble and selfless in their own ways as Seth Moulton was in his, even if they do not have the colourful and dramatic experiences and skills that he has.

Like a former student of mine, a tourist guide, who assisted me recently to entertain my family who came to visit me in Chiangmai, some eighteen visitors altogether, for nearly a week. During this time, he gave up all employment and thus suffered loss of income but he insisted on assisting me nonetheless.

Or a friend of mine who decided to become a vegetarian after, ironically, a fishing trip to Sri Lanka. When I asked him why he made this unexpected decision, he said that, at least, on his dying day, he could say honestly to himself that, if he accomplished anything at all, he avoided making animals suffer for his own enjoyment.

Each of us is capable of doing things like this, big or small. We can resist the urge to be the centre of attention all the time or win every argument. We can curb our urge to think negatively of anyone that we dislike for whatever reason or blame them for anything that goes wrong. And we can avoid shark’s fin soup, *pâté de foie gras* or any other dish, the preparation of which inflicts cruel and unusual punishment on animals even if we are not vegetarians. I can go on but you get the picture.

Obviously, what is important is to do it with the proper motivation of compassion and renunciation and to do it on a consistent basis, incrementally progressing as time goes by. Until the time arrives, whether in this lifetime or in a future one, when we can practise what T Prince calls, *‘the renunciation of one’s ‘self’ in its entirety, and the consequent destruction of all ill’* and reach our goal of enlightenment.

In the meantime, allow me to wish you pleasant reading, as usual.

**Chwee Beng
Editor**

‘An infinity of deaths and births stretches before (a lay person), and he has plenty of time in which to prepare himself for renunciation if he is not yet ready for it — provided, of course, that he continues to lead a morally blameless life, thus ensuring that he will continue to be born in more or less favorable circumstances in future.’

(T. Prince)

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The Rachel Maddow Show: Reporter exposes Candidate’s secret: Valor <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cgEtk97snRE>



BL EVENT

BL EVENT: BOOKS & ROBES OFFERING

Date: November 19, 2014
Venue: BL Auditorium
Photo Credit: Yew Beng



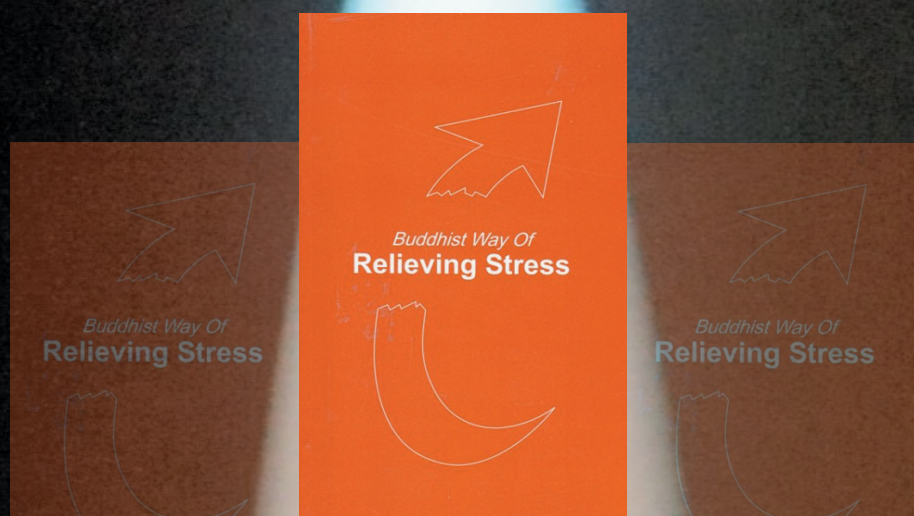
BL EVENT: BL FAMILY DAY & FUN FAIR

Date: November 16, 2014
Venue: Vacant Land adjacent to Aljunied MRT Station
Photo Credit: Yew Beng



BL EVENT





Buddhist Way of Relieving Stress by Arya Keerti Kumarasena

Published by Buddhist Cultural Centre, Sri Lanka

Reviewed by Prof Chandima Wijebandara.

A sociologist friend of mine said that stress is the most 'fashionable' health problem we have inherited from the last century. His caustic remark, though not exactly correct, contains a bit of truth also.

Some people, according to him, exaggerate their roles at work, at home and on social occasions. They claim they are stressed. Is this a genuine stress or a fashionable pretence, one might wonder. Are some people trying to impress others that they are important, engaged, busy, modern or sophisticated when they complain that they are stressed?

Stress, I believe, is always present. The complex and competitive life style of our time has only aggravated it. And it has been 'elevated' as an outcome of progress.

According to Dr Nisreen Nakhoda, stress is a modern malady that almost no one is untouched by. It is a multi-faceted monster that runs us

down in the long term. And it can ruin us if left unattended. Stress spares no one except an arahant.

Reseachers have found that it begins even before birth.

'When a mother suffers from stress during pregnancy, her baby's birth weight, heart rate, and motor activity are influenced. In old age, fear of isolation and loneliness heighten stress among the elderly and infirm. The consequence of long-term stress: (is that) the individual feels anxious, angry, hopeless, or trapped.' (ABC of Human Mind: A Family Answer Book by Readers Digest 1990, page 186)

Buddhist techniques, especially mindfulness meditation, is increasingly sought after for stress reduction.

According to the *Time* magazine, (March 3rd, 2014), Americans spent four billion dollars on

mindfulness related alternative medicine in 2007 including MBSR (the technique developed by Jon Kabatsin based on Buddhist Satipatthana).

On August 3rd, 2012, the *Daily Mail* reported that the former president of the USA, Bill Clinton, practised Buddhist meditation and had a Buddhist monk as his guide to obtain relief from stress and had already achieved remarkably positive results.

In that year, 477 research papers were published in scientific journals.

Thus, fashionable or not, stress has become a vital issue and the relevance of Buddhism in managing it is also increasingly recognised.

Moreover, the eminent Buddhist translator Thanissaro Bhikku 'chose stress' to be the English equivalent of 'dukkha' in Buddhism.

The book under review, then, is a welcome contribution to the growing stress literature. It presents a programme based on Theravada Buddhist teachings.

The writer affirms that having zero stress is almost impossible and also impractical. He states that *'...it may lead to boredom and at times to some degree of frustration.'*

The well known stress psychologist Hans Selye believes that stress often furnished the motivation and energy to achieve success. A certain amount of anxiety, for instance, prods a student towards preparing better for examination. There, of course, exists a comfortable and healthy-level stress called *eustress*. Think of the day you arrived home having completed several tasks with positive results. You were definitely tired and feeling a bit exhausted as well. Yet, weren't you enormously happy thinking it was worth it in view of your achievements? Such stress is definitely enjoyable. What we need to avoid is distress which is depressing. As Mr Kumarasena rightly puts it, the immediately practical target for us, as *samsaric* beings, has to be effective management of stress rather than total elimination of it.

The book Mr Kumarasena has produced, in fact, is an attempt to apply Buddhist meditation to the problem of relieving stress. It provides a systematic and analytical approach to helping the reader appreciate various shades of the problem using the Buddha's teachings. His familiarity with the insights brought to the subject by western psychologists has helped him immensely in presenting the old wisdom in a modern garb.

The author applies the problem solving approach in identifying stress and looking for solutions, as we may expect from a Buddhist writer.

Recognising the insufficiencies and limitations in approaches like those of Krishnamurty, Westen medicine and so called *gurus*, the author seeks to help the readers via a technique based on Theravada Buddhist philosophy, which, according to him, prepares a basic platform flexible enough to allow for individual differences. He provides a systematic step by step guide to those who wish to follow it.

To every chapter, the author adds flow-chart summaries enabling the reader to grasp his analysis in clear terms. Being himself an engineer he has attempted to make the charts communicate eloquently, displaying mutual links and causal influences. He has also documented his presentation well thus enhancing the academic reliability of his study. Moreover, the annexure he gives at the end of the text is highly useful as it presents authentic meditation instruction in a practical format.

While admiring the writer for this meaningful and timely contribution to stress literature, I wish to state that it would have been much better if the publisher had used normal 12 point fonts to the text rather than 16 point. Larger fonts make the book look thicker, yet as this is not aimed at children or very old readership the standard format might have retained better the dignity of this enlightening book.

BL EVENT

BL EVENT: ANJASA – THE PATH TO ENLIGHTENMENT
- Dance Theatre Production.

Date: January 23, 2015
Venue: Victoria Theatre
Photo Credit: Yew Beng



INTERVIEW

Bhante Ratmalane Somaloka
Mindfulness Meditation

Interviewer: Norman New

What are some of the proven psychological benefits of mindfulness in therapy situations?

Mindfulness practice has been around for a long time.

Jon KabatZinn introduced mindfulness practice to clinical setups, like medical schools. Since he started, mindfulness has been used in psychotherapy quite a lot. Owing to Jon KabatZinn's work, people have become very interested in mindfulness as a therapy technique and they have done quite a lot of research. Recently I saw an article which says there were a couple of hundred of research papers. In 2013, to my recollection, it jumped to a thousand. So people, particularly scientists, are finding it very effective.

According to my research, people take all the other therapeutic techniques, and try to find out what is really the mechanism behind their therapeutic value. And now they begin to see actually it does not matter what the technique is. If those techniques can tap into mindfulness, mindfulness is what will do the healing. Essentially it is the healing factor common across all the other techniques.

In fact it was Freud who at first discovered how mindfulness works in therapy but he didn't know it was mindfulness. He said that whenever we approach a client, we use free association. All we can do is to make the client conscious of his own conscious processes. The moment you become conscious, the healing takes place so even though he didn't know he was talking about mindfulness, that's exactly what mindfulness is supposed to be. A recent work by Elizabeth Blackburn also found out that mindfulness can be extremely effective in dealing with stress.

Apart from relieving stress, what kind of benefits can a secular practitioner expect to experience from practising mindfulness?

According to current research, you can not only use it for psychological benefits, but physical benefits. Jon KabatZinn, in his work, showed that people get therapeutic benefits for cancer, sclerosis, and many other diseases too. It has a tremendous effect on physiology as well as psychology.

How about someone who is not suffering from any physical or psychological ailments? Do they get any kinds of benefits?

Current studies show very clearly that stress does not work the way people used to think it was supposed to work. In other words, you do not have to be subjected to very strong trauma to feel stress.

Even just living your life in Singapore, it is stressful. And, unfortunately, our biological system is not capable of dealing with this kind of stress. Anywhere in the world, technological advancement as well as a fast-paced lifestyle, creates a lot of stress on the system. And, as I have said, our biological system is not developed enough to handle those types of stress. In that sense, I think mindfulness can be extremely beneficial.

When someone practises mindfulness, what kind of motivation should we begin with?

To do anything in life, we have to have motivation. When it comes to mindfulness, we have to have a tremendous interest in understanding our own lives, learn how to deal with life's situations, and how to maintain health, as those are important issues in life. If you have the motivation to want to become

healthy, then you look for a technique to help you maintain health. So for that, I think mindfulness seems extremely valuable.

How important is it for us to set aside time to practise mindfulness in our daily lives?

Like everything else, as said earlier, you have to have motivation. If you have the motivation and understand what it does for you, then naturally you will incorporate it into daily life. You don't have to do it at a specific time. At least once a day. If you can do it 10-15 minutes, that would be good.

So how long can one expect before one starts to see the benefits of mindfulness?

It's a hard question. When you talk about benefits, what kind of benefits do you mean?

Maybe psychological benefits like reduction in stress levels, a calmer mind. A clearer mind.

Those benefits you can experience in quite a short period of time. Again it depends on how serious, genuine or interested you are. I have seen people after a couple of weeks. They claimed that their stress levels are less. Their anger gets lesser. Even though they are in the same situation, their reactions are very manageable.

What are some potential obstacles in the practice of mindfulness and how can we overcome them?

The first thing, of course, is to understand what it is. Like anything, unless you understand, you are not going to do it so that is the biggest problem. Some people may have a bit of reluctance also if you come from a different religious background.

We have to help people understand that, even though mindfulness is discovered as a technique by the Buddha, it does not have anything to do with Buddhism. It is a part of our human existence. We can be grateful to someone who discovered it and helped us to use it but besides that, it is part of our human existence, our tradition. If you understand its therapeutic value, you should be able to use it and be happy that somebody helped us to understand something so valuable that exists within us.

Even if we have the motivation, why is it so hard for us to tame the mind?

We have to understand that it is not difficult in itself. The nature of our human mind is it always tends to (fixate on) the past or future. The nature of our mind is wandering and there is a system. That is a survival tool. You have to collect information and you have to relate the information to the world. You can't stop it. First you have to understand its nature. This is not a mind controlling business. We can't control the mind. We can't stop the mind from going here and there. The mindfulness practice is to (channel) it in a more constructive way. If you say you are going to meditate to stop the mind, it is going to be tedious work. Mindfulness is not supposed to be for that (purpose). Mindfulness is not to stop the mind, but to understand the dynamics involved in the process of mind.

Do you have any advice for beginners who wish to embark on this practice of mindfulness?

First you have to understand the foundation of mindfulness, that as human beings, we have this potential. And this is something we all accept. From the Buddha's point of view, the reason why he introduced mindfulness (was that, as) he said, by developing our mindfulness, we can be free from suffering, and develop all the potential within ourselves. If (the potential is) within ourselves, the best thing is, the most important approach is, to be aware of ourselves. If you are not aware of yourself, how are you going to awaken the potential? The motivation for practising mindfulness comes from realisation and appreciation that we do have a lot of resources within, not outside. If you believe that, then you know the value of mindfulness.

(Editor: This interview focuses on the benefits of mindfulness meditation for psychological and therapeutic purposes. The purpose for which the Buddha taught mindfulness meditation - the attainment of enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings - lies outside that focus but is a vital part of the Buddhist spiritual path and the best motivation for a Buddhist to practise mindfulness meditation.)